

Hong Kong Independent Shorts

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RHYTHMS

There have, of course, always been short films in Hong Kong. These were the usual fare: newsreels, government information and propaganda films, commercials, trailers, professional documentaries (one should mention the anthropological films of the late Hugh Baker which captured the rites and rituals of Southern China), and amateur films. I am concerned here, however, with avant-garde, experimental, alternative and independent (fiction, documentary and animation) short films outside the mainstream.

That there should even be an independent short film practice worth mentioning in Hong Kong is perhaps unusual. The Hong Kong film industry has always been dominated by mainstream, 35mm commercial products, first by directors trained in pre-1949 China or in the local studios; and then by the second generation of indigenous Hong Kong filmmakers who studied in the West (shamefully the Hong Kong Government has never seen the need to establish a proper film school for Cantonese language production). Within this context, the independent short film in Hong Kong has served two important purposes: first, it has represented the possibilities of an alternative cinematic expression outside the commercial mainstream; and, second, it has helped to encourage and 'train' aspiring young filmmakers, a number of whom subsequently entered the industry.

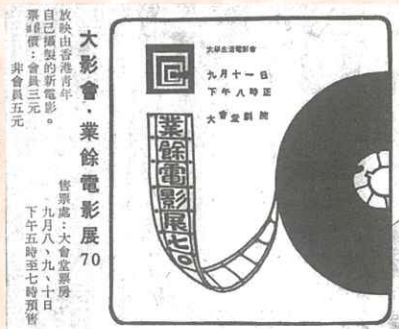
The development of the independent short film in Hong Kong has been bound up with cine-clubs, precariously financed festivals, and the passion of a small core of socially and artistically engaged

enthusiasts in a city-colony which has generally ignored the situation of its local artists and denigrated their value over the foreign product.

In essence, the short film movement in Hong Kong stems from 1966 with the College Cine Club, centred around "College Life" monthly, a magazine for college students. This movement was born during the time of the Cultural Revolution in China, and a growing awareness in Hong Kong of the new wave of cinemas from Europe and the American underground movement. A number of important figures in Hong Kong film culture emerged during this period: Kam Ping-hing (filmmaker and critic), Law Kar (critic), Sek Kei (critic), Ada Loke (critic), Lau Shing-hon (film director and critic), Ng Ho (television executive), Wong Kee-chee (filmmaker and record producer) and Lin Nien-tung (film historian and scriptwriter) and Sai Sai (filmmaker).

There were three important institutions in the development of the independent short film movement. The Phoenix Cine Club, established in the 1976, acted as a focus for the growing number of filmmakers and film enthusiasts. Under filmmakers such as So Kin-wing and Chan Tin-shing, then, later, rock music promoter Vicky Leong, and, later still, film and video maker May Fung (Fung Mei-wah) it showed independent films from the West, some classic works (booked from cultural agencies such as the Goethe Institut and the Alliance Française), and organised an annual independent short film festival. Much of the work was made in Super-8, although some works were made in 16mm (mostly by Hong Kong students, such as Allen Fong (Fong Yuk-ping), who had studied overseas). The second institution of importance was the Communications Department at Hong Kong's Baptist College which began offering training in film and video in the mid-1970s as part of a journalism course. As the only department of its kind, it attracted postgraduates such as filmmakers Allen Fong and Apple Kwen (Kwen Park-huen) to teach, cameraman George Chan (Chan Lok-ye) and historian Lin Nien-tung. The third institution that was of some significance was the establishment of the Film Culture Centre of Hong Kong in 1977. Initiated by young professional filmmakers and critics, the Centre set out to provide technical support and training to aspiring filmmakers, as well as mostly programmes of Hong Kong and Chinese films which had long been ignored by most of the community.

The Hong Kong short film movement is a very diverse historical territory and for the sake of manageability, I have divided this survey into four categories: documentaries and animation; the Phoenix Cine Club group; the 'social realist' works inspired by Allen Fong; and the 'alternative' works fathered by Charles Ng (Ng Sing-foon). There were, of course, overlaps between these groups, and this division does not imply any rivalry between them (indeed they were supportive of each other).



