

Feeling alive: Voices of incarcerated youth in *We Are Alive*

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of a documentary film to demonstrate the need to look beyond conventions for insight into youth incarceration. Yau Ching's (2010) *We Are Alive* documents a series of media production workshops conducted in juvenile correctional centres and training centres in Hong Kong, Macao and Sapporo, Japan. *We Are Alive* is a significant media text for analysis for two reasons. First, it is a youth-led documentary that offers a glimpse into settings that are often inaccessible to researchers, and second, it adopts a comparative perspective on three East Asian societies. The film offers rich data for sociological analysis as a point of access to understanding the lives of young people detained in correctional institutions in Asia. In analysing it, this article engages the contesting issues of social conformity, criminal justice, youth resistance and teenage masculinities and femininities through a close reading informed by a theoretical matrix comprising queer theory and cultural studies in an inter-Asian context.

Keywords

Documentary film, juvenile delinquency, Hong Kong, Japan, Macao, youth

Introduction

Cultural studies scholars were the first to highlight the importance of the image. Taking news photographs as his example, Stuart Hall (1981) argues that their selection constitutes an ideological process, with subjective meanings hidden behind news facts. Documentary films are often understood as media texts that provide a glimpse into uncharted territories and socio-political issues. Critical analysis of documentary films in relation to the social world has extended beyond the domain of film and cultural studies scholars. Stones (2002a) integrates

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Nussbaum's (1997: 88) concept of 'civic imagination' with the idea of sociological imagination to explore the humanistic attributes that film and television have cultivated in and conjured up amongst audiences. The intricate accounts of everyday life and social organisation depicted in film and television should be examined for their potential contribution to understanding the relationship between individuals and society (Stones, 2002a, 2002b). Redmon (2016: 3) coins the term 'documentary criminology' in calling for a methodology within criminology that engages with documentaries to provide a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of crime and other transgressions.

In this article, I use an unconventional documentary film as a case study to demonstrate the need to look beyond conventions to obtain cutting-edge insight into incarcerated youths. The film under discussion is *We Are Alive*, an experimental documentary film directed and produced by Hong Kong independent filmmaker and cultural studies scholar Yau Ching (2010). *We Are Alive* documents the process of conducting media production workshops in juvenile reform institutions in Hong Kong, Macao and Sapporo, Japan. The young workshop participants were provided with equipment to create short video letters in which they articulate their desires, memories, popular cultural influences and hopes for the future. In delivering the workshops, Yau gained access to a female juvenile correctional centre in Japan, a male juvenile training centre in Hong Kong and a girls' education and training centre in Macao. Face-to-face contact with the young people living in such facilities is often off-limits to researchers. *We Are Alive* as a media text for analysis is notable for being a youth-led documentary, for providing a glimpse into settings that are often inaccessible and for its comparative perspective on three East Asian societies. It can also be taken as a new form of 'sensorial knowledge' that complements traditional ethnographic approaches to criminology (Redmon, 2016: 4). I chose this particular film for sociological analysis because of its importance as a point of access to understanding the lives of young people detained within correctional institutions in East Asia. In this article, I provide a close reading of *We Are Alive* that is informed by a theoretical matrix comprising queer theory and cultural studies in an inter-Asian context to highlight such contested issues as social conformity, juvenile justice, youth resistance and teenage masculinities and femininities. I contribute to the literature on media sociology by highlighting such marginalised issues as gender and sexuality in Asian societies from a southern perspective (Connell, 2007).

As a form of cultural intervention into youth incarceration, the film urges us to rethink the social construction of youth personhood. I read *We Are Alive* as a media text that attempts to challenge normative assumptions about youth in trouble by highlighting youth-made videos and photographs that speak to common youth issues and desires that blur the boundaries between young people in or out of trouble. Of particular interest is how the filmmaker gained access to the three groups of young people and provided them with tools allowing their voices to be heard, as well as how she selected their self-narratives to portray the commonalities between these young people and their counterparts outside prison. I illustrate the way in which Yau Ching's *We Are Alive* creates an important space for alternative youth narratives while also being limited by the wider discourse on juvenile justice. I first provide an overview of various approaches to juvenile justice and a brief discussion of documentary films, and then map out how different understandings of juvenile justice influence the way in which incarcerated youths represent themselves. Finally, I demonstrate how the film reconstructs youth personhood across the three East Asian societies through the various themes that emerge.

