
Of Activism and the Land: Ecological and Utopian Visions of Post-Handover Hong Kong Documentaries

Winnie L. M. Yee

ABSTRACT

While Hong Kong's post-colonial identity has yet to be defined, it is clear that its destiny is strongly tied to the numerous movements and protests that have taken place since 1997. A conscious ecocritical turn—a return to land and nature and farming activities—is one of the developments in the post-handover period. It operates as a means to overturn the colonial discourse and to imagine Hong Kong apart from its economic identity. Using as examples Freddie Ho-lun Chan's two documentaries, *The Way of Paddy* (2012) and *Open Road after Harvest* (2015), this article explores the significance of social movements intent on reimagining the relationship between the land and the Hong Kong people. The ecological and utopian visions in Chan's films are meant to be seen not as an unreachable ideal but as a critique of the defects of the current system. This article argues that in the progression from the first documentary to the second we witness an awakening on the part of the filmmaker, one that is emblematic of the wider Hong Kong community. Taken together, the two films provide a full articulation of the nature of sustainability, both personal and collective, micro and macro, corporeal and affective.

KEYWORDS Hong Kong, eco-documentary, Save Choi Yuen Village movement, utopian vision, Freddie Ho-lun Chan

Ex-position, Issue No. 42, December 2019 | National Taiwan University
DOI: 10.6153/EXP.201912_(42).0008

Winnie L. M. YEE, Assistant Professor, Department of Comparative Literature, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Ex-position
December
2019

Introduction

While Hong Kong's post-colonial identity has yet to be defined, it is clear that its destiny is strongly tied to the numerous movements and protests that have taken place since 1997. The demolition of colonial iconic landmarks such as the Star Ferry Pier and Queen's Pier in 2006-2007, the Anti-High Speed Rail protest in 2008-2010, and the Umbrella Movement in 2014 have undermined the economic discourse that has determined the fate of Hong Kong. Could this city be read differently? Could it metamorphose into something beyond a free market capitalist economy? The sociologist Tai-lok Lui maintains that in 1997 Hong Kong's free market economy, partially democratized political system, and judicial system, "together with the guarantees of civil liberty and personal freedom, formed a shield to protect Hong Kong from interference by the socialist authoritarian state" (401). The growing anxiety of the Hong Kong people as a result of political interference from mainland China has strengthened the call for counter-hegemonic action. Hong Kong's identity crisis has deepened in the post-handover period.

During socio-historical turning points, creative works often provide a means to capture, reflect, and respond to events at a distance. These works later become useful evidence, documenting both the historical events and the sentiments they aroused. Often, they provide the reflection necessary for both the creator and the audience to negotiate the emotions connected with the event. For research purposes, these creative works help us to understand the various emotions involved in the shaping of social and historical events. Documentaries are a useful contribution to public discourse. Jacques Rancière, who has explored the distinction between fiction and documentary, asserts that, apart from the fact that documentaries use "images from real daily life and archive documents about events that obviously happened," the main difference between documentary and fiction is that "the documentary instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood" (158). Documentaries provide a platform for the audience to contemplate real events. This article investigates the use of documentaries in recording and reshaping the post-handover identity of Hong Kong, its connection to the land, and the effects of its social movements.

A conscious ecocritical turn—a return to the land and nature, and to related farming activities—is one of the developments of the post-handover period. It operates as a means to undermine the colonial discourse and reimagine Hong Kong apart from its economic identity. In recent years, there has been an increase in independent films dealing with nature and the land, stressing the crucial connections between human beings and nature, and challenging our use of natural

resources. This has been accompanied by the emergence of alternative communities—e.g., community farms such as Partnership for Eco-Agriculture and the Conservation of Earth (PEACE), Mapopo Community Farm, and *Sangwoodgoon* (literally House of Living)—that integrate appreciation of art (literature and film), education (workshops), and physical action (active engagement in farming). They emerged as alternatives to an urban life that is characterized by capitalist enterprise, developmental discourse, and neglect of the environment. They are flexible and generally operate on a small scale, producing organic food and promoting handmade products. The residents are also activists who advocate changing the future of Hong Kong. The focus on the land and nature in these alternative communities, and in post-1997 Hong Kong independent films, does not represent a nostalgic wish to return to premodern times; instead, it is part of an effort to mobilize land, nature, and human beings in an attempt to rethink Hong Kong. These communities, on the outer margins of Hong Kong, want not only to change the relationship between nature and urban renewal but also to harness the media and initiate social movements.

The ecocritical turn, which has nothing to do with economic profits and everything to do with new ideals, was almost unheard of during the colonial period. It was the social movements that took place during the period following the hand-over that encouraged the Hong Kong people to engage in further reflection. Freddie Ho-lun Chan has a reputation as an up-and-coming filmmaker. Recipient of the Asian Cultural Council Fellowship in 2018, Chan is a dedicated activist in the realm of documentary filmmaking. His films feature the underprivileged and marginalized members of Hong Kong society (such as the domestic help in *Beautiful Life* [2013]) and those surviving in inhumane living conditions (such as the characters in *Loft in the Air* [2012]). Still, it is his documentaries on the Save Choi Yuen Village movement and on his friends' embrace of alternative living that have received the most attention. Chan's land trilogy (the third film is in production) portrays how social movements have reimagined the relationship between the land and Hong Kong's identity. The utopian visions in Chan's films are not meant to function as unrealistic ideals; rather, they are critiques of the current system. Using as examples the first two films of the trilogy, *The Way of Paddy* (2012) and *Open Road after Harvest* (2015), this article argues that in the transition from the first documentary to the second we witness an awakening on the part of the filmmaker, one that is emblematic of the larger Hong Kong community. Taken together, the two films provide a full articulation of the nature of sustainability, both personal and collective, micro and macro, corporeal and affective, material and immaterial.