Documentaries and Animation

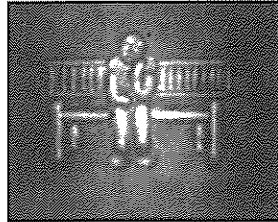
This was perhaps the most conventional stream of the Hong Kong independent short film movement. It is dominated by two main figures: Lo King-wah, who started a socially engaged documentary group (with Ambrose Law, Apo Leung and Stephen Teo) known as Action Films; and Neco Lo (Lo Tsi-ying), Hong Kong's best animator.

Lo King-wah emerged through the Phoenix Film Club scene with short films such as *No More Wedding*, a satirical look at relationships, and documentaries of engagement like *Solidarity with El Salvador*, which he shot about student activities during his study at York University in Canada. Lo's later work was more substantial, his two short narrative films *Whimpers* (1982, 40mins) and *Introduction* (1983, 40mins) deal with the student milieu, in the case of the former, the friendship between two girls, and in the latter, a group of intellectuals who are unable to break out of their limited social circle. While Lo's fiction work leaves something to be desired (*Whimpers*, for example, appears rather native), his later 'documentaries' are more interesting. The most substantial of these is *The Incident* (1984, 40mins), an episodic film in Super-8 about a group of young people and their hesitation about social and political involvement during an industrial dispute. The starting point for the film was an incident when the Hong Kong police arrested a local member of the Trotskyite Fourth International Group who was handing out leaflets to workers in Hong Kong's industrial area.

Action Films went on to make a number of films and videos, in part related to the work of the Christian Industrial Committee in Hong Kong, an important organisation fighting for workers' rights under the abuses perpetrated by the colonial Hong Kong Government in collusion with sweat shop capitalists. Action Films' first full-scale production was *War of Positions* which covered the Hong Kong Government's first attempts at 'democracy' in the colony (in effect a move towards token elected representation at the minor district level). Using a number of Super-8 cameras to follow the candidates, in particular the young grass-roots democrat (at least at the time) Frederick Fung, the film takes on an urgency that is totally in tune with the anticipation of the period. In the long term the film should have its place as a historical document. Action Films later produced Stephen Teo's fiction features, *Bejalai*, shot in his native Sarawak. Like the thrust of all Action Films' products, the film is strongly rooted in social reality, in this case the story of a man from the country who is forced to move from his village to the city because of the government's policy to tear down the natural forest that is the villagers' livelihood.

Neco Lo was born in Hong Kong in 1960 and, since the late 1970s, has stood for all that is independent animation in Hong Kong. Working full time as an illustrator/designer in the government station, Radio Television Hong Kong, Lo started the Single Frame Animation Centre in the early 1980s. Although he also made puppet animation films, it is from this period that Lo developed his trade-mark style of 'sand' animation (Lo draws his individual frames in sand on a back-lit glass pane to produce silhouetted images with visually exciting transitions). All Lo's work stems from fiction and fantasy – the charming puppet piece on a writer's block in 1980, *Night of a Sleepy Writer*; the nightmarish masterpiece, *The Man Who Shot Snapping Turtles* (1982, 10mins), based on a short story by Edmund Wilson; and the anxieties of youth in *Senpei's Summer* (1982, 14mins).

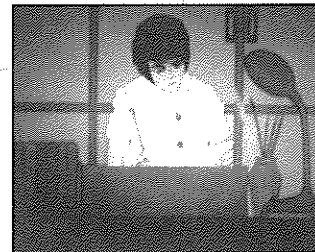
Eleanor Rigby (1980)



Blue Moon (1979)



Lonely Ship (1978)



The Phoenix Cine Club Group

The lingering characteristic of the Phoenix Cine Club group was its diversity that finally resulted in a frustration in its direction. For most of its existence, however (the group dissolved in the later 1980s), Phoenix provided an invaluable focus for the many young people interested in films and filmmaking in the 70s and 80s. Almost all independent short filmmakers at one point or another passed through the Phoenix Cine Club, including Neco Lo, Lo King-wah, Jim Shum (Shum Sing-tak), Apple Kwen, etc., who are dealt with in the other categories.

