

Hong Kong Panorama 86-87 (The 21st ^{HK} International Film Festival)
(HK: Urban Council, 1987).

An interview with director, Cha Chuen Yee, on *Once Upon a Time in Triad Society 2*



CHA Chuen-ye was born in Hong Kong in 1956. In 1978, he worked as an assistant cinematographer in TVB, and changed to be a director and producer in CTV/ATV. In 1991, he co-founded Concept Link Productions with Chung Kai-cheong. Films: *Mr. Fortune* (89), *Middle Man* (90), *Take Me* (91), *Off Track* (91), *Basic Impulse* (92), *Legal Innocent* (93), *Awakening* (94), *The Rapist* (94), *Our Neighbour Dective* (95), *Once Upon a Time in Triad Society* (96), *Once Upon a Time in Triad Society 2* (96).

Interviewed by Linda Lai & Kim Choi
Translated by Judy Au

"Heroes" belong to the realm of fictional fantasy. Last year's local cinema still witnessed many instances of tug-of-wars in heroic imaginations. While some filmmakers sought for new images of the "heroes," others cleansed off the final traits of romanticism. For the latter, Cha Chuen-ye and script collaborator Chung Kai-cheong were especially keen in unveiling the "man-eat-man" reality of the underworld and refused to abide in any faith in chivalry. Boys don't have to be heroes, they proclaimed. Furthering their parody of cops-and-robbers films in *Once Upon a Time in Triad Society*, the "sequel" concentrates more on deconstructing generic plot clichés and stereotypical characters. Developed around three different characters derived from three different kinds of generic conventions - a pimp, a swashbuckling would-be hero, and a young cop with a pregnant wife, the story gradually brings the three men together and culminates in the climatic gang war following a "time bomb" formula. Plotting of the gang war is secondary to characterization.

*Did you start formulating *Once Upon a Time in Triad Society 2* when you were filming *Once Upon a Time in Triad Society*?*

No, we had no plans for a second movie. We only felt that there were many unused ideas from the first film and we could do another one, or may be even more. There are still many ideas that we haven't explored. For small production companies, the market is crucial. You have to know there's a market before you make a commitment. I've seen a lot of gangster movies, but I think there are a lot of unexplored angles. Also, the "hero films" trend has created an audience for gangster movies. I'm sure they would come see it; they might even like it. So I decided to try a new angle, to see how the good guys and bad guys change.

What is an alternative hero?

Most heroes are gangsters or members of triad society; then they are divided into good crooks and bad crooks. That's something that I don't understand. Why are there always Robin Hood characters? I don't think there are too many of them in modern society. Why don't we do real gangsters? I mean gangsters who act like real gangsters. A smart gangster, a really cruel gangster, or a gangster who's so dumb that he gets betrayed and is forced out of business. We can do these bad guys, and they don't have to be good-looking, cool, or lady-killers. There are all these alternative crooks, and we want to do these characters.

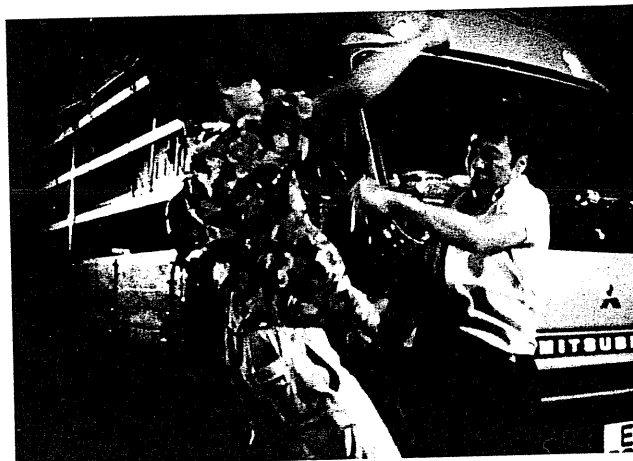
Do you have a specific mind-set when you do anti-heroes or when you take them apart?

Not necessarily. My only intention is to challenge norms and traditions. When I do a cops-and-robbers movie, I would ask myself if all the policemen act like policemen in these movies; what if they don't. I don't think anyone has done what we did regarding heroes. I mean, Chow Yun-fat is always a cool dude, he just doesn't do drugs. I think if you are going to be gangster, you must be really bad, bad enough to kill you own father. Which is to say, you must ask yourself if you can do that before you join a gang. If you can't, go back to school.

The cop in the movie is not a big hero. A cop in a cops-and-robbers movie is an important dramatic element. You set him up against a gangster, he's a good guy, even a hero. From another angle, he's also an ordinary guy like everybody else. He has his own problems to take care of, like his relationship with his wife, or some other trivial matters. Even super-cop characters like Danny Lee, Arnold Schwarzeneger, or Jackie Chan, they too have their own problems and pressure. They are like any white collar worker in Central. They get bossed around and they take shit from their superiors.

Part 2 doesn't seem to do as well as Part 1 at the box office.

