

Changes Manifest: Time, Memory, and a Changing Hong Kong

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Abstract

Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* (2011), the story of a caretaker's relationship to her middle class employers, in the director's hands, becomes an allegory for a changing society. Hong Kong, fifteen years after the return to the mainland, continues to have an uneasy relationship with increasing political and cultural Sino-centrism; a dis-ease which is manifest in the ageing character Ah-Tao, a figure whose struggles to preserve a localized Hong Kong culture are compounded by a stroke. Contrasting Ah Tao is the figure of Roger, played by Hong Kong cinema stalwart Andy Lau, whose job as a film producer, requires him to accept and accede to the demands of mainland financiers. Through Hui's mise-en-scene the director questions the cost of such acquiescence and regularly reminds the viewers, through the use of subtle inside jokes, humour and sundry cultural texts, of the former importance of Hong Kong local cinema and of its recent decline in autonomy. This paper examines the film as an allegory of change, anxiety and rupture to both Hong Kong and the contemporary Hong Kong film industry, contrasting the work to the director's pre-handover texts.

Keywords: Hong Kong, nationalism, transnationalism, localism, peripheralization

Ann Hui's film *A Simple Life*, (2011), is ostensibly a story of the exchange of roles between an aging caretaker and her long-time client. When Ah Tao, a maid who has worked for a family for sixty years suffers a stroke, it becomes the responsibility of her client to take care of her in her old age. But the film can also be seen as an allegory for post-handover Hong Kong, and provides Hui's reflections on the state of Hong Kong a decade after the handover of 1997. Hui, a woman in the male dominated Hong Kong Film industry, creates out of the character of Ah Tao a symbolic representation of her own circumstances as a director finding herself peripheralized by an industry with increased ties and strictures imposed by the mainland. Hui's voice as a filmmaker arises within the action of the film where the narrative events can be seen as allegorical of a once dominant film industry increasingly merged with or marginalized within the new Mainland controlled industry, and of her own unwilling move to the periphery of Chinese language cinema. Pre-handover films such as those made by Wong Kar-Wai reflected fantasies and anxieties of what the future re-integration with the mainland might hold. Kay Li discusses contemporary Hong Kong theatre and describes post hand-over theatre as a medium which "captures the city's response to the challenges of globalization through presenting global connectivity, by which I mean the different ways Hong Kong relates through its economy, people and culture to the world" (Li, 2007: 441). Indeed, Li makes connections between the circumstances of Hong Kong's re-incorporation to the mainland and the narrative content of theatre as allegorical of Hong Kong's post hand-over anxiety. "Hong Kong's relationship to globalization goes beyond global economic connections. Globalism intersects with the ultralocal, the national, and the (transnational) Chinese; the city's position is changing in the international framework, particularly because of the handover in 1997, or the resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong by the people's Republic of China" (441). Brian Hu, using Ackbar Abbas as an illustrative example, describes Abbas and others' approach to Hong Kong cinema as "a product of the island's postcolonial situation, and the ways in which culturally and politically, the 1997 handover to China affects its inhabitants and manifests itself in local film aesthetics" (Hu 2006, 407). Wong Kar-Wai's films tended to include allusions to deadlines as clocks, counting down minutes towards an uncertain future, or towards imagined catastrophic events. Hui, by comparison, deals with the realities of Hong Kong more than a decade after the handover of 1997. Patricia Erens makes a case for reading Hui's films as a site of contemplation of her role in the film industry and in the larger Hong Kong society in the main. Erens, writing on *Song of the Exile*, posits "Hui's work can be divided into three categories, although the boundaries are never as distinct as I am suggesting: genre films typical of the Hong Kong film industry; political dramas; and personal works" (Erens, 2000, 43). When writing about *Song of the Exile*, Erens describes the film as explicitly invested in the Hong Kong handover, stating:

The film sheds light on how the events surrounding the 1997 return of Hong Kong to mainland China served as a structuring subtext in a good deal of Hong Kong cinema. These events pervaded Hong Kong films, manifesting as a generalized sense of anxiety and ambivalence, and playing themselves out indirectly around issues of personal and cultural identity, beginning in the late 1980s" (2000: 44).

