JOHN WOO'S
A Better Tomorrow

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HKU PRESS
香港大學出版社

Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Road
Hong Kong
www.hkupress.org

ISBN 978-962-209-652-3

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound by Caritas Printing Training Centre, Hong Kong, China

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Introduction

In 1985, John Woo was a journeyman director working hard in romantic comedies and other modest projects, a respected but relatively unremarkable figure still largely on the sidelines of a burgeoning revolution in Hong Kong cinema.[1] Only slightly better known, Chow Yun-fat was known in the movie industry as an occasional romantic lead whose most successful work had been the television soap operas in which he had debuted. By 1986, however, with the release of *A Better Tomorrow* — in Mandarin, "*Yingxiong bense*," or, in Cantonese, "*Yinghuhng bunsik*" — which Woo directed and in which Chow starred, the two were household names, catapulted to Hong Kong superstardom by the record-breaking success of their action/crime film. By the mid-1990s, moreover, the local celebrity attained by *A Better Tomorrow* had gained worldwide renown, as the film rode a wave of global interest in the new Hong Kong cinema, the innovative and commercially powerful films which had emerged in the territory during the 1980s. *A Better Tomorrow* thus occupies an especially important place in the canon

of Hong Kong film, being historically significant in both local Hong Kong movie history and the writing on that cinema later promulgated by Western scholarship and criticism. But these areas of importance are not, of course, the same, raising the question of how Hong Kong cinema figures into today's globalized film culture. The reception of *A Better Tomorrow* provides crucial insight into this evolution of Hong Kong cinema, since the difference between the original popularity of the film in Hong Kong and the critical enthusiasm it garnered outside of Asia a decade later is in fact symptomatic of the conditions and motivations that led to Hong Kong's recent starring role in world cinema.

The "new Hong Kong cinema" and the globalization of film deserve mutual consideration because the phenomena occurred over roughly the same period. Numerous studies on the consolidation of a world cinema audience and industry show that the process took shape during the 1980s and early 1990s.[2] Yet, as this volume will show, the Western interest in Hong Kong cinema at the time often downplayed these factors in favor of political concerns, reflecting the active Western attention on the looming 1997 handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China.[3] The title of *A Better Tomorrow* itself provides an illustrative instance of the different contexts in which Hong Kong film was positioned and understood: although the Chinese title of the movie is literally translated as "True Colors of Valor" or "The Essence of Heroes," phrases which convey the appreciation of honor and chivalry for which the film is remembered in Hong Kong, the English title under which the film was also distributed provided an entirely different emphasis on futurity that proved useful for the politically-inflected and highly topical context in which the film figured in discussion outside of Asia.[4] In actuality, however, as much of the criticism would note, much of what seemed political in the film was also industrial, referring to the economic conditions of the film's manufacture and distribution, as the optimistic English title could

also describe the professional trajectories of Woo and Chow, since by the 1990s both men had transplanted themselves to Hollywood based on the success of *A Better Tomorrow* and other films. Understanding this transfer from a local to global industry as motivated primarily by economics rather than politics is crucial, since it reflects the centrality of capitalism that most studies show to be the prevailing force in globalization.[5] *A Better Tomorrow* is thus a key film in the history of Hong Kong cinema because of both its local importance and the fact that this success, as it was interpreted in Western transmission, laid the groundwork for a more universalist understanding of the seminal contribution of the new Hong Kong cinema that belies those early, overtly politicized attempts to understand it.

The different terminology harnessed in the East and West to acknowledge the impact of the film reveals its different concepts. The "hero" movie, introduced in Hong Kong by *A Better Tomorrow*, is a variant of the action/crime genre. This new genre, although originally unique to Hong Kong, was modified during critical and commercial reception in the West, particularly because the subgenre has two relevant precedents in the world history of film. One of these precedents is the action cinema, a genre currently dominated by Hollywood production, which has been essential to the consolidation of the world cinema audience. The other is film noir, the cycle of thematic and stylistically distinct crime films made in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s, and commonly interpreted as a psycho-political metaphor for the culture at large. Although the latter term would be important in Western scholarship on *A Better Tomorrow*, the former context more accurately captures the way in which the Hong Kong film impacted the global marketplace. That is, as might be predicted by the compounding of "action/crime" current in Hollywood cinematic taxonomies, the paramount legacy of the topical discourse in which *A Better Tomorrow* initially figured in the West was the fact that it brought the film to

Hollywood's attention as an exemplar of a promising commercial medium. The film thus gained a context to the world's dominant producer of popular film that, although vastly different from its original, local reception, was to lend it a global relevance that helped transform the world film industry.

