

NEW TERRITORIES: RECONFIGURING PUBLICS IN FORMER AND NEW HONG KONG CINEMA

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Hong Kong cinema is yoked to nostalgia. Sometimes called its golden age, the period of iconic films in the 1980s and 1990s is roughly flanked by two major historical dates: 1984, the year of the joint declaration between the British and the Chinese governments that set the date for the handover of Hong Kong to China, outlining the idea of “one country, two systems”; and 1997, the handover itself.

As Ackbar Abbas wrote in the midst of this period of cultural production, the era was the *déjà disparu* of the cinema of the time: “The Joint Declaration caused a certain amount of anxiety. . . . It made Hong Kong people look at their country with new eyes. It is as if the possibility of the disappearance of this social and cultural space led to seeing it in all its complexity and contradiction for the first time: an instance, as Benjamin would have said, of love at last sight.”¹ There was an anticipatory nostalgia baked into films of that time that self-consciously reflected upon its ephemeral present. New Hong Kong cinema today, thirty years on, continues this self-reflexivity of Hong Kong present and past, making the city its subject.

Yet the cinema of this former golden era, as Abbas argues, is interesting “because of the way film is being used to explore and negotiate a problematic and paradoxical cultural space without abandoning its role as popular entertainment.”² Hong Kong filmmakers today live out the subject of that political anxiety, which fueled the boom of cinema of their past, even as they face intense legal risk in filmmaking, especially documentary. By contrast, they are more explicitly political than their predecessors, taking history or events as subjects, and are interested not just in fictional narratives but in bringing their focus on genre into hybrid genres of documentary and nonfiction filmmaking. This political anxiety, articulated now more urgently as fear and paranoia, endures

today. This new era is defined not so much by a commitment to what is “popular” or “entertainment,” as it was to their predecessors, but by the very circumstances and legal risk that prescribe a different sphere entirely: a new Hong Kong cinema that lives on as fugitive and exilic.

The “Hong Kong Free Cinema Manifesto,” recently translated, feels like a confessional glimpse into the current scene and is signed by filmmakers working there today. First published in 2022, after the passing of the national security law of 2020, it has been signed by over thirty contemporary Hong Kong filmmakers—notably, using their own names at a time when many works are being released anonymously (as in the case of Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers) and when many filmmakers are self-exiling in fear of political persecution for making films (as in the case of documentary filmmaker Tammy Cheung). Citing films banned locally, the manifesto states that “filmmakers face increasing difficulties in securing financing or risk being blacklisted from the mainstream industry.”³ As the city’s funding is withdrawn and producers pull out of projects that are explicitly political, production houses close up, and resources are drying up within.

Writing in the introduction to her edited volume *Film and Risk*, Mette Hjort issues a reminder that risk in filmmaking is not just political but financial.

[The] continued existence of films that are both a form of cultural heritage and a vehicle for cultural memory comes to depend on the outcome of probabilistic reasoning in relation to clearly defined threats[,] . . . [and often the model of] government-subsidized filmmaking . . . redefined the economic risks (that is, losses) associated with national film production as the inevitable costs of sustaining national cultures.⁴

Yet in this new era, when Hong Kong cinema is in direct opposition to national or state interests, financial risk is dispersed and shouldered not by the state, or investors, but by the filmmakers themselves.

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To define Hjort’s term “film and risk,” it is critical to understand not just political risk in terms of disappearance, rearrest, doxing, attack, or forced exile, but also through extant dimensions of risk that also encompass personal financial debt and bankruptcy in support of an independent film practice. Even participating in a political project, as the manifesto suggests, might endanger one’s ability to keep a day job within the industry. These types of financial attrition are the implicit terms for a Hong Kong cinema imploding as the city’s public funding is disappearing and producers, afraid of being associated with political projects, are deserting filmmakers.

Self-conscious about legacy as much as history, the manifesto gestures at the weight of nostalgia carried by the fabled golden era of commercial Hong Kong filmmaking. Citing such films as *Days of Being Wild* (Wong Kar-wai, 1990) and *A Chinese Odyssey* (Jeffrey Lau, 1995), the “Hong Kong Free Cinema Manifesto” states: “Every single frame of our films is undergirded by this tradition of filmmaking that has evolved into different structures of feeling over the past century. It is through this understanding that we can break through and make a new generation of Hong Kong cinema.”⁵

The resurgence of Hong Kong cinema of this golden age among international audiences seems cyclical.

Art-house cinemas across major global cities—such as Film at Lincoln Center, the British Film Institute, the Institute of Contemporary Art (London), ACMI (Australian Centre for the Moving Image), the Metrograph (New York), and many others—have run retrospectives of Wong Kar-wai films over the past few years, as Wong continues to command status as an auteur seemingly synonymous with Hong Kong cinema nostalgia. Recent releases by the Criterion Collection (releases by Criterion have been cited as “a Good Housekeeping seal of approval”⁶) include Ann Hui’s *Boat People* (1982), a full remaster of Wong Kar-wai’s entire filmography, a rerelease of John Woo’s *The Killer* (1989) back into the collection, Stanley Kwan’s *Rouge* (1987), and Johnnie To’s *Throw Down* (2004).

