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Screen Sirens

As "3D Sex and Zen: Extreme Ecstasy," the world's first 3D skin flick produced right here in Hong Kong, hits cinemas this month, we think it's high time to look back at the 40-year history of the city's erotic film industry. Is it bound for a resurgence?

By Grace Tsoi | published Apr 07, 2011



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The Swinging Seventies

The first wave of erotic films



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In the 1970s, the first wave of erotic films filled Hong Kong cinemas: actresses shot to fame after showing their curvaceous bodies on the big screen; people were captivated by the seductive imagery; and even famous directors toyed with making sex flicks. It was the golden age of erotic movies in Hong Kong—when no one thought it was a big deal to make sexual movies, and some even considered erotic films a cinematic norm of the time.

That era was also a culturally turbulent time for Hong Kong. Western artists were exploring themes of sexual liberation, and movies such as

"Deep Throat" and "Emmanuelle" hit Hong Kong theaters. Under such influences, Hong Kong moviemakers began making local erotic movies, dubbing them "fengyue films." Such a cinematic experiment was possible in Hong Kong also because of its unique political situation. "The mainland only produced propaganda films at that time. In Taiwan, they either produced propaganda films, or made [romance novelist] Chiung Yao-styled romance flicks," says Verdy Leung, Visiting Lecturer at Hong Kong Baptist University's Academy of Film. "You wouldn't expect to see anything sexual in these films."

Apart from foreign trends, Hong Kong filmmakers had practical reasons to start making erotic movies. Moviemakers had never before worried about competition. But that changed in 1967, with the launch of TVB, the first free television channel in Hong Kong. "It was a big challenge for the movie industry. People had only watched movies for entertainment before, so there were a lot of grand cinemas, which could accommodate thousands of audience members. But when television first came, everyone turned to it because it was free, and people were still poor at that time. Box-office revenue dropped dramatically, and moviemakers had to find some other ways to ensure survival," explains Little Grass, author of the "Hong Kong Erotic History" (which was banned from the Hong Kong Book Fair by the Trade Development Council in 2004). Filmmakers used carnal and sexual scenes to attract the eyeballs of moviegoers, as law prohibited television programs from containing sex scenes. They took the right risk—the local movie business was salvaged. Plus, the ploy to win back viewers also spurred a larger movement in the film industry.

Shaw Brothers Studio was the dominant movie production company at that time, bold in its support of fengyue films and known for even including sex scenes in movies of other genres.

Interestingly, Hong Kong's first famous director of erotic movies, Lee Hung, is actually a woman. In 1969, Lee moved to Hong Kong and set up a production company that specialized in making sex flicks. "It is impossible to watch the movies now, but they could get quite pornographic. [You can tell] just looking at the movie stills," Little Grass says. Because society was still very conservative, Lee's company soon closed down, but not before she blazed a path for other (male) directors to follow later.

The 1970s were the glory days of Hong Kong fengyue movies, which would not have been possible without the skill and craft of different directors. Above the rest, one is hailed as the master. "The movies directed by Li Han-hsiang always evoke a historical feeling," says Dr. Sobel Chan, Senior Lecturer at the Academy of Film at Hong Kong Baptist University. "He also paid a lot of attention to the photography, art and lighting." Li hailed from the mainland and was deeply interested in Chinese culture and history, so he had a passion for turning classic literature and historical happenings into realistic, relevant tales for the silver screen. "Li liked collecting erotic antiques and erotic historical information," Little Grass says. "He used all these in his movies, which feel very authentic." (What a shame, though, that Li's vast collection of erotic paraphernalia was burned and destroyed by his family after his death in 1996.)

While Li focused on making fengyue movies set in ancient China, another prominent director, Lu Chi, specialized in modern and grassroots sexual movies. Before slipping behind the camera, Lu was actually an actor who was immensely popular during the 1960s. After moving backstage, Lu first directed some artsy films that were poorly received. He then made up his mind to produce erotic films instead, and even set up a production company to make them. Lu's films contain very explicit images that border on pornographic. As contradictory might it sound, Lu's movies also focused on delivering moral messages and embedding traditional values. In his films, women were often portrayed as oppressed and in search of salvation, while men were depicted as manipulative and exploitative of the female characters.

