
Chapter 7

Tracing the Science Fiction Genre in Hong Kong Cinema

Tom Cunliffe

Hong Kong cinema may be known as a cinema of genres, but one genre it has never fully developed is its own variant of science fiction. The genre is viewed as being a recipe for box-office disaster for locally produced films.¹ Given the dominance of Hollywood in the world-wide marketplace, the Hong Kong film industry has absorbed and reconfigured various genres from Hollywood to fit ideologically with Hong Kong's culture, but science fiction has never flourished in Hong Kong cinema.² This is because popular genres generally have strong economic and ideological roots in their respective mass cultures. The aim of this chapter is to trace the sporadic historical development of the science fiction genre in Hong Kong cinema and to analyse several films made in Hong Kong since 1979, which adopt science fiction elements to negotiate cultural and ideological anxieties related to modernity, coloniality and Chinese nationalism.

Wing-sang Law contends that colonial power in Hong Kong was never simply a top-down project of political power but was instead structured upon a complex web of relationships, or collaborative colonialism, which included a tacit collaborative contract between British colonisers and Chinese elites. Law argues that nationalism and colonialism were deeply interwoven in Hong Kong's historical context, and that to understand the creation of the 'mosaics of Hong Kong culture', it is essential to take on board how colonial power constantly disembedded and reintegrated Chinese identity.³ In short, 'colonial power always functioned in establishing discursive and non-discursive possibilities and boundaries for different forms of Chinese subjectivity to be constituted and negotiated'.⁴ Chinese cultural nationalism in Hong Kong, contained as it was by colonial power, became largely apolitical and abstract, and was promoted by the ruling class in forms that posed little threat to the status quo. The development of this abstract nationalist cause took place in conditions where social problems ran rife in Hong Kong due to colonial capitalist rule, and it motivated anti-colonial movements in the

1970s. From the mid- to late 1970s, young intellectuals in Hong Kong, working in cultural and artistic spheres including cinema, began to reject the binary frameworks of East versus West/nationalism versus colonialism, and instead attempted to 'establish a new local focus negotiating between these opposing poles'.⁵ It is, however, partly the tensions and compromises between Chinese cultural nationalism and Western modernity, linked to capitalist institutions and oppressive uses of science and technology as embodied by science fiction, that account for the scarcity of Hong Kong science fiction films, since the way science fiction conceptualises reality and life does not sit well with local traditions in Hong Kong cinema.

Yet, science fiction, however unpopular in local cinematic iterations, was on the radar of the Hong Kong film industry. The films I analyse in this chapter blend science fiction motifs, iconography and narratives with other local genres such as *wuxia*, *kung fu*, comedy and the undercover cop/agent thriller. They are *The Butterfly Murders* (*Diebian*, Tsui Hark, 1979), *Health Warning* (also known as *Flash Future Kung Fu*) (*Da lei tai*, Kirk Wong, 1983), *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* (*Xingji chuntai*, Alex Cheung, 1983) and *The Final Test* (*Zuihou yizhan*, Lo Kin, 1987). This mixing of genres foregrounds Hong Kong cinema's particular ideological perspective, which sometimes undermines, challenges or embraces the conventions of the science fiction genre. The different responses that each film articulates in the face of science fiction elements speak to the local culture in Hong Kong, being made up of constantly developing differences that resist being tied down to essentialist definitions of 'identity'. These varying responses are part of the complicated discursive enunciations of Chinese subjectivity conditioned by colonial power in Hong Kong, which refuse to be reduced to the strict East–West binary. In this experimental stage, from the late 1970s to the 1980s, Hong Kong science fiction films reveal the locus of Hong Kong cinema as one that shuttles between the local, national and global, both resisting and welcoming the modernity that the imagination of science fiction offers. This negotiation is a reaction to Hong Kong's position in between Chinese nationalism and British colonialism.

The Instability of Science Fiction in Hong Kong Cinema

Compared to many other film genres, science fiction took a long time to garner critical or theoretical attention in film studies. This was partly due to the difficulty of defining what exactly science fiction cinema as a genre is, especially as it overlaps with other genres like fantasy and horror.⁶ The overlap with fantasy especially will be elucidated in this chapter since Hong Kong cinema appears to favour the imagination of fantasy in *wuxia* films over the 'scientific' outlook of science fiction. Although the conventions of both genres are similar,

fantasy presents various impossibilities within the real world, while science fiction, however improbable, presents various possibilities that may come to be in the future. It is partly Hong Kong's contested history of never having political autonomy of its own due to residing in between two undemocratic sovereign powers that leads to the difficulties of representing or constructing a future, since Hong Kong's future has historically been, and still is, racked with uncertainty. This, perhaps, is why the impossible in fantasy is usually favoured over the possible. The immediately recognisable iconography of science fiction films – rockets, robots/cyborgs, futuristic cities, alien encounters and invasions, fantastic technology⁷ – is rarely seen in Hong Kong cinema. The three most dominant narrative types of science fiction – encounters with alien beings and planets; projections of science and technology altering societies, cultures and the future; and technological advancements that have the potential to replace, or alter, human life⁸ – are also uncommon in Hong Kong cinema. The films I analyse below do contain some of these elements but are also blended with numerous narrative or visual elements from locally popular genres to fit the ideological orientation of Hong Kong society during the 1970s and 1980s better.

Rick Altman proposes that genres are built up of repetitions but also variety and differences, so a genre should be studied by examining its syntactic structure (the narrational paradigms that are shared by individual films), semantic relationships (by seeing the genre as a system of differences) and pragmatics (those industrial and market conditions that reshape spectatorial expectations).⁹ In short, the semantic elements of a film are its content and the syntactic is the narrative structure within which this content is entered and arranged. As for the pragmatics, Moine states that if this organisation of the semantics into a stable syntax allows a genre to exist fully, 'it only exists socially . . . when a community agrees to recognize its semantics and syntax'.¹⁰ Throughout this chapter I will be assessing how science fiction is blended with other genres. The semantic–syntactic model can help explain the phenomenon of genre mixing since a typical narrative structure (the syntax) could be used from one popular genre while the semantic elements could come from another or numerous others. Certain genres are identified by very recognisable semantic traits, and various genres can be represented in a film simply by including a few suggestive semantic elements.¹¹ The way science fiction elements are blended into other genres spotlights how filmmakers negotiate the East–West dichotomy that is in constant flux under Hong Kong's colonial conditions.

