



A Better Tomorrow Ying hung boon sik

Director: John Woo

Production Company: Cinema City Co

Producers: John Woo, Tsui Hark

Screenplay: John Woo, Chan Hing-ka, Leung Suk-wah

Director of Photography: Wong Wing-hang

Editors: Ma Kam, David Wu

Music: Joseph Koo

Cast:

Chow Yun-fat (*Mark Lee*)

Ti Lung (*Sung Tse-ho*)

Leslie Cheung (*Sung Tse-kit*)

Waise Lee (*Shing*)

Emily Chu (*Jackie*)

Kenneth Tsang (*Ken*)

John Woo (*Inspector Wu*)

Tsui Hark (*Judge*)

Hong Kong 1986

96 mins

Digital 4K (restoration)

The screening on Fri 3 Jul will be introduced by Dr Lin Feng, University of Leicester

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Bullets and Brotherhood: The Films of John Woo

A Better Tomorrow

Every origin story has a prequel. It was Rick Baker, editor of martial arts magazine *Eastern Heroes*, who in the late '80s identified the emergent genre he called 'Heroic Bloodshed'. This was a group of Hong Kong action films that replaced the traditional weapons of kung fu with guns and explosives. Its key proponents were directors John Woo and Ringo Lam, and producer Tsui Hark. The movement's starting point is typically traced to a specific film, Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986). It's a tale of two brothers, one a criminal (Ti Lung), the other a policeman (Leslie Cheung), and the strains on their fraternal bond as the former serves a prison sentence and attempts, against the odds, to forge a new future for himself.

With its focus on intense homosocial relations, its mix of action and melodrama, its characters' strict moral codes, its stylised gunplay, and of course its introduction of actor Chow Yun-fat (playing the criminal's old comrade-in-arms Mark Lee), *A Better Tomorrow* would, despite its relatively low budget and almost complete lack of advertising, make a record-breaking HK\$34.7 million at the Hong Kong box office and, importantly, get a US theatrical release in 1990 after some festival play. Woo's film set the template for a run of features, Asian or otherwise, that would chase its success by imitating its scenarios and stylings.

Not that *A Better Tomorrow* emerged from a vacuum. It was reimagining specific story elements from both Patrick Lung Kong's *The Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967) and Hua Shan's *The Brothers* (1979), itself a remake of Yash Chopra's Indian crime drama *Deewaar* (1975). It was also clearly drawing inspiration from other sources, primarily (if not exclusively) American: the aggressive rhythms of hard-boiled fiction, the existential fatalism of film noir, the outlaw honour of the oater, the procedural doom of a Jean-Pierre Melville policier, the slick spectacle of France's *cinéma du look*, and even the tough-guys-and-guns ethos of high-(fire)powered American '80s actioners. Indeed, despite its forward-looking (English) title, *A Better Tomorrow* concerns men locked into past fates. Even Mark's look in the film's opening scenes – a duster and Alain Delon sunglasses – announces a man as much out of time as out of place.

Yet if the constituent parts of *A Better Tomorrow* were hardly original, their specific recombination would go on to have its own influence on cinema. For as well as engendering all the conventions of the Heroic Bloodshed genre, *A Better Tomorrow* would spawn remakes from India (Sanjay Gupta's *Aatish: Feel the Fire*, 1994) and Korea (Song Hae-sung's *Invincible*, 2010), as well as two sequels (Woo's *A Better Tomorrow II*, 1987 and Hark's prequel *A Better Tomorrow III: Love and Death in Saigon*, 1989).

Anton Bitel, bfi.org.uk, 10 July 2019

John Woo on beginnings and 'A Better Tomorrow'

I didn't go to film school because my family was too poor. The studios were very conservative and the industry was corrupt. Then in 1969 a company called Cathay welcomed a new generation of intellectuals and our whole group went in. I became a continuity person and was able to save enough money to keep on making experimental films. I was also writing film criticism.

