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Despair and hope: cinematic identity in Hong Kong of the 2000s

Cinematic
identity

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Abstract

Purpose – The goal of this article is to examine the current trends of political cinema in postcolonial Hong Kong. Many leaders of the Hong Kong mainstream cinema have accepted the Chinese authoritarian rule as a precondition for expanding into the ever-expanding Mainland film market, but a handful of conscientious filmmakers choose to make political cinema under the shadow of a wealthy and descendant industry, expressing their desire for democracy and justice and critiquing the unequal power relations between Hong Kong and China.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper consults relevant documentary materials and cinematic texts to contextualize the latest development of political cinema in Hong Kong. It presents an in-depth analysis of the works of two local independent filmmakers Herman Yau and Vincent Chui.

Findings – This study reveals a glimpse of hope in the current films of Herman Yau and Vincent Chui, which suggests that a reconfiguration of local identity and communal relationship may turn around the collective despair caused by the oppressive measures of the Chinese authoritarian state and the end of the Umbrella Movement in late 2014.

Research limitations/implications – Despite the small sample size, this paper highlights the rise of cinematic localism through a closer look at the works of Hong Kong independent filmmakers.

Practical implications – This study reveals an ambivalent mentality in the Hong Kong film industry where critical filmmakers strive to assert their creativity and agency against the externally imposed Chinese hegemonic power.

Originality/value – This investigation is an original scholarly study of film and politics in postcolonial Hong Kong.

Keywords Umbrella Movement, Herman Yau, One country, two systems, Political cinema, State of exception, Vincent Chui

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In April 2016, China barred CCTV (China Central Television) and Tencent from broadcasting the Hong Kong Film Awards after the local independent film *Ten Years* (十年) was nominated for best picture. A low-budget production, *Ten Years* comprised five short films, resonating with the public sentiment after the months-long sit-in street protests in late 2014, often called the “Umbrella Movement”, and presented a dystopian view of the city’s future in 2025. The movie marked a clear break from the trend of cinematic escapism that once characterized the Hong Kong film industry. The official ban placed the Chinese Communist Party’s ideology above arts and violated the public’s right to freedom of artistic expression, the rights of Hong Kong filmmakers to share their creations and the rights of Chinese citizens to enjoy films and participate in cultural dialogue (Lee, 2016c).

The Chinese media boycott of the Hong Kong Film Awards was part of a larger strategy of intimidation and repression against dissenting cinematic voices that refused to kowtow to the Communist dictatorship. The immediate aftermath of the transfer of Hong Kong’s

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sovereignty to China on July 1, 1997 has been marked by countless governance crises and escalating popular discontents, most of which arose from the suspension of democratic rights under the Chinese model of one country, two systems. Many Hong Kong directors, actors and actresses have accepted and internalized the Chinese authoritarian rule as a precondition for entering the fast-growing Mainland film market. A handful of conscientious filmmakers, however, choose to produce political cinema under the shadow of a wealthy and descendant local film industry, expressing the popular desire for freedom and democracy, and critiquing institutional inequality and injustice.

This article shows a glimpse of hope in the works of Hong Kong independent filmmakers Herman Yau (邱禮濤) and Vincent Chui (崔允信), suggesting that a reconfiguration of communal relationship and local identity may turn around the collective sense of despair brought about by the biopolitical apparatus of the Chinese authoritarian regime and the end of the Umbrella Movement. These two directors are chosen for this study largely because of their willingness to address local political controversies, articulate a unique Hong Kong cinematic identity and embrace civic engagement during the 2000s. Asserting the right to dissent and producing films from the margins, both Yau and Chui typify the trend of what Mirana M. Szeto and Yun-Chung Chen call the “Hong Kong SAR New Wave”, in which postcolonial filmmakers respond to the challenges of global neoliberalism and Mainlandization by taking on many localist subjects with a keen awareness of intra- and inter-cultural flows within Greater China. Beyond rejecting the “chauvinist and xenophobic petit-grandiose Hong Kongism typical of pre-1997 Hong Kong colonial inferiority complex”, they construct a cinematic critique of biopolitical power under the Chinese rule and champion a vision of grassroots activism that offers people hope and resources for transformative change (Szeto and Chen, 2012, p. 122; Szeto, 2014). Their cinematic initiatives offer a contextual perspective on the growth of political awakening among young people in Hong Kong during the Umbrella Movement in 2014.

Conceptually, Yau and Chui negotiate the “politics of representation” and the “representation of politics” as evinced in the overdetermined relationship between the visual and discursive regimes of representation in unique historical contexts. In *Chaos* (2008; 三不管), Yau characterized fear, terror and violence as the ingredients of the one country, two systems formula. Incarcerated people faced the threat of physical violence as a daily reality. Injustice, sexism and discrimination were normalized in the system and perpetuated through constant violence. Systematic violence ranged from hostile rhetoric, to violations of personal freedoms, to daily assaults, sexual abuses and brutal murders. The excessive use of violence reflected the authoritarian leaders’ obsession with fear and control. Yau presented a gloomy picture of human powerlessness because the people could never reform such a violent system and the whole society would eventually move toward an apocalyptic destruction. By comparison, in *Three Narrow Gates* (2008; 三條窄路), Vincent Chui revealed moral politics as a viable opposition against any form of state violence. Whenever the marginalized groups come together, the extensive networks of trust and solidarity that they engender often inspire more people to demand democratic governance, to fight inequality and injustice and to defend their rights. In so doing, the public could transcend their religious, gender, class and ethnic differences to challenge the status quo and correct the unjust system. These two filmmakers remind the Hong Kong audiences of their colonial inheritances and contemporary inequalities in an effort to suggest the various linkages between past and present, private and public domains, state and society, authoritarian oppression and democratic uprising.