Approaches to juvenile justice in Hong Kong, Japan and Macao

In Hong Kong, the first training centre for boys was established in 1953, with a reformatory school being set up five years later. The centre's curriculum focuses on discipline and hard work, whereas the reform school emphasises character growth through recreational and educational programmes. The first girls' training centre was established in 1969 with the intention of training girls to become proper wives and mothers. Public concern about juvenile crime continued into the affluent 1980s, a period Gray (1996: 309) refers to as 'the disciplinary welfare era'. Young people were assisted by outreach workers and school-based social workers to reconnect with their peers and families while at the same time being monitored and disciplined for their anti-social behaviour.

Gray (1996: 311) further observes from his perusal of sentencing decisions that juveniles are often sentenced based more on their perceived need for discipline than the severity of the offence they have committed. As a result, juveniles are often sentenced to residential training, probation and custody for relatively minor criminal offences. In a study of youth detention centres in Hong Kong, Chui (2005: 71) notes that these centres often deliver a 'short, sharp shock' to young offenders, who are forced to take part in military-style drills and programmes. Adorjan and Chui (2014: 27) concur with Gray's finding that young offenders often have no institutional experience prior to their admittance to detention centres, and often experience 'an amplification of criminal behaviours and criminal self-identity'. Laidler and Lee (2016: 29) discuss the gap between the rehabilitation ideal and the realities of young people's experience of institutionalisation, highlighting in particular 'the precarious balance of care and control' in early studies of juvenile delinquency.

In comparison to Hong Kong, there is a dearth of English-language criminological studies in Japan and Macao (Liu et al., 2001). The language barrier remains an issue for accessing information and data on Japan, and there is also limited English-language research on crime in Macao. The majority of such research is in Chinese, including several Master's theses from the University of Macau. In a comparative study of Japanese and English approaches to juvenile justice, Lewis et al. (2009: 76) find that the juvenile justice system in Japan is only one of many social institutions governing young people's behaviour. Social conformity is generally expected by Japanese society, and enforced through education, religion, family and peer groups. In addition, and different from the UK, Japan adopts a welfare-based approach to juvenile justice issues by combining formal criminal justice with informal means of social control in everyday social institutions (Lewis et al., 2009: 76). When a juvenile is arrested, his or her parents or guardians are often immediately notified by the police. He or she then appears before a family court judge, and is sentenced to either a juvenile correctional centre or a foster home. Juvenile correctional centres in Japan are set up as rehabilitation centres for young offenders, and offer vocational training, counselling and academic studies. Of the 52 such centres across the country, nine are currently for girls. Child pornography and 'compensated dating' are two of the most prominent youth-related crimes in Japan, and they are taken very seriously and incur heavy statutory penalties (Nawa, 2006).

Macao's economy is heavily dependent on its casino industry, with employment by the industry a fact of life for many families. The casino industry ranks second amongst the territory's major employment sectors, employing 20.8% of the labour force in 2011 (Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau, 2012). Upon graduation from secondary school, young people have to wait until they reach the legal age of 21 to work as a dealer in a casino. Gambling-related crimes such

as loan-sharking, fraud and illegal gambling are common amongst adults in Macao, and young people are often actively recruited to assist in criminal activities as well (Wan, 2012). The city's youth correctional institution comprises a boys' home and a girls' home, each of which houses its own observation centre for short stays, an education centre and a combined education and training centre. The combined centre targets youths who have committed serious criminal offences, and enforces a strict training regime focusing on discipline and physical fitness along with vocational and educational training. Zhao and Liu (2011: 217) note that the Public Security Police in Macao generally opt to hand out a 'police warning' to first-time young offenders who have committed a minor offence, which they argue helps to alleviate the stigmatisation of youth delinquency in Macao. In summary, Hong Kong's mix of a disciplinary and rehabilitation regime contrasts with Japan's welfare-based approach, whereas Macao appears to be more active in using such prevention measures as police warnings (Chui, 2005: 71). All three societies involved in the filming of *We Are Alive* have relatively low crime rates, and yet their governments are still very concerned about the issue of juvenile delinquency. For the young people living in these societies, social nonconformity and deviant behaviour are performed at grave risk. In the next section, I situate the film as a media text for comparative juvenile justice research through its inter-Asian referencing of popular culture and youth issues.

