

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD OR IN A CRYSTAL BALL

HOLLYWOOD CINEMA? Never heard of it. They're all American movies to us. Hong Kong cinema? There used to be such a thing. But by the time this book is published, after July 1997, Hong Kong will just be another dot on a rather, large map. A dot where perhaps movies are made. Chinese cinema.

When the British dropped anchor off the coast of China a hundred years ago, sheltered from typhoons by a nondescript island, they named it the Fragrant Harbor — "Hong Kong." No doubt the smell of bullion they would be able to extract by trading with the inscrutable continent added to the sweetness.

It seems money has always been part of the very air of Hong Kong. From the China traders to the financial bankers to the land speculators to the organized crime triads, and now to the Hong Kong filmmakers.

Since its naming, the still beautiful, rolling island is fronted by a harbor that has become much less fragrant. It's filled with sludge and sunken tankers and is slowly disappearing due to something called reclamation. Soon the watery strip that separates the island from the Kowloon Peninsula will cease to be.

Hong Kong and China will be one.

Those of you just discovering the vicarious pleasures of Hong Kong action cinema will thus be saddened to know that, much like the Star Ferry that chugs along a shorter distance every day, you are docking at the end of an era. Not that it hasn't been foreshadowed for many years.

"When I first became a fan of Hong Kong movies," says writer Ric Meyers, "it was phenomenal. You could go to any of the six theaters in New York's Chinatown and see a variety of wonderful movies — every week something different. Now, there is one struggling movie theater left."

Hong Kong movies have been their own worst enemies. For every Jackie Chan, who has unlimited budgets and time, there are many other actors and actresses who churn out four or five movies a year of dubious quality. For every actress that becomes a respected regular, there are many who are beaten or raped by triads trying to run the lucrative industry much as they would a drug cartel or a prostitution ring. "When a theater in Chinatown started showing porno movies, we knew it was not long for this world," says Meyers. "It would close down within a year."

Not to blame the triads entirely, the pirating of Hong Kong movies has also led to the industry's downfall. Just like a drug dealer who eventually kills off his own buyers, bootleggers cut into the gross of area theaters, causing cinemas to close down and ultimately decreasing the demand for movies, leading to cessation of good movies being made.

"You can put a policeman in each theater to catch them," says Jackie. "But even then, you don't know in which theater the illegal copy is made."

For years, Jackie's movies (along with the occasional Stephen Chow, Jet Li, or Andy Lau flick) were the only films that kept the Chinatown theaters open in the United States, despite the fact that you could buy bootleg copies down the street from said theaters weeks before a movie opened. The pickin's have been slim. No wonder Chan is cultivating new markets like the United States — even China.

While others are scared of what China's takeover of Hong Kong in 1997 will bring, Jackie is getting his foothold, filming in the once-forbidden country, and becoming the first Hong Kong director/actor whose movies appear there on the big screen, not just on illegal video copies. For Jackie, the reason for his acceptance into this world power, known for its strict, blackballing film codes, is clear.

'All these years, there is no politics in my movies and also I don't like politics. If you want to release in China, you have to cooperate with the Chinese government then you can release in China. Big market," explains Chan. 'At times, my movies would not cooperate with China, I film in some other country, but they still let it be released in China.'

Nevertheless, time is running out, and the roller-coaster ride is moving into the station. Unlike the famous Cyclone coaster of Coney Island, the attendant won't let you keep your seat for two dollars more and go on the exciting, thrilling, adrenaline-pumping ride again. It will be reshaped. Maybe it will become a Ferris wheel, or a whirlygig... or maybe one of those rides that spins around and the floor... drops out.

If we had a crystal ball, perhaps we could look toward the future. But could any orb capture the unpredictability of a Communist government? Instead, we must wait... much like the Hong Kong people themselves... and see.

Jackie Chan, in this situation is, essentially, the King of Siam (read that: Hong Kong), with responsibilities not only to himself but to his country and his subjects (read that: audience). Like that character of life, literature, celluloid, and lore, Jackie is headstrong, stubborn, acceptance-seeking and proud. He is also gentle, endearing, kind and hungry for knowledge. Whereas the king grasps for the right path in a country facing great change, Jackie looks for his path in his own changing city while facing the inevitable limitations of age coupled with the possibility of a new frontier. Like Yul Brynner in his performance as the famous king (they were both bald at one time too!), the right path must mean the path of dignity — the path with the most "face" (read: respect). 'I'll stay in Hong Kong,' says Jackie. 'If 1997 comes and the China government says 'Jackie, you cannot make this kind of movie anymore and you cannot live in this town,' either I will die or I'll just quit. But I do not think they'll do that. As long as I'm making Jackie Chan movies, I'll be okay.'

Despite this optimistic hope, as Chan becomes more of a recognizable figure in America, perhaps he will be spending less time in Hong Kong out of sheer necessity. The William Morris Agency, which now represents him in his stateside endeavors, wants him to make two movies in 1997 alone. As Hong Kong loses its freedom, Jackie Chan is more free than ever before. What does he have to prove? Nothing. Stunts and movies for him have been a piece of cake for twenty years.

"My father tells me, 'So, I'm sixty-five and I can still cook — what about you?'" Jackie humorously reported to Combat magazine in 1992. "I say, 'Yeh, yeh, yeh...'"

As long as Jackie Chan can still be involved in making movies.... Somewhere, he'll always be dying for action.