

HOUSEKEEPER OF HONG KONG CINEMA THE ROLE OF PRODUCER IN THE SYSTEM OF HONG KONG FILM INDUSTRY

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Abstract: In the 1990s while Hong Kong cinema were better known in the world, the industry operated more like guerilla filmmaking than modern movie business. Interestingly, parallel to the disintegration of the industry, there was the rise of the producers' position and the majority of production executives were women, a sign of progress in contrast to the previous studio era's absence of woman in production and placing the director as center of power. These woman producers were often fondly addressed as "the housekeepers," the matriarch figure in charge of administration. The industry capitalized on women's traditional gender role as caretaker and modern role as executives. Hong Kong producers, men or women, working in an industry going through the double edges of colonialism, capitalism, and globalism, adapted their roles to local socio-cultural context and industry organization structure and played an all-round and supportive role instead of replicating the commander-in-chief role of their Hollywood counterparts. The case of Hong Kong producer shows the inadequacy of existing theories and methodologies to conceptualize industrial models and professional positions situated in different cultural contexts. Studies on Hollywood woman producers often define the gender issue as a woman's issue and overlook the economic reality of American corporate culture and studies on Hollywood studio system often frame the producer-function as an economic issue and overlook the socio-cultural factor in shaping the organization structure and the producer's role in such system. To understand the role of Hong Kong producers, I would propose to theorize from within, contextualizing the system of Hong Kong cinema in the world market and situate the producer within the system of Hong Kong cinema. The case of Hong Kong producers illustrates how the industry draws from traditional cultural practice to adapt to modern global environment in the rapidly growing East Asian region.

In the 1990s, while Hong Kong movies were better known in the world, Hong Kong cinema seemed to regress to a cottage industry comprised of independent productions known for its filmmakers' frantic work style. There was an absence of integrated studios or emphasis on a clear division of labor; directors routinely started shooting without completed scripts and improvisation on the set was the norm. It looked more like guerilla filmmaking than a modern movie business. In the previous era the integrated Shaw studio was regarded as a symbol of the modern film industry in Asia. Interestingly, in the 1990s parallel to the de-integration of the film industry, there was the rise of the position of producers and 70% of the production executives were women. If women occupying an executive position is a sign of progress and a producers' cinema is a symbol of modern movie business, then Hong Kong cinema in the 1990s was more advanced than the previous studio era which recruited no woman in

production and had the directors, instead of the producers, as centers of power and creative control. Why in the 1990s were production executives mostly women? What was the role of producer in the system? In Hong Kong cinema woman producers were often fondly addressed as “the housekeepers,” the matriarch figure in charge of administration. On the one hand, it exploited women’s traditional gender role as the multi-task caretaker. On the other hand, it capitalized on modern woman’s leadership role as executives. Woman producers experienced the intriguing power dynamic of an industry going through the double edges of colonialism, capitalism, and globalism.

The history of Hong Kong film industry does not fit into a linear development model: from pre-modern to modern, from cottage industry to studio system or from directors’ cinema to producers’ cinema. Despite being located in a colony, Hong Kong cinema has survived for almost a century and thrived in the 1990s with a system adapted to its particular habitat. It is not a mechanical imitation of the Hollywood studio system model. The role of the producer is not a simple replica of their counterparts in Hollywood. Within Hong Kong cinema’s specific political, economic and cultural parameters, producers modify and adapt their roles to the local socio-cultural context, industry organizational structure and across various team chemistries. Like a housekeeper in a family, the producer played a significant, all-round, supportive role beyond a job specification could prescribe. The case of Hong Kong producer shows the inadequacy of existing theories and methodologies to conceptualize industrial models and professional positions situated in different cultural contexts. At present, the few studies on Hollywood woman producers often define the gender issue as a woman’s issue and overlook the economic reality of American corporate culture. Studies of the Hollywood studio system often frame the producer-function as an economic issue and overlook the socio-cultural factor in shaping the organization structure and the producer’s role in such system. To understand the role of producer in Hong Kong cinema, I would propose to “theorize from within” i.e. to contextualize the system of Hong Kong cinema in the world market and situate the producer within the system of Hong Kong cinema. The recruitment of women producers in the Hong Kong film industry is in congruence with the strategy of Overseas Chinese business practice and the Hong Kong style of management, i.e. it draws from traditional cultural practice to adapt to a modern global business environment in the rapidly growing East Asian region.

Studies of Woman Producers in Hollywood

In Hong Kong there is neither scholarly study nor much newspaper and magazine articles on the producer, not to mention focusing on gender dimension of this profession. At present Hollywood is the most dominant film industry in the world and its operation is the most extensively studied in the academy. It also experienced the rise of woman executives. In 2002, Jess Cagle in her magazine article, “The women who run Hollywood” featuring Stacey Snider, Sherry Lansing, and Amy Pascal, states that “for the first time in history, women are now running half of the six major movie studios” (Cagle 2002: 44). However, despite such groundbreaking historical significance, there are still few literatures on Hollywood woman producers about their roles in the studio system; on how they break into the old boys’ club, and on how their management style differs from their male counterparts or the impact of woman

leadership on organizational structure of Hollywood. Even with tremendous amounts of research in disciplines like gender, business management, and the Hollywood studio system, there are few that integrate theories from these disciplines and analyze the role of woman executives in Hollywood. Nevertheless, the few sources still serve as good references for studying Hong Kong producers and exploring how these issues may be conceptualized, framed, and reframed.