Before the mid-1970s, there were almost no science fiction movies produced in Hong Kong. In other media, however, science fiction found a larger audience. From 1963, the Hong Kong newspaper *Ming Pao* began publishing Ni Kuang's long-running *Wisely* series, a collection of over 150 science fiction adventure

stories that ended only in 2004. This success did not translate into film adaptations. While the 'new school' *wuxia* literature that emerged in the mid-1950s as newspaper serials by authors like Jin Yong were already being adapted into Cantonese films by the end of the 1950s,¹² the first *Wisely* film appeared only in 1986. Ni Kuang himself wrote over one hundred scripts for *wuxia* and *kung fu* films in the 1960s and 1970s but wrote only a single script for a science fiction film – the *Ultraman* rip-off, *The Super Inframan* (*Zhongguo chaoren*, Hua Shan, 1975). This suggests that the imagination, themes and topics of science fiction somehow did not fit well with the ideological perceptions of what Hong Kong cinema should be.

More concrete reasons for the box office failures of locally produced science fiction cinema link to audience expectations. Huen Ching Kwok observes that Hong Kong audiences find it difficult to get used to Hong Kong actors they are familiar with appearing in films related to science fiction themes of space and the future, but readily accept Hollywood science fiction films since they are connected to America's advances in space travel and technological development.¹³ In audience reception studies, constraints of genres are often discussed as being social rather than textual since they are defined by the expectations viewers bring to a film in a particular genre operating in a specific sociopolitical context.¹⁴ Kwok's point elucidates how audiences in Hong Kong were unwilling to accept a direct transplant of a Hollywood variant of science fiction to Hong Kong cinema.

Roger Garcia's discussion of the Hong Kong film industry's lack of daring producers also explains the dearth of science fiction films. Garcia states that it is unusual to see such a strong sense of wanting to do an old thing (the *kung fu* film) differently, as evident in *Health Warning's* melding of *kung fu* with science fiction, since producers were only willing to follow trends and 'the system doesn't allow for experimentation or development in the [film] medium'.¹⁵ The poor box office performance of Hong Kong science fiction films caused producers to avoid the genre.

This situation leads us to how the hugely popular genres of *wuxia* and *kung fu* have long negotiated anxieties over how colonial modernity could impact traditional Chinese culture, a juncture that further helps explain the lack of Hong Kong science fiction cinema. To jump forward a moment, Takashi Miike's *Dead or Alive: Final* (2002) is set in a dystopian futuristic world and is partly filmed on Hong Kong streets as a stand-in for the future, clearly inspired by the aesthetic of *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kokaku kidotai*, Oshii Mamoru, 1995). Curiously, *Dead or Alive: Final* opens with a montage of shots from different episodes of the 1960s Hong Kong Cantonese *wuxia* film series *Buddha's Palm* (*Rulai shenzhang*, Ling Yun, 1964). These images include fights between mythical beasts and swordfighters, light rays emitting from swordfighters' hands that shimmer in beautiful animated light, and

a character flying on a mythical bird in the clouds, before this image dissolves into a shot of somebody waking up in the film's 2346 setting. This montage pays homage to the history of Hong Kong action cinema that has influenced Miike; it also projects the dreamlike nature of cinema and of a fantastical imagination imbued with optimism which, as the voiceover heard over these images suggests, has been eradicated in *Dead or Alive: Final's* grim future setting. These images stand in for a future world that has lost its light and life to technology and is a direct illustration of the way that the fantastic rebels against the modernist disenchantment of the world, as this volume's introduction argues.

One of the images in this montage is that of a swordfighter using the 'Buddha's Palm' to strike open a metallic door, only to be confronted by two robots he must fight. Siu Leung Li argues that this sequence from the second episode of *Buddha's Palm* negotiates head-on the anxieties caused by the clash between traditional Chinese culture and Western modernity in colonial Hong Kong.¹⁶ Li points out that, prior to this scene, the palm-power fighter cannot blast open a steel door with his palm power and mutters: 'Why? . . . I think this must be a steel door! That's why it can't be cracked open.' First, the anachronism of this steel door in an ancient *wuxia* world sets up a contrast between modern technology and the presently inferior nature of martial arts. However, immediately after this moment, the hero blasts open a different steel door by using a more advanced strike from the Buddha's Palm set. Li points out that if the martial arts level is advanced enough, it can defeat modern technology. This is when the hero meets the 1950s Hollywood science fiction-style robots that eventually injure him, causing him to flee. Curiously, he fights the two robots with his sword. It is as if using magic against the 'modern technology' that the robots represent would be contradictory. Yet, he loses to them because he opts to use his sword rather than magic. Li posits that this oscillation between conquering or being subdued by modern technology and the strange sight of this blending of a mythical Chinese past with symbols of the modern West perhaps materialise from a 'hidden cultural anxiety at large derived from the confrontation between the native and traditional on the one hand, and the foreign and technological on the other'.¹⁷ This tension explains Kwok's assertion above about Hong Kong audiences accepting Hollywood science fiction but rejecting a Hong Kong variant. Hong Kong is, in some ways, a contradictory embodiment of a kind of Asian modernity that challenges the tradition-versus-modernity discourse imposed on Chinese cultures, particularly by the West. By blending science fiction with other popular genres, the science fiction elements of the films I analyse below generate critical discomfort by forcing into view the problematic aspects of the tradition-versus-modernity discourse.

