

Too Much Reality? Reflections on the Educational-Observational Film World of Tammy Cheung and Augustine Lam

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Introduction

“[H]uman kind / Cannot bear very much reality,” as the bird observes in “Burnt Norton,” the first of T. S. Eliot’s four-part poem sequence, *Four Quartets*, giving the reader a bird’s-eye perspective on human behavior. Tammy Cheung has expressed a similar viewpoint in respect of Hong Kong film audiences and their taste for escapist cinema in a number of interviews she has given since coming to prominence as one of the city’s most admired and respected documentarians.¹ She and her cinematographer and partner, Augustine Lam, have been directing the gaze of their observational-cinema-mode camera on Hong Kong as a civic society for two decades now, and the images are not always flattering. Employing a direct, fly-on-the-wall cinematography unmediated by spoken narrative or voice-over commentary, the pair see their role as documentarians to do precisely that—to document events and allow the viewer to interpret or judge for her- or himself.

While Cheung and Lam’s work is critically and academically admired, and has been significant in the overall context of Hong Kong’s post-millennial independent documentary development, the pair are aware that their films have not reached the wider audiences that the subject matter would seem to merit. They recognize the inevitable constraints on the wider distribution of their body of work, and these

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¹ See, for example, interviews with Tammy Cheung conducted respectively by Rachel Blundy and David Watkins.

days concentrate their efforts more on curating the Hong Kong International Documentary Festival, which makes an invaluable contribution to independent documentary practice in the city, organizing retrospectives on older filmmakers and introducing new mainland Chinese and overseas documentaries to the Hong Kong public.

My brief commentary-style essay on their body of work is conceived more as a critical appreciation than a straightforward homage. To put it simply, I am interested in tracing a through-line in their work, and exploring how the trajectory of their film work reflects how Hong Kong society and culture has changed in the twenty years since Cheung's first independent documentary, *Invisible Women*, in 1999. Prolific scholar of Chinese film Chris Berry has already done a very good job of introducing their work in relation to the documentary-making background of Hong Kong and what he sees as the transformative role their films have played in the changes in film culture in the city. There have also been a number of other informative articles on their work, as well as interviews with Cheung, notably Esther M. K. Cheung, Nicole Kempton, and Amy Lee's verbatim transcript of an interview in the anthology *Hong Kong Screenscapes: From the New Wave to the Digital Frontier*.

Instead of replicating these existing introductions to the work of Cheung and Lam, in the present essay I will simply recommend them as valuable informative background to the relatively uninformed reader. Both Berry's essay and Cheung et al.'s interview appeared before Hong Kong's current deadlock in a period when positions were less fatally polarized, and the Cheung-Lam partnership seemed set to record and witness further civil engagement in their work. I adopt a more reflective and analytical approach, and map the pair's film output onto the various sociopolitical developments in Hong Kong during the period that their independent nonfiction films have documented. Interestingly, there has been a ten-year hiatus in their independent production since the 2008 film *Election*, during which time they have devoted their skills and experience to mentoring and curating the documentaries of others.

In Berry's detailed essay on the pair's work, first with their own company Reality Films and subsequently with the production company Visible Record, Cheung is quoted as stating that she is more interested in the sociological aspects of documentary than in the psychological (Berry 223). This concern with communal and social interactions, as manifested in the public spaces of Hong Kong, is evident in all of her work. A particularly interesting aspect of their documentary work recording and witnessing civic interactions is the portrait that emerges of group dynamics and engagement between the public in various manifestations

and the Hong Kong police force. This is evident from the film *Rice Distribution* (2003) onward, not so much in the force's organization and performance of duties per se as in its relations with members of the public in stressful social contexts and spaces.

The unfortunate deterioration of the Hong Kong police from the socially responsible body formerly known as "Asia's Finest" to the socially confrontational, deeply distrusted, and violence-addicted force that we see in the streets of Hong Kong today is not captured by the trajectory of their own work. That said, their uncredited but signature editing on the 2016 documentary filmed by their mentees of the 2014 Umbrella Movement, *75 Days: Life, Liberty and Happiness*, the title being a direct reference to the fundamental human rights clause enshrined in the United States Declaration of Independence, records in its opening scene unjustifiable police aggression against peaceful protestors engaged in acts of peaceful if disruptive civil disobedience. Even in this recent film, however, the police are represented in a more positive light as relatively restrained and concerned about public safety in a number of other scenes, rather than behaving as a gung-ho government goon squad,² as is currently the case.