Ex-position
December
2019

This article will first briefly review the independent film scene in Hong Kong and the use of documentaries to reveal the close connection between social movements and history. Documentaries have exposed the limitations of Hong Kong's success story. My article will analyze *The Way of Paddy* (hereafter *The Way*) and *Open Road After Harvest* (hereafter *Open Road*) and highlight their significance in shaping Hong Kong's historical discourse, as well as the ecocritical discourse on the land and farming. These films trace three transitions: from collective to personal (the shift from society to the individual in the post-movement moment), from performative to existential experience (the shift in social movements from performativity to everyday struggles), and from macro politics to micro stories (the shift from philosophical debates on the meaning of protests to individual stories). There is a dialogue between the two documentaries regarding the purpose of life and the hopes associated with a return to land. A close look at these two documentaries reveals a general picture of Hong Kong's new relationship with land in the post-handover period. What is most significant in both films is the portrayal of the ways in which social movements have shaped the protestors and their views on the meaning of life. In addition to drawing attention to a new direction in Hong Kong documentaries, this study also deals with the rise of different cultural imaginations of Hong Kong, and the interconnectedness of Hong Kong and other communities.

The Independent Spirit and Social Movements in Post-Handover Hong Kong

Hong Kong independent cinema has had its ups and downs. Scholars have been tracking the correlation between the growth of the movie industry and the space outside the industry where independent films emerge. In an interview with Esther M. K. Cheung, the veteran independent filmmaker Yuan Hu observes, "The decline of the Hong Kong film industry in the mid-1990s also means the rise of other forms of Hong Kong cinema" (Cheung). Some critics have argued that independent cinema gains strength when it feels required to respond directly to social or historical events. The flowering of Hong Kong independent cinema occurred in the pre-1997 era when social and political stress prompted young filmmakers to appropriate new means to galvanize new discourse on the future of Hong Kong. Institutional support also helped to boost their success. The Hong Kong Arts Development Council, for example, has played an important role in funding film projects since the mid-1990s (Cheung). And, as Sebastian Veg notes, the independent film scene has also profited from "festivals, critics and cooperative collectives and distributors, like Ying E Chi or Visible Record" (3).

Another high point in Hong Kong independent cinema is tied to the social movements that happened in the post-handover period. Vivian Lee coined the term “post-nostalgia” to describe the “reinterpretation of the local against a repertoire of clichés [among which is] the so-called grand narrative of the Hong Kong success story” (qtd. in Veg 4). Veg notes that Lee’s observation helps to explain the shift from action cinema to the portrayal of the quotidian and the ordinary in some independent films. This article too deals with the shift toward the ordinary and the everyday in the post-1997 Hong Kong independent film scene and connects this shift with the utopian visions in documentaries. In addition to the impetus provided by social events, new technology and opportunities for competition and training also contributed to the rise of independent cinema. The increase in documentaries which form a critical part of the independent film scene in Hong Kong reveals the growing popularity of the genre. A quick look at Visible Record’s Chinese Documentary Film Festival would confirm this observation.¹ The number of documentaries produced in Hong Kong has been on the rise since the late 2000s when significant social events encouraged filmmakers to address social injustice and the systemic problems in the city.

To highlight the connections between documentaries, social awareness, and the land, we will briefly review a number of works that combine these features. One outstanding example is the Raging Land series by V-artist, a group that has made explicit their use of documentary to engage with social events. They have made a series of films to record the Save Choi Yuen Village movement and, more generally, to expose the relationships between the dominant capitalist property developers and disempowered people (often non-indigenous villagers and farmers who are forced from their homes due to development initiated by the SAR government). The Food and Farming Film Festivals, initiated by *Sangwoodgoon* in 2014, demonstrate another way of tapping the social activism of documentaries. While the film festivals curate both local and international documentaries, the organizers target “small but focused audience” and create “a series of unconventional opportunities for audience, farmers, artists, and organizers to share their views” (Yee 57). These opportunities include discussion panels, tours, farmer’s markets, and communal cooking. In this way, the organizers can disseminate the message of the documentaries without relying on academic lectures or mainstream culture. The screening of a film can prompt activities that put into

¹ The production of Hong Kong documentary films has been increasing in numbers steadily in the past decade. The entries from Hong Kong region in the Chinese Documentary Festival have reached its highest number in 2014 (nineteen entries, shorts and features combined) and 2016 (seventeen entries, shorts and features combined).

practice the film's message. In addition to these films, there are also smaller projects that have directed attention to the consequences of Hong Kong's continual urban redevelopment at the expense of local history and memories. These would include Mo Yan-chi Lai's *I+I* (2010) and *N+N* (2012) series, Jessey Tsang's *Ho Chung* series, Chi-hang Ma's *Ballad on the Shore* (2017), and Freddie Ho-lun Chan & Chloe Lai's *Rhymes of Shui Hau* (2017). These works may be broadly described as eco-documentaries. Even if their main aim is not environmental awareness, their emphasis on the land and memories prompt us to meditate on nature's relationship with human culture and to remind us of our physical and intellectual interdependence. The placement of humans in nature reveals the intricate connections between the human and non-human world. The rise of eco-documentaries represents a turning point in Hong Kong's independent film scene.

