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The rise of Chinese crime cinema: a surge born in struggle

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Thesis

**THE RISE OF CHINESE CRIME CINEMA:
A SURGE BORN IN STRUGGLE**

by

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Unless we burst out, we shall perish in this silence!

—Lu Xun, “In Memory of Miss Liu Hezhen”

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ABSTRACT

The film industry in Mainland China has grown rapidly in the 2010s, and in particular, local crime films have emerged over the past decade as a unique cinematic phenomenon that epitomizes China's political and cultural system and social realities. As little is known about this phenomenon in the West, this thesis would provide a comprehensive review of the history of Chinese crime cinema, with a focus on the development and characteristics of the genre in the 2010s.

The introduction defines the object and scope of the study, and briefly introduce the context of the Chinese film industry. The first chapter outlines the different forms of crime films in Mainland China before the 2010s, the strict content censorship in China, and the impact of Hong Kong and Korean films on Mainland Chinese cinema. The second and third chapter reviews selected Chinese crime films released from 2011 to 2020, and interpret in detail the influential ones. The conclusion summarizes the overall trends, commonalities and current status of Chinese crime cinema.

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INTRODUCTION — New Frontiers in East Asia

I. Subject Explanation

The 2010s was a decade that witnessed the rapid growth of China's film industry, during which the industry won the attention of the world for its economic scale. However, this commercial phenomenon hardly helped ease relations between filmmakers and censorship in Mainland China. As the film industry boomed, the authorities saw controlling the ideology of cinema as an increasingly important goal; and the rapid growth in the number of movie-goers was accompanied by a less intense focus on underground cinema, that is, the films made by Mainland Chinese filmmakers without government permission to produce or show them, than in the previous decade. More and more directors wanted to express their unique artistic tendencies and political aspirations through cinema, while taking a share of the vast film market. In a collision course with the market and censorship, the crime genre has emerged over the past decade as the most likely outlet to offer filmmakers a degree of freedom of expression. Over the past decade, the Chinese film industry seems to have reached an unwritten consensus that making crime films is attractive, because they may at the same time pass censorship and achieve commercial success to the satisfaction of investors, gain international attention, and provide a breeding ground for social commentary by filmmakers. Not only do these crime films expand the artistic spectrum of Chinese cinema, they also present a diversity of faces within. Subsequent chapters will cover that filmmakers moving north from Hong

Kong hope to continue to build on their world-renowned strengths in the genre; veteran Mainland directors are looking to break out of their previous comfort zones by approaching crime elements. At the same time, many young directors are showing more enthusiasm, and are looking forward to making their first feature films crime thrillers.

As one of the first film genres to take shape, crime films have always held an important place in the global film market. In Hollywood, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea, which is a latecomer to the film industry, there are more mature production industries and aesthetic models for crime films. Classic crime films often show the psychological depth of the characters through criminal events, thus opening up thoughts on human nature and reality. Judging from the market reactions, award-winning performances, and the critical responses in the past decade, Mainland Chinese crime films are emerging as a local genre with unique forms, and are attracting attention on the stage of world cinema. Localized crime films not only became popular with audiences in the age of China embracing capitalism in terms of entertaining and cultural significance, but also examined anxiety about individual social identity and reflection on human nature beneath the realism that's always been a defining quality of crime films. Bringing such films to the attention of the audience not only highlights the artistic style and narrative characteristics of crime films as a genre, but also expands the aesthetic lexicon of the industry.

The historical and social reasons for the rise of Chinese crime cinema in the last decade are manifold. China's own history of film and television, as well as the impact

brought by foreign films, have all played a role in this process. However, neither Chinese nor Western academia has produced sufficient studies of the phenomenon. There are a number of crime films that have achieved widespread attention within China that have received little decent distribution in the West.

To shed light on this genre for the benefit of the English-speaking community of scholars and lay persons, this thesis will dissect the causes, development, and current status of this phenomenon by examining the history of the genre in China, and will illustrate the aesthetic form of Chinese crime cinema in conjunction with close readings of several of them. Not only have Mainland Chinese crime films become one of the most noteworthy phenomena in Chinese cinema and Asian cinema today due to their diverse artistic qualities and political expressions, but studying them is also a relatively effective way to observe contemporary Chinese society.

It should also be stated at the outset that the term “China,” “Mainland China,” or “Mainland” in this thesis refers to mainland China in the general political sense, i.e. the area under the direct jurisdiction of the Central Government of the People’s Republic of China, which does not include Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan; in case of different circumstances, it will be stated in the context.

II. Defining the Research Object

As one of the most popular genres in the global cinema, the definition of crime films are continuing to be debated by the academic community. The first problem faced by this

thesis, which attempts to analyze and explore Chinese crime films in the 21st century, is to clarify the research object, i.e., what is a crime film? In many studies on crime films, there are two obvious tendencies: one is to confuse the subject matter with the genre, and to include all films with crime in them; the other is to expand the boundary of crime films, and to discuss crime films together with gangster films, action films, mystery films, and other genres that have overlaps and fusions with them (Wei 6). In order to clearly define the scope of this thesis and make the presentation uniform and coherent, this section will identify and establish the selection criteria for the genre.

A film's subject matter is naturally, like any other work of art, the subject of the narrative, determined by stories themselves rather than storytelling. As for genre, Steven Neale suggested that genre studies emerged as a result of academic attempts to treat the popular culture represented by Hollywood films as a serious academic object (Gui 182), and this is also similar in China today. Thomas Schatz suggested that the cultural rituals represented by different genres are of great reference value; however, it is also important to note that the current trend of genre fusion and stylistic variation in auteur cinema is making the cultural meanings in Chinese crime films less homogeneous and even internally antagonistic. Chinese film scholar Hu Ke adopted an interesting metaphor: "Genre is a product of the market economy, where the audience chooses the film by itself, and the pattern of films repeatedly selected by the majority forms a specific film genre (Hu, "Chinese Film" 267)." When it comes to film genre, it is best to think about them

with Hollywood, where they originated. The 1903 American film *The Great Train Robbery* is one of the earliest crime films in the history of cinema, and Hollywood further elaborated the genre concept of crime films to the world in the 1930s. Genre films, as a product of the mature American studio system, are highly patterned films under the categories formed according to different themes or aesthetic paradigms. The reason why a film is identified as belonging to a certain genre depends fundamentally on the concept and paradigm in it. “The so-called ‘concept’ is the system of values common to a certain film genre, i.e. the elements of thematic and social significance that the film assumes; a ‘paradigm’, on the other hand, is a pattern, an internal framework, or a universally followed norm hidden behind the organization of phenomena, which manifests itself in the form of common image features, iconic characters, recurring plot structures, and categorized sequences of shots, etc (Shen 114).” It can be seen that film subject is a broader concept than genre. It is known that while subject matter varies with narrative content, film genre exists based on a tacit agreement among filmmakers, critics, and audiences, and it points to the commonality of films in terms of thematic expression, visual presentation, and construction of characters, based on the above analysis.

In the continuous development and change of genre films, in order to maintain freshness and competitiveness, filmmakers keep changing and innovating, enriching content and forms, and thus genres evolve and sub-genres emerge. Within the global film industry, the boundaries between crime films and other genres or sub-genres has been

extremely blurred, as there are more or less overlaps and hybrids between them. Multiple scholars have suggested that the initial form of crime films should be gangster films; during the spread of gangster films, due to their excessive representation of violence and identification with gangsters, the censors eventually intervened and gave rise to cops-and-robbers films that focus on positive protagonists such as police officers confronting criminals and eventually achieving victory (Hao 2006). In the case of Mainland Chinese cops-and-robbers films, the narrative construction of the genre is not very different from that of Hollywood: a story is constructed with a criminal, and the focus of the film is on a detective or similarly functioning character. However, in terms of the broader crime genre, on the one hand, Chinese crime films are still in development and have not formed a mature genre pattern; on the other hand, the frequent blending of multiple genre elements in the creation of current crime films is both a result of active exploration by filmmakers and a reflection of the market's tendency on stimulating genre elements and resonant social commentaries.

Therefore, in order to take a panoramic view of the crime genre's development within Mainland China's film industry and its reflection on society, this thesis will understand and discuss the genre from a relatively broad perspective, that is, to make choices based on the crime elements contained in the film text. Among all the films produced by Chinese filmmakers and set mainly in modern Mainland China, those that focus on the narrative of legal offenses are certainly within the scope of research;

however, mystery films and action films that involve confrontations between law enforcement and the perpetrators, as well as drama films that depict victims or other civilians who have a close connection with the crime, will also be discussed.

III. Overview of the Chinese Film Market

For Mainland Chinese cinema, the film industry and film production are closely related to the box office, which has grown extremely fast in the 21st century. It is also necessary to start with an essential overview of the film market in Mainland China, which is inevitably closely linked to the economic development of society as a whole. The People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, and for the next thirty years, the country's economic development was relatively slow due to the planned economic system and successive social movements, and there was no way to talk about the prosperity of the film market.

In 1978, when the economic transformation called "reform and opening up" began in Mainland China, the annual number of Chinese film productions was 56, and the gross box office for the year was RMB 900 million. It is worth mentioning that the first foreign film introduced to China after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 was a Japanese crime film titled *You Must Cross the River of Wrath* (a.k.a. *Manhunt*, 1976) starring Ken Takakura, which was released in China in 1978. Thirty years later, in 2008, the gross box office for the year had reached RMB 4.34 billion, i.e. about \$650 million (La). Since then, the Chinese film market has shown explosive growth in the 2010s. In 2018, before the

coronavirus pandemic hit the country, China had long been the second largest film market in the world, with a gross box office of RMB 60.98 billion (approximately \$9.4 billion), up 9.06% year-on-year, and 1.716 billion tickets sold in urban areas, up 5.93% year-on-year; among them, the gross box office of local films was RMB 37.9 billion (approximately \$5.7 billion), up 25.89% year-on-year, with a market share of 62.15% beating the imported films, an increase of 8.31% over last year (Zhongshang). Such strong growth could drive film productions in almost every genre.

From its inception, cinema has been unique among the art forms because of its expensive costs and economic benefits, making it impossible to escape the imprint of commerce. In 1994, only 300 million film tickets were sold in China, and the market was already at a difficult time, with debts between studios, distribution companies, and theaters amounting to \$100 million. In order to solve the debt problem, the then Ministry of Radio, Film and Television issued a policy deciding to import ten recent blockbusters from foreign studios, aiming to pay off all debts within three years, because China's state-owned studios will receive a large box office share as exclusive distributors of foreign titles (Chen 253). The introduction of blockbusters activated the Chinese film market and attracted audiences to cinemas. The very first revenue-sharing film imported from Hollywood was Warner Bros.' *The Fugitive* (1993), a crime action film starring Harrison Ford and Tommy Lee Jones, which deeply shocked Chinese audiences and filmmakers with the marvelous entertainment at the end of 1994. The year 2003 saw the

release of Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, which accounted for a quarter of China's gross box office that year and was recognized as the beginning of the marketization of Chinese cinema (Yu). *Hero* led the Chinese film industry to embrace the business model of high investment and high return. And after *Hero*, Mainland Chinese filmmakers have collaborated with talents from Hong Kong and Taiwan on a number of war action blockbusters based on ancient Chinese history in the following decade, although most of them have not reaped a good reception. Under this wave of commercialization, the 2000s' Chinese film industry witnessed the rise of private capital, with state-run studios seeking to transform. This trend led to a response to market demand and a loosening of ideological restrictions on filmmakers.

Crime films have always occupied an important position and a stable market share in global cinema, but have been largely absent in the creative practice of Mainland Chinese cinema before 2010. In the 2010s, against the backdrop of the remarkable reform of film marketization following the 2000's trend, the continuous mediation between censorship and filmmakers, and the increasingly sophisticated tastes of film audiences, Chinese crime movies, which once lacked room for survival in the face of censorship and public opinion, began to show a spurt of development. Many underground directors were given the opportunity to make commercial films with relatively high budgets, while being allowed to retain their auteurist identity, as criminal behavior could be expressed as the embodiment of various social problems. Since 2011, the number of local crime films has

gradually increased in a more stable manner, with 20 local crime films released in 2011 and a stable number of 40 to 50 from 2012 to 2015. After the emergence of influential local films such as *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014) and *The Dead End* (2015), which received remarkable recognition from the market and critics from 2014 to 2015, the number of local crime films released in 2016 surged to 112 (Tan 7). Looking at the overall box office situation in the first quarter of 2017, the Chinese box office saw a decline in the first quarter for the first time in five years, but the box office results of local crime films showed a steady increase (Diyi). In the 2010s, Chinese crime films entered an unprecedented period of development, and the localized crime genre has to a considerable extent escaped the shackles of the past. On the one hand, it is actively seeking a balance between following the conflicting demands of the market and censorship. On the other hand, it is also engaging in dialogue and communication with society, with serious humanistic undertones and realistic portrayals under the entertaining packaging of the genre.

IV. The Attention From the Academia

The rise of Chinese crime cinema as an industrial phenomenon that has emerged in Asia only in the last decade is hardly well recognized. Domestically in China, in 2014 and 2015, with the release of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* and *The Dead End*, Chinese film scholars began publishing Chinese articles dedicated to interpreting specific local crime films. To this day, there has been a steady stream of scholarship. For instances, “The

Native Transplant of Film Noir: Taking Diao Yinan's Works as Examples" by Wei Mengyuan analyzes director Diao Yinan's approach to localizing the film noir aesthetic in his *Black Coal, Thin Ice* and two earlier films. "The Study of Young Director Xin Yukun's Film" by Xie Jingyi and "The Study of Cao Baoping's Cinematic Narrative" by Gao Meishan both interpret the creative characteristics and political expressions of these two directors who focus on crime cinema.