Early literature on Hollywood women filmmakers is often more like a political manifesto of gender equality than a pragmatic approach to economic realities. Ally Acker in *Reel Women – Pioneers of the Cinema 1896 to the Present* (Acker 1991) argues that women had a strong presence in the beginning but gradually faded out in the mainstream and in history. Despite her intention to redeem women's history, in the chapter on women producers Acker perceives the women producers and Hollywood as unchanging. In the biographical description, Acker provides more judgment than analysis, and repeats the stereotypical and binary types of powerful women. The movies Sherry Lansing produced are, "in large measure, those that support sex, violence, and sins against women" (Acker 1991:140), and "perpetuate the worst of the stereotypes about women" (Acker 1991: 142) Lansing is guilty of being "genderless and unthreatening in a studio system," and her nice girl image is endorsed by the patriarch of Hollywood. Dawn Steel became one of the boys and should not "be held up as a model for women in the film business." (Acker 1991: 145) She lacked the "consciousness about the image of women in the films she promoted." (Acker 1991:144) Listing more than 120 women and their films with an average of half to three pages brief biographies only renders these women faceless in history. Similarly, Dawn B. Sova in *Women in Hollywood – From Vamp to Studio Head* (Sova 1998) also argues that women filmmakers had a strong start and could meet their male counterparts on equal ground, but in the 1930s and 1940s once formal structures were established to determine roles and to set standards, women were pushed out of the high-power jobs. She describes the 1980s as "the beginning of a restoration to power for women in the American film industry." (Sova 1998: xiii) Women "once again move into roles as studio heads, producers, directors, and other positions that determine the focus and direction of the film industry." (Sova 1998: 197) But these women often created new enterprises and "remained outside of the mainstream of power." (Sova 1998: 181) Then in the 1990s women "chose to invade already existing enterprises" and assumed decision-making roles at major studios. (Sova 1998: 181) Sova entitles the 1990s chapter as "the limitless decade", "a decade that became increasingly open to women in all capacities. Greater numbers of women assumed positions of power at all levels. The 'old-boy' networks ...underwent a slow but steady metamorphosis into a growing 'old girl' network." (Sova 1998: 180) However, besides listing the women's names and their works, Sova did not explain why the Hollywood that pushed women out in the 1930s and 1940s would admit women in the 1980s and 1990s when the New Hollywood global conglomerates, as Schatz describes, were ever more structured and blockbuster-obsessed and "the production and calculated reformulation of these blockbuster films into multimedia franchises has become more systematic." (Schatz 1997: 76) She does not describe changes in the structure of Hollywood and how women took advantage of that to penetrate into the system. She does not elaborate on the relationship between gender and organizational structure. Acker and Sova's

inventory approach informs us women's presence in the industry but does not help us understand objective changes in the industry or subjective experience of the women.

Appealing to moral reasons for gender equality without attending to the specificity of women executives and Hollywood organizational culture leads to abstract generalization. To be equal is often mistaken as to be the same. The goal of getting women to the position of power is also a common view of gender equality in some business management studies where women are encouraged to act and think more like men.ⁱ In an industry like Hollywood's with a long history of entrenched power, sexism is the elephant in the room and there is tremendous pressure on women to repress the gender issue. Sherry Lansing is quoted in many occasions for denying prejudice against women and insisted that talent is the only criteria in this creative industry. Stacey Snider who declined Cagle an interview is "like many other younger women working in Hollywood, ...[who] resists being labeled a 'female executive' or drawing attention to her gender." (Cagle 2002: 46) Culture is a salient issue for analyzing gender relations and organizations because organizational cultures like that of Hollywood has been a significant barrier to change. The informal organization may transmit cultural messages about the "proper place" for women. Popular book writers or writers with high-rank industry experience are more perceptive and offer more practical advices. In her popular book on career advice for women *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office* (Frankel 2004) Lois P. Frankel acknowledges sex discrimination as a real part of a woman's employment experience, but warns women not to file complaints via formal channel or verbalize the concern openly because that may back fire. She also advises women not to change the system alone or play the gender card without exploring other alternatives. Even though she advises women to quit being a girl, she also strongly advises against woman acting like a man.ⁱⁱ One can imagine the daunting task facing women executives in Hollywood, a paradoxical industry: while creativity and breaking the rules is exalted, there are more tenacious secret rules rather than written ones. Gail Evans, an executive vice president of CNN, in *Play Like A Man, Win Like A Woman* (Evans 2000), also encouraging women to adapt to "malestream" but succeed on female terms, provides concrete description of the structure of American media industries, explores the unwritten rule in business and lists the usual traps women fall in such a structure. She points out the importance for women to be industry-savvy i.e. to be aware that the rules are written by men and the structure of the playing field is traditionally shaped like a pyramid. Sometimes a woman fails not because she lacks good ideas, but "because she lost sight of the fact that a good idea isn't more powerful than the structure that must approve it." (Evans 2000: 40) Evans goes further to urge women to change the system communally, to stay in the mainstream and change the system from inside out instead of finding a voice outside the system.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, it is much easier said than done. When a woman faces hostile cultures, she has to expend a tremendous amount of energy just to develop strategies for her own survival. Lynda Obst, one of the most successful producers surviving Hollywood for two decades, in her autobiographical survival guide *Hello, He Lied – And Other Truths from the Hollywood Trenches* (Obst 1996) illustrate the pragmatism of woman producers. Despite her humorous tone, one can still sense the gravity and the pressure woman executives face. Nevertheless, Obst manages to define success in her

