

HONG KONG STUDIES—Call for Papers—Documentary and Democracy (Special Issue)

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HONG KONG STUDIES—Call for Papers—Documentary and Democracy (Special Issue)

Guest Editors: Mike Ingham and Kenny K.K. Ng (with a special preface by Evans Chan)

Much of the engagement in independent documentary cinema by filmmakers of the last thirty years in Hong Kong has been connected with the city's ongoing, and regularly frustrated, engagement with democratic reform. It has charted, and in many ways reflected, the vicissitudes of attempts to create a valid sociopolitical identity among Hong Kong's diverse, often divided communities. Earlier Hong Kong documentary film in the 20th century had tended to be China-oriented, (e.g. the films of Shanghai-born Lai Man-wai) or intended to emphasise cooperation as well as mutual dependency, e.g. *Water Comes over the Hills from the East*, Lo Kwun-hung, 1965). In contrast, Government Information Service short films and promotional propaganda documentaries produced by the colonial-era Film Unit were standard fare, promoting a supposedly apolitical, but clearly paternalistic approach, until the emergence of RTHK as a government-sponsored, if notionally independent, broadcaster in the early 1970s. The broadcaster's subsequent spate of television documentaries sought, often very successfully, to cover important livelihood issues in the city, as well as gauge and reflect public opinion on a range of sociopolitical topics. Its contribution to public discourses during the momentous, but economically prosperous, years following the Joint Agreement of 1984 between China and the U.K. and the 1997 Handover was highly significant.

Independent documentary filmmaking, typically related to the city and its identity, developed in the latter decades in conjunction with the city's 'new wave' of filmmakers. During the first decade of the 21st century the rapid rise of independent documentaries in and about Hong Kong, as the city became a focus of international concern, tended to eclipse increasingly constrained public service broadcasting. Observational fly-on-the-wall documentarians, notably Tammy Cheung (Cheung Hung), and the prolific essayist filmmaker, Evans Chan, explored specific contemporary Hong Kong issues, and Chan and Louisa Wei also undertook more historical projects with local or regional connections, deploying creatively independent

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methods and approaches. Tammy Cheung and Augustine Lam's documentaries recorded the aspirations of Hong Kong people for genuine universal suffrage and representation, as promised under the city's Basic Law, while Anson Mak's more personal documentary-making projected a deconstructive and emphatically localist sensibility. Overall, this independent strand of filmmaking assumed greater importance, as issues of censorship and self-censorship began to impinge on local television documentary-making. In addition the trend for Hong Kong cinema since the millennium toward ever-closer co-production with mainland film companies seems to have transformed, but not curtailed, home-grown autonomous documentary-making.

Indeed, in the second tumultuous decade of the century independent documentary production, often on a modest scale and budget, has demonstrated surprising resilience. Some of the more established documentarians, such as Evans Chan (*Raise the Umbrellas* (2016) and *We Have Boots*, 2019), have continued to document the city's anti-paternalist struggles, while the Visible Record company run by Tammy Cheung and Augustine Lam has provided a platform for up-and-coming documentarians by running the Hong Kong International Documentary Festival on an annual basis up until 2019. At the same time, a new generation of younger indigenous, activist filmmakers, including Freddie Ho-lun Chan (*Good Luck Comrades*; *Loft in the Air*; *The Way of Paddy*; *Open Road After Harvest*—the latter two, so-called eco-docs) and Chan Tsz-woon (*The Aqueous Truth*; *Yellowing*) and Nora Tze-wing Lam (*Midnight in Mongkok*; *Lost in the Fumes*) deal with a range of issues surrounding community, locale, cultural politics and the politics of space. Newer documentaries, such as *If We Burn* by James Leong and Lynn Lee, offer inside views of the 2019 protests, and have begun to circulate at documentary festivals worldwide; local screening of such controversial films in public venues has become risky or impossible, and Hong Kong's recently imposed national security law has merely formalised already existing de facto restrictions on the city's dissident cinema—as the independent documentary genre tends to be characterised.

Together with other urban resistance groups documenting the defence of Queens Pier and Choi Yuen Village, and the origins and events of the 2014 Umbrella/Occupy Movement, this newer generation has shifted the focus of independent documentary filmmaking toward more local activist intervention. This shift seems to reflect a transition in documentary practices away from supposedly neutral, or at least dialectical, positions and transnational or regional perspectives toward a more localist, communitarian consciousness and resistance against would-be cultural assimilation. A fresh focus on local Cantonese language and culture is exemplified by two significant documentaries on Cantonese opera practices, *My Way* (2011) and *Bamboo Theatre* (2019), both directed by Cheuk Cheung. As the attitudes of the authorities in Hong Kong toward autonomous rights and genuine civic engagement and representation have hardened considerably, the approach adopted by newer documentarians is arguably more grass-roots. In some respects, it represents a return to the earlier model of independent small-scale collectives of the 1980s and '90s, as in *Videopower* (founded by Jimmy Choi) and *Ying e Chi* (founded by Vincent Chui), or individuals. After all, documentary

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cinema and video production has never been remotely mainstream in Hong Kong, or anywhere else, come to that. Perhaps this marginal role has helped it to retain its aura of authenticity, and is the reason we should value and nurture it. As Michael Chanan put it in his essay 'Filming the Invisible' in *Rethinking the Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices* (2008):

/// [...] documentary has a power, if not directly to reveal the invisible, nonetheless to speak of things that orthodoxy and conservatism, power and authority, would rather we didn't know and didn't think about. And this is exactly why we need it. ///

Considering the historical setbacks for Hong Kong's democratic reform, we consider democracy not merely as the manifestations of social movements, popular elections or democratisation in the political infrastructure. We conceive a democratic society largely as multiple public spheres that allow people to share in the life of their community, where they can exercise self-governance and group participation with mutual respect and caring for human cultures, natural lives, and our lived environment. How do documentaries engage people with a variety of social actions for cultural heritage, citizen rights and civic responsibilities, disability rights, animal rights, environmental justice, social justice for underprivileged groups, individual freedom, and communitarian fellowship? When full democratic participation is not even discussable in our malfunctioning political system, how can documentarians make the voices of the underrepresented heard and convey alternative stories of individual thinking and lifestyles to counter the dominant discourses of (post-)colonialism, authoritarianism, savage capitalism, and globalisation?

This Hong Kong Studies special issue calls for articles that examine any aspect of the intersection of Hong Kong documentary film/video and the topic of democracy in a broad sense. We welcome a wide spectrum of topics that address the intellectual legacy, aesthetic sensibility, formal/technological innovation, grass-roots empowerment, or sociopolitical function of Hong Kong documentaries, as well as foreign cases with comparative insights on documentary and democracy. Contributions of papers are invited for this Hong Kong Studies special issue on any aspect of the intersection of Hong Kong documentary film video and the topic of democracy in its broadest sense.

GUIDELINES

Research articles in English should be no longer than 6,000 words (including footnotes but excluding references). Research articles in traditional Chinese should be no longer than 8,000 words.

Scholarly reviews (books, films, performances) should be between 1,200 and 2,000 words; please first discuss suitability with the editors.

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Submissions in Microsoft WORD should be sent to hongkongstudies@cuhk.edu.hk before **31 December 2020** for consideration. Please prepare your manuscript according to our style sheet, available here (<https://goo.gl/UyLM8A>) or under the 'For Authors' tab on our website. Please remember to provide a short biographical note of no more than 50 words in a separate WORD document. Submissions will be double-blind reviewed.

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