

---

## Looking through My Fly’s-Eye View: Chan Tze-woon’s Documentary of the 2014 Umbrella Movement

Kenny K. K. Ng

### ABSTRACT

When pursuing a Master’s Degree in film production at the Hong Kong Baptist University, Chan Tze-woon made two short films, “The Aqueous Truth” (2013) and “Being Rain: Representation and Will” (2014). Both are mockumentaries about state conspiracy and are intended to challenge the lack of government transparency and accountability in Hong Kong. In September 2014, Chan picked up his camera to join and film the protests of young students and eventually filmed 1,000 hours’ worth of footage of the Umbrella Movement, from which he produced his first documentary, *Yellowing* (2016). In *Yellowing*, Chan forsakes the grand narrative of political and social interpretations, and shuns interviewing political activists or political celebrities who receive international media attention. His camera revolves around committed young rebels as individuals, catching their spontaneous responses and desires, idealisms and passions, hopes and fears, frustrations and contradictions, from a “fly’s-eye view.” This article explores how a documentarist attempts to see beyond the narrow vision of the particulars and contingencies of human actions. It discusses the ethics and politics of truth-telling in the reconstructed world of a documentary as found in many fly’s-eye-view accounts. The study reconsiders the provocative power of artifice and the authenticity of documentary-making.

**KEYWORDS** documentary, historical film, identification, mockumentary, Umbrella Movement, *Yellowing*

---

*Ex-position*, Issue No. 42, December 2019 | National Taiwan University  
DOI: 10.6153/EXP.201912\_(42).0007

**Kenny K. K. NG**, Associate Professor, Academy of Film, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

*The social totality is only sensed, as it were, from the outside. We will never see it as such. It can be tracked like a crime whose clues we accumulate, not knowing that we are ourselves parts and organs of this obscenely moving and stirring zoological monstrosity.*

--Fredric Jameson, "Remapping Taipei"

Discussing Edward Yang's film *Kongbu fenzi* (*The Terrorizers*, 1986), Frederic Jameson believes that film as a form has the potential to story-tell the social totality, wherein individual characters, self-contained stories, and segmented plots are connected not causally but through accident—much as art mimics life. As in the social novels of the nineteenth-century French writer Honoré de Balzac, the omniscient narrator is supposed to observe the disordered occurrences and scattered events, and put them together to become the materials of storytelling. The characters in the game constructed in the novel are not aware of each other's interactions and the causality of events—just as we are trapped in our lives without knowing the significance of an unexpected change of fortune or a reversal of circumstances. In our own narrow circles, we can barely know the social relationships of people and the meanings of events around us. But because the film storyteller juxtaposes characters and events in the plots, the socially isolated characters come to these accidental connections that rise to the level of causality. In Jameson's opinion, a film like *The Terrorizers* asks the public to re-imagine the whole picture of society. In that sense, it serves as an ironic criticism of the increasingly fractured human relationships and urban spaces in our modern media society. Yet the film fulfils the audience's desire to know the rationale of events and human actions as a way to understand why and how society has become what it is.

This imagined social totality, however, can only and ideally be achieved in a dramatic film structure. The omniscient storyteller, aided by the movie camera, produces effects of real and simulated experiences of the social by interweaving human connections.<sup>1</sup> Jameson argues that social totality as such is a "purely aesthetic" construct: it is "conceivable only in conjunction with the work of art," and hence it "cannot take place in real life" (114).

The authorial function as an omniscient social witness in fiction filmmaking raises paradoxical questions for documentary here. How can documentary filmmaking, by describing unmediated and non-scripted reality (as it claims),

---

<sup>1</sup> See Martin Jay for the concept of "totality," which he says "has enjoyed a privileged place in the discourse of Western culture" (21).

explore the possibilities and constraints of the partiality of vision and ideology of the filmmaker, who chooses the people and the “parts” of reality that s/he wishes to follow? In representing historical events, how can non-fiction filmmakers overcome their particular perspectives and their filmic “points-of-view” to reproduce generalizations of the broad social canvass?

Siegfried Kracauer (1889-1966), in his philosophy of history, uses the term “microhistory” to refer to the particulars of historical happenings as people experienced them, which cannot fully account for the generalities of “macrohistory” in the eyes of politicians. The “bird’s-eye view” of macrohistory and the “fly’s-eye view” of microhistory are in principle incompatible with each other. “The two kinds of historical enquiries do co-exist, but they do not completely fuse: as a rule, the bird swallows the fly” (127-28). Significantly, a documentarist of social movements may at best capture the heterogeneous experiences of the social witnesses—the “fly’s-eye view” of history as gathered from bottom-up observations. Then, what kind of historical consciousness is produced by documentary films? What are the strategies and techniques by which documentary filmmakers make meaning in their work?

These critical questions speak directly to the epistemology and art of Chan Tze-woon’s film *Yellowing* (2016), a documentary that followed Hong Kong’s 2014 Umbrella Movement from a grassroots perspective. In September 2014, Chan took his camera to join and film the protests of young students and ended up accumulating 1,000 hours’ worth of footage of the movement, from which he then produced his very first film. Chan forsakes the framework of grand political and social interpretations, and shuns interviewing political activists or political celebrities who receive international media attention. His camera revolves around committed young rebels as individuals, catching their spontaneous responses and desires, idealisms and passions, hopes and fears, frustrations and contradictions, from a “fly’s-eye view.” This article explores how a documentarist attempts to see beyond the narrowness of the particulars and contingencies of human actions. It discusses the ethics and politics of truth-telling in the reconstructed world of a documentary as found in many fly’s-eye-view accounts. The study reconsiders the documentary as an artistic endeavor, taking into account the artifice and mediation of the documentary-maker.

### ***Yellowing*: Fly’s-Eye View vs. Bird’s-Eye View**

The Umbrella Movement, a.k.a. the Occupy Movement, took place in Hong Kong in 2014 from September 28 to December 15, a total of seventy-nine days. It

originated from a civil disobedience campaign that began with a boycott of classes by thousands of high school and university students. They protested against Beijing's refusal to grant Hong Kong citizens a "true universal suffrage" in 2017 and an open election for the Chief Executive without pre-screening of candidates by the Beijing authorities. On September 28, the Hong Kong police fired pepper spray and eighty-seven tear gas canisters to clear the protesters on the street. But the violent police suppression was to no avail. The civil disobedience campaign snowballed to become a city-wide occupying movement in Mongkok on the Kowloon side, and Causeway Bay and Admiralty on Hong Kong Island.

Chan Tze-woon arrived at the scene as soon as the movement erupted. He took his camera to join and film the young students and protesters, and eventually filmed 1,000 hours of footage of what would come to be called the Umbrella Movement. It took him and his editing colleague five months to condense the material into a two-hour documentary titled *Yellowing*. A direct translation of the Chinese title is *Memo of the Troubled Times*, whereas the English title invokes the color of the ribbons and umbrellas that symbolizes the movement and the idealism of young protesters in pursuit of a democratic society.

Chan had been a student of political science at City University of Hong Kong before pursuing a Master's Degree in film production at Baptist University. Chan was not a political activist, however, and he had no previous association with the Occupy Central Movement and Umbrella Movement. But he decided to take part in the social movement as a documentary filmmaker, befriending a group of young student activists and following his subjects' development over the course of the movement in order to document their circles and investigate their intentions, arguments, political ideas, and ways of interpreting the events. "I wouldn't pretend to be just a silent observer," says Chan. "I'm presenting this film as a participant in the movement. And the main protagonists of the documentary have now really become my friends; we went through the experience together" (Lee). In actuality, Chan became a part of the activist group as a participant wandering the chaotic streets with his mobile camera, conversing with other protestors about social justice, and at times engaging inevitably in clashes and confrontations.