Such anxieties and ambivalences are similarly present in Hui's *A Simple Life* which expresses the director's frustrations with how the decline of the industry took its toll on her career as a filmmaker. As an already peripheralized member of the industry, Hui found her career moved even further into the margins after the handover, which resulted in the decline of the Hong Kong film industry as cinema production increasingly became consolidated with that of Beijing and with the ideologies of Mainland culture. Her peripheralization within the film industry, as well as that of her contemporaries, is the subtext of much of the humor of the film. The overall

tone of *A Simple Life*, as it in turns moves from touching to bitingly funny, directly contrasts much of Wong's earlier anxious, brooding pre-handover films. Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* is an observation of the consequences of the handover within the industry. Wong Kar-wai focused on dwelling upon the worst-case scenarios, whereas Hui's post-handover film discusses a reality that, while by no means ideal, is not nearly as traumatic as outlined in *Chungking Express* and *2046*.

Much of Wong Kar-wai's celebrated career as a filmmaker spans the period just prior to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong, and he, like many of his contemporaries, experienced a great deal of anxiety about what the handover would mean for Hong Kong and its film industry. Li reports:

Hong Kong's position after the 1997 handover was clearly defined in the official discourse between two sovereign nations – the United Kingdom and the People's Republic of China – symbolized by the ceremony that took place at midnight on 1 July 1997. This event was highlighted by the lowering of the British flag and the hoisting of two flags: a large one of the People's Republic of China and a smaller one of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. (Li, 2007, 442)

Li argues that many texts in the handover period are a manifestation of the 'fantasies, dreams, and anxieties' (442) of the population, stating "After the handover, people tried to work out their identity in relation to the rapid development of interconnections between the city and the motherland on the one hand, and the ever increasing integration of Hong Kong into the world community on the other" (441-442), Li concludes, arguing that Hong Kong theatre, drawing on daily life and the cultural milieu, was performed for ordinary people and therefore "reflected the fantasies, dreams and anxieties of the latter and wrestled with the issues of the handover in the imaginary space of the stage" (Li, 443). This anxiety is frequently exhibited within the discourse of the films of Wong Kar-wai in the film *Chungking Express*. The film is divided into two sections where a few days in the lives of two police officers are shown. The first story involves a detective who is looking for drugs traffickers and the second involves a local beat cop who patrols the streets of a small urban neighbourhood. Wong expresses post-handover anxiety through the use of language in the two parts of the film. In the first story, the first protagonist He Qiwu, who is also known throughout the film simply as Cop 223, speaks Mandarin and is played by the actor Takeshi Kaneshiro, an actor of Japanese birth and heritage but who was raised in Taiwan. The character of Cop 223, as it quickly becomes apparent, speaks several languages and switches between them with ease as he linguistically navigates the streets of the diverse and global city of Hong Kong. Cop 223 then becomes a symbol for the global aspect of the city of Hong Kong, representing much of what makes it unique; a globalized identity dependent on international commodity exchange and a city rich in polyphonic discourse. However, despite He Qiwu's apparent preference for Mandarin (the narration is spoken in that dialect), the dialogue of the film is spoken almost entirely in Cantonese. Further, the character also uses Japanese and English to interact with the various immigrant communities of his territory. The first section of the film constructs Hong Kong as a culturally rich and linguistically diverse society. However, in the second story told in the film, which follows the life of a local beat cop, it becomes clear that Wong is concerned with also carving out a specifically Cantonese identity within Hong Kong; the same Cantonese identity that Ann Hui shows being lost with Ah Tao's death in her 2011 film 'A Simple Life'. The films' concerns are both equally about the global and the local identities. Li points out that "...Chinese identities also became salient issues accentuated by the handover" (Li, 442); after the change in ownership, and the influx of different people at different times during

China's turbulent history, Hong Kong had created a unique identity for itself that it was not eager to let go of in favour of some unfamiliar, unified greater Chinese identity after the handover.

In the second part of *Chungking Express* there is also a specific focus on the desire to leave Hong Kong- to go to the West, or to simply become a part of the global community. Cop 663, the second lovelorn police officer of the film, meets an airline attendant while on a flight to an unknown location, and begins a relationship with her. The woman who becomes obsessed with him, Faye, who talks incessantly about leaving for California, sabotages any hope for the renewal of that relationship by breaking and entering into Cop 663's apartment and, in between putting sleeping pills in his water, replacing his curtains, and vacuuming his sheets, deletes the messages the airline attendant leaves for him, effectively cutting off his metaphorical connection to the outside world. Faye then substitutes that connection with herself, by leaving and coming back as an airline attendant herself. The film ends somewhat ambiguously, with Faye offering Cop 663 a boarding pass to a flight, although audiences do not know to where, and it is unclear as to whether or not he accepts the offer or not. This can be seen to reflect Hong Kong's desires to remain a part of a global economy after it is rejoined with the somewhat isolationist China, and the fear of what the implications of rejoining the country will mean for the future of Hong Kong itself. Wong expresses the anxiety that the handover will result in an elimination of the diversity of Hong Kong, ironing out indigenous Cantonese identities and restricting access to the global market.

