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# The *Ten Years* Phenomenon: Promises and Perils of Politically Engaged Cinema in Hong Kong

Vivian P. Y. Lee

## ABSTRACT

This essay revisits the circumstances under which the low-budget Hong Kong independent film *Ten Years* became a transnational film phenomenon. As an example of bottom-up resistance to official censorship, *Ten Years* is also a product of an emergent politics of media consumption characterized by a participatory mode of film and media spectatorship. While the film's success has inspired adaptations of the "Ten Years model" in Thailand, Japan, and Taiwan, it is also a product of the prevailing censorship regimes in Hong Kong and China that are exercising both overt and covert controls over the film production and exhibition within its bounds. The film's iconic singularity, therefore, also bespeaks the predicaments of making politically engaged films in Hong Kong today.

**KEYWORDS** politically engaged cinema, post-Umbrella Movement films, Hong Kong independent cinema, censorship, participatory cinema, resistance from below

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**Vivian P. Y. LEE**, Associate Professor, Department of Chinese and History, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Hong Kong officially entered the post-colonial era with the return of sovereignty to mainland China on July 1, 1997. More than two decades have passed since the change of flag, and Hong Kong is increasingly making international headline news, less for its clichéd images as one of Asia’s “little dragons” or the “Pearl of the Orient” than because of its well-organized mass protests over universal suffrage and political reforms, culminating in the Umbrella Movement in late 2014.<sup>1</sup> Alongside this unprecedented “Occupy” campaign, an incipient sense of ennui started to unfold, as local citizens began to sense the erosion of the city’s “high degree of autonomy” promised by the Basic Law, which amounts to the mini-constitution of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region after its return to Chinese rule. This, however, is not the only promise broken. Rocketing housing prices, an ever-widening wealth gap, exorbitant government investments in controversial public infrastructure projects lacking general consensus, and deteriorating levels of social and healthcare services are regular features in the local news. What is noteworthy is that the general social and political atmosphere in Hong Kong in the last few years has opened up a new space for collective self-reflection and rekindled interest in alternative forms of cultural self-expression.

Against a narrowing space of political participation, more experimental and noncommercial films are making a moderate comeback. The majority of these films take a highly critical look at the social and political malaise and injustice in present-day Hong Kong. In the past few years, a number of independent films have won applause from local and overseas audiences and critics. These include full-length feature films, mockumentaries, and documentaries that cast fresh and critical looks at the city’s crisis-stricken present. The more polemical works carry didactic criticism of the excesses of capitalism and the neoliberal state apparatus. As a contribution to this special section on Hong Kong independent cinema, this essay will focus on an omnibus film project, *Ten Years*, as a recent case of bottom-up resistance against official censorship and systemic marginalization of dissenting voices in mainstream cinema.<sup>2</sup> It argues that, as a low-budget independent film by a team of new directors, the film’s critical and commercial success reflects an emergent

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<sup>1</sup> Over 100,000 civilians, mostly students and young adults in their thirties, occupied the main roads of the city’s busiest commercial districts for seventy-nine days in protest when hopes of establishing universal suffrage and genuine democratic reforms by 2017 were virtually extinguished. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region’s clearing of the occupied sites by force was followed by isolated conflicts between the protestors and the police throughout 2015 and 2016. Between 2018 and 2019, the leaders of the 2014 protests, some of whom were students, were prosecuted and sentenced to various jail terms amidst wide public outcry.