Were the pair to make their own observational documentary on Hong Kong's civil strife in 2019, a different picture would certainly be revealed. Depending on public subsidies, particularly from the government-run Arts Development Council, to support their productions and festivals, Cheung has long been conscious of the need for discretion and balance in the company's output. What their work emphasizes, above all, is that the direct documentary cinema method is capable of conveying some uncomfortable, but salutary, home truths about different sectors of society, including both more powerful groups and less powerful ones. Indisputably, the selective shooting and editing of observational or direct cinema makes it far from the "objective" and "non-interventionist" form it was sometimes naïvely claimed to be in the 1960s. Unlike her "mentor,"³ the American director of observational cinema Frederick Wiseman, Cheung makes relatively few claims for the authenticity or phenomenological veracity of her work, as compared with

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² I use this expression advisedly in view of the compelling video evidence to indicate that local and mainland police officers have been operating as *agents provocateurs* instigating vandalism to inflame the situation and discredit the progressive faction and protestors by promoting the idea that they are rioters and even terrorists.

³ Cheung was particularly influenced by Wiseman's 1966 direct cinema documentary, *High School*, as is evident in her 2002 work, *Secondary School*. However, Cheung never actually met Wiseman. The latter, like many of his contemporaries, became drawn into methodological debate over truth claims for direct cinema, as compared with more expository types of documentary. Cheung and Lam tend to benefit from the general perception nowadays that direct cinema is just one among a number of available approaches, without engaging in controversial arguments based on the fallacy of a putative transcendent "truth" conveyed by the camera.

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other methods of mediating social actuality. Nonetheless, her strong sense of social justice and her civic consciousness have always been at the heart of her independent documentary work, the primary concern of which is nothing less than the sociopolitical amelioration of the city she has identified with since arriving here as a three-year-old.

From *Invisible Women* to *Election*: A Decade of Hope

Invisible Women, in featuring a significant number of indoor scenes focusing on individual rather than collective experience, was not particularly indicative of the body of work that followed it. The documentary was made as an exploratory exercise two years after Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty. It reflected the inspiration of her exposure to the observational cinema of Wiseman in its distanced, minimally interventionist approach. The short film focuses on the lives of three Indian women in Hong Kong, including an articulate and socially dedicated barrister born in the city and two domestic helpers, the latter scraping a living in order to provide for their impoverished families in rural India while being marginalized in the city by a combination of their low social status, their ethnicity, and their gender. *Invisible Women* includes a few group scenes, most notably a celebratory ceremony at a Hindu temple attended by one of her three subjects, and also succeeds in giving a good picture of the Indian community of Hong Kong of different social strata. Despite some weaknesses in its continuity, *Invisible Women* represents a successful attempt to convey thought-provokingly to the viewer the sense of marginalization of the two women migrant workers.

While it portrays the attempts of the more privileged woman to improve the lives of the marginalized, including a number of scenes featuring discussion of initiatives, such as one in the comfortable environs of the Foreign Correspondents' Club, the overall impression is that these vulnerable domestic helpers simply pass under the radar of official protection. The film ends inconclusively without any resolution of the two young migrant workers' predicament, and the more vulnerable of the two is caught in a poignant freeze-frame, which turns to a sepia tone as the image fades. The fourth "invisible woman" is, of course, Cheung herself, directing behind the camera and selecting what the viewer should see through her editing of the footage. Her treatment of the three subjects, nonetheless, transmits a sense both of intimacy and of what we might call critical empathy, the latter quality subsequently becoming a hallmark of her style. From the beginning, Cheung's work reflects her engagement with social justice movements—in this case, racial discrimination, which is a problem that Hong Kong has tried to wish away merely by ignoring.

The follow-up, 2002's *Secondary School*, was the first for Cheung's new company Reality Films, created for the purpose of making a socially conscious intervention in Hong Kong society via documentary film. *Secondary School* attracted considerably more attention and controversy, not to say visibility, than *Invisible Women*. For the first time Cheung worked with a co-author, Augustine Lam, who has shot and shared the editing of all of Cheung's films from this film onward. Initially *Secondary School* made little impact, but gradually the full implications of this documentary in terms of Hong Kong's local education system began to attract greater public attention, of both a positive and negative nature. In many respects, it is the film that came to define the direction of Cheung and Lam's documentary work by focusing on public institutions and civic responsibilities more concentratedly.

