



A HAUNTING PRESENCE : LET'S LOVE LET'S LOVE HONG KONG

CHRIS BERRY

A ghost is usually thought of as a shadow from the past, something cold, clammy, and dead that won't let go. But for those who have problems finding themselves in this world, ghostliness holds out the promise of another. Maybe this explains the peculiar and pleurably perverse popularity of ghosts in queer culture. Where others scream with fear, do we scream with hope? Is this true despite or even because of the long use of monstrosity as a metaphor to demonize and disparage queer people? Vampire movies are coded warnings against the dangers of forbidden sexual pleasures that, even before the popularity of lesbian vampires, were clearly queer — Count Dracula himself is an effete and apparently menstrual man who needs fresh blood with the full moon. But at least since Harry Krumel's 1971 camp classic, *Daughters of Darkness*, queer audiences have been lapping up the message that once bitten, never shy again.

Unlike her previous film *I'm Starving*, which depicts the relationship between an African-American woman and a Chinese ghost in New York, Yau Ching's feature film *Ho Yuk – Let's Love Hong Kong* is not explicitly a ghost story. But somehow, for me at least, both the characters and the film itself exude a haunting presence in Hong Kong that is at once charming, funny, poignant, sad, and exciting. Both *Ho Yuk – Let's Love Hong Kong* and its characters demand to be cherished, for only with loving support can we hope that the possibility that haunts the film might one day become real.



My understanding of the film stands in contrast to the synopsis accompanying its screening at the 2002 Hong Kong International Film Festival. There, the author somehow manages to describe *Ho Yuk – Let's Love Hong Kong*, which had a full house chuckling with pleasure, as a wearisome and drab downer:

First, there is Zero, who, like many Hong Kong youngsters, has a handful of unsteady jobs. She takes a fancy to Chan Kwok Chan, whom she stalks. Chan, in turn, has a job donning exotic costumes as a cyber paper doll for a porn website and a sex-worker lover who has a son and a separated husband on the Mainland. Then there's Nicole, who gets her orgasmic intimacy watching Chan every night. All these games of chasing, rejecting and seducing are played out in an economically and spiritually depressed Hong Kong, without much gusto. Awash with melancholy and disillusionment, it's a tall task to love Hong Kong.

How could such a clash of perceptions occur? In my opinion, although the film is clearly not a celebration, it is all the stronger for not succumbing to the "positive image" police's demand for advertising-style imagery of supposedly happy and healthy queers. Such images are repugnant insults to the reality and complexity of anyone's life, queer or straight, but they would be particularly incredible as depictions of queer life in Hong Kong today. Set in the near future, *Ho Yuk – Let's Love Hong Kong* stands on the threshold of possibility. The three women it focuses on are never explicitly named as lesbians, but they are clearly women who desire women. They all appear quite isolated amongst the teeming crowds of Hong Kong, but they have already spotted each other, and any day now they might meet up and have a real party.

Perhaps my tentatively optimistic sense of these possibilities helps to explain why I immediately thought of Ulrike Ottinger's rousing fantasy films about women's adventures when I saw *Ho Yuk – Let's Love Hong Kong*. They may not have even spoken to each other yet, but somehow I can see Zero, Chan, and Nicole joining together for an adventure, and maybe even an adventure on the China Sea ruled by Ottinger's *Madame X*. Furthermore, what Ottinger's films like *Madam X : An Absolute Ruler* and *Johanna D'Arc of Mongolia* share with Yau Ching's *Let's Love Hong Kong* is an expressive approach to representation-as-possibility. Although they take place in real environments and involve just-about-plausible characters, they are exaggerated and pushed beyond the realms of present reality. (And perhaps it is not entirely an accident that both filmmakers have a fascination with the undead — Ottinger's 2000 film is *The Blood Countess*).

It might be possible to believe in an all-girl klezmer trio, Lady Windermere, and Mongol princess as separate figures. But that they should all meet up and romp across the Mongolian steppes together, as they do in *Johanna d'Arc*, is (literally) far-fetched. *Ho Yuk – Let's Love Hong Kong* is less of a stretch. It's quite easy to believe separately in Nicole as the Westernized business woman by day and cyber freak by night, and Chan's love affair with a married sex worker from the mainland. But it's hard to see a world composed of such figures as anything other than Yau Ching's way of expressing the strange and convoluted constraints on nascent lesbian identity and culture in Hong Kong today, hemmed in by family, neighbors, the demands of work, and more.

To those unfamiliar with the city, these constraints may come as a surprise. For outsiders — both from the West and from mainland China



— Hong Kong seems to be a brash, cutting edge city, and a rare space of personal freedom. But the difficult history of queer filmmaking in particular and independent film in general in Hong Kong suggests a more complicated situation. While Hong Kong might be commercially brash, culturally it is a much more conservative society. In fact, one might even argue that the very prioritization of commerce is one of the primary factors constraining social and cultural change. In a society with few legal protections, fear of losing one's livelihood is a powerful motivation for discretion. This is even true for men, never mind for women.

On the one hand, Hong Kong has had plenty of gay saunas and bars for a lot longer than many other Chinese cities. But on the other, very few men have ever been willing to publicly identify as gay. In this sense, gay men haunt Hong Kong by night, not yet ready to appear by day. Despite a long series of melodramas about tragic divas all haunted by the possibility of queer interpretation, director Stanley Kwan remained coy about his sexuality until his documentary *Yin and Yang*, made to celebrate the 100th anniversary of cinema. Although his sexuality was an open secret, the reluctance of his interviewees — all colleagues and friends in the industry — to talk about even the representation of homoeroticism in the Hong Kong cinema made his own worries about the consequences of public self-identification completely appropriate. However, for all his worries, Kwan has gone on from success to success since *Yin and Yang*, culminating with his most commercially successful film to date, *Lan Yu*, a gay love story set in Beijing.

If Kwan's story is a hopeful one for the transition from queer ghostliness to presence and participation, it is in part because he has a long history of working in mainstream cinema. Independent filmmakers in Hong Kong, with few funding possibilities and venues other than the admirable



Hong Kong Arts Centre, still live far too much in the spirit world. In this sense, the marginality and on-the-threshold lives of the characters in *Ho Yuk – Let's Love Hong Kong* are echoed by the experiences of filmmaker Yau Ching and the career of the film itself so far.

As I'm sure the details given elsewhere in this volume set out in more detail, *Ho Yuk – Let's Love Hong Kong* was made on a shoestring budget. Cast and crew were volunteers and many were completely new to filmmaking. The shoot was done on the sly, without permits, and using a DV camera. The entire process took over three years. Furthermore, this is the first Hong Kong film representing lesbians made by a lesbian. For the writer of the Hong Kong International Film Festival synopsis of *Let's Love Hong Kong*, this difficult story may seem like just one more reason why it is "a tall task to love Hong Kong." But to me, each difficult step seems like an important one in making the ghostly presence of both lesbians and independent filmmakers in Hong Kong more visible. I enjoy Hong Kong's mainstream cinema, but I look forward to the day when the range of its independent cinema increases as much as I do to the time when some of the constraints holding back Zero, Chan, and Nicole are overcome. So, not because it's worthy but because its haunting presence is an inspiration, I want to close this brief appreciation by saying, "Let's Love *Let's Love Hong Kong*."

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