



FLOATING CITY, FLOATING SELVES: *LET'S LOVE HONG KONG*

FRAN MARTIN

As its English title suggests, Yau Ching's *Ho Yuk – Let's Love Hong Kong* entwines questions about sexuality and place. Its story concerns a group of young Hong Kong lesbians and their relationships with each other and the city they live in, but the film also raises broader issues about location and dislocation, homeliness and unhomeliness, and about the sexual subjectivities produced by a city culture marked by a volatile sense of in-betweenness and displacement. This thematic is implicit in the film's Cantonese title, *Ho Yuk*, which could be roughly translated as "on the move" and connotes a sense of rapid, disorienting, jarring motion. In the title sequence the first character, *ho* is suggestively broken up into its component radical elements: *nui jie*, meaning girls or women — appropriately, the full title then suggests "women on the move."

This film was written, produced and directed by Yau Ching, and is Yau's first feature film. It is also the first lesbian feature film from Hong Kong to be directed by a woman. Yau is part of a new generation of young independent lesbian filmmakers in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the subject matter, mode of production, and to some extent the style of *Let's Love* recall the works of Taiwanese filmmakers like Weng Ching-ting (*Voice of the Sunflower*, 2000); Li Xiangru (*2, 1*, 1999), and Yau's sometime collaborator, Chen Jo-fei (*Incidental Journey*, 2001, edited by the Taiwanese editor Chen Po-wen, who also edited *Let's Love*). The new



crop of low-budget, independent lesbian films coming out of Taiwan and Hong Kong since the mid-1990s arises from the broader context of the regional queer cultural boom of the past decade. There has been a steady and increasing circuit of exchange between the queer cultures of Taiwan and Hong Kong since early in the 1990s. Indeed, the term *tongzhi* (literally "comrade") which in both Taiwan and Hong Kong is used colloquially to designate "lesbian-and-gay" was taken up in Taiwan only after being imported from Hong Kong, in the early 1990s (Edward Lam translated New Queer Cinema as *Xin Tongzhi Dianying* for Taiwan's 1992 Golden Horse Film Festival). The two major Chinese-language glossy gay magazines of the 1990s, *G&L* and *Together* were both published in Taiwan but marketed to a dual Taiwan-Hong Kong readership, and recently, links between regional gay and lesbian communities have been consolidated by the *Huaren Tongzhi* (Pan-Chinese *Tongzhi*) conference series, organized conjointly by tongzhi groups in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The Hong Kong-Taiwan queer cultural axis that emerged strongly in the 1990s provides the wider context for Yau's film, which is undoubtedly an impressive example of the region's vibrant new wave of independent lesbian filmmaking.

But while the broad context for Yau's film can be seen as regional, the film itself is very much about the particularity of the Hong Kong local, albeit a local culture that is thoroughly permeated by transnational interconnections. What emerges very forcefully from the film is a particular re-vision of Hong Kong as viewed from the little-seen perspective of the city's lesbian subculture. The film intentionally, and politically, represents this milieu as an integral element of Hong Kong's urban life — sharing its streets, snack-stands, subways and apartment buildings — but outside of films like this one this milieu seldom appears in representations of the city's public culture, either locally or abroad.



Ho Yuk – Let's Love Hong Kong is an allusive film that projects its vision of Hong Kong's lesbian habitus by following the lives of three central characters, Chan Kwok Chan (Wong Chung Ching), Nicole (Colette Koo), and Zero (Erica Lam). Scenes of these women's days and nights are suggestively intercut with other images, including animated sequences featuring Chan in her role as campy porn icon on an the interactive website called "Let's Love ", and excerpts from a Discovery Channel-style documentary about giraffes, whose other-worldly air and lofty demeanour is paralleled through cross-cutting with the real-life Chan as she wanders the city. Nicole is a yuppie, femme, multilingual advertising executive. She spends her nights in her own private cyber-fantasy world, clad in outrageous lingerie and immersed in a multi-media environment with seven screens relaying the "Let's Love " website, where her cursor — which we see in a suggestive close - up is controlled by her fingers sensuously manipulating a spherical mouse button — interacts with Chan's animated image. Zero is an itinerant odd-jobs woman who sleeps in a surreal, cinema-like space along with a crowd of other people and her menagerie of pet cats and dogs. By day she works by turn as a lingerie saleswoman (we see Nicole in her store, browsing with interest through racks of glitzy bras and panties); a real estate agent; a car salesperson; and a vendor of sex potions in a night market. After meeting Chan by chance while showing a rental apartment, Zero becomes intrigued by her and begins to trail her through the city. Chan, meanwhile, lives in a cramped apartment with her parents, and maintains a close emotional and sexual relationship with a female sex-worker who she meets regularly in a hotel room, and pays for sex. Chan spends a lot of time looking for an apartment, yet either never finds one she likes, or else can't bring herself to move out of her parents' house and lose the close relationship she enjoys with her eccentric mother.



