

## Interview with Yau Ching: Filming Women in Hong Kong's Queerscape

*Gina Marchetti*

Yau Ching's *Ho Yuk: Let's Love Hong Kong* (2002) is the first narrative feature film about Hong Kong lesbians told from a lesbian/feminist perspective.<sup>1</sup> Yau Ching's road to filmmaking shows how Hong Kong's vibrant alternative film and video culture can nurture innovation, strengthen ties to the world filmmaking community, and involve Hong Kong filmmakers in the expansion of the public sphere for the marginalized, maligned, and dispossessed. The story of its production also highlights the connections between Hong Kong independent cinema and international trends in queer counter-cinemas. In this interview, Yau Ching talks about her development as a filmmaker, her inspiration for *Ho Yuk*, its production, and its impact on local as well global audiences.



Figure 14.1 Yau Ching.

*How did you first get involved in filmmaking?*

My experience of making films began long before my film education began ... I skipped school a lot and ended up attending Hong Kong “cine-club” screenings in the 1970s, e.g., Studio 1, Phoenix Cine Club, and going to second-run matinees. At that time, almost the only way to see non-commercial films other than at the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF) was at these venues. The HKIFF provided a big opportunity to see non-commercial films, but only once a year, while the cine-clubs had activities once a week, usually Sunday mornings. I remember seeing many of these European masters, which actually heavily influenced my work. Then, I started to find as much as I could in terms of literature, magazines, and newspapers on non-commercial films, in Chinese and English.

When you found yourself often sitting in one big theater with two or three people and you were always the youngest, and at times by yourself, you had to realize that there must be something “different” about you. My family sent me to this elite missionary school run by British nuns; I was totally traumatized by this experience and needed an escape venue. I was also beginning to realize that I had all this unusual affection for girls. Eventually, I went to the University of Hong Kong, which has no film department. I ended up choosing a department which I thought would be closest to my interests in film and literature, which is English and comparative literature. Because of my enthusiasm for film, I started getting involved in local independent media art societies, like Videotage.

I went to college in 1985, and Videotage grew out of the Phoenix Cine Club around that time. They gradually started to pick up video, and I was hanging out with them a lot. We organized screenings once a year and, basically, showed our own work. That’s how I started. I knew, at that time, I wanted to study film. When I was still at the University of Hong Kong, I was also very actively writing film criticism. After graduation, my first job was the executive editor (then editor-in-chief after a few months) at *Film Biweekly* because I had been writing for them regularly. I also worked briefly for the Hong Kong Arts Centre film department, and I freelanced as a screenwriter for television.

I decided to continue my education, so I went to California and then to New York. I started with drama in California, but it was too close to reality. I couldn’t live with the thought of the audience breathing right in front of me; that was too difficult. In New York, I studied documentary film, and I picked up a 16-millimeter camera for the first time. I made my first film, *Is There Anything Specific You Would Like Me to Tell You About?* (1990), within the first two months I was there. It won a couple of awards, and this was quite surprising for me. I suddenly realized what I could do with film. There are stories that I

could tell with it, things I could say with it, that may not be able to be told or said on paper. I think it's from that little short film that I realized that a lot of the relationship between image and sound I want to explore I wouldn't be able to do just in words. The New School University (formerly the New School for Social Research) in New York helped me explore these ideas within the very sophisticated framework of documentary. It also gave me a relatively solid understanding of the history of documentary and the diversity and vitality of the genre. My film *Flow* (1993), for example, is an experimental documentary. In that film, I was thinking about history, about how history could be narrated from a Chinese woman's viewpoint, someone always marginalized whichever society she lives in.

*How has feminism influenced your work?*

When I made that film, I was already heavily influenced by feminism. The film explored a shift in emphasis from registering the woman subject as central to speaking between women. *Flow* was a dialogue between two female subjects from two different worlds about different notions of Chineseness. It's a step towards using feminist politics as a site of interaction and also speaking to the larger figures of history and nation. The trauma of the Cultural Revolution and the suppression of the movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989 set up the framework of migration and exile internally and externally for a lot of Chinese migrants. *Flow* tried to understand physical migration as related to emotional and psychological *exile*.

