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# THE GROUND BENEATH HER FEET

**Fault Lines of Nation and Sensation in Yau Ching's *Ho Yuk:*  
*Let's Love Hong Kong***

**Olivia Khoo**

All my life, I worshipped her.  
Her golden voice, her beauty's beat.  
How she made us feel, how she made me real.  
And the ground beneath her feet.  
—U2, “The Ground beneath Her Feet”

*Y*au Ching's *Ho Yuk: Let's Love Hong Kong* (2002) has the somewhat weighty honor of being regarded as Hong Kong's “first lesbian film.”<sup>1</sup> It is the first film about women's desires for one another to be directed by a woman in Hong Kong and to use a mostly female cast and crew. All of the previous films about lesbianism in Hong Kong's cinematic history have been directed by men and have, to some extent, used lesbianism for its exploitation value.<sup>2</sup> To evaluate *Ho Yuk's* status as a “first,” this article focuses on three aspects of its originality: the film's theories and visualizations of the Hong Kong lesbian body and lesbian desire; the tensions it foregrounds between sexuality and Chineseness; and its impact on queer independent filmmaking in Hong Kong and Asia more broadly. The notion of movement underpins all three of these concerns, or rather, it highlights the fault lines between desire and the body, between lesbian sexuality and Chineseness, and between independent filmmaking and the commercial imperatives of the Hong Kong film industry. Together these fault lines are encapsulated in the film's Cantonese title *Ho Yuk*.

In Cantonese *yuk* is a verb meaning “to move,” although here it is being used colloquially as an adjective to describe a perception of movement, or of mov-

ing too fast. The word *ho* means “very,” or as an adjective “fond of,” and as it is written, the character also includes the radical *nui*, “girl” or “woman.”<sup>3</sup> Taken together, the words *ho yuk* therefore connote some combination of women, movement, and sensation.<sup>4</sup> In particular, *Ho Yuk* expresses the circulation of erotic desire between three women whose lives interconnect in Hong Kong sometime in the near future.

The main character, Chan Kwok Chan (played by Wong Chung Ching), is a model for an interactive pornographic Web site, “Let’s Love,” and the film often blurs the lines between the virtual and the real to present the urban space of Hong Kong as one of restless speed, where the search for ways to connect is foregrounded. Indeed, the central concern of *Ho Yuk* seems to be how to connect and how to feel in an environment in which relationships are becoming increasingly mediated by modern technologies: mobile phones, pagers, and anonymous interactions in cyberspace.<sup>5</sup> Despite the film’s preoccupation with connection, the three female protagonists never really connect; they are often alone, only ever crossing paths briefly either through coincidence or contrivance before going their separate ways again.

Chan lives with her parents in a tiny apartment. She and her mother are close, although they have a mostly silent relationship. In her spare time, Chan likes to look at apartments for sale, yearning for more privacy and space than she currently has. Zero (Erica Lam) also dreams of more space; she lives in an abandoned movie theater with a multitude of stray dogs and cats that she has adopted. Zero’s time is taken up with casual employment of various kinds, from selling women’s underwear to hawking sex toys at a night market. She also shows real estate, and through this activity, she meets Chan, develops a crush on her, and begins trailing her through the city. Finally, Nicole (Colette Koo), a high-powered businesswoman, spends her nights logged on to the “Let’s Love” program, masturbating as she dresses and undresses Chan the model with a click of her mouse. The film plays out the circulations of desire around the figure of Chan or, as her name translates, Made-in-China Chan.

### **Sites of Connection and the Paradox of Inertia: Hong Kong Lesbian Bodies**

For the three female protagonists who mimetically desire one another, the problem of connection becomes almost asymptotic, and they are forever circling and chasing because feeling has not yet been able to catch up to movement. René Girard’s notion of mimetic desire, or the desire for another person’s object of affection, sug-

gests that all human desire is mediated.<sup>6</sup> Within *Ho Yuk*, however, lesbian desire in Hong Kong is specifically mediated by the speed of a city that at times threatens to overpower it. In the new Hong Kong cinema, the interval between feeling and movement has been theorized as a problem of the place of affect within movement, or of how to feel when everything in the city is moving so quickly.<sup>7</sup> *Ho Yuk* presents a twist on that idea by suggesting that feeling (rendered in the film as “love”) can come only through inertia or through literally standing still, despite the fact that as Hong Kong’s first lesbian film, *Ho Yuk* itself creates a major tremor in the landscape of the city’s cinema. Brian Massumi’s theories of movement, affect, and sensation are useful for examining the potential of this form of inertia—of standing still while being able to feel and, in particular, to feel movement. Such a reconceptualization of the relationship between movement and affect is of value in thinking about the unique space of Hong Kong and the place of lesbian bodies within it.

Massumi seeks to redress the failure, within existing models of cultural theory, to consider the body and its capacity for movement and sensation—despite the obvious connections between them: “When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It *moves*. It *feels*. In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving. Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other?”<sup>8</sup> Massumi is primarily interested in exploring the question of change; movement suggests that a subject has gone through change, and a change in movement will produce a change in sensation and vice versa. Massumi suggests that this apparently simple conceptual displacement, body–(movement/sensation)–change, has resulted in profound slippages within the cultural theory that has sought to examine it. By bracketing the two middle terms (movement and sensation) and their unmediated connection, the two outside terms (body and change) often become elided, despite the fact that they have been of enduring concern—Massumi suggests perhaps *the* central concern—in the humanities in the past two decades.

Massumi is not alone in remarking on the absence of the body, in its particular connection to movement and sensation, in much of contemporary cultural theory. In addressing this lacuna, feminist and queer scholarship have in various ways attempted to make the body present. Early attempts to render the body visible sought to dismantle the mind-body split that has long dominated Western philosophy. Related to this dualism are dichotomies thought to constitute the subject: reason/passion, psychology/biology, public/private. These binaries have become hierarchized, with women invariably associated with the subordinated term. More specifically, women have come to be understood by, and oppressed through, their

bodies, which have been linked to nature and biology. Not surprisingly, feminists have traditionally remained wary of attempts to link women's subjectivities to the specificities of their bodies.<sup>9</sup> As Elizabeth Grosz argues, for too long "the body has remained a conceptual blindspot in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory" (3).

