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Moving images

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MOVING IMAGES

All the seats were occupied at the HKDI's auditorium in May for a screening of *Aberdeen*, the latest movie written and directed by Pang Ho-cheung. The audience was totally absorbed by the images on the screen as they laughed and cried over the engaging storyline. The film was presented as part of the HKDI Presents Film Series and was followed by a sharing session with the director.

As one of the most popular Hong Kong directors in the past decade, Pang is well known for creating films infused with authentic Hong Kong flavours, and *Aberdeen* is no exception. The movie is an intimate portrait of a modern Hong Kong family that gradually discloses their secrets. As the film unfolds conflicts among three generations of relatives are resolved.

The name of the movie, *Aberdeen* is suggestive and eloquent. Aberdeen is the place where the British forces first landed in Hong Kong in 1841, marking the beginning of Hong Kong's modern history. In Cantonese, Aberdeen is known as "Hong Kong Tsai", which means "the son of Hong Kong" or "little Hong Kong".

There are many Hong Kong signatures ingeniously woven through the movie, which represents a microcosm of the city's society. *Aberdeen* depicts controversial family issues with keen observation and local audiences have easily found emotional resonance in the film, which reflects a sense of collective confusion that Hong Kongers sometimes have about their own identity.

"There is a traffic sign indicating 'All Destinations' in Connaught Road and it haunts me every time I see it," says Pang. "Is there really a road that can lead to all destinations? What are the destinations for us Hong Kongers? Where do we want to arrive and where are we going exactly?"

He resolved to use the traffic sign in the film to induce reflections among the audience. "To me, the journey might be much more important than the destination."

The golden age of Hong Kong cinema may have passed but several productions with a local focus have recently received critical appreciation and good box office results, suggesting an important revival is under way. LIBBY ZENG met the talented directors behind two projects to explore their exceptional success.

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When filming *Aberdeen*, Pang used a large number of out-of-focus shots in order to create a sense of fantastical reality.

"Normally in a movie, every shot is clear and an out-of-focus shot might be considered unprofessional, but the world we see in real life is not like this," Pang says. "I wanted to illustrate family life in a real and authentic way, like a documentary. What happens next in life is always unpredictable, so the out-of-focus shots bring a natural beauty to the film."

Aberdeen is one of the two opening features at this year's Hong Kong International Film Festival. The other one is *The Midnight After*, a sci-fi movie directed by Fruit Chan. Adapted from a popular online novel, *The Midnight After* depicts a disturbing journey in which a group of passengers on a minibus discover that Hong Kong has become an empty, lifeless city.

Chan also came to HKDI to share his valuable insights with students in the *Successful Branding Journey* seminar. *The Midnight After* offers a captivating visual and spiritual feast for Hong Kong audiences, fusing popular social issues with Chan's iconic black humour. Although some critics said the movie dwelled too much on politics, Chan believes his production is a precise reproduction of current

Hong Kong society.

"Hong Kongers are more concerned about politics now. Political issues have become a common topic at the dinner table," he said.

Famous for his handover trilogy, the multi-award winning *Made in Hong Kong*, *The Longest Summer* and *Little Cheung*, Chan has always been dedicated to capturing the "real" Hong Kong by bringing to the screen stories of ordinary citizens combined with intense social commentary.

Co-productions are very common in today's Hong Kong film industry, mostly with funding from Mainland China and talents and ideas from Hong Kong. Some people think this kind of production deprives Hong Kong movies of their strong indigenous flavour because filmmakers have to pay attention to the tastes of Mainland audiences as well.

Although *The Midnight After* is not a co-production, Chan believes the trend toward movies that rely on Mainland funding is inevitable.

"The local market is saturated and it's hard for filmmakers to survive," says Chan, who sees nothing wrong with co-production if it is handled correctly.

"I think co-production has been politicalised by a lot of people," he says, claiming that what really matters is the way a director deals with his sources of funding. Chan believes a co-production doesn't



PREVIOUS PAGE & OPPOSITE PAGE ABOVE & BELOW SCENES FROM *ABERDEEN* DIRECTED BY PANG HO-CHEUNG
THIS PAGE TOP & BELOW PANG HO-CHEUNG (FRONT ROW CENTER), GIGI LEUNG (LEFT OF PANG HO-CHEUNG) AND KEARAN PANG WITH THE AUDIENCE AT THE FILM SCREENING AND SHARING SESSION

PICTURE GOLDEN SCENE CO. LTD & FRUIT CHAN



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have to mean sacrificing the interests and tastes of local audiences. "Filmmakers should not refuse good resources or great stories as long as they stick to their principles and consciences."

Pang also shares Chan's view about cooperating with Mainland China. He believes it's beneficial and inspiring for the Hong Kong film industry to join hands with different countries and cultures.

"Every place has its advantages and disadvantages. For Mainland China, the disadvantage is its existing censorship which discourages variety, but the advantage is that it has a huge market to support productions with large budgets." As Pang said, a good director should always strive to find the balance point.

Pang and Chan have a lot more in common than a shared view of co-funding. Both of them are versatile, have a good sense of humour, laugh a lot, play multiple roles as film director, producer and screenwriter, use Hong Kong as their main subject but have also explored the Mainland market. Last but not least, they both have a down-to-earth attitude towards filmmaking.

However, this doesn't mean they are conservative or reluctant to innovate. Creativity is one of the most important ingredients in their recipes for excellent movies. They always think outside the box, spare no efforts to transcend themselves and bring excitement and surprises to their audience.

"The independent film directors in Hong Kong are too ready to forgive themselves. They always think it's acceptable for an independent film to be low quality with simple and crude settings because its budget is

ABOVE & OPPOSITE PAGE
TOP SCENES FROM *THE
MIDNIGHT AFTER* DIRECTED
BY FRUIT CHAN
RIGHT AND BELOW FRUIT
CHAN AT HKDI



limited. But that idea is totally wrong," says Chan.

Chan believes it's important for directors to overcome budget restrictions and try every means to convey their ideas. There are dazzling fireworks in *The Longest Summer*, which Chan inventively "borrowed" from the opening ceremony of Tsing Ma Bridge in 1997. He also "borrowed" the scenes of Hong Kong's handover ceremony in the same year, when vehicles of the People's Liberation Army rolled into the city.

"Even a high budget movie can't afford such splendid scenes, but I managed to do it," says Chan.

To Pang, it's a different story. He innovatively broke the traditional concept of family movies by adopting several magnificent and eccentric scenes in *Aberdeen*, including a life-sized mechanical blue whale (around 30 feet long), a human-sized chameleon model and a large paper-made architectural model of Hong Kong.

These peculiar scenes capture the absurd in the mundane realities of our everyday life, leaving a strong impression on audiences that make *Aberdeen* stand out from other family movies.

Good stories are always deeply rooted in our daily life. If you take a look at the work of these two directors it's easy to see that the stories they narrate are part of our world. We are all familiar with them and that is why we relate to them and are touched by them. It is the particular twist of creativity and personal traits they add to the stories that make their films remarkable, and that draw us, enchanted, into their frames. ㊦