The cinematic *wuxia* genre often expressed similar anxieties in Hong Kong cinema that science fiction films did in Hollywood and elsewhere. For instance, many 1950s Hollywood science fiction films expressed anxieties over the 'communist threat' or nuclear war. Alien invasions were commonly associated with the former and some of the science fiction *Wisely* stories written by Ni Kuang at the height of 1960s Cold War paranoia took up similar themes in the very different sociopolitical conditions of Hong Kong. Several *Wisely* stories allegorise communist China as a threat to modern life in their plots about chlorine-breathing antagonists, scientists from Neptune, jellyfish, egg-like parasites or even disembodied brainwaves, all of which invade Earth and attempt to shape it into what they desire.¹⁸ In Hong Kong cinema, however, it was the *wuxia* genre that engaged in negotiating such anxieties, from the setting/safety of the distant past. Raymond Tsang notes how the Cantonese *wuxia* film series *The Six Fingered Lord of the Lute* (*Liuzhi qinmo*, Chen Liping, 1965) allegorises the fear of ideological infiltration via communist brainwashing in the way that the sound of the evil lord's lute can take over people's minds and make slaves of them by controlling their wills.¹⁹ Many *wuxia* films also feature a narrative of heroes and villains searching for a destructive secret weapon that can either destroy or maintain the martial world,²⁰ which draws parallels with numerous Hollywood and Japanese science fiction films that similarly express fears over the potential of nuclear war destroying the world. In terms of superhuman robots or androids that feature in many science fiction films, including *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987) and *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), *wuxia* films can also deal in similar concepts by means of a more localised formula. For instance, in the *wuxia* film *The Deadly Breaking Sword* (*Fengliu duanjian xiaoxiaodao*, Sun Chung, 1979), a professional assassin is badly injured. After an alchemist doctor treats him using acupuncture and magic potions, he is completely transformed. As Siu-fung Koo puts it, 'with his strength quadrupled, he functions like an invincible fighting robot'.²¹ The two genres can share narrative patterns, but the *wuxia* iterations replace futuristic imaginings that relate to technology or other worlds with more locally recognisable ideas.

The Hong Kong critic Noong-kong Leung's bemusement at the intense focus on the spiritual world over the scientific world in Hong Kong cinema also helps explain the lack of Hong Kong science fiction cinema. Writing in 1982, Leung compares the American film *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982) and the Hong Kong film *The Dead and the Deadly* (*Ren xia ren*, Ma Wu, 1982) to highlight the way that the former's visual language reveals the 'scientific reality of the microchip world' while the latter showcases the 'excessive extent to which Hong Kong films capitalise on the Dead'.²² Leung outlines Hong Kong cinema's inclination towards the spiritual world over the scientific one by describing how the realm

of ghosts and spirits is an essential component of Hong Kong's cultural imagination. Leung considers Hong Kong cinema's intense fascination with the spiritual world over the scientific one surprising, as illustrated by Hong Kong's filmic imagination frequently focusing on the mythological world of the past rather than filmic depictions of the future.²³ Leung's point indicates other reasons why the science fiction genre struggled to gain a foothold in the industry, where horror and the fantastic, appealing more to 'impossibilities' rather than 'possibilities', align more precisely with the cultural imagination of Hong Kong.

Although not a science fiction film, Kirk Wong's horror-comedy *Lifeline Express* (*Hongyun dangtou*, 1984) negotiates these tensions between spirituality and science, the former ultimately prevailing over the latter. Tiger's (Teddy Robin) brother (Kent Cheung) becomes neurotic due to a fortune-teller informing him he will soon die. Throughout the film, Tiger constantly protests against superstition and fortune-telling, and desires a scientific solution to his brother's problems. His incredulity at the 'pseudo science' of superstition, as he describes it, is tempered by the fact that he still brings along his brother's birth date and time to a professor after he is advised to do so. Tiger and the professor engage in a long debate about science and spirituality. When the professor states that the study of times of birth is also a science, Tiger asks: 'Can a professor be so superstitious?' The professor replies: 'Sceptical? Why bring your brother's birth details then?' This interaction suggests that superstition related to spirituality is something that science cannot explain and is somehow ingrained in local Hong Kong culture, as illustrated by the highly sceptical Tiger's inability to detach himself completely from superstition. The professor's challenge to Tiger's scepticism could be read as an attempt at bringing together spirituality and science into cultural confluence. The film ends with a special Taoist rite guided by the professor, which, as long as they can keep a number of candle flames burning until after 11 p.m. while a typhoon blasts strong winds, will cause Tiger's brother to survive. They succeed and celebrate, and so the film appears, finally, to advocate for superstition. The movie's questioning of the cultural imagination of Hong Kong (cinema) is, in some ways, an attempt to come to cultural terms with both spirituality and science as parts of Hong Kong's reconfigured modernity. The film's ultimate choice of spirituality and superstition over science, however, offers clues as to why the science fiction genre has never integrated well into Hong Kong cinema.

Science Fiction Enters Hong Kong Cinema

From the start, science fiction films in Hong Kong were blended with other popular genres of the time and usually took a more fantasy approach. An early

example is *Riots in Outer Space* (*Liangsha danao taikong*, Wong Tin-lam, 1959). This film utilises the popular two-fools comedy genre, where the two protagonists dream of visiting other planets and encountering aliens, thereby turning the science fiction elements into a fantasy since they are part of a dream. In 1976, Hong Kong film critic Sek Kei mentions that many Chinese translations of books from the West about UFOs and mysterious traces of aliens appeared in Hong Kong bookshops. But, in the realm of Mandarin cinema, *Laugh In* (*Haha xiao*, Lung Kong, 1976) was extremely fresh material, since the only other Hong Kong film that resembled *Laugh In's* blending of special effects and farce, up to that point, was the Cathay production *Monkey in Hong Kong* (*Sun Wukong danao Xianggang*, Tang Huang, 1969).²⁴ This latter film features the *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji*) characters, magically transported to contemporary Hong Kong, and while to some extent it shares the narrative structure of *Laugh In*, and many other science fiction movies that feature people/aliens/creatures from another realm arriving on Earth and observing human society, it resides firmly in the fantasy realm. At around the same time, the Shaw Brothers released *The Brain Stealers* (*Diehaihua*, Inoue Umetsugu, 1968), which utilises science fiction imagery and ideas as window dressing for a spy thriller, fitting into the popular series of Hong Kong Bond-esque spy films released in the mid- to late 1960s. Aside from the aforementioned *Ultraman* rip-off, *The Super Inframan*, which was released in 1975, there seems not to have been any other science fiction films produced in Hong Kong until *Laugh In*. In this film, Lung Kong deploys the science fiction genre to spread his favoured message of universal love through the auspices of an extraterrestrial being, a message that humankind, it seems, is no longer in a position to promote. The film blends didactic melodrama into this mix along with comedy, which localises the film and strengthens its satirical look at Hong Kong society through an extraterrestrial's eyes. It was only from the late 1970s that Hong Kong cinema began tentatively engaging more with science fiction.