Grosz, among others, has aimed to focus on the body as a key site of subjectivity and to recuperate bodies marked by social categories such as race, sexuality, and culture, despite the risks of this scholarship being perceived as essentialist or universalist.<sup>10</sup> Feminists have also attempted to make the body visible by exploring its interface with technology, with the aim of dismantling the belief that technology is exclusively a masculine preserve.<sup>11</sup>

The present article examines how the notion of *movement* can add to scholarship on the body.<sup>12</sup> This concept is of particular importance to the situation of Hong Kong and to emerging nonheteronormative communities located in a city where speed is central. To think the connection between bodies and movement requires attending to the relationship between the (lesbian) body and space. Growing research in the field of feminist geography is tackling the concerns emerging from the relationships between bodies and motion, desire and space.<sup>13</sup>

The field of feminist geography aims to think specifically about the *lesbian* body in space. Elspeth Probyn maintains a critical viewpoint on work that tends to submerge lesbian bodies under generalized discussions of "gender and space" or "sexuality and space." She argues that actual bodies become subsumed under the weight of theoretical discourses, making the question of how to "flesh out this lesbian body" even more pressing.<sup>14</sup> As a corrective, Probyn suggests "remak[ing] the idea of lesbians in space into a moving proposition," that is, moving from the conceptual to the corporeal, or more precisely to "a concept that is corporeal."<sup>15</sup>

To locate the feminist and queer work on the body, space, and desire most germane to the film *Ho Yuk*, I consider writings that are specific to the local context of Hong Kong. How is *Ho Yuk* uniquely about Hong Kong lesbians, and what is distinctive about the space of Hong Kong that differentiates it from other urban centers? As Henri Lefebvre notes, "Every society produces a space, its own space," but how are lesbian desires affected by (and how do they possibly affect) the spaces of Hong Kong in which these bodies move?<sup>16</sup>

Research on lesbian desire, space, and bodies in Hong Kong is still fairly scarce, although this is slowly changing. The difficulties of conducting research on queer issues within Hong Kong are similar to those afflicting feminist research; for various political and social reasons, the field is not (yet) as institutionalized as

it is in other countries. Hence, as Chan Shun-hing notes, “more active feminist discussions come from the feminist groups within the women’s movement and not from the academics.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, activists and artists (some of whom are also academics or training for an academic degree) produce many of the writings on Hong Kong. For instance, Lucetta Kam Yip-lo, a graduate student, has conducted in-depth research on TB (“tomboys”) in Hong Kong.<sup>18</sup> Kam has also edited a book of lesbian love stories titled *Lunar Desires: Her First Same-Sex Love through Her Voice*.<sup>19</sup> Denise Tse Shang Tang, also a graduate student and activist, is writing a dissertation on lesbian spaces in Hong Kong, including karaoke bars, cafés, bookstores, and game arcades.<sup>20</sup> Yau herself is an academic, filmmaker, and self-proclaimed “agitator.”<sup>21</sup> She recently contributed to a major collaboration among activists, academics, and members of the queer community in an oral history project titled “Brazen Women: Hong Kong Women Who Have Same-Sex Desires Oral History Project 1950–2004.” This project, funded by the Home Affairs Bureau of the Hong Kong government, consisted of archival research and in-depth interviews with fifteen women, together with a traveling exhibit showing the everyday life of same-sex-desiring women in the spaces they inhabit. While scattered ethnographic research on lesbians in Hong Kong has been conducted since the 1990s, the theoretical frameworks for analyzing this research have yet to catch up fully, despite the language of movement, speed, and intensities that has characterized Hong Kong’s commercial cinema for some time now.<sup>22</sup> To consider the lesbian body and desire in Hong Kong’s independent cinema, I must draw from other, related models.

Following the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on bodies and desire, and also drawing from Massumi, Sasho Alexander Lambevski argues that gay bodies (and their actions) cannot always be adequately explained using the usual models of sexual identity or sexual positioning. Lambevski critiques the limitations of dominant theories of gender and sexuality that link the body to a particular subject position. Where sexuality remains “firmly wedded” to identity, adding ethnicity, class, or age to the equation still constructs these sexed bodies in terms of predetermined affects and desires.<sup>23</sup> Lambevski argues for the urgent need to “fluidify discourse on sexuality” (305). While queer theory has attempted to account for and to accommodate new sexual realities, in Lambevski’s view situations and experiences still exist where queer theory reaches an impasse. Quoting Massumi, Lambevski states that “the idea of positionality subtracts movement, and the body’s inherent potential for variation and change, from the picture.”<sup>24</sup>

How can we put movement back into the examination of the body and



Figure 1. Zero (right) moves closer to Chan on an empty train

change in the context of Hong Kong? Whereas Lambevski (writing from the Western gay center of Sydney) argues against a discourse of stasis and signification, in the context of Hong Kong it is necessary to acknowledge that forms of stasis inhibiting more fluid forms of sexuality do still exist, pervasively and resolutely so. The key task thus paradoxically becomes how to add movement to stasis in order to envision possibilities for change. It is arguable that for Hong Kong lesbians (indeed for any emergent lesbian community) there is an urgent need for positionalities, mobilizations, and identities, without which various theories would not be of much use. Thus far most of the research on Hong Kong lesbians has been ethnographic, empirical work focused on material spaces and bodies in order to position these bodies within local contexts in Hong Kong where they might otherwise go unnoticed. *Ho Yuk* can be seen as operating in parallel to these concerns. As the character Chan says, “My agency doesn’t want our customers to realize I’m flesh and blood, that I walk the same streets they do. What they least want to run into is me, the real person.” But these are real bodies just as they are also virtual in their disconnection, and the question the film posits is how to build a connection between the two.

