

“I want my films to bring hope to spectators”: An interview with Michael Hui

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Abstract

Michael Hui received the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 40th Hong Kong Film Awards and the Award for Outstanding Contribution in Arts at the 15th Hong Kong Arts Development Awards. Hui was also featured as the “Filmmaker in Focus” at the 44th Hong Kong International Film Festival. Although the *South China Morning Post* (2022),¹ *Art and Piece* (2022),² *Michael Hui, Filmmaker in Focus* (2020),³ Karen Fang (2018),⁴ and Tim Youngs (2011)⁵ have also published interviews with Hui, they were more interested in the biographical and the industrial aspects of Hui’s career. This interview focuses on Hui’s insights into comedy’s versatility and how it consoles people in a time of gloom.

Keywords

Michael Hui | consolation | hope | nature of comedy | uses of comedy | gloom

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¹ Edmund Lee, “Hong Kong Film Director Michael Hui on 30 Years of Writer’s Block – ‘It’s Like I’m Trying to Build a Nuclear Bomb’ – and Why He Has No Regrets,” *South China Morning Post*, July 26, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3186490/hong-kong-film-director-michael-hui-30-years-writers-block> (accessed July 26, 2022).

² Tsang Kam Shing, “Michael Hui: ‘I’m running out of time,’” in *Art and Piece* 10 (2022): 42–73.

³ Geoffrey Wong and Ernest Chan, eds. *Michael Hui, Filmmaker in Focus* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong International Film Festival Society, 2020).

⁴ Karen Fang, “‘Absurdity of Life’: An Interview with Michael Hui,” in *Not Just a Laughing Matter: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Political Humor in China*, ed. King-fai Tam and Sharon R. Wesokoy (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 169–76.

⁵ Tim Youngs, “Life Is Worth Living: An Interview with Michael Hui,” in *Asia Laughs! A Survey of Asian Comedy Films*, ed. Roger Garcia (Udine, Italy: Centro Espressioni Cinematografiche, 2011), 55–63.

J.Y.: You once said the way you write comedy is “to find a situation — a subject [...] and then put a few characters inside and work as many gags as possible into that premise.”⁶ You have written so many gags. What are your insights?

M.H.: My materials are mostly inspired by my everyday life and my family and friends. In the early stage, the gags were based on true stories. They were just exaggerated a little bit. Then I gradually began to feel that film cannot only rely on putting a bunch of gags together, because the story is more important. I wanted my spectators to be able to see a more coherent story in my films.

J.Y.: In the HKIFF event “Michael Hui, Filmmaker in Focus’ Face to Face” last year, you mentioned that you want your comedies to amuse spectators from different races and cultural backgrounds and have an international spectatorship. I think this might be related to how your comedies have incorporated strong elements of visual humor from the Hong Kong Cantonese cinema of the 1950s and 1960s and Bruce Lee’s martial arts films in the early 1970s. In the meanwhile, the comedy films that you wrote, directed, and performed in such as *Games Gamblers Play* (*Gwai maa soeng sing* 鬼馬雙星, 1974) have revived Hong Kong Cantonese cinema since Director Chor Yuen’s *The House of 72 Tenants* (*Cat sap ji gaa fong haak* 七十二家房客, 1972). To what extent do you think the gags and humor in comedy film are supported or restricted by dialects (such as the Cantonese language)? And do you have to compromise between local appeal and the international market?

M.H.: The films I like are all about the basic emotions of human beings, instead of some kinds of obscure theories that only Albert Einstein can understand. For instance, the films of Charlie Chaplin, N!xau in *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980), Mr. Bean, and Mike Myers, etc. Those are the films that any spectators, despite their nationality and language, would enjoy watching. So I would also like spectators all over the globe to be able to enjoy my comedy films.

J.Y.: When it comes to language, I would also like to ask you questions about the dubbing and exporting of your comedy films. What are the languages that your films are dubbed in? Concerning these dubbed versions, such as the Mandarin version for the Taiwan market, what do you think about them? Would it be difficult to translate the gags because of linguistic and cultural differences? How did you and your production team solve those problems?

⁶ Youngs, “Life Is Worth Living,” 59.

