



CHU, Yiu-Wai Stephen.
2022. *Main Melody Films: Hong Kong Directors in Mainland China*.
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In 2003, few Hong Kong film fans could have imagined that a mere 14 years later Andrew Lau 劉偉強, director of the enormously successful *Infernal Affairs* crime films (2002–2003), would be helming *The Founding of an Army* (2017), a mainland Chinese propaganda film meant to commemorate the founding of the People's Liberation Army. Lau's trajectory as a filmmaker was certainly not unique: a great many established Hong Kong directors had already made a northbound journey, with big names such as Dante Lam 林超賢 and Tsui Hark 徐克 similarly contributing films to the nascent genre of "main melody blockbusters." It is this phenomenon that forms the subject of the new monograph by Stephen Chu Yiu-Wai, professor and director of the Hong Kong Studies Programme at the University of Hong Kong.

Chu, who has written numerous books on Hong Kong culture, presents this latest monograph as a kind of sequel to his *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China* (2013) and *Found in Transition: Hong Kong Studies in the Age of China* (2018) (p. 1–2). These two earlier works were uncannily timely, coming out just before the Umbrella Movement (2014) and the 2019 Hong Kong protests, respectively. Read today, they capture the zeitgeist of those moments remarkably well: linked together by Chu's postcolonial theory-influenced perspective and his despair about the perceived "death" of Hong Kong culture, these two books subtly reflected the broader cultural shift towards localist concerns, with the second book markedly angrier in tone than the first. As Chu writes in the acknowledgments of *Found in Transition*: "Being born, growing up, and living in Hong Kong, I have never felt out of place until lately. In a place where the impact of the rise of China is most intensely felt, I have begun to feel foreign at home" (xii). Given this sentiment and the momentous events of 2019, it is therefore surprising that in this third entry of his "Hong Kong studies" series Chu turns his attention to Hong Kong filmmakers' participation in mainland Chinese "main melody" (*zhuxuanlü* 主旋律, also translated as "leitmotif") films. He

explains his rationale as follows: "to create its own fate, Hong Kong has to consider how to retain its own characteristics given its inevitable integration into the mainland" (p. 3). His approach in *Main Melody Films* is therefore to look for the "trace" or "absent presence" of "Hong Kong reference" in mainland cultural production, and to turn away from the "mainland-Hong Kong dichotomy" (p. 227).

Certainly, the recent commercialisation of "main melody" films is a major development in Chinese cinema, and the unexpected role of veteran Hong Kong directors in this commercialisation is worth taking stock of. In the introduction, Chu sketches out a brief history of the term "main melody film," noting its first use by the then Head of the National Film Bureau in 1987 and by President Jiang Zemin 江澤民 in 1994; the category's growing commercialisation in landmark films such as Feng Xiaogang's 馮小剛 *Assembly* (2007) and Han Sanping's 韓三平 and Huang Jianxin's 黃建新 *The Founding of a Republic* (2009); and the hiring of Hong Kong directors to helm some of these films, especially following the success of Tsui Hark's *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014). A largely ignored, state-sponsored undertaking in the 1990s, main melody films are now dominating China's booming domestic box office. Limiting his scope to the 2010s, Chu organises his book by director, starting with chapters on Hong Kong New Wave veterans Tsui Hark and Ann Hui 許鞍華, and then moving on to (slightly) younger directors who mostly made their name in the 1990s and early 2000s, such as Peter Chan 陳可辛, Andrew Lau, Dante Lam, and Herman Yau 邱禮濤. Chapter Seven wraps up the overview by briefly discussing less notable main melody films by other Hong Kong filmmakers, such as John Woo 吳宇森, Gordon Chan 陳嘉上, Alan Mak 麥兆輝, Felix Chong 莊文強, and others. As this chapter overview already indicates, Chu's approach is auteurist: in each chapter he gives a career overview of the director studied before focusing on that director's main melody efforts, which he evaluates primarily by their ability to sustain some of the themes that characterised the director's earlier Hong Kong work.