While the film gives us many examples of disengagement and loneliness, it also shows us the small everyday attempts to connect. We see Chan crawl into bed with her mother when she can’t sleep, and Zero sliding along a seat on the MTR next to Chan even though the rest of the seats are empty (fig. 1). These are



Figure 2. Hidden and at a distance, Chan watches Zero crying

extremely important moments in the film, since they show how these women try to imagine a way of being (for lesbians) in Hong Kong's near future — through minute, incremental motions and gestures that rarely get recorded or, rather, are recorded as static.

It would be premature to discount the forms of stasis that continue to contain Hong Kong's queer cultures, or conversely to lose faith in the possibility for change. As Massumi elaborates, "After all is signified and sited, there is the nagging problem of how to add movement back into the picture. But adding movement to stasis is about as easy as multiplying a number by zero and getting a positive product" (3). Yau seeks to do precisely this with *Ho Yuk*. She seeks to add movement to stasis and to go from zero visibility to partial visibility, and in doing so she creates a powerful template for change. It is no coincidence that Zero is the name of one of the three female protagonists. She is the character who appears to feel the most, despite her name signifying "nothing."<sup>25</sup>

The character who represents stillness — Chan — is able to feel in a different way, through a paradoxical inertia. After dismissing Zero's attempts at affection (through a gift of mobile phones!), Chan watches Zero cry between the window slats. (This shot is obscured, signifying a blocked or mediated relationship to these emotions; see fig. 2). In the next scene, Chan, unable to sleep, crawls into her mother's bed for comfort. Chan also feels an earthquake that is imperceptible to the rest of the crowd (or to anyone not standing completely



still)—a whimsical touch added by Yau to foreground the different speeds at which her characters move.

Putting these diverse characters together is an exercise in attempting to “add movement to stasis,” and this daunting task leads Yau down the same path as that of Massumi—that is, she has to “abstract” the body (here, the lesbian body) in order to render it concrete. The body that is put back into the film (given the lack of viable alternatives) is a giraffe’s body. The construction of lesbian bodies as giraffe bodies in *Ho Yuk* or, perhaps more accurately, as particular kinds of bodies in motion, allows us to think about possibilities for change against conventional understandings of what independent Hong Kong cinema might mean in the context of narratives about marginalized sexualities.<sup>26</sup> In this instance, it might be necessary to reconceptualize movement as a matter of learning how to feel when one is standing completely still. It is a matter of adding movement to stasis.

### **Slow-Motion Giraffes: Chinese Sexuality on the Move**

The virtual bodies of an emerging lesbian community are posited in *Ho Yuk* both in contrast with and parallel to the reality of a “natural” world made prominent in the film through the ubiquitous figure of the giraffe. It is between these two sites—the natural and the technological, the real and the virtual—that Yau negotiates the possibility of Chinese lesbian subjectivity.

Significantly, *Ho Yuk* is set in the near future, similar to Tsai Ming-liang’s *The Hole* (1998), which is clearly an aesthetic, if not thematic, influence. *The Hole* is set in the final days of 1999 (even though the film was made over a year earlier) when a mysterious virus, the “Taiwan virus,” compels the government to quarantine large sections of Taipei. The two main characters live in apartments one on top of the other, and both have decided to remain in their homes instead of being evacuated; they literally don’t want to move. Even in the crowded tenements of Taipei, Tsai often shows his characters alone, performing solitary actions throughout the day. The only way that these two otherwise solitary beings are able to connect is through a hole between the floors of their apartments made by a plumber. However, at an entirely different narrative level, there is another point of connection that occurs in the musical sequences, or virtual imaginings, between the characters played by Lee Kang-Sheng and Yang Kuei-mei, set to the songs of Grace Chang. These colorful, over-the-top musical interludes have a similar function to the Web site “Let’s Love” in Yau’s film, which uses camp, kitschy computer effects to make it also appear not quite real. Although both films show very few ways of actually connecting either in a real time or in a real place, the fact that they take place in



Figure 3. Making space

a virtual realm invests them with an even greater potential. Both are love stories in slow motion, where nothing much happens because as yet it *can't*. Both films, which are set in the near future, speak about communities in virtual emergence.

At the other end of the spectrum to the virtual reality world of the “Let’s Love” Web site is the natural world of those ubiquitous giraffes. While they function metaphorically, they are also literally and integrally present within the film’s narrative and visual economies. Giraffes, we are told, have completely changed the topography of the African landscape by eating the leaves only from the uppermost branches of treetops. Giraffes are lofty, elegant creatures, and in the film we see them in pairs or, at the end, as a threesome. The film’s final scene, captured in an extreme wide shot, is a beautifully staged tableau of disconnection, but the film ends on a hopeful note by invoking the “naturalness” of it all. Nicole is cruising the streets of Hong Kong until she encounters Chan. (It is unclear whether she recognizes her as the model from “Let’s Love.”) Nicole asks Chan for a light even though she has her own lighter, but Chan ignores her. They stand silently side by side until Zero bounds into the frame from the left, and Nicole takes her cue to exit on the right (fig. 3). There are only two women centered in the frame at any given time, and they function as mimetic substitutions for each other—bodies that change or are exchanged (although not equivalent)—and orbit around the site of desire that is represented by Chan. Zero touches Chan’s neck and says, “Hey giraffe, checking out babes? Check me out.” Chan pulls up her sweater to cover

her exposed neck before she also exits on the left of the frame. There is then a cut to a shot (the film's final shot) of three giraffes running together in a field.