terms, “My goal has been to learn how to get movies made without losing sight of the reason I began. I have had to learn to recognize the insidious nature of the beast without becoming one.” (Obst 1996: 8) Rachel Abramowitz’s *Is That A Gun In Your Pocket – Women’s Experience of Power in Hollywood* (Abramowitz 2000) based on extensive research and interviews written in novelistic style vividly presents the lived experience of woman executives struggling to assimilate. With back stories of parents, spouses, friends and associates around the women executive, one can imagine how hard these women have fought when they cannot even verbalize sexism and there is no rosy female-bonding in this colony. In fact, these women engage each other in cut-throat competitions while men rely on the existing buddy network as a safety net. The characters in her book are women with strong characters and real histories.

The call for a more fluid gender role - for both men and women - in the business world is echoed in Linda Seger’s *When Women Call the Shots – the Developing Power and Influence of Women in Television and Film* (Seger 1996). Seger also observes that for the first wave of women executives in the 1980s the pressure to assimilate to the “malestream” was enormous. But she is optimistic that the new wave of women executives in the 1990s, even though mostly still in the middle-management, will gradually “trickle up” as the industry evolves. This generation of women executives re-visions business by re-defining success. While the traditional definition of power depends on competition with the result dividing winners and losers, for the younger generation women executives “power” is about getting the job done, about empowerment, and to be in a position of power is to be very clear about how one feels about things. Seger then compares the competitive model (usually associated with masculine qualities) and the collaborative model (usually associated with feminine qualities) and suggests that the collaborative model “seems the most conducive to women, and may be the most conducive to the film industry.” (Seger 1996: 62) She reasons that a competitive attitude can work directly against the goal of producing great films; the building up of individual ego is detrimental to a positive working environment; competition can waste time and be counterproductive when an inordinate amount of time is spent on corporate politics etc. The collaborative model can be more efficient because it removes internal competition, removes the need for politicking, and promotes strategic and creative thinking. Seger goes on to state that the effectiveness of the collaborative model is gradually appreciated by the new generation of men working under female bosses. Seger’s collaborative model is echoed by producer and Professor Myrl A. Schreibman in his *Creative Producing From A to Z – The Indie Producer’s Handbook* (Schreibman 2001). Schreibman points out that the two most important concepts in independent production are “relationship” and “ego”. This indicates the significance of collaboration in a flattened organization structure like independent production and producer, regardless of his or her gender, plays an important role in creating and maintaining an amicable work ambience. As the New Hollywood conglomerates focus more on investing in people who make films rather than making films in-house as in the classical era, the role of entrepreneurs become more important in the process. Together with the outsourcing of financial planning, marketing and script consulting to small businesses, the structure of American film industry is a complex mix of pyramid and flat organizational structure. It will be interesting to see more studies on the relationship between the new complex industrial

structure of Hollywood and the role of producers, as well as how American film business can better harness the female talents of this large segment of knowledge worker in the new knowledge-based economy.

Studies outside Hollywood and American corporate culture are most relevant to the study of the producer in the system of Hong Kong cinema in terms of organization structure and functions of women executives. Sally Helgesen and Carol R. Frenier, instead of urging women to assimilate to the “malestream,” look for female advantages and call for changes in organization structures. They reframe the gender issue as a business issue, instead of a woman’s issue. They illustrate how it makes economic sense to have woman leaders. Helgesen, in *The Female Advantage – Women’s Ways of Leadership* (1990), finds that women are best at running organizations that foster creativity, cooperation, and intuitive decision-making power. Using a diary studies approach documenting the dynamic of the everyday practices of the woman entrepreneurs, she notices how her subjects’ experience as women (wives, mothers, friends, sisters, daughters) contributes to their leadership style. The women entrepreneurs “tended to structure their companies as networks or grids instead of hierarchies, which meant that information flowed along many circuits, rather than up and down in prescribed channel.” (Helgesen 1990: 28) The organizations run by these women do not take the form of the traditional hierarchical pyramid, but more closely resemble a web. The women’s concern with relationships necessitates the impulse to share information and sharing “was also facilitated by their view of themselves as being in the center of things rather than at the top; it’s more natural to reach *out* than to reach *down*.” (Helgesen 1990: 27, emphasis in the original) Under female leadership the community is created around a central purpose. As we shall see, the organization of the Hong Kong film industry of the 1990s is closer to Helgesen’s web structure, and woman producers, situated at the center of the web, played an important role for the efficiency of information flow, pulling cast and crew together and maintaining this tightly-knit filmmaking community. Similarly, Carol Frenier, an entrepreneur and media producer, in *Business and the Feminine Principle – the Untapped Resource* (Frenier 1997), also proposes to explore the feminine side of our nature to transform our business environment. She explores feminine patterns of work and the feminine principle such as diffuse awareness, the quick of the moment, accepting the cycles of life and deep community. Her notion of feminine leadership is one which collaborates with the masculine, appreciates the value of combining feminine and masculine ways of thinking.