In 2017, Chinese crime films showed groundbreaking growth in both commercial appeal and artistic achievement, and the Chinese publications examining this phenomenon began to proliferate, mostly in the form of dissertations. Gao Yangyu's *The Narrative Study of the Adapted Crime Film for News Events in Mainland China in the New Century* reviews the trajectory of Chinese films adapted from real events. Zhu Dengfeng's *The Cultural Expression of Genre Film: Take The Chinese Mainland Crime Films For Example* analyzes the way Chinese crime films have developed as a genre. Wang Yufei's *Characteristics of Mainland Crime Films in the 21st Century* analyzes the aesthetic tendency of realism common to Chinese crime films. Shang Xiuqiao's *The Image of Criminals in Chinese Crime Movies in the 21st Century* provides a detailed psychoanalytic interpretation of the breakthrough changes in the portrayal of criminals in Chinese crime films over the past decade. Most of these Chinese-language scholarly works, after briefly reviewing the history of crime films or realist films in Mainland China, focus on the development and commonalities shown in selected aspects of

Chinese crime films in the 2010s.

Limited by the distribution capacity and influence of Chinese films overseas, as well as the difficulty of understanding the complexity and uniqueness of the Chinese cultural industry, English-language studies that provide a holistic reading of Chinese crime cinema are almost non-existent. Further, despite the fact that the Chinese film market has grown rapidly over the past decade to become the second largest in the world, overseas academic observations of the Chinese film industry have lagged too far behind. However, there are still some excellent English-language scholarly works that provide insight into the Chinese film industry and Chinese crime films, most of them by Chinese-speaking researchers. Yi Sun's "In Defense of Hong Kong: The Critical Reception of Milkyway Image Films" summarizes how Hong Kong critics view the trend of integration between Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese cinema. Wendy Su's book *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood: Cultural Policy and the Film Industry, 1994–2013* is a rare look at China's cultural industry, with Chapter 4, "Artistic and Critical Cinema under a Triple Threat: Marketization, Hollywoodization, and State Censorship," providing a detailed analysis of China's film content censorship. Xiao Jiwei's "China Unraveled: Violence, Sin, and Art in Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*" is a systematic interpretation of one of the most famous Chinese crime films, Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*.

In view of the lack of information on Chinese crime cinema as an overall phenomenon in English-language academia, this thesis will attempt to review the

development of Chinese crime cinema in a chronological manner, and to screen and analyze Chinese crime films that have caused strong reactions in the past decade. This thesis places the development of Chinese crime films in the 2010s within the broader context of the PRC's political and cultural system, to identify the positive effects of the crime genre on the Chinese cinema and Chinese society.

CHAPTER ONE — Chinese Crime Films Before 2010

1.1 Before 2000: State Propaganda

Genre films are an important indicator of the development progress of a country's film industry, and small and medium budget genre films are usually the cornerstone of the film industry. Generally speaking, the development of crime films in China started late. On the one hand, the construction of commercial film industry in China is still recent; on the other, the creation of the crime films has been greatly constrained under China's film content censorship in the past decades. Due to national conditions and historical factors, crime films in Mainland China showed a relatively homogeneous situation before the 21st century.

The origin of Chinese crime films can be traced back to the first Chinese feature film *Yan Ruisheng* in 1921, a black-and-white silent film that was of epoch-making significance in the history of Chinese cinema. The film is based on a real-life case in Shanghai: a bank clerk Yan Ruisheng due to huge gambling debts, murders a prostitute wearing valuable jewelries; Yan was eventually caught by the police and sentenced to death. The film received rave reviews and became a sensation. However, some newspapers criticized the film for promoting horror, pornography and being against human decency. In 1922, another crime film, *Zhang Xinsheng*, also based on a real-life case that occurred in Shanghai, was released. In 1923, the Jiangsu provincial authorities banned such films on the grounds that they were harmful to the minds of society (Wang

10). Then during the 1930s and 1940s, China was embroiled in the Second Sino-Japanese War, followed by World War II and the Communist Revolution, greatly hampering the development of the film industry.

In 1949, the Communist Party of China basically controlled Mainland China, and the People's Republic of China, under which it held power, was founded. During the "Seventeen Years" period from the early days of the founding of the PRC to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, a special genre of thrillers with ideological purposes was born in China, known as "anti-spy films." The background of these films was during the early days of the PRC, Kuomintang spies and armed agents from Taiwan, backed by the United States, often infiltrated the Mainland to wreak havoc, making counter-spy work a hot topic in Mainland China. The so-called anti-spy films have certain commonalities with Western spy films. Most of these films had a certain degree of suspense, which fascinated the local audience at that time. Meanwhile, the creation of such films was permitted and encouraged by the government, of course, because of their strong ideological nature and the polarized portrayal of characters, which was conducive to the propaganda of the Communist Party (Wang 10). Representative films of this local genre include *Invisible Fronts* (1949), *Secret Post in Canton* (1957), and *Visitors On The Icy Mountain* (1963). These films generally have a linear narrative structure with the main plot of communist police officers uncovering and stopping enemy agents from sabotaging national security, with a fixed portrayal of police officers, enemy agents, and

the masses (Xiang 12). These films had no reputation in the West, but they were unforgettable cinematic memories for Chinese people during the era of planned economy.

The Cultural Revolution, which took place from 1966 to 1976, completely destroyed China's cultural industry and brought film production to a near standstill, and at the end of 1978, China began its "reform and opening up", attempting to transform its economic system into almost a market economy. The film industry also started recovering, and immediately saw the emergence of films like *The Sacred Duty* (1979), *Murder in 405* (1980), and *The Snake Case* (1983), which were about police officers fighting crime (Wang 10). In the 1980s and 1990s, films containing criminal elements became active in China under the name of "public-security films."

In the face of more diverse forms of entertainment and the impact of foreign films, the Chinese film industry gradually began to pay attention to the audience's need for entertainment experiences. After the beginning of the reform and opening up, exchanges between the Mainland and Hong Kong intensified. Influenced by classic Hong Kong crime films, films such as *Desperation - The Last Frenzy* (1987) and *The Price of Frenzy* (1989) emerged in the Mainland that broke through in terms of both entertainment and artistry. By the 1990s, the dramatic changes in Chinese society led to an increase in drug abuse, robberies, and other criminal offenses. In line with ideological propaganda and education, as well as to meet the needs of the audience, films and television series based on real-life cases became extremely popular during this period. According to statistics, in

1994 alone, as many as 60 public-security films and series were produced (Meng 90). Among them, the drug enforcement subject was particularly popular, with representative films including *Drug Enforcement War* (1991), *Dark 25* (1992), and *Drug Enforcement Hero* (1996). The so-called public security films were still oriented toward indoctrination and propaganda functions, emphasizing collective rather than individual power, deifying police officers and demonizing criminals. With that the triumph of good over evil being the standard ending, the stories of all such films and series have a distinct political and contemporary background, repeating the clichéd themes, and losing their luster once China started moving into the new political and economic context later (Peng 38).

The 1990s were also a time of massive television penetration in China, and the combination of crime action films from Hong Kong and Hollywood weakened the commercial appeal of local films, resulting in television series gradually taking over from films as the mainstay of the crime genre. Gao Qunshu, a director who has made a lot of popular crime series, believes that “the cops-and-robbers genre developed well in the Mainland in the mid-1980s, and then the situation got worse and the television series turned to take on such an expectation (“Derek Yee and Gao Qunshu in Conversation”).” In the 21st century, as censorship was further tightened, the monotonous and technologically backward public-security films rapidly went into decline. The television industry responded to this by turning the attention to the daily work and lives of police officers, and the perpetrators and crimes were no longer the focus of the stories (Pan 15).

The more restricted film industry almost quit the crime genre, but those who held on to the genre were exploring a wider range of expression, while also inheriting some of the aesthetic paradigms of the public-security film. In the crime stories of the new century, the functions assumed by the characters tend to be diverse, as civilians and criminals has gradually become the reflection of reality before the camera.

1.2 The 2000s: Undercurrents Flow

In 2002, China's State Council issued a regulation, which explicitly stipulated in the *Regulations on Film Administration* that "films involving incitement to crime, gambling, eroticism, etc. are prohibited," causing the quite strong crackdown (Peng 40). In order to two the the line, a large number of filmmakers abandoned the stories involving criminal elements, and Chinese crime films encountered great difficulties at this stage. The Chinese government's film content censorship is one of the most stringent cultural censorship systems in the world, and the next section of this chapter will elaborate on the censorship in more detail. In terms of results, however, the paternalistic censors actually showed some flexibility, allowing a small number of films about crime to pass censorship — perhaps with many revisions — and even achieve commercial success. In addition, a significant number of underground Chinese films that did not or simply did not want to pass state censorship gained worldwide attention through overseas distribution.

During the 2000s, the filmmakers dominating the creation of Chinese crime films were the so-called Sixth Generation directors, such as Lu Chuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, Lou

Ye, Jia Zhangke, Wang Quan'an, and Li Yang. These directors began to make their mark internationally in the 1990s, and their works often focused on socially marginal subjects and the living conditions of the underclass, with an elitist "sense of auteur (Gao 22)." These films usually tap into and sympathize with the lives of the underclass from a dispassionate intellectual perspective. These directors grew up during the reform and opening-up era and the economic recovery, when China was at the early stage of building a market economy. They received a systematic education in a relatively open and diversified culture, and were exposed to a lot of foreign film theories. The Sixth Generation experienced firsthand the major changes in social, interpersonal and family relationships brought about by the transformation of the economic system. They also experienced the process of film moving from sacred art hijacked by propaganda to the reflection on ordinary life and becoming a mundane cultural product, so their concepts and the content of their works have changed dramatically compared to previous generations of Chinese directors. They paid more attention to social realities that are not covered by the state media, and faced the pain caused by economic reforms and rapid urbanization, as well as the small towns and mountain villages that have been forgotten during the modernization. Various marginal groups were the main subjects of their independent films, such as thieves, prostitutes and idle unemployed youths.

Chinese crime films that gained critical attention during this period include *The Missing Gun* (2002) and *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* (2004) directed by Lu Chuan, *Blind*

Shaft (2003) and *Blind Mountain* (2007) directed by Li Yang, and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) directed by Jia Zhangke, all of which center on depicting civilians around crime and often fail to pass censorship in China — even if they did, it would be still difficult for them to gain mass distribution domestically. However, most of these films received investment from overseas, won awards overseas, and were sold worldwide through European or Japanese distributors. This production mode has allowed these minority auteurs to boldly reveal the negative side of human nature, insisting on the path of realism to express their observations of the survival of the underclass in contemporary Chinese society.

To the Chinese public in the early 2000s, most Sixth Generation directors and their underground films remain unknown because most are banned by the government, and a few that pass censorship lack commercial appeal. However, as far as the domestic market is concerned, in the 2000s, there were still two crime films that were released across the country and attracted the attention of the whole society. The first was veteran director Feng Xiaogang's *A World Without Thieves* (2004), a Chinese-Hong Kong co-production that revolved around thefts on a train and was released after many rounds of battles with censorship. Feng's humanistic portrayal of the thieves made the film a huge commercial and critical success, even though at the end he had to arrange for the thieves to either be arrested or die. Another big success was Ning Hao's directorial debut, *Crazy Stone* (2006), which grossed over RMB 20 million on a budget of RMB 3 million ("Total 2006").

Funded by Hong Kong star Andy Lau, this film was a pioneer in Chinese black comedy cinema, allowing the entertainment properties of crime to be greatly exploited. Ning Hao and lead actor Huang Bo have since respectively become the most famous director and actor in the field of Chinese comedy films, although Ning's subsequent career has been severely hampered by state censorship.

In general, the size of the Chinese film market in the 2000s was not large, and the business model of film production and distribution was not mature. The most mainstream genre at that time was the historical epic combining elements of martial arts, war and romance initiated by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Hero*. Without capital support and permission from censorship. Although films and television series depicting bandits and gangs from the first half of the 20th century or earlier have sometimes appeared, basically Chinese crime cinema had only seen sporadic flashes in the 2000s.

1.3 Contemporary State Film Censorship

As mentioned earlier, the content censorship set up by the Chinese government has been a troublesome obstacle for all Chinese filmmakers. Before further examining Chinese crime films of the 2010s, some analysis of China's censorship mechanism is needed in order to understand why Chinese directors need to expend so much energy in dealing with this matter of censorship. He Ping, a famous Chinese director, has publicly stated that the conflict between the entire film industry and the state administration, including censorship, is the primary struggle facing Chinese cinema (Su 107). While state

ensorship has long had a pervasive impact on Chinese cinema, the censorship system itself, which wields absolute power, is secretive. No matter how fierce the public opinion is against the censors, they never speak up for themselves, as if the public opinion does not exist at all. In addition to film censorship, Chinese society as a whole is monitored by various censorship authorities, and these seemingly unrelated censors or regulators are said to have the power to influence the outcome of film censorship; at the same time, in-depth reports or studies of censorship in China are inevitably censored out, so many details of censorship are only known through word of mouth by industry insiders, and are difficult to verify.

However, some of the basic rules of censorship are relatively clear. China's film censorship has two main purposes: ideological control and the so-called protection of audiences in lieu of a content rating or classification system. The Chinese film censorship system involves a wide range of elements such as censorship standards, censorship implementation and the monitoring of censorship results (Mei 2). Fundamentally, the basic attribute of the state film censorship system practiced in China is first and foremost an ideological management based on administrative means (Zhan 73). The scope of influence of film censorship is so broad that a production unit that fails to pass the inspection to get the necessary license is not allowed to make a film, a film project that fails to pass the script censorship agency is not allowed to move forward, and a film that fails to pass the film censorship is not allowed to be distributed, screened, imported, or

exported (Zhang 187). While distributors who want to do theatrical releases must have the films pass the censorship to obtain film release licenses commonly known as the “dragon seals,” the distribution channels for streaming media and home video are simpler and looser, probably because the latter is much less influential than the former. The State General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, or SARFT, or SGAPPRFT, is the government agency in charge of film censorship. Since 2018, all administrative bodies on the film industry, including censorship, have been organized under to the Film Administration of the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (“From Today”). This administrative transfer undoubtedly reflects the desire of the Communist Party and the Chinese government to further secure their control over film as a tool of ideological propaganda.

