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A Project entitled

Laughing Out Loud:

The Rise of Hong Kong Social Satire Comedy Films in the 1970s

Submitted by

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Declaration

I, **KWOK Tsz Ching**, declare that this research report represents my own work under the supervision of Dr. WONG Ka Hong, Desmond, and that it has not been submitted previously for examination to any tertiary institution.

Signed

KWOK Tsz Ching

13th April 2023

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1. Introduction

Being a form of mass media, films not only embody the core values of a society, but they also make a certain demand on society.¹ The 1970s was a seminal period in the history of Hong Kong cinema, marked by the rise of a new film genre: social satire comedy. These films, known for their humorous and critical commentary on the social issues of the time, gained high popularity and were always box-office hits during that period. The satirical humour elements in these comedies had impressed mass audiences and owned a huge fanbase in Hong Kong. Some of their presentation styles, such as the scenes, dialogues and songs in the films even gradually developed into a part of local popular culture and had a strong cult following. Therefore, these 1970s social satire comedies also became a kind of collective memory of Hong Kong people. Apart from this, being an integral part of Hong Kong's film culture, they also continued to influence filmmakers and helped to sow the seeds of the later development of comedies in the local cinema. However, in recent years, together with the decline of the Hong Kong film industry, the production of social satire comedy films in Hong Kong drops drastically. Even though sometimes there maybe a few social satire comedies still being released, they already lose their appeal and are far less popular and well received than

¹ Daphne Chan and May Ng, "On the Eve of the Golden Age: 1970s Hong Kong Cinema," in *Oral History Series 7: When the Wind was Blowing Wild: Hong Kong Cinema of the 1970s*, ed. Hong Kong Film Archive (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2018), 10.

those masterpieces in the 1970s.

In view of the success of Hong Kong social satire comedy films during the 1970s but their downfall in recent years, some questions have thus aroused in my mind. Why the production and development of Hong Kong social satire comedy films could be so flourishing and thriving in the past, but not now? Was the emergence and rise of social satire comedies in the 1970s related to the contemporary environment in Hong Kong? If so, were there any particular historical factors or related specialties of these films that contributed to their high popularity at that time? In order to find out the answers for these questions, this research project will serve as a case study of 1970s Hong Kong social satire comedy films and provide a comprehensive examination of their development to discover the reasons for their rise at that time.

A. Research Questions

In order to fully understand the history of the rise of Hong Kong social satire comedy films during the 1970s, this study attempts to address and answer two different research questions. First of all, the main research question of this paper is “Why and how did social satire comedy film genre emerge and rise in Hong Kong during the 1970s?”. Regarding this question, I am going to examine the historical

context, such as the political, economic, social and cultural environment of Hong Kong in the 1970s, figure out what were the reasons that led to the emergence of this film genre in the local cinema, and try to explain how did these favourable factors contribute to their rise at that time. After figuring out the reasons for the emergence and rise of social satire comedy films in Hong Kong during the 1970s, the second research question is about “Why Hong Kong social satire comedy films in the 1970s were well received among audiences and gained high popularity?”. For this question, apart from the extraneous factors, I will also focus more on the films themselves. I am going to have a close examination of some key social satire comedies from that era, find out how did the production of these films interrelate with the contemporary conditions, and explore the specialties they possessed that contributed to their high popularity during the 1970s. Through answering these two research questions in this project, it is believed that the reasons for the rise of social satire comedy films in Hong Kong during the 1970s will be clarified as we can discover the factors that contributed to its emergence and high popularity at that time.

B. Research Significance

Regarding topics about the cinema of Hong Kong and its industry, different

historians have already done numerous research on tracing and examining its evolution throughout the years. While in terms of Hong Kong comedy films, there are also some scholars doing research on analysing their presentation style and culture from a perspective of film study and art. Yet, among all these studies, not many of them tried to just focus on studying the social satire comedies in the 1970s and examining its history. However, Hong Kong social satire comedy films in the 1970s not only laid the foundation for the later development of Hong Kong comedies in the local cinema, but they were also once an important cultural strand and one of the most precious collective memories of Hong Kong people. By focusing on studying the rise of social satire comedy films in Hong Kong during the 1970s, this research will be able to shed light on an important yet often overlooked chapter in the history of Hong Kong cinema and popular culture. Also, as social satire comedy films in the 1970s reflected the contemporary social issues and offered a unique form of social critique, this research project will show how these films helped to address the important social issues of the time. We can therefore have a deeper understanding of the Hong Kong society and the public discourse during the 1970s through examining these films and the historical context together. The power of film as a tool for social critique and public expression will also be demonstrated in this way. Apart from this, I believe that some of the research

findings in this study may be helpful for us to understand the recent situations and trends of comedy film in Hong Kong. Therefore, in this research project, I would like to fill in these gaps which are left by the previous studies of historians and scholars, and try to provide a more comprehensive investigation of the history of social satire comedy films in Hong Kong during the 1970s. I am going to dig in deeper to explore the development and rise of this film genre and demonstrate its importance in this paper.

C. Literature Review

As mentioned above, research and scholarly discussions on the development and evolution of Hong Kong cinema are very common. Famous publications such as Stephen Teo's *Hong Kong Cinema The Extra Dimension*², David Bordwell's *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*³ and Zhao Wei Fang's *The History of Hong Kong Film 1897-2006*⁴ presented the history of Hong Kong cinema and analysed the changing Hong Kong film style in different periods from both Western and Chinese perspectives. While other academic work like Chung Po

² Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema The Extra Dimension* (London: British Film Institute, 1997).

³ David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁴ Wei Fang Zhao, *The History of Hong Kong Film 1897-2006* (Beijing: China Radio & Television Publishing House, 2007).

