

MAN OF TAI CHI

As he prepares to remake the 1980s classic *Kickboxer*, actor turned director Stephen Fung tells Arthur Tam about finding inspiration from video games, the limitless possibilities in China and making an assault on Hollywood. Photography Calvin Sit. Art direction Jeroen Brulez

In the late years of the colonial era, Hong Kong saw a trend of arriving overseas-born Chinese talent and returning international school kids trying to make it big in the entertainment industry. Nic Tse was among them, as were Daniel Wu, Maggie Q and Shu Qi, all now household names. And another such hopeful, who rose to prominence in what was Hong Kong's own school of international starlets, was the adorably dimpled Stephen Fung Tak-lun, a fresh-faced Hong Kong-born, US-educated youngster who was looking to cut his teeth in the film industry. Indeed, at the time, few could have anticipated that Fung would become one of the few respected multi-talents in the city, carving out a career that would start with singing, then shift to acting, and later, start him on a directorial path which may now lead him to Hollywood.

During his student years at German Swiss International School, Fung already showed signs of following a creative path, practising away at the guitar with the dream of becoming a rockstar while also developing his taste for film with his self-recorded, spliced and edited home movies. After high school, Fung went to the University of Michigan to study graphic design, but would return to Hong Kong every summer to find work, eventually landing a gig at MTV (based here at the time), where he made connections with some of the industry's top influencers. Jackie Chan's manager, Woody Chan, was one of them, as was composer Mark Lui. But it was the relationship he forged with Gold East CEO Paco Wong that eventually led to Fung's first big break. Fung signed for Gold East, spent a brief period as singer of mediocre band Dry, and then started taking on small roles in films. He landed an important leading role in the tragic gay romance tale *Bishonen*, where he starred alongside his future business partner and best friend Daniel Wu as well as future girlfriend Shu Qi, which led to even bigger roles in films such as young adult action thriller *Gen X Cop* and the hit TVB series *The Green Hope*.

Despite building a relatively successful acting career, playing everything from a male

prostitute to a disabled pianist, Fung never quite climbed to the heights enjoyed by some of his contemporaries, many of whom have gained an international level of fame. Yet, while he may never have reached his full potential in front of the camera, Fung has made a significant mark behind it.

Since making his directorial debut with 2004's gangster comedy flick *Enter the Phoenix*, the now 39-year-old has shed his pop idol persona and gained respect as a serious filmmaker. After writing and directing his next two films, *House of Fury* and *Jump*, Fung, alongside Wu, both in search of a more creative outlet, started their very own production company in 2011, Diversion Pictures, backed by the titans of Chinese film, Huayi Brothers Media. With big investors and a huge budget, Fung wasted no time in releasing the first two instalments of his steampunk martial arts trilogy, *Tai Chi 0* and *Tai Chi Zero*, which collectively grossed \$50m at the box office.