Acker and Sova, appealing to the moral of gender equality, state how things should be; Frankel and Evans, being practical and pragmatic, explain how things can be in the given American corporate culture; Obst and Abramowitz, with first-hand experience or interview and research, shows how things feel like in candid detail; Seger and Schreiberman, whether comparing the collaborative and competitive models or contrasting studio and indie productions, calls for gender fluidity; Helgesen and Frenier, researching beyond Hollywood and American corporate culture, reframe the gender issue and extol female advantage and feminine principle. In Hollywood woman executives have adapted to be gender bi-lingual i.e. assuming both masculine traits such as ambition, assertiveness and competence and feminine traits such as caring, nurturing and connectedness. Helgesen and Frenier’s vision of female leadership and changing

industrial structure may still seem far-fetched in Hollywood but is a closer description of the phenomenon in Hong Kong cinema where women were invited, not for moral reasons of gender equality, but for economic benefits they brought to an industry going through seismic structural changes in a different socio-cultural context. It is from an economic perspective – the producer’s core job being about the bottom line - we start to better understand why in Hong Kong women were invited into the film industry and how producers, men and women, functioned in the changing organizational culture and industrial structure.

Theorizing producer-function in Hollywood studio system

In global media theories Hollywood’s relationship with other cinemas is often conceptualized as concentric i.e. Hollywood as the core versus the others as the peripheries. In Hollywood studio system studies the function of the producer in the studio system hinges on centralization. Such a centripetal view of world cinemas and the Hollywood producer system overlooks the role of American socio-cultural context in shaping Hollywood organizational structures. For example, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson in *Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell et al. 1985) and Thomas Schatz in “The return of the Hollywood studio system” (Schatz 1997: 73-106) argue, from the central producer system to producer-unit system of the classical era to later New Hollywood’s conglomeration, the different systems are merely revisions of the principal of centralization of Hollywood studio system because the studios either retained centralized physical facilities and labor or maintained the pivotal sectors of financing and distribution. Bordwell et al pay no attention to human agency in the big capitalist machine and Schatz pays no attention to the return of women studio heads in the return of the Hollywood studio system. It is not a surprise that David Bordwell in *Planet Hong Kong* (Bordwell 2000) makes no attempt to theorize the system of Hong Kong cinema despite his and his associates’ established work on Hollywood. The Hong Kong film industry being mysterious to him reveals the inadequacy of the theories and methodologies of their model to comprehend production in a different socio-cultural context and to recognize the role of producer in the process. In *Genius of the System* (Schatz 1988), Thomas Schatz conceptualizes the filmmaking process in the classical era in very masculine terms, “...studio filmmaking was less a process of collaboration than of negotiation and struggle – occasionally approaching armed conflict” (Schatz 1988:12) and his study of human agency covers no gender dimension. Nevertheless his insight about the melding of institutional force and personal expression brings out the concept of institutional authorship,^{iv} a different way of thinking about the producer’s role in the creative process. The producer, often dismissed as the interfering administrator on the side of the bankers, in Schatz’s interpretation is creatively constructive to the making of a movie, and this can be used to explain the impact of woman producers on the style of Hong Kong cinema. Timothy Corrigan in “The Commerce of Auteurism” (Corrigan 1991: 101-136) illustrates the distinctive auteur persona of director-producer such as Francis Coppola and how the author is constructed by and for commerce. However, Matthew Bernstein (Bernstein 2008: 180-189) argues that a TV producer like Jerry Bruckheimer cannot be considered an auteur, but he can facilitate the contemporary auteurs’ work and function as a brand name. In Hong Kong cinema, the producer, not positioned in vertical relationship with the director, is no

auteur or brand name. But he or she did contribute greatly in the creative process and played a key role in facilitating the auteurs' career, for example, director John Woo's producer Terrance Chang played a key role in launching Woo's career in Hollywood; director Tsui Hark's producer Nansun Shi played a key role in maintaining their production house and pulling through projects from falling apart for a quarter of a decade, an impressive accomplishment given the usual short lifespan of Hong Kong production companies. John Caldwell in *Production Culture* (Caldwell 2008) proposes an integrated cultural-industrial method of analysis, i.e. to integrate cultural analysis with political economic frameworks. He shows how TV producers at the top display a frat-boy image and repress their elitist background in the American TV cultural context. He proposes "theorizing from the ground up" which is not applicable to the Hong Kong film industry given its flattened organization structure. But to understand the role of producer in Hong Kong cinema, besides Caldwell's integrated cultural-industrial approach, I would propose to "theorize from within", i.e. to contextualize the system of Hong Kong cinema and situate the producer within that system in order to study how the producer worked at the center, instead of at the top of the organization, and how Hong Kong cinema, operated in the middle of an interrelating matrix, instead of either at the core or periphery of the world market.

Housekeeper of Hong Kong Cinema

If Hollywood woman producers are male impersonators with a gun in the pocket and poach power from men at the apex of the pyramid, Hong Kong woman producers are "the housekeepers," an unofficial title that bespeaks their position as the supportive maternal administrator in a web-like communa structure. They extend their role from controlling the string of the family purse and holding the family together to controlling the budget and schedule, pulling the cast and crew together, as well as cultivating and maintaining relationships with overseas financiers and distributors. There was a "proper place" already saved for her like in a family business with the duo-department structure usually with the male director leading the creative department and the woman producer heading the production executive department. While Hollywood women producers are described as crashing into the boys' club without invitation, Hong Kong women producers were invited by men who felt the need for women to fill the vacancy. While Hollywood women producers suppress their genders, Hong Kong women producers foreground theirs as a matriarch. Understanding the socio-political context that facilitated the economic empowerment of women as well as the industrial context of Hong Kong cinema that drew women into this industry and this profession would help.