Wong Kar-wai’s earlier works, with all their subliminal references to political and historical history (Wong is famously cagey about the political meaning of his films), now seem so obvious that they are hard to deny. References start with He Zhiwu, the character in Wong’s *Chungking Express* (1994) who obsesses over cans of pineapple, remarking that “everything comes with an expiry date.” They continue with *Happy Together* (1997), Wong’s first film made outside of Hong Kong and released in the year of the handover—a time marked by a wave of diaspora—with a central character, Lai Yiu-Fai (Tony Leung), whose name is a



Wong Kar-wai’s *Chungking Express* (1994) from the “golden age” of Hong Kong Cinema.

homonym in Cantonese for “You want to fly.” Even the title of his *2046* (2004) signals the year before the end of the fifty-year span of the “one country, two systems” agreement. As Lidija Haas argues about *Happy Together*, “[T]he film was released with the subtitle ‘A Story About Reunion,’ giving its exploration of a long uneasy partnership a more openly political valence.”⁷

Yet such a reading of Wong’s films, as an allegory implying an anguished reunion between Hong Kong and China, seems less salient today. Considering his recent works in production—entailing script approvals for the series *Blossoms Shanghai* from state censors and a distribution partnership with state-run Tencent—the “political valence” in Wong’s former work has become more elusive. In open cooperation with the state, these constraints mark a longstanding precedent in commercial Hong Kong film to meet the realities of state-regulated production and distribution at scale across the Sinophone market.

There is a tragic irony to the contemporary nostalgia for Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, which even in its time of production was already reflecting an ephemeral Hong Kong. It is as though such a feverish proliferation of retrospectives of this golden age of Hong Kong cinema only multiplies the nostalgia already inherent in the films, proving Ackbar Abbas’s prescient *déjà disparu*—thirty years on, to marvel at a city calcified in time through the filmic looking glass.

For Randall Halle, there is a stultifying nostalgia plaguing cinephiles who attempt to “freeze” the canon and eulogize the past. Halle points to those who lock “European [cinema] in time and dismiss current production as not living up to past glories. Such nostalgia is itself a longing for forms that appeal . . . to static aesthetic criteria,” which he aptly terms “the visual pleasure of viewing what one knows.”⁸ His challenge goes further:

The desire to view according to static aesthetic criteria, however, reveals that an element of entertainment value has always adhered to high cultural production, that element that allows for a distance from the political and sociohistorical conditions with which each film struggles.⁹

It is notable that this surge of current interest in Hong Kong (and Taiwanese) cinema of this time is buoyed by an appetite from Asian American audiences for more representation. Rey Chow remarks on how Sinophone cinema since the 1980s has uniquely contended with having formed “an inherent part of a contemporary problematic of becoming

visible” within the cinema world at an international scale. Sinophone cinema, she argues, “has since the 1980s become an event in which the entire world has to reckon.”¹⁰

These rereleases and retrospectives, all highly visible, run parallel to an unfolding present of political films post-2014 that are notably less visible: the more political the film, the less visible, and the auteurs of this new canon are notably absent from the global stage today. Further, with their original sociohistorical undercurrents not fully appreciated, this contemporary “nostalgia overdrive” of Hong Kong cinema among global art-house audiences readily ossifies those Hong Kong films of the past—and their vision and representation of the city itself—into a canonical resin.

Wong’s films of his early career consistently bring in such huge audiences today that a joke among some programmers is that a recessive slump of ticket sales can be boosted by a weekend run of his films; yet his films are exemplary of a Hong Kong cinema nostalgia overdrive. Waves of retrospectives are cyclical, but this particular elliptical cycle of global interest in Hong Kong cinema runs parallel to a dramatically different political moment for Hong Kong itself—and for new, working Hong Kong filmmakers. With film censorship laws preventing local audiences today from seeing a new wave of Hong Kong cinema, the public that film spectatorship has long been considered to construct, whether mass, local, or even available, has become obsolete.

Nostalgia, as Rey Chow argues, can be found throughout Sinophone cinema, and “the object of nostalgia—that which is remembered and longed for—often arguably takes the form of a concrete place, time, and event.”¹¹ In contrast, Chow argues, a different kind of nostalgia is present in Hong Kong films—specifically, Wong Kar-wai’s: they are “not simply hankering after a specific historical past.” Instead, “[n]ostalgia in this case is no longer an emotion attached to a concretely experienced, chronological past; rather it is attached to a fantasized state of oneness, to a time of absolute coupling and indifferentiation that may nonetheless appear in the guise of an intense, indeed delirious, memory.”¹² Randall Halle further suggests that “such nostalgia . . . is not really for a film . . . but actually, perhaps paradoxically, nostalgia for a moment in which people were viewing things they did not know, when people were open to engagement with new aesthetic forms.”¹³

Once upon a time, in the distant near past of the 1980s and 1990s, so passionate was the film culture of Hong Kong cinema that its audiences were known to slash the seats in the cinema with knives in protest if a film did not meet their standards. In the current political climate, by contrast, there

are no cinemas in Hong Kong that would show *Inside the Red Brick Wall* (Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, 2020), *Taking Back the Legislature* (Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, 2020), *If We Burn* (James Leong, 2023), or any other films that deal with or mention the protests in 2019. While the two works by Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers mentioned above, for example, have been exhibited through festival premieres and limited screenings around the world, the films have been barred from exhibition in their place of origin. Chan Tze-woon describes the process of sending his *Blue Island* (2022) to get approval: he relates that “the Office for Film . . . has continually stalled the vetting of this film and I got no answer. I understand this delay as a prohibition from screening this film in Hong Kong even though I have no official response.”¹⁴

The Hong Kong diaspora (especially those in the most recent wave of emigrants, living in sites from the San Francisco Bay Area, to Vancouver, to Toronto, to cities across the United Kingdom and Australia, or wherever the latest wave of the diaspora has arrived) are the audience for this new wave of Hong Kong cinema, at least the ones who can access these films, constituting a spectatorship that is predominantly abroad. The films themselves become a critical means by which a politicized diaspora maintains a connection with place. The local audience is now legally prohibited from seeing some of the most daring films from Hong Kong today but, while the term “local” is typically

used to describe a cultural context or origin, such films as *Blue Island* signal the construction of a new “Hong Kong public” dispersed by this diaspora. A counterpublic for new Hong Kong cinema, whether through clandestine, fugitive, or diasporic means, is actively being constituted by new distribution channels within and beyond the local.