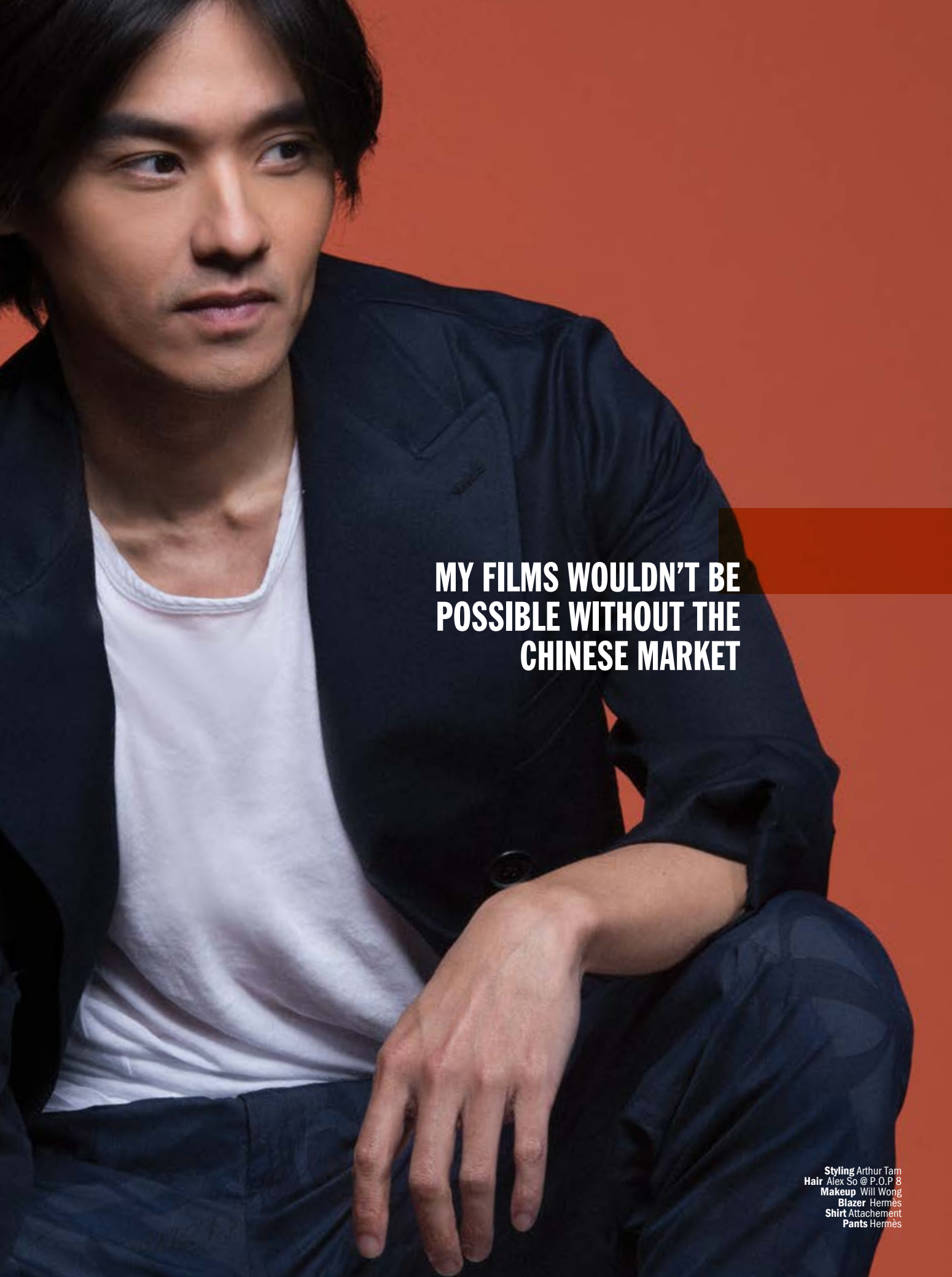
Indeed, this duo of films laid testament to Fung's aptitude to make films that sell – a talent he is next putting into use with a remake of the Jean-Claude Van Damme 1989 classic, *Kickboxer*. And as Fung prepares to commence filming on what will be his very first English-language release, *Time Out* sits down with him to talk about what may well be the young director's launching pad to Hollywood...

Hey Stephen, thanks for sitting down with us. So, we've been very interested in what you've been doing as a director. Take us back to the start of your love for filmmaking – where did that begin?

I think it was when I realised that I had the ability to do so. It's not like I came into this business thinking that I knew I wanted to be a director. But through acting, I started picking up how different directors wanted to tell their story through film. So I started with my friends to shoot MVs and other small production scripts and one thing led to another.

So it was purely out of interest?

Yes, it was. Back then, I had no editing ▶



**MY FILMS WOULDN'T BE
POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE
CHINESE MARKET**

Styling Arthur Tam
Hair Alex So @ P.O.P 8
Makeup Will Wong
Blazer Hermès
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Pants Hermès

I USED TO DRESS UP LIKE CHOW YUN-FAT, WEARING MY DAD'S TRENCH COAT AND CARRYING A BB GUN

machines, so I just used a video camera and pressed the start and stop button each time. I knew technically how to put things together though. I think because of that, I knew I was interested, so I started shooting MVs and commercials. This was around 2003. For me, money and making a living is important, but it's not the only thing. It's also about doing what I like doing, because if I do that, it leads to a more fulfilling and prosperous career. If you do what you like to do, you'll win in the end.

Do you have a preference for acting or directing?

If you ask me now, I would say I like directing more, but I still enjoy acting. But maybe in a few years, things will change. It's probably because the first 10 years of my career focused continuously on acting, which can get boring.

You've taken on quite a diverse range of roles, though – surely that was quite exciting still?

True. I try to choose roles that are quite risky, but those roles weren't plentiful. Ten or more years ago, Hong Kong films were all quite similar. The roles that usually came to me were playing college students or cops. When you get too many of those roles, it gets boring. I usually like playing roles that are less commercial. So, I think I'm going to be focusing on directing for the most part.