Aside from the three women, the character most powerfully present in the film is the city itself. The quotidian rhythms and textures of Hong Kong are omnipresent in the *mise-en-scène*, the camera's lingering attention to the city drawing our eye to dwell on the warm glow of low-wattage electric lights in a night market; the symmetrical curve of archways on the most famous early colonial-period building in Hong Kong, also known as Legco (Legislative Council), where Zero wanders alone at night; a passionate exchange between a man and his mobile phone at a snack stall; and the monumental, alienating façade of Chan's parents' low-rent apartment block. In a memorable scene, we see Chan riding the harbor ferry in the evening while outside the ferry's windows, Hong Kong island looms in the background as a mass of buildings that appears to rock back and forth in the fiery orange glow of its lights reflecting off the humid night air: a kind of apocalyptic, floating city.

The tension between at-homeness and displacement is a central idea raised by the film not only in relation to the city but also to the lesbian subjectivities it represents. On the most literal level, a large part of the film's screen-time is taken up by interior shots inside the women's variously problematic homes. Greeting her dogs and cats in the strange collective space where she lives which looks like deserted theatre, Zero tells her pets that she's waiting for the day when she can give them a proper home. Chan searches endlessly for an apartment, and in the hotel room that serves as a temporary, quasi-home for her and her paid lover, the two have a conversation about how many years it might take to save up enough money to buy a proper house. Even Nicole's luxury apartment is an unhomey home: plagued by a sense that something is wrong with the space, Nicole pays a *feng shui* master to tell her that her apartment is cursed by the fatal *qi* of a telephone pole pointing at the front window; that it lacks proper light; and that



she has placed her *feng shui* goldfish in the worst possible arrangement.

The tension between settlement and unsettledness is also apparent in a number of small details that draw attention to the often noted "in-between" situation of Hong Kong itself, the result of its colonial history and its ambivalent relationship with the People's Republic of China. The theme of cultural Chineseness — how to achieve it, certify it, or otherwise manage one's relationship with it — surfaces frequently: Chan's mother exhorts her to learn how to make turnip-cake since, "after all, you are Chinese." The "Let's Love" website, meanwhile, features another Chan costumed according to variously "Chinese" themes, from an elaborately gowned princess such as might inhabit a historical martial arts epic, to a girl coyly unbuttoning her electric blue *qipao*, to a knicker-flashing figure set against a background of hot pink with yellow five-pointed stars that cheekily (mis)quotes the national flag of the People's Republic. Yet such sly, stylized references to China and Chineseness probably serve more to deconstruct ideas about nationality as identity than to reinforce them. Relatedly, when Nicole tells her *feng shui* master that her parentage is a mix of Japanese, English and northern Chinese, he latches onto the Chinese element and declares that they are close compatriots since his family came from the same region of China. Yet Nicole's linguistic and cultural hybridity, as she slips effortlessly from English to Cantonese to Mandarin according to her situation, gives the lie to the *feng shui* master's easy recourse to the idea of a shared "Chineseness": Nicole's character implies that belonging, in this situation, has more to do with cultural syncretism than cultural essence; more to do with transcultural mobility than national roots.



One of the clearest signifiers of this structuring tension between place and placelessness is found in the film's central subject: the "Let's Love" website itself. With the intense erotic attachment that we see it evoke in Nicole, the website comes to appear — in much the same way that lesbian Internet cultures actually function in the region — as an abstract, displaced social environment that nevertheless facilitates the articulation and cohesion of real lesbian selves and communities. The fictional website nicely expresses the paradoxical character of regional queer Internet cultures: immaterial in one sense, yet in another sense intimately interwoven with the materiality of real people's everyday lives; placeless, ephemeral, and mobile in one sense, yet in another sense catalyzing the crystallization of lived and local forms of sexual subjectivity and interconnection.

If Hong Kong emerges through this film as an uneasily floating city defined by its ambiguous and contested relationship with "Chineseness," then lesbian selfhood is represented as bearing a similar relationship to mobility and displacement. As the three women move through the cityscape, inspired and compelled by their different erotic and existential yearnings, their driftings appear symbolic of a form of sexual subjectivity whose position within the wider culture remains tenuous and unsure. Chan wanders between empty apartments without finding the one she wants to live in; Zero drifts between odd jobs; and Nicole invests all of her emotional and erotic energies in the hovering, ephemeral world of cyberspace. If one reads these three characters metaphorically in relation to the question of Hong Kong lesbian subjectivity, then the film seems to suggest that lesbian selfhood in this context might be thought of as a floating subjectivity within a floating city. (In this regard, *Let's Love's* lesbian subjects are perhaps comparable to the perpetually



dislocated, in-process queer subjects that inhabit of the films of Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang, cited by Yau as an important influence on her work.) Yau's film evokes the painfulness and difficulty of inhabiting such a subjectivity-in-motion as strongly as it also conveys the particular pleasures and possibilities of lesbian lives in post-modern, post-handover Hong Kong, and it is far from an uncritical celebration of hybrid cultures and sexual identities in flux. Instead, with its quirky, ironic sense of fun, its richly allusive style, and its loving attention to the conditions of local lesbian lives, *Ho Yuk – Let's Love Hong Kong* raises key questions about identity, sexuality and place in the restless urban culture of early twenty-first century Hong Kong.

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