M.H.: My works back then were mostly made in Cantonese, without considering other markets. As for the overseas markets, the promotion department of the film company would usually take care of it after we had finished filming. As I can recall, my first few high-grossing films all had trouble with criticism and censorship. The biggest overseas markets in those days were places such as Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia. For example, *Games Gamblers Play* and *The Private Eyes* (*Bun gan baat loeng* 半斤八兩, 1976) were both banned from screenings due to the theme of gambling in the former and the cinema-robbing sequence in the ending of the latter. Fortunately, these problems were resolved in the end. I have also learnt a lot in the process. So it became less of a problem in later films such as *Security Unlimited* (*Mo dang bou biu* 摩登保鏢, 1981) and *Chicken and Duck Talk* (*Gai tung app gong* 雞同鴨講, 1988).

J.Y.: Who are the actors, actresses, and filmmakers that have influenced you in making comedies?

M.H.: The Marx Brothers, Blake Edwards, Neil Simon, Danny Kaye, Jerry Lewis, Gene Wilder, Woody Allen, Peter Sellers, Bob Hope, Laurel and Hardy, Rowan Atkinson, Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Jacques Tati, Buster Keaton, Yamada Yôji 山田 洋次, Morishige Hisaya 森繁 久彌 (comedian in the *Santô jûyaku* 三等重役 [Third Class Executives] series (nine films, 1952–1959), Han Langen 韓蘭根, Leung Sing-Por 梁醒波, Yee Chau-Shui 伊秋水, Lau Kwai-Hong 劉桂康, Yeung Kwun-Hap 楊君俠, Cheng Kwan-Min 鄭君綿, Lee Hoi-Chuen 李海泉, Liu Enjia 劉恩甲, Ma Si-Tsang 馬師曾, Sun Ma Si-Tsang 新馬師曾, Yu Ming 俞明, Tam Lan-Hing 譚蘭卿, and many others.

J.Y.: Your brother Sam Hui played a salaryman struggling to make ends meet in *The Private Eyes* and his character brilliantly represents an ordinary Hongkonger at that time when the economy began to thrive. The idea of Humble Wage Earners (*daa gung zai*) is also part of our Hong Kong cultural history and identity. What do you think about the significance of humor and comedy film for Hong Kong popular culture and identity?

M.H.: Most of the characters in *The Private Eyes* were based on true events, including the working experience of my father Hui Sai-Cheung 許世昌 when he first came to Hong Kong from Mainland China and worked in a hotel in Wan Chai and in an electric appliance shop in Mong Kok. I also incorporated

my early working experiences such as summer jobs, part-time jobs (selling stereo equipment, teaching, selling encyclopedias, working at TV stations), etc. in it. I have all sorts of emotions about these memories, but of course most of them were terrible to recall.

J.Y.: In the early stage of his career, Director John Woo 吳宇森 directed *The Pilferer's Progress* (Faat chin hon 發錢寒, 1977), *From Riches to Rags* (Cin zok gwaaai 錢作怪, 1980), and *To Hell with the Devil* (Mo dang tin si 摩登天師, 1982) and the other three Hui brothers⁷ participated in them – either in their production or as performers. May I ask, how did Director Woo come to direct these films with a style similar to the Hui brothers' comedies? And what are the differences between these comedy films of Director Woo and yours in terms of how their themes and approaches address the time and society during when they were made (such as through social satire)?

M.H.: I started my career working on TV variety shows. That was in 1974 and I didn't know anything about filming techniques when I made *Games Gamblers Play*, so Golden Harvest sent John Woo to me and he helped me do what I couldn't do myself. He was already a filming master at that time and could easily handle the camera movements and mis-en-scène of martial arts fight scenes or spectacles. Since *Games Gamblers Play* turned out well, we continued to collaborate on the next few films and used similar techniques to make them. I bet the "approaches" that you mentioned resulted from our fruitful collaboration at that time.

J.Y.: You collaborated with Wong Wan-Si 黃韻詩 in *Happy Din Dong* (Fun lok ding dong 歡樂叮噹, 1986). She is a character actress and comedian with a sharp wit. Can you tell us a bit about your collaboration with her? And do you think having an eccentric character and a unique sense of humor are the pre-requisites for being a successful comedian in Hong Kong?

M.H.: I didn't have many opportunities to collaborate with female comedians before making *Happy Din Dong*. Wong Wan-si is an exceptionally talented all-round actress and we had a great time working together. Unfortunately, this film was not well-received by the spectators, probably because I was not suitable for acting in films with themes about chasing girls. There was also another brilliant female comedian appearing in this film and she's Anita Mui 梅艷芳. Both Anita Mui and Wong Wan-Si gave wonderful performances in it.

⁷ The other three Hui brothers are Stanley Hui, Ricky Hui, and Sam Hui.