When the filmmakers, too, are displaced and self-exiled, or when their works cannot be shown in their place of origin, how can Hong Kong cinema be made and unmade, be understood “after place,” severed from its locus of origin? Writing on a theory of Asian cinema that is relevant to such questions of cinema and geography, Stephen Teo observes:

The notion of an Asian cinema is too vast a concept to be reduced to the question of its mere definition. Perhaps the central problem surrounding the problem of Asian cinema is an existential one: Is there such a thing as Asian cinema? Does it exist as a distinctive and unique entity, one which could be taught as an alternative model to Hollywood? . . . Asian cinema is viable only because it is a series of national cinemas.¹⁵

These same questions must also be asked of Hong Kong cinema. At face value, such questions might suggest a claim for its negation, but instead Teo’s provocation upends a conception of cinema as monolithic, as representative of the



Films of the new wave of Hong Kong cinema like *Blue Island* (pictured here) appeal to a diasporic public.

cultural production of a nation-state. Moreover, if Asian cinema is merely a collection of national cinemas, as Teo asserts, then the lens and domain of nationalism raises a core question for Hong Kong and also Taiwanese cinema, as cinema cultures that are distinctive and unique from places that are de facto countries. Teo boldly proposes that while “[n]ationalism manifests as a monumental style . . . Asian Cinema is also a reaction against the national—a postnational conceit.”¹⁶

The framework of the “postnational” offers a more productive framework through which to view Hong Kong cinema, both contemporary and past. Applying the “post-national” frame to Hong Kong cinema can be illuminating; if Asian cinema can be seen as an alternative to Hollywood, as Teo posits, it is also perhaps the case that the new Hong Kong cinema today is in the vanguard of such a move, as it reckons uniquely with the political and resists compatibility at both the territorial and national level.

To release *Blue Island*, Chan Tze-woon resorted to screening the film exclusively overseas:

[W]e are now reaching out to diasporic Hong Kong communities and audiences located overseas, like the U.S. and Canada, for *Blue Island*. We are also working with distributors in North America and Japan. *Blue Island* was released in Japan in July this year. In September and October . . . in Europe. This is our strategy at the moment. We are trying to work on different plans in order to gain access to the people of Hong Kong as much as possible.”¹⁷

New Hong Kong cinema cannot be theoretically confined simply by the national or even the territorial. When current laws prevent some of the most critical Hong Kong cinema made today from being seen by local audiences, an exilic or postnational framework is necessary to keep pace with new works and filmmakers.

What is the “Hong Kong” cathected through film, both past and present? The central project shared by parallel visions of Hong Kong—former and contemporary, narrative fiction and nonfiction documentary, commercial and independent—is that of how to encounter and (re)vivify the past through cinema. But how is it possible to move toward the past, especially the recent past, without a nostalgia tinged by sentimentality or an inherent longing for a fantasy of the past? Chan Tze-woon’s *Blue Island* offers up a unique challenge to Hong Kong cinema, contesting the former tropes of the sentimental and all its nostalgic reckonings with the past. Crucially, Chan counters nostalgia by

constructing a gaze at the tableaux of the past with an equanimity that allows the anachronisms of history to surface unresolved—as unresolved as they remain today. It is in this smashing together of eras and forms that Chan creates, as if by atomic fission, a voice for a truly present and unflinching Hong Kong cinema.

Chan Tze-woon was born in 1987, two years prior to the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 4, 1989 (or the “June 4 incident,” as Beijing calls it). His early childhood thus spans the final ten years of British colonial rule. This biological fact is the prelude to Chan’s first feature, *Yellowing* (2016), shot during 2014, which situates his generation’s political “becoming” through the lens of that earlier period of history: beginning with the Hong Kong people’s response to the Tiananmen Square massacre, the wave of diaspora out of Hong Kong that followed, his own family’s decision to stay, his memories of the handover in 1997 when he was ten years old, learning “one country, two systems” in elementary school and then studying basic law at university. By 2014, at the time of the Umbrella Movement, he was twenty-seven.

Chan thus belongs to a generation that has at least a nascent memory of colonial rule and an awareness of the transitional period, while also being sympathetic to the idealism of the younger generation, born after 1997, who in 2019 made up a significant demographic of protestors and student leaders and who honed an emerging and singular sense of what it means to be a Hong Konger. In *Yellowing*, Chan follows a group of protestors and friends in the Umbrella Movement. An attention to minor histories and to strategies of looking not at the events themselves but at their aftermaths, with an attention focused not on the leaders or the front liners but on various people on the margins of the page of history, is at the core of Chan Tze-woon’s storytelling.

He first raises the question of what Hong Kong means to its people in *Yellowing*. “Many say that Hong Kong is a floating city,” a voice-over in *Yellowing* begins, against a shot of Hong Kong from the perspective of a ferry gliding along the harbor. “Many of the older generation came here as refugees, treating ‘here’ merely as temporary shelter. This is the city in which I was born and bred.” This opening sequence then unravels a montage of harbor-front fireworks on October 1, National Day, along with tear gas as the city fills with explosions, smoke, and yelling; these scenes becoming increasingly indistinguishable from one another, coin-flipping between national pride and resistance.