This study therefore explores the different cinematic categories of action and noir as they intersected with the unique Hong Kong genre of the "hero" movie, placing all these generic contexts in relation to the personal and professional ambitions originally associated with *A Better Tomorrow*, which began as an ordinary commercial genre piece. The study begins with a formal description of the film, intermixed with relevant production history, which outlines aspects of Woo's vision and Chow's performance that would become canonized only after the immense, and completely unexpected, success of the movie. The second section recounts the enormous impact of the film in the summer of its release, while the third contrasts this reception in Hong Kong with the film's second life, in which it became the centerpiece of the growing global interest in Hong Kong cinema that occurred over the subsequent decade. The volume concludes with a brief examination of the local and global consequences of Woo's and Chow's world conquest, juxtaposing the current fate of the Hong Kong cinema with its rising influence in Hollywood that *A Better Tomorrow* had so central a role in enacting.

This study differs from much of the contemporary criticism of *A Better Tomorrow* and other Hong Kong action/crime films in two ways. First, it draws attention to the drastically different terms in which the film became part of the Hong Kong canon and which have been largely forgotten since that canonization. Second, it situates these different terms within the processes of the globalization of film. The aim is to show that the aspects of the film that English-language criticism tended to interpret politically were actually the conditions of the film's own creation and local

reception, both in terms of autobiographical elements worked into the plot of the film and the ways in which references to the film came to allude to Hong Kong cinema at large. Although the notion that the separate responses to the film in different places at different times should be distinct may seem obvious, understanding how and why these differences came about is fundamental to understanding the subsequent assimilation of Hong Kong cinema, once one the world's most vital film industries, by Hollywood. This work thus demonstrates that *A Better Tomorrow* was a foundational film in the new Hong Kong cinema because it both effectively launched two of the local industry's most famous stars, and, in doing so, positioned them to join the ranks of the world's most sought-after creative talent.

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Afterword: A Better Tomorrow, Today?

Nearly two decades after the first release of *A Better Tomorrow*, John Woo and Chow Yun-fat find themselves atop the world movie industry, living legends who are globally renowned. Chow, like Bruce Lee before him, has transcended the Hong Kong market to become a male icon to youth throughout America and, unlike Lee, has done so outside an ethnically-specific category such as martial arts. Global superstardom has brought Chow a variety of usual and unusual honors, including serving as an Ambassador for the World Wildlife Federation — and, in 2001, becoming the subject of a valuable set of postage stamps issued by the tiny South American country of Guyana. For John Woo, fame and influence have come so quickly that he is now in the curious position of promoting the older artists and directors who exercised such a strong influence on him — his quote in praise of *Le Samouraï* now promotes the video version of the 1967 film. Woo has also received the ultimate accolade in directorial status: his signature shot, the cinematographic moment combining a close-up with a rapid rack

focus during an action sequence, has been conventionalized in movie industry lingo. This "Woo shot" is now a familiar device for movie-goers and filmmakers alike, and is now, like "Bergman lighting" or "the Peckinpah slow-mo," a regular term in the technical vocabulary that Woo himself calls "the international language of films."[1] Woo's description of film grammar as a multicultural and transnational entity illustrates the incipiently global approach in which the director has always worked. For Woo, who feels that "we are all part of the same film family," the globalization of the Hong Kong film industry, in which he played a crucial role, was an inevitable part of its manifest destiny in the world movie capital of Hollywood.[2]