Works from the Phoenix Cine Club ranged from the experimental, such as Dominique Lui's new age visions of ancient Chinese poems in *The Legend of the Dragon* (1981), to straightforward documentary in Joyce Lam's *Chiu Chow Opera* (1979) and Chan Ting-ching's *Mak Siu-tong and his Puppet Shows* (1981) which are models of the genre, to Apple Kwen's work. The work is also variable in quality – Lai Hok-lim's *67-76* (1980), for example, is an experimental investigation

into the political, social and economic development of Hong Kong from 1967 to 1976 which gets stalled in the filmmaker's 'symbolic' performance; which So Kin-wing's work such as *A Creative Journey* (1978, 19mins), which documents a painter's thoughts and art, was generally solid.

Apart from all the documentaries, experiments and attempts at more conventional pieces, the Phoenix work should perhaps be remembered for its exposure of some filmmakers who went into the commercial industry. Undoubtedly the best of the group was Eddie Fong (Fong Ling-ching), who went on to direct *An Amorous Woman of the Tang Dynasty* (1984), *Kawashima Yoshiko* (1990) and *Private Eye Blues* (1994) and who is also active as producer and writer of a number of films, including those of his wife, Clara Law (*Farewell China, Autumn Moon*, etc.). Fong's short film work includes the Super-8 *Leaving Home* (1975, 20mins) about a woman who, just released from a rehabilitation centre, recalls how she was deceived by her boyfriend, the 16mm visual poem *Flame* (1979), and one of Hong Kong cinema's lost Super-8 masterpiece, *Painter* (1980). The film begins with the extreme close-up of a paint-brush and paint stroke and what appears to be a very serious work. Gradually, the camera zooms back to show a Vietnamese Chinese painter working on a kitschy Western landscape of the tourist variety. The camera then moves back further to show some fifty identical paintings which the artist is working on, in a very seedy looking basement. The film goes on to explore the painter's thoughts and fantasies (at one point he fantasies an angel walking past while he is having a coffee in a cafe). But it is in that first opening sequence that Fong already announces some of his preoccupations – the contradictions of life between the city and the country, between the interior and exterior, and of the anxieties of the transplanted artist (a growing preoccupation with Fong as he and his wife prepare to move to Australia before 1997).

Other filmmakers who went on to become commercial directors were Terry Tong (Tong Kay-ming) whose rather gentle 16mm documentary portrait of the contrasts between an old and young artist in *The Art of Ding* (1977, 22mins) sits rather uncomfortably with the violence of his later work such as *Coolie Killer* (1982, written by Eddie Fong) and *Yellow Peril* (1984). Another notable 'graduate' from the independent short film ranks was Alex Cheung (Cheung Kwok-ming) who built up a reputation as an experimental filmmaker, e.g. the 16mm short *Come Together* (1974) which uses the Beatles song as an accompaniment to his portrayal of a street wanderer. Cheung later went on to make one of the best works of the Hong Kong New Wave, *Man on the Brink* (1981).

Phoenix also provided a platform for the work of May Fung (Fung Mei-wah) whose earlier work on Super-8 was in the fiction mode, usually live action narrative but also a couple of animation works, e.g. *Pieces* (1977, 15mins) which deals with a young girl who saves up to buy a doll only to find that it has already been bought, and *Undercurrent* (1980, 9mins) about an outsider who reacts differently to two persons who need his help. Fung, and later Ellen Pau (who made experimental Super-8 works such as *Garden of Eden, Whether Be*, 1979) eventually moved to the forefront as independent women filmmakers. Fung's work definitely picked up after she formed the Afterimage Group and started to work in video which enabled lengthier explorations of feminism, e.g. *The Second Sex* (video, 1988) is a valid attempt at uniting structural rigour with a presentation of female repression in Hong Kong. Later, Fung and Pau brought their video talents to the experimental theatre group, Zuni Icosahedron (see below).