<sup>2</sup> Although the production team consisted of a professional crew, *Ten Years* can be understood as a “bottom-up” project in all other aspects of its production, from funding to mode of production and circulation (to be discussed below).

politics of media consumption and circulation in the public sphere as well as the larger reality of political censorship in Hong Kong today. Also pertinent to this discussion is the global attention the film has attracted since its release in 2015 and the transnational adaptation of the “Ten Years model” by filmmakers in Japan, Thailand, and Taiwan. Featuring an array of independent shorts utilizing Orwellian political allegory, science fiction, and social drama, these follow-up projects resonate with the Hong Kong template in their cinematic imagination of a not-so-distant future as almost a historical endpoint in which salvation has to resort to fantasy. From a self-funded collective film project to a transnational media phenomenon, the making of *Ten Years* encapsulates the promises and perils of making politically engaged films in Hong Kong today. While the film can be regarded as a successful case of resistance from below, its transnational popularity grew in proportion to the censorship regimes in Hong Kong and mainland China. The complex interplay of top-down and bottom-up forces in the production and reception of *Ten Years* can therefore shed light on the existential condition of independent cinema in Hong Kong, if not Hong Kong society at large. The discussion below will first revisit the circumstances under which *Ten Years* has evolved from a low-budget independent film project into a transnational film phenomenon, followed by an examination of the interplay between the film’s Orwellian prophecies and the way in which its mobile trajectory against covert censorship exemplifies a new politics of consumption spreading across conventional and new media platforms. The conclusion will reflect on the likely prospect of politically engaged filmmaking in Hong Kong.

### The Making of *Ten Years*

*Ten Years* is one of the most (if not the most) widely publicized and controversial “post-Umbrella Movement” films. The term “post-Umbrella Movement film” has gained momentum in mass media to refer to films that make direct or indirect references to the civil disobedience movement in 2014 and Hong Kong’s political situation ever since. (Some of these films will be mentioned below.) Allegedly, commercial theaters were reluctant to screen post-Umbrella Movement films despite their popularity among the local audience. Only *Ten Years*, the first film of its kind, was shown at a limited number of venues. Andrew Choi, the producer of *Ten Years*, came up with the idea in 2014 of making a film dedicated to his home city. Having raised a total of HKD500,000 (approximately USD70,000)<sup>3</sup> through his

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<sup>3</sup> This figure is based on my interview with the *Ten Years* production team (12-13 Feb. 2019, unpublished).

personal contacts, he lined up a mostly unpaid crew to start production. Originally conceived as a collection of shorts about Hong Kong in ten years' time, the film's production was interrupted by the Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong's first ever large-scale civil disobedience campaign against the Chinese government's high-handed rejection of universal suffrage as promised by the Basic Law. In a personal interview, the directors told me that they felt compelled to alter the original stories after what they witnessed on the occupied sites.<sup>4</sup> According to Choi, the film was not even intended for theatrical release. Upon completion, the film was first shown at a special screening session at the campus of a local university, before it was recommended for inclusion in the 2015 Asian Film Festival. A five-part composite film that speculates about Hong Kong's near future, *Ten Years* became an instant hit among the domestic audience, who found an uncanny resemblance between the film's nightmarish visions and the crisis-stricken present. The film soon caught the attention of local media for its unusually candid predictions of Hong Kong's social and political future (further discussed below).

An all-newcomers production, *Ten Years* has been among the best-known and most widely circulated independent films in Hong Kong in the last two years. Restricted screen space did not deter the film's accelerating momentum at special screenings and film festival showcases in Hong Kong and overseas. So far the film has been invited to over thirty film festivals and special screening events overseas. Amidst heated public debates and controversies over the film's artistic merit, the film won the Best Picture Award at the Hong Kong Film Awards (HKFA) in 2016, to the surprise of both domestic and international audiences. Indeed, as a low-budget, independent feature by five new directors with no credentials in mainstream cinema, the film's Best Picture win set a record in the history of the HKFA. It was disclosed at the award ceremony that local celebrities had declined to present this award, probably due to a generalized aversion to politically sensitive issues. This deep-running apprehension of being on the wrong side of politics among local celebrities (probably out of fear of losing the China market) was captured in a remark by Derek Yee, Chairman of the HKFA's organizing committee, during the award presentation: "What we have to fear most is fear itself." In China, the live broadcast of the ceremony was interrupted when the Best Picture Award was announced. Ironically, the film continued to pick up momentum at local and overseas screenings as a result of this barely disguised political censorship. By the end of 2018, the production crew had collaborated with filmmakers in Thailand,

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Other online sources use a slightly higher figure around HKD600,000 (USD77,000).