Yin's *A Century of Hong Kong Film Industry*⁵ covered the business history of Hong Kong film industry, and included a detailed discussion on its structure, market and other information like theatre chain distribution. However, all these studies were examining the development of the Hong Kong cinema from a macro perspective and did not focus on investigating the history of comedy films in Hong Kong, not to mention the social satire comedies during the 1970s. Even if there are related research on social satire comedy films, most of them were illustrated from a film study or cultural study perspective instead of a historical perspective. For example, in *A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies*⁶, film critics like Ng Ho, Law Kar and Shu Kei analysed the social satire comedies in the 1970s and commented on their themes, plot and film styles. In Ng's *A Portrait of the Comedian as a Schizophreniac*, he concluded that drawing laughters by producing chaotic and funny situations, and parodying life and society at the same time were the characteristics of comedy films in the 1970s.⁷ While for Law's *Michael Hui: A*

⁵ Po Yin Chung, *A Century of Hong Kong Film Industry* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2011).

⁶ The Urban Council of Hong Kong, *The 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival Retrospective Catalogue: A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies* (Hong Kong: The Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1984)

⁷ Ho Ng, "A Portrait of the Comedian as a Schizophreniac," in *The 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival Retrospective Catalogue: A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies*, ed. The Urban Council of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1984), 71-72.

*Decade of Sword Grinding*⁸ and Shu's *Three Faced Comedian*⁹, they reviewed the social satire comedies directed by Michael Hui in the 1970s and pointed out the changes in the film styles and techniques in his work. From all these above research, we can see that the existing scholarly conversation only concentrated on analysing the cinema of Hong Kong broadly and did not zoom in to study the film genre of social satire comedy. Also, most of the related work are only film analysis and film criticisms, the historical background for the development and rise of Hong Kong social satire comedy films in the 1970s was seldom mentioned and discussed before. Therefore, in this research project, I will build on the work of these previous findings and conduct a more in-depth case study of Hong Kong social satire comedy films during the 1970s to examine their history. For instance, unlike the existing scholarly literature, I will try to add in more detail to find out the historical reasons, such as the political, economic, social and cultural factors that led to the emergence and rise of this film genre in the 1970s by having a closer examination of the

⁸ Kar Law, "Michael Hui: A Decade of Sword Grinding," in *The 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival Retrospective Catalogue: A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies*, ed. The Urban Council of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1984), 65-68.

⁹ Kei Shu, "Three-Faced Comedian," in *The 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival Retrospective Catalogue: A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies*, ed. The Urban Council of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1984), 73-74.

historical context of Hong Kong at that time. Also, based on the research findings regarding the characteristics and film style of 1970s social satire comedies, I will analyse more about the specialties that these films possessed and explain how did they contribute to their high popularity in that period. To sum up, seeing the lack of historical research on Hong Kong social satire comedy films, I hope my project would be able to act as a pioneer and provide a more far-reaching study which examines the rise of this film genre during the 1970s from a historical perspective.

D. Methodology

This research project will apply a qualitative research approach to examine the history of the rise of Hong Kong social satire comedy films during the 1970s. In order to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the rise this film genre, this paper will draw on a range of research materials, including both primary and secondary sources, and carry out detail analysis and examination from within. To start with, literature review of related academic books, articles will be first undergone to study the development of social satire comedy films in the local cinema and the historical background during the 1970s, so that a broader context can be provided in exploring the factors for the emergence and rise of this film genre. Next, as this research is a case study of 1970s Hong Kong social satire comedy

films, film analysis of some representative local social satire comedies in the 1970s will be included in this project. I decided to choose a few key social satire comedy films, such as Chor Yuen's "*The House of 72 Tenants*"¹⁰ and "*Hong Kong 73*"¹¹, the Hui Brothers' comedies "*Games Gamblers Play*"¹², "*The Last Message*"¹³ and "*The Private Eyes*"¹⁴ for close examination. The themes, plot, presentation styles and production of the above iconic 70s social satire comedies will be analysed to figure out the reasons behind their high popularity. Besides, the film trailers and posters of the above social satire comedies are also some of the primary sources that I would make use of in this study since they are helpful in showing us the details of the films and the way how filmmakers promoted them at that time. Apart from this, I will also examine related journals or newspaper articles that provided information such as film reviews and data like box office records and number of viewers. Last but not least, interviews of the filmmakers, actors and industry experts who were involved in the production and distribution of Hong Kong social satire comedy films during the 1970s are also the research materials that I would be using in this project. I believed that their sharing in these interviews can provide some valuable

¹⁰ Chor Yuen, dir. *The House of 72 Tenants* (Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers, 1973).

¹¹ Chor Yuen, dir. *Hong Kong 73* (Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers, 1974).

¹² Hui Michael, dir. *Game Gamblers Play* (Hong Kong: Golden Harvest, 1974).

¹³ Hui Michael, dir. *The Last Message* (Hong Kong: Golden Harvest, 1975).

¹⁴ Hui Michael, dir. *The Private Eyes* (Hong Kong: Golden Harvest, 1976).

insights and help us to understand more about the background and motives in the making of these films, which can greatly assist me in finding the reasons for their emergence and rise in Hong Kong during the 1970s.

2. Historical Background

A. Features of Hong Kong Social Satire Comedy Films in the 1970s

Hong Kong social satire comedy films in the 1970s were characterized by their humorous and sharp portrayal of society. According to film critic Po Fung (2015), most of the 1970s social satire comedies were based on addressing and satirizing the social issues in Hong Kong, such as some controversial and sensitive topics like corruption, crime, poverty and social inequalities. Also, the protagonists in this film genre were always grassroots people and the social issues were reflected and criticised through their tough yet funny life experiences in the story plot.¹⁵ For example, Chor Yuen's *The House of 72 Tenants* in 1973 satirised different social problems in Hong Kong during the late 1960s and early 1970s through the stories of 72 tenants who lived in a run-down housing complex. Social issues such as water rationing, poor law and order in the society, police corruption and inflation were demonstrated in the film.¹⁶ Another few examples were Michael Hui's three most representative social satire comedy films in the 1970s, which were *Games*

¹⁵ Fung Po, "Finding Happiness in an Affluent Society — Cinema City Comedy Film," in *Self-cultivation in Hong Kong Comedy Films*, ed. Wai Hung Cheung (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Critics Society Limited, 2015), 66.

