

CRIME: HONG KONG STYLE

That Demon Within (18) 魔警

FRI 1 APR, 18:10

**Dir Dante Lam/2014 HK CN/111 mins/Daniel Wu, Nick Cheung, Sixuan Chen
In Cantonese with Chinese and English subtitles**

Beast Stalker (15) 証人

SAT 19 MAR, 18:10

**Dir Dante Lam/2008 HK/109 mins/Nicholas Tse, Nick Cheung, Jingchu Zhang
In Cantonese with Chinese and English subtitles**

Dante Lam: The man behind *Beast Stalker* (2008) and *That Demon Within* (2014)

It is particularly pleasing that *CRIME: Hong Kong Style* includes the UK premiere of one of director Dante Lam's best recent films *That Demon Within* (as part of the Glasgow Film Festival). Lam is a director who has, with his striking visual style, brought the Hong Kong crime film crashing and banging into the 21st century.

Over the past decade Lam has established himself as one of the hottest properties in East Asian cinema, directing a number of ambitious films that have for the most part been both commercial and critical successes. He may not be the best known name in the line-up for *CRIME: Hong Kong Style* but he is one, alongside the likes of Felix Chong and Alan Mak, of a growing group of director's who have re-invigorated the Hong Kong crime film with their visceral visual style and willingness to use the genre to deal with contemporary social issues.

Following a couple of credits as Assistant Director to Gordon Chan, Dante Lam's first major directing credit – not his first – was in 1998 as co-director, again with Gordon Chan, on the crime film *Beast Cops*. This film was driven by a fantastic performance from Hong Kong stalwart Anthony Wong as a charismatic yet ultimately compromised cop. Since then he has worked prolifically, with the best of his work undoubtedly coming within the arena of the crime film. Most notably, *Jiang Hu: The Triad Zone* (2000), which combines a gangster story with broad comedy and even flashbacks to the main character's life as a petty criminal in England.

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Lam followed up these early credits with a number of impressive crime films. For many it was *Beast Stalker* in 2008 that confirmed the director as one of the major talents to watch in the Hong Kong film industry and since then he has made a number of top-notch Hong Kong crime films. These are often – as in the case of *Beast Stalker* – inhabited by psychologically complex characters, in this instance a killer for hire (played by Nick Cheung) who is both physically and psychologically scarred and kills to ensure he can care for his disabled wife.

Lam's subsequent films have not always been without controversy. For example, his police story *The Sniper* was released in 2009 after some extensive re-editing after one of its stars, Edinson Chen was involved in a huge scandal. This followed the fact that photographs that he had allegedly taken of himself and a series of actresses found their way into the local press and magazines. To avoid the ensuing negative publicity *The Sniper* was extensively cut before its release to reduce Chen's part.

Despite this setback Lam continued to develop his style and reputation with a series of varyingly impressive, explosive films. These included *Fire of Conscience* (2010), *The Stool Pigeon* (2010) and *The Viral Factor* (2011). The latter making extensive use of Kuala Lumpur as a setting for some of its most action packed sequences.

The central character in *That Demon Within* is another of Lam's psychologically complex creations. Police Officer Mike, whilst an excellent officer, is overly contentious and clearly has a number of issues with the behaviour of his colleagues. It is his desire to continuously stick to the book that leads him to become increasingly distant from his fellow cops on the beat. In addition to this he becomes haunted by psychological issues brought on by an encounter he has with a member of a ruthless criminal gang who wear traditional masks to hide their identity.

What is striking is the way that both *Beast Stalker* and *That Demon Within*, and indeed Lam's work more extensively, offer characterisations that belie the criticism - often laid at the door of Hong Kong cinema - that it deals in nothing but broadly drawn stereotypes. Not that either is shy of drawing things broadly when it comes to Nick Cheung's malevolent presence in both films.

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Another notable aspect of Dante Lam's filmmaking is the way that he works again and again with the same actors. This has the effect of creating something of a stock company of performers. These include major stars of contemporary Asian cinema such as Nicolas Tse – whose nuanced performances drive both *Beast Stalker* and *Stool Pigeon*; Richie Jen – whose stoic characteristics Lam has used to good effect as in *The Sniper*; Nick Cheung - whose persona of cool malevolence is used with great effect particularly in *Beast Stalker* and *That Demon Within*. Lam also reuses character actors such as the likable Lui Kai-chi who crops up playing sidekicks and underlings again and again.

Alongside his action packed crime films, Dante Lam has also directed a number of films with a sports theme. His 2013 mixed martial arts action movie *Unbeatable*, again with Nick Cheung playing one of the lead characters was a big hit across Asia, whilst his latest release is the cycling drama *To the Fore* (2015).

Lam is currently completing another action driven crime orientated film, *Operation Mekong*. This project reunites him with the Taiwanese actor and singer Eddie Peng who appeared in both *Unbeatable* and *To the Fore*. With much of it shot in Thailand and Mainland China, it is due for release later this year in Hong Kong and certainly looks like one to look out for.

So, even if he doesn't make another film, Dante Lam's contribution to contemporary Hong Kong cinema is significant. He has brought a violent, energetic and kinetic visual style to the contemporary Hong Kong crime film and along with the likes of Johnnie To and Wai Ka Fai, Andrew Lau, Felix Chong and Alan Mak, in doing so has helped reinvent the Hong Kong crime film for the 21st century. Our *CRIME: Hong Kong Style* season is certainly enhanced by their presence.

Andy Willis (Season Curator, *CRIME: Hong Kong Style*)

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