<sup>4</sup> Personal interview, 12-13 Feb. 2019.

Taiwan, and Japan to produce their own versions of *Ten Years*. The rejection of these political films by local commercial theaters has intensified the public's concern over unofficial censorship in Hong Kong today, despite press statements by event organizers denying such claims (Lee, "Relocalising" 68-69). The accolades bestowed on *Ten Years* are more an acknowledgement of its moral courage in mounting incisive political criticisms of the ruling regime than a recognition of its overall artistic accomplishments. Despite its technical shortcomings, *Ten Years* has continued touring locally and internationally over the last few years, and probably will remain one of the most iconic independent works in the years to come.

### **A Political Film?**

The five shorts in *Ten Years* touch upon some of the most pressing issues faced by Hongkongers today, from language politics ("Dialect"), political activism ("Self-immolator") and the systemic erasure of local culture and identity ("Eggs") to collective amnesia ("Season of the End") and the manipulation of public fear in the name of national security ("Extras"). Conceived independently and stylistically diverse, the five stories exhibit a thematic coherence in their imagination of an Orwellian near-future which commands a sense of urgency. In "Dialect," a taxi driver is increasingly alienated from his son and disadvantaged in his profession due to his inability to communicate in Mandarin, the official language that has replaced Cantonese as the dominant language in everyday life. The pressure to give up one's native language, the film suggests, amounts to an erasure of cultural identity and memory, which the father painfully witnesses in his son's education. This father-son relationship is echoed in "Eggs," in which a grocery store owner insists on selling locally produced eggs as a way of preserving his cultural roots. His son, who attends primary school, cautiously stays aloof from his Red Guard-like classmates, who are seen patrolling local neighborhoods to report on suspicious, non-conformist activities. Unable to give up their hobby of reading unauthorized books, father and son take refuge in a samizdat bookstore as they carry on with their everyday life.

"Self-immolator" and "Extras" can be seen as companion pieces on political participation and conspiracy. "Self-immolator" tells the story of a student activist whose heroic self-sacrifice is echoed by the self-immolation of an unknown elderly woman in support of his cause. By adding a second martyr, the film seeks to pay tribute to undersung heroes in mass political struggles against state tyranny. The unnamed elderly woman also reminds viewers of the potential misrepresentation

of age and gender in political participation.<sup>5</sup> “Extras” adopts a quicker-paced, political-thriller style of storytelling. Two Triad sidekicks are drawn into a high-level conspiracy orchestrated by the government to instill public fear of a potential terrorist attack in order to legitimize a national security law. The lighter punches on this weighty subject delivered through comic action draw attention to the absurdity of the situation without losing sight of its real-world references, as Hongkongers are not new to controversies over tightening public order regulations in the name of national security.<sup>6</sup>

As critics have noted, “Season of the End” seems to stand alone as the most obscure and allusive segment of the five shorts. The film is set entirely inside a barebone apartment where a couple are obsessed with archiving the scraps and pieces of everyday objects before they disappear. Devoid of establishing shots, this apocalyptic drama evokes a sense of existential ennui that is both universal and contextually relevant, when one considers how the ex-colony has been gripped by a “crisis of disappearance” since the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 (Abbas). As I have argued elsewhere, Ackbar Abbas’s concept of disappearance should not be taken literally, even though “disappearance” has been a recurrent motif in a wide spectrum of Hong Kong films since the mid-1980s. In Hong Kong cinema, “disappearance” should be seen as a tactic of self-reinvention in the sense of deconstructing the many clichés (for instance, East meets West, Chineseness, and other prescribed identities) that have made the Hong Kong subject disappear as a critical agent in master narratives and cultural representations. In Abbas’s words:

Disappearance does not just intentionally wipe out the possibility of postcolonial identity. . . . It can wipe out identity by conferring plausible identities on the postcolonial—like the native, the marginal, the cosmopolitan. A culture of disappearance gives us identities to take away our subjectivity. (14)

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<sup>5</sup> My interview with the *Ten Years* production team.