Comparative juvenile justice, inter-Asia referencing and documentary films

Comparative qualitative research on crime and criminal justice in Asia encompasses ethnographic work on issues ranging from policing to prison life (Adorjan and Chui, 2012; Johnson, 2002; Martin, 2007). Travers (2013) criticises comparative research studies that employ western theories alone, calling for an interpretive approach to understanding the shared commonalities amongst the juvenile justice systems of closely linked East Asian societies. He argues that by comparing East Asian societies against 'an international (Western) standard', researchers are neglecting cultures and institutions within and across East Asian societies (Travers, 2013: 121). New concepts and themes for understanding the criminal justice systems in those societies need to be developed in conjunction with reference to western theories (Zhang, 2008). The de-westernisation of and inter-Asian referencing in knowledge production have long been on the research agendas of cultural studies scholars in non-western regions (Iwabuchi, 2014). This is not to say that Euro-American theories are never useful in theorisation concerning non-western societies, but rather that it is critical to acknowledge that academic knowledge production has taken place on uneven ground. Iwabuchi (2014: 46) cogently calls the issue at hand 'a question of reciprocal listening'. He raises the issue of reciprocity with regard to cultural studies scholars based in non-Euro-American institutions often looking towards Euro-American scholarship as a reference point while neglecting theories generated in non-Euro-American contexts. Iwabuchi (2014: 47) advocates inter-Asian referencing through dialogue with perspectives generated in Asian contexts while at the same time understanding the 'deep-seated western inflections' of Euro-American intellectual influences on Asian modernisation processes.

One of the purposes of making a documentary film is to make unheard voices heard and to bring forth new understandings of marginalised subjects. Hong (2013: 688) examines the inter-related notions of representation, representability and representativeness in Taiwanese filmmaker

Mickey Chen's documentaries on queer communities. He calls for a rethinking of documentary film, for it to be seen not merely as a record for those communities but rather as an actual form of politics open to various interpretations (Hong, 2013: 699). Reflecting upon China's new documentary movement, Lu (2010: 15) describes the movement's power to 'reveal new, and often painful, forms of reality' in the country's opening up and transition to a market economy. Tan (2016: 233) criticises the Singaporean government's ongoing censorship of political films despite its preoccupation with projecting Singapore as a neoliberal, creative city. The social location of a filmmaker often exerts a strong influence on both the subject matter and the making of the film. Mumbai filmmaker and scholar Neha Raheja Thakker situates filmmaking as 'a collage of urban assemblages' in her quest for 'humanity in the city' (see Sen and Thakker, 2011: 30). In Hong Kong, the 'activist documentary' movement of the 1970s featured subject matter ranging from territorial disputes over the Diaoyu Islands (known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan) to housing issues. The 1980s saw a burgeoning of television documentaries and the theatrical release of travel documentaries made by left-wing film companies from mainland China. With the onset of digital cameras, smartphones and a multitude of online platforms, the documentation of everyday life has become increasingly commonplace. Recent political tensions in Hong Kong have resulted in a protest culture that has given rise to new youth voices. The 2014 Umbrella Movement, for example, has sparked an unprecedented range of youth-produced art and videos over the past few years. The rise of localism and anti-mainland Chinese sentiments in the territory has also fuelled the creation of new media art that circulates on Facebook and other social media.

Background information on *We Are Alive* and its creator

Hong Kong filmmaker, poet and cultural studies scholar Yau Ching has been making films and writing on visual culture and sexualities for more than 20 years. Her experimental video art and films often explore issues of post-colonialism, Hong Kong identity, gender and sexualities. In addition to her early involvement in such art collectives as the legendary Phoenix Film Club and internationally renowned arts organisation Videotage, Yau is a former editor of *Film Weekly* and a regular social and cultural commentator in newspapers. She is also actively engaged in social movements advocating for the rights of sex workers and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community and in fighting for sexual rights. Her notable filmography includes *Diasporama: Dead Air* (Yau, 1997) an experimental documentary on the diasporic experiences of individuals who emigrated from Hong Kong. However, Yau is perhaps best known for making Hong Kong's first feature-length film on lesbian and transgender sexualities: *Ho Yuk: Let's Love Hong Kong* (Yau, 2002). I first met Yau in Vancouver in the mid-1990s when she approached me to speak about my experience of being a Canadian immigrant for *Diasporama*. Upon returning to Hong Kong to conduct postgraduate research on lesbian urban spaces, I wrote an article on *Ho Yuk: Let's Love Hong Kong* as part of my doctoral studies. For the current article, I conducted an in-depth interview with Yau in 2015 during which we discussed issues of representation, audience feedback and reception, as well as the ethics and responsibility of a filmmaker taking up youth-related issues.