Despite the fact that in this scene the women all "miss" each other, the film ends with the possibility of a community—in particular, an emerging Hong Kong lesbian community—that it shows *can* exist in the natural world (although this reconfigured space does not yet allow room for three lesbian bodies at the same time).<sup>27</sup> This renegotiation of the street space can also be viewed as a "structure of missing." As Probyn theorizes in relation to lesbian bodies in space, "Thinking through a structure of missing reminds us of how certain bodies miss each other, how this missing serves to produce a certain affective spatiality"; "space is sexed through the relational movements of one lesbian body to another."<sup>28</sup> Yet this structure of missing, of mimetic substitutions and exchange, is also symptomatic of a more vital relationship paradoxically constructed between the virtual site of "Let's Love" and the real or natural landscape of the giraffes. This paradoxical relationship codes lesbian desire in the film as something utopic.

As Annamarie Jagose argues, discursive constructions of "lesbian" figure it as other and elsewhere. The figure of the lesbian is seen as liberatory because it is a space outside the phallogentric order and heterosexual exchange, but because of this, it is also liable to be seen as *outside* the networks of power that so crucially underpin it.<sup>29</sup> The notion of utopia is therefore a fitting one for the figure of the lesbian—situated in a space that is potentially disruptive and enabling, yet also, literally, a no place (from the Greek *ou-topos*) (163).

But what is specific about the desire to make the Hong Kong lesbian body visible? This brings me to the fault lines on which the film rests and the rifts that it is trying to cover over. The real space of Hong Kong, which continues to deny visibility or full presence to lesbian bodies, is articulated with two other metaphorical or imagined spaces shown on-screen. These alternative imaginings seem to suggest that one of the few places that Hong Kong lesbian bodies *can* exist at present is in utopia—either a virtual reality utopia (set in the future as a hopeful possibility) or a utopia of giraffes running in the field (seen as natural, always already there, and therefore unquestionable). The film attempts to maintain a balance between these two extremes while struggling to show the ambivalence involved in taking such a position. However, the very material that the film tackles, which is otherwise always left *untackled*, leaves it on shaky ground.

### Fault Lines of Nation and Sensation

A significant fault line runs between (lesbian) sexuality and Chineseness. It is conveyed in muted terms, transposed beautifully onto the relationship between Chan (the lesbian daughter who keeps her work a secret—posited as her job but also presented as her sexuality) and her mother, played by Maria Cordero, who is used (ironically) to represent Chinese tradition because we only ever see her cooking or eating “exotic” food.<sup>30</sup>

In one scene, Chan’s mother teaches her daughter how to make turnip cake. She says, “When I’m gone you need to know to make this yourself. . . . You’re Chinese, after all.” Zero later tells Chan that turnip cake is her favorite food, highlighting a shared Chinese ethnicity but also a shared sexuality. Significantly, when Chan’s mother is sitting and stirring the turnip cake mixture with her, she says, “mo yuk” (don’t move). While tradition is generally viewed as static and not open to change, the film suggests that feeling can come about through *not* moving, by holding on to these bonds of tradition or, perhaps more accurately, by adding movement to stasis (since Chan is violently stirring as she is sitting still).

In another scene, Chan sits in front of the television and applies moisturizer while she watches an old Cantonese melodrama about a prodigal daughter (played by the erstwhile star Connie Chan Po-chu) who reconciles with her long-lost mother.<sup>31</sup> Chan repeats the daughter’s dialogue, begging forgiveness from her mother in a monotonal ventriloquism. For Made-in-China Chan, there is no emotion here, no nostalgia. In fact, far from being nostalgic about an unchanging Chinese tradition, *Ho Yuk* is ambivalent about the notion of an essential Chineseness. The film draws from both the connections and disconnections between the specificity of Chineseness (and Chinese sexuality) in a Hong Kong context and that of other contemporary Chinese societies.

Highlighting some of these connections between sexuality in spaces marked by “Chineseness,” Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei’s article on reticent politics is noteworthy for considering Chan’s characteristic silence and ventriloquism. By reconfiguring the notion of “reticent poetics,” Liu and Ding seek to dismantle essentializing views of Chinese identity from within certain Chinese perspectives on sexuality, beginning with the work of one of the most widely read and cited writers on *tongzhi* identities in Hong Kong, Chou Wah-shan.<sup>32</sup> Chou suggests that Chinese cultures treat same-sex-desiring persons with “silent tolerance rather than outright violence (as happens in the West).”<sup>33</sup> Chou explains that Chinese families will often use food and family meals in order to show acceptance of a child’s partner while not openly confronting the child’s homosexuality. For Chou, Chinese

cultures are thus “‘essentially’ non-homophobic” (31). For Liu and Ding the suggestion that reticence is a form of “tolerance” is itself homophobic, “keep[ing] lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender peoples in the realm of ghosts — without a proper place — vis-à-vis the socio-familial continuum” (32). That is, if gay and lesbian children within the family cannot be made to disappear, they can at least be made to cooperate in their own invisibility. The authors argue that equating reticence and tolerance (to an essential Chinese culture) is too simple. Thus, while “reticence” might be Chan’s dominant characteristic, her relationship to her mother and to an “essential” Chinese identity is more complicated than that. Chan says that her job on the “Let’s Love” Web site doesn’t require any special skills or that she talk much, and that her parents don’t know what she does for a living. In fact the only requirement is that she must not let anyone else know what she does for a living. In a voice-over, Chan says, “When you go to bed at night do you ever get a bitter taste in your mouth? You realize you haven’t spoken all day.” Similarly, her relationship with her mother, though loving, is mostly silent. Chan’s silence, and her related forms of ventriloquism, highlight the “dominant reticence” surrounding Chinese sexuality, which “allows for the reigning proper order in speech and action (at work, at home, in the socius) to sustain the notion of an untouched, unsullied, harmonious whole. Nothing as it should be has been changed or disturbed; at least not on the surface” (33, 49). *Ho Yuk* forces us to read beneath the surface, to notice the tremors and fault lines that lie beneath it.