<sup>6</sup> The most outstanding example is the 500,000-strong mass protest on July 1, 2003 against the proposed public order ordinance (Article 23), which would have effectively empowered the police to make arrests on suspected cases of “inflammatory publications” without a court warrant. The protest originated the annual march on July 1 in Hong Kong up to this day. Recent public outcry over a proposed revision to extradition laws has made the integrity of Hong Kong’s legal system a global concern. On June 9, 2019, over one million people marched protesting this bill. As the government took a hard line on the demonstrators’ demand, the situation deteriorated into massive opposition on the day when the proposed bill was set to be deliberated in the Legislative Assembly, and Hong Kong soon made international headline news again. On June 15, the government announced a postponement of the legal process until further notice. See “Hong Kong Protestors”; Chan; and Yip.

The five shorts in *Ten Years* can be seen as an attempt to grapple with the latest forms of disappearance—cultural, social, political, and corporeal—that the ex-colonial city has to confront once its “high degree of autonomy” is systemically undermined.

Since its release in 2015, *Ten Years* has been in the spotlight in critical circles in Hong Kong and overseas. Its creators have been invited to forums and special screenings at local universities followed by extensive discussions with faculty members and students.<sup>7</sup> These public platforms allowed for a deeper engagement with the project’s wider implications as not only an unexpected, victorious case of bottom-up filmmaking in Hong Kong but also a media phenomenon with regional resonances. What has emerged is a critical discourse on the ontology and ecology of independent filmmaking in Hong Kong, and the potentiality of an emergent global media community that can sustain a grassroots politics of media resistance. Karen Fang, for instance, situates *Ten Years* in the context of media surveillance and suggests that the film “continued the spirit of the Umbrella protests [and] exemplifies the interactive mix of old and new technologies in sociocultural and political expression” (144). One can say that the significance of *Ten Years* lies not so much in its undaunted political criticism alone as in its having been subjected to political censorship and surveillance, which ironically raised the film’s political calibre in the eyes of film critics and audiences worldwide. While neither the producer nor the directors would prefer the label “political film,” politics has defined the contours of the film’s production and circulation in Hong Kong as well as its transnational critical reception.

### **An Emergent Politics of Media Consumption**

On April 1, 2016, two days before *Ten Years*’ surprise victory at the HKFA, a counter-hegemonic effort was mounted to show the film at over thirty locations in Hong Kong (mainly community centers and outdoor venues). Thousands of people flocked to this carnivalesque event, which constituted no less than a gesture of protest against perceived official pressure to limit the film’s circulation. China’s official media started attacking the film as early as January. An editorial published on January 19 in the *Global Times*, the English-language mouthpiece of the Chinese government, dismissed the film as being a “virus of the mind” and its portrayal of Hong Kong by 2025 “ridiculous” and too pessimistic (qtd. in Cheng).

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<sup>7</sup> Among these campus events was the roundtable “Ten Years: East Asia and Beyond,” held at the University of Hong Kong on January 9, 2019. Videos of the discussion were made available on YouTube. Another event dedicated to the film was held at the Hong Kong Education University on February 13, 2017.

By mid-February, *Ten Years'* theatrical run in local theaters came to an end, despite the fact that it had outperformed *Star Wars* in one arthouse cinema and continued to register full-house attendance at the only remaining commercial theater during the Chinese New Year, golden-period holidays usually reserved for commercial blockbusters (Griffiths; "The Box Office"). Meanwhile, the HKFA started receiving calls urging them to change the voting system after handing out the controversial Best Picture Award to *Ten Years* (Cheung). Antithetically to the commercial logic of post-handover Hong Kong cinema, being non-China market-friendly worked to the advantage of this humble local film. The film's popularity grew proportionally to the watchfulness of the Hong Kong and Chinese authorities, eventually becoming one of the highest-grossing independent films in the history of Hong Kong cinema (E. Lee). Since February 2016, the film has been distributed overseas through Golden Scene, a local company known for its niche market picks, including *Flying Colors* (dir. Nobuhiro Doi, 2015), *Mad World* (dir. Chun Wong, 2017), *Still Human* (dir. Oliver Siu Kuen Chan, 2019), and *By the Grace of God* (dir. Francois Ozon, 2019).