*Yellowing* and Evans Chan's *Raise the Umbrella* (2016) represent two diverse approaches to documentary: the microscopic vision vs. the macro-political narrative. *Raise the Umbrella* attempts to delineate the protest's historical origin and impact by tracing the movement to the moment of post-Tiananmen crisis in Hong Kong. The film seeks to represent broad social issues and historical perspectives through the compilation of interviews with notable leaders of the old and

new generations—Martin Lee, founder of the Hong Kong Democratic party; Benny Tai, Occupy Central initiator; and Joshua Wong, the student leader—along with voices from student occupiers, international scholars, well-known politicians, media figures, and activist LGBT Cantopop icons. While *Raise the Umbrella* gives a holistic, bird's-eye-view picture of the mass movement, *Yellowing* is shorn of politicians' sound bites, reflecting young people's sensibilities and giving voice to ordinary citizens. The documentary has "no talking heads with expert opinions"—in short, "no adult story time" (Ling). The documentary makes no attempt to give any overarching conclusion on or closure to the current political situation.

Bill Nichols describes "participatory documentary" as when filmmakers "seek to represent their own direct encounter with their surrounding world" (*Introduction to Documentary* 187), while they actively engage with the situation they are documenting. The making of *Yellowing* partakes in this participatory mode; the documentarist pursues his subjects and becomes an integral part of the documentary. The documentary also betrays its "performative" characteristics as the filmmaker passionately shares a larger political motivation with his participant subjects. He brings a "heightened emotional involvement to a situation or role," and has us "feel or experience the world in a particular way as vividly as possible" (203).

Elizabeth Cowie treats documentary as a form of subject-oriented storytelling intended to carve out a possible space of seeing for ourselves and identifying ourselves in reality. No less than the fiction feature film, the documentary film "offers mise-en-scènes of desire and of imagining that enable identification even while, or rather because, it asserts itself as real" (86). It engages with the ethics of desiring, knowing, and identifying in the sounds and images.

In this sense, *Yellowing* can be taken as a "coming-of-age" story of the young student subjects, and of the filmmaker himself. Chan Tze-woon has never identified himself as a political activist, nor does he acknowledge *Yellowing* as a political film. Filming *Yellowing* is his journey of soul-searching. He seeks to make meaning of his encounters with his subjects and their lives as they describe them, their ideas of society, and their discussions of social justice. On the whole, *Yellowing* is a documentary of self-inquiry, and of youthful, emotive, and reflexive responses on the part of the filmmaker to inquire into what has happened and consider how to make sense of all these happenings for the young participants and subjects of the film. Chan in filming *Yellowing* does not set out to dictate a "truth"; he treats this documentary-making as a self-exploratory venture, the I-narration and manifestation of the youth's understanding of what they have witnessed there.

Nichols has stressed the inherent narrative tendency in documentaries by indicating that they are "fictions with plots, characters, situations, and events

like any other” (*Representing Reality* 107). But this insistence on a narrative, constructed basis to documentary should not undercut the assumed access to a shared historical reality. It should never undermine the ethics informing the filming of the social world, its actors and communities that matter to the documentarist. Rather, the crucial issue here is epistemological, which relates to what Kracauer calls the particulars and individual horizons of experience: How do you judge what you know when the events are filtered through the fly’s-eye view of the documentarist and the camera, and when filmmakers have no control over the social actors and incidents that they are filming? Unlike a fiction filmmaker who can reconstruct broader social pictures by creating the accidents and peripeties that bring the isolated characters together into consequential stories, documentarists have to work on the basis of the genre’s paradox: its essential impulse to catch life off camera, to film what is not intended to happen, and to show people what they do not expect to see. The notions of documentary as a plotless, commentary-less, *vérité*-style record of life, and of the documentarist acting as a “fly on the wall” with a less obtrusive camera to capture unmediated reality as it unfolds, still hold sway.

As a member of the post-1980 generation brought up in media-saturated Hong Kong society, Chan Tze-woon is conscious of high-tech hyper-reality and media deception. This is demonstrated in two short mockumentaries he made prior to *Yellowing*. “The Aqueous Truth” (2013) has a plot centered on state treachery. A sedative chemical has been added to Hong Kong’s drinking water supply to pacify the citizens and dampen dissonance. In “Being Rain: Representation and Will” (2014), the filmmaker—intrigued by the fact that the important dates for protests in 2014 were all affected by heavy rain—hypothesizes that the authorities engaged in rainmaking to curtail civil unrest. These were works of irony about state secrecy and conspiracy, taking to task the lack of government transparency and accountability. The films involve fictional enactments of events to confuse the audience with a mixed sense of truth/untruth at a moment when the truth has become increasingly difficult for the public to access in real social circumstances.

Chan Tze-woon’s short films epitomize his early attempt to experiment with documentary/fiction hybrids, and explore the provocative power of artifice and the authenticity of documentary-making. Thomas Doherty argues that the mockumentary form is reassuring because it places viewers in an empowered position and enables them to recognize the constructed nature of both mockumentary and documentary (22-24). Nichols asserts that at the heart of documentary is less a story and its disputably imaginary world than an “*argument* about the historical world” (*Representing Reality* 111). Documentary is “instrumental” as it is a deliberate attempt by filmmakers to alter their viewers’ relationship to

a subject, or change peoples' minds about or ways of seeing the world. The conviction of instrumentality enables us to acknowledge the "interpretive intentions" of documentary and to cease to insist on its innocence as a straightforward description of actuality (Shapiro 83). If documentary filmmakers take up historical materials, they should not claim to produce a comprehensive description of the movement of events, but should rather engage the audience in a discussion of ideologies, moral values, or social beliefs. They put their materials and techniques in the service of ideas and in the critique of culture. Documentary-making is essentially political as the filmmaker is committed to a point of view and works in a spirit of advocacy, going to great lengths to give voice to the views of certain individuals, groups, or agencies besides giving us photographic and aural representations of the social world. The political stance of the auteur complicates the genre's demand to tell the "truth." It challenges us to reinterpret and articulate many of the central tensions within documentary as a device of storytelling that can incorporate character development, editing style, and elaborate camerawork in addressing non-imaginary, real-life situations.

Indeed, documentary's claim to purity, to staying true to what it perceives to be the real, has been critically questioned since the last century. We are aware of the limits of the conviction that the camera does not lie, the declaration that cinematic images thus captured are capable of "speaking for themselves," of offering the "truth" without any need for interpretation (Roscoe and Hight 20). The promise of observational neutrality by documenting an unretouched record of the real was betrayed almost from the start; this can be seen as early as Louis Lumière's *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895) and Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922).<sup>2</sup> The ambition of classic documentary to present a truthful and authentic picture of the social world, armed with the power of the camera and the belief in a photographic realism, has always been a contradictory claim. For one thing, the documentarist has always to encounter the elusive boundaries of the genre. But what remains essential is the gist of storytelling in documentary: in declaring non-fiction film's mission to portray "the real," documentary filmmakers confront the factitious with

---

<sup>2</sup> In his forty-five-second "documentary" shot of some dozens of workers leaving his family plant, Lumière arguably had his "historical" shot carefully planned. One can see clearly that Lumière had the workers collect just inside the factory gates and wait there until he got his camera rolling. He had instructed the workers not to acknowledge the camera when walking past it (Shapiro 93). This cinematic choreography created a sense of the "real" insofar as the audience would capture the "actuality" of the scene without seeing the mediation. *Nanook of the North*, the pioneer of documentary filmmaking, was the product of a much greater degree of intervention on the part of the director than was initially thought. Flaherty's film shows the shaky line between factuality and artificiality: the film mixes observational footage with the director's staging of scenes, especially in the famous tug-of-war between humans and the seal. Critics have suspected a possible manipulation in filming in which "realities were admittedly assisted" (Ebert).

the factual, ideology with factuality, and storytelling with truth-telling.