Focusing on the stories of lesser-known activists and protesters of the Umbrella Movement, *Yellowing*

demonstrates Chan Tze-woon's interest in other ways of telling the story of social and political movements, an interest that will recur in *Blue Island*. The film ends with a friend of his, sitting in the occupation in Central, reflecting on the fear of betraying his political ideals¹⁸:

Am I afraid that I will be the same in twenty years? I don't know how I will become in twenty years, but I hope I won't become such a person. But if I really become that, hit me hard and wake me up. So your film will become very important evidence to show me how I had been twenty years ago.

This last scene is particularly telling. It foreshadows Chan's enduring interest as a storyteller in illustrating the complexity of Hong Kong history across generations, ideological rule, and energies of resistance that endure over periods of societal shift. In a critical foreshadowing of future events, another friend of his reflects, "We are young, we need to fight on." The events of 2019 pick up from these earlier unresolved energies and become a driving force in *Blue Island*.

It is important to note that *Blue Island*—released at a time when many filmmakers are working anonymously, have self-exiled to other countries, or have stayed in Hong Kong with the risk of being rearrested—has been released under Chan Tze-woon's actual name, and that he continues to live in Hong Kong. In the opening of the film, an intertitle appears stating that the film was made possible through the support of 2,645 anonymous backers. Many of the names in the final credits of the film either are listed anonymously or are pseudonyms, and some names are even obscured with bars, denoting those who have been imprisoned.

These hostile conditions have legacies. Hong Kong for much of the twentieth century was the first port of asylum for many. Chan's method of storytelling often brings paradoxes and contrasts to the surface, leaving tensions between pairs of elements, counting on the viewer to thread the difference. This method places puncta throughout the film, wherein he contrasts two opposing events and draws connections between them: mainlanders fleeing to Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution, Hong Kongers contemplating fleeing Hong Kong today; the Tiananmen Square massacre and the 2019 protests in Hong Kong; the 1967 riots and the 2019 protests.

Blue Island, shot beginning in 2018 and continuing over a five-year period, takes a hybrid approach to documentary, making use of Brechtian interruptions to stage tense dialogues that transcend the format of a reenactment.

Grander in scale, more poetic and ambitious than Chan's debut work, *Blue Island* begins with a shot of dense apartment blocks in Kowloon at night, animated by the sound of protest chants. These Cantonese slogans echo throughout the concrete apartment blocks filled with hundreds of units; in some shots, in the distance, there is the backdrop of the more globally iconic skyline. This montage then cuts to a distant shot of a prison, illuminated in the dark against a cliff face: the Hong Kong viewer can deduce that this is Stanley Prison in Aberdeen, where many political prisoners are kept.

An intertitle provides a context for the 2019 anti-extradition-bill protests and the national security law of 2020, stating that "among those affected were individuals documented in this film," an opening remarkably different in form from that of *Yellowing*. This time, Chan does not focus on bodies on the street in protest, like so many of the political documentaries at the time, but rather is interested in the aftermath of historical events and in how individuals, caught in the fold of upheaval, survive these paradigmatic shifts. The narrative technique of *Blue Island* weaves a radical historiography, animating and unsettling how one understands the key events in Hong Kong over the past sixty years. Chan Tze-woon tells the story of a political crackdown on Hong Kong, viewing the force of time as tragically elliptical.

In these phantasmic returns to a near as well as a more distant past, Chan employs reenactments to stage accounts of events, conscripting nonactors—many of them the student activists of other eras who were themselves involved in the movements of their time—to play the figures in these scenes.

In the first of these vignettes, opening on a night scene in 1973, two refugees, a woman and a man, escape through



A reenactment of two refugees preparing to swim to Hong Kong, in *Blue Island*.

the wilderness of southern Guangdong. They are heading for Hong Kong. As they reach the sea, glittering in the moonlight, a light tower in the distance shines as a beacon in the dark. Tied to each other by a rope, with the woman wearing a flotation vest as well, they swim toward Hong Kong in the dark. The waves get louder, they submerge, and suddenly the film cuts abruptly to daylight: an elderly swimmer with goggles in the harbor of Hong Kong, swimming alongside ships in the harbor, does a series of freestyle, breaststroke, and butterfly strokes across the glittering ocean in the sun. “The agony he endured recurs from generation to generation,” reflect two students, who perform in the reenactment sequence but now speak as themselves, out of character, looking at the water. They speak again: “Now that Hong Kong has come to this, have you ever thought of leaving?”

As the man emerges from the water, he is introduced as Chan Hak-chi, who “fled the Cultural Revolution in 1973.” Next Anson Sham, born 1997 in Hong Kong, and Siu Ying, born in 1999 on the mainland, are introduced as students who were themselves involved in the 2019 movement, although the audience is not told to what extent. Cutting in and out of the present day and reenactments, with voice-over of the students in conversation in the present and the staging of historical events, Chan Tze-woon begins to blur the timelines as he brings the audience “backstage” to share the process by which he prepares each person to participate in the documentary reenactment. Anson Sham reveals that his father escaped to Hong Kong in the 1970s. Siu Ying was born on the mainland, but her grandfather fled to Hong Kong, and after a lengthy process of applications he was able to get Siu Ying and the rest of her family to join him.

The clapping of a film slate introduces the next reenactment: a restaged Communist assembly in the countryside in the 1970s, proselytizing the teachings of Mao. “Long live Chairman Mao! Hurrah!” With fists in the air, the crowd’s chants echo back at the speaker, who has the famous “Little Red Book” in his hand. The film cuts to Chan Hak-chi, the swimmer, among the reenactment’s crowd.