The origins of *We Are Alive* lie in a series of media-making workshops held in juvenile training centres in Hong Kong, Macao and Sapporo from 2002 to 2005 (see Figure 1). In 2002, Yau was invited by the youth correctional institution in Macao to conduct a series of video-making



Figure 1. Film director Yau Ching with boys at male juvenile training centre.
Film director Yau Ching with girls at female juvenile correctional centre in Japan.

workshops. Then, in 2003, she was awarded a position as artist-in-residence in Sapporo, where she requested permission to conduct media-making workshops in a girls' correctional centre. In the summer of 2004, Yau began seeking opportunities to carry out similar workshops at rehabilitation centres and correctional institutions in Hong Kong. After a few months, she succeeded in gaining permission to deliver a four-day workshop at a male training and rehabilitation centre in Shatin. In all of the participating institutions, the participating young people were given digital cameras and sound recorders to create video letters and take still photographs of themselves and/or their peers in the institution. They were also provided with disposable cameras for use outside the workshops. During the workshops, Yau, as the facilitator and instructor, asked the participants to imagine making a video letter as if they were recording a message to place in a glass bottle and then throw out to sea. She asked them to record the letters for their future selves in five years' time. Other topics they could address in their letters were their hobbies, future dreams and favourite artists, films and books. The resulting eight-year film project is a montage of the video messages made by these young people and edited by Yau, as well as footage from the workshops and interviews with the participants carried out by the filmmaker. In the following, I

discuss the themes that emerge from the video messages in analysing the construction of youth personhood in *We Are Alive*.

Staging the juvenile experience

Social stigmatisation and the 'othering' of young people who have been involved in the criminal justice system are widely explored in the young participants' media representations. They were given a free hand, with minimal guidance. Many of the young women in Macao staged dramas and created scenes expressing their feelings of loneliness and frustration. In one scene, a girl pretending to be an authority figure yells at another girl: 'Can you stop [smiling] now? I'm yelling at you, and you keep laughing! You should be ashamed of yourself! You should be ashamed of yourself! Do you know what it means to [feel shame]?'. The authority figure the girl is impersonating could be a parent, a police officer/guard in the facility or a teacher. She imitates the way in which the adults around her speak to her. Being locked up is shameful not only for the girl herself, but also for everyone associated with her, as occurs in stigmatisation. Being shameful also needs to be understood as *feeling* shame. As the girl's voice escalates from the first sentence to the last, so too does the verbal violence being directed at the recipient.

Queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (2003: 36) poignantly states that '[s]hame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication. Indeed, like a stigma, shame is itself a form of communication'. She explains that feeling shame is both a sociable moment and a performance. It is sociable because it provokes feelings of shame from another through the desire for reciprocity. It is also performative, like a spectacle to be unfolded. Referring back to the extract above in which one girl commands another to feel ashamed, we are reminded that shame is a type of affect that acts in circuitry, projecting from one to another and back. Shame is also a common trope in descriptions of how one should feel when caught in a wrongful act.

Another scene from the Macao facility depicts a girl sitting on a chair in front of a table tennis table with her head resting in her hands as if she is making a confession (see Figure 2). She says: 'Actually I'm really not that naughty. Why was I sent here? There are tonnes of bad people out



Figure 2. Girl sitting at table tennis table in the Macao girls' education and training centre.

there. Why me? I'm not that bad. The judge, so nasty'. Her voice breaks between the sentences, as if she were sobbing. Her decision to act this scene out in front of the camera rather than talking straight to the camera appears deliberate yet indirect. It is a performance within the framework of incarceration. The staging of these girls' experiences in a juvenile detention centre speaks to a form of righteousness performed for an audience. In their fragmented representations of their everyday lives under incarceration, the notion of having done wrong or been wronged seems key to their self-narratives. The criteria for gaining rightful personhood within society are dependent on the congruence of a young person's behaviour and whether that behaviour is socially acceptable, legally binding and/or morally deserving.

In examining the criminalisation of racialised individuals within a neoliberal regime, Lisa Marie Cacho (2012: 4) examines 'how human value is made intelligible through racialized, sexualized, spatialized, and state-sanctioned violences'. She questions how in determining a person's social value, his or her given status position can be a way of representing him or herself as moral and deserving. Writing within the framework of the US criminalisation of racial minorities, Cacho (2012) emphasises moral value and its relationship with discrimination, political legitimacy, neoliberalism and personhood, prompting us to make a broader inquiry concerning the construction of personhood. In the extract cited above, the girl cries out for someone else to be sent to jail instead of her, as well as accusing the judge of bias, which speaks to her recognition of wider systemic injustice. The girl voices her discontent with and lack of belief in the justice system, and acts as if she is being framed and imprisoned by injustice. Her choice to deliver this message to the camera for receipt by an unknown audience can be understood not only as crying out for herself, but also as a critique of a system that is meant to educate and rehabilitate. As Cacho (2012) critically asks, who benefits from the imprisonment of youths? Can the earlier performance of shame speak to the unjust imprisonment of a young woman? The way that shame is deployed and represented in the film points to the structural injustices in the criminal system, but shame is also closely bound up with family for the young people depicted. In the next section, I draw upon their descriptions of their families to show how family relations are configured within institutional settings.