Rather than present an essential Chineseness, *Ho Yuk* offers us many competing images of what that might be and places these within a fluid framework of performance. We see Chan on the “Let’s Love” Web site in various costumes — Tang dynasty princess, Chinese Olympic athlete, provocative China doll buttoning and unbuttoning her cheongsam. There is also a significant fault line between Hong Kong and the People’s Republic of China in the film, particularly in the context of the post-1997 handover. The precariousness of this balance is highlighted by the presence of a fourth character in *Ho Yuk* — the mainland sex worker whom Chan periodically hires for sex and conversation. The film is quietly vocal (as opposed to reticent) about the sex industry in Hong Kong, and in particular the situation of sex workers from the mainland.<sup>34</sup>

Rather than the mainland being a clear marker of identity for the Hong Kong Chinese, Chineseness is characterized both by an ability to move and to feel movement (*ho yuk*), and by an ability to hold on to elements from the past and to feel when one is *not* moving (*mo yuk*). There is an ironic scene in which Nicole employs a feng shui master to reposition her badly placed goldfish. The master convinces her to pay him to take all of the fish away. Nicole adheres strictly to tra-

dition while also being a modern, transculturally mobile businesswoman, moving easily between Cantonese, Mandarin, and English in both her work and personal environments. (In Nicole's case, movement is characterized as an "upward mobility" that is class, if not gender, specific.) Maintaining this balance between moving and not moving is not easy; all the while fault lines are threatening to erupt, to make themselves visible, and indeed they do in the imaginative earthquake that takes place in Hong Kong.<sup>35</sup>

In the scene where the earthquake occurs, Chan is standing still as the train rolls by behind her. She struggles to breathe, and this scene is cross-cut and overlaid with the sound of Nicole's cries of ecstasy as she orgasms to Chan's image from the "Let's Love" Web site. At this moment, lesbian desire and sexuality are connected to a particular, localized place (Hong Kong), which is being shaken up (virtually and actually). A news flash appears in which the authorities tell us that only those standing still can feel the movement caused by the earthquake, and as yet there have been no reports of anyone having felt it. Directly afterward there is a cut to Chan saying, "Something's moving! Can you feel it? [*Ho yuk, ah*]." Chan is not officially recognized, she is *unreported*, and her voice remains unheard—but what becomes significant is that even when we think no one is noticing, someone often is.

From the global (cyberporn) site of "Let's Love" to the more immediate imperative "Let's Love Hong Kong" offered by the film's title, *Ho Yuk* offers a vision of how it might be possible to stay in one place (locally aware) and at the same time to be regionally and internationally "connected": to the changing relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China, to the vagaries of independent filmmaking (in Hong Kong and in America, where Yau was trained), and to lesbian and queer discourses circulating in the Asian region.<sup>36</sup> The film plays on the fault lines between national borders and national cinemas and negotiates the movements of gender and sexuality between them.

### **Queer 'n' Asian (and Independent)**

Unlike new queer cinema, which was gradually co-opted by the mainstream as U.S. independent filmmaking gained popularity, "queer Asian film" is a label that, as Helen Leung notes, functions predominantly within a film festival circuit.<sup>37</sup> It is therefore far less possible to discuss films as a coherent body of work under this rubric outside the festival context (14). There are, however, individual films that can still be considered independent in the sense of being politically motivated and made within the local queer community, often with volunteers on the crew, and in not being generally consumed by mainstream audiences. *Ho Yuk* is one such film.

The impact of *Ho Yuk* on independent and queer Hong Kong cinema can be seen in a statement by Yau that addresses the fault lines between national borders and national cinemas and the movements of gender and sexuality within and between them.<sup>38</sup>

Compared to our colleagues in many Asian countries including Taiwan and Mainland China, Hong Kong independent filmmakers experience a uniquely difficult lack of resources, from funding, crew, cast, services to distribution support and legal protection. Our so-called post-colonial situation is not necessarily better than colonial times in terms of available support for its arts and culture. The former successful money-making machine is turning into a gradually dysfunctional money-making machine, with nothing necessarily changing for the better. . . . There is not much of a choice: either you get swallowed up by waves, that move very fast, or you do not move at all. *Ho Yuk*, at least for me, expresses that lack of a choice, either moving too fast, so you lose yourself, or you remain still, as still as possible, as if you are not able to move at all.<sup>39</sup>

The alternative temporalities that Yau posits (which don't seem to be alternatives at all) highlight a fault line between commercial Hong Kong cinema and independent Hong Kong cinema. As "Hong Kong's first lesbian film," *Ho Yuk* further complicates the relationship (if indeed one exists) between independent and queer filmmaking in Hong Kong and East Asia more broadly. With Hong Kong's commercial film industry in crisis, a question that emerges is whether the independents (despite lacking resources and funding) are able to provide a viable alternative.<sup>40</sup>

That Zero lives in a deserted movie theater with other squatters acknowledges (and Yau states this in her production notes) that everyone now watches films at home—on VCRs/VCDs/DVDs or laptops. As in Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), local audiences have stopped going to the cinema (except to cruise). *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is telling in its portrayal of shifting Japan-Taiwan and Hong Kong-Taiwan relations. King Hu, the director of *Dragon Inn* (1966)—the ostensible subject of Tsai's latest film—left Shaw Brothers in 1967 to start up his own independent film company in Taiwan before returning to Hong Kong in the 1970s.