Another main mission of the Chinese state film censorship was to fill the gap created by the absence of a film rating system for purposes such as protecting the mental health of minors. Thus, the government takes a “one-size-fits-all” approach: the films that fail to pass the censorship are denied any chance of legal distribution at all; once a film passes the censorship, it will be open to audiences of all ages and educational backgrounds, meaning that Chinese children are legally exposed to more films which contain violence, dirty language and sexual elements than American children. Despite annual calls from film and video game studios for a state-run or sanctioned content rating system to provide more freedom for adult consumers, the government has never explained why proposition

to establish a content rating system have never been publicly discussed.

There are three main notable problems with state film censorship in China that continue to frustrate society with the system. For filmmakers, one of the most torturous aspects of censorship is that censorship standards are not clear and censors have absolute power of interpretation. Although the *Film Industry Promotion Law* was enacted and implemented in 2017, bringing the power of the executive branch under some legal constraints, the law does not cover all aspects of film censorship. As a result, articles such as “in violation of relevant national laws and regulations” provide the possibility for censors to abuse their power (Zhang 187). Film censorship is a system that involves all steps of the film production and distribution process, and it has the right to object to every detail of the film’s content. But the law regulates the censorship system only in a more macroscopic way, giving guidance only in simple principles. Different executors would have different interpretations of those principles, and it may even appear that the same film is subject to changing results from censorship. Although not entirely the opinion from the film censors, the following two examples illustrate the variability of the censorship synthesis in China: In 2012, Warner Brothers’ comic book adaptation *V for Vendetta* (2007) was broadcast uncensored on CCTV-6, the movie channel of state-run television, causing a sensation at the time, as the film was famous for its bold criticism and mockery of the authoritarian regime (Su 106); then in 2020, the film’s entry on Douban, China’s largest, IMDb-like rating site, was suddenly hidden for reasons

unknown. Another incident was even more infamous: a big-budget patriotic war film set during the Shanghai Battle of the Second Sino-Japanese War, *Eight Hundred* (2020) was originally scheduled for release in the summer of 2019 and was to premiere as the opening film of the Shanghai International Film Festival, the film's premiere was suddenly canceled, then its theatrical release was delayed a few days later. There was widespread speculation that the film, which had already passed the censorship board, was forced to delay its release at the last minute because a leftist civic organization criticized the film for not showing the contribution of the Communist Party of China in the war, but emphasizing the heroic resistance of the Kuomintang's army (Myers). While such speculation cannot be proven accurate, the final version of *Eight Hundred* released a year later is 11 minutes shorter than the version that was scheduled to screen at the 2019 Shanghai International Film Festival. A comparison of the trailers released in 2019 reveals that several shots showing the Chinese flag of the time — now the flag of the Taiwanese regime — were technically manipulated in the version eventually released in 2020. What happened to *Eight Hundred* is not something new, as similar incidents of censors withdrawing permission have occurred several times before. This suggests that censors are unconcerned with their own credibility, prioritizing absolute control over ideological influence, and that the outcome of film censorship can be swayed by political-related external factors.

The second significant problem with state censorship is the lack of a redress process.

Filmmakers are at a disadvantage facing the system, unable to participate in the process of film censorship. They can hardly express opinions on the films they produce and distribute, and can only submit to the decisions made by the censors (Zhang 187). In addition, it seems that neither the censors nor the producers and distributors of films have the right or courage to make the details on the censorship public, and therefore public opinion is powerless to do anything about it. The third problem is that civil servants are overly represented among censors. The homogeneity of the censors' backgrounds and status leads to a lack of the necessary representativeness and diversity in the system (J. Pan 5). The bureaucrats of the Communist Party's Publicity Department naturally do not take risks in order to ensure that the stability of public opinion and the impact caused by film censorship would not jeopardize their own positions, but rather respond with a relatively conservative attitude.

When the rules of state censorship are applied to crime films, although there are no clear rules to help researchers understand how censorship works, the experience of some industry insiders is also a relatively reliable way to learn. Hong Kong-based writer Nury Vittachi published an article titled "China's Crime-Free Crime Films" in the *New York Times* on January 3, 2015, describing how he learned through how he learned through conversations with Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong filmmakers about details of the state censorship. The article contains a few overstatements and untruths, and some of the rules mentioned in it later proved to be more flexible, but the article is still a very

interesting and concise summary. In the article, Vittachi wrote, “Welcome to the world of screenwriting for China, where crime stories are crime free, ghost tales have no ghosts and crooked politicians can’t be crooked (Vittachi).” Although a bit too arbitrary, such an overview does make sense. The censorship does neither allows the violation of reality, nor the extremely precise reproduction of reality.

“Once you’ve seen one acrobatic hero single-handedly dispatch an enemy platoon, you’ve seen a lifetime’s worth.” Vittachi continued on the Mainland Chinese cinema. This comment is of course not true. After all, Mainland Chinese cinema has at least long been known around the world for its martial arts films and realist films by the Fifth Generation directors. But considering that the sentence was written in 2015, this became almost a prophecy. Later in 2017, a patriotic action film that literally presents “one acrobatic hero single-handedly dispatch an enemy platoon”, *Wolf Warriors 2*, was released. This Chinese version of Rambo grossed RMB 5.68 billion (approximately \$874 million) in China, becoming the highest-grossing non-Hollywood film ever. However, under the swaggering appearance of its patriotic propaganda, this film also contains a bit of dissatisfaction with social issues: at the beginning of the film, the protagonist is tried by the military court, expelled from the army and imprisoned for attacking corrupt officials and police.

“At irregular intervals the agency provides a list of unmentionables. Sex scenes or depictions of ‘excessive drinking, smoking and other bad habits’ are a no-go.

‘Propagating passive or negative outlook on life, worldview and value system’ is banned; so is ‘stirring up ambivalence and conflicts between different religions or sects, and between believers and nonbelievers, causing disharmony in the community.’” These rules listed by Vittachi are not difficult to understand, but they often lead to extreme outcomes, especially in crime films where one of the immediate consequences is that scenes showing violence and sexual elements cannot be too explicit, and narratives about corrupt officials or other political ills must be modified to be as euphemistic and soft as possible. Among all results caused on crime films, perhaps the most unshakable point is that all the perpetrators will be arrested or die at the end of the story.

“Furthermore, the crime must not be initiated within China’s borders, as if the land itself were somehow pure. All characters in the uniformed services must be good guys. Government employees may never be corrupt. There are no prostitutes in China.” Yes, Vittachi’s descriptions of these censorship stipulations, which once seemed indeed accurate have been proven less accurate in the past five years. The next chapter will detail the film that made the changes. Vittachi also mentioned the influence of other government agencies on film censorship. “Getting a SGAPPRFT permit is just the first hurdle. If the hero is a monk or the setting is a temple or a church, the script will also require a permit from the State Administration for Religious Affairs. If it’s a spy movie, national security agents will have to vet it. For cop shows, you need approval from the police’s so-called art department.” This important rule, which has been repeatedly

speculated about and believed in recent years but equally unproven, reflects the dominance of censorship of all kinds in Chinese society. The rule has made it more difficult for Chinese crime films to portray law enforcement officers who are on the verge of law or morality, as the censors from the public security department are likely to assume that this would damage the image of the police.

At the end of the article, Vittachi wrote about the cooperative productions of Mainland China and Hong Kong: “At least half of Hong Kong movies today are co-produced with Mainland organizations, and screenwriters here are also having to toe the Beijing line... Can a good story be written under such conditions? It’s difficult. Some screenwriters have managed through cunning: One director squeaked a crime movie set in Hong Kong past the censors after claiming the action took place before the transfer in 1997, while the territory was still under The rule of those evil Brits.” Films set in Hong Kong are not within the scope of this thesis, but China’s state censorship is indeed affecting film productions outside of Mainland China. Filmmakers from not only Hong Kong, but Hollywood, which regards Mainland China as the biggest foreign market, and other regions are trying to understand China’s elusive rules of censorship, and continue to look for ways by which both parties can compromise.

1.4 The Influence of Hong Kong and Korean Cinema

As far as the entire Chinese-language cinema is concerned, Cantonese films from Hong Kong undoubtedly took the world by storm in the 1980s and 1990s with their crime

genre. Although in the 21st century, native Hong Kong films and Hong Kong-Chinese co-productions have made compromises in order to pass the censorship in Mainland China, the standards of state censorship for Hong Kong stories are obviously still much more lenient than those for Mainland stories. Long before Mainland Chinese crime films came to prominence, Hong Kong crime films had already made a profound impact on the film industry in Mainland China, other Asian countries, and Hollywood. For example, John Woo's *The Killer* (1989) and Andrew Lau's *Young and Dangerous* (1996) were spread around the Mainland through pirated video tapes, making Chow Yun-fat and Ekin Cheng, along with other Hong Kong actors and singers, the targets of imitation by Mainland youth. By the 21st century, South Korean cinema, which was also heavily influenced by Hong Kong cinema, rose rapidly. On the basis of absorbing the characteristics of Hong Kong films and combining them with the social reality of South Korea, Korean filmmakers have successfully defined their own crime genre. It can be said that crime films are almost the icon of the Korean cinema. Korean crime films have in turn influenced the Hong Kong film industry, and have also caused a new impact on audiences and filmmakers in Mainland China. *Silenced* (2011) and *Hope* (2013) are often mentioned in the Chinese internet communities as examples of films that influence society; and *Memories of Murder* (2003) is one of the films that Chinese filmmakers would most like to replicate. *Joint Security Area* (2000), with its portrayal of North-South Korean relations, has reminded many Chinese audiences of Mainland-Taiwan relations.

The Yellow Sea (2010) and *New World* (2013) even made many Chinese critics reluctantly admit that South Korea has surpassed Hong Kong in the crime film genre.

Hollywood films have certainly had an immeasurable influence on the film industries of China and other Asian countries, but the technical standards and cultural environments of Mainland China, Hong Kong and South Korea are so similar that the process by which the markets and industries of these three regions have influenced each other is more easily detectable. Hong Kong and South Korean films have been mutually inspiring for more than a decade, and Korean filmmakers have recently even begun remaking crime films from Mainland China. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into the connections between the crime cinema of these three regions. For the sake of the thesis' research, this section will focus on summarizing the influence of crime films from Hong Kong and South Korea on Mainland Chinese filmmakers. These influences will also be more concretely reflected in the next chapter's detailed review of Mainland Chinese crime films of the 2010s.

During the heyday of Hong Kong cinema's global popularity, the 1980s and 1990s, Mainland Chinese audiences were exposed to a large number of Hong Kong films through a variety of — primarily illegal — means, leaving an profound impact on cultivating Mainland Chinese pop culture, and its legacy keeps up to this day. By the end of the 20th century, Hong Kong films began to show a decline due to the impact of Hollywood blockbusters and the Asian financial crisis. 1997 saw the return of Hong

Kong to China, and in 2003 the Hong Kong SAR government and the Central People's Government of Mainland China signed the *Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement*, or CEPA, under which Hong Kong-Chinese co-productions were no longer subject to import quotas in Mainland China, and co-productions enjoy the same treatment as local films when distributed in the Mainland. Since then, a large number of Hong Kong filmmakers tried to knock on the door of the northward market when the Hong Kong market continued to lose ground. In the first year of CEPA implementation alone, 32 of the 39 co-productions declared for the SARFT's inspection were Hong Kong-Chinese co-productions, and the co-productions released in Mainland China in that year, such as *New Police Story*, *Kung Fu Hustle* and *2046*, all achieved more substantial box office revenues than in Hong Kong (C. Wang 3). The great wave of Hong Kong filmmakers going north in the 21st century, coupled with the cultural impact of Hong Kong films on the Mainland China in the 20th century, has led to a rather obvious influence of Hong Kong crime films on Mainland filmmakers.

Throughout the development of Hong Kong crime films, the cultural variation has been roughly from the "rule of man" to the "rule of law (Cai 52)." The creative tendencies of Hong Kong films in the 1950s and 1960s were divided into two types: the traditional Chinese culture represented by Shaw Brothers' Mandarin wuxia films, and the Lingnan culture symbolized by Cantonese films, both of which invariably conveyed a regional simple moral concept to sustain the functioning of the social system,

which has been summarized by some scholars as “all for one and one for all (Xü 52).” This simple sense of citizenship can be traced back as far as Confucianism, which influenced all of East Asia. As a result, the concept of “rule of man” used interpersonal relationships as a bond throughout Hong Kong films of the 1950s and 1960s, and evolved in the 1980s into the frequent emphasis on “chingyi” (情義), a Cantonese word literally meaning “emotions and moralities” or “ties of relationship”, in Hong Kong cops-and-robbers films and gangster films. Against the camera of John Woo and Ringo Lam, chingyi became the signature of Hong Kong crime cinema. In many “heroic bloodshed” films that followed *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), male friendship were highly praised, and the boundaries of the rule of law and morality were even blurred. In the 1990s, the Hong Kong gangster films, represented by the *Young and Dangerous* series, handed over the way of solving problems from the spirit of the rule of law to a combination of traditional morality and gangs’ conventions, and the chingyi between people became the only way to solve social conflicts (Cai 52).

However, around 1997, Hong Kong people began to lose faith in the rule of man imagination, leading to a shift in the once symbolic role of the police. A large number of B-movies and neo-noirs produced by Milkyway Image completely overturned the rule of man society laid down during the golden age of Hong Kong cinema. Chingyi and romantic heroism were dismantled with the advent of 1997. Especially after the signing of CEPA, films such as *PTU* (2003), *Election* (2005) and *Exile* (2006) from Milkyway

Image and directed by Johnnie To have abandoned the blind worship of the rule of man and instead consider its in a dispassionate way. These films born in the new century has clearly begun to focus on and question the issues of a society governed by the rule of law. Hong Kong crime films of the 21st century have portrayed more police officers stuck in moral dilemmas and hinted at the impact of institutional corruption, and this political transition continues to prove commercially successful. The highest-grossing Hong Kong film in Mainland China to date — a Hong Kong-Chinese co-production set in Hong Kong and produced primarily in Hong Kong, to be precise — is Herman Yau's *Shock Wave 2*. Released in late 2020, the film was a clear indictment of the police system with internal injustice and extremists, and it still resonated with the Mainland audience. In addition, Hong Kong filmmakers who went north to tell Mainland stories have been well aware of Mainland audiences' aesthetic identification with Hong Kong cinema, so attempts to integrate the narrative features of Hong Kong cinema into the social context of Mainland China emerged in a variety of genres, including crime films.