Now, turning to analyse several of these films, I will showcase a spectrum of different approaches to science fiction that reveal the tense and ambiguous relationship that Hong Kong cinema has in the period under discussion with science fiction. At times, there is a clash between the Western modernity and technology that the science fiction genre represents and locally developed genres and Chinese culture, while at other times, this seeming opposition is either embraced or articulated in an ambiguous way.

Science Versus Magic in the *Jianghu*: *Butterfly Murders*

Tsui Hark injected new life and innovation into the *wuxia* genre with *Butterfly Murders* and *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (*Xin Shushan jianxia*, 1983).

Both are tangentially connected to science fiction in inverse ways: the former looks to explain the normally unexplained fantastic feats of flying and magic through scientific reasoning, whereas the latter uses hitherto unseen modern special effects imported from Hollywood to update the fantastic imagination of *wuxia*. They both mix traditional traits of the *wuxia* film with modern technology and science, but to different ends; *Butterfly Murders* undermines myth through technology, while *Zu* celebrates myth with an explosion of light and colour rendered by technology. Although neither succeeded at the box office, *Butterfly's* science fiction-inspired tampering with the conventions of the *wuxia* genre rarely happened again, while *Zu's* fairy-tale world is more emblematic of the genre. This section will focus on the science fiction aspects of *Butterfly Murders* and the ways that it attempts to blend tradition and modernity rather than setting up an opposition between the two.

Butterfly Murders opens with a series of mysterious killings at a castle, ostensibly perpetrated by killer butterflies. The master of the castle calls in a number of martial artists to investigate, which precipitates many twists and turns, and the arrival of more martial artists from different clans, who proceed to kill each other off. The scholar Fang Hongye, who records the happenings in the martial arts world, also investigates. It is eventually revealed that the master of the castle has orchestrated this gathering and the butterfly killings to eliminate other martial artists in order to become king of the martial world. The film is set in a desolate desert wasteland bleached in a dusty yellow haze, resembling a post-apocalyptic world. Annette Michelson notes that many science fiction films, from *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) through to *Barbarella* (Roger Vadim, 1968), seem to regress from a sustained, coherent visual design to a 'fatigue of the imagination', a type of gothic past, and 'a style of medievalism . . . [that contains] billowing capes and gothic arches'.²⁵ This gothic look, including black capes, a black suit of armour and a dark castle, is precisely the design that Tsui opts for in his futuristic *wuxia* world set in the distant past, which fits well with the anachronistic technology used to explain otherworldly feats (Fig. 7.1).

Methods to modernise the *wuxia* genre include attempts to explain the flight of characters by showing them using a complex grapple hook and cable/rope system that can also turn into a type of zip-line. This zip-line leads to one character's death, a seeming commentary on the illusion of flight. In another sequence, two fighters glide across the screen on their respective ropes, with one catching the other with her rope and tying him up, the implication being that flight on these ropes is slower than the speed of otherworldly flight usually seen in *wuxia* films. Rather than magical palm power, homemade bombs containing gunpowder are used to explain smoke-filled explosive attacks by the martial fighters. The scholar even explains the ingredients used to make gunpowder, which are held



Figure 7.1 Flying with grapple hook and rope. Source: *Butterfly Murders* (1979).

in an underground cave in the castle. A metallic coat of armour is also used for defence. Critic and New Wave filmmaker Pak Tong Cheuk considers this attempt to blend the divisions between tradition and modernity, myth and science, and 'East' and 'West' to be a kind of creatively experimental failure. This is because he finds that the scientific explanations neglect the boundless potential of the imagination, especially when 'the metaphysical arts and extraordinary powers of the Orient contain their own spectacular attributes, which are well suited to the exercising of the imagination'.²⁶ Cheuk's discontent here links back to how fantasy rebels against a modernist disenchantment of the world, and is a direct illustration of the way that fantasy and science fiction operate in different registers: the impossible that gives free rein to the imagination versus the improbable that reins in and limits what can be depicted. *Butterfly Murders* operates in a sombre, modernist vein that does not accord with the transcendent qualities of fantasy.

Perhaps Tsui Hark chose butterflies as the ostensible killers due to the way they appear at times almost like an alien species in several prolonged close-ups, and also because they create a striking visual effect, including their appearance in several extraordinary butterfly-attack sequences that resemble onslaughts by science fiction aliens. However, the explanation of how the butterflies are controlled plays into more local traditions. Rather than being an alien attack, or even making the butterflies robotic, it turns out that a type of 'butterfly controlling medicine' controls the butterflies. When one character discovers this, he states: 'the art of controlling butterflies has reappeared'. On one level, it is treated like a traditional art with a long history in the *jianghu*; yet, on another level, one could argue that this medicine is chemical, which brings the notion back into the realm of science fiction. There is an ambiguity and overlap between

tradition and modernity here, as there is throughout the entire film. Ultimately, the film lays out a new vision of the *wuxia* genre in which martial artists' skills and powers are boosted by their ability to harness technology and other science-based weaponry, which tempers the flights of fantasy familiar to many *wuxia* stories with scepticism and rational enquiry. This amalgamation of a venerable old Chinese genre with a modern vision is a sign of a distinctly local approach bound up with Hong Kong's colonial history.