The Hong Kong film industry in the 1990s, a cottage industry comprised of independent production with over 90% of the filmmakers as freelancers, was the opposite of Hollywood. The industry, with about one thousand active members, was much smaller in scale and material resources and the organizational structure was much flattened. In this small community there was no trade journal for industry news and the filmmakers relied more on an honor system than formal organization rules or legal code. Power was much diffused and information flowed via informal channels which the producers called "gossip."^v It is closer to Helgensen and Frenier's vision of an

organizational structure which facilitated women leadership. Woman producers were expected to play a complementary and supportive role to the director and relied more on intuition than on formulated organizational and workflow charts. They played an important role in creating an ambience in the work place that was conducive to creativity and efficiency. That coincides with Rita Fung's assertion that the most important job for a producer is managing interpersonal relationships.^{vi} As Frenier describes her accomplishment in business often is "something that was outside of the usual measuring systems" (Frenier 1997: 21) her task seemed almost invisible to everyone. Maria Tong comments that the producer's is quite a thankless job because when the production runs smooth no one will notice the producer's contribution and hard work but when she fails, everyone notices.^{vii} In Hong Kong while the directors receive public recognition, the role of the producer is seriously under-rated. In the Hong Kong film industry, the producer, man or woman, had to have both masculine qualities of assertiveness and decisiveness as well as feminine qualities of modesty and diplomacy to lead the team with an iron fist in a velvet glove in a paradoxical city, a cosmopolitan colony.

Hong Kong was a fast growing city and the last thirty years of British administration was termed "velvet colonialism" (Mitchell 1998): soft authoritarian approach in retaining Hong Kong as a British colony. The cultural policy was for maintaining social stability rather than enlightenment of the colonial subjects in this economic city which was annexed by the trade-oriented British Empire to facilitate its international trade. Infrastructure for transnational business was built in early colonial years and cumulated into Hong Kong being the financial and communication center of the region in the 1990s. Therefore, since its inception Hong Kong cinema was a commercial, transnational and de-politicized mass entertainment industry. With the government's rhetoric of "active non-intervention" policy, small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs), more flexible in absorbing economic fluctuation, occupied half of Hong Kong's enterprises. These SMEs had been the backbone of Hong Kong's economic growth for the past few decades and many of which were family businesses. Film companies in the 1990s were also of small to medium scales and the film industry was not only flexible at the level of production, but also of industrial structure. The Hong Kong film industry had no lasting studio or production house and its history is characterized by alternation between studio system and independent productions. In the early 1980s when the traditional markets (Southeast Asia) were seriously shrinking, the Hong Kong film industry had to aggressively explore new overseas markets while Hollywood domination in Asian markets was increasing. The industry gradually de-integrated to lower overhead cost and started run-away productions in China and other Asian countries to lower production cost. As the Hong Kong economy took off in the late 1970s, the domestic market was too small to support the rising production costs. When market share guaranteed by monopoly or oligopoly practice faded, the pressure to depend on overseas markets increased. As Hong Kong cinema expanded its overseas markets, the bottom-line concern such as cost-efficiency, market viability, and financial planning became more prominent and the demand for producer who could balance business and creative dimensions of this culture industry increased.

As the Hong Kong economy transformed from manufacturing to service industries, the colonial government needed better educated labors, regardless of

genders. The free general education policy and civil service system were designed to train English-speaking labor for tertiary industries like financing, communication, tourism, etc. Education was made accessible to girls, and Hong Kong boasts a high percentage of women entrepreneurs and executives. But the rise of women to economic power was no rosy picture. For woman producers active in the 1990s, growing up in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s was far from sugar and spice as Frankel describes of American girlhood of the same decades. In a post-war refugee colonial society, young girls were pushed to grow up fast and help out the parents. While in Frankel's description girls in the U.S. were denied access in a competitive game, Hong Kong girls were forced to work and compete in the real world for survival. Child labor and factory girls working in sweat shops were common in the 1960s. In the 1950s and 1960s, child actress like Josephine Siao and child singer like Anita Mui (1963-2003) "quitted being a girl" and worked professionally at the age of five to support the family. Siao became one of the biggest stars in the 1960s Cantonese cinema and later re-invented herself as director-producer. She was still active, played leading roles and won the best actress award in Berlin and various international film festivals in the 1990s. Mui, the diva of Hong Kong Cantopop of the 1980s and 1990s, was respectfully addressed as the "Big Sister," a powerful nearly-matriarch figure in the music industry. Even for someone like powerful producer Nansun Shi coming from a better off background, there was no over-protected girlhood. "Nansun" means born in the south, indicative of the itinerant life in her formative years. In the unstable mid-1960, Shi was sent alone to South Africa by her father to a class of children coming from half a dozen countries (Chan 2002 Aug 14). Shi later went to the U.K. for college education in a competitive emerging field, computer science, rare even for Hong Kong boys by then. Beside political turbulence and social unrest, for that generation of filmmakers, constant migration also contributed to unstable childhood environment which extends to their adult lives. Many of them migrated from China or Southeast Asia, briefly settled in Hong Kong, went for overseas education, migrated mostly to English-speaking countries because of the 1997 turnover and then returned to Hong Kong because of the economic boom in the 1990s. In the age of globalization, overseas experience became an asset to executive leaders in Hong Kong film industry serving diverse market.