A Better Tomorrow, the film that launched the two men to superstardom, only grows in global prominence. The film's formerly secondary status in the West relative to *The Killer*, for example, is changing. Anecdotally, it is now far more common to hear critics and fans extol the movie as "the film that started it all," in a more informed celebration that refers to its originary status in Hong Kong movie history rather than the chronology of the films as they arrived in the West. In terms of consumer demand, home sales of *A Better Tomorrow* on DVD and VHS are strong. The American company Anchor Bay Entertainment, which also distributes in the UK, recently acquired the title, previously only available as an import from Media Asia. According to the company, *A Better Tomorrow* remains one of its best sellers.[3] Indeed, the film's prominence in foreign markets as "the film that started it all" is evident in a professional website (www.abtdvd.com), named after the movie, which reports in English on Hong Kong movies newly appearing on DVD. By borrowing the movie title as the name of the website the site expresses the homage at the heart of the project and plays upon the issue of futurity in the movie's title, since "A Better Tomorrow" also refers to the movies that, like the website itself, were influenced by the film.[4] The website thereby

appropriates the once politicized English title to use it as a purely commercial pun, acknowledging *A Better Tomorrow's* historic role in creating worldwide demand for the films that the site registers. The website is yet another indication that *A Better Tomorrow's* global audience is, contrary to the film's earlier history in Western distribution, beginning to cohere with original local, Hong Kong taste.

What is important in this shift in English-language interest in *A Better Tomorrow* towards the terms of the original, local history is that attention seems to have shifted from the "bloodshed" element of the "heroic bloodshed" genre previously emphasized in the handover-era criticism towards the heroism that was the movie's legacy for the *yingxiong pian* genre. The change is, notably, apparent at the popular level, and thus marks an ebb in the political rhetoric in which the film had prominently figured among scholars and critics. More importantly, this newfound appreciation for character-driven emotion rather than spectacle has had its effect on Woo and Chow's move to Hollywood and the efforts to fill their shoes in Hong Kong, as it suggests that the movies that will do best in both markets will be those that display something like *A Better Tomorrow's* emphasis on emotion and romantic heroism above and before spectacular action.

John Woo's current Hollywood career is a natural progression from the success initiated by *A Better Tomorrow* in Hong Kong, as his most successful US movies have been those in which he hews closest to the unique genre of the hero movie.[5] His first films, *Hard Target* (1993) and *Broken Arrow* (1996), were problematic projects made under tight studio control. Dismissed by some critics, they still performed respectably at the box office, earning US$33 and $70 million, respectively, in the US alone. By 1997, however, the year of the handover, Woo was at the top of the American box office, as *Face/Off*, in which producer Michael Douglas allowed Woo the privilege of a director's cut for theatrical release, earned

US$112 million at home and $300 million worldwide. The film, which depicts the hero's devotion to his family and the bond between the two brothers who are the film's villains, essentially revives the heroic concern with honor and loyalty associated with the *yingxiong pian*. Janet Maslin, the *New York Times* critic, praised it as a film whose "surprising strength ... is on a human level."[6] These impressive earnings were doubled a few years later by the Tom Cruise vehicle *Mission: Impossible 2* (2000, US$215 million at home; $545 million worldwide), in which Woo sought to differentiate his sequel from the predecessor, directed by Brian de Palma, by giving the movie his signature "emotional, passionate, and romantic" tones, in stark contrast to the hard, metallic surfaces usually associated with such techno-thrillers.[7] That movie also continued Woo's depiction of the "modern knight" that he began in *A Better Tomorrow*, as one action sequence shows Cruise using a motorcycle to charge his opponent head-on, like two knights jousting for the hand of a lady (and indeed both characters strive for the affections of the female lead, played by Thandie Newton). The fact that Woo, handpicked for the project by Cruise, was chosen to direct *M:I-2* is also interesting because it shows the director's rapid ascent to working with Hollywood's premiere actors. Coincidentally, the film — for Woo, "such a fun movie to make" — earned exactly the same box office in Hong Kong as *A Better Tomorrow* had fourteen years before, and was also similar in being the number one film of the year in Hong Kong.[8] This local success, reminiscent of *A Better Tomorrow*, arguably demonstrates Woo's continued influence at home, but under the different circumstances of his new Hollywood productions.