Situating Hong Kong cinema in the postcolonial era

For more than half a century, the Hong Kong film industry was dominated by martial arts action movies featuring Bruce Lee (李小龍), Jackie Chan (成龍), Sammo Hung (洪金寶), Jet Li (李連杰) and Donnie Yen (甄子丹). The plots of the movies were linear and repetitive and lacking coherence and depth, but their fight sequences were carefully choreographed. The industry owed its success to stunning visual effects, lavish fighting scenes and tearful melodramas. The styles gave moviegoers pure entertainment, an escape from daily hardships and an illusion for a better life. Jackie Chan's earlier films in the 1970s and 1980s were loaded with scenes of comedic violence. John Woo's (吳宇森) *A Better Tomorrow* (英雄本色) trilogy represented a new era of heroic bloodshed on screen and greatly inspired Hollywood and South Korean filmmakers. Hark Tsui's (徐克) *Once Upon a Time in China* trilogy, featuring Jet Li as the martial arts legend Wong Feihong (黃飛鴻), reconciled Chinese nationalistic sentiment with Cantonese identity. Meanwhile, arthouse movie directors such as Wong Kar-Wai (王家衛), Clara Law (羅卓瑤), Stanley Kwan (關錦鵬) and Anna Hui (許鞍華) questioned the complicated issues of urban realism, identity formation and border crossings.

In postcolonial Hong Kong cinema, violence, crime and overlapping identities are widely used in conjunction with more sophisticated story lines, the best examples being *Infernal Affairs* (無間道) trilogy, *PTU: Police Tactical Unit* and *Cold War* (寒戰). The diverse genres helped Hong Kong filmmakers earn worldwide recognition. The action movies, romantic comedies, historical epics and arts films not only shed light on the media representations of past and present as events, experiences and myths but also captured the cross between global and local cinema, transnational capital and Cantonese identity.

Hong Kong cinema has rebranded itself. It has positioned:

Its brands and brand-names globally so as to find trans-local and trans-regional niches within the transnational film marketplace, and this prompts Hong Kong film to be in constant dialogue with European art cinema and Hollywood commercial genres (Marchetti and Tan, 2007, p. 5).

Meaghan Morris' proposition that "Hong Kong has played a formative rather than a marginal role in shaping action cinema as it circulates globally today" (Morris *et al.*, 2005, p. 183) is tempered by Bordwell (2000), whose research reveals that Hong Kong cinema still remains a local cinema as opposed to Hollywood global cinema, which is characterized by large export volumes and a strong presence on movie screens worldwide.

For a city with a population of 7.3 million, Hong Kong continues to be a relevant cinematic force in the face of a hegemonic Hollywood system and a resurgence of Taiwanese, Chinese, Japanese, South Korean, Indian and Thai cinemas. Even though there has been an incremental decline, since the mid-1990s, from the zenith of its commercial success in the 1980s, Hong Kong cinema is "closely linked to the overwhelming change in the way feature films are consumed and the re-structuring of local, regional, and global film markets" (Hunt and Leung, 2008, p. 71).

By partnering with studios in the USA and China, Hong Kong filmmakers produced movies both for regional and international audiences. The most notable transformation was the Hong Kong filmmakers' cooperation with China after the implementation of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) in 2004. The CEPA allowed Hong Kong films to enter the lucrative Chinese market, often in the form of coproductions, without being restricted by the import quotas set for foreign films (DeBoser, 2014, p. 158). More than a business shift, the new sentiments were in support of the infrastructural development for coproduction practices in China. Removing the barriers that had hampered Hong Kong filmmakers, the business model was designed to "spread risk, provide greater market

access, furnish access to extensive infrastructure and studio facilities, offer more options for location shooting, and generally boost production values” (Bettinson, 2015, p. 135).

China seeks to turn itself into a global powerhouse of film and media production, and the coproduction agreement with Hong Kong has paved the way for reshaping the landscape of regional filmmaking (DeBoser, 2014, p. 158). Attracting Hong Kong filmmakers with irresistible financial incentives, China set out to dominate the domestic box office with Chinese films rather than Hollywood productions (Bettinson, 2015, p. 135). The China Film Bureau has expressed the hope that under the CEPA, Hong Kong producers would advance the goal of promoting national reintegration, but the products turned out to be politically ambiguous. Previous large-scale representations of Chinese history like Jacob Cheung’s (張之亮) *Battle of Wits* (墨攻) and Teddy Chan’s (陳德森) *Bodyguards and Assassins* (十月圍城) displayed a rising China that is trapped in confusion, chaos and instability rather than being capable of building a prosperous society and achieving national rejuvenation. In stopping at the point prior to achieving the dream of state consolidation, these filmmakers portray China as being tapped in “a moment of intense negotiation, fissure, and instability” rather than being capable of building a prosperous society and achieving *national rejuvenation* (DeBoser, 2014, p. 164). Instead of submitting themselves to the broad category of “Chinese national cinema”, many Hong Kong filmmakers take advantage of new business opportunities and resources to produce films for a Greater China film market.