It was only in the 21st century that Korean cinema began to have a profound impact on crime films in Mainland China. Due to a high degree of cultural intimacy and geographic convenience, South Korean filmmakers were once in close exchange with the Chinese film industry, but the deployment of a U.S. anti-missile system in South Korea in 2016 led the Chinese government to cut off most commercial and cultural exchanges between the two countries in retaliation at the time (Tiezzi), and the damage this

retaliation caused to cinematic exchanges has not been really restored. While there is no clear government document indicating that the Chinese government has forcibly banned the introduction of Korean films, the fact remains that the last Korean film released in China was the 2015 historical war action film *Assassination*. Through various illegal and legal means, however, Korean films remain popular among the cinephile community and continue to influence Chinese filmmakers.

“What is interesting about contemporary Korean cinema is how the shared political history of the 1980s has become a commercial bait to attract audiences (Choi 9).” The Asian economic crisis of 1997, which caused the bankruptcy of major Korean companies, woke Koreans up from the rapid economic growth of the “Miracle on the Han River” to realize that the past decades of development toward the West and the modernization they had experienced were nothing more than a “compressed modernity (Cai 53).” The tragedy of this compressed modernity is amplified by the inaction of the authoritarian government and the accumulation of capital by the powerful elite. The majority of the Korean people found that the modernization they had worked hard for was merely a rhetoric for the bureaucracy and the powerful elite to seize benefits. So their long-due vigilance and suspicion of the regime, intertwined with national history, social issues and political movements for democratization such as the Gwangju incident, became an important way for Korean films to effectively mobilize the audience’s emotions.

Korean crime films are often blended with political thrillers, reflecting a tendency to

criticize the top echelons of power. Compared to Hong Kong crime films that are sympathetic to the powerless at the bottom of society, such as ordinary police officers, gangsters or average persons, Korean crime films in the 21st century are more likely to focus their criticism on state power or the system, rather than covering up social injustice with romanticism. Mainland Chinese society, which shares many similarities with South Korean society, is also experiencing rapid economic development, severe inequality between the rich and the poor, and political corruption, so the indictment of the system and the pursuit of justice shown in Korean films have deeply affected Chinese audiences and inspired Chinese filmmakers.

For crime films, action scenes are usually an important element to attract audiences. Hong Kong crime films have always been known for their stylized action set-pieces. John Woo, who used to make traditional martial arts wuxia films, made the crime action film *A Better Tomorrow* in 1986, triggering the craze for violent aesthetics in Hong Kong. The symbolic style of action choreography Woo pioneered is a vehicle for hazy and romantic violence, where the cops or robbers “always maintain calm, natural and unrestrained, with smiling faces, agile and flowing movements, full of dance-like rhythm (Hu, “Hong Kong” 54).” From this point of view, the Korean crime films are very different from the Hong Kong counterparts in the understandings of the photogenic nature of violence. Although Korean cinema had been heavily influenced by Hong Kong cinema, it has taken a unique and successful path in action choreography. The artistic expression of violence

in Korean crime films is likely to be quite realistic, delivering the strong sense of pain, confronting the primitive instincts of human nature, and creating a conflict between savagery against civilization (Cai 56). Specifically, Korean crime films often show a continuous focus on and preference for brutality and physical pain, such as the hammer and mutilated limbs leaping high in *The Chaser* (2008) and the bloody fighting and the falling head in *I Saw the Devil* (2010), all of which attempt to draw the audience back to the primitive human society without political and moral constraints, thus reminding audiences of the essential meaning of the existence of order and justice.

To the present Mainland Chinese filmmakers seeking realistic expression, the style of violence embodied in Korean cinema is more in line with their needs. In recent years, Hong Kong filmmakers have also been studying the action choreography of Korean films. For Mainland Chinese films and Chinese-Hong Kong co-productions, the iconic Hong Kong style of action choreography is more often applied in historical epic films or martial arts films; regarding the crime genre, only the films directed by Hong Kong directors usually present set-pieces in the Hong Kong style. After absorbing and integrating influences from both Hong Kong and Korean cinema, Mainland Chinese filmmakers, who had been trying to carve out a path for the crime genre against a restrictive industry, entered the 2010s with astonishing results.

CHAPTER TWO — The 2010s: 2011–2016, A Turnaround in Silence

Entering the 2010s, the return of a realist aesthetic would become the primary driving force behind the rise of Chinese crime films in this decade, forming a creative trend of realism in a broad sense. As mentioned in Chapter 1, in the 1980s, the Fifth Generation of Mainland Chinese directors brought realism to a peak of creativity, such as Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thief* (1986) and Chen Kaige's *King of the Children* (1987), bringing Mainland Chinese cinema to the world for the first time. With the continuous reform of China's economic system, the gradual marketization of film industry and the further tightening of censorship, the Fifth Generation directors embarked on the road of commercial transformation in the 2000s. At the same time, Most of the Sixth Generation directors, as well as some other directors, persisted in realist creation by means of making underground and independent films, such as *Beijing Bicycle* (2000), *Suzhou River* (2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), *Blind Shaft* (2003), and *Lost in Beijing* (2007), all of which received investment from Europe or Japan and competed in Cannes and Berlin, were never distributed in China. Yet while some of these films have gained fame among the general public in China, it is more obvious that the Chinese cinema of critical realism under the wave of commercialization declined in the first decade of the 21st century and almost disappeared from the public vision. In the second decade, the combination of the multiple impetus composed of the development of the industry, the demand of the audience and the appeal of public opinion and the influence of significant

films, made realist cinema in a broad sense finally revive and regain the attention again, and the cinematic aesthetics of realism return and continue to thrive. It can be argued that Diao Yinan, Cao Baoping and Wen Muye — all of whose films will be detailed below — are among the most crucial drivers of this trend, but the achievements of other directors cannot be ignored. In addition, the growing awareness of crime among audiences thanks to the rich media of the Internet age, as well as the Chinese film market's demand for diverse genres, have contributed to this trend.

There are three main reasons why both veteran and new directors with artistic ambition are focusing on the crime cinema: first, of course, the crime genre is almost always grounded in a contemporary context and has the potential to address various real-life issues, making it easy to take an in-depth look into society and human nature. The second is that the crime genre tends to be integrated with other film genres, and there are mature commercialization methods for the industry to learn from, which is attractive to filmmakers, investors and audiences alike. Last, due to the historical convention of “anti-spy films,” “public-security films,” and crime television series, as well as the long-term influence of foreign films, the censorship officials have a certain degree of recognition for crime genre ideologically and empirically.

Specifically in terms of the implementation of cinematic language, those crime films adapted from real-life events can best reflect the strong aesthetic pursuit of realism. In the adaptation from life to film, filmmakers have to refine the motives, characters and plots,

while emphasizing the camera's ability to record reality, the shaping of public space, and the reenacting of social context. In order to enable more audiences to see their reflections on social reality, Chinese filmmakers are constantly searching for a balance between artistry, market need and negotiation of censorship, thirsting to attract audiences to cinemas through genre appeal, then guide the audience to feel the impact of realism.

2.1 2011: Budding

At the beginning of the 2010s, the growth of cinemas in China extended to every town across the country. At this time, already some directors decided to take advantage of the rapidly expanding demand from the film market and cast their ambition to tell crime stories of contemporary China on the big screen. In October 2010, director Gao Qunshu, known for a number of crime television series, made *Wind Blast*, a film that attempts to combine the traditional Chinese tale of martial arts story with the visual characteristics of American Western films, presenting a showdown between several police officers, outlaws and foreign killers in the wilderness of western China. A pioneer in the genre exploration of Chinese crime cinema, the film was a novelty to Chinese audiences at the time but did not reap success at the box office or positive critical reception.

In 2011, Chinese director Cai Shangjun, who has only made three films to date, made his second directorial effort, *People Mountain People Sea*, which foreshadowed the tone of Chinese crime films in the 2010s. The film is loosely based on a real-life case from 2009: a man was brutally murdered in the relatively backward and closed

southwestern province of Guizhou in China; his five brothers, dissatisfied with the sluggish response of the police, spent more than a year and traveled more than 10,000 kilometers to catch the murderer through their own efforts. The five brothers in the real incident are fused into one brother (Chen Jianbin) in the film. At the same time, the film ties the story backdrop to the illegal coal mines that sparked widespread concern in Chinese society in the 2010s due to the high number of accidents.

People Mountain People Sea won director Cai the Silver Lion at the 68th Venice International Film Festival in 2011. The film did not actually pass the censorship in China at first, but thanks to its Hong Kong investors, it was able to enter the main competition as a Hong Kong film (“Cai Shangjun”). The film is a typical realist film on news events, greatly weakening the suspense of the crime genre, with no flashy techniques and a calm and cool narrative, using documentary-style cinematography to capture crimes and emotions. In the overseas release of the film, when the protagonist realizes that he can neither identify the murderer from among the miners, nor escape from the horrifyingly closed illegal mine, he decides to die with all the miners, even though the murderer has already been killed by other miners. The film was released in China in August 2012 after a significant revision of the ending. In the domestic version, the murderer is eventually arrested by the police, which is the standard ending of most Chinese crime films released in China since then.

2.2 2012: Attempt

In 2012, Hong Kong director Johnnie To, best known for the neo-noirs produced by his studio Milkyway Image, made his first Chinese-Hong Kong co-production, *Drug War*. The film depicts a battle between police officers in the north of Mainland China and a group of drug dealers from the south, and is considered by critics to be a unique masterpiece among the Hong Kong directors' northward wave. The film is quite new both as a Hong Kong film and as a Mainland Chinese film, unlike either To's previous films or any later Chinese crime films made by Hong Kong directors.

In Mainland China, this unprecedented film sparked a critical debate. Some critics believed that To continued to carry forward his calm and objective cinematic language — especially in the film's final shootout, To restrained the excessive sensationalism caused by the characters' sacrifice, making the film more realistic and shocking in its chaos and harshness; with the help of this realistic style, the dark side and instincts of human nature are laid bare on the screen (C. Wang 57). Other critics were dissatisfied with the film's overly straightforward storyline — the film even ends with a close-up on lethal injection — and its clear-cut portrayal of good and evil, and felt that the film was too much like propaganda, as the characters' inner emotional world is left unexplored (C. Wang 57). Although critics came to completely different conclusions about the artistic accomplishments of *Drug War*, they all were struck by the pervasive calmness and neutrality of the film's presentation.

In Hong Kong, critics argued that Johnnie To succeeded in making a Mainland Chinese film a new form of Hong Kong cinema, from which both Mainland and Hong Kong audiences would obtain different interpretations (Yi 78). Some critics claimed that the political metaphor in this seemingly straightforward crime action film is that Mainland China views the democratic spirit from Hong Kong as a drug that must be eliminated (Yi 77). However, the film industry in subsequent years has shown that no later instance of Mainland Chinese crime films, whether from local Mainland Chinese directors or Hong Kong directors, has dared to try to replicate the vibe of *Drug War*. South Korean director Lee Hae-young remade *Drug War* as the Korean film *Believer* (2017), though he disappointingly adopted a flamboyant style.

Drug War features scenes of police officers using drugs, multiple officers killed in action, and execution by lethal injection, all of which were unprecedented in Chinese cinema in terms of sensitivity. After the film passed the censorship, To recalled: “We could not figure out the red line of the sensitive subject matter in the Mainland when we were shooting, yet the instructions given by the censorship is not as much as we expected, only saying that there were too many shootouts, too many police officers dying, as well as scenes of police officers using drugs could be retained, but to cut it shorter (Wan).”

The shootout scenes in *Drug War* are very noteworthy and impressive. These shootouts neither have the classic romanticism of Hong Kong cinema, nor are they quite like Hollywood films that seek military tactical accuracy. Actually, shootouts in Mainland

Chinese crime films are relatively rare, because the government strictly prohibits guns, and shootouts are indeed quite rare in reality, with excessive firearm violence making a film vulnerable to being censored. In *Drug War*, the shootouts have no score, only the noisy and continuous gunfire makes the audience frightened, as both the police officers and drug dealers make unscrupulous efforts to put each other to death. The casualness and even indifference that To showed in portraying this violence is almost creepy, as if he deliberately leaves the audience free to choose the object of their empathy.

Two other Chinese crime films made in 2012 are also worth mentioning. Newcomer Cheng Er's *Lethal Hostage*, a crime drama set on the border of southwestern China, adopts a complex narrative to tell the story of the astonishing relationship between a drug dealer, a hostage and police officers, while portraying the harsh conditions and lack of morality in the borderlands. The film garnered some acclaim, but what really made Cheng famous was his 2016 historical gangster film *The Wasted Times* — the film's exquisite cinematography and production design were highly praised, but with the story set around World War II, it is beyond the scope of this thesis. Director Lou Ye, who made his name worldwide with several underground films portraying modern China and was once blacklisted by Beijing, also finished the first of his films set in modern China to be officially released in Mainland China in 2012, *Mystery*. It is said that after the censors made numerous requests, a compromise was eventually reached and Lou only made a minor alteration to one violent scene, though he still expressed his dissatisfaction with the

ensorship by not crediting his own name in the film (X. Wang). This crime drama film about urban people's confused emotions leading to violence is not a particularly compelling one in Lou's oeuvre, but the film explored the direction for Lou's next crime film, *The Shadow Play* (2018).