J.Y.: In *Mr. Coconut* (*Hap gaa fun* 合家歡, 1989), you use the cultural differences between the North and South as the theme of the comedy film, as Director Wong Tin-Lam 王天林 did in *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* (*Nanbei he* 南北和, 1961). That's very contemporary. In your film, Ricky Hui's character is called Broker Lai.⁸ And the sequences that you performed in opposite Maria Cordero⁹ made me recall the funny sequences featuring Uncle Por¹⁰ and Tam Lan-Hing¹¹ in Hong Kong Cantonese comedy films (such as *The Stubborn Generations* (*Doi doi nau man caai* 代代扭紋柴, 1960) and *My Kingdom for a Husband* (*Syun gung jim si* 璇宮豔史, 1957). Also, your films often center on family and the ways family relationships occupy a critical role in them strongly resemble the Cantonese films from the 1950s and 1960s. May I ask, how did the Hong Kong Cantonese cinema from that period influence the ways you make comedies? Are there any Cantonese films that are memorable to you?

M.H.: Hong Kong Cantonese films have had a profound influence on me. During the 1950s and 1960s, we four brothers grew up in a squatter village in Diamond Hill in Hong Kong. We followed our mum to watch Cantonese opera and were mesmerized by the *Wong Fei-Hung* 黃飛鴻 films.¹² I was especially fond of watching the works of two seniors, Leung Sing-Por and Yee Chau-Shui.¹³ But my tastes changed when I got into La Salle College¹⁴ as I preferred Hollywood films such as *Rio Bravo* (1959) and *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). As for music, I became a huge fan of Elvis Presley and The Beatles.

⁸ *Broker Lai* (*Ging gei laai* 經紀拉, 1950) is a classic Hong Kong Cantonese comedy film directed by Mok Hong-Si 莫康時.

⁹ Maria Cordero is a Hong Kong singer, actress, TV host, and DJ of Portuguese-Chinese descent and she is nicknamed "Fat Mama" (*Fei Ma* 肥媽) in popular culture.

¹⁰ The nickname of the legendary Hong Kong Cantonese opera, film, and TV actor and comedian Leung Sing-Por (1908–1981) in popular culture.

¹¹ Tam Lan-Hing is a Hong Kong Cantonese opera and film actress who is best remembered for her plump figure and comedic roles with a bossy temper, an ability to deliver vivid performances, and fine singing skills.

¹² Wong Fei-Hung (1847–1925) was a Chinese martial artist, physician, and folk hero from Canton Province in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China and has been the subject of numerous film and media productions. The *Wong Fei-Hung* series in Hong Kong Cantonese cinema includes nearly eighty films, with seventy-seven films starring the martial arts practitioner and actor Kwan Tak-Hing 關德興 as the titular protagonist and two films featuring the Cantonese opera actor Pak Yuk-Tong 白玉堂 in the role between 1949 and 1970.

¹³ Yee Chau-Shui (1904–1955), like Leung Sing-Por, was a famous Cantonese film actor and comedian. Due to his premature death, the comedic roles he may have gone on to take in the 1950s and 1960s were mostly performed by Leung, whose successful comedy and acting career lasted until 1980, a year before his death.

¹⁴ La Salle College is an old and prestigious secondary school in Hong Kong. It uses English as the medium of instruction and is often seen as one of the best schools in the city.

J.Y.: What do you think about the differences between making comedy films at a time when the economy and the society are better off (such as Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s) and worse off (such as between mid-1990s and now)? And how can we try to overcome these difficulties in making comedy films?

M.H.: I think comedy is needed in all times. Everyone wishes they could go into the cinema and laugh off all their troubles in the outside world. But we don't have many comedy films showing in the cinema now. Instead, comedies have become viral in other media. For instance, when you switch on your phone and open the Tik Tok or YouTube apps, you can receive comedy videos shared by your friends for free. This is very different from the past and makes it even more challenging to attract spectators to buy film tickets and go into the cinema.