The rise of the China–Hong Kong coproductions coincides with the rise of a critical “new wave” in the Hong Kong film scene. The term “new wave” was used to describe the television and documentary works produced by idealistic directors from 1976 to 1984. However, there is a new generation of postcolonial filmmakers whose political worldview differs considerably from those of the 1970s and 1980s. Previous scholars used the term “New Wave” to describe the television and documentary works produced by young directors from 1976 to 1984, and Cheuk (2008) expands this definition to the cinemas that came during the period of preparing for Hong Kong’s transition to China (1984–1997). However, Szeto and Chen (2012) redefine the term “Hong Kong SAR New Wave” as a new generation of filmmakers whose socioeconomic status differs considerably from the 1970s and 1980s that the Hong Kong New Wave emerged. The postcolonial filmmakers have adapted the prolonged recession after 1997, the spread of neoliberal economic practices and the pressure for mainlandization. Witnessing the transition of Hong Kong from a colony into a special administrative region under the communist rule, the young producers oppose the hegemonic Chinese influence. They are aware that they are working in an environment different from British Hong Kong. They address local controversies with a critical awareness of intra- and inter-cultural flows in the Greater China region. Characterized by smaller budgets and less commercially driven motives, and emboldened by audience’s demand for realism, these conscientious directors have explored the fissures and contradictions in a fast-changing society troubled by a discontent against Chinese intervention in the city’s internal affairs, an insatiable appetite for materialism and a strong assertion of Hong Kong identity. Their cosmopolitanism rejects the “chauvinist and xenophobic petit-grandoise Hong Kongism typical of pre-1997 Hong Kong colonial inferiority complex” (Szeto and Chen, 2012, p. 122). Searching for local sensitivities, they articulate a cinematic vision of grassroots resistance against capitulating to Chinese dominance (Chu, 2015). Carving out their niche audiences at major film festivals from Cannes and Venice to New York and Pusan, the postcolonial New Wave directors employ filmmaking as a powerful tool of artistic and political critique (Wong, 2011). This development resonates with Paul Willeman’s characterization of non-Western films’ effort to

“stage” historical conditions as a key to exploring fissures and antagonisms that structure their own societies (Hjort and Petrie, 2007).

Seen from this perspective, Hong Kong presents “a theoretical conundrum” because it is “a cinema without a nation, a local cinema with transnational appeal” (Fu and Dessler, 2002, p. 5). Despite its dominant status within the Chinese-speaking world, the Hong Kong film industry rejects the conventional category of national cinema. Hong Kong cinema has not only modeled itself along the popular, urban, transnational and even postmodern and ethnic lines but has also repositioned itself as a crisis cinema by considering the various political and socioeconomic mutations that the postcolonial city is caught up with (Cheung and Chu, 2004). Adding to this, the multiplicity of cinematic expressions from martial arts to queer cinema in Hong Kong parallels with that in Hollywood and Bollywood, but the latter never experienced the severe sociopolitical and cultural crises that Hong Kong has faced. The semi-independent relationship of Hong Kong to the Chinese and Taiwanese national cinemas further complicates the issue. Hong Kong was always, and is still, a first-world metropolis in Asia, being a preeminent financial hub second only to Tokyo, even though the city was closely linked to the formation of these two rival Chinese polities during the Cold War.

Energized by the vibrancy of Hong Kong, film scholars have embraced this urban cinema with intellectual vigor and rigor, and they have developed some of the most theorized categories in global cultural studies. The *Infernal Affairs* trilogy, remade by Martin Scorsese as *The Departed* (2006), symbolized a new undercover film genre in postcolonial Hong Kong. The previous undercover films by John Woo such as *City on Fire* (1987) and *Hard Boiled* (1992) critiqued the institutional hypocrisy in a British-ruled capitalistic society, and sympathized with undercover agents torn between their professional duty as police officers and their fraternal loyalty to the triads. But *Infernal Affairs* looks at the complex encounters between two undercover characters, the undercover cop in the triad and the trial mole in the police (Leary, 2003, 2004; Lin, 2010). Their psychological struggles on screen mirrored the crisis of identity that the people of Hong Kong experienced in a transition from British colonial subjects to citizens of the People’s Republic of China. Hong Kong is an autonomous city-state that pretends to be part of China. Even though the city officially reunited with China after July 1, 1997, its people are reluctant to embrace the Communist regime and subscribe to the new Chinese national identity. In this respect, Hong Kong is a complex cultural entity that has transcended conventional categories like urban, popular, transnational and postmodern cinemas. It entails a wide range of filmmakers who assert their agency against the externally imposed hegemonic influences and who reclaim and recreate cinematically their political, moral and cultural consciousness. The complicated process of art–politics encounter in Hong Kong has exhibited different patterns and results, and it is often filled with hope, idealism, angst and disillusionment as shown in the following case studies (Lee and Kolluri, 2016).

Despair and hopelessness in *Chaos*

Chaos (2008, Herman Yau), known in Cantonese as *Saam Bat Gun* (Sanbuguan in Mandarin), is a futuristic thriller set in the ghettoized district of a prosperous city where vices and violence were rampant, and where the most dangerous criminals were in charge. The Cantonese term, Saam Bat Guan, refers to the century-old Kowloon Walled City, a densely populated settlement where prostitution, gambling and drugs were off limit to the British colonial police. Originally a Chinese military outpost, the Kowloon Walled City became an autonomous enclave in the colony after late imperial China leased the New Territories to Britain in 1898. Its Chinese population increased dramatically following the

outbreak of the Second World War (1937-1945) and the Communist Revolution (1949). From the 1950s to 1970s, local triads controlled the Walled City and ran illegal activities. In the film, Herman Yau used the old image of the Kowloon Walled City to reinvent an urban ghetto that was totally alienated from the outside world by a fortified wall. The police authorities never dared enter this no-man's land, and criminal lord Crow was the *de facto* leader of the ghetto. Without any official rule, chaos and disorder became the norm, and the residents lived in constant despair and frustration.