In her analysis of eco-feminism, Greta Gaard points out, "An intersectional ecological-feminist approach frames these [ecocritical] issues in such a way that people can recognize common cause across the boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, species, age, ability, nation—and affords a basis for engaged theory, education, and activism" (44). My discussion will not focus on feminist perspectives, but will examine how the links between eco-criticism and activism illuminate the recent interest in eco-critical perspectives in Hong Kong. As Hughes has noted, the eco-documentary is not merely a means to disseminate knowledge; it is also a response to the ideas, beliefs, and emotions that emerge in the process of audiovisual research into the environment. Bill Nichols has also drawn attention to the documentary's unique function: "Rhetoric [in the documentary], in other words, may sometimes be deceptive but it is also the only means we have as social actors, or citizens, for conveying our beliefs, perspectives, and convictions persuasively" (qtd. in Hughes 133).

Since the return of sovereignty to the motherland, activism in Hong Kong has been ignited by many controversial issues, one of the most contentious being the construction of the Guangzhou-Hong Kong high-speed rail line, which was the source of civil resistance from 2008 to 2010. This express line runs from the terminus in West Kowloon, heading north to the Shenzhen-Hong Kong boundary where it connects with the Mainland section. Choi Yuen Village, home to about 500 people, was scheduled for demolition because it was located along the rail track. In November 2008, Choi Yuen villagers received a notice that they had to vacate the village by November 2010. No meetings, discussions or negotiations had been conducted between the villagers and the government beforehand. The project affected approximately 150 households, representing a population of around 500, and at least 3,000,000 square feet of agricultural land. Hong Kong

residents held protests against the proposed railway, which would link Hong Kong with Mainland China's growing high-speed rail network. The opposition was initiated by media activists who had already taken part in campaigns such as the preservation of the Star Ferry Pier in Edinburgh Place in 2006 and that of the Queen's Pier in 2007. At the outset, the campaign against the Guangzhou-Hong Kong high-speed line focused on saving Choi Yuen Village, which was painstakingly built by its residents over four decades.

Various groups, ranging from environmentalists to the affected villagers, opposed the project. The activism inspired makers of independent films such as Benny Yin-kai Chan and Freddie Ho-lun Chan to document the sentiments of the Hong Kong people, draw attention to the importance of cherishing nature as part of one's home, and propose a new way of envisaging Hong Kong's identity. Among the numerous documentaries depicting the Save Choi Yuen Village movement and the alternatives offered by a life of farming, *The Way*, *Open Road*, and *Kong Rice* (2015)² could be considered the most representative. They examine Hong Kong's agricultural industry, rural-urban conflicts in the name of development, and the material significance and symbolic meaning of "farming." They also explore the ideological conflicts between attachment to place and eco-cosmopolitan tendencies, the rural and the urban, individuals and government, and intellectuals and the masses.

The Way and *Open Road* are the two documentaries directly related to the Save Choi Yuen Village movement. *The Way* documents the movement, the foundation of *Sangwoodgoon*, and events such as *Sangwoodgoon's* rice planting process and its Dragon Boat Festival. During the filming process, Chan shared the planters' experience of unpredictable weather and asked the villagers about the difficulties of farming when there was a shortage of land and labour. Documenting non-traditional rice-cultivating techniques, the film deals with the relationship between the farmer and nature, and the evolution of the protest movement. In *Open Road*, Chan continues to explore Hong Kong's agriculture, land policy, and urban development. This film tells the stories of three local organic farmers: Yu-wing Wong, a peasant leader who, threatened by political infiltration, decided to quit politics and focus on his farming; Oi-chun Hung, a rural woman who fought against the North-east New Territories development plan while taking care of her sick husband and

² In the short film *Kong Rice* (2015), Yiu-Hei Chan depicts the rise of a new group of local farmers comprising professionals and university lecturers. They want to revive farming in Hong Kong and, despite the dismal yield, still give it their all. They also support cultural preservation and say "No" to the government and property conglomerates in order to prevent the last natural refuges in Hong Kong from becoming commercial developments.

managing the family farm; and Moon-yee Ho, a sixty-year-old truck driver who decided to change his career and live a more fearless and free life as a farmer.