Mak Siu-tong and his Puppet Shows (1981)

Hong Kong Independent Shorts

"Social Realism"

Allen Fong was an inspiration and supporter of independents who wanted to make works that were fictional but more related to their own reality. These filmmakers were interested in moving into features production, but not into the genre cinema that dominates the local industry. Fong's own work, docu-fiction concentrating on the realities of contemporary Hong Kong society, set the tone and aspect for this stream of the independent short filmmakers.

Fong himself was no stranger to the short film. His film school work at USC consisted essentially of three short films, including the very interesting *Always Up in the Air* (1975, 9mins), a documentary shot in the US about a man walking on stilts. Upon his return to Hong Kong in 1975, Fong entered the Government station, Radio Television Hong Kong where he shot 18 films (between 22 and 45 mins) for the station's *Below the Lion Rock* series. To some extent we have to discount this work from the independent short film scene (and, therefore, also the episodes shot by other directors such as Ann Hui), but the influence of the social realist, short form dramas appearing on HK Television at the time (not only on the *Lion Rock* series but also at TVB with the *North Star* series with episodes by Yim Ho, Patrick Tam, etc) cannot be ignored as some influence, not only on the independent short filmmakers but also on the Hong Kong 'new wave' when it finally appeared in the late 70s/early 80s.

This stream of independence is best represented by Apple Kwen and Cheng Chi-hung. Born in 1952, Kwen graduated from Hong Kong's Polytechnic's Design Department in 1978 (he later taught in Hong Kong's Baptist College Communications Department). Starting off in an experimental mode, Kwen gradually found his vocabulary in a sort of docu-fiction, combining a sensitivity for the dramatic moment in an ordinary

Baptist College Communications Department Students 1980



situation with warm comedy. His short film from 1980, *Photos*, is a sardonic tale on families taking photos of each other in Tiananmen Square in China. Kwen developed his docu-fiction mode with *Hee Wong Terrace* (1981), a 16mm prize-winning work about a protagonist whose memories are prompted when he learns of the destruction of an old, run down part of Hong Kong *With Below the Railroad* (1984), Kwen developed his use of the docu-fiction pioneered by Allen Fong. In this 16mm short, Kwen deals with the relationship between an old man and a young boy and, in metaphoric term, the relationship between China (the old man crosses into China by the railroad) and Hong Kong (the boy who is left behind). What is striking about the film is its production value - beautifully shot and acted with technical support from Baptist College's facilities and students. The experience led Kwen to direct his first, and independently produced 16mm feature *Reunion* (1986) which deals, quite brutally, with an unemployed man, his estranged wife, and the prostitute he has set up in an apartment (the Chinese title of the film refers to the 'one-woman brothels' prevalent at the time in Hong Kong).

Cheng Chi-hung, born in 1962, made his mark with a short Super-8 film, *Revisit* (1982) that deals with a former student returning to the Film Culture Centre after two years. In 1983 he produced and directed the 2-hour Super-8 feature, *Between Stops*. The film cost HK\$10,000 and was released on video in 1983. The film (US\$1,200), and was shown at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in a limited run. *Between Stops* tells of Ah Cheung who, while waiting for the exams, spends his university summer vacation on one of outlying islands where he develops a close friendship with a teenaged girl whom he tutors, and better understands his relationship with his ex-girlfriend. With its deliberate, slow pace and fixed camera shots, and youth milieu, the film reads as something between Ozu and Truffaut. In the same year, Cheung took a major role in Allen Fong's feature, *Ah Ying*. In 1984 Cheng returned to the short film form with *The School Report* (1984, Super-8, 20mins) that, told from one student's point of view, follows the anxieties of several students as they go to school to receive their report cards.



Short Film Creative Workshop of Kwen Park-huen

Much of the impetus of trying to create a commercially viable social realist/art cinema culminated in the formation of the Hong Kong Film Culture Centre in 1977. Fong's second feature, *Ah Ying* (1983) is precisely about this important episode in Hong Kong's developing film scene - the establishment of the Hong Kong International Film Festival provided a prestigious showcase for the short film independents, a revitalised film magazine, *Film Biweekly* (created from the ashes of *Close Up* magazine and edited by Law Wai-ming and then Li Cheuk-to), disseminated a spectrum of ideas and focused on the new Hong Kong filmmakers.