Secondary School records daily life in two government-funded institutions, St Catherine's School for Girls in Kwun Tong and Ying Wah College (for boys) in Yau Ma Tei. The technique of parallelism and contrastive juxtaposition that becomes a regular structural device employed throughout Cheung and Lam's subsequent films is first evident here. Although this device is open to the criticism that it can promote unfair and simplistic comparison by producing a reductive binary effect, the editing is reasonably balanced, and the film depicts salient examples of sincere commitment to teaching and learning in each institution. This skillful editing method of cross-cutting between the two schools allows the viewer considerable insight into their day-to-day operation. On the other hand, the institutions themselves, both viewed as top schools in Hong Kong's self-conscious, if hypocritically fudged, ranking, may have been disappointed with the results, perhaps assuming that they would be filmed through rose-colored lens filters. Berry reports that despite the controversy the film generated in 2003-2004, it was generally considered by teachers to have "stimulated thoughts about our education system" (Berry 227).⁴

It has been generally assumed that *Secondary School* represents a thoroughgoing critique of the Hong Kong school system, partly because in various interviews Cheung has indicated that, as a Hong Kong adolescent, she didn't feel inspired by her own girls' secondary school experience. While there is much to critique about the educational system per se in the film's subtext, particularly the self-serving and bureaucratic *laissez-faire* approach of the Hong Kong Education Bureau, which is not represented in the film, the documentary captures by and large the patience, goodwill, and genuine dedication of the staff and students in both schools. The

⁴ Chris Berry is here quoting teacher comments in a *South China Morning Post* piece written by Andy Cheng ("Young Post," 14 Jan. 2004).

bustling daily life of each institution is skillfully depicted, and scenes of assembly, classroom lessons, recess time and tuck shop queues, sports and extracurricular activities and so on are evenly distributed across the respective institutions throughout.

For each of the more absurd scenes included—probably the best example of which is the sheer mind-numbing triviality of the staff meeting at St Catherine’s on the question of formulating rules to ensure that students wear their P. E. shirts tucked inside their shorts—there are correspondingly redeeming scenes of good practice within the obvious constraints. The orchestra rehearsal scene at Ying Wah College, for example, reveals a close rapport between the music teacher conducting the small orchestra and his students that is all about the music, conveying the point that shared dedication to the discipline of the subject itself provides its own discipline. There is likewise a genuine rapport between some of the teachers in each school with their students studying most subjects in English in the then rigidly elitist, top-down EMI (English Medium of Instruction) system. Revisiting the film nearly two decades later, one is struck, not only by the professional dedication shown by the staff, but also by the relatively good-natured response of the students in the largely, though not exclusively, teacher-centered confined classroom spaces. Had Cheung and Lam’s camera been trained on two Band Five (now more euphemistically dubbed Band Three) schools, the potential embarrassment factor at the Education Bureau might have been much greater.

In the following year, the pair produced their award-winning documentary *Rice Distribution*,⁵ the first of their two 2003 films focusing on the elderly. The single, hand-held camera of Lam records the donation of bags of rice by a Taoist organization in Hong Kong to thousands of elderly people as part of a religious ceremony to mark the Hungry Ghost Festival in August 2002. The film’s relatively fast editing rhythm contrasts strongly with the apparently static conceptual content of waiting for something to happen. Also, thanks to the perceptive and revealing camerawork of Lam, as well as to Cheung and Lam’s astute editing choices, the viewer is able to adopt an initially neutral view of the proceedings.

The distribution is scheduled to begin in the afternoon of an initially hot and subsequently rainy summer’s day. Elderly people are seen making their way into an open park area in Wong Tai Sin, Kowloon, in the early morning, with some queuing well before dawn, so as to make sure they are able to receive tickets from the organizers which will entitle them to free bags of rice. It is only as the film progresses

⁵ The documentary won the Grand Prize and Open Category Gold Award at the Hong Kong Independent Short Film and Video Awards for 2003.

and the events of the day unfold that the reflective viewer begins to see problems with the way the organizers have planned and managed their philanthropy. In the process one is likely to arrive at the conclusion—although the direct cinema style of presentation does not impose this interpretation, even if the selection and editing clearly suggest it—that the Taoist organization is more concerned with performing the ceremony and meeting its charitable religious obligations than with the well-being of the elderly. Ultimately, the images tend to speak for themselves, and represent a powerful challenge to, and even indictment of, their motives and methods. In contrast, the other two parties involved in the event, the hard-pressed but conscientious police officers controlling the crowd and the elderly recipients of the charitable offerings, are represented more sympathetically.