While *The Way* focuses on social issues, *Open Road* is based on personal portraits. As Nichols notes, “Social issues documentary might seem to go with the expository mode and an earlier movement in documentary, whereas personal portraiture might seem to go with observational or participatory modes and contemporary debates about the politics of identity” (243). A social-issue documentary like *The Way* deals with public affairs from a socially sensitive perspective. The film is a stunning reexamination of the agricultural history of Hong Kong and the consequences of reckless urban development. *Open Road* is a personal-portrait film that focuses on the individual rather than the general problems of unemployment and financial hardship. It demonstrates the intimate connection between the personal and the political, and the way individuals are shaped and repressed by neoliberal logic. The urban history of Hong Kong is reflected through personal stories. These two documentaries can best be read as a dialogue that consolidates the filmmaker’s understanding of the future of Hong Kong’s farming industry and the city itself.

Ecological and Utopian Visions of Land: From Collective to Private Space

In order to better understand the importance of Chan’s two documentaries, it is necessary to look at the utopias his films portray. Utopias abound in post-colonial art. In his discussion of post-colonial writing, Bill Ashcroft notes, “[N]othing accomplishes this [utopian vision] better than literature, which is inherently utopian because its *raison d’être* is the imaging of a different world. Place becomes central, not as *utopia* but as the site of transformation, the location of identity, and the generation of a utopian idea—one [Ernest] Bloch calls *Heimat*. Such literature tends to resolve the ambiguities of hope” (12). While Ashcroft’s context is literature, his comments are also applicable to the cultural imaginations proposed in Chan’s documentaries. In the field of environmental humanities, scholars have noted that utopian imaginings are invoked in creative works about former colonies that must transcend the anxiety of “not-being-at-home.” In the case of Hong Kong, these anxious feelings were particularly strong during the period around the hand-over. Some scholars argue that this anxiety is shared by all people: “The human condition is fundamentally one of ‘not being at home.’ Presumably, such as an anxious feeling is exacerbated in the modern world” (Tally 4). Former colonies are deprived of opportunities to understand their history and traditions. They are, therefore, forced to “project a kind of schematic representation of the world and

one's place in it that becomes a way of making sense of things. . . . By projecting a sort of imaginary map—a metaphor for constellating the various forces that directly and indirectly affect one's life—one may overcome one's anxious homelessness, and if one does not exactly feel 'at home,' then at least one develops strategies for navigating the uncanny spaces" (4). Documentaries present not the world of imagination but the world of facts, yet they can still suggest possible changes to society by depicting alternative survival skills. If it is through imagination that one can produce a vision that reflects one's reality, in documentaries, imaginative visions can be achieved through creative techniques that reflect one's reality.

In *The Principle of Hope* (1954), Ernst Bloch argues the most important aim of art is to show the potential of the future—the utopian moment—that is already embedded in the present. This is also the aim of many Hong Kong filmmakers. Land and farming are used as catalysts for such utopian moments. To a large extent, the function of utopias is to encourage “the conceptualization of existing modes of experience and perception from a different point of view” (Gardiner 37). Utopias are a response to “the phenomenology of human alienation and the reification of social relations under capitalism and bureaucratic socialism” (37). This view of human alienation and the reification of social relations as the consequences of a capitalist market economy is also evident in Chan's documentaries. Chan's land series could be described as ecotopian: it conveys the difficulties of social reality while attempting to provide imaginative alternatives. The two documentaries must be watched together. At the beginning of *The Way*, *Sangwoodgoon* is portrayed as the solution to Hong Kong's overreliance on the market economy. The success of the organic farm in the Tse Uk Village in Pat Heung suggests the possibility of an “alternative haven” where former urbanites can pursue a self-sufficient life in a harmonious relationship with nature. This alternative, however, is questioned as the film progresses. The reasons that prompted people to join *Sangwoodgoon* cause the audience to suspect that the community is just a form of escape. While this is never stated explicitly, the self-questioning of the residents, together with the reservations expressed by the film, casts doubt on the meaning and function of the organic community. The film critic Helen Hughes has noted that when documentaries present an argument, “[t]he point of the argument is that it is an argument, an active subjective engagement that is looking for support, for collective action” (118). *The Way* does not provide an easy solution for the audience; it does not suggest that organic communities can solve all the existing problems of Hong Kong. Questions are raised in *The Way*, and *Open Road* can be seen as a preliminary answer.

While *The Way* relies on news footage of the protests to explain the emergence of *Sangwoodgoon*, this footage is not provided as an object of passive contemplation.

It is juxtaposed with interviews with members of the community who provide reasons for their decision to join. The audience is encouraged to pay attention to the interplay between representation and discourse—the tension between the way social movements and protestors are depicted by the camera and the way the protestors actually live their post-movement lives. Hughes compares the documentary to the site of a battle: “it makes claims about the relationship between representation, communication and the real” (126). While *The Way* stresses the shaping of social movements and the discourse that leads to the legitimization of an alternative community, *Open Road* retreats from the spotlight and seeks out individual stories. The return to the mundane suggests a different take on the future of Hong Kong. Free from political ambitions and burdens, the three farmers are embodiments of a larger Hong Kong story. Their experiences interweave personal honour, family relationships, economic shifts, and historical developments. The political is embedded in the individual struggle. It appears that Chan has come to a tentative conclusion as to what he considers to be the way ahead, not just for the protestors, but for Hong Kong as a whole, one in which land and nature will have a crucial role to play.