Because of my short films, I was able to travel a lot internationally. Being based in New York can be very isolating, so being able to travel with these pieces to Japan, Canada, and Europe allowed me to see the Chinese diaspora in a different light. This helped me work through the documentary *Diasporama: Dead Air* (1997), which is about Hong Kong people moving to different countries during the 1990s and what that means to these people. As a Hong Kong-born woman artist, *Diasporama* also became a process for me to work through my own pre-Handover anxieties. I really rushed to get it done, because we were not sure if we could have it shown in Hong Kong after 1997 (we were much more naïve about the censorship apparatus at the time). It was actually shown sensationally on June 30, at the Hong Kong Arts Centre. It was one of the earliest works funded by The Hong Kong Arts Development Fund.

I decided to leave the United States after that film. I think being a "person of color" and interested in issues not necessarily US-based, not necessarily about subjects speaking in English, led to my departure. I realized that there are a lot

of issues that I am interested in about Hong Kong, for example, about the sexual identities of Hong Kong people as related to coloniality.

At that time, I was teacher at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and I hated the Midwest. The environment was white-dominated, racially and class segregated, thus even more isolated than New York.

*Diasporama* won a prize at the 1st Hong Kong Independent Short Film and Video Awards; I think it fulfilled some demand from the community. The fact that I wasn't so bound and tied down by all the taboos, pressures, and frustrations being felt in the society at the time might have helped me realize more possibilities. Because of the positive feedback that documentary got, although it got almost no attention outside Hong Kong, I was encouraged to apply for a larger grant. I came back to Hong Kong in 1997 for three months, showed the documentary, and, then, after having talked with a lot of people, I went back to Michigan's freezing winter. That winter, I started writing the script of *Ho Yuk: Let's Love Hong Kong*,<sup>2</sup> and I submitted the proposal to the Arts Development Council early in 1998, and it got funded. I resigned from my job, returned to New York to shoot a short 16-mm film *I'm Starving* during that summer, then I left the US for London to do doctoral studies. I started shooting *Ho Yuk* around Christmas 1999 in Hong Kong.

*How did you manage to write the script for Ho Yuk and complete your doctorate in London at the same time?*

I am a workaholic. I wasn't born to rich family, so studying has always been a privilege. Working hard was the only way to survive. I learned that when I was very young. I had this opportunity to do my first feature narrative *Ho Yuk* but I had to finish it within a very short time before the award was taken back. On the other hand, I also needed a Ph.D. to get a teaching job if I was going to come back to Hong Kong. So I wound myself like a clock by working twelve hours every day on my dissertation for one year nonstop, on top of teaching two courses when I was in London. I finished two chapters in nine months, which pleased my two supervisors so much that they let me return to Hong Kong to work on the rest. I came back in the summer of 1999, finished a draft of the script of *Ho Yuk*, and started teaching fulltime at the Hong Kong Polytechnic. I used all the term breaks during 1999–2002 to shoot and edit the film. While I was waiting for my cast and crew — most of whom also had full-time day jobs — to give me their free time, I worked on the rest of my dissertation and did my oral defense. In short, between 1999 and 2002, I did manage to complete my Ph.D. and a feature film simultaneously on top of teaching full time. But I wouldn't recommend my work schedule to anyone.

*How did you conceive the characters for the film? Did your initial conception change during the production?*

In 1996, I did a two-month workshop at the Hong Kong Arts Centre about filming the body. The woman who plays Chan Kwok Chan (Wong Chung-ching) in *Ho Yuk* was one of my students in the workshop. There were also a couple of students from Hong Kong Baptist University, who ended up in my workshop and became my crew members for *Ho Yuk*. Wong Chung-ching has a way of carrying her body and of interacting with the world that fascinates me. When I came back in 1997, I talked to her again. We had a couple of pretty long conversations about our lives. In 1999, when I came back to cast, I already had a draft of the script in hand, with her in mind as the main character.