For Chan Tze-woon, mockumentary and documentary are the two sides of a coin, the combined stakes that stand for different but intertwining approaches to empowering film's function of truth-seeking. Mockumentary has to betray the documentary form itself in order to expose the lies of the government, that is, to tell the truth. Documentary often counts on the device of storytelling to reconstruct compelling images and sounds of historical occurrences.<sup>3</sup> Still, Chan's documentary-making has to engage in a war over actuality and virtuality to vie with mainstream media and official versions of the event in historical storytelling.

Despite positive reviews from international independent film festivals (Taiwan, Vancouver, and the Czech Republic), which would normally have guaranteed *Yellowing* a local theatrical release, all of Hong Kong's major cinemas refused to show the film. *Yellowing's* producers staged "guerrilla screenings" at smaller venues such as school lecture halls and local museums to fight back against the marginalization of their film. Chan was worried about the practice of self-censorship as the local film business shied away from offending Beijing: "I don't want [self-censorship] to become a norm like it is in mainland China" (E. Cheung). In addition to self-censorship, Chan claimed that local media coverage shunned the perspective of ordinary demonstrators: "Mainstream media mostly focused on the leadership of the movement and exaggerated violent scenes of protesters"; "I think independent film producers have the responsibility to document what mainstream media failed to report on" (E. Cheung). Public perception of protest camps has often been shaped by the wild and fierce images of unrest disseminated by the mainstream media. As a result, peaceful protesters are likely to be seen as law-breaking, diehard activists prone to inciting violent action.

The predominant role of mainstream media in representing politics and historical events, especially when Chinese national politics, with its covert and overt ideological control, looms large in Hong Kong society, gives documentary makers new possibilities but also serious challenges. Hong Kong's restricted autonomy is manifested in its public television programs (TVB) and government-produced documentary films, which practice self-censorship to avert criticism of

---

<sup>3</sup> *Yellowing* may have followed other Hong Kong indie political documentaries such as Tammy Cheung's *July* (2004) and *Election* (2009). The former chronicled the mass protest of Hong Kong citizens on July 1, 2003 against the proposed enactment of Article 23 of the Basic Law to introduce draconian security measures in the city; the latter focused on the 2004 election campaigns involving conflicting political camps in fierce clashes. Lo Chun-yip's *To Be Continued* (2010) and *Days After n Coming* (2011) continued the series of activist documentaries devoted to social movements. *Yellowing*, however, differs from the non-intrusive approach of Cheung's and Lo's films in the vein of *cinéma vérité*, as Chan also employs the participatory mode in filming as a performance agent engaged in the social protests.

HKSAR governance and Chinese politics, and manage to “maintain the authority and interests of the unelected status quo” (Aitken and Ingham, “Documentary Film” 556). In China, where censorship and surveillance are ubiquitous and documentary films are governed by the state television company CCTV, independent filmmakers struggle to explore sensitive political, social, and cultural issues, often with considerable difficulty and risk (555).

Chan Tze-woon believes that his film is “an important record” that gives an “insider’s view” of a watershed moment in Hong Kong history (E. Cheung), as it bears witness to the 2014 Umbrella Movement that made the world aware of Hong Kong’s growing local consciousness and a new post-1997 political culture. Meanwhile, most mainstream commercial films made in Hong Kong after the 1997 Asian economic crisis and especially since the 2008 global financial tsunami have increasingly been tailored to the much larger mainland China market, and are prone to self-censorship even before entering the mainland. In particular, the preferential market policy of CEPA (Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement) effective since January 1, 2004, which privileges Hong Kong-China co-productions over foreign films in entering the mainland, has effectively deprived Hong Kong films of their local color and critical edge in order to meet China’s ideological censorship. This shift from a “Made in Hong Kong” to a “Made by Hong Kong” industry results in the “Mainlandization” of market, production, and labor in Hong Kong cinema, to the effect that “mainstream Hong Kong begins to see globalization and the rising China as both menaces and blessings” (Szeto and Chen 116). Nevertheless, new technology and new media have allowed new space for an independent cinema to develop.<sup>4</sup> Vincent Chiu, the founder of Ying E Chi, an organization of Hong Kong independent filmmaking, believes that new technology such as digital film “frees us from the industrial system and allows us more possibilities in our creation” (166).

On the margins of the local film market that is dominated by Hollywood and co-production films and subject to commercialization and self-censorship, the independent filmmaking community is exploring new venues and exhibition networks, where “the notion of Hong Kong identity and history is opened up for discussion and debate” (Kempton 110).

*Yellowing* exemplifies a growing local independent filmmaking tradition, one that is producing films primarily for Hong Kong audiences and addressing Hong Kong issues, which in turn become the subject of greater international attention. The following analysis of the film text attempts to provide insight into the techniques that filmmaker Chan Tze-woon uses in his portrait of the movement participants. It

---

<sup>4</sup> For Chinese references on independent filmmaking in Hong Kong, see Tam, Lee, and Ng.

explores how Chan's filmmaking manages to balance its first-person perspective with the need to show various aspects of the political movement on screen.

### **Look Back in Anger: Chan Tze-woon vs. Policeman 33356**

*Ex-position*  
December  
2019

*Yellowing* focuses on a small group of committed rebels and their activities: Lucky Egg (nickname), who gives impromptu lectures on English and political philosophy; Yiu, a young construction worker who wanders in and out of the protests; Rachel, a law and literature student from the University of Hong Kong who is eloquent in expressing her ideas and queries. Chan's camera revolves around these individuals, providing a fly's-eye view and catching unawares their spontaneous responses and desires, idealisms and passions, hopes and fears, frustrations and contradictions.

Early on in filming the pro-democracy protests, Chan Tze-woon believed he should stick to the role of an "actuality filmmaker" and make a fly-on-the-wall documentary that observes events without being intrusive to his subjects: "I'll refrain from radical expression and continue to play a purely observational role in my films, which try to understand the political environment through the people" (Lee). However, it did not take long for him to realize that it was well-nigh impossible to stay a mere observer or witness of the social movement after he was assaulted by a uniformed policeman while following the confrontations on Mongkok streets.

Chan Tze-woon resolves to include in *Yellowing* footage showing the cop's fierce visage, and his repugnance after realizing that Chan's handheld video camera was still recording after the filmmaker had fallen to the ground. Alongside the footage Chan adds his lines of reflection on the crucial episode:

(27:15)<sup>5</sup>

I've always believed that the camera in my hands can protect me, and it can calm those who are descending into madness in front of me.