The Way depicts the establishment of *Sangwoodgoon*, investigates the founders’ agricultural aspirations, records the process of growing rice by the *Sangwoodgoon* farmers, and, most importantly, presents Chan’s own musings on the significance of the social movement. The first half of the documentary progresses chronologically according to the cycle of growing rice; the second half provides a meta-narrative of the process of filmmaking (Chan conducted a new round of interviews after receiving feedback from the first cut of the film). Chan’s own reflections are especially in evidence in his discussions with Sze-chung Chow, a core member of *Sangwoodgoon* and also a close friend. The collective spirit of *Sangwoodgoon* is stressed by the camera’s constant depiction of groups at work in open spaces. If life at *Sangwoodgoon* can be understood as a post-movement moment, this moment still retains its political essence in its commitment to solidarity. As Erik Swyngedouw suggests, “A political moment is always placed, localized, and invariably operative in a public space. Squares and other (semi-)public spaces have historically always been the sites for performing and enacting emancipatory practices” (34). Although the social movement that prompted the creation of *Sangwoodgoon* has come to an end, the images of communal labour convey a nostalgia for collective action, which has now been transferred to farming.

The documentary highlights moments of solidarity: learning to farm as a group, protesting as a group in the early days, attending dinners and discussions as a group. For the farmers, environmentalism is an embodied politics. As Alberto

Melucci puts it, “activists tend to incorporate their environmental concerns and commitments into everyday cultural practices; they seek consistency between their ‘political’ positions and ‘personal’ preferences, pursuing practices compatible with the visions they strive collectively to create” (qtd. in Horton 130). Solidarity is a motif in *The Way*—both the solidarity of the protestors who continue to explore the possibility of a sustainable way of living free from the hegemony of property developers, and the solidarity that comes from aligning personal views with a larger movement. A belief in togetherness is indispensable in an organic community. When Chan asks Sze-chung Chow why he was drawn to farming, Chow responds by asking why Chan was drawn to filmmaking. Chan answers that he began filming the documentary as a representative of a collective, but now he wonders if that is a sustainable position for a filmmaker. *The Way* leaves us pondering this question.

It might be in response to this question that Chan filmed *Open Road*. Telling the stories of three farmers’ survival, the film is an eco-documentary dealing not with social movements but with personal experiences of the land. The farmers are given plenty of time to reflect on their lives, with the camera following their work on the farm. During their monologues, they reminisce about a past that has withered away. A series of shots recording Wong delivering his organic vegetables to various households highlights his loneliness—a single man fighting the huge forces of mass distribution. Traversing foot bridges, subways, pedestrian walkways, and train crossings, the handheld camera follows Wong’s difficult progress, which is undertaken rain or shine. The quick pacing of the camera shots also reflects an urban world that is not compatible with the quiet farmland that is often presented as being apart from the hustle and bustle of the urban city. The other farmers, Ho and Hung, are also shown alone; in their case, they are standing in their fields, their bodies accommodating themselves to their tools. Individuality and personal relationships with the land are stressed (in contrast to *The Way*, which focused on communities and collective efforts). The farmers do not complain or express any regrets. Their direct engagement with land is shown in their sowing, growing, and selling the vegetables. Unlike amateur farmers who are shown setting up nets to prevent birds from eating the crops, these experienced farmers have a more relaxed and realistic relationship with the land. They work to no specific rhythm or pace; they adapt to the flow of nature. Their relaxed behaviour is reflected in the medium and long shots that show the farmers in the midst of their fields and crops. These long shots are juxtaposed with close-ups of, for example, a small bug on a vegetable leaf or raindrops shimmering on the surface of the plants. The camera invites us to pay attention to the world beyond our usual visual confinement

through enlarging our visionary and cognitive perspective. It urges the audience to look and think beyond its limited scope. These personal stories are testimonies to the possibility of a meaningful personal struggle. Chan absents himself from this film and keeps the spotlight directly on his three subjects whose lives appear entirely self-sufficient.

From Performative Body to Existential Body

It is clear, then, that the two documentaries take very different approaches to challenging the dominant discourse and celebrating the connection between people and the land. In *The Way*, the focus is on performative bodies. Judith Butler celebrates the body's right by arguing that "showing up, standing, breathing, moving still, speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly, an unforeseen form of political performativity that puts liveable life at the forefront of politics" (18). Her main contention is that when bodies assemble publicly to give form to a particular set of aspirations, "they affirm a 'plural and performative right to appear' that expresses a 'bodily demand' for novel social, political and economic arrangements 'no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity.' This demand derives its social and material force from its embodied and performative expression" (Duff 520). In protests and public events, performative bodies provide powerful demonstrations of agency.

In *The Way*, not only are there footages of protests in which the bodies of the participants act and are acted upon, there are also numerous instances of other types of performance. There are scenes of farmers trying to sing away the difficulties of their tasks, their bodies framed against a background of nature and farming implements. On several occasions, the film draws attention to the filmmaker's process of framing: Chan can be seen cuing the farmers on how to pose. The apparatus of documentation is exposed by shots of Chan in the camera frame and the recurrent image of television screens. Two types of performances, then, are highlighted: those undertaken by the bodies involved in protests and in farming, and those of the bodies performing for the documentary camera.