Wong Kar-wai's film *2046* also deals heavily in these concerns of the global and the local. *2046*, although made in 2004 and therefore containing a post-handover perspective, is a film about memory. More accurately, it is a film that explores the consequences of what happens after memory fails. The opening sequence specifically discusses secrets, and the narrator tells of a method for keeping secrets. He claims that carving a hole in a tree and whispering your secrets into it will ensure that the secret is kept, a sentiment which similarly appears in Wong's earlier film *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and which echoes *Chungking Expresses'* first cop 223's declaration that he hopes that if memories must have an expiry date, that it would be only after a million years. The three films all echo the same fears that the Hong Kong identity is one that is destined to be forgotten, and the films become an attempt to preserve a specific culture and context – a cultural autonomy which is feared to be consigned to the past unless preserved through filmic devices. The film *2046* has an ephemeral feel to it, with a transient narrator and mysterious, hazily realized characters who travel into and out of the narrative and are forgotten and remembered randomly. The narrator, Chow Mo-wan, spends much of the action of the film being a self-described expert with women, declaring at one point that there were "lots of one night stands... nothing lasts forever" (Wong, '2046'). This sentiment of ephemerality seems to be the underlying theme of the entire film; Wong Kar-wai's anxieties about the future of Hong Kong just a few short years after the handover are transferred onto the text of a film that takes place in the 1960s- a major turning point in the economical and cultural history of Hong Kong, just as the 1997 handover was expected to be. While the focus of *Chungking Express* explored anxieties regarding the consequences of actual economical and cultural changes, *2046* deals with the fear that, eventually, not only will these changes occur, but that people will begin to forget that things had ever been any other way. Hong Kong's Cantonese culture will become, in a sense, a secret, whispered into a hole somewhere and forgotten about. Within the gaze of the film *2046*, the loss of Hong Kong's Cantonese identity and status in the global market was and would be one thing; the imminent loss of memories about the time of Hong Kong's separation from China would be another disaster entirely. Chow Mo-wan's novel, also entitled '2046', is about a train that takes its passengers

to a place where they can access lost memories, and Wong uses films as his own train to the potential lost memories of Hong Kong. The film becomes Wong's way of ensuring that, should the fears about the future of Hong Kong come to pass, at least there will be some vessel through which memories of post-1997 Hong Kong can be accessed.

If Wong Kar-wai was a filmmaker dealing with anxieties regarding what might happen after the 1997 handover and the vague 'what-ifs' of Hong Kong's future, Ann Hui is working with and around reality, and the actual, present-day consequences post-1997. In *A Simple Life*, made in 2011 and intended to be her final work, Hui creates an avatar for herself in the character of Ah Tao, played by Deanie Ip. The film introduces Ah Tao during a sequence in a marketplace. She is portrayed as very picky about both quality and price of the ingredients, and has a rather lightly intentioned and yet somewhat cruel trick played on her by some young men who work behind one of the stalls. It is clear that Ah Tao is something of a pain to these men; she picks and chooses the best products and demands appropriate prices, and as a result becomes the butt of a joke constructed by the men who are 'in charge' of the marketplace environment. The men, seeing her coming, turn down the temperature in the walk-in refrigerator, knowing that her fussy nature will ensure she is in the fridge for longer than they wish as she picks through the frozen product. When Ah Tao goes into the cooler, she comments that it feels much colder than usual. This scene, then becomes representative of Ann Hui's own experience with the men of the integrated Beijing/Hong Kong film industry, an industry from which she was being 'frozen out'. There is a suggestion that, as Hui demands a certain level of quality in both her own work and in that of her colleagues, she can expect to find herself further peripheralized and mocked by the men in the marketplace – film financiers who are looking for commercial entertainment – just as Ah Tao should expect to be pranked for her finicky nature. The point that this joke occurs on the same day that Ah Tao has her stroke also hints that, perhaps, it is the thoughtlessness of these men that leads to her eventual death. The severity of the consequences of their actions are unexpected and unintentional, but still quite significant, for both Ah Tao and Ann Hui, who had begun to find the film industry increasingly hostile to her form of autobiographic and personal film making.

