

# CRIME: HONG KONG STYLE

To Be Number One (18) 跛豪

SUN 13 MAR, 13:00

Dir Poon Man-kit/1991 HK/136 mins/ Ray Lui, Kent Cheng, Cecilia Yip

Cantonese, English, Mandarin, Thai, Hakka, with Chinese and English subtitles

Born in 1956, Poon Man-kit was one of many Hong Kong directors of his generation to make his name in local television. He made the transition into the film industry in 1988 where over a short 8 years he produced 11 films across a wide range of genres. *To Be Number One* was made in 1991 and remains most popular and critically acclaimed Poon made during his brief film career. Though he himself missed out on the Best Director award to Tsui Hark (for *Once Upon a Time in China*), *To Be Number One* was a big winner at the 1992 Hong Kong Film Awards where it picked up accolades for Best Picture and Best Screenplay. Poon retired from the Hong Kong film industry in 1996 and has since become a successful director of television series on the Chinese mainland.

Ho, the central character in this "true story" based on the life of mobster Ng Sik-ho, is played by Ray Lui whose acting career began on television in the late 1970s. Lui's celebrity sky rocketed in the 1980s through the popularity of *The Bund* – a show he starred in alongside international superstar Chow Yun-fat. (Poon Man-kit himself later adapted *The Bund* for the big screen as *Shanghai Grand* in 1996, his last film as director). Lui is joined by a host of regional stars in *To Be Number One*. Fat Kwan is played by Kent Cheng, a dependable actor of dramas and comedies who was almost always identified by his large size. Viewers may recognise him from his recent role as Fatso in the *Ip Man* series. *To Be Number One* also stars local sex symbol Amy Yip as May. Known for her roles in "Category III" exploitation films like the infamous *Sex and Zen* (1991) Yip appeared in *To Be Number One* at the height of her popularity, one year before she retired from show business altogether.

*To Be Number One*'s rags-to-riches triad story has an obvious debt to the American films of Martin Scorsese and Brian de Palma but the influence of Hong Kong's own cinema history is equally apparent. Following from the crime films of Ringo Lam and John Woo in the 1980s, *To Be Number One* continued the trend for morally ambiguous "heroes" who became less and less heroic over time. Though there are no saints in films like Lam's *City on Fire* (1987) (inspiration for Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*) or Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), their characters are often brought together by a sense of duty, honour, and brotherhood. By contrast, *To Be Number One* continually surprises us with its lack of morality and Poon's direction does little to condemn the worrying actions of its lead characters. This celebration of soft-core titillation and all things villainous was a smash hit with local audiences and *To Be Number One* kick-started a series of 'rise of the gangster' films in the years after its release.

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.