Everything changed in the ghetto with the arrival of a city police officer and a petty criminal. On their way to prison, police officer Mickey and convict Tai-Ho had an accident and crashed into the iron gate of the ghetto. They fell into the hands of Crow's followers. Crow hated the law enforcement agency so much so that he tried to identify and execute the police officer. A woman called Ling suddenly showed up to identify Mickey as her former criminal partner. As a result, Mickey left with Ling and Tai-Ho was held as a captured policeman. Ling was in fact the ex-wife of Tai-Ho but she left him to be killed because he abandoned her and her daughter Yan decades ago. Ling hoped that by saving police officer Mickey, he could help her and Yan flee the ghetto. While Ling and Mickey contemplated their escape, Tai-Ho broke away from captivity through the help of Yan. Once Tai-Ho found out Yan to be his daughter, he sought to redeem himself by working with Mickey to take Ling and Yan out of the Walled city. Meanwhile, a deadly plague broke out inside the ghetto. Instead of sending in the medical staff, the authorities declared a state of emergency and sent troops to kill everyone inside the contaminated zone. The government troops defeated Crow's followers and massacred all the ghetto residents. Mickey, Tai-Ho and Ling eventually helped Yan escape through a tunnel, but they were mistaken as contaminated residents and killed by the troops.

Chaos was made against the transformation of Hong Kong from a British colony into a special administrative region under the Chinese Communist rule. The cinematic landscape of the secluded ghetto was more than a metaphor in the film. The camera glided over the glittering lights and shadows as dark as the abyss. The setting was so ominous that the sun never shone, leaving the grey alleys and sky behind. The gloomy ghetto displayed a sense of noir and symbolized the old Kowloon Walled City. The physicality of this secluded area was saturated with all types of structural violence. When the refugees fled violence from mainland China to Hong Kong in times of wars, they trapped themselves in a new zone of exclusion and were ruled by criminal gangs. Hong Kong writer [Leung \(1993, pp. 120-123\)](#) once referred to the Kowloon Walled City as a zone of darkness, where anarchy and normalcy existed side by side. Prostitutes and addicts squatted on the streets, children played games outdoors and missionaries and social workers gave powdered milk and canned food to the poor. While gangsters profited themselves through illegal activities, most people struggled to live normally.

The cinematic representation of Hong Kong in *Chaos* as a ghettoized community reminds us of the analytical insights of German political thinker [Schmitt \(1922/1985\)](#) on state sovereignty and Italian philosopher [Agamben \(1998\)](#) on Auschwitz. Here one can draw on their ideas to examine the cinematic critiques of fascist potentialities in China-ruled Hong Kong. Schmitt considered sovereignty to be the absolute power of the rulers to impose a state of exception that suspended civil rights ([Ong, 2006, pp. 18-19](#)). Equally important are the notion of extra-territorialization (i.e. the volatile geographies produced through geopolitics and international law) and the apparatus of violence as a mode of governance ([Gregory et al., 2007, pp. 205-236](#)). The iconic status of the Kowloon Walled City stood out as a space of both constructed and constrained visibility. Most of what happened inside had to be shielded from the public gaze. Missing in the public view were the dehumanizing

institutions and practices that reduced people to a form of bare life. The cinematic ghetto in *Chaos* was by nature a giant concentration camp, where the fences, cages, bars and walls testified widespread and systematic practices of torture. In this underworld, violence and control embodied each other in a deadly manner. Such images challenge China's ostracization of Hong Kong from its larger national and juridical formation, depriving the local residents of their civil rights. Giorgio Agamben theorized this mode of governance as the pornography of horror beyond any ethical comprehension, and the key to his concept was the idea of a *homo sacer* as both an ostracized (bare) life and a condition upon which the ruling authority asserted its power and made law.

Contemporary Hong Kong has witnessed the continuation of colonialism, with the Chinese Communist state replacing the British autocratic rule. Herman Yau is suspicious of any political establishment (Cheung *et al.*, 2008). Whether in a colony or a dictatorship, the state often marginalizes one group of people as noncitizens and deprives them of all protection. In Tibet, Inner Mongolia and the Muslim-majority Xinjiang region, Han Chinese rulers impose the policy of dispossession and mistreat local Tibetans, Mongols and Uyghurs as fugitives in their ancestral homelands. The ethnic minorities submit themselves to the control of Han colonialists, who in turn, blame the recalcitrant subjects for their own misery (Caprioni, 2012). Such structural violence arises partly from the apathy and submission of the people to the hegemonic rule, and partly from the institutionalization of strong control mechanisms. If state-imposed dispossession constitutes a mode of governance, terror is its ruling tool. There is a long history of appropriating terror as an instrument of control in the modern era. In Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, Maoist China and North Korea, state terrorism entailed more than physical intimidation. The state institutionalized a culture of fear to the extent that ordinary people would not dare to rebel because they had no one to trust. Regulatory restrictions along with a high level of oppression completely undermined social bonds and precluded any possibility of collective action (Gregory and Pred, 2007, p. 22). Herman Yau dramatized the wretched experiences of the filmic characters to display the intimacy of terror, fear and violence in an imaginary Hong Kong. The traces of destroyed apartments and the marks left by the soldiers on walls represented the implementation of a social cleansing policy. The landscapes of terror were shown through underexposed lighting in images of narrow dark alleys and huge empty spaces. Beyond the physical death, the terror strategy aimed at casting a long-lasting impact on the memories of the survivors (Gregory and Pred, 2007, p. 120). Therefore, the culture of terror transformed death from a physiological experience into a social fact (Taussig, 1985).

