

# CRIME: HONG KONG STYLE

**The Pilferers' Progress (aka Money Crazy) (12A) 發錢寒**

**MON 15 FEB, 18:20**

**Dir John Woo/1977 HK/92 mins/ Richard Ng, Ricky Hui, Angie Chiun**

**Cantonese with English and Chinese subtitles**

John Woo's name is often at the tip of our tongues when we think of Hong Kong cinema. His films *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), *The Killer* (1989) and *Hard Boiled* (1992) brought many new viewers to Hong Kong cinema in the '80s and '90s. Images of actor Chow Yun-fat, smoking cigars and wrecking teahouses in effortlessly cool slow motion continue to be some of the region's most iconic and they had an obvious impact worldwide, most famously on the Wachowskis and *The Matrix* (1999). Though internationally famous for these "heroic bloodshed" films of the 1980s, John Woo began his career long before then in the local television industry and was directing films for 10 years before developing his trademark style. Fans may be surprised with this early film, *The Pilferers' Progress*, and its 92 minutes of slapstick comedy, bad magic tricks, and dodgy make-up.

*The Pilferers' Progress* was Woo's first film as both writer and director. It was produced by Golden Harvest, a production studio formed in the 1970s to compete with the Shaw Brothers – the studio responsible for the iconic martial arts films of the '60s and '70s. The film enlists the help of two comedy heavyweights for its leading roles: Ricky Hui (playing Poison) and Richard Ng (Dragon). Ricky was one of the Hui Brothers, who as a group reinvigorated Hong Kong's entertainment industries through their appearances in television, films and popular music in the 1970s. He is best remembered in the UK for his role in the cult hopping-vampire hit *Mr Vampire* (1985). Ricky's on screen companion, Richard Ng rose to fame in the 1976 Hui Brothers film, *The Private Eyes*, and quickly became one of Hong Kong's most bankable comedy actors. *The Pilferers' Progress* and his film *Winner Takes All!* were the biggest earners at the Hong Kong box office in 1977 and he became a household name in the years following through regular appearances alongside Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung in the *Lucky Stars* film series. Keen-eyed viewers may have also seen him in brief roles on British television shows *Red Dwarf*, *River City* or *The Bill*.

Sitting somewhere between *Mission Impossible* and *Looney Tunes*, *The Pilferers' Progress* is a showcase for the diversity of Hong Kong cinema and a great example of the variety of films that fit under the "crime" umbrella. It was made during a period of transition when the martial tales of old were losing audiences to new stories set in modern day Hong Kong. *The Pilferers' Progress* was one of many films aimed at the urban population – often the working class – who were struggling to make ends meet during a period of rapid modernisation in Hong Kong which saw a widening class divide between the richest and the poorest. The story



Awarding funds from  
The National Lottery®



# HOME

## CRIME: HONG KONG STYLE

of conniving tricksters struggling to make a living, told through slapstick gags and off-colour humour was ubiquitous in Hong Kong in the 1980s and *The Pilferers' Progress* offers a rare glimpse of the beginnings of this hugely popular genre.

Fraser Elliot (University of Manchester)

Presented with the support of the BFI, awarding funds from The National Lottery. This season is also supported by Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office, London.