This is a matter of timing. But we think the audience actually likes it better than Part 1. Unlike Part 1 which challenges the audience's viewing habits, Part 2 goes out to meet their expectations. Though they may find it hard to relate to the characterization in the third part of the film. On the other hand, there are actually people who don't like Part 2. Some real-life gangsters can't take Francis Ng's character, not to say admitting to themselves that they are actually like him. They want themselves to be Andy Lau, who can single-





Once Upon a Time in Triad Society 2

Director: Cha Chuen-ye

Script: Chung Kai-cheong

Cinematographer: Ko Chiu-lam

Editor: Angie Lam

Music: Johnny Njo

Art Director: Lam Wai-sum

Producer: Cha Chuen-ye, Chung Kai-cheong

Cast: Francis Ng (Dagger), Roy Cheung (Dinosaur),

Cheung Tat-ming (Fat Won), Ada Choi (De Da)

Production/Export Agents: Concept Link Productions,

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1996 Color 35mm 92 min

handedly take on a hundred guys and win, even if he gets seriously injured. Or maybe mix him with Roy Cheung's character. He has a girl who loves him to the very end, and a big brother who appreciates him. But our film does not fulfill these expectations.

I may want to make a film with a super-hero cop, but not a super-hero crook. I may do commercial movies, but there are bottom lines.

Can you tell us more about plot development?

I have two major considerations. One, this is a gangster movie about the triads. Two, this is also a slice of life in a big city. There are all kinds of people, and things happen. There are gangsters, fruit peddlers, school teachers, etc. For some reasons at a particular time and place these different people with diverse backgrounds and experiences get together. It's the same situation but they react differently and they get different results. It's like you and I meeting here at 3 in the afternoon over some business. One thing this movie wants to talk about is how the triads affect ordinary people. Things like their cars get burnt, their stores are robbed, and serious gang wars on the streets.

Are there ideas in Part 2 that didn't find expression in Part 1?

We tried to say too many things in Part 1. This time, scriptwriter Chung Kai-cheong and I decide to use fewer words. We want to show how things are done rather than said, and use the "time bomb" formula. Which is also more appealing to the audience.

There are three storylines. Francis Ng is a comic character, a bit like Stephen Chiau. Roy Cheung is a rough neck but he's also sensitive. The cop Cheung Tat-ming is like someone from an early Alfred Cheung movie. At first, we thought about mixing the three into one. But in the end we decided to develop them separately, to have three different styles.

I myself like the scene when Roy dies, and with the song, it's even more intriguing. I also like the gang war scene. But we didn't have enough resources; I'd really like it to have more details. Now it turns out like a general framework without much content. Like a meal at a roadside restaurant, it's just not rich enough. I kind of regret that the censors excised some dialogs. But they really are not foul language. They are there to add flavor to the film. The censors think Roy Cheung shouting "Tuen Mun is the coolest!" when he boards his car has a problem.

Towards the end Francis Ng forgets his home phone number. That sequence begins with him getting on a car, meeting a friend and finally arriving home. I rather like it; it's good drama. The hand of fate. He tries to run away and ends up back in Mongkok, then draws a bad lot and is forced to take revenge on his dead big brother. Things really get emotional. He knows he's going to die,

and he even forgets his home phone number. The audience may laugh, but they know he's a goner. They can't be too happy when they see him forget his number. At that point, they're already identifying with the character's emotions.

How do you put the three storylines together?

Mainly by the "time bomb" formula. On the one hand, the narrative points to the final gang war. And when we think of the "time bomb" formula, we decide to tie all the threads to that sequence. It's easier because there is less explanation to do. Otherwise we would have to negotiate all the bends and turns in the story, and we may make mistakes. But we also have an ending for each character after the fight scene. Roy's end is an irony. Francis' needs a little explanation but perhaps forgetting the phone number alone is already sufficient. As a commercial film, the end sequence needs to be very explosive. But the fight is full of irony and cynicism. The big bosses risk nothing, only the small potatoes pay with their lives. Is it really worth it? You can hide, but in the end you must fight for your life. Then you see an exit, but is it really an exit? Francis remembers his family, his parents, yet he can't do anything about it. However, since this is a commercial movie, it ends with a fool getting all the fool's luck.

How are the ideas developed?

We already had a lot of characters when we were still working on Part 1. There are also all sorts of people in triad society. Francis Ng's character is like a friend of mine. Ada Choi needs a little exploration. We went to the cafes in Mongkok and observed 15 and 16-year-old teenage girls. We also talked to people. Her name, De Da, tells us she's a young person who wants very much to be very hip. We started with the themes, then we developed characters. For example, the cop. We analyzed types of cops and look for facts and stories. We also read books and Magazines such as the Next Magazine. We wanted the character to be real, we had to imagine we know him very well, then we developed his character. We didn't start from the story and plots alone.

Is there anything that you wanted to do but never had the chance?

I want to do human emotions, the primitive emotions between human beings. This is something that modern society doesn't have or tries to ignore. I always want to make good films - with critical acclaim and successful box office returns. I am not like Stanley Kwan or Lawrence Ah Mon. They can starve for their principles. Basically I'll do anything, and I'll put myself to it. It's not impossible to do a good job shooting Veronica Yip taking off her clothes. The most important thing is how you do it. 