Talking about families

The participants' feelings about their connection with or disconnection from family arise throughout their recordings. We are presented with seemingly disorganised excerpts from these young people's stories concerning the dynamics of their relationships with family members. Comparison of the various narratives reveals that Hong Kong boys often present a picture of themselves as a responsible breadwinner within the family as their ideal future role. However, there are conflicting accounts. Being with family is sometimes highlighted in the boys' descriptions of a special event or of the happiest moments in their lives, whilst others discount it in recalling traumatic experiences with family. However, the girls display an even wider range of attitudes towards their families. In one instance, a girl in the Macao facility describes her emotions in different situations: 'When I'm happy, I smile. When I'm unhappy, I look "cool". But when I'm worried about my mom, I cry'. The girls in the Sapporo facility are more direct in describing contentious family relations. There are several occasions in which the girls are asked about their relationships with their parents. In one case, when asked 'Do you miss your parents?', a girl answers 'Not really'. When the

interviewer pursues the reason, asking 'Why not?', the girl hesitates for a few seconds, and then says abruptly: 'Cos they really bug me'. Throughout the film, we watch this same girl being annoyed by the teachers in the facility and being frank about rebelling against authority. Yet, when she films herself we also witness her talking about her dreams of enjoying melon buns and other things she misses from the world outside the institution. However, the outside world where her parents reside seems to pose more of a problem than anything else, which goes back to Cacho's (2012) assertion about young people gaining rightful personhood in society through social conformity, in this case conformity with one's expected role as a daughter. It is also congruent with the Japanese juvenile justice system's use of such social institutions as peer groups and family to govern behaviour. Any form of deviance in relation to others is reprimanded.

Another workshop participant states:

I don't have a mother, [and] my dad is in jail for taking drugs. He's very scary. I dunno why, he's always upset. He also fought with grandma. The cops had to come ... But I didn't want to go home, [and] the hospital did not want me to go home, so I am living here now and talking with everybody, including the teachers, too. The dorm manager and his wife are like mom and dad to me.

Viewers are only given the explanation that this young woman was sent to the institution because she was 'sick'. Repeatedly throughout the film, she gives 'being sick' as the primary reason she was sent to the facility, and she shows photographs she has taken of the dorm manager and his wife to represent life within the institution. Parenting styles and poor parent-adolescent relationships are often related to problematic behaviour in adolescents, and it is widely agreed that exposure to domestic violence and criminal activities carried out by parents exert a significant impact on both bullying behaviour and victimisation amongst male adolescents (Baldry, 2003). The point being made by the filmmaker here can be read as a deliberate pause in how one should understand life within institutional walls, thereby complicating the story of what being jailed means to a young person.

The daily schedule in the Sapporo facility is strictly regulated, with detainees expected to lead a highly disciplined life and to take care not to fall behind schedule. One of the facility's staff members mentions in the film that 'their [the girls'] daily life is all decided for them'. In her study of the everyday lives of girls detained in the Hong Kong Kwai Chung Girl's [sic] home, Chan Mei-wan (1988) also demonstrates how the home's system of rewards and punishments encourages social conformity. Expanding upon John Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming, Sakiyama et al. (2011: 166) use the case of juvenile offenders in Japan to illustrate the cultural context of deviance prevention in a society that values social conformity and communitarian living. Seeking forgiveness through apologies is expected in Japan to the extent that those who have committed a criminal act are expected to seek forgiveness from the parties harmed by that act (Smith and Sueda, 2008). One young girl at the Sapporo facility makes an apology to her family in the film: '[To the future me,] be good to dad [and] mom. [And] grandma, please. Sorry this video is kinda weird. Sorry. I'd be grateful [then bows 90 degrees towards the camera]'. In this private moment, she blames herself for severing family relations. Her stoic expression during the apology signifies a form of repentance that is tied to her social location as a young girl who has been arrested for compensated dating and detained in the facility for more than a year. By apologising on film, this

young narrator takes responsibility for her imprisonment, echoing Cacho's (2012) problematisation of the casting of racialised individuals as deserving of criminalisation by neoliberal regimes. What I mean is that the narrator is not only influenced by the Japanese cultural tradition of apology but is also taking up the neoliberalist tendency to assume responsibility despite interrogating the role of the state in legitimating certain acts as illegal and in need of correction.

In the next section, I focus on the comparative aspect of the film, look at the inter-Asian referencing of pop culture references and further explore the social meanings that the workshop participants attach to those references. My overarching aim is to examine how these inter-Asian pop culture references relate to the overall film narrative of constructing youth personhood.