Chow's American career has similarly seen him make the jump from a Hong Kong to a Hollywood icon, by remaining, for the most part, within a *de facto* continuation of the *yingxiong pian* genre. As with Woo, success came after an insignificant first appearance, which also made apparent the ways the hero genre was changing

in the different industries and global marketplace. Chow's first Hollywood feature role was in *The Replacement Killers* (1998), a heroic bloodshed-style urban crime drama designed especially for him, but which was doomed by a flimsy script that had little character development and in which the actor barely spoke, due to the producers' concerns about the actor's admittedly still hesitant English. But shortly after that disappointment Chow starred opposite Academy Award-winner Jodie Foster in *Anna and the King* (1999), a dramatic remake of the classic Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *The King and I* (1956). As the handsome and honorable King of Siam, Chow's performance drew the film's most enthusiastic praise in the States and also buoyed the film in the actor's original market — it narrowly missed being one of the year's top ten movies in Hong Kong. The following year, Chow was the center of the global movie phenomenon *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a flying swordsman film by Ang Lee which became the most successful foreign film in American history, with a world box office take of well over US$200 million. The film represented the advanced state of globalization at the millennium, as a Chinese-language movie, helmed by a Taiwan-born Hollywood director and funded by an amalgamation of Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan, and American sources, was written by a Chinese and American creative team and shot in mainland China with an international cast and crew.[9] Significantly, Chow's role as a philosophical Shaolin monk was both a return to, and departure from, his identity as the suave action hero which first made him famous to Chinese audiences in *A Better Tomorrow*. For while his role in *Crouching Tiger* returned the actor to a nominally Chinese genre, it was totally new in the sense that Chow, as previously noted, is not a martial artist and in the film spoke Mandarin rather than the Cantonese dialect spoken in Hong Kong. Thus, in the second, global phase of fame that Chow has experienced, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* can be seen as the *A Better Tomorrow* of its time

— a film that would launch a slew of imitations and parodies and make the actor a worldwide household name.

The worldwide popularity of *A Better Tomorrow* also had two important legacies for global film at large: the creation of a new kind of romantic action star and the discovery of a new path to directorial status — that of the promotion to director from the unusual position of action choreographer. These developments are interesting because they illustrate the further imbrications of the stars and practices of the distinctive Hong Kong and Hollywood industries.

As it was introduced to Hollywood, the romantic action star created in Hong Kong film by *A Better Tomorrow* would depart from the exaggeratedly muscled icons of recent American actioners, as much as it had distinguished the hero movie from the martial arts genres of Hong Kong's past. The script for *Face/Off,* for example, was originally written for Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. That they were replaced by John Travolta and Nicholas Cage — physically smaller but more versatile actors —demonstrates the transition within Hollywood from the action movies of the 1980s to the new kind of action Woo offered. In *Face/Off* Woo continued his trademark reliance upon balletic action and romantic appeal by casting an actor (Travolta) who made his film career by his dancing, and by shooting the other (Cage), as he did Chow Yun-fat in *A Better Tomorrow,* with clothes that "looked great blowing behind him as he walked."[10] Moreover, the mere casting of Travolta recapitulated the lines of influence and industrial exchange that *A Better Tomorrow* set in place. Fresh from his starring role in *Pulp Fiction*, a film possibly influenced by Hong Kong film and which did a great deal to promote Woo and *A Better Tomorrow,* Travolta had modeled his later performance in Woo's *Broken Arrow* on Chow Yun-fat, particularly copying Chow's way of handling cigarettes. By the time of *Face/Off,* Travolta's continuing partnership with Woo therefore appears as the

Hollywood heir of the distinct heroism originally shaped by Woo around Chow. Similarly, the changing look of action heroism that Hong Kong brought to Hollywood is further underscored as quintessential American icons, such as Tom Cruise, explicitly seek to emulate the modes of glamorous action previously associated with Chow Yun-fat, such as catching guns in mid-air and shooting with weapons in both hands. (Cruise, however, notably eschews any of the longing gazes between men that are also characteristic of Woo's work.)

These actors in Woo's movies are in stark contrast to the shirtless bodies that figure in American action flicks and who are starting to replace these action stars in global markets. For example, in the 1980s Arnold Schwarzenegger was voted by theater-owners worldwide as the "International Star of the Decade," whereas by the 1990s, in Asia at least, Chow bore a similar title.[11] The power of Woo as a king-making director was further apparent with his second American film, as Travolta, in *Broken Arrow*, succeed Schwarzenegger as Hollywood's highest paid actor.[12] Moreover, the more general success of the new action stars specializing in romance and sensitivity rather than physical superiority is evident in the recent prominence of more diminutive stars such as Cruise in the action genre. The photogenic glamour associated with Cruise, for example, marks a break in the tradition of the Hollywood action star similar to that of the Armani-clad Chow Yun-fat in *A Better Tomorrow*.