As a director, you've made a lot of martial arts action films. Would you say this is your main genre?

I would say I enjoy action-drama the most. I don't like directing anything that doesn't have interesting characters. I like movies where the characters are not just there to provide action sequences. There needs to be a purpose to the action. The film that I just directed called *Tai Chi 0* doesn't have a complex story, but it makes sense and has strong characters, which makes the story compelling.

There's been a lot of buzz about your new film. Can you tell us a bit about it?

Well, it's a remake of *Kickboxer*, and it's also going to be called *Kickboxer*. Right now, the script is ready, so we are ready to move on to the next stage and start casting. It's an English language movie and it's going to be set in Thailand. We're hoping to get a larger Western appeal from this film.

Are we talking Hollywood?

Kickboxer is a Hollywood film, so I would hope so.

What inspired you to remake this movie?

It's a film that I really enjoyed watching when I was young. Growing up in Hong Kong, you get exposed to a lot of martial arts films and we make a lot of good ones, so we have a pretty high standard. The movies that were coming in from Hollywood at that time were not very good, except *Kickboxer*, which was one of the good ones. Van Damme is a trained martial artist, so his moves look authentic in the film. We are not just going to do a direct remake.

There has to be something of importance that warrants a remake. I hope it's going to be a challenging experience.

So is Van Damme going to have a cameo in the film?

Maybe... nothing is confirmed just quite yet.

Compared to your previous films, what's going to be different with your approach on *Kickboxer*?

Style-wise, this movie is going to have a gritty tone. With *Tai Chi 0*, we were trying to achieve something that was more family friendly because there are not a lot of those films in the Mainland. We wanted something like *National Treasure* to cater toward a younger audience. For the next film, it's probably going to be something more brutal and mature.

You mentioned you hope *Kickboxer* will be a Hollywood release, but you've worked a lot in China so far. What do you think about the Chinese film industry at the moment?

Hong Kong's film industry is still moving, but the golden era of the 80s has passed. We used to pump out maybe 300 films a year, but now we have around 30. In terms of quality, though, I think we have a better percentage of good films. We have directors like Wong Kar-wai making some really good films. And now we have a lot of co-productions with China and their large box office distribution. For example, movies like *Tai Chi 0* would have never been made 10 years ago, simply because of the cost. So in terms of realising what I want to do, it wouldn't be possible without the Chinese market. I know a lot is being said about censorship in China, but luckily with titles like *Tai Chi 0*, there is nothing much that can limit my creativity.

So you like working in China?

Yeah, it's cool – different and exciting. We used to shoot a lot of movies in Hong Kong and the weather is pretty much just hot all year round. But with more production in China, there are different environmental settings you can play with. And culturally, it is different over there, which is new and exciting.

It's been almost 20 years since you started up in the Hong Kong entertainment industry. What's the biggest difference now from when you first started?

A lot of things have changed. Now I focus on more behind the scenes work. And every time I direct, it's a different kind of work from being an actor. When I was just an actor, I could work simultaneously between a few projects. But as a director, you have to be there from day one til post-production, so it's not the same use of your time. In a way it's very stressful, but it's rewarding, because usually I write my own stories.

Sure. And for your stories, what really inspires you?

A lot of my ideas come from comic books and video games. I've always read mangas and watched anime, and I play a lot of video games. Even as a kid, I'd play *Dungeons and Dragons*.



Tank top Hermès
Pants Hermès

We've got to aim for something new. I want to do something different or at least try to do something different.

So you are kind of a geek then?

I guess you could say that!

Throughout your directing career what are some of the major challenges that you've had to face?

At first, going from an actor to a director, I had to earn people's trust. People see you in front of the screen, so they see you as an actor and not a director. But once you do a decent job, that perception changes. Come the second time around, it's much easier.

Do you think you're respected as a director now?

Yeah, I think so – especially in Hong Kong, where I've done five movies.

How have you felt about the trajectory of your career so far? Are you happy with it?

Yeah, I am. I think I'm very fortunate to still be in the business. Not everybody gets to do what they like to do.

Is there anyone in particular you really want to work with?

One of my favourite films is *A Better Tomorrow*. When I was a kid, I liked dressing up like Chow Yun-fat, wearing my dad's trench coat and carrying a BB gun. I would love to work with Chow Yun-fat.

And finally, what's on the Stephen Fung checklist for things to accomplish in your career?

I don't really have a checklist, so I don't know. I choose to play it by ear. ■

For more on Fung's work, check out diversionpictures.com.