The surprising choice to pursue what Chu calls "Hong Kong (in China) Studies" (p. 227) was already noted above. Given the wave of award-winning documentaries and indie films coming out of Hong Kong, the rise of a new local television station (ViuTV), and the generation-shifting craze for the boy band Mirror, there seem to be plenty of more pertinent topics to consider in the recently revived academic field of Hong Kong Studies. A more significant shortcoming of the book, however, is that it operates with an overly broad concept of the main melody film, which in some chapters is expanded to cover basically any film by a Hong Kong director aimed primarily at a mainland audience. While state censorship indeed makes it nearly impossible to broach some topics and closes off certain narrative possibilities, describing a film like Herman Yau's *Shock Wave* (2017) as a "quasi-main melody film" (p. 163) creates too monolithic a picture of current mainland Chinese and Hong Kong film production. Related to this, more attention to the specific sociopolitical contexts in which specific main melody films were produced and received would probably have resulted in more varied and deeper readings of specific films than the current narrow focus on Hong Kong filmmakers allows,

especially as these directors generally have limited opportunity to significantly shape these films. These qualms aside, Chu's work brings a major development in Chinese cinema to broader attention and is exemplary in its reference to an impressive range of sources, which testify to a near encyclopaedic knowledge of China's and especially Hong Kong's cinematic output, as well as the rapidly increasing scholarship on these topics.

References

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KOROLEV, Alexander. 2022.
China-Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics.

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The West has pushed Russia's back up against the wall." This sally uttered at the beginning of the war in Ukraine by Hua Chunying 華春瑩, spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is a good illustration of the current proximity between China and Russia. Western strategies have long counted on a façade of friendship, a marriage of reason that hides suspicion and rivalry between Beijing and Moscow. However, for Alexander Korolev, professor at the University of New South Wales and educated in Nanjing and Hong Kong, there is no doubt that the Sino-Russian partnership is structural. He proves this by reviewing the development of the alignment between China and Russia since the fall of the USSR, with reference to official sources and Chinese and Russian archives, illustrating his arguments with a series of clear schematic graphs and tables.

Korolev's first aim is to demonstrate the solidity of Sino-Russian relations, some of which go beyond the framework of more formal alliances despite the absence of a defence pact. The second is to put forward a new theoretical framework for the phenomenon of "alignment" in international relations, the absence or conceptual vagueness of which Korolev deplores in the literature. On the basis of this, the author believes that the strategic alignment between China and Russia will endure, since it is motivated by systemic rather than conjunctural factors.

The work is composed of seven chapters, with the first and last forming the introduction and conclusion. Chapters One and Two present the conceptual context of the study based on a comprehensive survey of the literature, in which well-known names in the theory of alliances (Waltz, Walt, Wilkins) intersect with those of French researchers (Tertrais, Niquet). This clear theoretical framework highlights the absence of an objective method of measuring alignments in foreign affairs. To fill this gap, Korolev suggests a series of military, economic, and diplomatic indicators divided into progressive levels of intensity. He notes that an alignment does not require an alliance, the advantage of which is above all to make official an existing strategic understanding. "To align oneself" would therefore indicate a less formal, but highly structural reality since it is founded on common interests and shared perceptions of the balance of power and international threats. This new tool, tested on the Sino-Russian alignment, might be applied to other situations such as the explicit relationship that exists between Taiwan and the United States, or the vaguer relationship between Iran and China.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five consist of a more empirical demonstration. Korolev first shows how the alignment between China and Russia has progressed since 1990. The interdependence between Moscow and Beijing followed the settling of border issues, and arms sales between the two countries. It was built upon exchanges of military technologies and the integration of their industrial defence bases, ambitious joint exercises that showed a growing level of interoperability between their armed forces, and collaborative projects for the joint development of an early warning system. This all suggests political will and a high level of confidence as well as the premise of an integrated defence policy. For Korolev, even though this progress has been made without a defence pact, the latter is unnecessary since it is already taking shape at a technical level whilst its absence offers flexibility to Moscow and Beijing.

Chapter Four continues by emphasising the concerted opposition of Russia and China to a unipolar world order dominated by the United States, their shared interest in pushing back this influence on their geographical margins, and their joint perception of a military threat towards them on the part of Washington. For Korolev, these elements of rapprochement are systemic and have certainly reached the point of no return. Korolev also questions the geostrategic justification for an American international policy in conflict with both Moscow and Beijing and which strengthens an axis of resistance on which cumulative military spending is close to that of the United States in terms of purchasing power parity. Although the author does not pass judgement on a Western policy justified by Russian and Chinese military movements, the war in Ukraine