The other legacy of *A Better Tomorrow* to global film is introducing a new path to screen stardom to Hollywood — the promotion from action choreographer to director. Woo, who choreographed key action sequences in *A Better Tomorrow* himself, is perhaps the best-known example of this route to success, although Hong Kong has a long roster of directors who made their names as action choreographers, and many have taken advantage of the current interest in Hong Kong-style action cinema in

Hollywood opened up by Woo. Jackie Chan is the quintessential instance, since the performer not only choreographs and directs but also stars in his productions.[13] Woo and Chan's success in America thus boded well for their former colleagues in Hong Kong, as Hollywood studios, much like the Hong Kong companies that churned out imitations of *A Better Tomorrow*, all rushed to sign their own Hong Kong talent. Ching Siu-tung (*Heroic Trio*, 1992) and Yuen Woo-ping (*Iron Monkey*, 1993) are former action choreographers-cum-directors in Hong Kong who may benefit from this opportunity. Yuen Woo-ping has already embarked on this endeavor, and is now one of the most highly sought after creative talents in Hollywood. He served as the action choreographer of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Matrix* (1999) and its sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions* (both 2003). To top that, with the assistance of the ubiquitous Quentin Tarantino, Yuen has successfully released in the US his Hong Kong movie, *Iron Monkey*, now a decade old, where it earned US$15 million.

Such influence on world cinema has not come without cost for Hong Kong film, as the fame that *A Better Tomorrow* initiated has made its once uniquely over-the-top sincerity hard to come by, even when Woo has his pick of action scripts. As the film critic Manohla Dargis has noted, "even as Woo's influence grows, his own work seems to have become ... less personal"; "as the Hollywood action film has become more Woo-like, the director himself has become increasingly less so."[14] Bob Longino, another American film critic, pokes fun at this homogenized stage in his career as "Holly-Woo."[15] Chow Yun-fat himself has described a loss of challenge and excellence in his current career as well. In an interview with a Hong Kong newspaper, the actor expressed regret that the different conditions of work in Hollywood essentially preclude him from finding projects like *A Better Tomorrow*, clearly the film he considers his single most important work:

> I have made seventy films in Hong Kong, [and] only *A Better Tomorrow* I won't be able to encounter again — [perhaps] a 1/70 in chance. Now, in America, I make a movie a year. [Therefore], if I work for another twenty years, there still will be only twenty more films. I might have to wait for another seventy movies before running into a movie like *A Better Tomorrow* again.[16]

Here Chow expresses doubt that the slower, more expensive, and hence more calculated and conservative mode of filmmaking in Hollywood could produce something as visionary as the original hero movie. This predicament affects both Woo and Chow, as the opportunity for worldwide fame that Hollywood offers is counterbalanced by risk management and a much slower rate of production that curtails the kind of invention in which they participated in Hong Kong.

Further forestalling the possibility of another *A Better Tomorrow*-style breakthrough in Hollywood, is the fact that the dynamic, double-fisted, and sentimental action films which originated with the film, and for which Hong Kong became known, has since been co-opted by Hollywood. *The Matrix* (1999, US$460 million worldwide), a film whose spectacular action sequences were choreographed by Yuen Woo-ping, is a case in point. The sci-fi film, a global blockbuster, stars part-Asian actor Keanu Reeves as a trench-coated and double-barreled freedom fighter, clearly demonstrating the legacy of the iconic action stardom initially perfected by Woo and Chow. In fact, Chow Yun-fat was originally approached to star opposite the lead, but regrettably, he turned it down, and Laurence Fishburne later took the role. By thus incorporating Asian talent in diluted or invisible form, the film was a Hollywood rip-off of Hong Kong-style action flicks that cannibalized the market for Hong Kong-style action in Hong Kong itself.