Anson Sham asks him, “Was the mood like this back then?” Smiling slightly, the present-day Chan Hak-chi responds, “No, not so fervent,” and discusses the strategy of forced labor and reeducation camps during the Cultural Revolution. Anson Sham then asks, “What did you think Hong Kong was like?” Chan Hak-chi responds, “I thought Hong Kong was a free place.” Chan and his wife are then seen participating in the protests, holding hands and wearing black shirts. A montage of actors running through the mountainous region of southern Guangdong is intercut

with shots of protesters running through the urban streets of Hong Kong.

As a channel promising freedom, a port of asylum, Hong Kong offered escape but also swallowed people whole. Chan Hak-chi next takes a ferry to an outer island for a memorial. Someone reads from a poem: “Anchors lifted, family forsaken. Never heard of again, grief surges endlessly. A slab stands today, mourning far and wide. . . . Blessed was Hong Kong, marvel no more.” Another voice chimes in: “Lost souls of the sea, our friends, can you hear us?”

As the camera pulls away, it reveals a small peninsula in the harbor, with docks and shipping containers in the background. An intertitle states: “50 years ago, 200,000 mainlanders fled to Hong Kong in the 1970s.” Adjacent to this text, another reads, “As of today, 90,000 Hong Kong residents have left the city, since the National Security came into force.”

Telling the epic tale of decades of social upheaval—not through nation-states, without elite activists as protagonists, not even through singular events, but instead through a prolonged tableau illustrating decades-long resistance, political hopes, and failures—Chan drives forward a telling of political history in *Blue Island* that is committed to the minor characters of history. Focused beyond the conspiracies, cabals, and political intrigues that often dictate the newsworthy stories of social upheaval, he is interested instead in those who survive it.

One question is in constant view throughout the film: “What does Hong Kong mean to you?” Siu Ying answers, “My sense of belonging in Hong Kong strengthened with the movement, but what I really love about this place, in the mainland I wouldn’t emphasize—sure, I’d say I’d be Chinese, but I didn’t feel a sense of belonging to the community.” Anson Sham answers, “I know Hong Kong tried its best to resist decay. But attempting to defy fate seems futile. To me, I want to help my hometown. I feel for this place and its people.” In response to whether he has thought of leaving Hong Kong, he replies, “I think Hong Kong, to me, is my family.” The students who play the subjects, the original social actors, in the reenactments take on a performance that becomes entwined with and nearly indistinguishable from how they view their own lives and city today.

Blue Island is a title that suggests Hong Kong as a port city, a metropolis that contains generations of disenchantment, disappointment, and political melancholia. It suggests that citizens of this city have been caught in the turns of successive hegemonic powers and upheaval, unable to determine their own fates. In response to each wave of change, each generation merely endures—like a relentless swimmer in a vast ocean.



Chan Hak-Chi swims in the Hong Kong harbor in *Blue Island*.

The woven vignettes in *Blue Island* make a point about the recurrence of history and raise critical questions regarding the belated ability to see events as they unfold. Reflecting on the prevalence of live-streaming the protests, and how their audience and its influence on the social movement was unique, Chan Tze-woon has remarked on how his approach with *Blue Island* was obliged to acknowledge the limits of what his camera was able to do in the face of such real-time video.¹⁹ Chan's interest, by contrast, is in the aftermath of events and of 2019, looking at what happens in the days that follow the apogee of political becoming.

The film's second vignette stages a reenactment of a family gathered around a television, watching the news of Tiananmen Square protests, interwoven with archival footage of Hong Kongers marching in protest. In Cantonese, the following chants resound: "We support the people of China"; "Long live the solidarity of all overseas Chinese across the world"; "Down with autocracy"; and "Down with Li Peng." In the streets of Hong Kong, protesters from 1989 sing the Chinese national anthem, "Braving Enemy Fire, March On!" The lyrics resound with tragic irony as the massacre of Tiananmen Square follows. Students scramble amid smoke and gunfire and the blood of their comrades.

These scenes, entwined with footage of the crackdown on the 2019 vigil for Tiananmen held in Victoria Park, in Hong Kong, introduce the next protagonists. Keith Fong Chung Yin, student representative in the 2019 protests, is

introduced while he is awaiting trial; since the film's release, he has been sentenced to nine months in jail for being seen purchasing laser pointers. Kenneth Lam, the other protagonist, is a survivor of the Tiananmen Square massacre who now works as a lawyer and advocate.

Reenacting the massacre, Keith Fong Chung Yin at first delivers a stilted monologue. Chan Tze-woon suggests that his crew show him the original video again, and coaches Keith Fong: "See if you can't project your own experiences into the character. You're not just playing a twenty-year-old Lam in the eighties. You are also playing yourself." His performance is uncanny. Later Fong, as himself, confesses: "I was always prepared to be arrested. I've been expecting it since I ran for student union." The film then cuts to Lam in his law office today; amid his pile of papers, there are pictures of 1989.

In a later scene at a party for the Federation of Students' sixtieth anniversary in a bustling banquet hall, Lam is seen among colleagues and activists. On the stage, he gives a speech, addressing the room:

When we were young we dreamt of a better world. I never expected to know the meaning of "shattered faith." Let me tell you, 1989 was such a historic movement. In its aftermath, the world plunged into deeper darkness. . . . I fell asleep and refused to wake up at the Federation of Students, because I didn't want to face reality.