As mentioned above, the status of *Ten Years* goes beyond that of a controversial political film to that of a transnational phenomenon and a model for later adaptations. This global spread of what can be called a "film idea" was preceded by a more organic digital diffusion of (un)authorized media content on social media that helped disseminate news and clips of the film. A serendipitous official release on YouTube, for instance, was prompted by an illegal upload of an unfinished version of the film that instantly went viral on the social media platform.<sup>8</sup> The YouTube release was followed by an official release on iTunes. Soon after the film's iTunes launch was announced, the Chinese government ordered the shutdown of Apple's service days before the film's official Hong Kong streaming, but reportedly Chinese downloaders could still have access via non-mainland China registered accounts (Wen). Online searches for *Ten Years* peaked whenever news of its suppression came out, as the film continued to make rounds at film festivals and community screenings all over the world, including a special screening at a local school in Northern India, where the Tibetan government-in-exile led by the Dalai Lama is based. According to Ka-Leung Ng (director of "Self-immolator"), who attended the post-screening discussion with the audience, this school is the only remaining school in the world that uses Tibetan as the medium of instruction, after a Chinese (Mandarin)-medium policy was enforced throughout Tibet.<sup>9</sup> Small-scale

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<sup>8</sup> Felix Tsang, marketing executive of Golden Scene, speaking at a roundtable discussion at the University of Hong Kong, January 2019. Also see note 7.

<sup>9</sup> My interview with the *Ten Years* team.

special screenings supported by local donations were also held for overseas Chinese communities. By early 2019, the film has been shown at more than thirty overseas locations and is now available on Netflix and DVD.

What can be observed from the theatrical and online release of *Ten Years* is an emergent politics of consumption that has evolved from a local resistance to official censorship into a transnational multimedia phenomenon. Placing the film in a global context of grassroots media resistance, Fang sees in it an example of “participatory cinema” and “media-enabled counter-surveillance” (143). As “a powerful instance of cinema censorship and media citizenship . . . the film’s exhibition both realized and resisted the repression portrayed in the film’s fictional plots” (147). While the film is not the first and only instance of this new politics of consumption in Hong Kong, it is one of a kind in terms of its geographical reach and adaptive reuses across Asia. What cannot be overlooked is the way in which alternative screening practices combining the strengths of on-site viewing and digital media have contributed to an interactive public spectatorship and a discursive critical community as essential constituents of a transnational media citizenship. Another more politically engaged short film, *Liusi beiwang lu* (*June 4th: An Undeleted Record* [2019]), by one of the directors of *Ten Years*, Jevons Man-Kit Au (responsible for “Dialect”), premiered on the online film channel of a local newspaper, *Apple Daily*, in commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown in Beijing. The film was also broadcast on Facebook and screened at several community venues between May 30 and early June. News about the film’s premiere circulated on Facebook, Google, and numerous social media platforms amidst a wave of public commemorations around the world.

A film about political censorship and freedom of speech revolving around the June 4 Tiananmen incident, *Liusi beiwang lu* belongs to a stream of “post-Umbrella Movement” films—for instance *Yellowing* (dir. Chan Tsz-woon, 2016) and *Raise the Umbrellas* (dir. Evans Chan, 2016)—that actively challenge official surveillance and self-censorship in mainstream cinema. Very often, these films will have to seek alternative and noncommercial channels to reach a broader audience at home and abroad. A distinctive feature of this participatory mode of independent filmmaking and spectatorship is that, regardless of whether or not a film will turn out to be profitable, participatory filmmaking amounts to an about-turn against the Chinese market, otherwise the Mecca of a film industry dominated by Hong Kong-China co-productions. This anti-commercial turn among a minority of filmmakers also points toward a new understanding of the market for local-content films, which since the implementation of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) in 2004 has been equivalent to that in mainland

China.<sup>10</sup> Instead of being defined solely by theatrical runs and ticket sales, the market for politically censored films exists as a mobile community of digital media users actively co-producing a new spectatorship that extends beyond theater circuits and mainstream media channels. The critical currency derived from this alternative market, in turn, enhances the film's commercial value in the eyes of global media networks such as Netflix and iTunes.