¹⁶ Cheuk To Li, "Postscript," in *The 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival Retrospective Catalogue: A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies*, ed. The Urban Council of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1984), 127.

Gamblers Play, *The Last Message* and *The Private Eyes* respectively. These three comedies also presented hot social issues through the stories of ordinary citizens from the lower class in a satirical way. To start with, *Games Gamblers Play* in 1974 criticised the serious gambling problems in Hong Kong by showing the funny story of two con men trying to get rich quickly through gambling in the film. While *The Last Message* in 1975 reflected the critical state of Hong Kong society after the stock market collapsed in 1973 and satirized how stock mania made people crazy through incidents that took place in an asylum in the film.¹⁷ As for *The Private Eyes* released in 1976, it showed the pressure and frustrations experienced by wage earners in the society through a story that took place in a private detective agency. Therefore, we can see that the satire of the society and the recognition and identification with the grassroots class can be said as the keynote of social satire comedies in the 1970s. Apart from this, compared with the previous Hong Kong comedy films, social satire comedies in the 1970s were not that narrative, but they were more exaggerated, vulgar and farcical in terms of film style. For instance, film critic Huang Nan Xiang (1973) pointed out that the narration of *The House of 72 Tenants* was quite loose and the story plot was fragmented to satirise and laugh at different social ills.¹⁸ Another film critic Law Kar (1984) also suggested that the

¹⁷ Ng, "A Portrait of the Comedian as a Schizophreniac," 71.

¹⁸ Nan Xiang Huang, "From Stage to Screen: The House of 72 Tenants," *The*

plot development in films like *Games Gamblers Play* was not completed and the film mainly ran along a string of verbal gags and punchlines played against a backdrop of comic situations.¹⁹ In addition, sometimes the gags in these 1970s social satire comedies were relatively vulgar that the film content might be inappropriate, especially not suitable for children. Hence, it can be seen that apart from satirizing the social issues and bringing out social messages, social satire comedy films during the 1970s also focused more on inducing laughter, amusing and entertaining audiences by including a bunch of jokes in the films.

B. Popularity of Hong Kong Social Satire Comedy Films in the 1970s

Social satire comedy films produced and released during the 1970s were popular and well received among the audiences in Hong Kong. The high popularity of this film genre could be seen from the box office records during that time period. Throughout the 1970s, social satire comedies were always box-office hits in the local cinema. For instance, Chor Yuen's *The House of 72 Tenants* in 1973 was the highest grossing film in that year. It grossed about HK\$5.6 million, hit the box office records and even eclipsed Bruce Lee's "*The Way of the Dragon*" in 1972.²⁰ In the

Perspective Monthly, no. 41 (16th October 1973): 61.

¹⁹ Kar Law, "Michael Hui: A Decade of Sword Grinding," 65.

²⁰ Hong Kong Film Archive, "The House of 72 Tenants," in *Hong Kong Filmography Series Volume VII (1970-1974)*, ed. Hong Kong Film Archive (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2010), 191.

following year, Michael Hui's *Games Gamblers Play* was the top box office film of 1974 in Hong Kong. This film took in about HK\$6 million at the box office and broke the record of *The House of 72 Tenants*.²¹ *Hong Kong 73*, which was another social satire comedy directed by Chor Yuen and released in the same year, also claimed the second place in box office performance of that year.²² In the next few years, Hui's social satire comedy films such as *The Last Message* in 1975, *The Private Eyes* in 1976 and *The Contract* in 1978 continued their success and were box office champions in each year.²³ Among them, *The Private Eyes* was a box office smash. The film topped about HK\$8.5 million at the box office in 1976, becoming the film with the highest grossing and attendance in Hong Kong during the whole 1970s. It was also the most lucrative film ever since the founding of Hong Kong at that time. Apart from this, *The Private Eyes* was even re-released in Hong Kong again in 1979, 1983 and 1984 respectively because of its high popularity.²⁴

Besides, if we look at the overall box office performance, we will discover that six

²¹ Hong Kong Film Archive, "Games Gamblers Play," in *Hong Kong Filmography Series Volume VII (1970-1974)*, ed. Hong Kong Film Archive (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2010), 251.

²² Hong Kong Film Archive, "Hong Kong 73," in *Hong Kong Filmography Series Volume VII (1970-1974)*, ed. Hong Kong Film Archive (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2010), 228-229.

²³ Fung Po, "Preface," in *Hong Kong Filmography Series Volume VIII (1975-1979)*, ed. Hong Kong Film Archive (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2014), 8.

²⁴ Hong Kong Film Archive, "The Private Eyes," in *Hong Kong Filmography Series Volume VIII (1975-1979)*, ed. Hong Kong Film Archive (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2014), 115-116.

out of ten highest grossing Hong Kong films in the 1970s were social satire comedies (see Figure 1).²⁵ From all these data, it is crystal clear that Hong Kong social satire comedy film in the 1970s was a huge success and their performance even outweighed the kung-fu and martial arts films genre that had dominated the local cinema for several decades.

²⁵ The Urban Council of Hong Kong. "Top Ten Grossing Hong Kong Films (1970-1979)," in *The 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival Retrospective Catalogue: A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies*, ed. The Urban Council of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1984), 182.

Highest Grossing Hong Kong Films (1970-1979)

Year	Film Title	Film Genre	Gross (HK\$)
1970	The Chinese Boxer	Kung Fu	2,076,658
1971	The Big Boss	Kung Fu	3,197,416
1972	The Way of the Dragon	Kung Fu	5,307,350
1973	The House of 72 Tenants	Social Satire Comedy	5,626,675
1974	Games Gamblers Play	Social Satire Comedy	6,251,633
1975	The Last Message	Social Satire Comedy	4,553,663
1976	The Private Eyes	Social Satire Comedy	8,531,699
1977	The Pilferers' Progress	Social Satire Comedy	5,056,559
1978	The Contract	Social Satire Comedy	7,823,019
1979	The Fearless Hyena	Kung Fu Comedy	5,445,535

Figure 1: Highest Grossing Hong Kong Films (1970-1979)

(Source: The 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival Retrospective

Catalogue: A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies)

3. Why and how did social satire comedy film genre emerge and rise in Hong Kong during the 1970s?

The emergence and rise of social satire comedy film genre in Hong Kong during the 1970s was highly related to the historical context and it was therefore attributed to various political, economic, social and cultural factors, namely the political and socio-economic turmoil, the rise and popularization of television, the change of filmmaking system and the relaxed film censorship during the 1970s. The above four factors combined and interrelated with each other, and together contributed to the appearance and growth of social satire comedy films in the local cinema.