Undermining Science Fiction through Comedy: *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star appears to be Shaw Brothers' response to *Zu*, an outward show of muscle-flexing to boast that they could also do big-budget special effects films. Shaw Brothers marketed the film as 'an amazing science fiction film'²⁷ and were clearly trying to cash in on the success of *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977). Yet, the comically inflected opening sets the tone for the entire film: over images of space and stars in a dark sky, similar to the openings of the *Star Wars* films, the 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star' nursery rhyme plays on the film's soundtrack. What follows is a series of comic sketches roughly bound together to form the thread of a narrative, in which jokes are constantly made about the conventions of science fiction and technology. This complete rejection and parodying of these conventions betray an anxiety about cultural values at risk in the face of technology. It is a sign of the process that Stephen Teo outlines, in which many Hong Kong filmmakers, from the New Wave period (1976–84) onward (of which Alex Cheung, the director of *Twinkle*, is a part), navigated their conflicted and ambivalent relationship with Chinese culture and politics and their own local identity in their cinema. They strove to create a postcolonial identity while preserving Hong Kong's distinct history. Yet, the fact that this history is constituted by the colonial experience complicated their efforts in constructing a Hong Kong identity disconnected from both colonial and national identification.²⁸ *Twinkle's* approach to science fiction embodies these anxieties.

The film riffs on *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977) in part of its plot about a UFO that lands on Earth. Meanwhile, a wholly unrelated story of two private detectives seems almost to belong to another film. The articulation of the two bumbling private detectives, who represent everyday Hong Kong citizens struggling to make ends meet, fits into the ideological orientation of the majority of Hong Kong comedies made during this period, which often focused on ordinary people fighting to survive in a cut-throat world. This plotline links to the science fiction plot only at the film's halfway point, through

the character Li (Cherie Cheung). Li is set to marry a rich heir, but after she is 'abducted' and raped by aliens from the UFO, the heir's father rejects the marriage and a despondent Li goes off to commit suicide. The private detectives coincidentally bump into Li and they decide to help her by investigating the alien mystery. The science fiction plot, up to this point, is barely featured in the film, and when it is, it functions as a gimmick to show off special effects, including the effects-heavy UFO landing, and as a way of achieving comedic purposes.

Once the private detective, Eden (James Yi Lui), enters the UFO, designed like a *Star Wars*-style spaceship, he ends up fighting a Darth Vader clone with lightsabres. As he tries to escape from 'Darth Vader', he yells out various passwords to try to open the high-tech doors in the futuristic UFO. This scene replicates a similar comedic interlude in *Security Unlimited* (*Modeng baobao*, Michael Hui, 1981), showing the film's debt to the Hui Brothers' comedies. Eden then calls out the name of a popular comedian who had a long career in Cantonese cinema from the 1930s to the 1950s, Yee Chau-sui, who is the real-life father of James Yi Lui.²⁹ This oscillation between high-tech modernity and tradition resembles the scenario in the *Buddha's Palm* second episode, discussed above. Here, Eden faces a hi-tech door as the lightsabre-wielding Darth Vader clone chases him. James Yi Lui, playing Eden, desperately calls out the name of his real-life father, who evokes the traditional Cantonese cinema of the 1950s and traditional patriarchal society. In the face of this threatening technological onslaught, tradition linked to 1950s Cantonese cinema is sought through a joke. Technology is then mocked when 'Darth Vader's' lightsabre runs out of batteries just as he is about to kill Eden. Eden then proceeds to beat 'Darth Vader' before a flying kick sends him smashing through a UFO window, vanquishing this technological threat through a display of physical prowess.

The ending reveals that the UFO/spaceship and everything associated with it is a fake, constructed by the doctor character. The film, finally, finds it impossible to accept the convention of UFOs/spaceships from outer space and the technology associated with them, which is why it spends its entire running time undermining and cracking jokes at the conventions of the science fiction genre. Perhaps engaging with these conventions would be a tacit acknowledgement that local Hong Kong culture was at risk in the negotiations between tradition and modernity, or national and colonial identifications. *Twinkle* was not prepared to confront this and so it parodied the conventions that it refused or was unable to use.

Imaginations of the Future: *Health Warning* and *The Final Test*

There are very few Hong Kong films set in the future.³⁰ This seems strange, given that many science fiction films from other countries have been inspired by the

aesthetic clash between the bright, gleaming and commercial and the dense, urban and run-down that marks Hong Kong's cityscapes. *Ghost in the Shell* is the most famous example that depicts a futuristic city inspired by the excessive urban modernisation of Hong Kong. Neither of the two Hong Kong films set in the future analysed below utilises the city's iconic neon lights and outpouring of information flowing through the bustling streets. Instead, desolate, decaying streets and high-tech factories dominate, rejecting the image of a postmodern city on which much other science fiction cinema trades. Science fiction films depicting the future typically imagine bleak/apocalyptic/dark futures that are caused solely by human behaviour or human inventions.³¹ This pessimistic imagining of bleak futures, often under the control of an authoritarian power, seems to embody a deep discontent in society at the time that they were made. *Health Warning* takes the future setting as an opportunity to negotiate anxieties about cultural tradition against technology, while *The Final Test* articulates the future as being threatened by a combination of ruthless capitalism and authoritarianism. In these ways, both films address anxieties related to Hong Kong's peculiar position in between China and Britain.

Health Warning is a *kung fu* film set in an imagined dystopian future. Its director, Kirk Wong, explained his disappointment at its box-office failure since, if it had been more successful, other filmmakers would probably have tried making more futuristic science fiction films, adding that he is 'sure a lot of people are quite frustrated in trying to find new ways of shooting kung fu films'.³² So, Kirk Wong saw the movie primarily as a *kung fu* film, fused into a science fiction world. Yet, the oscillation between tradition and technology rendered by the merging of *kung fu* and science fiction is apparent from the film's opening.