Law Wai-ming in 1980

However, other trends and currents were simmering under the surface and from quite a different and previously 'immature' area of Hong Kong's burgeoning cultural scene.

The Alternative Cinema

The Alternative Cinema

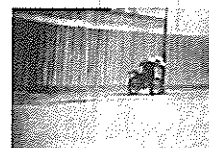
Working our way past the bulk of short film work in the 1970s today, it is possible to see the first half of that decade as being dominated by perhaps the most important filmmaker of the entire movement, Charles Ng (Ng Sing-foon). Ng was a TV producer in the industry, but also an independent filmmaker. His work at the time still defines the parameters and characteristics by which Hong Kong independent should be judged.

Unfortunately only two of Ng's films, both made in the 1970s, survive today (Ng has never made a feature) - *Fly* (1973) and his masterpiece *Blackout* (1975). Both films, unusual for the short film genre are properly lit and staged, shot in 16mm with synchronised sound, carefully structured and edited - that is, technically sophisticated and accomplished compared with the bulk of contemporary experimental films. But, more importantly, Ng stakes out new territory in trying to make, as aesthetic strategy, films that used the conventions of television and commercial cinema but ended up looking like neither. Ng eschews the characteristic marks of the experimental cinema (handheld, waving camera, meandering narrative, optical effects) and instead adopts the rigour and economy of technical clarity. *Fly* (co-produced by Wong Kee-chee) begins as a standard film about dance, except that the dancer himself is the antithesis to the common expectation - fat and awkward. Similarly, his subject - not a graceful swan, but a domestic fly, it is a film entirely of reverse expectations and knowing absurdity.

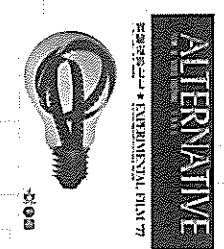
Blackout is presented as a comedy of an independent filmmaker played by Ng himself trying to coax heady performances from his incompetent stars. Just as everything seems to click and he gets ready for a take, there is a blackout over the city. The film then continues with lengths of black film and credits and a comical soundtrack. *Blackout* is one of the few independent Hong Kong films that manages to link aesthetic concerns and audience pleasures. The frustration of artistic production, and making films with neither light nor normally exposed film (ironically, although the director in the film cannot actually shoot film, the actual film continues with black film) are turned into an aesthetic based on the comedy and economy of means. *Blackout* appropriately was Ng's last completed film and a sad reminder that he finished nothing more in the decade (although Roger Garcia did attempt to produce one of Ng's films in the 1980s; see below).



What the World Needs Now is Love (1970)



The Great Chase (1970)



Today *Blackout* stands as a very interesting symbol of independent Hong Kong cinema: frustrated, invisible and unachieved.

With Ng's absence, the avant-garde alternative cinema became dormant in the late 70s, even more so with the ascendance of the social realist. But the avant-garde was not dead. It was about to be reborn in an unexpected manner. With the performance piece, *Journey to the East*, a mixture of dance, electronic music, incantations, video and film taking place in several parts and often in different locations (one version used the different spaces - theatres, galleries, dance rehearsal rooms of the Hong Kong Arts Centre), Hong Kong culture was dragged into late 20th century modernist art. The event was conceived and orchestrated by Danny Yung and Gus Wong.

Yung had studied and worked in the US, and in New York had formed an avant-garde group called Signifier (including Terence Chang, who later produced John Woo's films). His return to Hong Kong was marked by a prolific period of performance art, climaxing in the *Journey* pieces. Yung himself had made Super-8 films, presenting, in 1979 and 1980, a series of inventive Super-8 animations using Chinese calligraphic characters. In line with his ironic approach to politics, Yung took Maoist slogans and turned them around. *Serve the People, People Take Note* and *#@** (all Super-8, about 3 mins) play endlessly on the various possibilities of the Chinese ideogram. Yung's masterpiece was *Journey* (1981, 10 mins) which is composed of three shots taken with a Super-8 camera in China. In the first, a couple part in a street; followed by a second shot tracking along the Shanghai Bund in a ship; to the last shot as a sequence from Sun Yu's 1934 classic agitmelodrama silent, *Big Road*, where a woman struggles through ice and snow with her baby.