The cinematic dichotomy between fear and terror, crime and control reflected a sense of desperation and despair under the one country, two systems formula (Chu, 2013). The powerful elite who ruled by fear also ruled in fear. The affluent outside world fortified itself against the unwanted ghetto inhabitants. The militarization of border control through fences and walls was part of the spatial and legal strategies of exclusion. Politically, Hong Kong did not become independent as many former British colonies. The British rulers handed over the sovereignty of the city to China in 1997 without consulting the will of the local population. The residents were deprived of their rights as British citizens and denied the opportunity to mobilize and form their independent city-state. To ease the public worries about the future of the city under communism, Article 5 of the Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini-constitution, guaranteed that Chinese socialist system would not be implemented locally and that the existing capitalist system and way of life would remain unchanged for 50 years. The first deadline for Hong Kong's transition passed smoothly on July 1, 1997, but the second deadline is approaching when Hong Kong is mandated to be integrated into the political, economic, and social structures of China in 2047.

What life was like in this cinematic ghetto? *Chaos* deliberately portrayed the ghetto population as a hopeless people, the reign of terror by Crow as brutal as the Chinese Communist dictatorship and the outbreak of plague as the beginning of a gradual death of the whole community. Crow was the dictator to be feared and respected. He controlled the ghetto population with explosive earrings that he could detonate anytime, and he retained all the power over Ling and other women. He ordered Ling to prepare wines and feasts whenever he pleased, and in exchange, he provided Ling with protection. This arrangement presented an illusion of security because Ling was exclusively Crow's and could not be with another man, just as Hong Kong is completely under the Chinese rule. In this depressing environment, there was a brothel for the ghetto residents to seek pleasures. The brothel was decorated with various colors and shades, creating a dreamy and seductive mood. A prostitute told Yan either to live according to one's fate or to resist against the hopeless situation. While the fancy and eye-catching lights appeared to be captivating inside the dark and gloomy ghetto, the sense of helplessness could never be fade with the manmade lights surrounding them.

Mutual suspicion and distrust always prohibited solidarity among the subaltern people. Terror, fear and violence were the most effective weapons of mass distraction that fortified a porous community, legitimated the oppressive rule and deflected the public's attention from escalating internal crises. Through violent suppression and mass deception, the sovereignty, as represented by Crow, asserted the right to condemn some people to a form of bare life (i.e. their very biological existence depending on the sufferance of the sovereignty). While the regime of surveillance permeated every space of the ghetto and marginalized the people, it created a condition upon which Crow drew his political power. The sovereignty repeatedly excluded anyone deemed to be potentially subversive. Living in fear, the subalterns internalized the reign of terror as normal and desirable. Law and violence folded into one another in this dark zone of exclusion. This gloomy feeling of the state of exception underlined the whole film. Once the state of emergence prevailed, terror and violence could easily force the people to submission.

Because of the lack of control over their own destiny, the ghetto residents faced many unpredictable risks such as the plague and the military invasion. The shocking ending of the film brought back the memories of two historical moments that have haunted the people of Hong Kong for years. When the plague spread across the ghetto, the religious zealots might see it as signs of the end times. Because the ghetto ran a blood trafficking business, the untested blood led to a widespread epidemic of BL23 that killed countless people outside. As a metaphoric disease, BL23 stands for Article 23 of the Basic Law that forbids any act of treason, secession, sedition and subversion in Hong Kong against the Chinese state, or theft of state secrets, and that prohibits foreign political bodies or nongovernmental organizations from undertaking political activities critical of China. In addition to this political undertone, the filmic health crisis reminded everyone of many innocent deaths during the outbreaks in 2003 of avian influenza (H5N1) and sudden acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the epidemic in 2013 of bird flu (H7N9). Rather than sending in the medical teams to rescue the sick, the invisible state ordered troops to eliminate the entire ghetto population. Such a cinematic commentary juxtaposed the extermination of those patients with the fear of the virus BL23 spreading from the ghetto to the outside world. The massacre in the film was a single moment of trauma, and this paralleled a perpetual state of terror that the local population witnessed during the Communists' crackdown on the prodemocracy activists in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989, the Hong Kong police's attacks on Umbrella Movement protestors in late 2014, and the violent confrontations during the "Fishball

Revolution” on Lunar New Year’s Day in February 2016 (Chow and Lee, 2016; Lagerkvist, 2016; Lee, 2016d, 2016a).

