
Introduction

Hong Kong Independent Cinema in the Post-Handover Era

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Hong Kong independent cinema has gained more and more currency in both academia and film production and reception circles since the 1997 handover. The term “independent cinema” is frequently invoked in critical discourse and film festival programming; it suggests a distancing from the mainstream film industry in terms of styles, genres, and modes of production, distribution, and financing. Independent filmmakers can be auteurs with greater control over the subject matter and aesthetic choices compared with their mainstream counterparts. Still, creative autonomy is never absolute and may come with a trade-off between the filmmaker’s convictions and the need to reach a wider audience. Filmmakers have to play by the emerging rules of independent cinema. Dynamic and ambivalent exchanges between independent and mainstream cinema are constantly at play in Hong Kong when independent filmmakers (or films) enter mainstream production and circulation.

To call attention to the burgeoning independent film scene and fledgling, relatively unrecognized filmmakers in post-millennial Hong Kong, my colleagues and I have recently put together the first Chinese-language monograph on this subject, *Xianggang duli dianying tujing: fangwen pinglun ji (Indiescape Hong Kong: Critical Essays and Perspectives)* (Tam, Lee, and Ng). Our project interweaves critical scholarship in film studies with in-depth interviews with individual filmmakers in order to foster linkages between academic work and first-hand personal accounts.

My colleagues and I also aim at introducing to the English-speaking world the complex topos, political contours, and historical developments of Hong Kong’s

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independent film scene in the past two decades. (Our book encountered clandestine censorship and rejection by a university press and a couple of commercial presses in Hong Kong, possibly because some of the chapters addressed the topic of public protests, before it was published in 2018 with the support of an independent publisher.) We believe that it is pivotal for this cinema to capture greater attention and visibility in international academic and pedagogical communities. Hence this collaboration with *Ex-position*.

This feature issue includes articles that examine the rapidly growing independent cinema in post-1997 Hong Kong. Focusing on younger and less publicized directors and their works, the articles interrogate aesthetic sensibilities, intellectual positions, and socio-political functions from the perspectives of filmmakers, critics, academics, students, social activists, and concerned viewers. The films under discussion urge the audience to reflect on the lifeworld of youth and political resistance; the relationship between city and nation; the politics of ecology, land, and local community; the issue of censorship; and the ethics of documentary making and social participation.

Social activism has been increasingly tied to the claims of environmental justice and individual cultural rights in post-handover Hong Kong. In “Of Activism and the Land,” Winnie L. M. Yee explores the ecological movement intent on reimagining the relationship between land and the Hong Kong people through a study of Freddie Chan’s documentaries, which suggest an ecocritical return to land and nature. Enoch Yee-lok Tam’s “A Turn to the Politics of Place in Hong Kong Independent Documentaries” examines the social activism around land within larger political parameters, and argues for a politics of place that embraces urban preservation, democratic participation, spatial occupation, and the reconstruction of communities. Both studies point to an awareness that the individual’s right to the city—the right to form social ties and connections with others, and build relationships with nature and land—is increasingly seen as far more important than the individual’s liberty to reap profits and benefits. The Hong Kong government, a de facto property developer and landlord (probably the most profitable in the world), treats people either as chattels or as stakeholders in society, seeing their value merely in economic and utilitarian terms. The documentaries discussed by Yee and Tam are committed to defending the right of individual citizens to shape their livelihoods and sustain the built environment. People live to pursue happiness, and to contribute to their fellow citizens and community.

Globalization may be one reason for the revival of local cultural identities. More crucially, the collaborative forces of Chinese nationalism and transnational capitalism have operated in the city with little regard for the interests or voices of

underrepresented groups; full democratic participation is not possible in the current political system. In the neoliberal market economy, most mainstream films in Hong Kong are made with the mainland China market in mind, and are self-censored accordingly. The rapid growth of a local independent film industry that addresses Hong Kong issues are made primarily for Hong Kong audiences—the non-stakeholders in the global market economy. Yet, as Vivian P. Y. Lee argues in “The *Ten Years* Phenomenon,” a low-budget film like *Ten Years* may have become a transnational film phenomenon because politically provocative and non-commercial films can partake of the new media consumption environment and alternative global networks and thus go beyond the censorial mechanism and mainland Chinese national politics.

The 2014 Umbrella Movement, in which young and peaceful activists campaigned for universal suffrage and political reform, was tinged with a sense of idealism in a climate of powerlessness—powerlessness to change the deepening inequality between the stakeholders and non-stakeholders, the haves and have-nots. In “Looking through My Fly’s-Eye View,” I examine the critically acclaimed documentary *Yellowing* and the storytelling techniques filmmaker Chan Tze-woon employed to portray the participants in the Umbrella Movement and to catch the spontaneous responses, desires, hopes, and fears of the *enfants terribles*, the rebels with a cause.

Five years since the Umbrella Movement, the city has descended into complete mayhem since June 2019, with the violence-addicted police force stepping up suppression and making wanton arrests of activist students, journalists, social workers, and democratic legislators related to the unabated pro-democracy protests. How can film storytelling, both fictional and non-fictional, respond to a reality that exceeds human imagination and tolerance? How do filmmakers tell stories about local lives and changes in society? In “Too Much Reality?” Mike Ingham reflects on the educational-observational film world of Tammy Cheung and Augustine Lam, respected documentary pioneers and educators. Cheung and Lam have employed a fly-on-the-wall cinematography and observational mode to inspire measured and balanced critical debate. The neutrality adopted by these veteran documentarists contrasts with the partisan manner adopted by young documentary filmmakers such as Chan Tze-woon, who turned into an active participant himself while shooting *Yellowing*. Through exploring the trajectory of Cheung and Lam’s films and philosophy, Ingham not only reveals the historical changes in Hong Kong society and culture, but also ponders the question: Is the modest observational documentary method capable of conveying the uncomfortable truths of brutality and violence that we are witnessing in 2019? His remarks

on the ethics of film form and the representation of reality recall Theodor w. Adorno: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34). This appeal concerns not only artistic means or intellectual goals but also the ethico-political responsibility that filmmakers bear in the face of “too much reality” in post-millennial Hong Kong.

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