2.3 2013: Predicament

In 2013, crime films produced in China remained rare. One of the films that gained attention was Ning Hao's *No Man's Land*. Ning Hao followed up *Crazy Stone* with a more complex black comedy crime film, *Crazy Race* (2009), and then he made *No Man's Land*. However, the latter, originally scheduled for release in early 2009, had tortuous trouble getting past the censors. More concerned with the darkness of human nature than social issues, this neo-Western road film fictionalizes a violent struggle and revenge that takes place on a desert highway in western China, with the plot showing incompetence of the police. Over the next four years, *No Man's Land* endured a protracted battle with censorship. Finally, in late 2013, with an improved industrial environment and a fill-in ending that brought the survivor in the story out of her psychological shadow, the film was approved for release.

No Man's Land is not a particularly brilliant masterpiece, but it's rare to see a decent crime road movie made in China. The cinematography is attractive enough, and the gritty visuals of the yellow desert shrouding the northwest of China are rare. As for the plot, there really isn't much for the audience to recall, simply showing the violent

confrontations between several groups of characters. But Ning Hao may have gone to great lengths just to create and present the type of story that fits the Chinese context in every way, not to mention the three-minute fill-in ending that is on the verge of ruining the entire movie's atmosphere.

Within days of the release of *No Man's Land*, another very different crime film, *Police Story 2013* (a.k.a. *Police Story: Lockdown*), was released in China. The film was directed by Ding Sheng, an avid storyteller of cop shows, whose most successful moment came two years later with *Saving Mr. Wu*. Nevertheless, *Police Story 2013* is also a decent crime thriller, focusing on a dedicated veteran Beijing policeman escapes after being taken hostage with his rebellious daughter. They eventually discover that the mastermind (Liu Ye), who is behind the kidnapping of all the witnesses and police officers involved in his sister's murder, attempts to find out the truth of the case. The indifference of the contemporary Chinese middle class can be seen in these witnesses. The film unfolds as a mystery fiction, and the action scenes are basically flashbacks of Chan's character and how he is tortured by the kidnappers.

Audiences and critics alike were generally unhappy with the lack of action in the film, which stars action legend Jackie Chan and is titled after the celebrated *Police Story* franchise. However, the film's text indeed has a strong emotional dynamic and a credible perspective into class differences in Chinese society. In addition, the villain character who ties together these social observations is himself a sympathetic character to the

audience, and his presence represents one of the breakthroughs in Chinese crime cinema, namely that often the perpetrators are no longer one-sided villains, a point that will be evaluated in focus later on.

Aside from the two films mentioned above, the most important Chinese crime film of 2013 is undoubtedly Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*. As an auteur who made his name through underground films in the 2000s like *Lou Ye*, Jia also began to try to gain recognition from the market and the general public in the age when the Chinese film industry grew extremely fast. He also tried to reach some compromise with the censors through his international fame. *A Touch of Sin*, an episodic film based on four real-life cases, had investment from state-run studios, and Jia pushed hard to get it released in China (Wong). At one point, he spoke confidently about the domestic release, though without explicitly stating the reasons for it. Ultimately, the film was not released in its domestic market, but its overseas release still made it Jia's most famous work of the 2010s. As with many of Jia Zhangke's other works, a large number of cinephiles in China have pirated the film via the Internet. In the United States, thanks to Jia's reputation, *A Touch of Sin* has received a considerable amount of research in English, which is arguably unmatched by any other Chinese crime film in this regard. Therefore, this chapter will not spend much time on this film. It should be mentioned, however, that while the Chinese title of the film literally means "Doomed by Heaven," its English title "A Touch of Sin" is an obvious homage to King Hu's wuxia canon *A Touch of Zen* (1970).

Jia acknowledged his attempt to mirror the Chinese reality that the underclass had to resort to violence to assert their rights, in a way that emotionally echoes feudal history and technically approaches genre cinema (Xiao 30). And this approach was later followed in another of his crime drama films, *Ash Is Purest White* (2018).

2.4 2014: Turnaround

2014 was arguably a turning point for Mainland Chinese crime cinema, and this unexpected turnaround was achieved almost exclusively by one film. Diao Yinan, a director who specializes in neo-noir, made his first mid-budget feature with an all-star cast, *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, which unexpectedly won the Golden Bear at the 64th Berlin International Film Festival.

The story follows the death of Wu Zhizhen's (Gwei Lun-mei) husband five years ago, who is judged by the police to be the result of a bizarre body-shredding case, when police officer Zhang Zili (Liao Fan) shot down the murderer who was resisting arrest with a gun. Five years later, a similar serial murder occurs, and all of these victims had been in love with Wu. Holding the case as the unresolved knot in his heart, Zhang takes the initiative to approach Wu, only to fall in love with the woman like a moth to a flame. Two people who have suffered major life setbacks gradually move from mutual sympathy to love; and as they become more intimate, Zhang discovers the truth about what happened five years ago.

A month after winning the award, the film was released in Mainland China, where it

grossed a satisfactory box office of \$16 million. The domestic version of the film was slightly shorter than the international version, but Diao claimed that he took the initiative to do so for commercial reasons and to speed up the narrative pace. After the success of *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, the China Film Art Research Center and the SARFT held a scholarly seminar for on it. Mao Yu, then director of the Film Bureau of the SARFT then, said at the seminar that *Black Coal, Thin Ice* embodied differentiation and diversity, and that the Film Bureau had given unprecedented attention, concern and support to the production and marketing of the film from the perspective of China's film development strategy (Yao 41). The accomplishments of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* made Chinese filmmakers and audiences alike aware of the potential of crime films in terms of market and artistic achievement, and delivered a signal to the industry that censors could compromise regarding the crime films.

The commercial success of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* was due not only to the reputation brought by the award, but also to the fact that the narrative is more accessible to the masses, which is similar to the three-act structure that Hollywood has long been practicing. The story is divided into three parts, starting from two murder cases five years apart, with the conflict of characters triggered by the investigation of the broken corpses as the main body of the film, and ending with the case being solved. The cinematic language of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* is close to the documentary style: Diao combined a lot of ambient sound effects and realistic locations trying to restore the environment of the

old industrial area in Northeast China, with the poor state of the characters, snowy landscapes and cold-toned lighting blended to create a gloomy and chilling vibe. In terms of the text, it is easy to see the commercial appeal of the film: the opening crime is extremely eye-catching; the emotional thread between the hero Zhang and the heroine Wu unfolds throughout the film following the development of the case, and this duo of a down-and-out cop and a mysterious dame also seems to draw on the characterization of Hollywood film noir.

In terms of theme, however, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* has an expressive ambition beyond the average commercial films. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* exudes existentialism, highlighting the existential anxiety and dystopian consciousness of life's fragility and uncontrollability (Tan 21). Diao portrays the protagonists as existentialist figures, locating their lives in the loneliness and at a loss. Laid-off policeman Zhang has no sense of belonging in his relationship and career. He gets drunk every day at the beginning of the story. Zhang is then determined to find meaning in life and prove his worth by devoting himself to solving the murder case; however, he is soon caught in a quagmire of emotions, entangling his own fate with that of the suspect Wu, deepening the agony of uncertainty. Such anxiety and loneliness do not simply belong to individuals, but are present in all the characters in the film, as a metaphor for the anxiety of modern people's lack of self-identification with their environment. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* focuses on the existence of the lower class in society, and embodies a universal disorientation facing

extreme hardships.

One of the characteristics of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* is that it offers a different perspective on the crime genre. It presents a thriller in a localized storytelling and aesthetic style that resembles Western film noir. By constantly setting up conflicts, Diao achieves creating narrative suspense and vagaries, and he keeps the audience's understanding of the characters in a fresh state, molding a stage for the film's thematic commentary on human nature. As a breakthrough in Chinese crime films at the time, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* provided a more mature model for balancing the director's personal expression with the general public's acceptance.

Another 2014 crime thriller that garnered widespread attention was *The Coffin in the Mountain*, although it did not receive major distribution until a year later. Featuring a rural-setting, the film was made on a shoestring budget. It was directed by newcomer Xin Yukun, whose higher-budget production *Wrath of Silence*, released three years later, even became the focus of Chinese film scholarship.

At the beginning of *The Coffin in the Mountain*, a burnt corpse suddenly appears to break the silence of the village; and the night before, a series of strange events also happen one after another, so that a group of seemingly unrelated people are connected to each other. When the whole village is in a state of panic, the honest and just village chief tries to find out the truth, only to find himself already in deep trouble. His son tries to break free from his father's power and kills a fellow villager in an argument, and just as

he tries to turn himself in, he is told that the case has already been closed. Numerous characters and suspense emerge, and these parallel threads intertwine in the third act. *The Coffin in the Mountain* seemed to encounter few difficulties on censorship, with the only visible outcome being the additional captions at the end of the film indicating that the criminals had been arrested and tried in a customary way.

Since the huge success of Ning Hao's *Crazy Stone* in 2006, young Chinese directors have been looking to construct novel and well-structured crime film narratives. *The Coffin in the Mountain* is the quintessential film born out of this trend. By breaking the unity of time and space through the narration of different characters, the narrative approaches the truth step by step in the winding and splicing of narrative threads. The plot of *The Coffin in the Mountain* is not quite complicated in itself, but Xin delicately made the story unpredictable through editing the whole story into multiple threads and dividing the perspectives and narrations of different characters by similarities. The audience would be readily captivated by the enthralling narrative approach while being impacted by the film's realistic expression of the closed and backward countryside.

Also in 2014, there was the sensational drama film containing criminal elements, *Dearest*, which features only victims and law enforcers rather than perpetrators. This film, based on true events, tells the sentimental yet dynamic story of several parents searching for their trafficked children. Its director, Peter Chan, is a well-known Hong Kong director, but Chan's portrayal of Mainland Chinese society is surprisingly both realistic and

compassionate, and this trait carries over to his later work. Contributing in driving attention to the real-life victims of human trafficking, *Dearest* is an impressive role model for Chinese cinema reflecting social issues.

2.5 2015: Surge

Positively propelled by *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, Chinese crime cinema in 2015 saw considerable growth in both production numbers and box office. One of the most influential works for the year was *The Dead End* directed by Cao Baoping, which grossed three times as much as *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. Cao Baoping, a professor at the Beijing Film Academy, previously directed two feature films in the 2000s, but had not made a film in seven years prior to *The Dead End*. After the success of *The Dead End*, he has been focusing on directing and producing crime films.

Based on a novel, *The Dead End* broke some of the long-standing taboos of censorship discourse. Nudity, homosexuality, moral ambiguity, and an ending with the fatal miscarriage of justice made Cao Baoping's *The Dead End* a smash hit for a film with obvious flaws. This boldness marked a step forward for genre cinema in Mainland China and deeply inspired other creators. Perhaps the most striking part of *The Dead End* is the deconstruction of the masculine characteristics of the male characters (Tan 22). The excellent performances of the three leading actors drive the audience to feel the tension of their characters, while director of photography Luo Pan's handheld camera intensifies the sense of unease they present on screen. Cao Baoping, as director and co-writer, imposes a

strong personal style on the film, but his persistence in the face of harsh censorship proved to be a more significant factor to the expression of *The Dead End*. Although Cao eventually had to make certain compromises, such as deleting minor plots and adding an abrupt ending of a criminal committing suicide, he still managed to retain the core of the characters' personality.

Another crime film that reaped great success in the same year, *Saving Mr. Wu*, shares few commonalities with *The Dead End*. Director Ding Sheng had always wanted to make a tense genre film that embodies the unique temperament of ordinary Chinese police, and he finally did so in *Saving Mr. Wu*, a standard crime thriller that shows resemblance to Peter Berg's films. Based on a dramatic real-life case, the film features three distinctive protagonists: the police captain (Liu Ye), the head kidnapper (Wang Qianyuan) and the star hostage Mr. Wu (Andy Lau). The story was also remade in 2021 by South Korean director Pil Kam-sung into *Hostage: Missing Celebrity*, with Lau's character played by his Korean counterpart Hwang Jung-min.

Saving Mr. Wu is notable for its genre aesthetics, especially its reasonable use of the editing methods that Hollywood blockbusters has developed. A red clock appears repeatedly in the film, signaling an urgent atmosphere. In terms of shot and scene transitions, director and editor Ding organizes the story in a cause-and-effect relationship so that it is more tense and natural in terms of time and space shifts. Meanwhile, when adapting the original case, *Saving Mr. Wu* also appropriately introduces the classic

Hollywood set-pieces, including the last-minute rescue. For the critical moment of the rescue scene, Ding eschewed the intensity of the conflict and did not create a striking soundtrack. Instead, he uses slow motion with fuzzy sound effects to show the rescue at a quiet and slow pace, allowing the audience to experience the desperate and stunned state of mind of the hostage under pressure.

Aside from its technical maturity, perhaps the film's most interesting achievement is that critics have generally commented positively on Wang Qianyuan's performance, playing a kidnapper with a personality not often seen in Chinese crime cinema. Before the 21st century, Chinese crime films mainly presented the dichotomy between positive and negative characters, highlighting the glorious image of law enforcement, demonizing or stereotypically portraying criminals, and even leaving criminals in a state of aphasia (Pan 60). Since 2010, Mainland Chinese crime cinema has made a huge breakthrough in the portrayal of criminals, and dug deeper into the mentalities of the characters. Since the police usually have to be active representatives of the regime, and the victims are often morally protected and socially vulnerable, criminals, who may come from all kinds of social classes and fields, have become the most compromising characters for censorship. On the basis by paying attention to the characters' mentalities, and integrating factors such as identity and social environment, the filmmakers have successfully shaped a rather human and eclectic spectrum of criminals, so that these characters have long ceased to be mere villains.