### **Continuation: Politically Engaged Films in Post-Umbrella Movement Hong Kong**

The unexpected accolades and media spotlight on *Ten Years* may have made it as much a template for later adaptations as an exception that is unlikely to reoccur in the local indie scene any time soon. Yet, the lessons drawn from making a politically engaged local-content film can inspire future projects even when discounting the serendipitous circumstances of its unanticipated success. *Ten Years* and other post-Umbrella Movement films survived stringent (self-)censorship via distribution channels outside the established system. This alternative market is constituted within a mobile transnational media community through which alternative film projects can circulate outside the conventional arenas of theaters, film festivals, and even DVD sales. Apart from critical applause and public impact, one inevitably needs to think about the pragmatics of financing and long-term sustainability of noncommercial filmmaking in Hong Kong. As an independent film not (initially) intended for commercial release, *Ten Years* exemplifies not-for-profit filmmaking in Hong Kong worth contemplating at a time when political complaisance determines a film's commercial prospects ("Johnnie"). In Hong Kong, public funding for independent film projects is administered by two statutory bodies: the Arts Development Council (ADC) and the Film Development Council (FDC). Grants from the Arts Development Council range from HKD100,000 to HKD500,000, which are favored by independent filmmakers working on small-scale projects. The Film Development Council awards bigger grants to film projects designated for commercial release. New directors would usually bid for the First Feature Film Initiative grant. Capped at HKD2 million, the grant will cover only 20% of an approved budget or the actual cost, whichever

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<sup>10</sup> CEPA was an economic agreement between China and Hong Kong that allowed a selected number of professions and industries greater access to the mainland market. Under CEPA, Hong Kong films were exempted from foreign film import quota upon meeting certain requirements of mainland Chinese personnel and investment involvement. For a discussion on the different phases of CEPA's implementation and its impact on the Hong Kong film industry, see Yau; Yeh and Chao.

is the lowest. Given the funding requirements published by both public bodies, a film like *Ten Years* would stand a very slim chance with the FDC scheme, while the concern over timeliness and bureaucratic scrutiny would prompt filmmakers to look for alternative funding sources (Kempton).

The challenges faced by independent filmmakers in Hong Kong have prompted some creative responses from those who are self-consciously steering the course of their filmmaking outside the commercial mainstream. In 2012 an experimental crowdfunding initiative was launched by Ying E Chi, a nonprofit arts organization dedicated to the promotion of independent filmmaking in Hong Kong. Collaborating with the Chongqing Independent Film and Video Festival in mainland China, the 1st Chinese Independent Filmmaking Fundraising Project (CIFFP) supported the production of six short films. One special feature of this project is the engagement of all donors as “co-producers” whose names will be acknowledged in the credits. Also, all co-producers will be invited to the premiere of the films and receive complimentary DVDs of the shorts in return (Ying E Chi). These films were promoted through Ying E Chi’s community screening programs and its annual event, the Hong Kong Independent Film Festival. A DVD box set was also released in 2017. According to information published on the Ying E Chi’s website and other online platforms, four short film projects have been lined up for the 2nd CIFFP (announced in 2013) but no further news of the fundraising results has been released. A more successful example of crowdfunding is Rita Hui’s *Pseudo Secular* (2016). Another post-Umbrella Movement film that takes a wide perspective on civil disobedience movements across the globe, from the Wall Street sit-ins to Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement, Hui’s call for crowdfunding soon reached its HKD1-million goal within one month. *Pseudo Secular*’s success can be attributed to the timeliness of its subject matter and the way in which local issues are mapped onto a globalized struggle for freedom and social justice. As an alternative mode of film financing, crowdfunding seems more effective as a promotional and public engagement tool than a sustainable funding source. Be that as it may, the increased accessibility and affordability of digital technology has enabled more improvisatory and less financially encumbered projects. One such example is Chan Tsz-woon’s *Yellowing*, a documentary about the Umbrella Movement. According to Chan, he grabbed his camera and started recording after the police launched a tear-gas attack against the student protestors. Released in 2016, *Yellowing* was shunned by commercial theaters in Hong Kong. No doubt, since the release of *Ten Years*, there had been an aversion to screening politically sensitive films in local theaters. Unable to secure screen space, Chan worked with Ying E Chi to stage several “guerilla screenings” in Hong Kong; the film was also broadcast on