Notwithstanding, Cheung refrains from portraying her elderly subjects in a blanket sentimental or condescending fashion. The shots and edits reveal that, while some are self-controlled and reasonable, others are cantankerous and pushy, and, as we see from the shots of the first aid tent, they are in variable states of physical and mental health. A dominant theme in the documentary is the inadequacy of planning and facilities for the elderly, despite the organizers' experience in running the event on an annual basis. The flaws in the system are played out in front of the camera as, after all tickets have been claimed, most of the elderly remain in the area, reluctant to leave in case they miss out, while the police make strenuous but unavailing attempts to get them to leave.

The climax—if also something of an anti-climax—is reached when the organizers finally distribute the bags of rice to those with tickets. The aloof stance on the part of the temple authorities toward the beneficiaries of their charity is clearly captured by the camera. At this point the recipients must deal with the next problem of struggling up steep steps to the nearest bus stop with their eight-kilogram bags of rice. The on-duty police officers help some of the less able-bodied, again underlining the positive way the police conduct themselves throughout the proceedings. Lam's restless camera returns to those who have lingered behind in the vague hope of still receiving free rice. The film then cuts to the temple volunteers responsible for distributing the rice, and we see them closing the stalls and chatting, following which there is an announcement that there are considerable quantities of rice left over. A senior figure is heard informing these volunteers that they can take one or two bags home with them, ignoring the disappointed latecomers who wander disconsolately over the now-twilight and litter-strewn public space—one of the lasting images that remains with the viewer after watching *Rice Distribution*. One practical, beneficial outcome of the film was that the Legislative Council watched it after an accident occurred the following year; after

they did so, the legal code related to rice distribution was tightened to ensure greater safety (Cheung, “Documenting” 162).

The other film produced that year by Cheung and Lam was *Moving*, a narrative designed to highlight not only the plight of Hong Kong’s impoverished elderly, but also the commitment and dedication of its devoted social care workers. *Moving* follows the fortunes of a group of elderly inhabitants of Lower Ngau Tau Kok Housing Estate, whose community is dispersed when they are relocated to different parts of Kowloon and the New Territories. Many of them have lived in this same (now run-down) government housing estate for several decades, and the sense of alienation and confusion among some of the senior citizens at their compulsory resettlement is palpable, despite the best efforts of the solicitous social workers. The film is a silent indictment of the callousness of government policy toward the elderly, many of whom, as they point out in conversation, contributed to Hong Kong’s economic miracle in earlier decades, only to face severe cuts in social benefits that are surely to make their lives even harder after their move away from Ngau Tau Kok.

Again focusing on group interactions, as in *Rice Distribution*, the film starts with a visit by a group of secondary school kids from Tin Shui Wai (a new town in the N. W. New Territories) who are being introduced to the Ngau Tau Kok inhabitants by their teacher. A number of individual interviews follow, conducted inside the elderly residents’ flats—soon due for demolition in preparation for the construction of a more upmarket estate. The residents’ obvious identification with an area that is familiar and convenient, affording them low-cost shopping options for their daily sustenance, is skillfully captured in their engagement with the interviewers and social workers.

A trademark visual motif in Cheung and Lam’s films, whereby their own external hidden camera mediates either an internal visible camera within the frame or an internal screen featuring relevant (or at times seemingly extraneous) material, comes to the fore in *Moving*. The social workers supervise recorded interviews with the elderly, some of which are both revealing and touching. The impossibly small table around which his family life formerly revolved becomes the focus of attention in an interview with an old man now living alone; this simple but poignant moment is one among the many scenes that underline the ambivalence of the film’s title, subliminally associating its surface literal meaning with a powerful emotional, metaphorical one.