The other characters, Zero and Nicole, came into play when I started to cast in the summer of 1999. I was cruising in lesbian bars with my casting director. I walked into this lesbian bar in Causeway Bay, and there was this young woman sitting alone by herself drinking. I gave her my card and asked her if she would be interested in playing in a movie. She didn't say anything the whole time. She just took my card, and she called me the next day. She came to the audition with a lot of other people that I also picked up in different bars. I knew from the time I saw her that she would be the one to play Zero (Erica Lam). After I did the audition, I talked to her extensively about her life, about her experiences, about what she has done, her love stories, and I wrote a lot of that into the script. All of these interactions dramatically changed my script.

I spent three months rehearsing with them before shooting and changed the script accordingly. It was also in that period I picked up two other main actors in the film, who had acting experience. One is Maria Cordero, who plays the mother. She is extremely gay friendly, surprisingly. I felt very fortunate having her.

*Why were you surprised? Do you feel there is prejudice against gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities in the film industry?*

It is extremely difficult for the Hong Kong film industry to deal with any issues involving sexual orientation and with women's issues at the same time. I think as long as those two issues don't intersect then you are fine. I didn't realize it until I made *Ho Yuk*. I approached everybody I could remotely think of in the industry for help including gay directors, lesbian distributors, women producers but none helped. I think as long as you focus on women's issues or you focus on gay issues, and it's not women, then you are in a safe zone. In Hong Kong, gays help gays and straight women; straight women help men. The fact is *Ho Yuk* deals explicitly with lesbians and it also deals with a lot of other women's

issues; for example, sex work, mother-daughter relations, women's masturbation, women and cyber sex, etc. I also think that showing homosexuality in Hong Kong is much safer if you're not gay yourself. There is also a lot of self-silencing among queers in the film industry and if you work on or even help an explicitly queer project, it becomes an act of self-disclosure. Many people would avoid getting close to you because of that.

*Why do you think the film provoked this reaction?*

I think it's a combination of things. The fact that lesbians are not portrayed stereotypically in the film upsets a lot of people. Other films with lesbians show them either as mannish psychopaths or feel-good eye candy. I think the way I have of telling the story also pushes a lot of buttons. Other films have lesbians as sidekicks, some of them contrasted to normality, while, in my film, lesbianism isn't an issue. Lesbianism wasn't there to be contrasted with anything; the women are as normal as could be. A lot of the problems that arise in the film do not come from these people's sexuality as much as from the social, economic and/or political contexts.

*The Hong Kong context for the film is extremely important. Could you talk about that a bit?*

Absolutely. That's partly why I wanted to use the title *Let's Love Hong Kong* (this "Let's" is the "lesbian" part). Love connotes desire, and Hong Kong is actually a major character in the film.

*"Ho yuk" means "let's move"?*

"Ho yuk" means moving very fast, and the character "ho" in Chinese of course can be broken up into woman/male child. In the film, when the Chinese title comes up, the character was broken down into these two parts.

When I was writing the film, I was outside Hong Kong, and I was thinking of my own problem of returning — whether to or whether not to come back. I don't like this place, so why come back? But, I love the place, so I had to go back. Why do I love it without liking it? One way to address this issue is by looking at housing, the lack of physical space.

*Could you please explain that space where the people congregate and sleep? I'm a little confused about it.*

Hong Kong is a very crammed environment, without much human space. Zero can barely survive in a space like this, and not very comfortably. That's exactly what Hong Kong is for a lot of people, a lot of people can survive in it,

but not very comfortably, not very humanly. The lack of space manifests itself in many different ways. There isn't a physical lack of space per se, but none of the space is very easily appropriated for human use. Even appropriated, they could also be destroyed overnight. Many of the long shots at Star Ferry, around the Central Post Office and the fountain, the love hotels and their yellow signs in Yaumatei — were all shot with feelings of nostalgia as if they were soon to disappear.