The first signs of this concern emerged at the beginning of the decade, with the most impressive drug dealers in the aforementioned *Drug War* being a pair of deaf-mute brothers with amazing marksmanship, a convention that Johnnie To has clearly brought to Hong Kong cinema. The antagonist role in *Police Story 2013* seeks revenge for his sister who died due to social indifference. When it comes to *Saving Mr. Wu*, the kidnapper in the film is an outright villain, but his personality makes him the most memorable character. The kidnapper, although vicious and sophisticated, often shows a stoicism comes with reason; he also shows no remorse in the face of his mother before he is executed, but is able to calmly comfort her — a scene that is hard not to make the audience have mixed emotions. Wang's outstanding performance in this film also helped him later become one of the most popular actors in China.

Other influential crime films of 2015 include *Mr. Six* set in the city, *Mountain Cry* set in the countryside, and *What's in the Darkness* set in a 1990s' factory. *Mr. Six* was directed by Guan Hu, later known to the public for his historical war epic *Eight Hundred*. The film, starring acclaimed director Feng Xiaogang, is about the bleak life of a Beijing gangster in his later years, and won Feng the Best Actor award at Taiwan's 52nd Golden Horse Awards. China's largest streaming platform Tencent Video had announced a longer director's cut of the film, only to cancel the release at the last minute — for reasons that could only have come from censorship.

2.6 2016: Growth

2016 was a much less surprising year than 2015, but Chinese crime cinema were still becoming more diverse. New director Yang Qing's second feature film, *Chongqing Hot Pot*, is set in his home city of Chongqing, where all the actors used Chongqing dialects. Setting stories in their hometowns is also a characteristic shared by many young Chinese directors in recent years. At its core, *Chongqing Hot Pot* is a sentimental comedy of nostalgia about youth, but with a reconstruction of comedic patterns against a crime story. The film celebrates the ability of ordinary people who have lost their way in life yet become civilian heroes in a modern metropolis where materialism is paramount. The action scenes in the second half of the film clearly reference Korean cinema, with the primitiveness and agony of the characters as they chase and fight in the rainstorm amplified by slow motion, accompanied by an astonishing score.

That same year saw the release of Cao Baoping's second crime film, *Cock and Bull*. This black comedy film is based on the same real-life case as *People Mountain People Sea* six years earlier, but with a much stronger commercial appeal, telling the story of how a murder in a remote area of southwest China connects the fates of a group of people. The film's narrative uses a multiple-perspective, segmented structure to create strong suspense and dramatic tension. While *Cock and Bull* relies on commercial patterns in terms of story and characterization, Cao still adheres to his own aesthetic style and realistic concerns: he tries to portray and explore the living environment of the remote

and backward areas through the ludicrous plots and the spectacular visual presentation. In fact, in terms of a black comedy film that tries to entertain the public, *Cock and Bull* is undoubtedly a success and stands out in the Chinese film market in 2016.

A month after the release of *Cock and Bull*, a crime thriller that marked the future direction of Chinese action cinema, *Operation Mekong*, was released. This high-budget Chinese-Hong Kong co-production by veteran Hong Kong director Dante Lam, known for his predilection for firearms and military-related subjects, is based on the 2011 Mekong River massacre and the subsequent Chinese police investigation. Following the October 5, 2011 attack on two Chinese cargo ships in Thai waters of the Mekong River in the Golden Triangle region, in which 13 Chinese crew members were killed by militants, the Chinese government sent police task forces to Laos, Myanmar and Thailand to launch a cross-border investigation; in March 2013, the four main culprits were executed after being handed over from Laos to China. The film is loosely based on this real-life incident, but includes more exaggerated action scenes and gives the Chinese police a bigger role in the investigation than they actually had. Since the much of the film takes place primarily in Southeast Asia rather than Mainland China, the film is technically beyond the scope of this thesis, but I will discuss it briefly, because it is useful for our further understanding of state censorship. To enhance the commercial appeal of the film, director Lam and his screenwriter team revised the script repeatedly and obtained the support of the Chinese Ministry of Public Security (Liu). The film ended up being filled with extremely

exaggerated violence and even a fictional episode in which Chinese police officers suffered heavy casualties, all of which seemed at the time to be significant concessions from censorship. The film demonstrated the considerable compromises censors could make when a film is simultaneously supported by the market and meets the political standards of the authorities. Two years later, with the full-scale support of the Chinese Navy, Lam made the war action blockbuster *Operation Red Sea*, and the censors had to make even more concessions again: the film grossed about \$600 million despite containing numerous horrifying shots of violence and gore, making it the highest-grossing film in the Chinese market in 2018.

CHAPTER THREE — The 2010s: 2017–2020, Towards Colorfully Blossoming

Today's media and film scholars tend to study the history of Chinese auteur cinema in the context of the chronology of Chinese director generations in the 20th century. When the French New Wave began to influence Chinese film studies in the 1980s, under the influence of auteur theory, Chinese academia began to use the term "Fifth Generation directors" to refer to some young directors who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in the 1980s, which later became a conscious identity in the theoretical discourse. The Fifth Generation directors were the first to be named, and according to their age, the previous generations of directors were divided reversely (H. Zhang 267). The terms "Fifth Generation" and "Sixth Generation" have become fixed terms in Chinese film academia, referring to a specific group of film directors, a certain cinematic trend, a certain narrative feature or a certain cinematic aesthetic orientation (H. Xü 5). Auteur theory has made film critics pay attention to the directors' personalities and styles, and write articles about Chinese auteur cinema. To a certain extent, these film criticisms influenced the aesthetic development of ordinary audiences and solidified advocates from among the cinephile community for directors such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Jia Zhangke, and other auteurs. This phenomenon, in turn, has prompted filmmakers to consciously highlight their own personal styles. For instance, "my camera does not lie" is the filmmaking philosophy claimed by Lou Ye, a Sixth Generation director deeply influenced by the theories of André Bazin (Y. Gao 21).

Against the backdrop of China's fast-growing film market, Sixth-Generation directors such as Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye and Wang Xiaoshuai, who once mainly made underground films or independent films financed by overseas funding, have begun to move closer to the industry mainstream. They have attempted to make more expensive films for domestic release, using their fame to negotiate censorship while maintaining their personal expression and style, though the results were often not what they had hoped for. As underground directors have been transformed, and the enthusiasm of both critics and audiences have been lost to more expensive and publicly available films, the underground cinema that once underpinned China's cinematic aesthetic in the 2000s — albeit with a rather vague definition — no longer receives a great deal of attention. There might be unique crime films emerged in 2010s Chinese underground cinema, but only a few of them have gained critical attention or have been brought into insightful research.

As for the new directors who have emerged in the 2010s, especially those who made their mark at the First Youth Film Festival in Xining, they have caught up with the surging industry and have secured investment to make their own crime films. As illustrated in Chapter 3, a significant number of the crime films released in the last five years with both personal expression and genre characteristics came from young directors who have only made one film or none at all. China's film industry is growing extremely fast, but filmmakers' resources are still scarce, making directors, rather than producers, the most vocal and central group in the industry. This condition, coupled with the revival

of realism described in the previous section, has revived Chinese auteur cinema.

3.1 2017: Breakthrough

2017 saw Chinese crime cinema take a further step towards displaying sensitivity to social issues. The year saw different types of Chinese crime films winning awards overseas, together forming the calling card of modern Chinese cinema, while Chinese cinephiles generally recognize and expect domestic crime films as a rising phenomenon. Among the various crime films that emerged during the year, three harvested the most critical acclaim: *Wrath of Silence*, which showed the struggles of the underclass; *The Looming Storm*, which recreated the illusion of history; and *Angels Wear White*, a rare feminist film. The three films to be discussed are all from relative newcomers: *The Looming Storm* is a directorial debut, while the other two are just the second feature films of their respective directors.

Following *The Coffin in the Mountain* three years earlier, Xin Yukun made the higher-budget, more ambitious *Wrath of Silence*. The film has yet to get a proper release in English-speaking regions, but it caused quite a stir in Chinese academia. Therefore, this thesis will make a more detailed analysis of the film.

Set in 2004, *Wrath of Silence* follows the encounter between a mute miner (Song Yang) searching for his missing son and a lawyer (Yuan Wenkang) looking for his missing daughter, and a ruthless coal mine owner (Jiang Wu). The first decade of the twentieth century saw a number of socially shocking mining accidents in China, with

illegal mining and labor disputes flooding the provinces. The film *People Mountain People Sea* mentioned above also made its commentary on this issue. Underneath the genre trappings of crime thriller and the apparent theme of violence, the film harbors a concern for the underlying realities of contemporary society. Through a crime story, *Wrath of Silence* reveals that in modern China, violence is a choice born out of a lack of choices for the commoners like the miners, but a powerful weapon for the rulers like the violent and arrogant mine owner to actively seize social resources. The lawyer, who is silent in the face of atrocities, treats the underclass with a more ambiguous face, and his selfishness and indifference make him another kind of abominable perpetrator of violence. *Wrath of Silence* incorporates a number of real social events in China, including forced demolitions, coal mine accidents, manslaughter by hunters, missing children, industrial pollution, and the arrests of lawyers. The social memories projected by the film in these events also form a common memory texture. They accomplish the perception, reinforcement and reconstruction of reality under a framework of the intertwined fates.

The miner, who is aphasic on both physical and social levels, repeatedly ventures alone in order to find his son. He does not flinch in the unfavorable situation of one against many, and takes down the crowd of attackers again and again. The action scenes are stylistically reminiscent of Korean films such as Hong-jin Na's *The Yellow Sea* (2010). Korean cinema has had a huge influence on Chinese filmmakers over the past two decades, and the action choreography in *Wrath of Silence* is clearly a departure from the

traditional Hong Kong styles, showing violence that is sensual and pragmatic, with no obvious formula. In the second half of the film, the everydayness and suddenness of the violence is particularly evident in the smashing of heads with ashtrays. However, while these action scenes are certainly entertaining, they do not provide the pleasure of catharsis — instead, in the wordless fighting, the film shows that in a perverse environment where the rich are violent at every turn and the middle class is silent for their own interests, the underclass, no matter how much they struggle against the bullying and oppression, can only fall victim to the law of the jungle and the end of the food chain in the face of the chilling reality.

As Park Chan-wook did in *Oldboy* (2003), Xin Yukun used strong visual contrasts in the spatial design of *Wrath of Silence*. The imagery of sheep and lamb appears repeatedly in the film, and there is even a lamb processing machine in the mine owner's office — no doubt a symbol of the underclass. The dichotomy between the group of sheep represented by the miners and the carnivores represented by the mine owner also creates a clear adversarial nature between the two spaces where they are from: the miners' village and the owner's company. When the miner is brought into the company, the grey and earthy atmosphere of a pale villager is highlighted in opposition to the clean atmosphere of the office building. The viewer follows the miner's perspective and first sees the brightly lit, colored office area, while the thugs crouch inside, hinting at the hypocrisy of the civilized facade. Furthermore, the mine owner's office has an even colder interior, displaying a

variety of hunting-acquired animal specimens — the modernity suddenly becomes eerie, as the suited mine owner is the epitome of capitalist collusion with corrupt politics, representing the parties directly responsible for the entire chaos and tragedy.

While the commentary of *Wrath of Silence* alludes to, if not directly applies to, current Chinese society, *The Looming Storm* attempts to connect with contemporary audiences by looking back at the trauma of history, with its narrative weaving back and forth between 1997 and 2008. It was the first feature film from young director Dong Yue. Veteran actor Duan Yihong, who won the Best Leading Actor award at the 30th Tokyo International Film Festival for this film, plays a factory security guard named Yu — literally meaning “redundant” — who is working outside the official system and struggling to become a full-fledged policeman. In order to gain recognition from the system, Yu becomes obsessed with trying to solve a murder case on his own. In the 1990s, the market economy was irreversibly pushing China to undergo a radical transformation, and the planned economic system was facing collapse: factories had to shut down, causing unemployment to skyrocket. At this point, Yu, like a redundant man who goes against the trend, tries to find an identity within the system in the twilight of the planned economy.

The film is also apparently influenced by Korean cinema, or more precisely by Bong Joon-ho’s *Memories of Murder* (2003), a classic crime thriller that has been imitated by several Chinese films, including the aforementioned *People Mountain People Sea* and

What's in the Darkness. A protagonist desperate to find the culprit in a particular period, and the mystery ultimately unresolved — these elements are successfully transposed by the director Dong to the context of 1990s Mainland China. Dong intentionally connected the murders in a small town with the surging times, peering through the crime to see how the wheels of the times are turning and how the collective psyche of society is changing.

At the beginning of *The Looming Storm*, Yu is portrayed as a marginalized man. He is the head of the security department of a factory, a worker who does not produce, and a security guard who is not police. This sense of dislocation is evident from the fact that Yu is always at the border of the camera frame: in the police car, Yu sits in the back, barely in the same frame with the policemen; and Dong makes full use of the bars and windows inside the car to isolate Yu from the system where he aspires to be. Of course, Yu is not willing to be a supernumerary. Perhaps because of identity anxiety and a vague sense of crisis about social transformation, Yu's dream of being transferred to the governmental police system by solving criminal cases becomes an obsessive belief, triggered by the serial murders.

Yu and the class he represents are at a loss as the space in which they once lived is gradually disappearing. In the film, the factory is no longer full of modern symphony of steam whistles and steel strikes. The horizontal and diagonal compositions of the interlocking steel bars tear apart the complete space within the camera frame, and the flames in the furnaces are dying under the continuous pouring of cold rain. One of the

film's climaxes — and a turning point in Yu's life — takes place in the factory: an eight-minute chase scene that shows the individual's confusion and anxiety in the labyrinth of the times.

The Looming Storm is generally divided into two narrative passages: 1997 and 2008. By revisiting the factory at different times, Yu contrasts the same space, and the extinction of space is used to express the fading of memory. At the end, the factory is blown up, the chimney collapses, and people like Yu, who is disoriented, see the huge and orderly collective space dissipate in the tide of restructuring. As workers in state-owned enterprises with a strong sense of belonging and a fixed trajectory of life, they can only stand frozen in the gap between the end of the dying era and the unpredictable future. What goes up in smoke with the shattered chimneys is the collective memory of the workers — Chinese society was changing from a highly unified and centralized one full of strong social connections to a more localized and fragmented one.