Girlhood was no less brutal and competitive than boyhood in such a society in that era. It did not necessarily get more liberating when girls grow into womanhood even after gaining economic power. In her ethnographic study of women entrepreneurs in Hong Kong, Priscilla Pue Ho Chu (Chu 2004) concludes that the motivation and reason women were often pushed to set up their business was to provide extra income for the family or to help out the husbands' or fathers' business. It is rarely motivated by the women's own ambition or for her own good. Unlike their counterparts in Hollywood, Hong Kong women producers entered the industry without a vision to break into the boy's club or the ambition to get to the top. Producer Chung Chun entered the Shaw studio by answering a newspaper advertisement, not knowing that they never have women working in production before (Chan 2002 August 12). Chung switched her job because she was bored by her clerical job in shipping. Producer Jessinta Liu switched her job in taming sea lions in the Hong Kong Ocean Park to leading the production team in movie business (Chan 2002 August 22). Nansun Shi was invited to join the fledging Cinema City in the early 1980s while she was dating

Tsui Hark, their star director. The men inviting her only knew that they needed a woman in their company as they expanded. They didn't even know what the job title and specification were except calling the post "housekeeper" assuming it to be self-explanatory (Chan 2002 August 14). Nansun Shi, a veteran public speaker appearing on radio and TV shows, jokingly and humbly called her job as a "translator" - to translate negative unpleasant wordings between colleagues and partners into agreeable ones. Her sense of humor probably makes her a survivor. "Whatever hardship we are facing now, it will be good material for jokes in the future," she said as she described the early struggling years in Cinema City. In that interview for the Hong Kong Film Archive, supposedly to be formal and serious, Shi filled it with jokes and laughter while delivered the hard data and information we needed. Unlike their Hollywood counterparts, Hong Kong woman producers just acted like they belonged with no pressure to assimilate. It was for economic reasons that women were included in or excluded from this industry. For example, in the 1990s woman writers were admitted to Tsui Hark's writers' group with the intention of widening market appeal of Tsui's masculine martial arts films.^{viii} The most obvious change and impact was the insertion of the romance plot in *Once Upon A Time in China* series (Tsui 1991-1994), a remake of a 1960s long running Cantonese martial art film.

In the production executives department women were very welcomed. Lorraine Ho, chair of the Hong Kong Production Executive Association, comments the inconvenience and interruption of production caused by the previous generation of male producers who often put their egos before the projects (Chan 2002 September 9). Ho praises women for their skill in negotiation and smoothing things out, an ultra important skill in Hong Kong's tight schedule tight budget productions. While praising the women's problem solving oriented attitude, she teased the creative department as "the zoo," where the problem-making wild things are.^{ix} The director and his team often make everyday a crisis management day for the production executives by constantly improvising on the set. Like other woman producers, Ho also has good sense of humor and fills personal interview with jokes and laughter.^x The division of labor along gender line is best exemplified by the Film Workshop, a production house established by Tsui Hark and Nansun Shi with Tsui as the director and Shi as the producer, and the couple acted like parental figures in the company as described by their staff (Ho 2001 June 25). While Tsui operated in typical masculine style of being competitive and goal-oriented (Chan 2000 August 4),^{xi} Shi was there not only to take care of the marketing and administration, but also establishing and mending relationship.^{xii}

Sometimes the partnership is a male-male pair and their roles switched when they move across different systems. For example, in their Hong Kong productions in the 1980s and early 1990s, producer Terrence Chang usually played the diplomat role to smooth things out while director John Woo was the *enfant terrible* insisting on director's artistic integrity. But when they worked in Hollywood in the mid-1990s, John Woo played the good cop and Terrence Chang played the assertive aggressive producer (Chan 2003 Dec 2). With Hong Kong cinema moving from the studio era to independent production in the 1980s and 1990s, there was also the emergence of a new generation of "the collaborative males." Director-producer Gordon Chan named his production house *People* because he cares about interpersonal relationship and would like to have a positive and mutually respectful working environment. Gordon Chan is

gentle looking even though he produced such acclaimed movie with a title like *Beast Cop* (Chan, G. 1998). He laments that in the past there was a hierarchy and workers at the bottom such as the extras were often treated like the subaltern (Chan 2000 August 16). Director-producer Peter Chan who also worked in the studio era criticizes the chain of command and tight control over creative team (Chan 2000 August 3). In the mid-1990s he founded the co-op like production house *UFO* (United Film Organization) with four other friends in the industry. Peter Chan, also a gentle looking man, was the only non-action movie Hong Kong director sojourning in Hollywood. In the new millennium he found the pan-Asian coproduction company *Applause*. This generation of flexible “collaborative males” of Hong Kong cinema with their experiences in the systems of the old Shaw studio, Hong Kong production of the 1980s and 1990s as well as Hollywood productions, are now making their move in China where the film industry is also going through rapid changes.