Due to the low budget, onscreen text describes the film's future world as being one where huge advances in science and technology have caused people to become idle and decadent, leading to the crumbling of social order and the destruction of civilisation. Survivors roam the rubble-strewn, desolate, dark streets, affiliating themselves with martial arts schools. It is suggested that training in *kung fu* is a method to combat the social decay wrought by modern technology. The Straight Path school bases itself on traditional values, enforcing a strict training regime on its disciples and carrying forward martial arts virtues from the past. This tradition is articulated visually in the opening, with the master of the school (Eddie Ko) wearing a simple white T-shirt, and shots of his disciples carrying dragon and lion dancing equipment, playing the lion dancing drum and practising martial arts moves in a dilapidated old building. In comparison, the X school has recently appeared and its leader uses drugs and medicine-technology cocktails on his members to train and control them. He also lobotomises them to create an army of obedient warriors. Nazi symbols

emblazon the X school while the modern-dressed leader punches some white-coated scientists after a failed lobotomy experiment. This contrast immediately pits tradition, here embodied by *kung fu*, a legacy of southern Chinese culture, against a sinister modernity. This set-up also takes the classic *kung fu* genre staple of clashing martial arts schools, usually one upstanding institution and one corrupted, and transports it to a fascist dystopia.

The dialectic between tradition as good and pure and technological advancements as corrupt and a threat to tradition runs throughout the film. Killer (Wang Lung-Wei) is the leading disciple of the Straight Path school and tests his martial skills in underground fights. An injured woman, whose child he saved, asks him why he believes only in 'ancient herbal stuff' when there are now all sorts of neo-medical treatments. Killer brushes this off, linking the 'neo-medicine' to the neo-Nazis that now roam this world. Later, the Straight Path school master cooks medicine using traditional Chinese ingredients to heal the wounds of a disciple. When Killer is attacked with chemicals, his master refuses the advice of a doctor to cure him with this 'neo-medicine' since it is 'against our principles to use such twisted treatments'. The doctor then proceeds to rub the blood of a chicken on to Killer's wounds and gives him other traditional forms of medicine to revive him. Killer's traditional school rejects the medicine associated with technology, which, by extension, is a rejection of the capitalist modernity that has brought about this film's dystopian world.

Classic elements of the *kung fu* genre are also utilised in a rapidly cut montage of Killer chopping down trees after his master orders him to gather firewood, which resembles a *kung fu* movie training sequence. It also highlights the traditional way of life that the school still encourages. These strict conditions are sharply contrasted with the exotic and decadent lifestyle of the X school, whose members revel in a drug-fuelled existence in their disco-arcade headquarters. The members imbibe drugs through gas masks, a transvestite strips and howls with drug-induced laughter, and women stand around naked among the flickering arcade machines as dancers slowly move to the pulsating electronic synth score. Killer's friend becomes involved with a female member of the X gang, and she murders him. In a transfixing scene, Killer goes to confront the female assassin. He wanders through this den of futuristic sin to the sounds of a remixed and slowed-down cover of the Eurythmics' 'Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)'. The camera slowly tracks his progress as he throws or hits members of the neo-Nazi gang out of his way, cascades of bright artificial light illuminating his path. The combination of cuts between close-ups and the fluid motion of the camera, slowly moving between the dancers to the slow synth score, represents the drug-fuelled hazy atmosphere. Killer is attacked by one of the female assassins with multicoloured chemical syringes and returns to be healed by his

master. After the X gang destroy the Straight Path school, Killer and his master enter the X gang leader's base to exact revenge.

Further opposition between tradition and technology is evident as they enter the X gang's base. The film chooses to ignore guns altogether, to replicate the patterns of *kung fu* cinema. For instance, in *Once Upon a Time in China* (Huang Feihong, 1991), Tsui Hark shows how martial arts were ineffective in the face of the guns of Western imperialism in nineteenth-century China. It would have been unrealistic and disconcerting to equip the high-tech X gang with sophisticated weaponry and allow the gun-less Killer to defeat them, which speaks to the tension between what science fiction and *kung fu* represent. The *kung fu* genre places boundaries in the science fiction world of the film and limits its technological fantasy. Pak Tong Cheuk considers the X gang's lack of weapons absurd in the film's futuristic setting, the gang representing high-end technology as it does,³³ while Kwai-Cheung Lo argues that the emphasis on the human body over advanced technology 'can be understood as a self-realising mode of responding to modernity and a rejection of the blind replication of imported sci-fi films'.³⁴ The film complicates this idea of the empowerment of the body to combat sinister technology/modernity in the sequence where Killer advances toward the leader of the X gang and faces a group of black-masked fighters, seemingly products of lobotomy and under the complete control of the leader (Fig. 7.2). They appear superhuman in strength and barely seem to notice Killer's attacks. They beat Killer and he has no apparent way of overcoming them. But Killer's master, in a computer control room, gains access to a computer program and manages to shut it down, which causes the black-masked assassins to malfunction and become harmless. Killer quickly dispatches them. Despite it not being explained how the master, a symbol of tradition, understands how to operate the computers, this sequence again brings into focus the battle between tradition and technology/modernity, as Killer initially cannot defeat the black-masked figures using his martial arts, but it is a technological flaw that ensures their downfall and allows tradition to overcome technology. The fact that the master must use computers to help Killer, however, suggests that modern technology is not unconditionally rejected. This sequence, in fact, simultaneously demonstrates both the failure of tradition (*kung fu* cannot overcome the technologically modified fighters) and the failure of modern technology (those modified fighters malfunction).

The film ends on an ambiguous note, with Killer driving off into the smoke in a futuristic-looking car, complicating the message of tradition overcoming technology/modernity. With almost everybody dead and his school wiped out, where is he driving to? This thrilling and experimental take on the *kung fu* genre forges another step in the struggle between tradition and technology in Hong



Figure 7.2 *Kung fu* fight involving technology and technological flaws.
Source: *Health Warning* (1984).

Kong science fiction cinema and is an attempt to recover a past at risk of being destroyed by the future.