Stand-out moments captured later in the film, in addition to scenes of stressed elderly subjects looking lost in their even smaller new homes, include an activist meeting for the purposes of campaigning against the government’s proposed

welfare cuts. The film incorporates shots of a subsequent fund-raising promotional campaign in Central, in which the elderly are shown working their assigned pitch in pairs, looking like fish out of water in such a fast-paced, brash, and moneyed environment. Tellingly, many of their more affluent fellow citizens seem utterly impervious to their efforts, and walk past as if they were invisible. Images of the self-conscious seniors, juxtaposed with giant screens on the sides of tall buildings advertising Western brand-name fashions, serve to emphasize the absurd irony of the situation. The closing scene of a Chinese New Year reunion, in which we see a few more spirited citizens singing “golden oldies” as part of the communal entertainment, seems designed not only to endow the documentary with a mildly upbeat ending, but to reiterate through visual metaphor the film’s theme of the importance of social networks for the elderly.

Cheung and Lam’s multiple camera sources for 2005’s *July* enabled them to capture wide-ranging images and perspectives on the peaceful, but vehement, street demonstrations challenging the inept performance of first Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa’s administration. The rally, organized by Hong Kong’s Civil Human Rights Front on July 1, 2003, six years to the day since the transfer of sovereignty, was held to protest the planned national security legislation known as Article 23 in the Basic Law, as well as to complain against the sharp economic downturn that was causing much hardship among grassroots sectors of society. The massive turnout for the march from Victoria Park in Causeway Bay to the Government Offices in Central attracted worldwide media attention. In their first film made for the newly formed Visible Record company, Cheung and Lam maintained their successful fly-on-the-wall method, eavesdropping on various exchanges between the organizers, democracy activists such as Martin Lee, Szeto Wah, Audrey Yu, and “Longhair” Leung Kwok-hung, and also the police and the participants. Unlike their previous films made for Reality Films, *July* benefits from the camera team employed by Cheung and Lam, the results of which are edited and transformed into a coherent work by the pair in the post-production process.

Added to the mix are a number of “vox pops,” including both supportive and contrary views on the street protest, the first time Cheung modified her straight observational cinema mode to incorporate non-interventionist strategies. The contrastive method of cross-cutting from images of the protest march to the specially arranged “patriotic carnival” on post-SARS health consciousness taking place simultaneously in Victoria Park is reminiscent of the approach adopted in *Secondary School*. This latter event, organized by the pro-Beijing element, is demonstrably feeble and stage-managed by comparison with the genuine carnival atmosphere created by the protestors, with the contrastive editing technique in

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post-production emphasizing its ineffectiveness. As in *Moving*, we see frames within the cinematographic frame, as media images of marchers are juxtaposed with images of the then Chinese premier Wen Jiabo giving an address.

The march featured many anti-Tung chants and songs, including protest evergreens such as “We Shall Overcome” and the Hong Kong protest classic, “Do You Hear the People Sing?” from *Les Misérables* in Cantonese translation. The strategically placed cameras capture the problems and frustrations of a public gathering that attracted far more marchers than anticipated by the authorities; the bottleneck of marchers trying to get out of Victoria Park and being held back by the police for hours is assumed by some protesters to be a deliberate ploy designed to deter people from marching to Central. Despite the frustration, however, marchers are shown to be peaceful and respectful, while the police are generally represented as solicitous and safety-conscious concerning older marchers queuing for a long time in the hot sun. The film follows the massed march to government offices, and witnesses scuffles followed by the arrest of a woman protestor, as well as a throng pushing forward with near-fatal results. Titles fast-forward events covered to July 4, with giant screen images of Tung broadcasting a message to the Hong Kong public, and subsequently to July 9, showing a candlelight gathering ahead of Legislative Council talks. The film closes with the official announcement of the Government’s decision to delay indefinitely the introduction of Article 23, because, as the end credits make clear, they had lost the backing of pro-business parties.

July captured a transformative moment in Hong Kong’s sociopolitical consciousness, and reflected what came to be known as the “Spirit of July,” as the film’s end-titles indicate. One upshot of the march was that Tung stepped down before the end of his second term of office. Another, related to the film itself, was that, according to Cheung, Visible Record was temporarily disfavored by the Arts Development Council in its subsequent funding exercises, as reported to her by an inside source (Cheung, “Overt Racism”). Cheung’s film played its part in propelling the protest into local folklore by incorporating footage of the speeches, songs, chants, and banners that enlivened the proceedings, eschewing expository voiceover commentary. As the *Hong Kong Economic Journal* pointed out, “the film gave Hong Kong people a memento of what happened to us all in July 2003” (Ho 18); while in the newspaper *Ming Pao July* was praised for “its stark realism without frills or narration” and described as “an honest piece of work void of sensationalism” (“Witnessing” 17).