I wanted to explore how to appropriate the massively beautiful public spaces in Hong Kong for lesbian desire. Lesbians are not supposed to have agency in this kind of city. I wanted to show the violence of that space, how that violence coincides with the beauty of it. It's something that I see as very much part of myself, something that I yearn for and detest at the same time without being able to leave it.

*One of the themes of Ho Yuk seems to be the search for community and the frustration of that search.*

I think, when we talk about space, we are also talking about community. We are talking about the sense of belonging, and we are talking about how these characters were immensely isolated in a city that is extremely crowded. This is another way of speaking about beauty and violence at the same time. My inspiration for Zero's living space came from finding myself crammed in economy class on airplanes. At one point, I was thinking, why does this actually feel very much like growing up in Hong Kong, sleeping on airplanes? Initially, *Ho Yuk* was conceived as a sci-fi movie, and there is still a touch of that. I thought five years from now what would Hong Kong become? When you have even more of a gap between the rich and the poor, even more people, more bad air, more enforced homogeneity, more need to keep up that façade of an "international city," and yet even less space, even more techno-craze and therefore illiteracy, what would this city become?

When I met Erica (who plays Zero), she was selling cell phones on the street. Now, five years after we met (after the shooting of the film), she is working as a real estate agent. When the economy is not doing well, the retail sector is hit the hardest. A lot of the characterization of Zero in the film came from Erica. For instance, she really has a lot of stray cats at home; I think she identifies with stray cats.

*Could you talk about cyberspace and cyberspace interactions in the film?*

Space in Hong Kong is intricately linked with the use of technology. I was fascinated by how people's lives are deeply penetrated by technology in every

small way possible. I was trying to understand how that need for immediate access to people is closely connected with the need to be alone in spaces that are extremely crowded — to be somewhere else all the time. Hence, I used cyberspace in the film as an “other” space.

When I spoke with Erica, I realized that her position of being disadvantaged manifested itself in two major ways: one is her lack of access to English; and the other is her lack of access to technology. The irony is that most of her jobs are heavily related to technology, but the jobs are designed in such a way that she doesn't have to know how to manage the technology or master the technology in order to sell it. We seldom think about how exploited the retail segment of the labor force actually is. When I met Wong Chung-ching (who plays Chan Kwok Chan), she called herself a “photo retoucher.” That means, she worked on a computer for fourteen hours a day, every day, repeating the same commands, without seeing anybody most of the time. Her relationship with technology was very intimate yet alienated. It was in contrast to Erica's job selling technology she couldn't use, but, in a way, also very similar.

I also wanted to write a character in terms of a particular class position — closer to me as a filmmaker and university professor, so I added a third character — Nicole (Colette Koo). I met Colette, who was a theater actress. She played in stage productions like *Vagina Monologues* in English. She had theater training in London, with a strong British accent, so her character would speak to some of the issues on colonialism. Investigating class relations and use of space in Hong Kong, one inevitably had to come face to face with the colonial legacy.

I had these three characters in mind, and I began to explore the possible relationships among them. Chan Kwok Chan's character and her setting were very much like my own background growing up. I lived in a housing estate for nineteen years. That experience of living in a studio flat with five other people ... very close to your mom — not necessarily knowing how to communicate — but developing a very intimate physical relationship. I decided Chan Kwok Chan could be a sex worker and develop a relationship with Nicole through the Internet.

*Could you talk about the film's Category III rating? Given the film deals with young lesbians, is it frustrating that this rating limits your audience to adults?*

That's really a very interesting question, because I think that also speaks to some of our earlier discussions about space as well. I think Hong Kong public space is heavily dominated by politics without people realizing it. I was shocked when it was categorized as Category III when it first played in the HKIFF.



The film had another rating problem in Taiwan, when it was nominated for a Golden Horse Award. For the Golden Horse, a film has to have a public screening in a cinema, but the Taiwan censors refused to pass *Ho Yuk*. Because it couldn't pass the censors, the film was screened in private for the judges only.