After *Health Warning*, the next Hong Kong film to depict a futuristic, dystopian environment is *The Final Test*, made in 1987. It is set almost entirely inside a factory, where workers are treated as dispensable slaves and controlled by deadly performance-enhancing drugs. It blends elements of the *kung fu* and crime thriller genres into its science fiction iconography of sparse grey corridors, neon tube lighting, flashing lights, metal fences and a generally grungy aesthetic. The story is heavily influenced by *Outland* (Peter Hyams, 1981), with some significant variations that reveal its reorientation to reflect the preoccupations of Hong Kong cinema.

Outland tells the story of a grizzled Marshal (Sean Connery), who is assigned to a post in a mining colony on one of Jupiter's moons. The Marshal desires to eradicate the ills of the world, in this case the barbaric manager of the labour colony, who oversees part of an intergalactic drug ring that feeds workers brain-destroying amphetamines. The Marshal, accordingly, wages a one-man war against this vicious system. In *The Final Test*, Ying Mo (Austin Wai) is introduced

in a brutal fight sequence in which he defeats an opponent to gain the right to be assigned the role of security chief. *The Final Test* then diverges further from its source by making Ying Mo an undercover agent, sent to investigate how the factory is using drugs to boost worker productivity, fitting it into a long line of Hong Kong undercover crime thrillers. Ying Mo is given his mission, funded by the 'International Labour Organisation' high up on the peak with the Hong Kong cityscape sprawling out below, linking the story to Hong Kong and departing from *Outland's* outer space setting. Although not much more is made of Ying Mo's undercover status, Wing-sang Law argues that the repeated motif of undercover cops being dragged down by their confusion over their identity in Hong Kong thrillers (from at least 1981) reveals a series of identity crises of the Hong Kong people.³⁵ In *The Final Test*, this typical Hong Kong crime thriller convention is used in a science fiction setting to investigate a sinister organisation that kills its workers for 'spreading rumours that damage the company'. The film opens with a security officer confronting the factory manager (Yuen Wah) over the stimulant used to exploit the workers by increasing their energy levels, which makes them mental slaves to the company. He is hunted down and killed in the factory as a loudspeaker announcement blares out that he has been exposed as an enemy: 'He spreads rumours harmful to our interests. You must raise your vigilance.' This heightens *Outland's* depiction of the ideal of capitalism: disposable workers who obediently accept their fate, while articulating the future factory as an authoritarian system that brainwashes its workers and destroys those who attempt to change it. The plot tweak to make Ying Mo an undercover agent, sent to investigate an authoritarian system that wipes out any form of protest, reveals anxieties both about the extraordinarily exploitative system of capitalism, as science fiction tends to do, and also perhaps about the looming date of 1997. The undercover element also subtly shifts *Outland's* futile one-man crusade into an organised resistance against corruption and exploitative working conditions.

Ying Mo arrives by boat at the mining factory. There are several shots scattered throughout the film of boats moving across the horizon and little islands dotted around that signal the setting as Hong Kong, which further links the plot to Hong Kong's sociopolitical context. Perhaps it was for budgetary reasons that the action was relocated to Earth, but it also situates the film in a local context. Both works focus on the dire conditions of the labourers, who inhabit this prison-like environment and put up no resistance. The workers sleep in cages in both films, but if futuristic science fiction usually rewrites a known city, then this bleak future projection was already a reality in Hong Kong, where some of the poorest do sleep in 'cage homes', a brutal example of stark economic inequalities resulting from the government's laissez-faire policies (Fig. 7.3).



Figure 7.3 Workers sleeping in cages. Source: *The Final Test* (1987).

Once Ying Mo discovers that the manager is manufacturing the drug in the factory, the message ‘He spreads rumours harmful to our interests. You must raise your vigilance’ is again blared out on loudspeakers across the building. A doctor has been coerced into producing these drugs and ends up helping Ying Mo fight against the assassins sent to kill him. When Ying Mo and the doctor finally confront the factory manager, the latter pragmatically states that ‘we’re not enslaving these workers, if man makes machines work incessantly, machines can do the same to man. This will increase productivity and lower productions costs. Human life is cheaper than machines.’ The manager, who is revealed to be a cyborg when his ripped shirt uncovers a metallic body, is in charge of a conspiracy to make humans work for robots. He cannot be killed by bullets and is eventually taken down when a metallic door crushes him. This variation on *Outland’s* human-only plot articulates the way that science and technology are used, not to end domination and alienated labour, but to reinforce both. Ying Mo and the doctor attempt to leave but several more assassins appear and gun down Ying Mo in a hail of bullets, sparks and blood. The doctor rushes towards him as he slumps down dead, before picking up his machinegun and firing wildly, creating a shower of sparks around her. The film concludes with this freeze frame, an incredibly abrupt and bleak ending.

Outland ends with the Marshal successfully dispatching the corrupt manager and the hired assassins sent to kill him before returning to Earth to reconcile with his wife and son, satisfied that he has done his bit, while the system he rebelled against remains exactly the same. This depiction of a man rebelling against the

system and achieving personal victory consolidates the individualistic ideology of Hollywood, while nothing fundamentally changes. *The Final Test*'s bleak ending suggests that the system destroys those that attack it and business resumes as normal. These similar points are oriented to the democratic ideals of America in the former, and to the lack of democratic rights in Hong Kong in the latter. The altered plotline in *The Final Test*, which highlights people's lack of power when they face an authoritarian system, here embodied as an extreme form of capitalism, seems to reflect again on how films responded to the lived reality of Hong Kong: a reality structured by mercenary capitalism and designed to serve a small elite, combined with a lack of democratic rights and institutions under British colonialism and also under the future rule of the PRC from 1997, making it difficult for people to control their own lives, free from the dictates of state and capital.