Although not a typical crime film from 2017, *Angels Wear White*, a rare Chinese feminist film, shall be mentioned briefly here. Completely different from the two male perspective-driven films mentioned above, it indicts the loss of women's voices in Chinese society. *Angels Wear White* is the second feature film of Chinese female director Vivian Qu. With its boldly selected topic and sensitive expression, it drew public attention. In this feminist film that focuses on topics such as sexual assault on children and the growth of girls, Qu uses breathtaking cinematic language to connect audience

emotions with female characters, and profoundly exposes the suffocating situation of women and girls in the patriarchal society. The castration fear and the male gaze are reversed by Qu to re-examine the relationship between the film and its audiences of the different genders. Qu doesn't attempt to turn the film into a typical feminist film by showing female rebellion. Throughout the film, she never uses the camera to vent the girls' feelings to gain resonance and sympathy. Instead, she exerts psychological metaphors to guide the audience to feel the oppression and fear of female groups at the bottom of the society with a feminist mentality and perspective, revealing her ideology of criticizing women's marginalized positioning in the male-dominated reality.

3.2 2018: Impact

In the summer of 2018, a Chinese crime comedy-drama film grossed about \$450 million domestically, becoming the most far-reaching realist film to impact Chinese society to date, as it even impelled national leaders to comment on domestic policies due to the social discussion caused by its popularity. And one of its executive producers was the director of *Crazy Stone*, Ning Hao. The film, *Dying to Survive*, is ample proof of the widespread and huge demand for realistic crime films from the market and the public. After the film became a sensation, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang gave instructions to relevant government departments about the social issues portrayed in the film (Han). Since there was a Korean film *Silence* (2011), which in China — through piracy — was famous for triggering a positive response from the South Korean authorities, many

Chinese cinephiles argued that Chinese cinema could finally be compared to Korean cinema in terms of social impact for the first time due to this phenomenal comedy-drama film, *Dying to Survive*, the second feature film from young director Wen Muye.

This film, based on a real-life case, tells the story of an ordinary man (Xü Zheng), who decides to illegally import Indian generic drugs for many leukemia patients, after an unexpected encounter. The text and the cinematic language of *Dying to Survive* are not new, and it looks like borrowing the idea of *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) in the way of the Korean film *A Taxi Driver* (2017). However, the film excels in its smooth and sensational defense of its characters: in some circumstances, lifesaving deeds are technically illegal, but the culprits are not really the wrongdoers, and should not be considered responsible for faults. As with the innovative portrayal of the villain discussed earlier, *Dying to Survive* makes a powerful defense of a “criminal syndicate” made up of various moral civilians, clearly making the audience aware that law enforcement should not sanction these people. The highlight of the film is that after the protagonist is finally surrounded, arrested and sentenced by law enforcement agencies, as he is escorted to prison, hundreds of patients line up along the streets to see him off. The silent protest expressed in this scene is quite touching. Director Wen has explained his expectations for *Dying to Survive*: “There is no shortage of art-house films with elitist expressions in China, they abound. What is lacking are films that are both entertaining and socially reflective, as well as showing the arc of souls. The Oscar winners such as *Schindler’s List* and *Forrest Gump*

are both enthralling and able to stimulate social discussion, while they also make the audience pay attention to human nature — it's all three layers that compose a good film (Li).” It is unlikely that the censors failed to anticipate the potential shock of public opinion that the film might cause, but the reason why censors left the film relatively untouched, even with its explicit critiques, remains unknown. The good morals advocated by the story are naturally ones of strengths and virtues, but perhaps it should be noted that the father of one of the film's screenwriters, Han Jianü, is none other than Han Sanping, China's most influential film producer and the former chairman of China Film Group Corporation for fifteen years, whose industry clout have helped the film.

In the same year, both Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye also coincidentally completed their latest crime films. Jia's crime romance film, *Ash Is Purest White*, passed the censorship in a relatively smooth way, with the only surprise being that he had to cut out Feng Xiaogang, who was embroiled in a legal dispute at the time, from the domestic release. The Chinese-French co-production had a budget of about \$12 million, far less than the cost of an action blockbuster, but enough to prove that Jia Zhangke's film was already a mainstream production.

The literal translation of *Ash Is Purest White*'s Chinese title would be “Sons and Daughters of Jianghu”, and “jianghu” (江湖) is a word that appeared in most Hong Kong crime films and wuxia films in the 1980s. This word is more than 2,000 years old and roughly means a civil society of the non-ruling or non-official classes. Based on Jia

Zhangke's own experiences, the film narrates the love story of Qiao (Zhao Tao), a disco dancer, and Bin (Liao Fan), a member of a local gang. Compared to *A Touch of Sin*, *Ash Is Purest White* draws more obviously on the Chinese wuxia genre. Even though the characters are still portrayed in Jia's usual style, as ordinary people struggling in harsh life, it is also possible to find in them more idealized and detached characteristics. In contrast to the realism portrayed by his earlier films, which made extensive use of non-professional actors, *A Touch of Sin* and *Ash Is Purest White* attempt to depict a more abstract group of people in a figurative character role (Tan 28). Although *Ash Is Purest White* might evoke associations with the "chingyi" of classic Hong Kong cinema, Jia did not simply reproduce the Hong Kong cinematic complex, but rather treats the characters' relationship in a realist way. *Ash Is Purest White* draws on but breaks away from the heroism of the Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s, coldly demonstrating the disillusionment of traditional masculinity.

Lou Ye's *The Shadow Play* was not that lucky and suffered another blow by censorship. The film, shot in 2016, was not allowed to have a major release until 2019. The final version of the film was five minutes shorter than the version entered at the 55th Golden Horse Awards in 2018. And its making-of documentary *Behind the Dream: A Documentary on 'The Shadow Play'* — which of course chronicles Lou's struggle with censorship — has so far failed to be released in Mainland China.

Adapted from an online post again like *Mystery* six years ago, *The Shadow Play* has

grander narrative ambitions. Set in 2012 in southern China's Guangdong Province, a government official in charge of urban planning and construction accidentally falls to his death during a dispute over the demolition of an "urban village", and a young police officer, Yang Jiadong (Jing Boran), begins to investigate the case; he gradually discovers that the fall is closely related to a disappearance case in 2006, and the wife (Song Jia) and daughter (Ma Sichun) of the deceased official, as well as a real estate developer (Qin Hao), are also involved. The narrative of *The Shadow Play* has a complicated timeline, containing as many as eleven time stamps. These carefully edited time stamps, together with the immersive cinematography forged by handheld cameras and long takes, contour the tangled fate of the three main characters over the past thirty years. To the audience, the film's cinematography, editing and narrative together form a disorienting, even chaotic viewing experience that echoes the complex fates and emotional relationships with the characters.

The film deals with hot topics in society such as urban villages, forced demolition, illegal law enforcement, collusion between officials and businessmen, domestic violence, and infidelity. The urban village refers to the traditional villages that remain in urban areas, and is a unique phenomenon that has emerged during the urbanization process in Mainland China: in the thirty years since the reform and opening up of China in 1978, some cities have expanded rapidly, and the rural areas that were previously located around the cities have been incorporated into the urban landscape, surrounded by

high-rise buildings.

Urban villages are usually not planned and managed, and are dominated by low and crowded illegal buildings, which are outside of the urban management system and are considered by many scholars to be a form of slum with Chinese characteristics. Lou used cinema to condense the darkness and cruelty of reality, intervening in the social trauma that the authorities and many civilians are reluctant to mention, trying to force the society to remember the underclass that has been buried in the context of the social development process and the division between the rich and the poor.

In addition to the works of the two veteran directors mentioned above, two other films by young directors are also worth mentioning in 2018. One is Rao Xiaozhi's crime black comedy film *A Cool Fish*, which is his second feature film. The title makes it clear that this is a film centered around minor underclass characters: the protagonist is a divorced security guard (Chen Jianbin) who has fallen on hard times outside the official system, and his relationship with his daughter is tense. The lack of both social and domestic standing foreshadows the disillusionment of his ideals and a tragic ending. The other is Bai Xue's *The Crossing*, a Chinese-Hong Kong co-production that marks her directorial debut. The film follows a schoolgirl's risky life of smuggling as she wanders between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, a coming-of-age crime story with anxiety and ambiguity that serves as a soft metaphor for the relationship between Mainland China and Hong Kong.

3.3 2019: Divergence

Several influential Chinese crime films of 2019 presented very different styles, yet all were embraced by audiences and critics alike. The biggest surprise for the year was a newcomer from Hong Kong, Derek Tsang, who has flexed his talents in portraying the reality of Mainland China. Tsang made *SoulMate* in 2016, a critically acclaimed melodrama following the decades-long friendship of two girls. But his latest work in 2019, *Better Days*, is far more ambitious. The film about school violence and juvenile delinquency was nominated for the 69th Berlinale, but the Chinese government forced it to be withdrawn. Ten months later, the heavily revised film was released with barely any marketing in Mainland China, and despite the plagiarism controversy of the original novel it is based on, *Better Days* still grossed a staggering \$227 million.

Defined as a coming-of-age melodrama, *Better Days* is in fact an example of genre mash-up, combining traditional crime thrillers with teenage romance. Although there are still fragmentations in this blend that cannot be ignored, the social realities that the film focuses on and presents make the romance more emotionally profound as well. Even though this is just Tsang's second feature film, he spreads his compelling cinematic language over almost the entire film. The opening scene, in which a schoolgirl jumps off the building, offers a glimpse into Tsang's ambition: the audience follows the perspective of Chen (Zhou Dongyu), the heroine, who is cut off from the outside world by an English-language listening exercise, and then realizes the chaotic situation in the campus

only by sight. The sequence in which Chen descends the stairs and approaches the corpse of her friend uses the *mise-en-scène* of a standard thriller. The switch between low-angle and high-angle shots deepens the confrontation between the individual and the collective. The characters are surrounded by buildings, chats on people's cell phones flash by quickly, and close-ups of Chen's face and corpses are presented through the modern medium of smart devices. Similarly, Tsang employs pseudo-surveillance camera footage several times, which, while not helpful to the narrative, certainly highlights the power means of governmental law enforcement force, and thus the incompetence of the police when dealing with school violence and resorting to forced confessions.

Better Days' presentation of relationships in architectural space is also noteworthy. Tsang fully exposes his qualities as a director born in Hong Kong in this aspect, showing a high sensitivity to urban space. *Better Days* was shot in Chongqing, a highly three-dimensional metropolis like Hong Kong and had been favored as a location for crime films and series, including *Chongqing Hot Pot* mentioned above. Dense buildings, enclosed school campuses, vertically extending steps, and intersecting viaducts — these architectural elements together build the film's oppressive and cramped emotional atmosphere, and largely suggest the common social situation of the female protagonist Chen and the male protagonist Bei (Jackson Yee). Beneath the shell of teenage romance and juvenile delinquency, *Better Days'* deeper expression is a concern for class issues.

Better Days is also a good example for observing censorship at work, with regard to

the film's withdrawn nomination from Berlin. Among all censored Chinese films, sometimes the content changes requested by the state censorship are minimal and limited to domestic releases when the films seem unlikely to cause social impact, as in the case of Diao Yinan's *Black Coal, Thin Ice* and *The Wild Goose Lake*, while sometimes the impact is extremely radical and used for worldwide releases — *Better Days* unfortunately falls into the latter category. According to some sources that may never be officially confirmed, and through a comparison with the trailers, the released version of *Better Days* is seven minutes shorter than the version originally sent to Berlin, with major cuts to Bei's brutal life as a punk and negative portrayals of teachers and police officers, in addition to long statements indicating that the Chinese government has paid sufficient attention and made efforts to intervene in school bullying. Nevertheless, *Better Days* is still so good in its chopped form that it was one of the five nominees for the Best International Feature Film at the 93rd Academy Awards as the Hong Kong entry.

Diao Yinan, who changed the course of the industry with *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, also brought his new work in 2019, a pure neo-noir, *The Wild Goose Lake*. Once again, Diao reenacted the struggles and fatalities of the underclass, while at the same time alternating the film between highly realistic and unrealistic. Diao is straightforward in portraying gangsters and prostitutes as if they are ordinary people — only they live in the underworld at the edge of the city. This approach of not attaching moral judgment throughout the film, as if the boundaries of the law have been completely blurred and

everyone, including the police, acts only in the name of conviction and duty. *The Wild Goose Lake* features bolder violence and sexual elements and more dazzling spectacle than *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. In *The Wild Goose*, Diao intensifies the expressionist visual style, with symbolic references and the use of neon light even taking the film to the surreal side. *The Wild Goose* shares thematic and visual tropes with film noir, but is not exactly an imitation of Hollywood neo-noirs; meanwhile the fragmented and subdued narrative makes the film closer to European cinema (H. Li 112). Diao has not only broadened the path for the crime cinema in China, his understanding and creation of neo-noir has also received a positive response from both the market and worldwide critics, allowing him to continue to exist as a unique auteur in Chinese cinema.

The Wild Goose is Diao Yinan's expansion of his focus on careers and regions. He also represents this trend of concern: the portrayal of criminals is often combined with multiple narrative threads, allowing the audience to gain a more comprehensive understanding of criminals from different perspectives and to explore the reasons why they become criminals. The criminal characters in Mainland Chinese crime cinema in the last decade has enriched the image and existential significance of themselves from more diverse angles and purposes, bringing renewed attention to once-disembodied criminal characters and prompting audiences to contemplate their deeds on both social and philosophical levels.

In addition, Chinese crime cinema of the 2010s have increasingly portrayed civilians

in pursuit of justice. From *People Mountain People Sea* and *Black Coal, Thin Ice* to *Wrath of Silence* and *The Looming Storm*, the protagonists in these films are ordinary people such as workers, security guards, and laid-off police officers who spontaneously assume responsibilities similar to law enforcers or detectives for various purposes. This kind of characterization avoids the political burden of having the police as the protagonist, offering filmmakers more freedom in portraying their characters; the approach also enables filmmakers to focus more on the causes and resolution of conflicts within the civilian class, questioning the absence of law enforcement and expanding the vision of reality covered by the films.