After the theatrical run in Hong Kong, the DVD company Panorama picked it up. It was released as Category III on DVD, following its categorization at the Film Festival screenings and at the Broadway Cinematheque run. A couple of months later, I got a phone call from Panorama telling me that the censors actually called them and said they should have sent it to the censors again before the DVD was released, because the rating that they gave was just for the festival and theatrical run and they wanted to rate the film again. They had to pull all the DVDs back from the market and the censors wanted it to be given a Category IV rating unless certain scenes could be cut.

*When does this happen?*

Category IV is a very important but under-discussed category in Hong Kong. It means the DVD could not be released to the general public in its entirety. Two shots were identified that made *Ho Yuk* a Category IV film — one is the shot depicting female ejaculation in the background with Chan Kwok Chan dancing in the foreground, and the other shot has a penis in the background amid many pole-like objects. Both of these genitals are obviously animations without being connected to any human body. Panorama called me up and said that I had a choice between pixillating the images of the genitals, or cutting the two shots altogether. I of course found the ruling ridiculous. Panorama negotiated with the censors; the penis was saved in the end but the scene was cut shorter. I had to replace the vagina cum shot with another similar shot in the film.

I almost went bankrupt making this film. I am back to teaching, back to making smaller experimental documentaries, and I have not been able to make feature films for a long time. Although it won the Critics' Prize in Portugal and a nomination at Golden Horse, and its video rights were picked up by distributors in France, Japan, North America, and Hong Kong, I don't think *Ho Yuk* was considered to have done very well commercially. International film critics and scholars constantly showed interest in it but these normally don't count in Hong Kong film culture unless you're Wong Kar-wai. It has made fundraising for my second film really hard. I applied for an Arts Council grant recently for my second feature, but they rejected it ...

*Did anything else surprise you about the film's reception in Hong Kong?*

Hong Kong's construction of public space is often not pushed or changed or determined by cultural products but by the legal infrastructure, I think that has a lot to do with the colonial legacy and how the society was set up under the British. Recently, we've been seeing a lot more negotiation of the public space because of the discussion around the anti-discrimination bill. Homosexuality has been decriminalized in Hong Kong since early 1990s, but there is no anti-discrimination law. If people face discrimination at their jobs, in households, in public spaces, there is no law to protect them. Over the last fifteen years, the local lesbian and gay community has tried to get this anti-discrimination bill passed.

There is a lot of backlash against the law from religious communities, mainly from the Christian conservative right. They are very resourceful in Hong Kong, and they have bought a lot of newspaper ads, conducted petition campaigns, and so forth. Hate campaigns have generated a lot of attention, discussion, and debate that pushes the issue into a public cultural space where it has never been pushed before. The Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, for example, which has existed for more than ten years, has not been as successful in getting this issue on the table as these conservative religious groups in several months! A lot of very explicit discrimination against LGBTQ people, for example, blaming them overtly as monsters, criminals, perverts, AIDS-carriers, and all of those things, in the long run, can be productive. I think there's a major paradigm shift going on. Unfortunately, in the short term, it might have to be experienced in painful if not traumatizing ways.

*What has the reception been like for Ho Yuk within the Chinese-speaking world outside of Hong Kong?*

I received overwhelmingly warm responses in Hawaii, Taiwan, Beijing, Japan, New York, San Francisco, London ... All of these were actually quite surprising for me, since I thought the film dealt primarily with Hong Kong issues, with so many local references ...

*How would you compare the state of LGBT rights in Hong Kong with the rest of the Chinese-speaking world?*

Hong Kong is both ethnically Chinese and a former colony. The internalization of colonialism includes depoliticizing sexual issues. Being Chinese plus British colonial doubles the reticence about anything sexual and political. I think it's that mutual reinforcement of two very reticent cultures that

makes this society very repressive in many ways. Once you move out of Hong Kong into other Chinese-speaking communities, that difference becomes very obvious. In Taiwan and in most places in mainland China, people are much more open sexually. That's why the discourse around discrimination against lesbians and gays in Hong Kong is unprecedented. The anti-gay activist strategies and sentiments have been imported from the North American Christian Right via pre-Handover middle-class migrants. Many of these migrants have moved back to Hong Kong in the last decade after the Handover.