A vibrant independent film scene did exist parallel to the commercial film industry in Hong Kong in the 1970s. Although it all but disappeared in the 1980s, independent filmmakers reemerged during the 1990s with greater government

support through the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. However, of the filmmakers who currently live and work in Hong Kong, only two publicly identify as queer and independent: Simon Chung—*Innocent* (2005), *Stanley Beloved* (1996), *First Love and Other Pains/One of Them* (1999)—and Yau.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps more productively then, *Ho Yuk*'s status as Hong Kong's first lesbian film can best be measured in connection with several recent films (both narrative features and documentaries), made by women, that have emerged from the independent film scene in Asia in the past few years, despite the uneven distribution of resources mentioned by Yau; for example, there is Li Yu's *Fish and Elephant/Yu he Daxiang* (2002), China's "first lesbian feature film"; Ying Weiwei's documentary, *The Box/He zi* (2001), also from Mainland China; Yan Yan Mak's highly acclaimed *Butterfly* (Hong Kong, 2004); Chen Jofei's *Incidental Journey* (Taiwan, 2001); Zero Chou and Hoho Liu's *Corners/Si Jiao-Luou* (2001), a lyrical documentary about the closing of the Taipei gay bar Corners; Kaze Shindo's *Love/Juice* (2000) from Japan; and Desiree Lim's (a.k.a. Dez) fantastical feature, *Sugar Sweet* (2001), touted as the "first Japanese film to be made by and about lesbians."<sup>42</sup> *Sugar Sweet* also tackles (lesbian) pornography and cyberspace connections among Asian lesbians. Like *Ho Yuk*, *Sugar Sweet* reworks the notion of women's desires as "pornographic," reinventing them instead as fantasy.<sup>43</sup> Women, though not necessarily lesbians, directed all of these films.<sup>44</sup> *Ho Yuk*'s status and visibility needs to be seen in conjunction with these other films and as part of a wider, coterminous development of independent filmmaking by women in the Asian region. Furthermore, together these films need to be regarded in terms of how they expose the existing gender fault lines within what might be considered queer Asian cinema (which has sorely lacked the contribution of women).

Bérénice Reynaud has made a similar, contextualizing remark in relation to the new Chinese documentary movement; she notes that women's voices don't get heard unless or until they do something "big" like make China's first lesbian feature film or, in this case, Hong Kong's first lesbian feature film—despite the fact that Li and Yau have both been working for several years in the industry (Li in television and Yau making short films and documentaries). In response to this oversight, the use of an earthquake (as something literally earth-shattering) becomes apposite.

It is significant that the earthquake's epicenter is posited as being near Lantau Island, close to the site of Disneyland (and the Big Buddha).<sup>45</sup> There is plenty of evidence of the influence of American popular culture in the film, as well as other elements from Asian popular culture. Zero sleeps with a stuffed toy of Ernie the Muppet and wakes to a Hello Kitty alarm. Chan inspects a one-of-a-kind



house with baroque arches, Michelangelo-style frescoes, and antique Chinese beams. Chan's mother notes that the supermarkets are getting bigger, but they seem to be selling only Coke. It is therefore arguable that this earthquake will have regional, if not global, resonances.

The point that Yau seems to be making is that in order to perceive the effects of the "earthquake," one has to be standing still, and stillness is not the same as inertia, since in reality the ground is anything but stable. The film posits the question of how we are able to feel when it *appears* as though nothing is moving; that is, how do we learn to feel movement and in doing so hold, if not enact, possibilities for change? *Ho Yuk* is a very slow-paced film, shot with a mostly static camera (using gestures, colors, and slow and simple movements).<sup>46</sup> In response to the central problem of how to feel when one (and one's city) is moving so rapidly, the answer seems to be that only those who stay still will be able to feel. Hong Kong's lesbian bodies are characterized by this combination of stillness, movement, and sensation.

This seems to be the paradox of inertia as it is played out in the film—of having the most far-reaching effects while remaining localized, and of being hopeful (or perhaps just utopic) about the ability to add movement to what appears to be an otherwise static landscape. *Ho Yuk* creates quite a tremor in the landscape of the queer and independent film scene in Hong Kong. It does this through strategies of stillness while at the same time acknowledging the significant fault lines on which the film rests: what we think stays the same, never really does. The ground is moving beneath us all the time.

## Notes

For their advice on earlier drafts of this article I would like to thank Denise Tang and the two anonymous reviewers for *GLQ*. I also wish to thank Yau Ching for her kind permission to reproduce stills from *Ho Yuk*.

1. The film is based on a short story published by Yau Ching in *Ming Pao Daily* in 1997. Preproduction began in 1999 when the Hong Kong Arts Development Council awarded the script a small production grant.
2. Hong Kong cinema has come a long way since the Shaw Brothers' film *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (dir. Chor Yuen; 1972), purportedly the first film in Hong Kong to feature a kiss between two women. Other films featuring "lesbianism" in Hong Kong's history, such as *Naked Killer* (dir. Clarence Fok; 1992)—a modern-day remake of *Intimate Confessions*—and *Green Snake* (dir. Tsui Hark, 1993) show a "glamorous" side of lesbianism; that is, they use lesbianism as an exploited com-

modity. This is true also of Maggie Cheung's character in *Full Moon in New York* (dir. Stanley Kwan; 1989) and even of *Portland Street Blues* (dir. Wai Man Yip; 1998) since the protagonist, played by Sandra Ng, arguably maintains a different kind of glamour value as a triad boss. *Ho Yuk* certainly does not present lesbianism as something glamorous, nor is it out to exploit its "lesbian credentials."