The scene can be read as a somewhat biting commentary on the state of the Hong Kong film industry and Hui's own treatment within it. As Hong Kong cinema was absorbed by the film industry of Mainland China and cities such as Beijing and Shanghai became major centers of film production in China, Hong Kong cinema slowly became a more and more peripheralized site within the industry, where it had once been a central point of innovation and a focal point of Chinese language film. It is something of a joke that, within the film, most of the 'down and out' residents at the old folks' home Ah Tao resides in are actors, producers, and directors from the golden age of the Hong Kong film industry, most of whom had experienced their golden years of filmmaking in the 1980s and 1990s. One character in particular, Uncle Kin, is played by Paul Chun, a well known actor and director who made most of his movies during the previous era. Kin is an unusual character and he seems to be constantly asking Ah Tao and Roger for money. He claims it is because of his health problems, but the audience quickly realize that, really, it is because he wants to seek the companionship of prostitutes. Roger, upon finding out about Uncle Kin's habit, attempts to chastise him for asking for money yet again, but is admonished by Ah Tao who tells Roger to let Kin do what he wants while he still can. It is a sobering sentiment that serves as a rare reminder to the audience of the true end and purpose of the film- Ah Tao's death, which could easily have been ignored for much of the film. The statement that Uncle Kin should be permitted to do what he likes suggests that, while the group of people the character of Uncle Kin represents have made considerably less films recently, they should be permitted to continue doing what they like with their careers, though

the newer, younger generation of filmmakers and audiences centered around mainland culture may not appreciate, or even approve. The film suggests that there is room in Hong Kong for both commercial and artistic film industries. While the peripheralization of the Hong Kong independent film industry after that period had negative influences on most all filmmakers in Hong Kong, it took a particular toll on women such as Ann Hui. In Lisa E. Bloom's article on Asian women artists she points out that "Even [a] period of affluence... has not made it easier for Asian women artists to establish careers for themselves on the same footing as their male counterparts. The more inflated the prices for art, the lower the proportion of commercially successful artists who are women" (Bloom, 2003:14). Even in the golden years of Hong Kong cinema Ann Hui was, undeservedly, one of the least acknowledged filmmakers. Erens refers to Hui as a 'New Wave' filmmaker within Hong Kong, and claims that she produces three main types of films: drama, political, and personal. Of course her films often combine two or even all three of these types, as 'A Simple Life' does, but politics, particularly gender and age politics, are certainly prevalent, and in these contexts the political becomes very personal to such artists. Erens claims that Hui tended to produce art films; not quite the action and entertainment movies that were popular in the mainstream. While the types of films Hui produced certainly had no small part to play in her marginalization within the industry, one need only to try and find other examples of female filmmakers before recognizing that gender politics were, and still are, a clear issue.

As the Hong Kong film industry declined, then, so did Hui's career. The industry's continued focus on entertainment values left little room for the types of films Hui was making. As Erens points out, "...each [of Hui's genre films] creates a twist on the genre and several have strong political overtones" (Erens, 43). This penchant for combining the personal with the political so explicitly in her work aligns Hui with many contemporary feminist artists. Just as female artists are less commercially successful and peripheralized in the world of art, Ann Hui experiences the same kind of peripheralization within the Hong Kong film industry. The decrease in popularity and size of the industry in Hong Kong has led to its return to more chauvinistic values and the decline of Hui's career. There is a scene at the premier of the movie that Roger, Ah Tao's client-turned-caretaker, has produced, which contains a sequence that becomes a perfect vessel for the notion that Hui's colleagues can no longer 'speak her language'; when Ah Tao turns to a gentleman sitting nearby- who turns out to be a producer from Mainland China- and requests that he not smoke as it is bad for health, he reveals that he cannot speak Cantonese and Ah Tao must get her point across with crude sign language, pantomiming tobacco's effect. Hui, then, becomes that nagging old woman whom nobody can understand; she insists upon making art films that don't sell and aren't popular, but refuses to adapt to, as Hui sees it, lesser standards of filmmaking. The only way she can get her point across to her audience is by resorting to a far more crude form of communication, like Ah Tao's gestures. Just as Ah Tao does not really belong at that film premiere, and is only permitted because of the indulgence and kindness of her client, Ann Hui has been told she does not belong to the commercial film industry. The chauvinistic film industry of this newly handed over Hong Kong has told her that her correct place is sitting quietly in the margins, or else not making films at all.