I was punched by a policeman. I didn't know what to do. At first a policeman accused me of hitting him. Another bespectacled police officer came towards me. But I was so scared. I couldn't steady my camera. All I captured was this hideous face. He realized I was filming him, so he turned and went away. Someone tried to block my camera. Looking at his back, I was too scared to confront him, and could only watch him return to his group.

---

<sup>5</sup> The time markers of the documentary cited in this article are based on the filmmaker's copy of his film from Vimeo.

Not only has the punch scene shattered the claims of police probity and the necessary and lawful use of force, but it also undermines the filmmaker's illusions about the power of the camera to give him more freedom and the ability to view what is happening "out there" without any involvement or influence. "When we learn to be documentary film directors, we're taught that people tend to restrain themselves in front of cameras," Chan says. "So I felt a responsibility at the scene, where the policemen were arresting people with excessive force. But once I was punched, I was at once disillusioned about the power of the camera and totally disappointed with the policemen, who are supposed to uphold the law" (Lee).

This accidental footage, however, is then purposefully inserted in *Yellowing* and reflected upon by the filmmaker not so much as a disclaimer of the camera as a means to reinvigorate documentary's capacity to catch life unawares. The director's voice and body disrupt the seamless boundary between filmmaker, narrator, and spectator. The first-person singular intrudes in the unfolding of events through editing. The cinematic storytelling thus urges the spectator to reflect upon the problematic idea of an unobtrusive and fine line between the filmmaker and the filmed world. Notable is the shot in which the documentarist is filming the retreating policeman—realizing he is being filmed—slowly walking away with his back facing the camera. The camera inadvertently catches the participants and passers-by on the other side of the street, all holding up their mobile phone-cams to record the scuffle. This sudden and unexpected change of circumstances as captured by Chan's camera bespeaks the crisis of representation in a modern media society that is saturated with information and spectacle.

The episode of Chan's encounter with police violence challenges us to question the claim that high-tech camera phones can reveal and reconstruct a truthful picture of social reality—they rather complicate reality by delivering too many competing or even contradictory versions of a social event. At a time when new social media and (mis)information have destabilized the nature of reality and truth-telling, documentary's function as a tool of vigilance and truth-telling is threatened. Jean Baudrillard has long warned of the danger of media coverage when information in virtuality overcomes what happens in reality.<sup>6</sup> In the global and high-tech media world, we do not have the means to reestablish the truth through carefully controlled images when image precedes and replaces the object and the fact. But we can exercise our freedom to question our relation to what we take to be reality and also to question the conventions mediating its representation.

---

<sup>6</sup> In *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Baudrillard alerts us to the questionable nature of the televised images of what was occurring in the Persian Gulf; he argues that these images achieved nothing but affecting world opinion and emphasizing the overwhelming might of American forces.

*Ex-position*  
December  
2019

Navigating from the observatory to the participatory mode, Chan's documentary-making, with nary a hint of irony about storytelling, nonetheless has its moments of self-caricature to allow his opponents' voices to be heard. In interviewing Lucky Egg at a bus stop, Chan decides to include an interfering, grumpy passer-by and his unfriendly slur on the student:

(29:37)

Egg: Those who are part of this movement have been tolerating abuses, as we don't want to be affected by a small group of people and let it ruin what we've achieved.

(29:44)

Passer-by: Shut up.

Interviewer: Why did you tell us to stop talking?

Passer-by: You turned HK into a mess. Is it good? We should stop subsidizing you university students. Return the money to us taxpayers.

Chan's open treatment of the spontaneous response of the passer-by swiftly turns the abrupt incident into a story worth telling. Egg's immediate reaction to the hostile neighbor's aggression is one of calm; he maintains his composure in explaining to the filmmaker (the interviewer)—as well as the audience through the camera—that he and his student activists all count on peaceful dialogue with people who hold views that differ from their own. Like characters in a book who do not know that they are being read, the participant (interviewee) and the documentarist (interviewer) here encounter an unforeseen twist. Chan chooses to refresh the form of documentary with an open earnestness to present the un-staged scene, and in so doing he manages to mirror the idealism and maturity of the young people at its center. As Sean Gilman observes, in its "ground-floor, first-person perspective," *Yellowing* "finds more honesty and wisdom and life than a hundred Hollywood issue-advocacy films."

The first-person perspective of the documentary is spelt out with the filmmaker's voiceover at the beginning. This introduces Chan Tze-Woon himself at various stages since his birth in 1984, and how his autobiographical timeline relates to the history of Hong Kong from the colonial to post-Handover periods.

(03:22)

Many say Hong Kong is a floating city. Many of the older generation came here as refugees, treating here merely as temporary shelter. This is the city in which I was born and bred.

(03:36)

Hong Kong was once a British colony. Before I was born, in 1984, “The Sino-British Joint Declaration” was signed. Hong Kong was to be returned to China in 1997.

(03:48)

After the June Fourth Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, many of my relatives, fearing the handover, emigrated. My family, however, chose to stay.

(04:09)

When I was ten, Hong Kong was handed over to China. It turned from a British colony to a Special Administrative Region.

(04:19)

That time we visited China was a lot brighter. The Forbidden City was in much better shape.

(04:26)

In primary school, we learned about “one country, two systems”; Hong Kong is run by its people and enjoys a high degree of autonomy. At university, I studied the Basic Law. I was convinced that Hong Kong would gradually achieve universal suffrage for the Chief Executive and the Legislative Council.

(04:43)

In the blink of an eye it's 2014. I am turning twenty-seven this year. There is still no democracy in Hong Kong. The realization of our dream seems to be delayed forever. The freedom and rule of law that we have been enjoying have seriously deteriorated.

*Ex-positio*  
December  
2019

The minute-long sequence starts with the night view of Victoria Harbor and watery imagery (also Chan's favorite in his earlier mockumentaries), followed by footage of his family and school life. The meditative beginning immediately gives way to a montage sequence of fire and human noise. We see footage of the fireworks performance in one of the Lunar New Year celebrations, and hear a Mandarin-language sound track that instructs and steers the festival-going crowds: "The fireworks performance is over. Please follow the instruction of the police to reach Admiralty via Harcourt Road footbridge (or) to reach Central via Lung Wo Road. Thank you for your cooperation" (05:04). The aural component of the sound track is visually translated into the *topos* of the historical event. The environs of Admiralty at the juncture of Harcourt Road and Lung Wo Road comprise the political topography of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. The center of eruption has become the place of memory for the filmmaker, while Chan's voiceover goes alongside a shot of an empty spot in Admiralty: "I went back to the roundabout. This is where I started filming this documentary" (05:19). Footage of a stalemate one night sets in. It features the face-to-face opposition between the students and the police. In *Yellowing* the filmmaker consistently exercises the artifice of opposition by arranging antagonistic images and sounds in a meaningful sequence, such as fireworks vs. teargas, the national anthem vs. Cantopop music, students vs. the police.

### **Looking Awry: Who Am I?**

Rachel is the most sophisticated and articulate among her peer activists. *Yellowing* features a scene of an open forum on democracy that includes Chan Tze-woon (as a participant), Rachel, and other students on the lawn of a university campus.

(36:04)

R (Rachel): The whole Occupy Movement and the students' strike really changed the way I see Hong Kong. I never thought that Hongkongers can be like this. I am not saying they are not good citizens, but . . .

C (Chan Tze-woon): They have the qualities of a good citizen yet refuse to show them.

R: They know what the right thing to do is but refuse to do anything. But when you are present at the Occupy sites . . .