3. The phrase *ho yuk* can be interpreted several ways. I rely on Helen Hok-Sze Leung's definition, which seems to me closest to the spirit of the film, in "Loving in the Stillness of Earthquakes," in *Ho Yuk: Script and Critical Essays*, by Yau Ching et al. (Hong Kong: Youth Literary Press, 2002), 57.
4. For further discussion of the connotations of the phrase, see Amy Jankowicz, "Let's Love Hong Kong," *Down the Rabbit Hole Film Reviews*, [www.geocities.com/saakfbi/letslovehk.html](http://www.geocities.com/saakfbi/letslovehk.html) (accessed June 20, 2006).
5. Fran Martin has written about the importance of lesbian Internet cultures in Asia to the lives of real lesbians. See Fran Martin, "Floating City, Floating Selves: *Let's Love Hong Kong*," in *Ho Yuk: Script and Critical Essays*, 48.
6. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).
7. It is often understood that the cinema of Hong Kong "moves too fast" and that feeling has not yet been able to catch up to movement. One prominent exponent of this idea is Ackbar Abbas, whose influential theorization of the new Hong Kong cinema utilizes Fredric Jameson's notion of the waning of affect characteristic of the postmodern condition. See Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 27. In relation to Hong Kong video works, Joan Kee writes, "It is hard to live in Hong Kong without becoming obsessed with mobility. One's status is measured by one's ability to migrate, travel. . . . Mobility is largely configured as movement, and moving and transience, as a result, is the norm" ("Inertia Reels: Mobility in Hong Kong Video," *Afterimage* 29, no. 4 [2002]: 8).
8. Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 1.
9. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1994), x.
10. For a broad overview of feminist critiques of mind-body dualism, see Linda Martin Alcoff, "Feminist Theory and Social Science: New Knowledges, New Epistemologies," in *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Duncan (London: Routledge, 1996), 13–27.
11. See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991); Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); and Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

12. For theories of the “body” and “change,” there is rich scholarship in the areas of transgender theory (e.g., Susan Stryker, Judith Halberstam) and body modification (e.g., Nikki Sullivan), although these are not directly relevant to the film *Ho Yuk*.
13. Duncan’s *BodySpace* is an excellent collection in this expanding field of scholarship.
14. Elspeth Probyn, “Lesbians in Space: Gender, Sex, and the Structure of Missing,” *Gender, Place, and Culture* 2 (1995): 78. The body that Probyn seeks to “flesh out” is specifically that of the “lipstick lesbian.” As a counterpoint to this particular body, see Ann M. Ciasullo’s argument that the visualization of the lipstick lesbian by mainstream Western media of the 1990s was made possible by effacing another kind of lesbian body—the “butch”—since images of the butch lesbian are less easily consumable by the mainstream. Note that both of these arguments refer generally to white, upper-middle-class bodies.
15. Probyn, “Lesbians in Space,” 79. The phrase “a concept that is corporeal” is borrowed from Elizabeth Grosz in relation to the notion of desire. Cited in Probyn, 84.
16. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 31.
17. Chan Shun-hing, “Interfacing Feminism and Cultural Studies in Hong Kong: A Case of Everyday Life Politics,” *Cultural Studies* 16 (2002): 708.
18. *TB* closely approximates the term *butch* used by local lesbians. This study formed part of Kam’s MPhil thesis, “Negotiating Gender: Masculine Women in Hong Kong” (Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2003), also published in part as “TB 這 性 別” (“Gender: TB”), *E-Journal on Hong Kong Cultural and Social Studies*, no. 2, September 2002, [www.hku.hk/hkcsp/ccex/ehkcss01/frame.htm?mid=1&smid=1&ssmid=7](http://www.hku.hk/hkcsp/ccex/ehkcss01/frame.htm?mid=1&smid=1&ssmid=7) (accessed June 20, 2006).
19. Lucetta Kam Yip-lo, *Lunar Desires: Her First Same-Sex Love through Her Voice* (Hong Kong: Cultural Act Up, 2001).
20. Tang presented a paper titled “Spaces to Be Manoeuvred: Lesbian Identities and Temporalities” on the panel “Mapping Women’s Desire: Cases in Hong Kong and Shanghai” at the “Sexualities, Genders and Rights in Asia, First International Conference of Asian Queer Studies,” in Bangkok, Thailand, July 7, 2005, based on work in her PhD dissertation.
21. Yau Ching, “Performing Contradictions, Performing Bad-Girlness in East Asia” (presented at the Cultural Studies Seminar Series, Lingnan University, Hong Kong, April 26, 2005).
22. For other examples of ethnographic research on queer bodies and identities in Hong Kong, see Joyce Y. M. Nip’s study of the use of an electronic bulletin board by a Hong Kong women’s group, the Queer Sisters, in “The Queer Sisters and Its Electronic Bulletin Board: A Study of the Internet for Social Movement Mobilization,” *Information, Communication, and Society* 7 (2004): 23–49. On the use of public space by Hong Kong gay men, see Travis Kong Shiu-ki’s in-depth interviews in “Queer at Your

- Own Risk: Marginality, Community, and Hong Kong Gay Male Bodies,” *Sexualities* 7 (2004): 5–30.
23. Sasho Alexander Lambevski, “Movement and Desire: On the Need to Fluidify Academic Discourse on Sexuality,” *GLQ* 10 (2004): 306.
  24. Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 9.
  25. “‘Zero’ refers to a state of (non)being that is nevertheless balanced precisely on the edge of ‘nothing’ and ‘something’: though presently ‘nothing,’ it (?) may soon be(come) ‘something’” (Edward Brannigan, “To Zero and Back: Noel Burch’s *Theory of Film Practice*,” in *Defining Cinema*, ed. Peter Lehman [London: Athlone, 1997]). This is a wonderful description of emerging lesbian communities in Hong Kong: “zero” in the sense not of lack but of potential, poised on the verge of becoming.
  26. Giraffes are actually able to move at great speed (the word *giraffe* comes from the Arab *xirapha*, “the one that walks very fast”). However, Yau plays documentary footage of giraffes in slow motion, representing the animals as graceful, languid bodies. By slowing down their movements for this film, Yau enables us to view their bodies differently and to experience their movements within the context of change made visible.
  27. This seems to me an example of what Gill Valentine would call a renegotiation of the “heterosexual street.” See Gill Valentine, “(Re)negotiating the Heterosexual Street,” in Duncan, *BodySpace*, 146–55.
  28. Probyn, “Lesbians in Space,” 83, 81.
  29. Annamarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.
  30. The casting of Cordero, a famous mixed-race singer from Macau, is ironic, given that she represents family and “pure” Chinese tradition in the film. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for *GLQ* for drawing this point to my attention.
  31. Yau Ching, “Treatment for *Ho Yuk*,” in *Ho Yuk: Script and Critical Essays*, 100.
  32. *Tongzhi*, or “comrade,” is a self-identifying term that has been used by sexual minorities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China since the late 1980s and early 1990s. For more on the definition of this term, see the Institute for Tongzhi Studies Web site, [www.tongzhistudies.org/about/aboutTongzhi.htm](http://www.tongzhistudies.org/about/aboutTongzhi.htm) (accessed June 20, 2006).
  33. Quoted in Jen-peng Liu and Naifei Ding, “Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6 (2005): 31. Although writing in the context of Taiwan, the authors note shared characteristics across contemporary Chinese cultures and explicitly name Hong Kong.
  34. For example, Zero sells sex toys at the Temple Street night markets in Yau Ma Tei, where many newly arrived immigrants from Mainland China often choose to settle. Rental apartments (in older buildings, partitioned into tiny spaces) are much cheaper in this area (as in parts of Kwun Tong, Sham Shui Po, and Sheung Wan). In response, social service centers for new immigrants have also been established in these areas.

