

Movie makers come up against latest censor edict

1997 taboo for HK films

THE question of political censorship in Hongkong, often obscured by controversies over the portrayal of sex and violence on the screen, was raised recently after sections of a recent locally made film fell to the cutting room floor.

"Home at Hongkong" was by no means a political film, but the censors saw fit to delete certain references to 1997, newsreel of Margaret Thatcher's visit to Hongkong last year, and film of the Cultural Revolution.

And there is growing disquiet in the local film industry that censors will simply not allow films that deal directly or indirectly with the future of Hongkong to be shown.

A number of directors and producers have already discussed making films with a 1997 theme, but they say it is impossible to get financial backing for a film if the backers cannot be assured the film will pass the censor.

"This is very bad for the serious film industry in Hongkong," says Ann Hui, director of the acclaimed "Boat People". "Directors automatically censor themselves, and will not touch sensitive subjects for fear of their films being cut or banned."

Said producer John Sham: "The message from the censorship board is basically, don't make any films about 1997, and there's no way investors will put up money for such films in these circumstances. It's absolutely stifling for the local film industry."

Chief government censor, Mr Pierre Lebrun, explained that the basic tenet of political censorship in Hongkong was the desire not to "damage Hongkong's good relations with other countries".

But asked how "Home at Hongkong" fell into this category, Mr Lebrun said that certain references to 1997 had been cut for another reason.

"We cut the bits that were prejudicial to the outcome of the talks on Hongkong's future, directors should wait for a result on the outcome of their talks, it is not their business to decide what the outcome of the talks would be," he said.

He denied that the bits were cut because they were deemed offensive to China, on the contrary, local critics have perceived the film as enthusiastic on reunification.

So was pressure put on the censors by higher ranking government officials in Hongkong? Mr Lebrun denies it.

by
Charles Scanlon

"The decision to cut the film was made by our panel of censors alone, nobody from outside told us to cut it at all," he said.

But Mr Lebrun took further exception to the use of documentary film in what was a work of fiction, a technique used in many films that have been passed by the censors and shown in Hongkong — most often in war films.

"It is the policy of the department not to mix up real people in a fictionalised story, because it may give people the wrong impression," he said.

Misleading

"I don't know why they put the documentary bits in, they were gratuitous, and misleading before the talks on Hongkong's future are settled, it is not the job of directors to settle the future of Hongkong."

Many film directors feel just as strongly it is not Mr Lebrun's job to decide what they can or cannot include in their films.

"I don't know what he's talking about," said John Sham. "No directors are talking about settling the future of Hongkong; we're talking about creative fiction."

The government's own Film Censorship Standards guide book outlines films or parts of films that will be liable for censorship on political grounds.

"Films that provoke

hatred or contempt of the government of Hongkong, damage good relations with other territories, encourage public disorder, unwarrantably offend religious bodies or reputable local organisations, or provoke hatred between persons in Hongkong of differing race, colour, class, nationality, creed or sectional interest.

Expanding on these points in a later chapter, the book states, "No film should be banned simply because it is political in nature or has

propaganda for its sole or main purpose."

The book then goes on to qualify this statement.

The film would be liable for cuts or a ban if it was deemed likely to cause a breach of the peace, or inspire groups to organise seditious, or subversive underground bodies.

Further, films should not include attacks on other governments or national leaders, particularly if they were likely to be resented or cause emotion amongst Hongkong audience.

"Purported descriptions of very recent or current activity should be scrutinised carefully for material likely to provoke quarrels in audiences which include political opponents," it goes on.

Many local film directors feel that this weight of regulations gives the censor carte blanche to cut what he wants, the result is that their freedom or willingness to produce controversial or even "relevant" local films is seriously stifled.

Director, Leung Po-chih, sees certain elements of the local film industry turning to

more "socially aware" subjects, "and if these films are stifled there will be a lot of anger," he says.

It is generally accepted that the censors are discriminatory in their interpretation of the "guide book" at their disposal, certainly many films that are passed could easily have been deleted.

"The real aim of the censorship seems to be to protect the Hongkong government, but even then they are oversensitive," says Mr Leung.

"Boat People", for example, was passed intact by the censor, despite its portrayal of the current Vietnamese regime in a less than favourable light, why? Mr Lebrun explains.

"We did not see Boat People as a political film, although some people saw it as such," he said.

But Mr Lebrun then conceded, "It was attacking an ideology if not a country."

Ann Hui says she was confident "Boat People" would not have trouble with the Hongkong censors after the script was passed by the Chinese authorities (it was filmed on the island of Hainan).

In the case of the "Deer Hunter", which was also passed under the more stringent rules for television, Mr Lebrun says, "it represented the Vietnamese Communists as barbarians, but it also showed the American soldiers in not too good a light."

Offence

Mr Lebrun admits that he and his team of censors are particularly "careful" in dealing with films that might cause offence to the Chinese.

"Because of our proximity to China and the fact that our relations with China have never been so good we take the attitude, why rock the boat? Certainly we are more careful in our approach."

It was in this context, he said, that a number of films from Taiwan had not been granted a licence in Hongkong in recent years.

Mr Lebrun added that he knew of no direct pressure for film censorship here being applied by the Chinese authorities themselves, although he conceded that complaints may have been made to government above his head.

And he added that at least one film from China had been cut here because of uncomplimentary references to the United States.

So what of the future, and the likelihood of more references to 1997 creeping into locally made films. Can directors expect to have all traces of the issue sliced from their films?

"It depends on the context of the story. We won't cut everything that is related to 1997," he said.

"But if it offends the sensitivities of the people, or if it scares people stiff, or if it precludes the outcome of the talks, or if the director sets himself up to make a decision on the outcome before the diplomats do, then we will cut it," he said.