C: Sometimes you become very numb living in this society. But

- when you actually go to the actual site of the social movement, you will feel. . . . For instance, you never picture yourself working at the supply center.
- R: That's true.
- C: When you're there you'll wonder: what can I do to help?
- R: Often enough we dislike China because we feel it's encroaching on Hong Kong bit by bit. We see it as a rotten, corrupt and one-party dictatorship, but that has nothing to do with the Chinese people, right? Now we have translated our hatred for that country onto its citizens, and it is not right.
- C: It is not a democracy yet it emphasizes its nationality. A lot of Blue Ribbons will ask you: are you a Chinese person or not?
- R: What is exasperating is that you can't argue with these people. They just won't engage in your argument. Say, if they ask you if you're a Chinese person or not, you'd say, whether I'm Chinese or not has nothing to do with our fight for democracy. They won't understand, and will shout at you, "Are you Chinese or not?"
- C: That's why I've been talking about the steamed bun soaked in blood. It really captures the situation.
- R: I really like the story of the steamed bun soaked in blood.<sup>7</sup>
- C: We've done so much, yet it turns out people don't understand what we're doing.
- R: The revolution will not succeed if people don't understand it. If people don't understand the reason for revolution, the revolution will not succeed.

The discussions between Chan and Rachel address interrelated questions of identity: Who are we young students? What are Hongkongers like? Are we still Chinese if we are fighting for democracy in Hong Kong? On the one hand, the Umbrella Movement has made Rachel proud of Hong Kong citizens, seeing how they fight for democracy; on the other, she does not want to abandon entirely the lineage of Chineseness, and feels she should not transpose her hatred of the PRC

---

<sup>7</sup> The literary metaphor "steamed bun soaked in blood" comes from Lu Xun's short story "Medicine" ("Yao"), written in 1919. The story tells how a father obtains a steamed bun, which has been soaked in the blood of an executed revolutionary, to heal his diseased son. On a symbolic level, the bloodsoaked steamed bun satirizes the ignorance and cannibalistic acts of Chinese people. In *Yellowing*, Rachel and Chan use Lu Xun's metaphor to discuss the difficulty of situations in which people who are against the protest do not really understand the cause behind it, that is, pursuing democracy in what the protestors refer to as the "revolution."

regime onto mainlanders in general. Rachel's worries stem from the identity crisis of Hongkongers as seen in the deepening contradiction between a shared form of pan-Chinese cultural identification and the rise of a localist discourse that puts emphasis on local distinctiveness (Veg, "Rise of 'Localism'"). In addition, Rachel is anxious about the split of Hong Kong people into the pro-China Blue Ribbons and pro-Hong Kong Yellow Ribbons. How can she convince the people who do not agree with what she and her fellow students are doing? By engaging in an open dialogue that operates through rational understanding, Rachel hopes that she can persuade her opponents that the students' appeal for democracy and "revolution" has less to do with a problematic sense of Chinese identity than with their quest for a just society which they see as proper and true.

In the course of filming, Chan and a group of activists meet a fourteen-year-old secondary school girl, also named Rachel, who decided to leave home in her uniform to hang out with the protesters on the frontlines in Mongkok. They warn her about safety precautions and alert her to the possibility that she may be arrested. They ask her what her parents think about her joining the protesters there, and she says they had an argument. In the film, Chan's chance encounter with Little Rachel begins as an accidental connection, but his follow-up interview with her reveals deeper issues of identification and knowledge, and manifests a dramatic connectivity, yet difference, between the rationales of the two Rachels for taking part in the protests.

(1:46:04)

C (Chan Tze-woon): What are you actually fighting for?

LR (Little Rachel): We should restart the constitutional reform. If not, there is nothing to say.

C: Do your parents support you?

LR: Yeah, but not for staying in Mongkok. We had an argument this morning.

C: This morning? Why?

LR: Because I said I would still come even when I am alone; and actually there would be someone with me. . . . They asked me if I really wanted to be arrested. Then I thought, since the first day of protest at Admiralty, I have been mentally prepared for it. That's what I said to them. Then they left me alone.

C: So you are prepared to be arrested?

LR: I am, because it is illegal to occupy the streets even for a good

cause. I know I have violated the law, but I don't think I have done anything wrong.

Little Rachel looks determined and declares her motivation and mission straightforwardly (“We should restart the constitutional reform”). She affirms that she understands the consequences of “civil disobedience” (“I have been mentally prepared for it [arrest by the police]”). Personal and familial problems and domestic rebellion seem to be tied up with social dissidence in her running away from home. By succinctly capturing her response to the question of what “she is actually fighting for,” Chan’s documentary places the spectator as a questioning subject in order to comprehend the social movement through myriad avenues of human perception (feeling, emotion) and understanding (fact, knowledge). The film invokes identification much less as a matter of knowledge than as a problematic of desiring. As Cowie puts it, identification is “a relation of desire, of wishing, not as but as if. One’s own desires are played out through these figures of ‘identification’ and not as them” (89). *Yellowing* can be seen as portraying the young students in webs of desires centering on what they wish to know and who they wish to become. The two Rachels begin to mirror each other in their searches for meaning. Little Rachel is picking up the rhetoric of democracy in wrestling with her family conflict, whereas Rachel is confused about how to convey what she believes to be true to her ideological opponents. Chan is never didactic in documenting his subjects and their stories; he does not say that what they do is absolutely right or wrong.

Chan Tze-woon's  
Documentary  
*Yellowing*

### **No Place like Home: Yiu's Story**

Discussing the longing for “utopia” in Western society, German thinker Ernst Bloch has noted:

At the very beginning Thomas More designated utopia as a place, an island in the distant South Seas. This designation underwent changes later so that it left space and entered time. Indeed, the utopians, especially those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transposed the wishland more into the future. In other words, there is a transformation of the topos from space into time. (3)

Bloch points out that utopian thinking originates from More’s spatial concept of an *outopia* (“no-place”) to represent an ideal or perfect society but undergoes a temporal turn to mean our longing for a better future.

The demonstrations in Hong Kong's Occupy Movement in 2014 took another spatial turn, moving from pursuit of a true democratic society and free elections for the Chief Executive in 2017 to staking out urban protest sites where tens of thousands of citizens chose to take to the city's streets to transform "privately owned public space" (thoroughfares largely occupied by the rich and by elites engaged in financial activities) into a protest stage for political reform. In Admiralty, an area on Hong Kong Island, the Connaught Road occupied zone was dubbed "Harcourt Village" and extended more than two kilometers in the heart of Hong Kong's financial center. Chang-fai Cheung calls the Harcourt Village a "utopia," in that what started out as scattered barricades against police clearance action evolved into a fully-fledged small village, full of campers and frame tents. The peaceful protesters in the village set up a counselling booth, a small library, recycling and religious facilities, security patrols, various open lecture spots, and first-aid stations. The occupation increasingly developed into an alternative campus and study area with Wi-Fi and desk lamps for students to study with volunteer tutors assisting them. As Chang-fai Cheung observes, "Everyone was free to express what he/she felt in words or in art forms. Most people went back to work during the daytime but came back to the village after work" (80). The movement's maturation from an uncertain settlement to a bona fide village smacked of "classical political anarchism" as "a self-organizing community that has no leader" (Barber).