Deployment of East Asian pop culture references

East Asian pop culture icons such as Hong Kong actor Stephen Chow's 'no-sense' comedies figure prominently throughout *We Are Alive*. Youth performances of their favourite pop icons or imitations of the style of particular pop culture icons add another dimension to the film. A notable editing technique in the film, which is not characteristic of conventional documentaries, is the deliberate interruption of the young participants' recordings and/or interviews with music videos, animations, commercials and film excerpts when they mention influential pop culture idols in their lives (see Figure 3). Each such interruption is a response to the young person's account of who he or she admires in popular culture. Edited excerpts featuring Chinese and Japanese musicians and actors, including Bruce Lee, Morning Misume, Stephen Chow, Shina Ringo and Utada Hikaru, are inserted at various moments in the film as if they are spontaneous thoughts that spring up during the young people's narrations. At times, these film and music video excerpts are presented in conjunction with a young person's performance of the celebrity icon depicted.

For example, we watch a tomboy mimicking the canonical and rebellious figure Bruce Lee (see Figure 4) in a playground in Macao while dressed in a traditional blue cotton jacket and making kung fu moves while a voiceover says:

She's 'Bruise Lee'. She's also the tallest and coolest one in the girls' home. She can kick ass ... or so it seems. 'Bruise Lee' is obsessed with martial arts. She practises all day. That's how she went totally nuts.

Although some of the boys in the Hong Kong facility also mention Bruce Lee, the kung fu moves performed by the Macao tomboy are notable for representing a form of gender subversion. Her performance, accompanied by another girl's narration, transgresses gender boundaries. More importantly, the narrator's mocking admiration of 'Bruise Lee' is reminiscent of the real Bruce Lee's rebellion against authority and racial superiority. The viewer is prompted to think about what fighting means in this context. The Bruce Lee performance in the middle of a playground in a juvenile detention centre can be perceived as an act of resistance against the authorities. Appropriating a cultural icon widely seen as a rebellious figure can be related to the girl's assertion of moral righteousness. It is also a performance that crosses over into what Judith Halberstam (2005: 15) calls 'a queer time and place'. This young tomboy momentarily occupies the playground of a penal institution with the assistance of a friend and her video camera, flexing both her muscles and her gender identity. The appropriation of a rebellious figure is playful



Figure 3. Mapping of workshop participant onto a pop cultural image.



Figure 4. Workshop participant Bruise Lee performing as Bruce Lee in a playground within a girls' education and training centre in Macau.

and consistent with staging performances for the camera. The youth performances captured on camera in the film can be read as momentary escapes from their institutionalised settings. The choice of mainstream pop culture icons adds another layer onto the narrative of incarcerated youth being 'as normal as possible' (Yau, 2010: 3). Moving on from the earlier discussion of the staging of the juvenile experience on screen and the inter-Asian referencing of youth icons here, the following section examines the rare representation of intimacy within youth detention centres.

Capturing sexualities and social conformity

In their discussion of life in male and female prisons in the UK, Bosworth and Carrabine (2001: 511) draw upon queer studies and feminist and critical race theory to highlight 'the agonistic play of power' within everyday resistance and subversive practices amongst offenders. In particular, lesbian relationships amongst female offenders are read as resistance towards the stereotyping of gender roles and the enforcement of heterosexuality. One does not expect to see bold depictions of sexuality and 'practices of intimacy' in a film portraying the lives of young people locked up in juvenile detention centres in East Asian societies (Jamieson, 2011). We expect physical bodies to be heavily regulated within such institutions, but practices of intimacy are rarely a critical issue in representations of youths in detention. In *We Are Alive*, the participating boys and girls are given cameras, microphones and headphones to create their own videos, and some of them create video letters to their loved ones. One boy also records his admiration for another boy in the facility. These portraits of intimacy give the participants a voice.

When asked to make video letters about their most memorable experiences, some of the boys choose to talk about their girlfriends. Their shyness is captured vividly on camera. As instructed by Yau, many of them write down what they want to say before delivering their messages on camera. In some instances, the narrator turns his head to the side, scratches his neck or head, looks away and then back to the camera, reads from the script or uses it to cover his face. In one scene, a boy reads from a pad of paper as he recalls his experience with his first love:

I didn't dare to look her in the eye. I was thinking, does she really like me? If I told her, but she rejected me, I would feel shitty. I gathered all my courage and said to her, 'Yes, I really like you. Can you be my girlfriend?' She smiled, very sweetly, and said 'Yes'.