In 1981 Yung and Wong, together with a number of younger artistes such as James Wong and Jim Shum (Shum Sing-tak) formed an avant-garde theatre group, Zuni Icosahedron, to continue the work begun in *Journey to the East*. Zuni actively promoted a commingling of the arts into multimedia events and extended various Super-8 practices into video art. By this time Yung was dividing his time between Hong Kong, where he was actively managing Zuni and directing most of its stage productions, and San Francisco where he was producing what eventually became *Dim Sum* (Wayne Wang, 1983). The conjunction of an avant-garde Hong Kong artist and an apparently innovative Asian American filmmaker should have produced a heavy crossover film. But what emerged in the final version of the film was a heady compromise of the original concept (and a shadow of Yung's version), and so an important opportunity in the development of Hong Kong independent cinema was lost forever.

Yung never made another short film (he has since worked occasionally in short videos), but instead helped to push along Zuni's pre-eminent position in mixed media performance art. In 1982 Zuni, with support from the Goethe Institut, organised Hong Kong's first (and amazingly to this day its only) Video Art Exhibition at the Hong Kong Arts Centre. The event was apocryphal because it marked a turning point, or rather turning away from film to video in the independent short film scene. Ironically, the other moving force behind the exhibition, Jim Shum was about to establish their position as Hong Kong's leading short filmmaker and producer of the 1980s respectively.

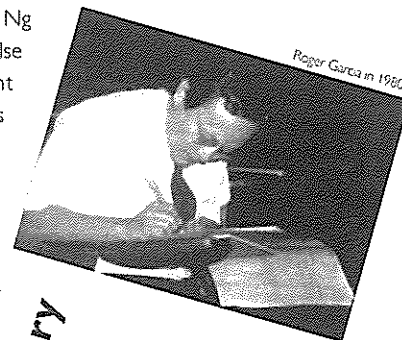
Exploring New Territory

Just as Charles Ng dominated the avant-garde short film in the early 1970s, so too does Jim Shum stand astride the 1980s as Hong Kong's most developed alternative filmmaker. Shum, like Comyn Mo (Mo Man-yu) after him (see below) and Charles Ng before him, is a true original in the Hong Kong film scene. Born in Hong Kong in 1957, Shum trained as a quantity surveyor and began reading, rather than seeing, about Andy Warhol films and other works of the American Underground. Borrowing a Super-8 camera in the late 70s, Shum created his versions of those films. The *Flicker* series (different rates of flickering), the static shot of a naked torso in *Sweet Dream* (1979), *Hand and Falling Object* (1979), all take their cue from the American Underground. But with an important difference: their works adopt a puckish, fanciful spirit. They are less than serious, but still press on. Shum's best work from this period includes *Rhythm* (1980), a sublime work, similar in construction to Yung's *Journey*, with three static shots reminiscent of Straub – flesh against stone, a tree in a cemetery where the "wind listeth where it will."