Another notable director of erotic films was Ho Fan. Originally a

photographer, Ho emphasized aesthetics, images and photography—perhaps at the expense of story-telling. Ho was a persistent and prolific erotic filmmaker. He started making them in the 1970s and was still at it in the 1990s. (Veronica Yip Yuk Hing's "Hidden Desire" was one of his pieces from that period.)

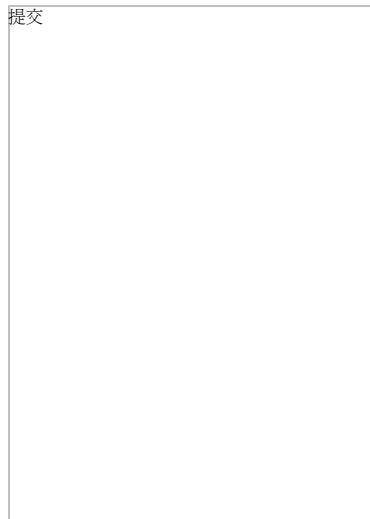
By the early 1980s, though, the wave of fengyue films spearheaded by these directors gradually died down. To this day, experts debate the exact reasons for its demise. "Some people say that it's because the 1980s was the golden age of Hong Kong cinema," Leung says. "Movies sold anyways, and it was not necessary for moviemakers to produce erotic films [to make money]."

Hong Kong in the 1980s also saw the rise of a new breed of conservatism—one that was against a spirit of sexual liberation, which many thought fengyue movies preached and condoned. In 1977, a group of university students formed an activist group critical of mass media, which they blamed for promoting and spreading violence and pornography. Later, the same kind of movement prompted further social protests targeting at rectifying the perceived immorality of Hong Kong. It was not until 1988, when the government announced a new classification system for movies, that the city saw a revival of local sex flicks.

Must-watch movies of the 70s

Cinematic classics

Intimate Confessions of A Chinese Courtesan (1972)



Director Chor Yuen is best known for his wuxia (martial arts) movies, and he incorporated these elements into the making of his erotic films, which culminated in the masterpiece, "Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan." Jin E, an innocent girl, is abducted and sold to a brothel. She then changes her name to Ai Nu and swears to take revenge by killing her clients. Seduced by Ai Nu's beauty and tough personality, the bawd Lady Chun falls for her. Ai Nu then appeases Lady Chun and learns martial arts from her in order to better exact her revenge. It was the first Hong Kong film to depict a lesbian relationship. Some scenes are quite sexual as the characters describe S&M, and there is a fair amount of nudity, as the story takes place in a brothel.

The Golden Lotus (1974)



The classic novel of the Ming Dynasty, "The Plum in the Golden Vase" remains a timeless inspiration for erotic filmmakers in Hong Kong. Among all the movie adaptations, no one has surpassed Li Hang-hsiang's "The Golden Lotus." It portrays the story of a concupiscent merchant Ximen

Qing, who lusts after Pan Jinlian, the wife of Wu Dalang. The two murder Wu and Pan marries into Ximen's family as his fifth wife. The story revolves the promiscuous sex life of Ximen and the struggles among his wives. Some of the plot might sound rather explicit, but director Li Han-hsiang turned the ancient text into a compelling and seductive tale. Watch out for a baby-faced Jackie Chan, who plays a pear vendor in the movie.

Starlets for Sale (1977)



Lu Chi's directing skills may not be highly acclaimed, but his movies are definitely worth watching—especially if you are curious about Hong Kong life in the 1970s. His movies are, if nothing else, reflective of the social realities at that time. In 1977, the government relaxed censorship rules, and so this film became the first Hong Kong production to show pubic hair. (Some more movie trivia: Chan Wai-ying was the first actress to do it.) The story describes how stars sell their bodies for money—some willingly, others not. In the film, one of the actresses kills herself after the media harasses her; after that, others regret their harsh behavior and try to rectify what they did. Lu Chi did always like to get a little preachy toward the end.

The Extraordinary Life of Tina Leung

There was more to this famous erotic film actress than meets the eye...



In the heyday of erotic cinema in the 1970s, many actresses put on torrid performances in fengyue movies, but only Tina Leung, also known as Di Na, is remembered today as a true Hong Kong sex symbol. Her sexiness was not just about her voluptuous body—Hongkongers were equally impressed by her knowledge, business acumen and patriotism.