As a coda, it is worthwhile highlighting a couple of recent examples of the meeting of science fiction and Hong Kong cinema to show how the genre still negotiates various anxieties in relation to Hong Kong's (political) subjectivity. In Wong Kar-wai's *2046* (2004), Tony Leung's character writes science fiction stories about a time-travelling express train that takes passengers to reclaim lost memories from the future in 2046 – the date when the one-country, two-systems formula is set to expire. Kwai-cheung Lo suggests that the way that the characters in *2046* 'are transfixed by a "future" that resists any ultimate signification' could open up interesting political readings.³⁶ This again links to the way that Hong Kong cinema seems to struggle to imagine or construct a concrete future due to Hong Kong's own political subjugation. Louis Koo's long-cherished, \$56 million science fiction film *Warriors of Future* (*Mingri zhanji*) is forthcoming. Koo himself, who stars, produces and was heavily involved in creating the universe of the film, recently said that the movie shows how the 'Hong Kong people can also make world class special effects'.³⁷ Koo's focus on 'Hong Kong people' here is revealing. Kwai-Cheung Lo describes how Chinese-language criticism often argues that Chinese filmmakers should not give up on the science fiction genre, since science fiction films

symbolise the way the future can be conquered and imagined, and how advanced technology is mastered (as proven in the ability to produce such a genre), that would easily be translated into an index of national strength and cultural (soft) power.³⁸

This is now happening in mainland Chinese cinema; witness, for instance, the recent mainland box-office smash hit *The Wandering Earth* (*Liulang diqiu*, Frant Gwo, 2019), which has been acquired by Netflix with world-wide streaming rights. That Louis Koo, long a supporter of local Hong Kong cinema, wants *Warriors of Future* and its special effects to show the world that Hong Kong cinema

can compete with the films of other nations world-wide is a sign that science fiction is a genre that continues to navigate Hong Kong's predicament over its place in the world, now, most especially, in relation to China.

Conclusion

These films that engage the science fiction genre all negotiate various contemporary social problems and contradictions in colonial Hong Kong. *Butterfly Murders* attempts to temper the fantastic with scientific reasoning and an affirmation of (admittedly ancient) technology, while *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* takes a polar opposite approach and completely undermines and mocks the technology associated with the science fiction genre, betraying anxieties about technology's potential impact on local culture in Hong Kong. *Health Warning* also lays out a wide range of views on and reactions to an encroaching modernity entwined with technology, working through the oppositions, and finding convergences, between technology and traditional Chinese culture, finally ending on an ambiguous note. Through its bleak imagining of a future that was almost a reality in some aspects, *The Final Test* erases the liberating potentialities of science and technology by showing how they are used in a totalitarian way to enslave and dominate human beings.

Every film analysed in this chapter performed poorly at the Hong Kong box office. This fact, compounded with a lack of daring producers, ensured that barely any science fiction films were produced in Hong Kong during the period under discussion. A sense of wonder related to fantasy and the impossible, rather than technology and the 'possible', was favoured, a phenomenon that has arguably continued up to the present day. The sporadic development of the genre in Hong Kong, combined with the way that it was usually mixed with other popular local genres, meant that there was no set pattern for films to follow. Each film here utilises science fiction to comment on dissatisfactions or anxieties at the time they were made, which specifically embody the contradictions that Hong Kong historically faced in its struggles between Chinese culture and nationalism on the one hand, and coloniality on the other. Yet the fact that the science fiction genre continued, and still continues, to be reconfigured and mixed with other staple Hong Kong generic forms also marks the ongoing relevance of this cultural and sociopolitical struggle between the local, the national and the global.

Notes

1. Keeto Lam, 'Film workshop', 12.
2. Yingchi Chu, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 67.
3. Wing-sang Law, *Collaborative Colonial Power*, 5.

4. Ibid., 5.
5. Wing-sang Law, 'Hong Kong undercover: an approach to "collaborative colonialism"', 528.
6. Annette Kuhn, 'Introduction', 1.
7. J. P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film*, 4.
8. Ibid., 12.
9. Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*.
10. Raphaëlle Moine, *Cinema Genre*, 62.
11. Altman, *Film/Genre*, 132.
12. Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*, 84–5.
13. Huen Ching Kwok, 'Hong Kong produced sci-fi movies and series are difficult to succeed'.
14. Sarah Berry-Flint, 'Genre', 27.
15. Roger Garcia, 'Dialogue 3: Evans Chan–Roger Garcia', 12.
16. Siu Leung Li, 'The myth continues', 51–2.
17. Ibid., 52–3.
18. 'Ni Kuang', *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* (last accessed 4 August 2020).
19. Raymond Tsang, 'Wuxia fantasy'.
20. I thank Raymond Tsang for this point.
21. Siu-fung Koo, 'Philosophy and tradition in the swordplay film', 29.
22. Noong-kong Leung, 'Golden years', 12.
23. Ibid., 12.
24. Sek Kei, 'Haha xiao: ticai xinjian, shihe ertong' (*Laugh In: fresh theme suitable for children*), 141.
25. Annette Michelson, 'Bodies in space', 61.
26. Pak Tong Cheuk, *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema (1978–2000)*, 86.
27. *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, DVD Extras (Hong Kong: IVL, 2002), DVD.
28. Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 250.
29. Kwai-cheung Lo, 'Tech-noir', 146.
30. *Life Is a Moment* (*Zhaohua xishi*, Teresa Woo, 1987) and *I Love Maria* (*Tiejia wudi*, David Chung and Tsui Hark, 1988) are also relevant in this section. However, the majority of the former is a romantic drama set in 1987 and only a small section is set in the future, while the latter implicitly criticises present-day institutions and social structures as being the cause of a bleak future that humanity attempts to take a stand against.
31. Bruce H. Franklin, 'Visions of the future in science fiction films from 1970 to 1982', 21–2.
32. Roger Garcia, 'Dialogue 1: Kirk Wong–Roger Garcia', 3.
33. Cheuk, *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema (1978–2000)*, 191–2.
34. Lo, 'Tech-noir', 148.
35. Wing-sang Law, 'The violence of time and memory undercover', 388.
36. Lo, 'Tech-noir', 153.
37. 'Chi 4.5 yi paozhi gangchan kehuanpian "Mingri zhanji"' (Splashing 450 million on Hong Kong produced science fiction film *Warriors of Future*).
38. Lo, 'Tech-noir', 142.