J.Y.: You were part of the ensemble cast who starred in the “Artists China Flood Relief Fund Movie” (*Hoeng gong jin ngai gaai mong ngo daai din jing* 香港演藝界忘我大電影) *The Banquet* (*Hou mun je jin* 豪門夜宴, 1991), a comedy film written by the South China Film Industry Workers Union (華南電影工作者聯合會, or 影聯會). How did the suggestion of remaking Director Lee Sun-Fung 李晨風, Lee Tit 李鐵, Ng Wui 吳回, and Law Chi-Hung's 羅志雄 *Feast of a Rich Family* (*Hou mun je jin* 豪門夜宴, 1959) come about? What was your impression of the films made by Union Film Enterprises Limited or left-wing film companies (such as Great Wall Movie Enterprise Limited, Feng Huang Motion Picture Company, Sun Luen Film Company, Kong Ngee Company, and Wah Kiu Film Company) when you were small? What were your preferences for Hong Kong films (such as Mandarin films, Cantonese-dialect films, Chaozhou-dialect films, and Amoy-dialect films; left-wing film companies, right-wing film companies (such as Shaw Brothers Pictures International Limited, Motion Picture & General Investment Company, Limited (MP & GI), and Lan Kwong Film Company); martial arts fantasy films, modern drama films, and melodrama films) at that time?

M.H.: When the flood struck Eastern China back then in 1991, I had gone to visit and inspect the affected areas. They were absolutely disastrous. After returning to Hong Kong, I found artists such as Jackie Chan 成龍 and Anita Mui had initiated the idea of a fundraising concert. They had used “Bridge Over Troubled Water” as the theme song, which I thought was meaningful. Film workers also responded to the call to make a film to raise funds for the victims. I naturally joined them and took part in the project. I could recall that it was rushed during the time of filming and many teams were filming

at the same time. Clifton Ko Chi-Sum 高志森, Barry Wong Ping-Yiu 黃炳耀, and I were good friends and our team made good progress in filming. I also think it was a good idea to adapt *Feast of a Rich Family* during that time.

J.Y.: Director Wai Ka-fai’s 韋家輝 *Fantasia* (*Gwai maa kong soeng kuk* 鬼馬狂想曲, 2004) is a comedy film that pays tribute to you. There are many references to the films written and directed by you such as *The Private Eyes*, *Security Unlimited* (*Mo dang bou biu* 摩登保鏢, 1981), *Last Message* (*Tin coi jyuu baak ci* 天才與白痴, 1975), and *Games Gamblers Play*. Actually, your films also often feature some kind of popular cultural references, such as *Jaws* (1975) and *Mr. Vampire* (*Goeng si sin saang* 殭屍先生, 1985). Do you think this way of creating is a feature of Hong Kong comedy film? Apart from this, how would you describe the characteristics of Hong Kong comedy film?

M.H.: I have seen *Fantasia*. My wife especially likes Lau Ching-Wan’s 劉青雲 performance. Apart from mimicking me closely, he incorporated some elements that he made up himself. To my surprise, he could even act very well in some scenes that I hadn’t done myself! And yes, my films have quite often poked fun at other films such as Bruce Lee’s films, *Jaws*, etc. These are all things that I found it fun to do during the time of filming.

J.Y.: Crime comedy films and political comedy films such as Alfred Cheung Kin-Ting’s 張堅庭 *Her Fatal Ways* (*Biu ze, nei hou je!* 表姐，你好嘢！) series (1990–1994) and *Bodyguards of Last Governor* (*Gong duk zeoi hau jat go bou biu* 港督最後一個保鏢, 1996) are only a part of Hong Kong’s comedy film tradition. Would you agree that even though the current film censorship standards are strict, filmmakers and writers can still make brilliant comedy films? If you think that’s still possible, what would be the trick of it?

M.H.: I think the key to comedy film is representing humanity and emotions, especially human weaknesses. So even if it’s about crime or politics, it can still be a wonderful comedy film.

J.Y.: Professor Karen Fang conducted an interview with you in 2018. In that interview, you mentioned a script about the Chief Executive of Hong Kong.¹⁵ May I ask what has become of that script?

¹⁵ Fang, “Absurdity of Life,” 176.

M.H.: Yes, that one imagines if there's a day when the Chief Executive and her Chief Secretaries have all died in an accident, then the governing duties would fall temporarily on a simpleton civil servant played by myself, whose blunders would create a series of gags. But this story is still in progress.

J.Y.: Are you still creating? You were interviewed by Mr. Tim Youngs in 2011. In the interview, you mentioned that you are still searching for an “inspiring and moving” comedy story that can keep the spectators laughing at a high frequency.¹⁶ Have you found it yet?

M.H.: I have been exploring this all the time. I think I have almost found it. I wish to film this story in my next film.

J.Y.: Do you find the best comedies are all tragicomedies, which laugh at the sadness and pain in life after understanding them? Would it be cynical to do so?