Among the people to whom he speaks at the party is an individual working on the China–Hong Kong bridge, beaming with excitement over the promise of a rising GDP with infrastructure from the Belt and Road Initiative. He also speaks to others about the Occupy Central 9 case²⁰: even though they have the best lawyers for their defense, they have no strategy. “The charges they laid are carefully chosen,” he says to a group of younger individuals. “Since the nineties, we have felt like deserters. I felt I needed to take care of myself and my family first before doing what was my duty. I often felt that this was a bit lacking. So when I see you guys I feel very ashamed.”

As Kenneth Lam makes his way amid the party, a few younger faces emerge, with subtitles introducing them: Lester Shum, awaiting trial since January 2021; Leo Tang, sentenced to four months in prison in 2020; Nathan Lau, awaiting trial since January 2021; Benny Tai, of those convicted in the Occupy Central 9 case, awaiting trial since January 2021; and Au Nok-hin, awaiting trial since January 2021. Lam confesses to Tang on behalf of his generation, as theirs is fighting on the streets, “We owe you too much.” Lam’s admission is tragic, as though to suggest that his generation’s failed resistance produced the historical debt that has been deferred to the next—in this case, their grandchildren.

The presence of these intertitles and their silence, with Chan choosing not to interrupt these scenes, is haunting.

Amid the loudness in the room, the events that this scene foreshadows underline the ongoing tectonic shifts in the social and political landscape that undergirds everyone there. Dread is palpable. In a later sequence, gathering around a street corner next to a police station, they perform a ritual of burning Taoist papers for the dead in memory of Tiananmen, and a fellow survivor asks Lam, “Do you think all those people who came back from Tiananmen became lonely souls? I didn’t think so at first, but as time went by . . .” She trails off. The flames burning Taoist papers for the dead are flickering in the wind as a sequence of old photographs of Lam and his comrades in Beijing emerge, apparitions from the past of their lost political ideals.

The realities involved in sustaining and pursuing political ideals raise a set of questions that Chan Tze-woon began to consider in *Yellowing* through a conversation between a son and his parents. His parents tell him, upon learning that he is participating in the protests, “I am passionate but I also need to feed myself.” Caught between ideals and pragmatism, his father laments, “Strike is very difficult if you have to support a family. I want to participate, but I need to pay my mortgage and support my kids.” Such concerns, weighing the pragmatism of resisting, are left open-ended in *Yellowing*, but Chan returns to them again in *Blue Island*. Who can afford to live out their political ideals? And what price must they pay?



Kenneth Lam and other Tiananmen Square Massacre survivors burn Taoist paper offerings for the dead in front of a banner reading “The people will not forget,” in *Blue Island*.

Chan's method of telling history embraces a radical equanimity that resists any attempt to adjudicate one's role in it. As if to demonstrate that knowing this history without flinching from its paradoxes might be the only route to know it better, eschewing all attachments to fantasies and conventional modes of telling the past, Chan immerses the viewer in a speculative temporal stage where all his protagonists, subjects as well as actors, can reckon with the loss of others—as well as their own losses, past or present or future. As Bill Nichols has argued, documentary can offer the viewer a unique space of mourning:

The attempt to conjure that specter, to make good that loss, signals the mark of desire. What constitutes a lost object is as various as all the objects toward which desire may flow. . . . In other cases, the working-through of loss need not entail mourning; it can also[,] via what we might call the fantasmatic project, offer gratification, of a highly distinct kind.²¹

Chan Tze-woon's use of reenactment constructs a hybrid form that renders “the past to new ends,” where life and performance blur, where something else emerges.²²

The works by Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers picture a fugitivity in filmmaking that confronts the dispossession of a subject on camera in revolt.²³ In contrast to their directness, Chan Tze-woon's *Blue Island* takes a different route: a reliance on reenactment as a means of possessing the past. As Dennis Lim observes in another context, “Put another way, it is a perfect demonstration of the kinship between ghosts and movies. Premised on illusion and promising endless reanimation, cinema has been called the ghostliest of mediums. Ghosts represent unfinished business, the persistence of the past.”²⁴

While acting as Kenneth Lam, Keith Fong is still wearing the costume of banners of Tiananmen behind him. As he reflects in a conversation with Chan Tze-woon, “I think the dream of a democratic China died on the night of June 4. So what about Hong Kong? I want it to have a democratic, free—or a government that answers to Hong Kong people.” Chan asks him, “Do you think that's achievable? Will you see it in your lifetime?” Keith Fong looks off into the distance without answering.

Directing activists in constructed historical scenarios, Chan brings parallels and paradoxes to the surface, moving between political ideals and their realities. Telling such a complex history of enduring without giving in to nihilism, fatalism, or any simple reactionary conclusion, Chan attends to each event in history by weaving his way from

historical point to point in order to elucidate the tensions involved in enduring time itself.

While the first two vignettes show an enduring history of political refugees fleeing persecution from the CCP (China's Communist Party), where such comparisons between the history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are relatively compatible, the historical comparisons begin to rupture as the film slips into the highly contentious territory of its last and most dynamic story of contrasts. Drawing comparisons between the 1967 riots and the 2019 protests, *Blue Island* addresses the ideological paradoxes inherent in the history of resistance in Hong Kong over the last century.