Butler's discussion of the affective dimensions of performative enactment can shed light on our understanding of performative bodies in *The Way*. While bodies at work may not lead directly to changes in the political system, as Butler argues, "Sometimes it is not a question of first having power and then being able to act; sometimes it is a question of acting, and in the acting, laying a claim to the power one requires" (58). As Cameron Duff succinctly puts, to the extent that power is claimed 'in the acting,' "this power ought to be understood in affective terms as a

lived moment of transition in the body of its claimant. As the right to appear is performatively enacted, it is affectively expressed as a corporeal transition in capacities and sensitivities” (521). Jenny Lee, the founder of *Sangwoodgoon*, experienced an epiphany during a protest that changed the direction of her life. Her power, however, does not come from her futile efforts to save Choi Yuen Village but from her actualization of the potential to change her life course. Her power can also be understood in affective terms, for her actions affect other bodies in the protest. Performativity, then, can be understood in two ways: one is the performance itself (e.g., when collective singing and speeches are heard), and the other is the performativity of identity that is enacted by shared physical movements and hence shared agency. In *The Way*, performativity is underscored by the rhythms of the film: the farmers are shown repeatedly performing farming chores. Because of this performative enactment, the farm is transformed from physical land to an ideological space that symbolizes possibilities of hope. And because of the singing, which is intended to laugh away the hardship of work, the space becomes an affective and communal one.

While agency is highlighted through the performative bodies in *The Way*, the sense of the precariousness of this life—that is, the lack of control over the unstable social conditions and one’s destiny and—remains unaddressed. In *The Way*, while Yik-tin Yuen, who teaches the members of *Sangwoodgoon* how to be farmers, considers farming a full-time profession, most of the members of *Sangwoodgoon* must have other jobs to lead a decent life. There is the implication that the real problems faced by the full-time farmers—their personal struggles with land and everyday survival—are not reflected by the organic farmers, even though the organic farm *Sangwoodgoon* was intended to act as a bulwark against the precarious life precipitated by the neoliberal market economy. In *Open Road*, the uncontrollable forces of the neoliberal market economy are best represented by the contrast between movement and confinement at the beginning of the film, when the protagonist, Ho, is introduced. While his presence in the farmland is characterized by his slow and deliberate actions, this liberty is in stark contrast to his complete confinement behind the steering wheel. The tracking shot, with the camera mounted inside the car, shares the confinement of the driver. The external scenes pass quickly by the window, reminding us of the changing space of the city and the rapid progress of market economy. Ho’s stasis is also evident in a discussion among the drivers about the strategies necessary for journeys lasting many hours (urinating into plastic bottles, etc.). By choosing to focus on three full-time farmers, *Open Road* deals with the authentic real-life struggles of farmers. Their stories reflect the lack of control over one’s destiny and the threat of hidden

exploitation. Critics have argued that precarity arises from the exploitation of everyday life, not just the workforce: it is “a form of exploitation which operates primarily on the level of time. . . . In post-Fordism this form of time management disappears. Not so only because future is not guaranteed, but also because the future is already appropriated in the present. . . . Precarity is this form of exploitation which, by operating only on the present, exploits simultaneously also the future” (Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2). In *Open Road*, the precariousness of life is evident in the farmers’ lack of control over their land. At any time, the government could take over Moon-yee Ho’s and Oi-chun Hung’s farms for development. No matter how devoted and determined the farmers are, this aspect of their future is not in their hands. This precarity, however, does not rob them of the will to fight and struggle: in fact, it is this awareness of uncertainty ahead that allows them to formulate their identity.

A vivid awareness of aging is shared by the three farmers portrayed in *Open Road*. All three express their hopes and concerns about the passage of time. The former truck driver, Ho, is anxious to leave behind the past and move on with his new life on the farm. Oi-chun Hung shares her passion to devote the rest of her life to farming with her husband. Yu-wing Wong, who spent twenty years in the electronic business at the height of Hong Kong’s economic growth, now hopes to raise Hong Kong’s local vegetable production to occupy 10% of the market share. The awareness of aging is best represented by the rhythm of the camera. A static camera is used to chronicle the chores of the three farmers, so all movement is initiated by the farmers. This highlights the slower pace of life, the contrast between the hustle and bustle of the city and the tranquil and serene countryside. The pervasive calm encourages contemplation and provides no direction for viewers, so their observations are free from any economic predetermination or cultural assumptions.

In “Following the Rats: Becoming-Animal in Deleuze and Félix Guattari,” Leonard Lawlor explores the ramifications of Gilles Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of subjectivity and uses their conception of “becoming-animal” to highlight the challenges facing people in the modern world. Self-affirmation is based on self-presence (Descartes’s “I think therefore I am”) and auto-affection (e.g., my ability to hear myself speak at the moment I speak). Such affirmation provides humans with a justification to dominate other species. Philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari, however, question such essentialism and the hierarchy it presumes. In order to truly understand oneself, “desubjectification” is needed. What leads us to this essential process is the awareness of aging. Aging is experienced in molecular changes. As Lawlor observes, “The micrological cracks in a life refers us

to this sort of experience: you wake up one morning and realize you have gray hair, and now it's over, you're old. . . . The micrological cracks of aging, these experiences in which one is finally aware that one has lost something of oneself, are the agent of becoming. But aging also indicates the necessary condition for becoming: the condition in which one's molar form is destroyed—the condition, in other words, of 'desubjectification'" (173). While Deleuze and Guattari's discussion is aimed at transcending the boundaries between humans and animals, and promoting interspecies understanding, it also underlines the relation between the awareness of time and the formation of subjectivity. It is actually through an awareness of limited time that we come to realize the thresholds in life. *Open Road* portrays this awareness of aging succinctly. By shifting from the performative body in *The Way* to the aging existential body in *Open Road*, Chan presents two ways of imagining the self. While the first documentary ends in self-doubt and self-questioning, the second documentary ends with a more affirmative tone ascertaining the agency of the individual farmers.