A. Political and Socio-economic Turmoil

First of all, the political and socio-economic turmoil undergone in Hong Kong during the 1970s had provided social satire comedy films with a rich supply of themes and created a space for satirical commentary, which led to the emergence and rise of this film genre in the local cinema. In the 1970s, although Hong Kong underwent a series of reforms after the 1967 riots, the rapid urban modernization and changes in society had brought about a significant amount of social unrest and a large number of social issues.²⁶ To begin with, the 1970s was said to be a climatic

²⁶ Eric Kwan Wai Yu, “Modernization of Hong Kong Comedy Film in the 1970s, Comedic Persona, and Psychology of Viewing: A Preliminary Study Based on

period in crime and corruption.²⁷ According to James Kung and Zhang Yueai (1984), the crime rate in the 1970s was high and kept on increasing. In 1973, the crime rate had already rose 17% over the previous year of 1972. The total number of cases also increased further from 37,778 to 50,707 in 1974, yet the detection rate had dropped in contrast. While in 1976, crime was still rampant in Hong Kong, with over fifty thousand of cases recorded.²⁸ Social problems like bank robberies, prostitution, gambling and juvenile delinquency became so prevalent that they were already regarded as the daily routine of the city during the 1970s.²⁹ In terms of corruption, Lui (2012) pointed out that it was a problem that infiltrated every corner of Hong Kong society in the 1970s since it had become a norm in all government departments. Among them, police corruption was the most serious. For ordinary citizens at that time, in their daily life, it was not uncommon to see police officers and firefighters extracting bribes before carrying out criminal investigation or putting out fire.³⁰ The bribery scandal of the chief superintendent Peter Godber in

Michael Hui Koon-man's Works," *Kaohsiung Normal University Journal*, no. 51 (Dec 2021): 3.

²⁷ Stephen Teo, "The 1970s: Movement and Transition," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 110.

²⁸ James Kung and Yueai Zhang, "Hong Kong Cinema and Television in the 1970s: A Perspective," in *The 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival Retrospective Catalogue: A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies*, ed. The Urban Council of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1984), 15-16.

²⁹ Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, "Besides Fists and Blood: Michael Hui and Cantonese Comedy," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 170.

³⁰ Tai Lok Lui, *The Familiar Seventies* (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book, 2012), 18-

1973 even further exposed the severity of the problem. Apart from this, in the same year, Hong Kong's economy was cracked down by the international oil crisis and the stock market crash, resulting in a soaring of unemployment rate and serious inflation in the society. The stock disaster and economic recession had also led to tens of thousands of Hong Kong stockholders going bankrupt at that time.³¹ From these, it can be seen that the 1970s was a chaotic period in Hong Kong, with a poor law and order and a gloomy economic outlook in the society. All these political and socio-economic problems at that time had caused a widespread discontent and a growing sense of frustration among ordinary citizens. This kind of environment also led to an increasing disillusionment with the government and cynicism towards those in power. The turmoil and social climate that Hong Kong was experiencing in the 1970s thus brought plenty of subjects for social satire comedy films and provided a fertile ground for filmmakers to use satirical humor to comment on the social issues and highlight their absurdity, contributing to the emergence and rise of social satire comedies in Hong Kong. For example, Chor Yuen's *The House of 72 Tenants* in 1973 drew material from the social problems in Hong Kong during the 1970s and reflected the social phenomenon in a satirical way. Although the film was based on a stage play which was originally set in Shanghai in the late 1940s, Chor

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³¹ Tai Lok Lui, *The Familiar Seventies*, 17-18.

tried to make it more localised to document the situation in Hong Kong. He mentioned that during the filmmaking process, he put in elements of Hong Kong society to satirise the social norms. Scenes like firefighters extorting the tenants and dialouges like “Have money, have water. No money, no water. Want water give money. No money don't bother” in the film were statement of actual facts (see Figure 2).³² Michael Hui’s *Games Gamblers Play* in 1974 and *The Last Message* in 1975 were also inspired from the social issues occurred in Hong Kong during that period. In the 1970s, gambling activities such as playing mahjong, betting on horses and gambling trips in Macau attracted many citizens and they occupied an important spot in the lives of Hong Kong people.³³ Hence, Hui mentioned that he chose this common social topic as the theme for *Games Gamblers Play* to satirise the gambler mentality that prevailed in the society at that time (see Figure 3).³⁴ As for *The Last Message*, Hui satirised the stock fever in the 1970s through the film. For instance, the asylum that the story took place was named as “Hang Seng Psychiatric Hospital” to insinuate the ups and downs of Hang Seng index (see

³² Hong Kong Film Archive, *Oral History Series 3 Director Chor Yuen* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2006), 43.

³³ Yu Cheng, “The Gambling Streak as Seen in Hongkong Movies,” in *The 12th Hong Kong International Film Festival Changes in Hong Kong Society Through Cinema*, ed. The Urban Council of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1988), 32.

³⁴ The Hong Kong International Film Festival Society, *Michael Hui, Filmmaker in Focus* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong International Film Festival Society, 2020), 24.

Figure 4).³⁵ Therefore, we can see that the political and socio-economic turmoil in Hong Kong during the 1970s gave rise to social satire comedy films by providing different social themes and creating a favourable social climate for satire.



Figure 2: “Have money, have water. No money, no water.