It is, of course, no accident that the film meant to mark the death of Ann Hui's filmmaking career is in fact a film about death. Ah Tao finds herself at the end of her life just as Ann Hui has come to the conclusion that she has reached the end of her career; however Ah Tao's death marks more than just Hui's personal retirement. It also marks the death of the Hong Kong film industry as it had been known by Hui and her comrades in the 1980s and 1990s. When Ah Tao has her first stroke, there seems to be a handover of caretaking responsibility; this is read quite

clearly as symbolic not only of the political handover of Hong Kong in 1997, but of Hui's handover of the film industry to the men in the industry who were making all those action and entertainment films. Sick and unable to care for herself, Ah Tao relinquishes her duties as Roger's caretaker. Ah Tao no longer takes care of Roger; she will no longer buy the high quality fresh seafood and prepare lavish, artistic meals for him. Instead Roger, who, in a stroke of ironic humor not uncommon within the film, literally produces populist films that are described in the film itself as being bad – as being so boring that they put Ah Tao to sleep and cause audience members to leave the premier – must take over for both himself and Ah Tao. The audience of *A Simple Life* are encouraged to show concern with regards to Roger's domestic competence, particularly when it is revealed that he would have found it too difficult to even take care of Ah Tao's cat after she is placed in the residency. It is clearly meant to be at least mildly concerning that this is the character meant to represent the new leaders and caretakers of Hong Kong cinema. Ah Tao's death also indicates something that Wong Kar-wai's films were similarly concerned with; a loss of Cantonese culture and identity as expressed through death and dispersal.

Food is one of the most important signifiers of Cantonese culture within the film, as throughout the film Ah Tao's cooking had been Roger's one expensive indulgence. Everything else Roger consumes is bare and cheap. He wears old clothes and is often mistaken for a taxi driver or mechanic. His apartment is sparse and functional. However, the food that Ah Tao prepares for him is lavish and sumptuous, and his meals consist of braised ox tongue, pan fried crabs, and steamed turbot. These meals are also a facet of Cantonese culture and a marker of the 'old' Hong Kong that, with Ah Tao's retirement and eventual death, seems to disappear from Roger's life entirely. Hard as Ah Tao tries to find a replacement for herself to begin to work for Roger, none of the young caretakers she interviews have even the slightest interest in preparing the lavish meals to which Roger had grown accustomed or caring for him in the same way that Ah Tao had for his entire life. One potential replacement caretaker refuses to do certain tasks, another has no idea how to 'properly' make rice, and another even gets very angry that Ah Tao would suggest or expect her to be able to perform the tasks she herself has been doing for over sixty years. This sequence serves as commentary on the lack of care this newer generation of filmmakers seems to take in what Hui perceives as quality; and the handover of control of the industry marks the end of that quality. Even the location where the interview takes place, a rather dingy looking diner where Ah Tao and Roger had had a disappointing meal with a rude server only several scenes before, shows a lack of care for tradition. This trend continues as Ah Tao's health declines. The last thing the audience sees Roger eating after Ah Tao's final stroke, is a truly pathetic looking cup of noodles, presumably from a vending machine or a cheap takeaway shop. It is a rather long take, particularly since it really only consists of Andy Lau as Roger, looking despondent while sitting in an uncomfortable-looking hospital chair, eating his disappointing instant noodles. This sequence, completely unnecessary as far as the plot is concerned, serves to symbolize the end of an era, both for Roger personally and for Hong Kong in its entirety.

While the films of Wong Kar-wai, as well as Wong Kar-wai himself, seem to be dealing with pre-handover anxiety about what might become of Hong Kong and with remembering the Cantonese identity that he is so eager to carve out within his films, Ann Hui's films, in particular *A Simple Life*, are dealing with the reality of the situation after the handover has already happened and commenting on its influence within the film industry. As an already marginalized member of an industry ruled and populated mostly by men, by 2011 Hui had become a largely ignored party in the increasingly chauvinistic 'boys' club' of the declining Hong Kong film industry. The character of Ah Tao becomes a vessel for Hui's frustration with

her professional situation when viewed in the context of Hui's struggle with being pushed to the margins of Chinese cinema and having her art films deemed less appealing than the less refined action films of her male counterparts. While, ironically, this would be the film that would rejuvenate Hui's career and cause her to agree to take on other projects, the storyline of the main character Ah Tao was meant to end with a metaphysical death; of the character of Ah Tao and of Ann Hui's career within the Hong Kong film industry

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