These confessional love letters to girlfriends are being read out behind bars in a setting that does not allow one to feel romantic or loved. Indeed, one boy points out that his girlfriend broke up with him by letter after her teacher instructed her to do so because of his status as a juvenile delinquent. In another sequence, we watch a boy recording his narrative 18 times, swearing between takes when he is interrupted by others in the room.

We watch another boy recalling the following happy memory:

The happiest moment of my life was when I went with my family and my girlfriend to Lion Rock to watch the sunrise. The sunrise that day was so beautiful, like a salted egg yolk. After watching the sunrise, me and my girlfriend went to grab a bite. But by the time I got to look at the photo, I was already here. Because I got into trouble. When I saw the photo, I couldn't help



Figure 5. Intimate portrait of boys in the male juvenile training centre in Hong Kong.

bursting into tears. But I said to my dad, when I'm out, we'll definitely have another chance to go watch the sunrise together again.

Practices of intimacy refer to how we act within social groups and with one another to establish a socially recognised form of closeness and to have 'a special quality of close connection' (Jamieson, 2011: 3). Such practices in the form of hugging and fooling around are captured in scenes filmed in the former Shatin Boys' Home in Hong Kong (see Figure 5). Interestingly, acts of hypermasculinity, which Reich (2010) argues constitute everyday practice in male institutions, are missing here. One cannot always tell whether the scenes are captured by the filmmaker or recorded by the workshop participants themselves. In one instance, a boy confesses his love for a roommate. After a bit of fooling around, he playfully pins down the object of his affections and pretends to kiss him. He then speaks into the microphone: 'He's cute and friendly. If I were a girl, I'd definitely fall for him. Too bad he's not a girl'. In my interview with the filmmaker, she explains: 'He's talking about gay desires, but he has to use a heterosexual framework to frame his gay desires. The expressing of his desires is very queer. Self-contradiction is built into the narrative'.

The suppression of gay desires is a concern not only in this instance. Gender role conformity and heterosexuality are often the cultural norms in penal institutions. As mentioned in the article's overview of approaches to juvenile justice in both Chinese and Japanese societies, collectivism and harmony are key cultural norms. Children and young people in particular are trained to believe that they must practise social and gender conformity by putting aside individual interests and desires. Conformity is not only expected within the family but also within peer groups. Self-control theory is often used to explain juvenile delinquency, with such poor self-control characteristics as risk-taking, impulsivity, self-centredness and hot-temperedness seen as related to a young person's likelihood of engaging in criminal activities (Chui and Chan, 2015). The act of cutting oneself, discussed in the next section, can also be erroneously read as a personal act without social ramifications. Yet I assert that the representation of self-harm on film constitutes a protest designed to highlight bodily harm as a public issue in need of 'shared witnessing' (Ahmed, 2004: 94).



Figure 6. A girl's display of her cutting marks.

Representation of self-harm on camera

A number of young girls in both the Japan and Macao facilities display cutting marks on their arms while filming themselves (see Figure 6). One girl offers a close-up of a scar on her wrist, remarking in Japanese, 'This is a "wrist-cut"'. She then pulls her wrist back, takes up the black spongy microphone and says, 'I'm eating the microphone'. She opens her mouth and pretends to swallow the microphone. Two seconds later, she says, 'The microphone has been eaten'. The girl's display of a healed wound indicating self-harm is followed by pretending to swallow a large spongy microphone. Is she just goofing around, or is she trying to downplay the act of cutting herself? Or is she telling us that a past act of self-harm in an institutional setting is demonstrative of what being labelled as deviant actually means, i.e. a form of institutional violence? Self-cutting as a deviant behaviour is commonly associated with young women (Hawton et al., 2002; Kirkcaldy et al., 2006).

Another account in Macao shows a young female narrator saying, 'Now look at the back of my left hand; there's a tattoo' (see Figure 7). The camera then focuses on the Chinese character for 'evil' on her arm before moving up as she says, 'Keep going up, and you'll see a lot of scars'. These straightforward images of multiple cuts and a tattoo are what viewers might expect of 'bad girls', but they are also the images chosen by the young girls themselves, as if they assume they are the images the public wants to see to verify their status as bad girls. Discussing the use of disgust as a performative act, cultural theorist Sara Ahmed (2004: 94) asserts that the 'shared witnessing' of a disgusting event is critical for generating affect in order to have an effect. That effect can be creating a community of witnesses. The exhibition of self-harming behaviour in the case of *We Are Alive* can also be read as the shared witnessing of a performative act of deviance in a confined space with a wider audience.