From Macro Time to Microscopic Events

The Way opens with depictions of the social upheavals that paved the way for the civil disobedience movement in 2014. *Open Road*, however, is not concerned with large public protests. *The Way* deals with the ways in which social movements have transformed protestors and the public, and explores possible means to sustain their momentum. The narratives are selected to highlight the way that social activism leads to self-reflection and a more independent subjectivity. There is an urgency conveyed in the documentary: editing and camera work are used to establish a quick pace. The interviewees are followed in their walk to the train station or their approach to a farm after it has been hit by typhoon: the focus is on action and the inescapable momentum of time. There is a sense that the protestors, the farmers, the narrative, and Hong Kong as a whole have to move forward. The documentary encourages the audience to consider the question of how to move on as a group. Such questioning forces the audience to cease being passive spectators and become active participants. The documentary explicitly criticizes the "prevailing discourses and representations [that] consisted of the hegemonic myth of miraculous economic success, which imagined barren rock, or a fishing village, transformed into a modern metropolis" (Ku 453). Jenny Lee, the founder of *Sangwoodgoon*, whose speeches at the protests and interviews with the filmmaker are documented in the documentary, also rejects the capitalist logic and the vision of Hong Kong becoming an ever more profitable urban center. It is only by returning

Ex-position
December
2019

to the land and sustainable ways of living that the inclusive ideal of a truly global city can be achieved.

Open Road can be seen as an attempt to answer some of the questions posed by *The Way*. In order to do so, Chan takes a microscopic look at everyday life. The three farmers in *Open Road* tell their personal stories, but these stories occur against the backdrop of Hong Kong's socio-economic development. Chan avoids making the film into a crusade for civil disobedience, but there are occasions of protest in each story: workers argue about the compensation at the cargo terminal; Oi-chun Hung fights the threatened expropriation of her land; Wong and his younger son take part in a protest. These moments, however, are not at the center of the protagonists' stories; instead, they are incidents in a life devoted to the land. In this documentary, it is small stories that are used to illuminate larger social issues. They give a sense of the intricacies and complexities of each situation.

The power of micropolitics is highlighted by the use of contemplative shots: Moon-ye Ho leaning against the door of his home, staring at the prolonged rain; Oi-chun Hung and her husband performing their daily chores; Yu-wing Wong working on his farm. These contemplative shots dissolve the separation between humans and nature: the camera unites them. Time slowly passes in the subtle movement of the wind, the minute water drops on the soil, and the tiny holes on the leaves. These details echo the microscopic concerns of everyday life, confirming their existence and subjectivity. Presence is conveyed not simply through the appearance and actions of humans but through the acknowledgement of the coexistence of multiple species. There are no major obstacles in these farmers' everyday lives, but this does not mean that their lives are easy. These shots capture the deep sense of connection between these farmers and their land, and thus bring home the tragedy and injustice involved in expropriation. If the function of literary utopias is to encourage "the conceptualization of existing modes of experience and perception from a different point of view," this documentary definitely raises the audience's awareness of "the phenomenology of human alienation and the reification of social relations under capitalism and bureaucratic socialism" (Gardiner 37). Such a recognition of the consequences of human alienation and the reification of social relations applies not only to Chan's farmers but also to the people of Hong Kong during the post-handover period.

Conclusion

Fredie Ho-lun Chan's two documentaries are important reflections on the ecocritical turn of Hong Kong politics and the possible alternatives of the city's fate. The

films capture a transitional moment in Hong Kong's politics by recording the life of the protestors in the post-movement period. The persistent questions about the future of social movement, the future of farming, and the future of the city remind us of the importance to act. The value of *The Way of Paddy* lies in the questions it poses. The discussions with the interviewees blur the edges of the documentary. They show the closeness of the filmmaker to his subjects (many of the interviewees are Chan's friends) and the closeness between artistic creation and action. The conversations are open-ended and even involve role reversals: toward the end of *The Way*, Chow, one of the interviewees takes the lead and asks Chan about his filmmaking ambitions, and we hear Chan's voice in answer. The line between interviewer and interviewee, and between the visual and auditory, is crossed. The film cannot be easily categorized as an activist documentary or eco-documentary; instead, it is an example of an eco-documentary that reflects on the fate of both the land and the city.