Less apocalyptically, Herman Yau reminded the audiences that the only way to overcome the fear of terror was through “loud bells, bright lights, and theatrical gestures that boldly reveal the state of exception for what it is – the everyday dissolution of citizenship, of right, of political life”. Poems, songs and stories came to expand the subalterns’ horizons. “The eruption of language, the evocation of emotion, the expression of suffering, of political and ethical aspiration, of loss” may provide the oppressed with a glimpse of hope about justice and truth beyond what they used to know (Gregory and Pred, 2007, p. 51). In the film, the desire to escape from the ghetto and the will to live united Mickey, Tai-Ho, Ling and Yan in their fight against Crow. Ling was determined to free her daughter Yan from slavery, even though Yan was blinded by ignorance and did not appreciate her mother’s sacrifice. Ling was the filmic Mother who renounced everything for the child. She remained steadfast and was the ultimate beacon that guided erratic ships to safety. Born inside the dark and gloomy ghetto, the young and innocent Yan neither saw the sunlight nor knew anything about the outside world, and she perceived Crow’s reign of terror as the order of the norm. Ling, however, planted the seeds of conscience in Yan’s mind. There was a swing in a rundown courtyard and Yan liked to play on the swing during her childhood. Ling planted some yams for her daughter in the courtyard, reminding her that it was possible to grow food among poisonous weeds. As with the Buddhist lotus flower in deep mud away from the sun, Ling tried to keep her daughter pure in a sinful environment. When Yan conversed with her biological father Tai-Ho, she could imagine a brighter world outside the ghetto.

Sadly, the resistance against the draconian rule of Crow was futile, partly because Mickey, Tai-Ho and Ling failed to organize other inhabitants to rebel from within, and partly because the advancing security forces never trusted Mickey as one of them, killing him and his party. There was no warning or dialogue between the troops and the people. The tragic ending of the film dramatized a feeling of powerlessness and vulnerability, and it challenged the audiences to see both colonial legacies and contemporary inequalities as two sides of the same coin. One political subtext of this film is that the postcolonial narrative of *laissez-faire* prosperity available to the Hong Kong public could not protect their individual dignity and integrity. Only when people recognized their painful sufferings and knew right and wrong, they would stand up to the status quo and change the authoritarian system.

Glimpse of hope in *Three Narrow Gates*

Produced by Hong Kong independent filmmaker Vincent Chui, *Three Narrow Gates* is a sociopolitical drama that explores the corruption of society in the postcolonial era. It has been 20 years since Britain handed over the sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997. Yet, a combination of hegemonic deterrence and antidemocratic elites, a weak culture of civic engagement, and political pressures from Beijing have slowed down the pace of democratization. The public avoided antagonizing the Communist rulers in Beijing and remained indifferent to politics (Horlemann, 2003, pp. 21-23). Sharing the same sense of frustration, Chui thickened the filmic plot with a larger narrative of political corruption in Hong Kong and placed his characters in a tangled web of conflicting interests and loyalties.

The film started with an unsolved murder case that connected several strangers including a former policeman 6277 with gambling addiction, a cynical police officer, a Protestant church pastor Rev. Ma who defended the marginalized through a popular radio program, a sex worker from China who struggled to earn money to support her sick mother at home and an idealistic photojournalist Eva who cared about truth. Coming from the

middle- and working-class backgrounds, the protagonists found themselves trapped in a scandal involving business corruption, media self-censorship and legal malpractice. They uncovered numerous secret deals between the corporate interests of Hong Kong and the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities. Rather than making compromise with the status quo, they engaged in a painful struggle for justice, truth and freedom. Throughout the movie, Rev. Ma referred to Mathew 7: 14, "Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it". He used repeatedly this biblical metaphor of a narrow gate to talk about the ease of following the wrong path toward self-destruction. The moral struggle of these protagonists indicated that the path of corruption was easier to follow than the journey to truth. This biblical worldview hewed toward the complexity of human psychology rather than a Manichean struggle between good and evil. Nevertheless, a handful of conscientious citizens – a former police officer, a prostitute, a clergy and a photojournalist – overcame their disagreements and dared to challenge the status quo. The contrast between their activism and the apathy of people around them highlighted the perseverance in the quest for justice.

This thriller critiques the development of postcolonial Hong Kong on several fronts. First, Vincent Chui rejected the popular obsession with pride and prosperity in Hong Kong. He framed the urban landscape in a low-lighting exposure and characterized the city as a dangerous and corrupt urban jungle. The murder of a corporate lawyer in a private yacht set off the investigation that led to numerous scandals. The Hong Kong-owned factory in China released large amounts of toxic chemicals that poisoned many villages. The camera captured realistically the squalid living conditions of desperate renters in Hong Kong. The working-class youth, as represented by the ex-cop 6277 and the Chinese sex worker, lived in extremely overcrowded and rundown apartments. All characters lived with a sense of uncontrollable destiny in this rapidly changing city.

Second, the film departed from the conventional media representations of Hong Kong's Western-educated middle-class professionals as competent and compassionate. To Vincent Chui, the remarkable success of these professionals led to moral degeneration because greed and distrust replaced industriousness and decency and destroyed social bonds between the people. "The façade of prosperity and stability" was built on a "systemic silencing of dissent" at all professional levels (Lee, 2013, p. 17). The church deacons, mostly businessmen, discouraged Rev. Ma from speaking out against injustice and urged him to focus on spiritual matters alone. The news editors censored the controversial pictures taken by Eva about corporate corruption to appease their financial patron. The police chief obstructed any investigation into the murder of a corporate lawyer because of pressure from the top. The problem of moral decay among the middle-class professionals correlated with the gradual erosion of universal values such as human rights, democracy, rule of law and moral integrity under the Chinese rule. As Hong Kong relied on the Mainland market for its economic growth, many professionals were reluctant to resist pressures of ideological, political and cultural assimilation from China (Liew, 2012, p. 778). They turned a blind eye to the rampant practice of corruption and nepotism in all levels of Chinese bureaucracy. Before the global financial meltdown in 2008, the fast-growing Mainland economy was thought to be a blessing for Hong Kong. Through cross-border trade, corporate Hong Kong saw China as a land of endless opportunities. The global financial crisis, however, led to slower growth, massive unemployment and widespread turmoil in China (Lee *et al.*, 2012). The filmic characters reflected the vulnerability of corporate Hong Kong to the dangers of fraud and the strains of economic slowdown.