Want water give money. No money don't bother” in *The House of 72 Tenants*

reflected the corruption problem in government departments

(Source: *The House of 72 Tenants*)

³⁵ Chi Wa Chan, “Urban Fantasy — The Comedy Mode of Michael Hui,” in *Golden Harvest: Leading Change in Changing Times*, ed. Hong Kong Film Archive (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2013), 82.



Figure 3: Gambling was chosen as the main theme in *Games Gamblers Play*

(Source: *Games Gamblers Play*)



Figure 4: “Hang Seng Psychiatric Hospital” insinuated the ups and downs of

Hang Seng index in Hong Kong during the 1970s in *The Last Message*

(Source: *The Last Message*)

B. The Rise and Popularisation of Television

Although the rise and popularization of television in the 1970s had posed a threat to the cinema of Hong Kong by attracting many audiences away from films, it also contributed to the emergence and rise of social satire comedy film genre as it laid the foundation for their development in the film industry.³⁶ Television actually brought a lot of new ideas and resources of social satire comedy to the local cinema.³⁷ The making of social satire comedy films was always inspired by popular TV drama series and shows at that time. For example, Chor Yuen's *The House of 72 Tenants* in 1973 was regarded as a television film.³⁸ Ng (2018) pointed out that seeing the success of *Enjoy Yourself Tonight* (EYT), which was a long-run variety programme produced by Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB), Chor borrowed its sketch structure and used the same social satire comedic approach to create the film (see Figure 5).³⁹ His another production, *Hong Kong 73* was also adapted from *Seventy-Three*, which was a highly rated social satire comedy drama series in TVB

³⁶ Cheuk To Li, "Introduction," in *The 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival Retrospective Catalogue: A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies*, ed. The Urban Council of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1984), 9.

³⁷ Kar Law, "Changes and Social Influences in Hong Kong Cinema Post – 1967: A Comparison with Hong Kong Television," in *Oral History Series 7: When the Wind was Blowing Wild: Hong Kong Cinema of the 1970s*, ed. Hong Kong Film Archive (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2018), 46.

³⁸ James Kung and Yueai Zhang, "Hong Kong Cinema and Television in the 1970s: A Perspective," 15.

³⁹ Chun Hung Ng, "On the Eve of the Golden Age: 1970s Hong Kong Cinema," in *Oral History Series 7: When the Wind was Blowing Wild: Hong Kong Cinema of the 1970s*, ed. Hong Kong Film Archive (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2018), 24.

(see Figure 6).⁴⁰ Apart from Chor's work, Michael Hui's *Games Gamblers Play* in 1974 was also born out of the popular sketch comedy television series in the early 1970s, the *Hui Brothers Show* (see Figure 7).⁴¹ In view of the high popularity gained by the programme, Hui decided to bring the show to the cinema and tried to transplant its successful elements to the film.⁴² In the making of *Games Gamblers Play*, Law (2018) pointed out that Hui used the same creative team of Hui Brothers Show to mastermind the film and continued to adopt the skit-style of their television work, like presenting hot social issues abounded with local jokes.⁴³ Therefore, we can see that television had an interlocking relationship with the emergence and rise of social satire comedy film genre in the film industry. The popularisation of television exerted much influence in terms of the subject matter for social satire comedy films and the appearance of these comedies was thus mostly originated from the television shows.⁴⁴ On the other hand, it can also be seen that television acted as a training ground for social satire comedy film talents like the Hui Brothers' team as they learnt the filmmaking skills and techniques in television work and then

⁴⁰ Hong Kong Film Archive, "Hong Kong 73," 229.

⁴¹ Fung Lun Cheung, "The Features and Significances of four Hui Brothers' Comedies in the 1970s," in *Age of Hybridity: Cultural Identity, Gender, Everyday Life Practices and Hong Kong Cinema of the 1970s*, ed. Kwai Cheung Lo and Kit Wa Man (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2005), 173.

⁴² Tai Lok Lui, *The Familiar Seventies*, 25.

⁴³ Kar Law, "Changes and Social Influences in Hong Kong Cinema Post – 1967: A Comparison with Hong Kong Television," 46.

⁴⁴ Cheuk To Li, "Postscript," 127-128.

applied their experience to the local cinema. All these contributed to the emergence and rise of social satire comedy films in Hong Kong during the 1970s.



Figure 5: The sketch structure and social satire comedic approach of *Enjoy*

***Yourself Tonight* (EYT) was borrowed by Chor Yuen in the making of**

The House of 72 Tenants

(Source: *Enjoy Yourself Tonight*)



Figure 6: *Hong Kong 73* was based on the television comedy series,

Seventy-Three

(Source: *Seventy-Three*)



Figure 7: *Games Gamblers Play* was regarded as

an extension of the television programme, *Hui Brothers Show*

(Source: *Hui Brothers Show*)

C. The Change of Filmmaking System

The change of filmmaking system during the 1970s had contributed to the emergence and rise of social satire comedy film genre in Hong Kong by providing more room for creative innovation in the filmmaking process. Before the 1970s, most of the film production companies like the Shaw Brothers adopted the studio system in the making of film. Although this kind of filmmaking method could ensure a steady and effective production, distribution and release of films because of its vertical integration nature, it had some drawbacks in managing the creativity of films. Zhao (2007) pointed out that the studio system emphasized on centralisation and institutionalisation, and followed assembly line method of production in filmmaking.⁴⁵ Under this studio system, Chung (2011) stated that any decisions in the making of film, such as the genre of the films, budgets and casting were all determined by the film production companies. The production was so tightly controlled that filmmakers seldom had a say in big decision making process and they did not have much space for creativity, like choosing the themes for their films.⁴⁶ Also, film was always regarded as a commercial venture in this kind of film studio.⁴⁷ For big film production companies like the Shaw Brothers, quantity

⁴⁵ Wei Fang Zhao, *The History of Hong Kong Film 1897-2006*, 222.

⁴⁶ Po Yin Chung, *A Century of Hong Kong Film Industry*, 229.