While there is a clear division of labor along gender lines and a prescribed place for women executive in Hong Kong productions, it seems that it is difficult for people (especially men) without a clear gender role to occupy an executive position in this Chinese filmmaking community.^{xiii} There are some other unwritten rules from the past practice of Chinese opera troupe system that may sound absurd to outsiders. For example in certain teams, women, regardless of their power and rank, are seriously forbidden to sit on the crew’s tool box. Besides gender as marker for one’s “proper place”, seniority is also a license to certain power. For example, on a visit to the set, I was told that a certain lighting man is well respected in the industry just because he has worked in this field for a long time^{xiv}. Seniority, loyalty, and honesty are valued in this organizational culture. Such gender and seniority role assignment might come from the Confucian social order dictating the proper places for “everyone” (ruler and the ruled, father and son, men and women, elderly and junior etc.) except gays and lesbians. Mother Power occupies a prominent position in Confucian social order and more researches need to be done to confirm this association. Without breathing the traditional local business culture and understanding the specific political economic and social historical context of this industry, it is hard for an “outsider” to understand or get a foothold in this industry. For example, Philip Lee, though being a Chinese and speaking the local language, but trained professionally in Japan and the U.S., avoided bringing a lawyer with him during the negotiation stage of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (Lee 2000) when he sensed the informal atmosphere and different practices of Hong Kong filmmaking community (Chan 2000 August 18). Traditional Chinese cultural value and practices play an important role in shaping the organizational structure and business practice of this industry. Drawing from tradition and adapting to modern international business environment, Hong Kong enterprises have developed a distinctive business model and distinctive style of management.

Overseas Chinese business model and Hong Kong style management

The Hong Kong film industry, being part of the larger Hong Kong economy, was operated like many Overseas Chinese businesses: clan-like structure, family-managed enterprises and emphasis on flexibility and innovation. While most business management courses focus on public-management enterprises, Hong Kong style family-management started to gain attention in the academy in the West.^{xv} Today in

the West, continuous innovation becomes vital for business success against the backdrop of global complexity.^{xvi} Peter Drucker, the man who invented the discipline of management in the U.S., perceptive of many of the major developments of the late twentieth century, repeatedly emphasizes the importance of continuous innovation in knowledge-based society. He gradually shifts more attention to development in East Asia, a turbulent region with rising opportunities, and notices a distinctive overseas Chinese business model planning alone no longer works and in the context of integrated world economy, transnational world money and weakening of sovereignty etc. (Drucker 1980: 9) In *Managing for the Future – the 1990s and Beyond* (Drucker 1992), he predicts that the big enterprises will change from a command-and-control army model to the flat organization model of an orchestra. In *Managing in a Time of Great Change* (Drucker 1995) he calls the overseas Chinese, “the new economic superpower.” They are the driving force behind the explosive economic growth of coastal China, leading the economies of the fast-growing countries of Southeast Asia and branching out to the West. Drucker perceptively points out that the multinational groups of the Overseas Chinese, unlike the Japanese or the typical Western companies, function in a distinctive way. They are like “a clan doing business together...The word of the founder-CEO is law. But his authority far more resembles that of a Confucian head of the house...than that of the head of a business...What holds together the multinationals of the overseas Chinese is neither ownership nor legal contract. It is mutual trust and the mutual obligations inherent in clan membership.” Although he realizes the strength and deep roots in Chinese culture and history of this clan structure, nevertheless, he is certain that they will maintain their basic Chinese character, “They will change details, but they won’t change the fundamentals any more than the Japanese changed their when they modernized” (Drucker 1995: 208) In his book on Asia (Drucker 1997) the themes of sea-change, borderless world, knowledge society, entrepreneurship and innovation are more accentuated and China becomes the focus. In the opening chapter “The challenge of China,” Drucker further elaborates on the distinctive Chinese management style and management structure, “I have often said that the secret of Japan consists in Japan’s ability to make a family out of the modern corporation. The secret of Chinese management may well consist in the ability of the Chinese to make the family into a modern corporation.” (Drucker 1997: 7) In the 1990s coastal China has been the fastest growing area in the world economy, and the importance of the Overseas Chinese is their contribution to mainland China. Drucker points to a financial network which Bordwell calls “the bamboo network” in his study of Hong Kong film industry. The Hong Kong cinema, with its reliance on Overseas Chinese cash-based financing, instead of bank loan financing, was remarkably different from Hollywood starting at the financial sector. It was never operated like a mini-size version of Hollywood even though it’s also transnational and commercial.

Conclusion

In the decade of sovereignty change with political uncertainties, volatile regional economy and social restlessness, Hong Kong cinema, to compete in the world market without the material power like Hollywood or government protection like other national cinemas, fell back to local business cultural practices to provide stability and certainty for efficient operation. The producer functioned as a resourceful housekeeper

providing powerful backing for the production team in a system diametrically different from Hollywood but adapted to Hong Kong's vibrant cultural and volatile political economic context in that specific era. The housekeeper phenomenon in the 1990s illustrates that the gender issue is an economic issue rather than a women's issue. Hong Kong cinema developed a distinctive business model and style of management in "turbulent times" when unique events changed the configuration and planning no longer worked. To paraphrase Drucker, it is a strategy for tomorrow that enables a business "to take advantage of new realities and to convert turbulence into opportunity" (Drucker 1980: 4) In the new millennium as Hong Kong cinema focuses more on China market, involves Hollywood financing and expands its co-production with other Asian film industries, Hong Kong filmmakers have to open up more to the systems of China, Hollywood and other Asian cinemas. The function of producer is no longer confined to "the housekeeper" of a small filmmaking community operating in an informal setting. It will be interesting to see more researches on the history and system of Hong Kong cinema, an alternative to Hollywood's studio system model lest the boom of Hong Kong cinema in the transitional period be dismissed as a fluke and the lesson be lost.