Bullets and Brotherhood: The Films of John Woo

A Better Tomorrow Ying hung boon sik

Fri 3 Jul 18:15 (+ intro by Dr Lin Feng, University of Leicester); Sat 18 Jul 18:15

A Better Tomorrow II Ying hung boon sik II

Fri 3 Jul 20:50; Sat 18 Jul 20:45

The Killer Dip huet seung hung

Sat 4 Jul 20:45; Fri 17 Jul 18:05 (+ intro by Vicki Brown, co-founder of the MilkTea collective)

Once a Thief Chung hang sei hoi

Sun 5 Jul 18:10; Thu 16 Jul 20:30

Hard Target

Tue 7 Jul 18:20; Fri 17 Jul 20:40; Wed 29 Jul 20:50

Bullet in the Head Dip huet gai tau

Wed 8 Jul 20:20 (+ intro by film critic Katie Smith-Wong); Tue 21 Jul 20:25

Hard Boiled Lat sau san taam

Sat 11 Jul 20:30; Wed 22 Jul 20:20 (+ intro by Xavier Alexandre Pillai, BFI TV Programmer); Sat 25 Jul 14:45

25 and Under: An Introduction to John Woo

Thu 16 Jul 18:15 BFI Blue Room

Face/Off

Fri 24 Jul 18:05; Fri 31 Jul 20:20

Red Cliff Part I Chi bi + **Red Cliff Part II**

Chi bi: Jue zhan tian xia

Sat 25 Jul 17:00

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I later worked for the Shaw Brothers as an assistant director to martial arts director Zhang Cheh for *Boxer from Shantung* and *Blood Brothers*. In 1973 I was hired to co-direct an independent low-budget film called *Young Dragons*, which was eventually banned in Hong Kong because it was too violent. It lost money, and was sold to Golden Harvest, where they signed me up for three years. I directed kung-fu pictures – often shot in Korea for 200,000 HK dollars. This is not what I wanted to do, but I was under a lot of pressure. I was 27, and the youngest director working at Golden Harvest. Some people were assistant directors for more than ten years before they were allowed to direct.

Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung worked as stuntmen for me. I recognised their potential and gave Chan his first acting part in *Countdown in Kung Fu* (aka *The Hand of Death*, 1975). Then I made a Cantonese opera film, *Princess Chang Ping* (1975), which was very popular. Later I worked as a production consultant to help the great comedian Michael Hui on his first two films: *Games Gamblers Play* and *The Private Eyes*. And it was the comedy *Money Crazy* (aka *The Pilferer's Progress*), a smash hit in 1977, that really established me. In 1981, after my 17th movie, I left Golden Harvest to direct the first picture of a newly founded company. Cinema City.

My film *Laughing Times* (1981) made money. and I was willing to accept a much lower director's fee for the opportunity to make the films I wanted. To my disappointment, the studio wanted me to do nothing but comedies. That was one of the worst times of my life. The three owners of Cinema City, finding me 'too old-fashioned', sent me to Taiwan, where I was stuck for over two years. They let me direct two films there, but the less said about them the better. When I returned to Hong Kong, Tsui Hark, who was starting his own production company, the Film Workshop, offered me a job. This is how we came to collaborate on *A Better Tomorrow*. A lot of the emotion behind the film reflects my friendship with Hark.

A Better Tomorrow develops an idea we both had, though basically it was I who wrote the script. Apart from the Cantonese opera film, I always wrote my own screenplays, even for the comedies – in this I'm an exception in Hong Kong, where directors mostly rely on others to write screenplays. For *A Better Tomorrow*, Tsui Hark first wanted to do a film about three women, and I changed it to three men. We both agreed that the film should stress human values, and Hark encouraged me to project my own feelings. The result was much better, much richer than he had expected.

John Woo, *Sight and Sound*, May 1993 (Translated by Terence Chang)