⁴⁷ Cheuk To Li, "Postscript," 130.

was more important than quality in filmmaking in order to make a quick profit.⁴⁸

As a result, filmmakers needed to work on as many projects as possible in a short period of time instead of producing refined films. To save time and secure financing, Fu (2000) mentioned that most of the filmmakers just exploited old and sensational subjects like folktales, martial arts and Cantonese opera in the making of film, leading to overproduction and shoddy films in the local cinema, and the work seldom had connections to the current social issues in Hong Kong.⁴⁹ Therefore, we can see that the inflexible and rigid studio system adopted by film production companies before the 1970s left little freedom for the creation of innovative films or diverse genres of films, which made it difficult for social satire comedy to emerge in the local cinema. However, in the early 1970s, the newly formed film studio, Golden Harvest, implemented an independent filmmaking system in the industry. Unlike the old-style studio system adopted by the Shaw Brothers, the system of Golden Harvest was more flexible in the making of film (Zhao 2007, 7).⁵⁰ Chung (2011) pointed out that under this independent filmmaking system, film production companies would carry out decentralisation in their operation and the filmmaking

⁴⁸ Kar Law, "Changes and Social Influences in Hong Kong Cinema Post – 1967: A Comparison with Hong Kong Television," 50.

⁴⁹ Poshek Fu, "The 1960s: Modernity, Youth Culture, and Hong Kong Cantonese Cinema," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 81.

⁵⁰ Wei Fang Zhao, *The History of Hong Kong Film 1897-2006*, 7.

rights were in the hands of filmmakers. Directors now had the power to decide details like the genre, the themes and the casting of their films, and the film studio would just act as an investor, providing financial support and related assistance to them. Hence, we can see that in this filmmaking approach, the film production company had less intervention in film shooting, which liberated the production rights from the monopoly of traditional film studios. Filmmakers were given more freedom and room for development in the making of film. This allowed them to give full play to their creative talents and produce films with richer and more diverse themes, contributing to the emergence of social satire comedy film genre in the local cinema.⁵¹ Michael Hui's case was exactly an example in showing the influence of this independent filmmaking system on the emergence and rise of social satire comedy films in Hong Kong. According to Hui (2018), when he recalled his working experience with the Shaw Brothers in the early 1970s, he mentioned that the company had larger constraints on film creation and funding under the studio system. The Shaw Brothers did not give filmmakers a lot of freedom in the making of film and required them to produce films only with traditional and standardised themes that were similar to the past. Therefore, when Hui decided to create his first film, *Games Gamblers Play*, his idea of producing a social satire comedy film was

⁵¹ Po Yin Chung, *A Century of Hong Kong Film Industry*, 229.

rejected by the Shaw Brothers. However, Golden Harvest which adopted the independent filmmaking system, welcomed Hui's idea and agreed to let him be the scriptwriter, director and leading actor for the film at the same time. They even helped him to set up a satellite company, the Hui Film Company, for better independent operation. During the making of the film, Hui pointed out that the parent company, Golden Harvest, provided him with a lot of space for creation and did not intervene him when he chose to use social issues like gambling as the subject of the film. Instead, it was only responsible for affairs like financial support, technical support and the release, distribution and promotion of films. As a result, with the help of the independent filmmaking system in Golden Harvest, Hui successfully produced *Games Gamblers Play* in 1974 and continued to collaborate with the company to create more social satire comedy work. Hence, Hui commented that the flexible independent filmmaking system allowed him to unleash his talents and creativity, letting him produce more masterpieces of social satire comedy film genre in the 1970s, which was impossible under the old studio system in the past.⁵²

Therefore, it can be seen that the change from studio system to independent filmmaking system in Hong Kong film industry during the 1970s had provided

⁵² Michael Hui, "It feels like signing a long-term contract without signing a contract," in *Oral History Series 7: When the Wind was Blowing Wild: Hong Kong Cinema of the 1970s*, ed. Hong Kong Film Archive (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2018), 171-175.

filmmakers more room and freedom for film creation, which let a hundred flowers bloom in the local cinema, directly leading to the emergence and rise of social satire comedy films in that time period.

D. Relaxed Film Censorship

Last but not least, the relaxed film censorship during the 1970s also led to the emergence and rise of social satire comedy films in Hong Kong as it created a more open environment for their production and release. Before the 1970s, the colonial government had imposed an extremely strict film censorship in Hong Kong due to political reasons. Filmmakers working in the 1950s and the 1960s were unable to make films that explored political and social conditions (Sek 1988, 15).⁵³ However, after the 1967 riots, the colonial government of Hong Kong learnt the lesson and started to realise that there was a huge communication gap between the government and the ordinary citizens. To improve the relationship with the local people, Fu (2000) pointed out that the British colonial government tried to relax its control of political dissents and permit greater freedom of speech to the public. Therefore, the film censorship in Hong Kong was also freer in response to this change.⁵⁴ Lee

⁵³ Kei Sek, "The Social Psychology of Hongkong Cinema," in *The 12th Hong Kong International Film Festival Changes in Hong Kong Society Through Cinema*, ed. The Urban Council of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1988), 15.

⁵⁴ Poshek Fu, "The 1960s: Modernity, Youth Culture, and Hong Kong Cantonese

(2019) suggested that the film censorship scale in the 1970s became relatively relaxed when compared to the past. The government and film censors were also lenient about the sensitive content like political issues, violence and sex reflected in the films.⁵⁵ Under this environment, the film industry became bolder and more unrestrained.⁵⁶ Filmmakers in the 1970s were allowed to touch on previously taboo topics such as social scandals and crime, and expose them in their work. They could also express their views and opinions more freely through their films, like commenting on the political and socio-economic issues and criticising the government or those in power. Chor Yuen and Michael Hui's production, which contained sensitive and controversial social issues such as police corruption, gambling and robberies, were created and released successfully because of this relaxed film censorship. Hence, we can see that the freer censorship policy during the 1970s had led to an open creation environment that was favourable for the emergence and rise of social satire comedy film genre in Hong Kong.

To conclude, the emergence and rise of social satire comedy film genre in Hong Kong during the 1970s was highly related to the political, economic, social and cultural

Cinema," 75.