The same vulnerability can be discerned in the slow progress toward democracy. A democratic election should be fair and transparent, and exhibit the element of surprise and

unpredictability. This component of an unexpected outcome excites citizens and makes electoral campaigns so appealing. In Hong Kong, democratization refers to the implementation of universal suffrage for the election of the Chief Executive and legislators as guaranteed in the Basic Law. Adhering to a longstanding policy of denying full democracy to Hong Kong, China preempted significant electoral reforms in 2007, 2008, 2010 and 2014, and its handpicked political agents never gained much legitimacy in the eyes of the public. For example, Hong Kong's chief executive election is nothing more than a "bird-cage democracy". Hong Kong's pro-democracy heavyweight Martin Lee (李柱銘) in the 1990s said that China deliberately excluded liberal democrats such as him and Szeto Wah (司徒華) from executive leadership after 1997, but still permitted them to serve as a permanent opposition within the Legislative Council. This strategy worked well for China throughout the 2000s. By coopting a handful of pro-democracy politicians, Beijing claimed the role of benevolent sovereign over Hong Kongers, thereby improving its international image and gaining some legitimacy for the one country, two systems policy (Lee, 2017b, 2017a).

The timing and mechanism of universal suffrage are still hotly debated among the pro-democratic and pro-Beijing politicians in Hong Kong. The pro-democratic camp, known in the media as Hong Kong democrats or pan-democrats, is a loosely organized coalition of political parties, civic groups and community organizations. What brings these groups together are the call for universal suffrage (i.e. one-person, one vote) and the distrust of Chinese authoritarianism. These ideological issues distinguish them from the pro-Beijing camp as represented by the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong. On economic and social issues, most pro-democratic and pro-Beijing politicians have much in common as they defend Hong Kong's free market economy and its social welfare net for the poor. Nonetheless, a series of governance crises under Chee-Hwa Tung, the first Chief Executive, and the administrative incompetence of Donald Tsang and Chun-Ying Leung, Tung's successors, completely undermined the credibility of the postcolonial government.

Against this incomplete political transformation, Vincent Chui is critical of the commodification of human rights in which a managerial system of market-state reduces the people's access to public goods and services. The postcolonial rulers only consider democratic rights to be exchangeable commodities which they handed out to the people bit by bit. They reject the constitutionally based relationship between justice and law, and conduct negotiations with the civil society in market terms. When they apply the logic of economic transaction to regulate the public domain, their autocratic policies perpetuate all forms of discrimination against the poor (Cheng, 2007; Gregory and Pred, 2007, p. 49). They even ridicule the entire concept of universal suffrage and treat the people as a faceless mass to be domesticated. During the Umbrella Movement in 2014, HSBC (Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation) Holdings board member Laura Cha, a non-official member of the Executive Council of Hong Kong and chairperson of the Preparatory Task Force on the Financial Services Development Council and former vice chairwoman of the China Securities Regulatory Commission, expressed such anti-democratic sentiments among the ruling elites. She justified the disenfranchisement of Hong Kongers by comparing them to freed African-American slaves, suggesting they should endure a century of authoritarian rule before getting their electoral rights. These remarks provoked widespread public anger and caused irreconcilable conflict with the civil society. Because the postcolonial state administers justice in managerial terms, its legitimacy hinges on the satisfactory material outcomes of socioeconomic policies. Faced with the impacts of the 2008 global financial turmoil, the

government with its undemocratic mechanisms has failed to cope with social and economic grievances.

In contrast to the pessimistic portrayal of Hong Kong by Herman Yau, Vincent Chui expresses a glimpse of hope in the self-mobilization of society. This hope is the rebuilding of mutual bonds among citizens through faith-based activism. As French thinker [Touraine \(2014, p. 128\)](#) points out, “a life devoted exclusively to consumption, to self-interest or to the rejection of other people often constitutes an obstacle” toward the embrace of universal values of justice, freedom and equality. The best way to fight an unjust system is to isolate the status quo from civil society so that citizens can search for an alternative mode of governance. In British Hong Kong, Roman Catholicism and Protestant Christianity exercised much institutional influence and enjoyed privileges disproportionate to their overall membership. Being the religion of the status quo, the teachings of the Church supported and stabilized the colonial rule. But the impacts of religion on social behaviors are largely determined by diverse human interpretations of religion. Some Christians defend the tradition of church-state separation referring to Luke 20: 25: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar’s, and unto God the things which be Gods”. Other people may interpret Christianity as a total blueprint for life by referring to Matthew 6: 24: “No one can serve two masters. [. . .] You cannot serve both God and money”. As with faith communities elsewhere, the Church in Hong Kong never submits completely to the secular authorities, and most religious practitioners uphold the transcendental ideas of sacred and profane, right and wrong, good and evil ([Lee, 2003](#)). The cinematic character Rev. Ma appeared to be “the most inspiring embodiment of the Christian virtues of self-sacrifice and of fraternal agape” ([Rorty, 1999, p. 207](#)). Both Rev. Ma and his wife were baptized in the fire of civic activism during the late 1980s. As a young couple in May 1989, they supported the Tiananmen Square prodemocracy activists against the Communists’ declaration of martial law. In his sermons, Rev. Ma asked the congregants to enter the kingdom of God through a narrow gate and to support activism. He crossed the religious boundaries to reach out to nonbelievers such as police officer 6277 and photojournalist Eva. He provided these confused youngsters with a moral compass, mediated their disagreements and offered practical solutions. The work of Rev. Ma mirrors the rising civic engagement among Hong Kong’s faith communities.