The tent community that turned the six-lane thoroughfare in Admiralty into a host site for protesters was just another microcosm of the city. It echoes the motif of the "floating city" in the beginning of *Yellowing*, as Hong Kong people are desperate to make a "home" in the city, to find by any means a place of their own. There is a trenchant sense of place-making, as well as of bonding and solidarity among the temporary settlers that makes them feel at home in the occupied zone. People rediscover the feeling of cohesion and connection in Hong Kong society, and wish to break away from mundane urban life and alienation in the everyday world.

Lubica Učnik reiterates the function of community as "a way to an anchored sense of the life that we live together" (28), and "the *common* way of looking at things around us and searching for meaning together when the world is changing" (26). In *Yellowing*, Chan Tze-woon devotes considerable efforts to depicting a lived, communal experience of youthful activists far more peaceful and purposeful than news headlines might have suggested. They build tents, deliver water supplies, fix leaks in shelters, celebrate the birthday of a new acquaintance, and even goad each other into speaking to people they have crushes on.

Though Chan manages to document images of young people in solidarity and communal conviviality, he is by no means naïve about this “perfect anarchist collective” (Barber). He does not shy away from portraying moments of in-fighting and setbacks as the young participants are frustrated to see themselves misunderstood by the “masses” or even ostracized by society. As soon as Rachel introduces visitors to their “lovely home” (the tent in Mongkok) and cherishes the “intimacy” the nameless occupants share as family (24:12), Chan shifts to the next scene where we see the ruthless demolition of the tents and eviction of the student occupants by the police. Chan’s editing is intended to show the contrasting images of “homelessness” (utopia) and “homelessness.” Chan interviewed a girl who, along with her boyfriend, was among the last to retreat, and she could not stop crying when recalling how the crowd kept scolding and humiliating her partner.

(25:15)

Girl: My boyfriend and I were two of the last hundred people staying inside that tent. The police told us to leave. My boyfriend and I were among those who retreated. We didn’t want to leave, because those who were holding up the pillars of the tent were all girls, except for my boyfriend. Anyway we retreated. Many citizens on the streets insulted us as we walked by. The students ahead of me burst into tears. They really crossed the line. Someone told my boyfriend to become a prostitute. Some pointed their fingers at my face. There were many police around me, many of them.

The accumulative effort of young protesters in no way amounts to an epic and historic display of youthful rebellion in *Yellowing*. The filmmaker narrates the story of Yiu, a vacillating participant. A construction worker by profession, Yiu is a few years older than his fellow activists, who are mostly students. He grew up in a traditional Chinese family with a strong sense of filial piety and hierarchy. His attitude toward life is realistic, albeit with a tinge of youthful romanticism.

As Chan Tze-woon reveals Yiu’s trajectory, we see that Yiu has found it difficult to mingle with the younger people who surround him. Chan uses Yiu’s story as a counterpoint to the lopsided romantic view of emboldened youth and solidarity. Yiu has a daytime job. He has his own limits and cannot devote all his time to the movement like the rest of the group. In one scene, Chan’s camera follows this marginal figure who roams about from place to place to stay aligned with the

*Ex-position*  
December  
2019

activists. But he is more like a nomadic protester than a core member of the group. One night he fails to secure a resting space in the camp as he arrives too late. He has to borrow a mattress from the supply center so that he can sleep in the outskirts of Harcourt Village so as to maintain his presence and participation.

Yiu talks to the filmmaker about this catch-22 situation; it irks him to have to balance work and social activism.

(40:25)

Apart from this, I don't know what else I can do. I am not involved passionately as I used to be. If now I have a job, I choose my job over other things. Because those are my responsibilities. Other things, such as this, become less important.

I never thought that I'd participate in civil disobedience. I'm not psychologically prepared. . . .

If this generation refuses to do anything, Hong Kong will be gone. Our parents' generation didn't do anything, and if we don't do anything either, the burden will be passed to the younger generation. There is no reason for them to fight for my future. I saw our parents' generation turn a blind eye, so I am determined to join this civil disobedience. I was supposed to attend for a week only. I never thought that it would become so long.

It's a catch-22 situation between work and here. I kept on reading the news and couldn't concentrate. Sometimes I really want to come at once but I can't. At that time I was feeling really sad.

If it had happened a few years ago when I was younger, it would be great if I were a student. But I never thought of doing it when I was a student. (Yiu sighs.)

Struggling between reality and dreams, duties and limits, Yiu betrays his psychological conflict over becoming a devotee to the social cause. He has given little thought to the idea of civil disobedience. What would happen if he got a criminal record? Yiu replies that his girlfriend has said that she would dump him. "Well, she is probably kidding," explains Yiu. "We have been together for eight years. She wouldn't leave me just like that" (12:06).

Chan's camera has followed Yiu's relationship with Fung, his male companion, during the protests. In a confrontation with the police, Fung has rushed out with

the students over the road. Yiu stays behind and realizes that he did not bring his goggles (for protecting his eyes from tear gas). When the filmmaker asks him, “Are you ready?” Yiu feels helpless, saying, “No, I’m not. Screw it. Where on earth is Fung? Watch your back if there’s police. The police are approaching. Police are here!” (54:06).

In these contingent scenes of eruption, I would argue, the filmmaker does not so much want to show the weakness of the character as to present us with the complex reality of the social movement. Neither a passionate participant nor an indifferent onlooker, Yiu is alienated from the social campaigners he wishes to follow. His thoughts sometimes seem to be in a muddle when he fails to take decisive action; apparently he is pondering the meaning and possible consequences of any action taken. Are we prepared to “sacrifice” for the movement, and can we see the results at the end of the day? His wavering attitude complicates the ideas of youthful idealism and collectivity. Yiu’s story challenges our romantic impulse to build an easy equivalence between “I am” and “we are.”

### **Never Look Away: Rachel’s Letter to Professor Chen**

Unlike Yiu, who is torn between the pragmatism of his working life and the idealism of social movement, Rachel, the law and literature student, appears to be a quixotic campaigner for the cause she believes in, and a young rebel who challenges the authority and conservatism of her professor. *Yellowing* devotes much time to Rachel’s story. She distributes yellow wristbands sporting the slogan “They Can’t Kill Us All.” She admires what she and her fellow protestors are doing as exercising a positive understanding of “anarchy.” She believes that it is a mass movement without a “center”; they don’t need a leader to lead their action. When asked if she worries about the government using real guns to suppress the movement or facing real persecution after the event, Rachel says that she is not as worried as her parents, who witnessed the 1989 Tiananmen atrocity. “It’s cool to have a ‘political scar,’” she notes in a “romantic” tone, suggesting that getting jailed or undergoing some form of persecution for the greater good of Hong Kong would only make a young activist look heroic.

Rachel gives the film’s most eloquent speeches and forceful rebuttals against charges from authority figures who denounce the students’ idealism and action as premature and naïve. In the middle of the film, Rachel takes her professor to task by reading before the camera his letter to Hong Kong students—addressing her audience in public—while indicating her objections to the letter one by one. The letter is written by Albert Chen, a professor of law at the University of Hong Kong

as well as an authority on the Basic Law in Hong Kong who serves on the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the PRC.

(1:17)

*Ex-position*  
December  
2019

R (Rachel): Professor Albert Chen (HKU Law Professor) uploaded this “Letter to Hong Kong” to his course website; I don’t think it’s very appropriate. He wrote, “To my students from HKU this semester.