In 1981 Shum linked up with Roger Garcia, a previous director of the Hong Kong International Film Festival and film critics who made the essay film, *New Maps of the City* (1981), about the urban discourse 'in-between' the east and west. With Klaus Vetter, then director of the Goethe Institut and Ingo Petzke, and experimental filmmaker from Germany, they produced the experimental documentary, *Hong Kong Topography*. The film is unique in Hong Kong cinema as the first real foreign co-production in the experimental film field. In 1983 Garcia started the Modern Films Production group to promote alternative films from Hong Kong (and later Raymond Red's films in the Philippines). In the 1980s many of the Modern Films were shown at international film festivals and in arthouse cinemas. Shum's *The Contract*, with the actress Pia Ho, was the first Modern Film. In a series of unusual tracking shots and flickering computer word processing images, Shum filmed Garcia's contract with him intercut with Pia Ho in innocent and suggestive poses on the floor. Shum's subsequent film work, all with Modern Films and produced by Garcia, took on a variety of forms. His finest achievement in short films of the 1980s was perhaps *The Cities Trilogy* which consisted of creative short documentaries shot in Beijing, Tokyo and Taipei. Seen today, these films capture an excitement of the spirit and time in the mid-1980s that has all but disappeared. The Taipei episode, *Rocky 73*, is the finest of all the pieces (although it was *Peking Beijing* that was sold to Channel 4) depicting a Taipei confused between the old and the new guards. In a sense, it is as much about Shum's relation to film culture as to society. Shum's other trilogy for Modern Films (which Garcia changed to Neo Films for feature production in 1989) consisted of *Surfside* (1986), an interesting three-shot film where most of the narrative takes place in the background, *Poolside* (1987), which deals with the lesbian relationship of two women in a foursome, and the Super-8 feature, *Besides* (1990), which deals with the problems that arise when a male model rebuffs the advances of his artist's girlfriend. The characteristics of Shum's work were basically deconstructed storylines, an interweaving of disparate characters, rigorous montage, and an acute sensitivity to the rhythms of the image and sound (Shum himself is an accomplished soundman and composer/musician in the commercial industry, e.g. the soundtrack for Kirk Wong's futuristic kung-fu classic, *Health Warning* (1983)). Modern Film's most ambitious project was Shum's experimental 16mm feature (the first and to date the only work of its kind), *Sand* (1986), starring the late sculptor, Antonio Mak, as a man who has lived various lives in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and edited in a radical fashion by Eddie Fong (Fong Ling-ching).

Modern Films helped to define the alternative Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s not only through the production of Shum's work, but also backing the work of Comyn Mo and various others. Mo, like Ng and Shum before him, is another unique character in the Hong Kong film scene. Born in 1960, Mo came into prominence with *Six Films by Comyn Mo* in 1984. Modern Films subsequently produced all his Super-8 and 16mm films such as *Seeing* (1986), a film about ghosts and dance that takes place in an old colonial building and *Four Films by Comyn Mo* (1988), a series of poem films shot in different locations and at different speeds. Unlike Shum's work, Mo's films were looser in construction, more experimental, and mostly centred around Mo's body (often naked and physically contorted), his meditations and his asthma. Mo later went on to make the enigmatic *ngo5* – the title based on the Chinese romanised term for "I". Some of Mo's remarks on the film crystallised his approach to filmmaking. "It is rather like looking at a very familiar character for too long so that the character becomes utterly strange. The whole film has a fragmented feel. Dreams, memories – the thing which forms part of our being – do they belong to the outside world or are they reflections of our soul?"

The Modern Films production list runs to about 30 films and two features. Most of these were by Shum and Mo, but Garcia also produced works by Stephen Teo, the experimental documentaries *Meditations: India* (1984) and *Meditations: River* (1984), the latter shot in Sarawak; Jerry Liu (who went on to write feature films by Leong Po-chi and Tong Au) who made the rather unusual *Transatlantic* (1984) with soundtrack by writers Linda Jaivin and Ian Buruma; and other works by Law Wai-ming and Simon Ko. Garcia also financed the unfinished and untitled short film by Charles Ng in 1984. The film was apparently based on Ng being mistaken for someone else in Beijing, with subsequent Kafka-esque and comic results with the Chinese authorities. Sadly, the film was never finished.



Exploring New Territory

The Current Situation

The peak of the Hong Kong independent short film was in the 1970s and 1980s. With the gradual demise of Super-8 film as the medium of choice among independents, and with the rise of video, the short film per se went into a decline in the late 1980s. Many of the practitioners from the 1980s have also moved on to other things. Apple Kwen and Cheng Chi-hung are active in the industry; Jim Shum went to Taiwan as a music-video director and soundman/composer; Roger Garcia is a producer in America; Charles Ng is a newspaper editor in Australia; Comyn Mo, who was the newcomer to the Modern Films group in the mid-80s, is now a 'veteran' of the Hong Kong independent scene. May Fung and Ellen Pau work with Danny Yung in Zuni Icosahedron (although they still continue to make films and video).