If the two documentaries represent a dialogue, *Open Road* can be seen as an answer to the questions posed in *The Way*. *Open Road* focuses on the small stories of individual survival, illuminating specific experiences with farming and land. The impact of viewing daily life through this microscopic lens is not any weaker. The farmers' fates are entangled with the politics of the city. Their strong will to survive, fulfill their ambitions, pursue happiness, and live a simple life may not be politically motivated, but it contributes to the collective good. Chan developed his cinematic technique in *Open Road* so as to highlight the connection between the land and freedom. The ecological and utopian vision of *The Way* emerged out of its depiction of a social movement and its commitment to an ideology that respects the land and pursues a sustainable way of life. The ecological and utopian vision of *Open Road* lies in the more realistic and quotidian experience of the land. It seems that an answer has been provided: for a truly sustainable future, one has to fight for one's turf.

Chan's works must be situated in a larger ecocritical context, where it is argued that the function of documentary is to promote eco-consciousness or a green way of reading. The importance of these two documentaries lies in their portrayal of a different imagination of the city's future, one that challenges the overdetermined economic discourse that has confined Hong Kong people's perspective. The ecocritical concerns of the documentaries are shared elsewhere in Asia. The Japanese documentary filmmaker Shinsuke Ogawa, whose works deal with farming and activism, is featured in *The Way*. The long struggles of Korean farmers and their demonstrations during the 2005 summit of the WTO in Hong Kong prepared the conditions for the later engagement of Hong Kong's social activists. This

broadening of Hong Kong's independent film scene to encompass cross-cultural dialogues suggests that Hong Kong's engagement with Asia extends beyond shared financial interests. These cities and nations are connected by their shared fate in today's environmental struggle. As Ursula Heise maintains, it is important to support "eco-cosmopolitanism" as our preservation of home, and the environment requires our collaboration and good faith.

WORKS CITED

- Ashcroft, Bill. "Introduction: Spaces of Utopia." *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal* 2.1 (2012): 1-17.
- Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope*. 1954. Trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1986.
- Butler, Judith. *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015.
- Cheung, Esther M. K. "Dialogues with Critics on Chinese Independent Cinemas." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 49 (2007). Web. Accessed 24 May 2019.
- Duff, Cameron. "The Affective Right to the City." *Transactions* (2017): 516-29.
- Gaard, Greta. *Ecological Politics: Ecofeminists and the Greens*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998.
- Gardiner, Michael. "Bakhtin's Carnival as Critique." *Utopian Studies* 3.2 (1992): 21-49.
- Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Horton, Dave. "Demonstrating Environmental Citizenship? A Study of Everyday Life among Green Activists." *Environmental Citizenship*. Ed. Andrew Dobson and Derek Bell. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2006. 127-50.
- Hughes, Helen. *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the Twenty-First Century*. Bristol: Intellect, 2014.
- Ku, Agnes Shuk-mei. "Identity as Politics: Contesting the Local, the National, and the Global." *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Hong Kong*. Ed. Tai-lok Lui, Stephen W. K. Chui, and Ray Yep. London: Routledge, 2019. 451-61.
- Lawlor, Leonard. "Following the Rats: Becoming-Animal in Deleuze and Guattari." *SubStance* 37.3 (2008): 169-87.
- Lui, Tai-lok. "A Missing Page in the Grand Plan of 'One Country, Two Systems': Regional Integration and Its Challenges to Post-1997 Hong Kong." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 16.3 (2015): 396-409.
- Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Film Fables*. Trans. Emiliano Battista. Oxford: Berg, 2006.

- Swyngedouw, Erik. "Anthropocene Politicization: From the Politics of the Environment to Politicizing Environments." *Green Utopianism: Perspectives, Politics and Micro-Practices*. Ed. Karin Bradley and Johan Hedrén. New York: Routledge, 2014. 23-37.
- Tally, Robert T., Jr. "Sartre, Marcuse, and the Utopian Project Today." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.1 (2010): 1-10.
- Tsianos, Vassilis, and Dimitris Papadopoulos. "Precarity: A Savage Journey to the Heart of Embodied Capitalism." *Transversal* 10 (2006): n. pag. Web. Accessed 18 Oct. 2019.
- Veg, Sebastian. "Anatomy of the Ordinary: New Perspectives in Hong Kong Independent Cinema." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (2014): 1-20.
- Yee, Winnie L. M. "Nature in the City: A Study of Hong Kong's Independent Eco-film Festival." *Ecology and Chinese-Language Cinema: Reimagining a Field*. Ed. Sheldon H. Lu and Haomin Gong. Londo: Routledge, forthcoming. 48-64.

Films

- Chan, Ho-lun Fredie, dir. *Beautiful Life*. Ocean Leung, 2013.
- . *Loft in the Air*. Hong Kong Catholic Commission for Labour Affairs, 2012.
- . *Open Road after Harvest*. Ocean Leung, 2015.
- . *Rhymes of Shui Hau*. Urban Diary, 2017.
- . *The Way of Paddy*. Ocean Leung, 2012.
- Lai, Mo Yan-chi, dir. *1+1*. Xin Xixiang, 2010.
- . *N+N*. Xin Xixiang, 2012.
- Ma, Chi-hang, dir. *Ballad on the Shore*. ACO, 2017.
- Tsang, Jesse, dir. *Big Blue Lake*. Golden Scene, 2011.
- . *Flowing Stories*. Kam and Ronson Enterprises Co. Ltd., 2012.

**Manuscript received 4 June 2019,
accepted for publication 21 Oct. 2019