France, whose critics played an important role in popularizing

Hong Kong film across the globe, has similarly absorbed the Hong Kong style. The Hong Kong-inspired swordsman-style action film, *Le Pacte des Loups*, set in medieval France was released in 2001. The film's director, Christophe Gans, is a former journalist for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, co-editor of the early report on Hong Kong film in that journal, and publisher of a magazine and distribution company devoted to Hong Kong film. This European borrowing of Hong Kong style is particularly interesting, since the once proud French film industry, which at the time was also suffering due to the popularity of American imports, adopted the genres and styles of other industries in order to innovate and survive. Meanwhile, at the time of this writing in 2003, few Hong Kong films surpass HK$25 million in total box office, a paltry comparison to the HK$35 million *A Better Tomorrow* earned nearly two decades ago. This dramatic downturn in the industry is due in large part to competition from satellite television and sales of pirate DVDs and VCDs, but the effect is impossible to ignore. Poignantly, Hong Kong is not even included as one of the twenty-one national or geographical centers of film production in *The International Movie Industry*, a 2000 study of the global film industry, an oversight which is perhaps indicative of Hong Kong cinema's fall in status by the end of the 1990s.[17]

In light of the apparent fall of Hong Kong cinema, it is interesting to note that an early attempt to sustain the local industry explicitly sought to exploit *A Better Tomorrow* in an unabashed attempt to gain audience. The 1994 film, *Return to A Better Tomorrow*, is a variation on the *yingxiong pian* genre by Wong Jing, a director known for his shameless imitations of previous box office successes (one of his better-loved contributions is *God of Gamblers*, the hero movie starring Chow Yun-fat that was the number one film in 1989, and which started its own branch of sequels and clones). The film stars Ekin Cheng, a teen heartthrob who would later rise to fame through the *Young and Dangerous*

films (begun 1996), a series that was itself an adolescent version of the *yingxiong pian* that *A Better Tomorrow* spawned. (That series, incidentally, would have its own *A Better Tomorrow*-like effects. As Stokes and Hoover note, Cheng's "skin-tight fashion might have done for Versace what Chow Yun-fat did for Armani.")[18] *Return to A Better Tomorrow* constitutes a double-effort to resurrect the appeal of *A Better Tomorrow* that had been so prominent during the local industry's prime. The film's effort to revive the 1980s blockbuster is apparent in both its English and Chinese titles, the latter of which also recalls *A Better Tomorrow's* Chinese title, since it translates as "the New Essence of Heroes." The movie actually has nothing to do with the original Woo film, but the desperation of the effort is illuminating as it shows both the continuing local sense of *A Better Tomorrow's* importance and the industry's desire to return to the vitality the local market enjoyed before globalization. Indeed, although *Return to A Better Tomorrow* failed to earn anything resembling the record-breaking box office of its namesake, it certainly continues to profit from the title's deliberate similarity to that of the original movie, as DVD rentals and sales are bolstered by confusion or curiosity regarding its relationship to the earlier series.

The Taiwanese release of Mel Gibson's Oscar-winning film, *Braveheart* (1995), offers a more intriguing example of the persisting influence of the *yingxiong pian* genre. The Gibson film used the same Chinese title as *A Better Tomorrow* — "*Ying Hung Boon Sik*" or, in the Mandarin spoken in Taiwan, "*Yingxiong bense*." This Chinese retitling of a Hollywood film illustrates the overlap of global and local that John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* had always occupied. By marketing a film starring a Hollywood icon under a Chinese title familiar to local audiences, the Taiwanese distribution of *Braveheart* relied upon local context to promote a global product, a reversal of the universalizing tendencies with which globalization is usually associated. Instead, the re-use of the Chinese title

illustrates the process of "glocalization," which marketers use to describe situations in which the procedures of globalized retail paradoxically employ increasingly localized marketing strategies.[19] Indeed, by adopting the title associated with the quintessential hero movie, the Taiwanese marketing of *Braveheart* placed Gibson's film within that genre, rather than the categories of "epic" and "action" with which it had been associated in the US. It also recast Gibson, its star, as a Hong Kong-style hero in the mode of Chow Yun-fat. That the film, an historical epic about a thirteenth-century Scottish patriot, like Wong Jing's *Return to A Better Tomorrow* actually has nothing to do *A Better Tomorrow* is irrelevant. Rather, this Taiwanese revival, by way of Hong Kong, provides a fascinating instance of the evolving relevance of Hong Kong film in the globalized film industry.