The pair’s next film, *Speaking Up*, marked an interesting departure from the collectively oriented observational cinema for which Cheung and Lam were now noted.

Manifesting their strong sense of civic consciousness, nonetheless, and building on the “vox pop” device initially featured in *July*, the film was composed almost exclusively of a montage of talking heads—with the exception of a few external relevant sociopolitical images. Some of the speakers are public figures in the arts and media, while others are ordinary members of the public. The filmmaker herself does not appear and cuts all her questions, so the viewer must deduce the topic—as well as the question that stimulates the particular set of interviewee responses—from the talking heads themselves.

There is an interesting range of topics covered from the more individual to the more collective, and the film is clearly designed to bridge the gap between personal and sociopolitical aspirations of citizens. It represents an area of discussion that Hong Kong’s paternalist pre- and post-Handover administrations had sought to downplay or ignore, one that the massive July 1 protest had brought to the surface of public consciousness. As in any democratic context, opinions expressed span a broad spectrum from the more localist to the more nationalist perspectives. Above all, the film effectively ridicules the authorities’ disingenuous claim that Hong Kong people don’t care about politics and aren’t mature enough to enjoy universal suffrage.

Having shot two documentaries the following year of similar talking-head interviews with primary and middle school children in Cheung’s native province of Jiangxi on the Mainland, *Village Middle School* and *Speaking Up 2*, Cheung and Lam turned their attention once again to Hong Kong’s political arena. They began the demanding task of editing the vast video footage they had taken in 2004 of the hotly contested Legislative Council electioneering and announcement of results. The eventual product, *Election*, released in 2008 in a provisional cut, was a featured presentation in that year’s Hong Kong International Film Festival. To a considerable extent, the film can be seen as something of a sequel to *July*, in the way it portrays the reputedly apathetic Hong Kong citizens participating in the political process. It captures the animated and intense process of canvassing in the weeks leading up to what were seen as watershed elections in the Hong Kong SAR. Issues such as the proposed anti-subversion law had been a focus for dissent in the 2003 civil protests and were now part of the ongoing political debate in the increasingly politically aware city.

Despite the limited nature of the elections, precluding the possibility of universal suffrage for the Chief Executive, keen public interest in the views and positions of the various parties is evident in the film. Cheung’s roving, independent camerawork and tight editing are extremely revealing. They create a distanced framing of party canvassers, members of the public, and the media, frequently

finding angles and shots that speak volumes, without the need for verbal intervention. This defamiliarizing *vérité* effect enhances the documentary's external viewpoint, allowing the film to stand outside the often heated debates and amusing publicity stunts—including the pro-Beijing DAB's (Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong) cheesy hugging of nonplussed “boat children” at the Aberdeen waterfront and the Pan-Democrats' environmentally friendly but publicly hazardous “wobbly bicycle” electioneering. Simply by giving a platform to blunt-talking independent politicians, such as Leung Kwok-hung, in the film, Cheung was considered unpatriotic by pro-Beijing factions. The fact that her film actually affords more screen time to the pro-Beijing Hong Kong politicians, who do a better job of making their campaign appear risible than any commentator or intervening voiceover possibly could, seems to be no defense against charges of political bias on the part of her detractors.

Longhair's harangue of the Hong Kong government, and especially senior delegate Rita Fan, to press for *ping faan lok sei* (overturn the verdict of June 4) is a moment of palpable drama in the film. It makes us reflect that issues of bias and truth are complex in assessing documentaries. However, as Cheung is doubtless aware, the feisty Leung will always communicate his message more effectively than his “patriotic” adversaries. In terms of on-screen representation in the observational documentary, quality of depiction tends to trump quantity. Experienced film-makers like Cheung and Lam are only too well aware that their subjects' contributions will shape the film and inevitably express their own personal sympathies as directors in a sub-textual, sometimes subliminal way. At the same time, Cheung's imperative in her films for recording civic engagement devoid of expository voiceover commentary, and featuring strictly factual detail in the on-screen titles, underlines her often-stated argument that her films are not intended to be politically partisan.