Chen: “Dear Students, I started teaching law at HKU in 1984. In the same year, the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed. Since then, ‘One Country, Two Systems’ has been my research topic and interest. Today I feel an unprecedented crisis in the practice of ‘One Country, Two Systems.’ The road of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ seems increasingly narrow and bumpy,” he continued. “In particular, unless general citizens, including young people, have a solid understanding of the political and legal reality under the principle, and confront this political reality with a rational, pragmatic attitude, conflicts between the two systems will grow. “The internal struggle within Hong Kong society will lead Hong Kong into self-destruction. Hong Kong will decline from its glory days. The first time Hong Kong implements universal suffrage, candidates running for Chief Executive should be nominated by a Nominating Committee as required in Article 45 in Basic Law. This nomination system hardly fulfills the benchmark set by most democratic countries. Chinese officials have made it clear that this nomination system is designed in consideration of national security.”

R: What the hell? “The goal is to ensure all candidates have love for the country and Hong Kong, are not working against the central government. . . .” They wrote this bullshit into the constitution? This kind of constitutional logic is very problematic. I’m sorry. “. . . to ensure that the elected Chief Executive is someone that is both trusted by the Chinese government, one that the Chinese government gladly appoints.” That is utterly problematic! I can’t believe that a law professor would defend such a twisted regime! “. . . for the stability of the central government, and to prevent foreign forces from undermining the central government

through intervention in Hong Kong.” Is this a legitimate reason for our lack of democracy? To maintain national security and to prevent subversion from foreign forces are legitimate reasons in his eyes.

Chen: “I believe anyone who knows Chinese politics would agree that, whatever kind of occupation might take place in Hong Kong will not change the Chinese government’s mind. An honest opinion might be hard on the ears. I know a lot of Hong Kong people don’t want to hear what I just said, but this is the political reality.”

R: I think you shouldn’t accept the reality when it is that distorted. Do you understand? The reality is that China wants stability and to prevent foreign subversion of state power. Is it a reasonable explanation at all? This isn’t political reality. It’s dirty politics. It is dark, distorted politics. Okay, it is indeed political reality, but it’s a dark and distorted one. Does it mean we have to take them all in? No. At least I won’t accept it.

Chen: “Since Hong Kong’s democratization has been decided, Hong Kong people must help ourselves out by seeking survival through the chinks in ‘One Country Two Systems.’”

R: What the heck? How can you say that, Prof. Chen! “Cherish the freedom that we currently enjoy. Try your best to bring out the Lion Rock Spirit.” Are you mad? Honestly, I’m very pissed.

The sequence of Rachel’s reading and debunking of Chen’s letter in effect epitomizes the sophisticated devices of storytelling in the documentary. In following the camera’s gaze on Rachel, we spectators are lured and allowed to see ourselves in a self-identifying process. That is to say, the film privileges Rachel’s voice over that of the other (surely over that of her professor). Rachel speaks to us, and we are engaged by her address. Her speech positions the spectators as addressees as well as those who conform to her cause. In presenting Rachel’s discourse, the documentary achieves a compelling narration, a storytelling whereby we identify with the character and her thought as she explains it, and are ready to share her ideas and philosophy.

In the final Chapter (“A Memorandum”) of the film, Rachel reads an open letter to Professor Chen. What matters, as we understand it, is that the letter is addressed to the film’s audience rather than really being directed at her professor. “Professor, I am not erudite as you are, so I can only write to you with my passionate, or rather naïve, child’s heart.” Rachel begins her letter in a humble tone. Yet she proceeds to

*Ex-position*  
December  
2019

argue that what the students have been doing is morally just and politically rational. She simply cannot agree with living in a “distorted political reality,” in which Hong Kong citizens are bound by a policy framework designed by the Chinese government based on national security, stability, and prevention of foreign conspiracy. She then turns from the grudges she holds against Chinese politics to her deeply felt love for Hong Kong as seen in the bonding and collegiality of her fellow students.

(2:01:10)

What I witnessed at all the occupied zones were increasingly tired yet determined faces. What I saw was a rebirth of the Lion Rock Spirit. Professor, I have never seen a Hong Kong like this. Isn't this the old Hong Kong that our ancestors remember fondly? The old Hong Kong with a strong communal spirit and close bonds.

“Also, don't you see, there are many other reasons behind the massive Occupy Movement that we are witnessing today?” (2:02:55). As Rachel explicates deeper social contradictions as the long-term factors lying beneath the movement, she delivers more sophisticated social analysis: “There is no more upward mobility in the social class structure.” She thus exposes the lies of politicians that the eruptions of the movement are merely youthful rebellion. Rachel's unauthorized, expository voiceover here goes along with a montage of images of the city's rundown corners and dilapidated neighborhoods: “We live in the street in pain and rain. It is also because many of our restaurants, stationery shops and bakeries are gradually disappearing, and they are replaced by chain stores and jewelry shops, and large shopping malls.” In *Yellowing*, Chan Tze-woon offers no expert voice or comments from authority figures. But the ingenious use of sound in combining the seen and heard in this final chapter turns Rachel's words addressed to the professor into her letter of love to the city of Hong Kong. As Rachel says at the end, “It is because the future is ours, we want to protect it against the odds. We don't want to see a Hong Kong that we can no longer recognize in the future. Chances are gained, not granted. We are young, and we should fight on.”

### **Postscript: Begin Where It Ends**

As Ian Aitken and Mike Ingham have argued about the future of Hong Kong's independent film scene, documentary filmmaking is “certain to be beset by struggles” for “the right to exercise that important option of casting a cold eye on

events in Hong Kong and its environs” (*Hong Kong Documentary Film 224*). Ackbar Abbas notes that it is arguably the ambiguous position of Hong Kong cinema vis-à-vis nationalism and self-determination that has been instrumental in stimulating the emergence of a uniquely “stateless” cinema: a cinema in need of a “politics of memory” as the aspirations typically associated with nationhood “make no sense in a Hong Kong context” (126).

*Yellowing* can be seen as manifesting this “politics of memory” Abbas has described. The ending’s contemplative voiceover by the filmmaker himself complements a montage sequence of the occupied zone after the government’s eviction ended the seventy-nine-day student demonstrations.

(2:05:22)

Chan Tze-woon: Now that the occupation is over, everything goes back to where it began, as if nothing had happened at all. Except for the extra whiteboard in my studio, and footage from these seventy-nine days. Have we changed anything?

The filmmaker’s remark constitutes more of a personal memorial statement on the events than an analytical exegesis of them. “Have we changed anything?” Chan Tze-woon seems to be hesitant about the consequences of the student movement, but he is very assertive about his film’s ability to become an important site of memory. Seconds later, the film refers back to a conversation between Chan and Lucky Egg, which took place a few days before the occupation site was demolished.

(2:06:19)

Chan Tze-woon: Are you afraid that you will be the same in twenty years?  
Lucky Egg: Am I afraid that I will be the same in twenty years? (Sigh.) I don’t know what I will become in twenty years, but I hope I won’t become such a person. But if I really become like that, hit me hard and wake me up. So your film will be a very important piece of evidence, to show me how I was twenty years ago.