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NOTES

ⁱ For example, Christopher Flett in his book *What Men Don't Tell Women About Businesses: Opening Up the Heavily Guarded Alpha Male Playbook* (Hoboken, N. J.: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2008) advises women to adapt to "malestream" from the perspective of a self-proclaimed "reformed Alpha Male." He shows how men view women in business and how women can benefit from knowing how men do business. He warns women that she might sabotage her career by not knowing how to deal with dominant men professionally. He lists the mistakes women made such as taking things personally, putting ideas in question form and not keeping secrets etc. It is true that the business door can only be opened by women who can get along with male power. However, Flett sees women as the problem, the object of rescue. His solution is to release masculine energy in women but at the same time women have to remain non-threatening and not bruising male egos. He concerns more about reforming women than empowering them. His male-centered approach is more about repressing than liberating femininity in women as if masculinity were the superior trait.

ⁱⁱ Frankel writes: "...Being different from men isn't something to change or

hide... Women bring a unique set of behaviors to the work-place that are needed, especially in today's climate. Our tendencies to collaborate rather than compete, listen more than talk, and use relationships rather than muscle to influence..." (Frankel 2004: 62)

ⁱⁱⁱ Evans writes, "Once you leave the corporate arena, you don't have the same impact on big business, which in turn means you don't have the same impact on the world. If we are going to make our marketing and our products more female and more family-friendly, we need to be part of the team creating them. It's important that we inhabit the places of power in as many positions as possible... Large corporations shape our lives. They produce the entertainment shows that we decry... The more we're around to make key decisions, the more they will go our way." (Evans 2000: 156-157).

^{iv} Schatz writes, "The quality and artistry of all these films were the product not simply of individual human expression, but of a melding of institutional forces. In each case the 'style' of a writer, director, or costume designer – fused with the studio's production operations and management structure, its resources and talent pool, its narrative traditions and market strategy. And ultimately any individual's style was no more than an inflection on an established studio style." (p.6)

^v When I asked Jessinta Liu how she got industry information, she said, "People in our field are very gossipy. Whatever happened in the morning, the whole town will know in the afternoon." (Chan 2002 August 22)

^{vi} This casual conversation with my college friend was around summer 2001.

^{vii} This casual conversation with my college friend was around summer 2001.

^{viii} The conversation with Liu Damu was around 2001. Liu was a core member of Tsui Hark's brainstorming writer group. He is also my senior in college.

^{ix} Lorraine Ho is my senior in college and I worked in her student productions a few times. We already knew each other but haven't met again since college. Ho's communication skill is seen in her initiative in breaking the ice and warming up the conversation quickly.

^x And of course I was also warned by a male filmmaker, "However soft those women look, don't mess with them." There are many rumors of woman producer intimidate man by verbally bullying him and forcing him to back up to the wall. But I am more interested in knowing how these women establish their authority and effectively deal with men who challenge them.

^{xi} Rumor has it that Tsui Hark fell out with directors like King Hu, Yim Ho, and John Woo etc. In the interview I asked Tsui what he thought about this, Tsui did not confirm or deny the rumors but insisted that "Everyone should look at the end products, the films we finished." (Chan 2000 August 24)

^{xii} "Sharon Hui (scriptwriter) mentions Nansun Shi's role as the boss's wife and a parental figure in Film Workshop. She says Tsui and Shi are a perfect team. Tsui takes care of the creative aspect of production, while Shi takes care of management. Hui says, 'Nansun Shi's communication skills helps Tsui Hark retain a lot of relationships and networks. Their parental role in the office helps create a harmonious atmosphere. This helps maintain close relationship.'" (Chan 2002: 56)

^{xiii} In a casual and friendly chatting with a female filmmaker, I was told that there is the unwritten rule that gay men cannot be executive producer in Hong Kong film industry

and my source prefers to remain anonymous.

^{xiv} It was around summer 2001 when I visited my friend Rita Fung on a set.

^{xv} For example, in an interview published in *Harvard Business Review* on Hong Kong style supply chain management Victor Fung of Li & Fung Ltd, Hong Kong's largest export trading company, describes how his company transforms from a traditional Chinese family conglomerate to an innovative international public company (Maretta, J. 1998: 102-114) The book-length study is published in *Hong Kong in Chinese* (Li & Fung Research Center 2003)

^{xvi} For example, in a survey of 1,500 chief executives conducted by IBM's Institute for Business Value creativity, instead of operational effectiveness, influence, or dedication, is considered the essential leadership asset. The recommendations for innovation include innovation through business model change, "a shift toward corporate cultures that are far more transparent and entrepreneurial" and "leaders will be rewarded for their ability to build creative enterprises with fluid business models," states Kern (Kern 2010: unpaginated)

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