Throughout her filming career, Leung always maintained a sex kitten image. But she only shot to fame following her performance in "The Warlord," directed by maestro Li Han-hsiang, in which she was the first local actress to appear nude on screen. Playing the fourth wife of a warlord, Leung rose from a bath to greet her lover. The audience, which was still conservative at that time, was dazzled with Leung's rosy skin, generous curves and slender legs. However, Leung later said she regretted the performance.

In fact, Leung's cinematic career did not start in Hong Kong, but in Thailand. At the age of 17, she met the younger brother of the then prime minister of Thailand. Stunned by her beauty, he pursued her and offered her film roles. Because of her popularity, she became a known figure in high society and was surrounded with socialites and important political people during her time there. In an interview with Cable TV in 2008, she claimed that she was collecting intelligence for the Chinese Communist Party at that time. "I played a spy in my first movie. But they didn't know that I was already a spy in real life," Leung said.

The Thai officials had certainly committed a mistake by underestimating Leung. A well-read woman (despite an unremarkable formal education), she was deeply influenced by her father, a university professor. Leung was well versed in Chinese history and literature and in fact penned a total of four books in her lifetime.

Unlike other stars, Leung was very outspoken about her political leanings and she had identified herself as a communist sympathizer. When the Cultural Revolution reached its zenith in 1973, Leung attempted to return to the mainland to “serve the people.”

At her peak of fame, Leung bade farewell to the silver screen and became an entrepreneur. However, her business failed and she declared bankruptcy (in fact, she was also the first person to declare bankruptcy in Hong Kong). It was rumored that Leung was in debt of more than \$100 million. Miraculously, she overcame her financial problems and repaid all her debts within four years. Later, she ventured into the aerospace industry, proving to be a savvy businesswoman—it was estimated her company made more than \$500 million in revenue per year.

Leung's knack for business made her a billionaire, but she also saw industry as a way to salvage the country by opening up its economy. In her ventures, she helped China acquire military and aeronautical equipment. She also helped with the marketing of Galileo, a global satellite navigation system developed by the Europeans, claiming that the move was to help China stand on equal footing against the Americans. Thanks to her efforts, the airports in most mainland cities had installed the system by the 1980s.

Leung's private life was also the cause of much controversy. In 1967, the unmarried Leung scandalized the city by announcing her pregnancy. She then wed swimming coach Ma Yizhang. However, the marriage only lasted for five years. Leung's divorce did not stop other men from pursuing her. A TV producer attempted to commit suicide by swallowing 84 sleeping pills after she spurned his advances, while Josiah Lau Ka-kit divorced his wife to win Leung's heart. However, all these men bitterly failed and she remained single for the rest of her life.

For Leung, her greatest love was her daughter, Tina Ma. In her memoir, Leung reminisced about when her daughter hit puberty—she would hunch her back in order to hide her growing breasts. Leung at first found it hard to accept that her daughter suffered from Gender Identity Disorder. But Leung supported her daughter, and Tina finally became Michael Ma Tin-yu at the age of 25, after undergoing sex reassignment surgery.

In 2005, Leung made a surprise comeback to the local entertainment industry. No longer a seemingly superficial sex kitten, she hosted of TVB's documentary program “A Century of China.” Leung's knowledge, intelligence and eloquence won her critical acclaim.

Leung was diagnosed with cervical cancer and she passed away in April 2010 at the age of 65. Apart from her beauty, Leung will also be remembered as a legend in the history of Hong Kong.

A Climax for the Erotic Film Industry

The 1980s and 90s were another golden age.



The development of Hong Kong's erotic film industry reached another climax in late 1980s, when the government established the Film Classification System, which assigned every movie made into three categories. Under the new system, Category III movies became strictly "adults-only."

Those were the glory days for Hong Kong erotic filmmakers, and the number of erotic movies made was astonishingly high. In 1990, for example, about 1,200 movies were sent to the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority for rating. Of those, more than 500 were graded Category III movies.

"Filmmakers no longer had to hesitate, and they could make movies that targeted an audience that enjoyed sex flicks," says Verdy Leung. "They didn't need to worry about moral criticisms because they were making Category III movies, which are for adults only anyway." The system brought more clarity to the business, and filmmakers became bolder in exploring the production of erotic movies. There was also a monetary incentive: the production cost of skin flicks wasn't high, and there was a good chance that they would generate sizable profits for investors since interest in erotic movies was robust.