Lucky Egg charges Chan with the task of showing them the film in twenty years so that they will be reminded of what they were like and what they used to believe in. And that is one thing the documentary can surely claim to do. The participant’s

*Ex-position*  
December  
2019

aspiration bespeaks the politics of memory of the documentary. “Yellowing” can also refer to the process by which old photos or videos may fade and become blurred. “The film then, as suggested by its Chinese title, not only serves as a ‘reminder’ for the participants to be replayed in 20 years, but indeed constructs the collective memory of an entire generation” (Veg, “Yellowing”). Through his choice of informants and their responses, Chan reflects on his own journey as a filmmaker. He has become a chronicler as well as an agent who inquires into the meaning of the social movement by making a documentary, which, no less than a feature film, functions to story-tell the shared experiences, self-reflections, and collective memories of the filmmaker and the participants as well as the spectators.

*Yellowing* provides no grand narrative or reflexive analysis of the political context and events. It does not have a happy ending either. Built on the momentum of the Umbrella Movement, the film adheres to an internal rhythm of storytelling as framed by a poetic structure of contrasts and conflicts between home and homeliness, action (confrontation) and word (dialogue), orchestrated with the leitmotifs of friendship, courtship, and comradeship. There is an Eisensteinian sense of dramatic structuring in *Yellowing* achieved through moments of stasis, conflict, climax, achievement, and loss—the editing following the flow and flux of people and events without the pretense of pointing toward a “resolution.” The documentary film does not come to a closure. It does not seek to produce political compassion in the audience or depict heroes or culprits. It positions the spectators right there with the participants and social actors, caring about them and getting to understand their aspirations and anxieties. The documentary, like a good historical film, expresses the cultural-historical sensibilities of the milieu. In this regard, Chan Tze-woon has made *Yellowing* a beautifully rendered image of the past to pay homage to his fellow citizens and their love of their city.

## Chapter Sections and Narrative Structure in *Yellowing*<sup>8</sup>

### Prologue

1. Encounter	Confront 1	<i>fff</i>	
2. Fear is contagious			Dialogue
3. Familiar yet so strange home			Home
4. EVISU glasses 33356	confront	<i>ff</i>	Monolog
5. Change group chat subject to: On shift list at our new home			Home
6. Fung: We should continue the Occupy Movement without Mongkok			Dialogue
7. Boycott class, continue learning			Home
8. Civil disobedience is . . .	confront	<i>ff</i>	
9. Deliberate polling (Bargain/Hijack/Chips)			Dialogue
10. Unresolved case of Mongkok	Confront 2	<i>fff</i>	
11. Lucky Egg presents: Random street class			Home
12. Evolution of study area			Home
13. Injunction	confront	<i>ff</i>	Dialogue
14. XX doesn't represent me I should be my own representative			Dialogue
15. A cross-generational letter			Dialogue
16. Recently added	Uptown Girl	♥♪	Home
17. If you're the King of Occupy Central	confront	<i>f</i>	Dialogue
18. I met an 18-yo girl in Mongkok	Hey Jude	♥♪	Home Dialogue
19. What's doomed to fade	Confront 3	<i>fff</i>	
20. A memorandum (Rachel: "Dear Professor Chen . . .")			Home Dialogue

Chan Tze-woon's  
Documentary  
*Yellowing*

<sup>8</sup> I borrow musical notations and numbers to articulate the dynamics and expressiveness of individual chapters of the film. The marking *fff* stands for *fortississimo* ("very, very loud"), and *ff* for *fortissimo* ("very loud"). A good film, like a musical piece, has a dynamic structure to deliver emotion. I see the film as comprising alternating "motifs" of "confrontation," "home-seeking," and "dialogue."

Ex-position  
December  
2019

## WORKS CITED

- Abbas, Ackbar. "Hong Kong." *The Cinema of Small Nations*. Ed. Mette Hjört and Duncan Petrie. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007. 113-26.
- Aitken, Ian, and Mike Ingham. *Hong Kong Documentary Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014.
- . "The Documentary Film in Hong Kong." *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema*. Ed. Esther M. K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Esther C. M. Yau. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015. 539-56.
- Barber, Elizabeth. "The Main Hong Kong Protest Site Is a Perfect Anarchist Collective." *Time* 20 Oct. 2014. Web. Accessed 1 June 2019.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Trans. Paul Patton. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.
- Bloch, Ernst. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. Trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1988.
- Cheung, Chang-fai. *Another Place Another Time*. Hong Kong: Infolink, 2018.
- Chan, Tze-woon, dir. *Yellowing*. Ying E Chi, 2016.
- Cheung, Eric. "Screened Out? Film Charting Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement Struggles to Be Seen." *The Guardian* 25 Sept. 2016. Web. Accessed 1 June 2019.
- Chiu, Vincent. Preface. *On Ground We Stand: Hong Kong Independent Film Festival, 2008-2017*. Ed. Enoch Yee-lok Tam and Tit-leung Cheung. Hong Kong: Typesetter, 2017. 166-67.
- Cowie, Elizabeth. *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2011.
- Doherty, Thomas. "The Sincerest Form of Flattery: A Brief History of the Mockumentary." *Cineaste* 28 (2003): 22-24.
- Ebert, Roger. "Nanook of the North." *RogerEbert.com* 25 Sept. 2005. Web. Accessed 4 June 2019.
- Gilman, Sean. "VIFF 2016: *Yellowing* (Chan Tze-woon, 2016)." *Seattle Screen Scene* 5 Oct. 2016. Web. Accessed 4 June 2019.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Remapping Taipei." *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992. 114-57.
- Jay, Martin. *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Kempton, Nicole. "Performing the Margins: Locating Independent Cinema in Hong Kong." *Hong Kong Screenscapes: From the New Wave to the Digital Frontier*. Ed. Esther M. K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Tan See-Kam. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2011. 95-110.

- Kracauer, Siegfried. *History: The Last Things before the Last*. New York: Oxford UP, 1969.
- Lee, Edmund. "Punched by Police and Shunned by Cinemas, Occupy Documentary Maker Still a Believer." *South China Morning Post* 26 Apr. 2016. Web. Accessed 2 June 2019.
- Ling, Steffanie. "Yellowing/Luanshi Beiwang: Memo of the Troubled Times." *NYAQ/LXAQ/SFAQ: International Art and Culture* 31 Oct. 2016. Web. Accessed 1 June 2016.
- Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007.
- . *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- Roscoe, Jane, and Craig Hight. *Faking It: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2001.
- Shapiro, Ann-Louise. "How Real Is the Reality in Documentary Film? Jill Godmilow, in Conversation with Ann-Louise Shapiro." *History and Theory* 36.4 (1997): 81-101.
- Szeto, M. Miranda, and Yun-Chung Chen. "Mainlandization or Sinophone Translocality? Challenges for Hong Kong SAR New Wave Cinema." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6.2 (2012): 115-34.
- Tam, Yee-lok, Vivian Pui-yin Lee, and Kenny K. K. Ng. *Xianggang duli dianying tujing: fangwen pinglun ji (Indiescape Hong Kong: Critical Essays and Interviews)*. Hong Kong: Typesetter, 2018.
- Učník, L'ubica. "Memory and Power: Reflections on the Personal Experience of Utopia." *Another Place Another Time*. Ed. Chang-fai Cheung. Hong Kong: Infolink, 2018. 5-35.
- Veg, Sebastian. "The Rise of 'Localism' and Civic Identity in Post-Handover Hong Kong: Questioning the Chinese Nation-state." *The China Quarterly* 230 (2017): 323-47.
- . "Yellowing: Memo for a Generation." *vegsebastian.wordpress.com* 25 Aug. 2018. Web. Accessed 10 Oct. 2019.

\*\*Manuscript received 30 June 2019,  
accepted for publication 21 Oct. 2019