The Japanese girl in the scene described above reappears in a later scene:

I'm not good at talking. Please look. Do you remember this? This is from me; it's from slitting my wrist. Remember? The teachers and the child guidance people said 'Don't hurt yourself'. I started doing this after reading a book called *Knife*.

The first time I cut [myself was] to deal with the pain. Well, when it bleeds, how should I put this ... how do you say ... like ... only through this, [though] hurting myself [can] I put up with a lot of things.



Figure 7. A girl's tattoo with the Chinese character 'evil' or 'fierce'.

Adler and Adler (2007: 539) define self-injury behaviour such as cutting oneself as 'a complex process of symbolic interaction rather than as a medical problem'. They urge us to investigate not only the personal but also the social issues that lead to self-harm. By choosing to show the audience their scars in an institutionalised setting and explaining their reasons for the acts that caused them, these girls make us aware of the social context in which self-harming behaviour is articulated. The typical self-injurer is commonly perceived to be young, female and middle-class, but several studies point to social exclusion and socioeconomic deprivation as socioeconomic factors leading to incidences of self-harm (Hawton et al., 2002; Platt et al., 2005; Shek, Tang, 2014 and Yu, 2012). I read Yau's inclusion of the young women's self-harm representations as demonstrating that the private act of hurting oneself can constitute recourse to wider structural forces. The representations attract the public gaze, making viewers 'shared witnesses' to a painful event.

Conclusion: Youth futures

It is perhaps the futurity of young people that is often of concern to parents, teachers, police officers and social workers. One can imagine a typical documentary on juvenile crime beginning with the background of young offenders and the reasons they were arrested, followed by facts and figures to highlight social injustice and the systematic discrimination of the criminal justice system. At the end of such a film, a viewer might expect the filmmaker to show how the young people featured have fared since being released from detention. As a researcher, I asked Yau whether, as a filmmaker, she thinks about how the young people in *We Are Alive* are doing today. In response, she gave an elaborate answer listing her reasons for not following their lives:

I don't think about it. People as[k] me this question all the time. I think my film is different from other youth documentaries but it is a documentary nonetheless. The film is not a human story. The reason why I put so many young people in the film and [did] not focu[s] on [say] three young persons is because I didn't intend to make a character-based story. I'm not following one person for ten years. I don't investigate their families or anything outside of the reformatory school or institution. It's only what they have told me in the film and that's it. I intentionally

didn't want to follow their future ... I wanted to make a documentary that represent[s] a moment, [a film] about these young people and their 'one-night stand' with me. It is only in an institutionalised setting and an isolated environment like the one in this film [that] can ... enable young persons to tell the[ir] story like [they do]. Outside of this setting, they wouldn't tell the stories the way they [do] in the film. I need the film to not be about one young person's life. I need the film to be a story about our society, [and] not about just one society, but three societies, an inter-Asian story.

The self-filmed narrative accounts created by the workshop participants do not depart from their happiness and ensuing anxieties about leaving their institutions. Their futures are told through their video letters, particularly when the filmmaker asks them to imagine themselves in five years' time. In other words, their futures are told through a mediated representation of themselves. One boy envisions his future with a large degree of uncertainty: 'I might be studying, working or ... back in prison. A college student, probably not. My grades will be really good or bad. Or maybe I'm already dead. I'm not sure I'll still be alive; I may be dead by then'. His jumps from the possibility of being a college student to not being able to imagine oneself as one to the possibility of his already being dead or being dead in the near future are delivered in one smooth narrative. Here, we can expand on Cacho's (2012) theorisation of social death to suggest that once a youth has been criminalised, his or her eventual release may be insufficient to confer him or her status as a socially recognised, respected person. A young person's humanity 'is represented as something that one becomes or achieves, that one must earn because it cannot just be' (Cacho, 2012: 6).

To conclude, this article illustrates how notions of moral righteousness and youth personhood are constructed, negotiated and enacted through textual analysis of the video letters produced by young people incarcerated in youth detention centres and reformatory schools in Hong Kong, Macao and Japan, as depicted in Yau Ching's innovative documentary *We Are Alive*. It presents the construction of youth personhood as transgressing boundaries of intimacy, blurring societal understandings of conformity and reclaiming representations of self-harming behaviour. In one telling moment in the film, a girl follows the workshop guidelines in filming herself making different facial expressions. Similar to the other participants, she films her 'angry face', 'sad face' and 'happy face'. After telling us that we are looking at her happy face, however, she says, 'My happy face may be a little disgusting'. This brings us back to Ahmed's (2004: 94) claim about 'shared witnessing'. A film such as *We Are Alive* affords us a shared witnessing of everyday life for incarcerated youth, allowing us to make sense of normality and its contested meanings.

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