Moviemakers of that era were very creative and produced films based on different themes. Some of the sex flicks were loosely based on classic works of literature, such as "The Golden Lotus" and "Strange Stories From a Chinese Studio." Some filmmakers drew references from real and high-profile crime cases, especially the gruesome ones that centered around rapes. Still others, such as "The Eternal Evil of Asia," centered on themes of Asian witchcraft and the like. These films appealed to moviegoers across Asia. "Audiences from countries like Thailand and Malaysia actually loved these kinds of movies, but they could not produce such movies by themselves," Sobel Chan says. "Therefore, they had a strong demand for such films."

This successful wave of erotic films, however, would not have been possible without the willing and eager participation of hot actresses. Some well-known starlets saw shedding their clothes as a surefire way to reach a breakthrough in their cinematic careers.

One pioneer of the period was Veronica Yip Yuk-hing. A Miss Asia Pageant winner, Yip shot to fame by starring in three Category III movies: "Take Me," "Hidden Desire" and "Pretty Woman." It would be easy to assume that Yip was just another pretty airhead—but she wasn't. She created a bold image for herself and people took her seriously, much like Chrissie Chau, a modern-day model who has attracted attention for both her looks and her outspoken personality. After she played roles in the three adult movies, Yip also starred in many critically acclaimed films—and she earned two nominations at the 1994 Hong Kong Film Awards.

After Yip's commercial success, a lot of actresses wanted to copy her and star in erotic films themselves. However, it was only Loletta Lee Lai-chun, who succeeded in launching a serious career by way of skin flicks. "It was very exciting. We actually grew up watching 'Happy Ghost' and Lee had

always kept a girl-next-door image. Then suddenly, you saw her starring in Cat. III movies," Little Grass says. With her child-like face and curvy body, Lee became every man's fantasy.

Those who are familiar with Hong Kong movies should also remember Amy Yip, another star from the 90s. Yip might not have been a great beauty, but her huge breasts meant that everyone knew her name. She starred in "Sex and Zen," a 1991 movie directed by Johnny Mak Dong-hung. It was a blockbuster, grossed more than \$18 million and was the first in a series that has culminated in the recently opened 3D installment. But for all her success, it is worth noting that Yip never flashed nipples or her private parts on the silver screen.

The Decline of Erotic Film

But can a new 3D flick spark a revival?



Hong Kong cinemas no longer show erotic films, relegating them to DVDs or the internet. These days, popular actresses aren't willing to shed their clothes on screen. Audiences are turning, instead, to watch Japanese adult videos (more commonly known as "AV"). Since 1997, these trends have been unfolding—and that's why Hong Kong's erotic film industry is withering.

"First, Hong Kong movies are in decline. Second, even across the world, erotic films are in decline, too. Back in 70s and 80s, there were a lot of large-scale sex flicks, such as 'Deep Throat' and 'Emmanuelle,'" says Stephen Shiu, producer of the recently released "3D Sex and Zen: Extreme Ecstasy." "But in the 90s, filmmakers no longer made such films because the industry had been hard hit by the internet. People don't need to pay when they download porn, and the sex scenes are always way more explicit than erotic films that are shown in the theater." Instead of going out and sitting with a bunch of strangers, porn-watchers today prefer more privacy to watch by themselves.

There have also been general sea changes in social norms, which have led filmmakers to be cautious when it comes to boundary-pushing projects. "Hong Kong society has become more conservative over the years," says Leung. "Producers wouldn't take the risk of making controversial films [now]." Due to this shift in perception, actresses view porn movies as a threat to their careers—no longer does starring in one mean a shot at the big leagues. But not too long ago, many big stars—such as Leslie Cheung Kwok-wing and Cherie Chung Chor-Hung—actually filmed erotic movies, and no one thought twice about it.

It seems, however, that there is some momentum for a revival of erotic movies in Hong Kong—perhaps propelled by the advent of 3D technology and its application to porn. But while Shiu is optimistic that "3D Sex & Zen" will be a box-office blockbuster, he holds that the audience in Hong Kong is too limited to spark an industry-wide renaissance. A true resurgence will require a mainland audience, too, which will be impossible as long as porn is officially prohibited there. "The golden age of Hong Kong erotic film won't come back unless the Chinese market opens up," says Shiu, who adds that he won't give up the

distribution rights for "3D Sex & Zen" in China. He is determined to outlast China's porn ban: "I am waiting for the day when China allows erotic movies. After all, they have to allow erotic films eventually, and this movie could make over \$1 billion. Let's see who lives longer!"

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