The prevailing language that references these two events, “riots” versus “protests,” speaks to the differing opinions in popular memory about them. As historians Ray Yep and Robert Bickers point out, the use of “[t]he term, ‘riots’ (*baodong*), carries negative connotations of violence, wantonness and destruction, as it does in English. . . . The collective memory of the event as ‘riots’ reflects widespread popular contempt and condemnation of the disturbances that took place in 1967. Chinese public opinion was clearly on the side of the colonial administration in 1967” due to a campaign of bombings and fifty-one deaths.²⁵ As Ray Yep argues: “The crisis sparked by the anti-colonial riots in 1967 is arguably the most important historic episode of the colonial history of Hong Kong in the post-war era.”²⁶

Yet, despite its significance, Yep and Bickers observe that the historiography of this event is challenging, with many accounts seen as “partisan” or “journalistic.”²⁷ Moreover, “the public representation of these months of conflict is muted—there is little mention of them in the Hong Kong Museum of History, and most works on post-war history of Hong Kong allocate no more than a few pages on this subject.”²⁸ On the other hand, there was a mass concerted effort in 2019 for protestors to resist the label of riot, in the face of the term's often being used in press conferences held by Chief Executive Carrie Lam or the police, with a popular protest chant insisting “no rioters, only tyranny.”

This context of a highly contested history, only partially processed, of leftist revolt is what Chan Tze-woon invokes by pairing the two activists: Raymond Young, a leftist activist who was charged with subversion for publishing an anti-colonial bulletin in the 1960s, is paired with Kelvin Tam Kwan Long, a 2019 protester charged with rioting. Long, facing a sentence of ten years, contemplates the time ahead of him as he sits in a cell with Young, who was jailed in the 1960s for eighteen months for writing, printing, and circulating an anticolonial bulletin. Taking in his fate, Long



A close-up shot of protestors' zip-tied hands in a 2019 mass arrest, in *Blue Island*.

focuses on the three concrete walls around him. Young understands himself as Chinese, and sees his act as righteous and nationalistic, while Long identifies as a Hong Konger and stands explicitly against the CCP. Despite their political differences, which could frame their positions as ideologically opposite, Young offers Long a perspective on what is to come, remarking:

Time is the greatest test. Time will slowly erode your ideals. Especially when you see others who were in the movement with you, they may or may not be leaders. Some will flee, some will be in power. And some will forget their aspirations and ideals. . . . Imagine what your comrades will be like forty-five years from now. In fact, most of us have been abandoned.

Young offers that they are both the “abandoned kids of the riot.” As a leftist dissident, Young is a complicated character. Since his sentence, he has become a highly successful businessman, living in a large house overlooking one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in Hong Kong, Repulse Bay. “We, the people of Hong Kong, across our 150-year history,” he asks, “have we ever been able to control our own fate? No, we have always been at the whim of fate.”

A central theme that occupies the work of Chan Tze-woon, whether *Blue Island* or *Yellowing*, is how individuals meet the fate of time, and how political ideals meet their test.

What many of the characters in these vignettes have in common is their status as survivors of significant historical events; while some may be known, others are not. Chan brings a challenge: how to grapple with historical subjects on-screen, how to account for histories of revolt outside of the West that demand an attention to the inconveniences of a narrative that encompasses plains of resistance over successive eras.

In Hong Kong, the history of even a democratic left is often made minor. Tom Cunliffe observes, “In the wake of the recent 2019 uprising and implementation of the National Security Law, the labor activist Au Loong-yu recently wrote that if there is any possibility of a democratic left in Hong Kong today, the histories of earlier waves of leftists in Hong Kong (including *The 70's Biweekly* collective) must be taken into account.”²⁹

Blue Island questions how the complicated historical process of revolt in such places as Hong Kong can be made legible—by resisting sound bites and cold-war binaries of ideology, by attempting a third way. Possibly this is a narrative that, in the words of Fadi A. Bardawil, breaks the “deadlock of having to choose between authoritarian nationalists and imperial democrats,” wherein the “long eclipsed subject and agent of emancipation—the people—[occupy] center stage again.”³⁰ Perhaps it is a narrative that recognizes how the so-called abandoned kids of the riot were also the ones who believed in the riot, as well as the protest, as ways of transforming history.

While Chan Tze-woon raises these questions about ideology in his film, it is precisely their unresolved tensions that are *Blue Island*'s strength. His method is such an interesting model for political film. In a time when so many films coming out of Hong Kong depict the protests to attempt to make their case, the work of Chan Tze-woon raises questions about what audiences should expect out of political cinema. Resisting the expectation to merely meet the audience's desire for being validated or lectured to, abstaining from any moralizing narration, Chan here attends to a more unsightly subject: tableaux of revolt, uprisings, and the messiness of political evolution. Avoiding the swell of optimism, idealism, or hope, Chan faithfully attends instead to the aftermath, even to disenchantment and disillusionment, in the wake of ongoing catastrophe and the necessary energies that sustain resistance and survival over time.

The final scenes of *Blue Island* bring the device of reenactments into the courtroom. In a doubling of time, reenacting his own appeal for the film, Eason Chung, one of the Occupy Central 9, reads his speech before his sentencing:

We refused to be subservient to provisions, to authority, and to institutions. We want to venture into an unknown world. A world where history and the present are entangled, where individual endeavors interact with unanticipated turns of events. . . . I have no need to make an appeal here today. All of us sitting here today have a responsibility to step out of this courtroom, out of the legislature, out of the media landscape to leave behind all intermediaries to get to know the world in person. To experience the world ourselves. None of this can be explained in this courtroom.

Following that speech, the final scene of *Blue Island* is silent: a montage of individuals sitting in the courtroom,



Eason Chung in a reenactment of his court sentencing, in *Blue Island*.

looking back at the camera. Intertitles appear once again, noting the individuals' professions as "activist," "community organizer," "clerk," "district counselor," "YouTuber," "deliveryman," "fitness center owner," etc., along with their sentences and charges. Some faces are recognizable; others are those of ordinary people. The sequence is a disquieting reminder of a scale that cannot be captured on film: the thousands awaiting trial, to be charged, or awaiting sentencing. The sequence is intentionally overlong, in order to impose a durational rhythm that echoes the systematic and less visible process of legal and carceral attrition that is prolonged and exhaustive.