- For alternative portrayals of the situation of mainland sex workers in Hong Kong, see Fruit Chan's *Durian Durian* (2000) and *Hollywood Hong Kong* (2002); *Love Will Tear Us Apart* (dir. Nelson Yu; 1999), or *One Night in Mongkok* (dir. Derek Yee; 2004). There are also a number of significant ethnographic studies of the movement of sex workers between the mainland and Hong Kong, such as Elaine Jeffreys, *China, Sex, and Prostitution* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2004).
35. The earthquake as a trope for the tremors in Chinese women's lives is also employed in Sylvia Chang's *20 30 40* (2004). Chang was born in Taiwan; the film is a Hong Kong–Taiwan–Japan coproduction, although Chang is most well known as one of a handful of female Hong Kong star-directors.
  36. Yau received her MA in media studies from New School University in New York and has taught at various U.S. colleges. Her work also screens regularly in film festivals and colleges around America, taking in diverse influences from the United States while remaining locally connected to contemporary Hong Kong society. She made a short film in 1999 titled *I'm Starving*, which is an erotic love story about an African American ghost and a Chinese woman who share an apartment in New York's Chinatown.
  37. Helen Leung, "Queer Asian Cinemas," in *The Bent Lens: A World of Gay and Lesbian Film*, ed. Lisa Daniel and Claire Jackson, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2003), 16. The term *new queer cinema* was first used by B. Ruby Rich in the September 1992 volume of *Sight and Sound* to describe an explosion of independent work by British and American filmmakers of the 1990s such as Tom Kalin, Gregg Araki, Derek Jarman, and Laurie Lynd. These works, characterized by their formal and aesthetic experimentation, were often politically motivated by their connections to AIDS activism, ACT UP, and Queer Nation.
  38. *Ho Yuk* was programmed in a section of the 2002 Hong Kong International Film Festival titled "The Age of Independents: New Asian Film and Video," which was created by a grant from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council in 1999. The broader status of Chinese independent filmmaking is changing, relying increasingly on the international film festival circuit. *Ho Yuk* was invited to the Vancouver International Film Festival, the Sao Paulo International Film Festival, the Hawai'i International Film Festival, the Singapore International Film Festival, and the Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan. It won the International Critics Prize at the Figueira da Foz International Film Festival in Portugal.
  39. Yau Ching, "After Five Years," in *Ho Yuk: Script and Critical Essays*, 18.
  40. The Hong Kong Arts Center inaugurated the Independent Video and Film Awards in 1993, and each year entries have steadily increased. The impact that queer filmmakers will have on this emerging independent film scene remains to be seen.
  41. Julian Lee—*The Accident* (1999) and *Night Corridor* (2003)—has been considered by some as a queer and independent filmmaker, although he has never publicly self-

identified as queer. Other examples include Evans Chan's *Map of Sex and Love* (2001) and Chung's *First Love and Other Pains* and *Innocent*. In the realm of short film and video makers, it is also possible to include Kit Hung and Ellen Pau as "queer and independent." Although publicly identifying as gay, Stanley Kwan is not considered independent in Hong Kong. These examples should be qualified by the recognition of the difficulty of distinguishing independent and commercial films in Hong Kong, particularly since 1997 (see Abbas, *Hong Kong*, chap. 2).

42. *About Gay Movies*, [www.aboutgaymovies.info/films/sugar\\_sweet.htm](http://www.aboutgaymovies.info/films/sugar_sweet.htm) (accessed June 20, 2006). Desiree Lim is now based in Vancouver, Canada, although she made *Sugar Sweet* while living in Tokyo.
43. This feminist reclamation of pornography as something self-defining and self-empowering has been promoted and to some degree initiated by films such as *Variety* (dir. Bette Gordon; 1983).
44. For example, Li Yu has publicly stated that she herself is not a lesbian, although she cast a young lesbian couple whom she met in a bar in China. Lisa Roosen-Runge, "The 20th Vancouver International Film Festival—a Report," *Senses of Cinema*, [www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/17/vancouver.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/17/vancouver.html) (accessed June 20, 2006). Many of the films I have mentioned are either documentaries (e.g., *The Box and Corners*) or are shot in a documentary style (e.g., *Fish and Elephant*), and like *Ho Yuk* will often employ nonprofessional actors who are also lesbians in the lead roles, effectively "playing themselves." Some of these films, including *Ho Yuk*, also contain highly fantastical elements to signify emergent or virtual imaginings.
45. The Hong Kong Disneyland project was announced in November 1999 as a joint venture between the Walt Disney Company and the Hong Kong government. The park opened in September 2005, although in the time of *Ho Yuk* (made in 2002 but set in the near future), it had already been built.
46. Yau writes, "In order to represent a society that moved very fast (*ho yuk*), I wanted the camera to be very quiet. In 99 percent of the scenes, the camera should be kept still, without any movement" ("After 5 Years," in *Ho Yuk: Script and Critical Essays*, 17).