M.H.: The comedies I like all share some common features, such as innovation, trespassing the boundaries between high art and popular culture, and crossing the limits of languages. Most importantly, they would make me feel the world is a better place after I've finished watching them.

J.Y.: Your comedy films often satirize inequality in society (such as *The Private Eyes*) and strange phenomena (such as *Chicken and Duck Talk* (*Gai tung app gong* 雞同鴨講, 1988) and *The Magic Touch* (*San syun* 神算, 1992)). What are some good subjects in society right now that have caught your interest?

M.H.: Comedic themes can come from different social atmospheres and life experiences as one ages. For instance, I have had the chance to learn new things such as using Google, YouTube, Netflix, and phone apps in recent years and during the course of this, I have come to realize the drastic changes that have happened to communication between people. Moreover, my grandson and granddaughter are gradually growing up and they have some issues concerning education and choosing schools. My health, too, is slowly deteriorating and it creates many medical problems about therapy and medication. These are all subjects that I haven't experienced in the past.

¹⁶ Youngs, “Life Is Worth Living,” 60.

J.Y.: In the HKIFF publication, Michael Hui, *Filmmaker in Focus*, Director Chung Mong-Hong 鍾孟宏 mentioned that you once said, “I want my films to bring hope to the spectators (*ngo paak dik din jing zau si jiu joeng hon gwo dik jan jau gaang hou dik hei mong* 我拍的電影就是要讓看過的人有更好的希望).”¹⁷ In a recent issue of the Hong Kong Film Critics Society quarterly, *HKinema*, quite a few young artists and scholars said they would like to see Hong Kong filmmakers making comedy films again.¹⁸ What would you suggest the younger generation of artists or scholars should do in order to maintain hope in difficult circumstances?

M.H.: I’m aware that the development of comedy film-production in many countries such as India, Taiwan, Thailand, and South Korea has been thriving in recent years. I think it has become convenient to do research for filmmaking these days. Various universities and institutes are also offering some decent filmmaking courses. Even filmmaking equipment has become more portable and affordable than it was in the past. There’re even some people who can make films with their phones. So I think as long as the filmmaker is creative, he or she must be able to make good films.

J.Y.: In retrospect, you have transformed from a teacher at night schools to a co-host in *The Hui Brothers’ Show* (*Soeng sing bou hei* 雙星報喜, 1971–1972), and from a TV host to a master of comedy who has entered the collective memories of local civilians. May I ask what are your reflections on this transformation from an intellectual to an artist?

M.H.: If I had not entered the filmmaking industry in those years, I might still be a teacher to this day. But it’s not likely that I would be a good one. Or perhaps I could have earned more money if I had run a business or had invested in real estate, but I would never have been as contented as I am now. For this reason, I am truly grateful for what I have been given, for the opportunities I have had to bring some joy to others.

¹⁷ Wong and Chan, *Michael Hui*, 80.

¹⁸ Hong Kong Film Critics Society, “Zhi yizhi jianchi de dianying ren 致一直堅持的電影人” [For Those Film People Who Have Persisted], *HKinema* 55 (August 2021): 3, 8, 19, 21, and 22, <https://www.filmcritics.org.hk/hkinema/hkinema55.pdf> (accessed December 31, 2021). See p. 3 (Serrini, independent singer and songwriter; scholar), 8 (Lam Ah P, member of the band My Little Airport), 19 (Wong Hin-Yan, independent singer and songwriter), 21 (Edmond Tong, member of theatre troupe), and 22 (Nicholas Wong, poet; scholar).

J.Y.: Can you please share ten of your favorite comedy films with us?

1. *3 Idiots 3 ईडियट* (3 eediyat, dir. Rajkumar Hirani, 2009)
2. *You Are the Apple of My Eye* 那些年，我們一起追的女孩 (*Naxie nian, women yiqi zhui de nuhai*, d. Giddens Ko, 2011)
3. *Goodbye, Mr. Loser* 夏洛特煩惱 (*Xia luo te fannao*, dir. Yan Fei and Peng Damo, 2015)
4. *Extreme Job* 극한직업 (*Geukan Jigeop*, dir. Lee Byeong-heon, 2019)
5. *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (dir. Jay Roach, 1997)
6. *Midnight in Paris* (dir. Woody Allen, 2011)
7. *Bruce Almighty* (dir. Tom Shadyac, 2003)
8. *Some Like It Hot* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1959)
9. *City Lights* (dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1931)
10. *The Full Monty* (dir. Peter Cattaneo, 1997)

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