Expanding on a notion of accented cinema, or exilic and diasporic cinema, it is not just filmmakers or artists themselves, but the works—films as vehicles for ideas and their audiences—that become exilic under hostile conditions. Given the challenge of viewing new Hong Kong cinema today, audiences can now be guided by Chan Tze-woon's *Blue Island* toward central questions of how to engage with the past. What to seek out of the past to tell the present? Are such fabulations through the moving image driven by a melancholic attachment to a former time? Is it possible to seek a past to redeem the present? Or is this a search to redeem the past? Such questions on the aftermaths of history—and their unresolved feelings and tensions—are live and ongoing, and are being taken up by a new generation of Hong Kong filmmakers today.

Amplified by its indelible imprint on global cinema, and despite its small geographic size, Hong Kong has often found itself at the nexus of global history. If one looks hard enough, one finds mention of Hong Kong in seemingly unexpected places.³¹ Even James Baldwin wrote about Hong Kong once, speaking of himself only in the plural, and with a voice seemingly out of time. His words offer a fitting epigraph:

In that darkness of rape and degradation, that fine flying froth and mist of blood, through all that terror and in all that helplessness, a living soul moved and refused to die. We really emptied oceans with a home-made spoon and tore down mountains with our hands. And if love was in Hong Kong, we learned how to swim.³²

Notes

1. Ackbar Abbas, "The New Hong Kong Cinema and the *Déjà Disparu*," *Discourse* 16, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 66.
2. Abbas, 66.

3. Daniel Chan, David Chan, Crystal Chow, and Rex Ren, "Hong Kong Free Cinema Manifesto," trans. Daniel Chan and Tom Cunliffe, *Film Quarterly*, <https://filmquarterly.org/category/quorum/>
4. Mette Hjort, "Introduction: The Film Phenomenon and How Risk Pervades It," in *Film and Risk*, ed. Mette Hjort (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 12.
5. Daniel Chan, David Chan, Crystal Chow, and Rex Ren, "Hong Kong Free Cinema Manifesto," trans. Daniel Chan and Tom Cunliffe, *Film Quarterly*, <https://filmquarterly.org/category/quorum/>
6. Kyle Buchanan and Reggie Ugwu, "How the Criterion Collection Crops Out African-American Directors," *New York Times*, August 20, 2020, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/20/movies/criterion-collection-african-americans.html.
7. Lidija Haas, "Wong Kar-wai's Masterpieces of Political Uncertainty," *New Republic*, December 2, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/160315/wong-kar-wai-masterpieces-political-uncertainty-review>.
8. Randall Halle, "History Is Not a Matter of Generations: Interview with Harun Farocki," *Camera Obscura* 16, no. 1 (46) (May 2001): 49.
9. Halle, 49.
10. Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 14.
11. Chow, 52.
12. Chow, 51–52.
13. Halle, "History Is Not a Matter of Generations," 49.
14. Quoted in Tiffany Sia, Emilie Sin Yi Choi, and Chan Tze-woon "Three Hongkongers on Making Documentary Film under the Gaze of the State," *Artnet News*, September 15, 2022, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/making-documentary-under-the-gaze-of-the-state-2176000>.
15. Stephen Teo, "Asian Cinematic Practice: Towards an Alternative Paradigm" (paper presented at the international conference organized by the Asia Research Institute [ARI] of the National University of Singapore, March, 6–7, 2007).
16. Stephen Teo, *The Asian Cinema Experience: Styles, Spaces, Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 15.
17. Sia, Sin Yi Choi, and Tze-woon Chan, "Making Documentary Film."
18. Central is the heart of the financial district in Hong Kong, where many occupations and protests took place.
19. Sia, Sin Yi Choi, and Tze-woon Chan.
20. The Occupy Central 9 refers to a court case in which nine democracy advocates were tried and convicted for their roles in the 2014 Umbrella Movement.
21. Bill Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantastic Subject," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (2008): 83.
22. Nichols, 83.
23. For more on their work, see Tiffany Sia, "Phantasms of Dissent: Hong Kong's New Documentary Vernacular," *Film Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (Summer 2022): 34–46.
24. Dennis Lim, "Rouge: Love Out of Time," June 21, 2022, Criterion Collection, www.criterion.com/current/posts/7833-rouge-love-out-of-time.
25. Robert Bickers and Ray Yep, eds., *May Days in Hong Kong: Riot and Emergency in 1967* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 3–4.
26. Ray Yep, "The 1967 Riots in Hong Kong: The Domestic and Diplomatic Fronts of the Governor," in Bickers and Yep, 21.
27. Bickers and Yep, 2.
28. Bickers and Yep, 1.
29. Tom Cunliffe, "Documenting Anti-colonial Social Movements in Early 1970s Hong Kong with 16mm," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 62, no. 2 (Winter 2023): 176.
30. Fadi A. Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), xv.
31. In Laura Poitras's film *Citizenfour* (2014), for instance, filmed five years prior to the protests of 2019 that were ignited by the extradition bill, Edward Snowden wonders aloud to his lawyer, in one uncannily prescient scene: "Is there a precedence for this: Hong Kong extraditing someone for political speech?"
32. James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," *Contributions in Black Studies* 6 (September 2008): 12. Originally written in 1964.