The most recent step in the evolution of *A Better Tomorrow*'s global influence is the American film, *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002). A remarkable debut from director Justin Lin, the independent film is a portrait of violent and disaffected high-school students that features an Asian-American cast. According to Lin, who is himself Asian-American, the title of the film is an amalgamation of *A Better Tomorrow* with *The Joy Luck Club* (2003), a successful movie which portrays the relationships of four Chinese women and their American-born daughters. Lin originally invented the title as part of a different project, a "spoof on a Hong Kong action film, but with the sensibility of *Joy Luck Club*." He explains that the project came to him because it acknowledges the two contexts in which mainstream American audiences had, by the millennium, grown accustomed to viewing Asian actors on screen: "either as gangsters jumping around in slow-motion and shooting two guns, or the total immigrant experience." Clearly, Lin is referring to the double-barreled acrobatics for which John Woo and Chow Yun-fat were now known in the US as well as Hong Kong. For Lin, his hybrid title was "a joke that I had with the cast

and crew," but its indebtedness to *A Better Tomorrow* is quite important.[20] First, in recalling the title of the Hong Kong blockbuster, Lin's movie presents itself as an heir to its historical significance, both alluding to the ethnically Asian cast in Lin's film and also highlighting the prominence of violence in its plot. Indeed, much of the print journalism on the film seemed to pick up on this latter attribute, frequently selecting a freeze frame of a fight scene for the accompanying visual. Secondly, the title *Better Luck Tomorrow*, as opposed to Woo's *A Better Tomorrow*, interestingly suggests a more qualified optimism than existed in Woo's films, and therefore retains something more of the noir sensibility than had even been present in the original *A Better Tomorrow*. In fact, Lin's film has its own association with youth violence, in a manner more shocking than of what *A Better Tomorrow* had been accused. The film is based on the "Honor Roll killing," an actual murder of a classmate by California highschoolers, and for Lin the title was a way of using cinema to show "today's youth tomorrow."

Perhaps, in retrospect, ambiguous optimism about the merging of global and local is what *A Better Tomorrow* is about. The hilltop scene in which Mark and Ho ominously discuss the fragile beauty of the city is, above all, a scene of urban splendor. Woo has said the scene was meant to express his love for the city and the people and how hard they work, but it also, importantly, uses film as a way of capturing and preserving the fleeting spectacle. It is a simultaneously optimistic and pragmatic perspective on future change, a position that is also characteristic of the director's feelings on the current fate of Hong Kong cinema. Although he acknowledges that "the Hong Kong film business is ... getting to be in a critical situation," Woo is confident that it "won't be hard for Hong Kong people" to "start from zero," because "they are smart and strong." Woo's faith in the resurgence of the local cinema recalls the feelings he has about how "Hong Kong people work together to make Hong Kong successful" that motivated his making of *A Better*

Tomorrow. In the context of Mark's comments about emigration and "starting over" in this famous scene, *A Better Tomorrow* looks forward to a time when Hong Kong cinema could dominate — and not just influence — global cinema, in the same way that it had controlled the local audience in the past.

It is an inevitable part of the processes of industrial consolidation that its developments may seem to be expressed politically. For example, in the interview for this volume, when Woo speaks of "political issues," he is referring not to the handover of Hong Kong but to the professional culture he had to adapt to upon his arrival in Hollywood. Similarly, the director's cautious optimism about globalization, as is evident in his call for the country of China to "open up," is not so much an ideological commentary as an expressed hope for greater aesthetic and cinematic dialogue, as in his desire for "a cultural exchange, to gain more friendship between us all and to start a new movie market in the process."[21] In these comments Woo uses the language of politics to describe what is

Figure 5.1 On the set of *A Better Tomorrow*. Courtesy of Kenneth Hall.

primarily an economic objective — "to start a new movie market" — and thereby voices precisely the metaphors of globalization that had characterized the handover-era Western criticism on *A Better Tomorrow* and its importance in Hong Kong film. Indeed, he presents himself as a mediator for global Hollywood who possesses the necessary skills for translating between local and global. For Woo the challenge lies in new culturally-hybrid genres, such as "a movie that embodies the great cultures of the East and the West," no doubt continuing the global production and reach initiated by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, or a "truly internationally themed movie," in which Woo's special love for the French New Wave, for example, would be acknowledged by him "by taking a small crew and one camera and going out into the street," forcing his own distinct genre to conform to French styles. Importantly, none of these dreams are significantly different from the syncretic style of filmmaking in which *A Better Tomorrow* was made, indicating that for Woo, at least, his vision of Hollywood remains pretty much what it had been in Hong Kong. Thus, in conclusion, it is intriguing to note that in Woo's own account of the perceived political content of *A Better Tomorrow*, his language is surprisingly reminiscent of the dialogue in the film. The director both echoes and amends Mark Gor's comment about "the beauty of Hong Kong" that won't last, when Woo comments that "I still hope all the beauty of Hong Kong will remain the same."