At the end of 2019, another crime drama achieved unexpected commercial success, marking the last normal moment of prosperity of the film market before the pandemic. Malaysian director Quah Boon-lip came to Mainland China to make his first feature film, *Sheep Without a Shepherd*, a remake of the 2015 Indian film *Drishyam*. In order to pass the censorship, the story takes place in a fictional country based on Thailand, instead of China; moreover, the ending is far different from the original, as the innocent lawbreakers are eventually punished. However, the police corruption and violent demonstrations that are preserved in this remake recall the massive demonstrations on the streets of Hong Kong throughout 2019.

3.4 2020: Revival

After the pandemic largely eased in China, the Chinese film market began to revive

in the second half of the year. The war film *Eight Hundred*, mentioned in the last chapter, was released in August and grossed \$470 million, which greatly boosted the revival of the Chinese film industry. In terms of crime films, two films that attracted attention were released in November. Li Xiaofeng's *Back to the Wharf* attempted to unify the corrupt side of the social system with a shadowy individual psyche. Despite being considered a film with a seriously defective screenplay, *Back to the Wharf* is still impressive in its stylish cinematography and performances. Hong Kong director Ho Leung Lau's crime action film *Caught in Time* was a more substantial commercial hit for the rest of the year.

Since the huge success of Dante Lam's *Operation Mekong* in 2016, more Hong Kong filmmakers had been inspired to come to the Mainland to participate in the crime thriller productions. Screenwriter Ho Leung Lau's second directorial feature film, *Caught in Time*, a China-Hong Kong co-production, is based on a real-life case in 1990s China — a setup that not only pays homage to 1990s' Mainland Chinese crime television series, but also allows for mass shootouts to pass the censorship. Still, he had to make compromises, such as conceiving a fictional map of a province for the film, although its archetype is obviously Guangdong — when Johnnie To was making *Drug War* back in 2012, he was already forced to change the names of the cities featured in the film to be slightly fictional, even though every Chinese citizen could see the archetypes at a glance.

Ho Leung Lau is less keen on gunfights than Dante Lam, although the film's action scenes are still entertaining. As a flawed cops-and-robbers film, *Caught in Time*

intentionally builds a distinctive vision of the Chinese cities of the 1990s: a shabby, cluttered cityscape that can only be overlooked by climbing the television tower in the city center. Lau linked the collective memories to the VHS screenings, arcade games and other media of the time in order to present a common impression of Chinese society in the 1990s. However, in order to shape the heroic duo like in the classic Hong Kong crime action films, Lau sacrificed the authenticity of the story, resulting in that the film does not fully represent the true history. But the film still has its fresh and mature traits and was an unexpected smash hit — it is foreseeable that more directors will come afterwards to uncover the crime stories of that chaotic period. An interesting fact is both *Caught in Time* and *Drug War* end with an execution; they seem to reflect the Hong Kong directors' exploitative vision of the Mainland law.

As the world stumbles into the 2021 and beyond, the Chinese film industry continues to suffer from the recurring pandemic-related shutdowns. Fortunately, there are still new directors emerging and bringing their crime films to the screens across China. Lü Yulai's *Break Through the Darkness* is essentially a propaganda film for China's anti-corruption efforts, yet as a result, Lü was allowed to present some rare scenes showing government corruption. But perhaps the film's biggest effect is to remind people of Zhang Yimou's political thriller *Under the Light*, which was supposed to be released last year but apparently hasn't passed the censorship so far.

In 2021, as the Communist Party of China celebrated its centennial, the Film

Administration has tightened its grip on theatrical releases, yet a few refreshing local crime films have been licensed to release: Wen Shipei's *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* and Shen Yu's *The Old Town Girls*; both are the first feature film for their directors. Wen, the director of *Are You Lonesome Tonight?*, seems to be a big fan of European cinema, attempting to use sophisticated, distinctive lighting and a non-linear narrative to recreate the criminal milieu of 1990s southern China. *The Old Town Girls*, on the other hand, attempts to connect family problems and juvenile delinquency in a surprising way: in a small, heavily industrialized town in a economically depressed southern province, a girl plans to retain her mother with the help of her friends, only to get into serious trouble as a result. The two films are hardly satisfying, but both explore the connections between urban space and crime narratives.

Two other black comedy films are even more riveting: *The Eleventh Chapter* and *Manchurian Tiger* both use quirky humorous touches to portray human relationships in mid-sized cities. The former incorporates formal traits of stage play into the filmmaking that also fits the plot, while the latter explores the absurd regional charm of northeastern China. Almost every month, there are such crime films by either new directors or unconventional filmmakers being released, representing the reassuring fact that Mainland Chinese crime cinema continue to flourish, even if not always popular with the market.

CONCLUSION — How An Oppressive State Views Crime

Compared to the first decade of the 21st century, the overall production quality and commercial performance of Chinese crime films in the 2010s have improved significantly. They have pioneered a variety of cinematic languages and scales of expression, explored bold narratives, and become more proficient in creating suspense and capturing spectacles. By borrowing and blending technical approaches from Hong Kong, South Korea and Hollywood, many commercially successful Chinese crime films have cultivated universal methods to fascinating narratives, intense conflicts and extreme character states, representing the rapid development of genre cinema in China and the maturation of the Chinese film industry. Filmmakers increasingly dare to construct more elaborate and complex narratives and attempt to move beyond simple dichotomies in shaping the moral relationship. This phenomenon has changed the attitude of many Chinese audiences about local genre cinema, making crime films regular box office toppers. The commercial success of the genre has in turn given investors more confidence and fostered a stable audience, creating a positive momentum for development.

However, as mentioned throughout this thesis, censorship still hinders. Even the most eminent and sophisticated Chinese directors like Lou Ye and Zhang Yimou can't easily overcome the obstacles caused by censorship. Cao Baoping followed up *Cock and Bull* with *She Kills* and *Wade Through the Sea of Anger*, but both finished films seem to be trapped by censorship at the moment. Newcomers often have a harder time:

cinematographer Zhang Ji's first directorial effort, *Fire on the Plain*, a highly anticipated adaptation of a romance mystery novel made in 2021, left the popular Christmas slot for unknown reasons after its original title "Moses on the Plain" was censored. Perhaps censorship may force some filmmakers to take more obscure approaches to present the crimes or ideological expressions, leading to unexpected artistic effects, but such a fluke is worthless in the face of censorship's strike on the industry. The only good thing is that there are plenty of examples proving that censorship has proven to be inconsistent, with censors continuing to redraw the rules. The reputation of the filmmakers, the pressure of public opinion, the support of official agencies, the value of the film itself, and even the scale of the economic and social impact that a film may achieve in the future can all influence the final verdict handed down by the censors — but even if a film passes the censors, the distributors still must be prepared for the censors to suddenly withdraw their decision. Over the past decade, as crime cinema has become more influential, each year the censors seem to be making new concessions. As things stand, it seems that Chinese filmmakers shall continue their struggle with censorship in an effort to bring their work to the public, prompting some degree of communication and dialogue between the parties.

With its stunning performance in earning awards and box office, Mainland Chinese crime cinema, which struggled to rise from invisibility and underdevelopment during the 2000s, has managed to appear as a mainstream genre popular with the market and critics within a decade. Represented by the Sixth Generation and the new directors emerging in

the last decade, Chinese filmmakers have imposed distinct styles on the crime films they make, while expressing strong social concerns and humanist themes. They have struck a unique and influential artistic path in the cultural field subject to strict government control, giving industry watchers optimism about its future.

This thesis has sought to provide a comprehensive review, interpretation and summary of the relationship between the evolution of the film industry and its deployment of genre. The long road ahead for Chinese crime cinema is still full of challenges, with censorship, the market and even the lasting impact of the pandemic on the film industry — all these difficulties must be faced tenaciously by filmmakers and audiences in China. Compared to Hollywood or Korean crime cinema, the international recognition Chinese crime cinema has gained has been far more limited. Nevertheless, as the world's most populous country, the largest box office market, and sole socialist superpower, China is likely to be one of the most important social science research objects of the century, whether for the U.S. on the other side of the globe or any other country. Therefore, for the outside world, the greatest achievement of Chinese crime cinema to date is perhaps to provide an intuitive and humanistic window into the politics, culture and people of this country.

APPENDIX — Mainland Chinese Films Mentioned

Chapter One: in order of mentions.

Yan Ruisheng (1921, 閻瑞生) dir. Ren Pengnian

Zhang Xinsheng (1922, 張欣生) dir. Zhang Shichuan

Invisible Fronts (1949, 無形的戰線) dir. Yi Ming

Secret Post in Canton (1957, 羊城暗哨) dir. Lu Jue

Visitors On The Icy Mountain (1963, 冰山上的來客) dir. Zhao Xinshui

The Sacred Duty (1979, 神聖的使命) dir. Mao Yuqin & Teng Jinxian

Murder in 405 (1980, 405 謀殺案) dir. Shen Yaoting

The Snake Case (1983, 銀蛇謀殺案) dir. Li Shaohong

Desperation – The Last Frenzy (1987, 最後的瘋狂) dir. Zhou Xiaowen & Shi Chenfeng

The Price of Frenzy (1989, 瘋狂的代價) dir. Zhou Xiaowen

Drug Enforcement War (1991, 緝毒戰) dir. Tai Gang

Dark 25 (1992, 黑色 25) dir. Yin Aiqun

Drug Enforcement Hero (1996, 緝毒英雄) dir. Xū Qingdong

The Missing Gun (2002, 尋槍) dir. Lu Chuan

Kekexili: Mountain Patrol (2004, 可可西里) dir. Lu Chuan

Blind Shaft (2003, 盲井) dir. Li Yang

Blind Mountain (2007, 盲山) dir. Li Yang

Unknown Pleasures (2002, 任逍遙) dir. Jia Zhangke

A World Without Thieves (2004, 天下无贼) dir. Feng Xiaogang

Crazy Stone (2006, 疯狂的石头) dir. Ning Hao

Hero (2002, 英雄) dir. Zhang Yimou

Eight Hundred (2020, 八百) dir. Guan Hu

Wolf Warriors 2 (2017, 战狼 2) dir. Wu Jing

Chapter Two: in chronological order.

The Horse Thief (1986, 盗马贼) dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang

King of the Children (1987, 孩子王) dir. Chen Kaige

Beijing Bicycle (2000, 十七岁的单车) dir. Wang Xiaoshuai

Suzhou River (2000, 苏州河) dir. Lou Ye

Lost in Beijing (2007, 苹果) dir. Li Yu

Crazy Race (2009, 疯狂的赛车) dir. Ning Hao

Wind Blast (2011, 西风烈) dir. Gao Qunshu

People Mountain People Sea (2011, 人山人海) dir. Cai Shangjun

Drug War (2012, 毒战) dir. Johnnie To

Lethal Hostage (2012, 边境风云) dir. Cheng Er

Mystery (2012, 浮城谜事) dir. Lou Ye

No Man's Land (2013, 无人区) dir. Ning Hao

Police Story 2013 a.k.a. *Police Story: Lockdown* (2013, 警察故事 2013) dir. Ding Sheng

A Touch of Sin (2013, 天注定) dir. Jia Zhangke

Black Coal, Thin Ice (2014, 白日焰火) dir. Diao Yinan

The Coffin in the Mountain (2014, 心迷宫) dir. Xin Yukun

Dearest (2014, 亲爱的) dir. Peter Chan

The Dead End (2015, 烈日灼心) dir. Cao Baoping

Saving Mr. Wu (2015, 解救吾先生) dir. Ding Sheng

Mr. Six (2015, 老炮儿) dir. Guan Hu

Mountain Cry (2015, 喊·山) dir. Larry Yang

What's in the Darkness (2015, 黑处有什么) dir. Wang Yichun

Chongqing Hot Pot (2016, 火锅英雄) dir. Yang Qing

Cock and Bull (2016, 追凶者也) dir. Cao Baoping

Operation Mekong (2016, 湄公河行动) dir. Dante Lam

Operation Red Sea (2018, 红海行动) dir. Dante Lam

Chapter Three: in chronological order.

Wrath of Silence (2017, 暴裂无声) dir. Xin Yukun

The Looming Storm (2017, 暴雪将至) dir. Dong Yue

Angels Wear White (2017, 嘉年华) dir. Vivian Qu

Dying to Survive (2018, 我不是药神) dir. Wen Muye

Ash Is Purest White (2018, 江湖儿女) dir. Jia Zhangke

The Shadow Play (2018, 风中有朵雨做的云) dir. Lou Ye

A Cool Fish (2018, 无名之辈) dir. Rao Xiaozhi

The Crossing (2018, 过春天) dir. Bai Xue

Better Days (2019, 少年的你) dir. Derek Tsang

The Wild Goose Lake (2019, 南方车站的聚会) dir. Diao Yinan

Sheep Without a Shepherd (2019, 误杀) dir. Quah Boon-lip

Back to the Wharf (2020, 风平浪静) dir. Li Xiaofeng

Caught in Time (2020, 除暴) dir. Ho Leung Lau

Break Through the Darkness (2021, 扫黑·决战) dir. Lü Yulai

Are You Lonesome Tonight? (2021, 热带往事) dir. Wen Shipei

The Old Town Girls (2021, 兔子暴力) dir. Shen Yu

The Eleventh Chapter (2021, 第十一回) dir. Chen Jianbin

Manchurian Tiger (2021, 东北虎) dir. Geng Jun

Under the Light (TBA, 坚如磐石) dir. Zhang Yimou

Conclusion: in order of mentions.

She Kills (TBA, 她杀) dir. Cao Baoping

Wade Through the Sea of Anger (TBA, 涉过愤怒的海) dir. Cao Baoping

Fire on the Plain (TBA, 平原上的火焰) dir. Zhang Ji

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