Yet there are still short filmmakers in Hong Kong. In 1992 Stanley Kwan (director of *Rouge*, *Centre Stage*, etc.) directed *Too Happy for Words* written by Edward Lam, previously with Zuni Icosahedron, produced by Jackie Chan and starring Josephine Siao and Maggie Cheung. Edward Lam's notes for the film *A Woman Is a City and A Woman Is a Woman* related directly to the urban sensibilities of Zuni and Shum's Modern Films of the 1980s. The mise en scène of the piece, however, is rather different – heavily stylised as a fashion statement, with over-the-top, confused performances by the two stars. Kwan's short is a curious nexus of the TV commercial and the avant-garde stage.

Although the short film in Hong Kong became dormant in the late 1980s, the mid-1990s have been characterised by a revival of sorts. In 1993 the city's municipal authorities (which also run the film festival) initiated the Hong Kong Independent Short Film Competition. A healthy number of entries showed that filmmakers had perhaps not disappeared, but due to the lack of venues, had been hidden away. Most of the films were now made in 16mm with some work on Super-8. Lau Ying-keung's *Late Night* (1992, 16mm, 32 mins) was the outright narrative winner. Its portrayal of the breakdown in communication between a young man and woman was stylish, using a slow 360-degree pan to show the 'confusion' between the past and present perceptions of the characters. Chu Shum's animation film *Toxic Trip* (1991, 16mm, 5 mins) is a humorous clay animation with an environmental message. Ho Kwan's *Body & Soul* (1992, 16mm, 9 mins) is also interesting in its depiction of a woman who finds out that her boyfriend is a transsexual.

Entries for the 1994 short film competition were fewer than the preceding year, but there were some outstanding works. Mark Chan's (Chan Kam-lok) *Pagliacci* (1993, 16mm, 26mins) is a heartfelt film about the perennial Hong Kong theme of identity and place. A Hong Kong mime artist living abroad decided to return home, just before the Communist Chinese takeover in 1997. In a slow motion scene she wonders whether she is a butterfly having a nightmare. There is a melancholy and loneliness to the film that speaks more about living in Hong Kong today than its countless commercial films.

One waits with some trepidation for the next wave of new Hong Kong independent short filmmakers. In Hong Kong the memory of culture and culture makers is short, but one hopes that the spirit of independent cinema that was established in the 1970s and 80s will survive, whether on video or film will become less important. The important fact will be whether independent cinema will survive in the face of an increasingly commercial industry and the political changes after 1997.

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The Current Situation

方令正 Eddie Fong (Fong Ling-ching)
方育平 Allen Fong
毛文羽 Comyn Mo (Mo Man-yu)
朱迅 Chu Shum
何秀萍 Pia Ho
何群 Ho Kwan
吳承歡 Charles Ng (Ng Sing-foon)
沈聖德 Jim Shum (Shum Sing-tak)
林年同 Lin Nien-tung
林奕華 Edward Lam
金炳興 Kam Ping-hing
唐基明 Terry Tong (Tong Kay-ming)
區丁平 Tony Au
張建德 Stephen Teo
張家振 Terence Chang
梁惠琪 Vicky Leong
梁普智 Leong Po-chi
梁寶林 Apo Leong
陳天成 Chan Tin-Shing
陳廷清 Chan Ting-ching
陳樂儀 George Chan
陳錦樂 Mark Chan (Chan Kam-lok)
陸離 Ada Loke
章國明 Alex Cheung (Cheung Kwok-ming)
麥少棠 Mak Siu-tong
麥顯揚 Antonio Mak (sculptor)
馮美華 May Fung (Fung Mei-wah)
馮檢基 Frederick Fung
黃奇智 Wong Kee-chee
廖永亮 Jerry Liu
榮念曾 Danny Yung
劉應強 Lau Ying-keung
鄭智雄 Cheng Chi-hung
盧子英 Neco Lo (Lo Tsi-ying)
鮑詠倫 Ellen Pau
羅澍基 Ambrose Law
羅維明 Law Wai-ming
譚家明 Patrick Tam
關柏煊 Kwen Park-huen
關錦鵬 Stanley Kwan
嚴浩 Yim Ho
蘇建榮 So Kin-wing

(按中文筆劃序排列)