Notes

Chapter 1 Introduction

1 The travails of John Woo before the success of *A Better Tomorrow* are detailed in Christopher Heard, *Ten Thousand Bullets: The Cinematic Journey of John Woo* (Los Angeles: Lone Eagle Publishing Company, 1999), 1–38. See also the lavishly illustrated French volume by Caroline Vié-Toussaint, *John Woo* (Paris: Dark Star, 2001). For a glimpse of Chow Yun-fat before *A Better Tomorrow*, see Olivier Assayas, "Chow Yun-fat: Adieu le télé," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 360–361 (September 1984): 106.

2 For example, Tino Balio, "'A major presence in all of the world's important markets: The globalization of Hollywood in the 1990s,'" in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 58–73; Diana Crane, Nobuko Kawashima, and Ken'ichi Kawasaki, eds., *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Colin Hoskins, Stuart McFadyen and Adam Finn, *Global Television and Film: An Introduction to the Economics of the Business* (Oxford:

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3 It is impossible to provide a comprehensive bibliography of the countless publications on Hong Kong cinema that appeared in the 1990s. The notes to this volume attempt to cite the best known English language works.

4 Not all Western countries, however, maintained the English-language marketing of the film. In France, for example, the film was more descriptively entitled *Le Syndicat du Crime* (The crime syndicate).

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6 Michael Bliss, *The Spiritual Cinema of John Woo* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002).

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9 Jillian Sandell, "Interview with John Woo," *Bright Lights Film Journal* 31 (1994); Kenneth Li, "1001 Faces," *A. Magazine*, June/July 1996.
10 Kenneth E. Hall, *John Woo: The Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc, 1999), 97.
11 Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," *Village Voice*, 1962; reprinted in *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968).
12 A comparable moment in a later Woo film would be the purely symbolic shot of Chow Yun-fat in a gun optic and surrounded by a curtain of blood, which occurs in *The Killer* (1989). David Bordwell discusses this image in *Planet Hollywood: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 7–8.
13 Steve Rubio, "The Meaning of Chow (It's in His Mouth)." *Bad Subjects*, 13 April 1994, http://eserver.org/bs/13/Rubio-Sandel.html.
14 John Powers, "Glimpse Eastward," *Film Comment* (June 1988): 34–38, 38. See also Michael Singer, "Chow Must Go On." *Film Comment* (June 1988): 46–47.
15 Interview with John Woo.
16 The Chinese title [縱橫四海] of Woo's 1991 movie is, of course, different. The title was also adopted for a 1996 made-for-TV movie shot in Canada, that premiered on Fox TV as "John Woo's Once a Thief."
17 Interview with John Woo; Woo reports that he used three to six cameras for action photography.
18 E.g., "Ballets with Bullets," *New York Times*, 22 February 1996. The Hong Kong Movie Database (www.hkmdb.com) also uses the phrase "bullet ballet" as a generic category.
19 Interview with John Woo.
20 E.g., cited in Bey Logan, *Hong Kong Action Cinema*, 118. See also Hubert Niogret, "*L'inévitable chaos: Sur quatre films de John Woo.*" *Positif*, no. 392 (October 1993): 39–41, 40, which cites the hallway-arsenal scene in *A Better Tomorrow* as evidence of Woo's ingenuity,

"infinitely more brilliant than his colleagues." Translation by Karen Fang.

21 E.g., Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, 105, 103; Hall, 104.

22 Interview with John Woo.

23 Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, 101–106.

24 E.g., Mikel J. Kloven, "My Brother, My Lover, My Self: Traditional Masculinity in the Hong Kong Action Cinema of John Woo," *Canadian Folklore Canadien* 19:1 (1997): 55–68.

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13 Kenneth E. Hall, interview with Peter Chang, *John Woo: The Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc), 108.

14 Lee Server, *Asian Pop Cinema: Bombay to Tokyo* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 35.

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Chapter 5 Afterword: A Better Tomorrow, Today?

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