⁵⁵ Suk Man Lee, *Shadows of the Cold War: A History of Hong Kong Film Censorship in Geopolitics* (Taipei: Monsoon Books, 2019), 182-183.

⁵⁶ Kei Sek, "The Social Psychology of Hongkong Cinema," 15.

environment. It was also a response to the combination of the above four factors. First, the political and socio-economic turmoil in the 1970s had provided different subject matter for social satire comedies, such as crime, corruption and economic recession, and created a favourable social climate for satirical commentary in films. Next, the rise and popularisation of television during the 1970s had laid the foundation for the development of social satire comedies by bringing new ideas, resources and talents to the film industry. While the transition from studio system to independent filmmaking system granted filmmakers more room for film creation, making them free to choose social satire comedy as the genre of their films. Last but not least, the greater freedom of speech and relatively relaxed film censorship after the 1967 riots allowed filmmakers to make films that exposed sensitive and controversial social issues in Hong Kong, which was favourable for the production and release of social satire comedy films. All these historical factors interrelated and combined with each other and contributed to the emergence and rise of social satire comedies in the local cinema during the 1970s at last.

4. Why Hong Kong social satire comedy films in the 1970s were well received among audiences and gained high popularity?

Hong Kong social satire comedy films in the 1970s possessed a number of specialities that made them well received among the audiences and become popular in the local cinema at that time. Among all, providing and acting as an effective abreaction channel, produced by a younger generation of filmmakers and featuring famous television stars were the three main reasons that contributed to their high popularity during that period.

A. Effective Abreaction Channel

To begin with, Hong Kong social satire comedy films in the 1970s were well received among audiences and gained high popularity since it provided and acted as an effective abreaction channel for local citizens at that time. As mentioned above, the 1970s was a chaotic period in Hong Kong which great changes and upheavals took place. However, facing different political and socio-economic issues, ordinary citizens seldom had the chance and medium to voice out their grievances to the government in the past. Lui (2012) mentioned that although the British colonial government tried to rebuild the relationship between the government and the society after the 1967 riots, the government still did not open a wider avenue for citizens to

participate in politics and decision making in social affairs in the 1970s.⁵⁷ If local citizens were troubled by social problems, they did not have an official channel to speak out and complaint due to the huge communication gap. As a consequence, social satire comedy films in Hong Kong during the 1970s, which often addressed and satirised political and socio-economic issues in a humorous and light-hearted way, provided a much-needed outlet for social commentary and criticism. Ng (1993) pointed out that these films were often outspoken about unreasonable social phenomenon like crime, corruption, inflation and social inequality, and this reflected the frustrations of the general public.⁵⁸ The parodies of the ruling classes and the satires in the comedies also helped to release their suppressed discontent and resentment, acting as a safety valve for them to relieve pressure.⁵⁹ Hence, because of this function, social satire comedy films in the 1970s were welcomed by local citizens. In addition, social satire comedy films during the 1970s also provided a form of escapism for locals who were dealing with the stresses of daily life as the combination of entertainment and social concerns in the comedies were able to give Hong Kong citizens a refreshing feeling that cheers them up (Lai, 1974).⁶⁰

Therefore, we can see that social satire comedy films in the 1970s provided and

⁵⁷ Tai Lok Lui, *The Familiar Seventies*, 21.

⁵⁸ Ho Ng, *Ng Ho's Folklore Studies of Films* (Hong Kong: Subculture, 1993), 173.

⁵⁹ Wei Fang Zhao, *The History of Hong Kong Film 1897-2006*, 250.

⁶⁰ Kit Lai, "Ghost Films and Comedy Films Nowadays, Why Comedy Films are Popular?," *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, November 16, 1974, 24.

acted as a medium for citizens to vent their spleen at the time that public grievances were suppressed, which made them become well received and popular among the local audiences in the society.

B. Younger Generation of Filmmakers

Social satire comedy films in Hong Kong during the 1970s were popular as most of them were produced by a younger generation of filmmakers, which helped to win the appreciation from young film audiences that made up the major core of the local cinema at that time. Take Michael Hui's *Games Gamblers Play* as an example, its creation and production team mainly consisted of young film talents in the 1970s, including the Hui Brothers, Lau Tin Chi and John Woo. The film trailer of *Games Gamblers Play* also advertised that the film was made by devoted young people with local audience in mind, emphasising the enthusiasm and vitality of the younger generation of filmmakers (see Figure 8).⁶¹ Unlike the older filmmakers who were burdened by historical or cultural baggage, and could only create films with traditional themes such as family ethics, martial arts and Cantonese opera, Teo (2000) pointed out that this young generation of filmmakers had a greater sense of audience values and were able to address more down-to-earth subjects in their social

⁶¹ Chi Wa Chan, "Urban Fantasy — The Comedy Mode of Michael Hui," 81.

satire comedies.⁶² Same for the film audiences in the 1970s, most of them belonged to the post-war generation and they were no longer that China-centred and cautious like their parents who regarded themselves as refugees and immigrants only.⁶³ Instead, Fu (2000) mentioned that this new generation of film audiences had already viewed Hong Kong as their home and had a strong sense of belonging and social awareness. They cared more for the society and paid more attention to the political and socio-economic affairs in Hong Kong.⁶⁴ As a result, social satire comedies in the 1970s which were created by young filmmakers attracted young film audiences and gained high popularity as they reflected the contemporary society through the films. Sek (1999) suggested that young generation of filmmakers always discussed about social issues like crime, corruption and economic recession in their social satire comedy films, which were the top concerns of Hong Kong citizens at that time. This created resonances and aroused identification with the young audiences who were experiencing these same issues in their daily lives.⁶⁵ Also, these comedies often featured relatable characters which typified everyday person, making audiences highly engaging and entertaining. Therefore, as social satire

⁶² Stephen Teo, "The 1970s: Movement and Transition," 96.

⁶³ Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, "Besides Fists and Blood: Michael Hui and Cantonese Comedy," 170.