*Ex-position*  
December  
2019

Taiwan's public TV. The film soon started touring internationally, showcased at film festivals in Vancouver, Taiwan, and Berlin. *Yellowing* is not alone as far as covert censorship is concerned. A special screening of Evans Chan's *Raise the Umbrellas* at the Asia Society was cancelled on very short notice because the director only invited pro-democracy speakers to attend the discussion panel (Lai).

### **Disappearance, Once Again? Popular but Forbidden Films**

Arguably, all the films mentioned in this essay are popular films in terms of audiences' and critics' endorsement. Yet, none of these films were welcomed by commercial theaters despite keen public demand. It is obvious that commercial considerations have become secondary to political correctness in the operation of commercial theaters in contemporary Hong Kong whenever the content of a film is deemed to be potentially suspect in the eyes of official censors. No less ironic is the fact that all these films have a small budget, conforming to a noncommercial category that has been historically marginalized in Hong Kong's film culture. The surge of politically engaged films since 2014 has much to do with the deteriorating political environment in Hong Kong and the widespread anxiety over the city's future as a result. Twenty-two years after the handover of sovereignty, the crisis of disappearance has materialized into more tangible hazards that are jeopardizing the city's social, cultural, and political life. *Ten Years* and other popular but forbidden films discussed above indicate a new politics of filmmaking symbiotic with a new politics of transnational media consumption that creates the necessary conditions for an activist film culture to stay afloat, albeit not without financial and nonfinancial risks. These noncommercially oriented films usually resort to alternative modes of funding and circulation, while serendipity may springboard a fortunate few into theatrical and/or media network release. In this connection, what we used to understand as the "film market" has to be rethought. The film market in Hong Kong today is no longer a reflection of what the audience want to see, but what they are *allowed* to see. The stories of *Ten Years* and other post-Umbrella Movement films point toward an invisible programming mechanism that operates via politically weighted pre-selection. This, of course, is in part a structural problem of the film exhibition business, which works on the basis of alliances and franchises, but the recent phenomenon of popular but forbidden films speaks volumes about the disenfranchisement of ordinary people as consumers and co-producers of their own visual culture within established parameters. Significantly, a more vibrant culture of grassroots resistance to official censorship has emerged against a paranoid regime's tightening measures to snuff out every sparkle of *suspected* dissent.

From a modest independent film project to a transnational film phenomenon, *Ten Years* offers multiple points of access to increasingly intertwined modes of media production and reception in which an interactive and participatory viewing public constitutes a mobile network through which film projects shunned by the mainstream industry can materialize and reach out to wider audiences. While the film's unanticipated critical and commercial success can be seen as a triumph of the people against systemic control, its iconic singularity also reflects the compromised creative freedom in Hong Kong, especially when it comes to popular art and media such as cinema. The fact that *Ten Years* and other post-Umbrella Movement films have to resort to guerrilla-screening tactics to map out an alternative space of transnational media production and consumption, however, begs the question of whether a politically engaged cinema in Hong Kong may one day become a kind of underground cinema in its hometown, just as the samizdat bookstore in "Eggs." If this question turns out to be too far-fetched, it may be a reason for us to rejoice at a time when film is not the only thing disappearing in what used to be one of the freest societies in the world.

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