Coda: “Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command”

In their book *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman*, Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson make a valid critique of Wiseman's output, to the effect that he fulfils the function of author, but hides behind the observational camera “demystifying institutions but mystifying his own role” (Benson and Anderson 311). While Berry describes Cheung and Lam's method as “open” and “uncontrolled” (Berry 215), indicating that he sees no hidden agenda, manipulation or mystification involved in their documentary work, the choice of topics and post-production decisions undoubtedly plays a significant role. Cheung's focus on public

debate and even-handedness in the rhetorical structure of her films—certain “warts and all” scenes lay bare inevitable divisions among the progressive groups, including the younger generation, whom she sees as fatally disinclined to read widely or sufficiently⁶—tends to deflect criticism of this kind. Her documentaries have mapped the rise of civic consciousness among Hong Kong’s putatively passive and politically malleable population, and their trajectory is also that of Hong Kong’s aspiration for greater sociopolitical accountability and transparency.

Although Reality Films and Visible Record have covered a gamut of age groups and issues in their output to date, one under-represented group has been university students and young adults. In 2016, however, Cheung and Lam undertook responsibility for post-production on *75 Days: Life, Liberty and Happiness* from material shot by a cooperative of young filmmakers calling themselves “Film 75.” The reason the pair did not wish to be credited for their slick editing work that transformed raw footage into a complex piece of documentary narrative is not difficult to fathom: they were aware of its potentially controversial reception on both sides of Hong Kong’s political divide. *75 Days* has been criticized on the social media of progressive circles for over-representing dramatic confrontation in its snapshots of events occurring in the three focal points of protest, Admiralty and Causeway Bay on Hong Kong Island, and Mongkok in the heart of Kowloon.⁷

The film follows wide-ranging civil disobedience in response to the undemocratic electoral “reforms” proposed by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress in a series of chronologically sequential vignettes edited from the extensive footage originally shot by the fledgling documentarians. To be fair, the work features some of the flash-points and rifts within the alliance of progressive groups, but it also captures the resilience, solidarity, and sense of responsibility of young protestors amid their makeshift “tent cities.” Many of the film’s images linger in the mind long after watching, particularly its poetically elegiac closing section featuring nighttime hues of the transformed cityscape, under which we see several protestors hugging one another as a gesture of solidarity and mutual support. These are juxtaposed with harsher daylight shots of the government’s clear-up operation aiming to obliterate all traces of the protestors’ presence on the streets.

⁶ Based on comments made in the 2017 interview with Rachel Blundy for *South China Morning Post* and also in conversation with the present author in May 2019.

⁷ See, for example, the film review “75 Days: Life, Liberty and Happiness Is Disturbingly Overly Dramatic in Its Portrayal of the Umbrella Movement” posted on the blog *Webs of Significance*, 22 Oct. 2016.

Aficionados of Cheung and Lam's work would doubtless wish to see them produce a new fly-on-the-wall documentary addressing the turbulent situation that Hong Kong is currently experiencing. Whether the pair would be inclined to represent the police as the politically weaponized force, unequivocally representative of pro-Beijing interests that it now appears to be to many of us in Hong Kong, is debatable. Cheung's assertion in her 2011 interview for *Hong Kong Screenscapes* that her films "definitely do not incite a revolution" (Cheung, "Documenting" 163) implies that she sees the role of her films to inspire measured and balanced critical debate, as opposed to spearheading any kind of social movement. The disarming modesty of her artistic goals and the intellectual curiosity behind her *raison d'être* in becoming a filmmaker also preclude any possibility of seeing her or the equally mild-mannered Lam as social revolutionaries. If Hong Kong kind couldn't "bear very much reality" before, whether on screen or in actuality, they are becoming increasingly attuned to it today. Cheung and Lam's mentoring of young filmmakers, added to a healthy audience interest in the Documentary Festival, suggests that the documentary is in better shape these days, even if Hong Kong itself is not. By observing the "plodding and sordid crowds," as Walt Whitman observed them with equal acuity, citizens Cheung and Lam have contributed their verses to the "powerful play"⁸ of post-Handover life in Hong Kong.

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⁸ I am here quoting Whitman's poem "O Me! O Life," included in *Leaves of Grass*.

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**Film World of
Tammy Cheung
and Augustine
Lam**