⁶⁴ Poshek Fu, "The 1960s: Modernity, Youth Culture, and Hong Kong Cantonese Cinema," 71.

⁶⁵ Kei Sek, *Sek Kei's Film Criticism Collection 6: The Style of Eight Famous Directors (Part Two)* (Hong Kong: Subculture, 1999), 20-21.

comedy films in the 1970s were produced by young filmmakers who had sharp social acumen and spoke to the social concerns of audiences, they were well received among the public and gained high popularity in the local cinema.



Figure 8: “Filmed by devoted young people with you in mind”

in the trailer of Games Gamblers Play in 1974

(Source: Games Gamblers Play (1974) Original DVD Trailer)

C. Starring of Famous Television Stars

The rise and popularisation of television in Hong Kong during the 1970s not only brought new ideas, resources and talents that led to the emergence of social satire comedy films, but the starring of their famous stars in these films also helped to draw a large audience, which contributed to the high popularity of social satire

comedies in the 1970s. Starting from the late 1960s, television had become the most influential communication media in Hong Kong. With an increasing spending power of Hong Kong people at that time, televisions, which were originally a kind of luxury goods, had become affordable for ordinary citizens and had gradually become a necessity for every household. According to Lui (2012), only 27% of the families were equipped with television sets in 1968, but the figure had jumped to 60% in 1970. In 1974, the number of families equipped with television sets even rose to 86.2% and reached 90% by 1976.⁶⁶ The popularisation of television had made it become the main home entertainment and information medium in Hong Kong. As a result, television artists established ready rapport with the local audiences and became household names in the city. Having a solid audience base, their participation in the social satire comedy films during the 1970s thus undoubtedly attracted mass audiences and gained high popularity. For example, in *The House of 72 Tenants*, Chor Yuen casted both artists from *Enjoy Yourself Tonight* (EYT) and Shaw actors for the film.⁶⁷ Famous television entertainers like Lydia Sum and Ivan Ho were in the main line-up, other familiar television actors like Adam Cheng and Do Ping were also guest stars in the film. The combination of

⁶⁶ Tai Lok Lui, *The Familiar Seventies*, 20.

⁶⁷ Hong Kong Film Archive, *Oral History Series 3 Director Chor Yuen*, 43.

popular television stars and A-list actors became the attraction of the film itself.⁶⁸

We can also see this from the slogan on the film poster for *The House of 72 Tenants*,

“All stars from Shaw Brothers mobilise, television entertainers out in force” (see

Figure 9). Hence, Po (2014) suggested that the popularity of the film was due to the

fact that it featured many famous television stars.⁶⁹ While in *Hong Kong 73*, Chor

also used more than 70 television artists and film actors, which again drew a huge

audience.⁷⁰ Apart from this, in Michael Hui’s social satire comedies, the Hui

Brothers were also former television entertainers and thus the films gained a lot of

support because of their huge audience base. Therefore, it can be seen that the **star-**

studded line-up in these Hong Kong social satire comedy films during the 1970s

helped to attract large audiences and contributed to their high popularity at that time.

⁶⁸ James Kung and Yueai Zhang, “Hong Kong Cinema and Television in the 1970s: A Perspective,” 15.

⁶⁹ Fung Po, “Preface,” 8.

⁷⁰ Hong Kong Film Archive, “Hong Kong 73,” 228-229.



Figure 9: “All stars from Shaw Brothers mobilise, television entertainers out in force” as shown on the film poster for *The House of 72 Tenants*

(Source: Hong Kong Film Archive)

To sum up, the high popularity of social satire comedy films in Hong Kong during the 1970s was due to the fact that these films possessed several specialities which made them well received in the local market. First, social satire comedies provided and acted as an effective abreaction channel for Hong Kong citizens in the 1970s, helping them to release their resentment and voice out their grievances. Next, most of the 1970s social

satire comedy films were created by young filmmakers who tried to address social issues through the comedies. The films thus resonated with the younger generation of audiences and suited their taste. Apart from this, social satire comedy films in the 1970s had a star-studded line up of actors, the appearance of famous television star in the comedies helped to attract mass audiences. All these specialities made Hong Kong social satire comedy films stood out in the market and contributed to their high popularity during the 1970s.

5. Conclusion

All in all, social satire comedy films in Hong Kong during the 1970s were important cultural products that portrayed and reflected the contemporary society. The humorous satire of society and the identification with the working class were the main features of these films and they gained high popularity in the local cinema, always being the box-office hits throughout the whole decade. Under my research, the emergence of this film genre in the 1970s was found to be highly related to the historical context and it was caused by a number of political, social, economic and cultural factors. First of all, the political and socio-economic turmoil undergone in Hong Kong during the 1970s provided a rich supply of social subject matter and created a space for satirical commentary. While the rise and popularisation of television brought new ideas and resources, and also acted as a training ground for social satire comedy film talents. In terms of the change of filmmaking system, the shift from studio system to independent filmmaking system opened up more room and space for the creation of social satire comedy films. Last but not least, the relaxed film censorship during the 1970s gave rise to the production and release of social satire comedies which often contained sensitive and controversial content. Apart from the above environmental factors, Hong Kong social satire comedy films in the 1970s were well received and popular in the local cinema because they had some own specialities. To begin with, the parodies and critical

commentary in social satire comedy films acted as an abreaction channel for local citizens in the 1970s, where they could release their resentment and frustrations that were suppressed in their daily life. Besides, social satire comedies during the 1970s were made by a younger generation of filmmakers, who were able to create film content that resonated with the post-war generation and won over audiences. Moreover, 1970s social satire comedies often featured famous television stars, the star-studded line up in these films thus attracted mass audiences and led to their high popularity. Therefore, from the research, we can see that the rise of social satire comedy films in Hong Kong during the 1970s was largely due to the contemporary environment and the special features that these films possessed. The historical factors and the specialities of the films interacted and combined with each other, and finally gave rise to the flourishing development of social satire comedy films in Hong Kong during the 1970s. All these had led to the golden age of this film genre in the past and made them become an iconic chapter in the history of Hong Kong cinema and popular culture.

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