According to [Nedilsky \(2009, 2014\)](#), a growing number of religious actors have contested the terms of political participation after 1997. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong worked with human rights lawyers in 1999 to defend the disfranchised Chinese migrants against the local government’s discriminatory policy of public housing allocation ([Tam, 2009, p. 150](#); [Tam, 2013, p. 162](#)). The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong encountered tremendous pressures to identify with the Beijing-supported postcolonial administration. During the controversy over the implementation of Article 23 of the Basic Law in 2003, a law designed to prohibit local citizens and organizations from opposing the Communist regime, the Catholic faithful, under the charismatic leadership of Cardinal Joseph Zen, challenged the Hong Kong government over the issues of freedom, democracy and human rights. A decade later, in late 2014, Cardinal Zen urged the citizens to support the Occupy Central with Love and Peace Campaign, a civil disobedience movement that took over the city’s financial district for months and demanded universal suffrage in elections for the Chief Executive and legislators ([Cheng, 2011](#); [Lee, 2014b, 2014c, 2014a](#)). The large-scale democratic struggle has given rise to an unprecedented level of political awakening among the young people in Hong Kong ([Chow and Lee, 2016](#)).

Another positive message that Chui stresses is the shared struggle of the working class in Greater China. After 6277 fell in love with the Mainland sex worker, he was invited by her

to dine with other Chinese prostitutes. When 6277 visited the sick mother of the sex worker, he encountered a Mainland public security officer. The two men cooperated to uncover the scandal of pollution caused by the Hong Kong-owned chemical plant. Given the exploitative nature of globalizing capital, the struggle of Rev. Ma and Eva in Hong Kong alone would not be enough. It is important for the suffering masses in Hong Kong and China to overcome their ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences and to develop cross-border networks of popular activism. When the subalterns engage in what Jeremy Brecher and Tim (1998) called “globalization from below”, this transnational collectivism from bottom up will bypass the surveillance of nation-states and ensure the victory of subaltern struggles.

Conclusion

A series of postcolonial scandals have revealed three worrying trends about the deterioration of public governance in Hong Kong. First, there is a total mistrust of the government authorities. The previous Chief Executive Chun-Ying Leung, who was in office from 2012 to 2017, mismanaged so many crises that completely tarnished his self-constructed image as a populist, fighting for the little guy against the Mainlandization of Hong Kong and the negative spillover effects of China’s economic slowdown. The majority of the population have realized that the constitutional framework of “one country, two systems” is degenerating into that of “one Hong Kong, two societies”. The privileged classes like the Chief Executive, lawmakers and their cronies are inviolable and immune from any legal process, whereas ordinary people are brought under as much scrutiny as criminal suspects. Second, there is a convergence of interests and agendas between the Hong Kong local state and the Chinese Communist Party leadership in Beijing. Both sides are seeking to maximize their political options and strengthen an authoritarian tyranny, willing to use any measures to remain in control of the city, including brutal violence against protesters. They have launched a systematic smear campaign in preparation for a crackdown on some political fringe groups. They identified a few scapegoats and made them an example for the rest of the society. This shows the elites’ resolve to seek justifications within domestic laws to intimidate civil society and to launch a crackdown on dissent prior to large-scale protests. Third, policing in Hong Kong is intertwined with the autocratic rule. The police has abandoned the tradition of neutrality in politics and transformed from a law enforcement agency into an instrument of oppression, ensuring the survival of the Chief Executive. In any crisis where a Manichean mindset prevails, all involved parties tend to be on edge. Frontline police officers and demonstrators are more willing to fight each other in a public square. This explains why the government spent millions on water cannon tanks and anti-riot gears for police officers. Without militarizing the police, the rulers cannot put the frustrating public at bay (Lee, 2016f, 2016e, 2016d; 2016b).

Worrying about these crises and an uncertain future in 2047, Herman Yau and Vincent Chui find themselves trapped in a futureless society that they see around them. But they strive to offer a message of hope by portraying the postcolonial city as a unique cinematic entity that speaks for and by itself, and that reassesses its historical relationship with the British colonizer and resists pressures for further integration into the Chinese motherland. Their filmic narratives demystify Hong Kong as a harmonious society and a self-sustaining economy. What they show is an autonomous city-state with its own sense of historical, political, and sociocultural consciousness. Such popular consciousness is deeply reflexive, inspiring the people to stand up to the hegemony under the most oppressive circumstances. Even though Hong Kong has no control over its sovereignty and the ruling elites force the city to be part of China, its diverse populations still adhere to their quasi-national identities and articulate the desire for a just and democratic future (Chu, 2003).

Finally, these cinematic reconstructions manifest popular uncertainty over the fate of Hong Kong. The filmmakers critique the utter failure of China's one country, two systems, and reveal a city fraught with severe tensions and conflicts, which the elites have tried to contain and cover up through appeals to economic growth. Yet Hong Kong still faces the problem of governance, for coinciding with its steady growth through integration with China is the awakening of its citizens and with it the rise of organized activism on an unprecedented level. By rejecting authoritarian rule and excessive capitalism as solutions to these crises, both filmmakers urge the public to defend the civil society through grassroots mobilization.

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