

Chinese Identities on Screen

Edited by Klaus Mühlhahn and Clemens von Haselberg

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Branding Sate, Being Alternative: Locating Queer
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Yau Ching

MANY AND TWO OF (A) KIN(D)

— An Imaginary Dialogue with Hong Kong Independent Filmmaker Yau Ching

In this paper, I would like to share with you some thoughts that I have been having lately about the works of a person whom I've gotten to know quite intimately over the past few decades. She is known as 游靜 (which could be literally translated as “swimming/playing in quietude”) in the Chinese-speaking worlds, a name given to her by her father not for its poetry but to reserve a life of quietude for himself. For a variety of reasons, Yau Ching has always had difficulty in speaking of her own works, so she has hired me to discuss her works instead. Here I should state clearly that, although I have been in dialogue with Yau Ching for a long time, and have been considered as “kin” to her, I do not in fact know her very well.

Coming Out of Oneself

Hard wired with a reckless desire for upward mobility and a modern – if not quite Christian – work ethic, Yau Ching has always operated as if she could live forever. Born with sickle cell disease in Hong Kong, and having watched too much James Dean on television (her mother was a big fan) at an early age, she works as if she might die anytime. Her writings were first published in Chinese in the early 1980s. After being immersed in Shakespeare, Russian novels, and Chinese early modernist poetry at college in Hong Kong, Yau Ching swore, following in the footsteps of Chaplin in *Modern Times*, that she would only learn how to push mechanical buttons from then on. In order to follow Chaplin, she had to go to New York – which had she heard was a key meeting place for many different kinds of buttons and button-pushers – to learn how to make films. She found herself, first of all, in a school where a large number of German refugee scholars had taken shelter, and after this, taking part in a studio art program in which a filmmaker called Yvonne Rainer was teaching. Rainer, if the “truth” be told, did not really teach: rather, she would sit behind the group of young artist wannabes (different meaning from “budding artists”), either listening to their endless boasting about the difficulties of working on something that they called art or mumbling her way through as she performed her own speech disorder. The program director would sometimes burst in to ask, “What kind of a class is this?”

At that time, Rainer had just completed a feature film called *Privilege*, in which a narrative, personal documentary was cast in a highly self-critical, reflexive – often referred to as “experimental” – form to interrogate the issues faced by “women” (this universalizing category was also problematized in the film) going through the menopause in the US. Rainer was also starting on her next piece of work, which examined the lesbian relationship between two women, one of whom had been diagnosed with breast cancer. In retrospect, I think it would be fair to say that Yau Ching’s work was greatly inspired by Rainer in many ways. While Rainer has been moving across dance, writing and filmmaking, Yau Ching also travels between the forms of literary and critical writing to films and videos. While Yau Ching’s work has also sought to put the private, the intimate, and the self-doubting selves into the political, she also learned from Rainer the resistance to and fascination with genre-based filmmaking, as all efforts of categorization, including

genre, *are* political. Before she met Rainer in 1992, Yau Ching had made a short film entitled *Is There Anything Specific You Want Me To Tell You About?*, an experimental documentary about the relationship between historical memory, desire and migration. This was, perhaps, one of the reasons that Rainer chose Yau Ching to be her protégé in the first place.

Identity Fails

Stephen Chow (in black suit and tie): Bro', that I can dress up today in exactly the way you do to go to work, makes me very happy!

Andy Lau (in black suit and tie): Isn't it. You look like a human, finally.

Chow: Bro', I wanna...

Lau: What? What else do you want?

Chow (switches to singing and dancing): ...I wanna work hard and move up, not to let people down. I wanna work hard and move up, to make my friends happy.

Lau (joins Chow dancing and a whole group of young people wearing black suits): Hey, young people need to work hard. Don't be sad and melancholy. One should rely on one's self and strengthen one's will first...

The two are about to go arm in arm singing from the top of the stairs but suddenly lose their balance and roll down the steps instead.

Crowd (watching and pointing to the fallen couple): You make "no sense"!

Lau and Chow (together): You don't have to watch, stupid!

(Tricky Brains)

The voiceover of *Is There Anything Specific You Want Me To Tell You About?* constructs a woman character who is writing letters to another fictional character called Shu and asking her almost unanswerable questions, many of which are concerned with notions and layers of departure, ranging from historical narratives designating Chineseness, to heteronormativity, to gender construction as "woman", and so on. Those who are familiar with Yau Ching's writings from the 1980s might find the interrogative, rhetorical tone of this voice resembling the tone of her early writings. This was the last time, however, that this voice would predominate in Yau Ching's moving image works, although it does re-surface, for just a few minutes, in *Diasporama: Dead Air*, a feature documentary released just before the 1997 handover. From that time onwards, the singularity of the apparently autobiographical gave way to a multitude of voices which explored desire and social relations, and structured the conditions *to be... to be what?* That is the question. Rainer seems to have been asking this question in different forms for more than four decades, for example, how to be a dancer and a filmmaker at the same time (*Lives of Performers*), how to be a straight woman (*A Film About a Woman Who...*), how to be a straight man (*The Man Who Envied Women*), how to be a lesbian and, last but not least, how to be a lesbian suffering from cancer (*MURDER and murder*). For Yau Ching, the "to-be what" seems to be an open-ended question. In *Flow*, completed in 1993, Wenyi Hou, the Chinese woman migrant artist being interviewed, struggles with the impossibility of identity formation through speech and performs instead a documentary scene that has obviously been rehearsed, in order to highlight the *unhumanness* of being human. She asks whether it is possible that we all originated from and could be reducible to grapes, in the form of bunches, connecting and consumable, yet all brilliant and different in their own contexts, or in her words, "in another kind of time".

The grape metaphor is a key motif in this work. The multiple possibilities that the grape offers for enabling and nurturing life – through its embodiment of seeds and being eaten – are transformed into objects/things for “painting” on handmade paper. In other words, the act of executing the “paintings” kills the grapes yet, at the same time, injects them into a second life cycle called art, a different process of preservation and decaying, living and dying. These processes of enquiry, self-reduction and re-invention should be seen as emotive responses to a form of historical violence in which humans, be they rulers or family members or teachers, have been rendered into non-human forms, gods and monsters, and the innocent efforts of re-imagining and narrating these from a mundane, human perspective (Wenyi asks: “Does the Sun need to pee? Is the Sun’s pee rain for us sprouts so we could grow?”) have been considered moral and political taboos and would cause great psychological stress, if not physical lives.



Video Still from *Flow*

The subject in *Flow*, according to her own self-disclosure, has failed to live up to national (partyline-embracing proletarian or bureaucratic Chinese in China; functional, job-secured or profit-making in the US), family (married heterosexual woman), individualist (autonomous and able to articulate oneself through language) standards. *Flow* ends with Wenyi asking the question: “How many cycles does one have to go through in order to be human?”, which suggests the difficulty of achieving humanness and the predicament of recycling consciousness; the fear and futility of reincarnation.

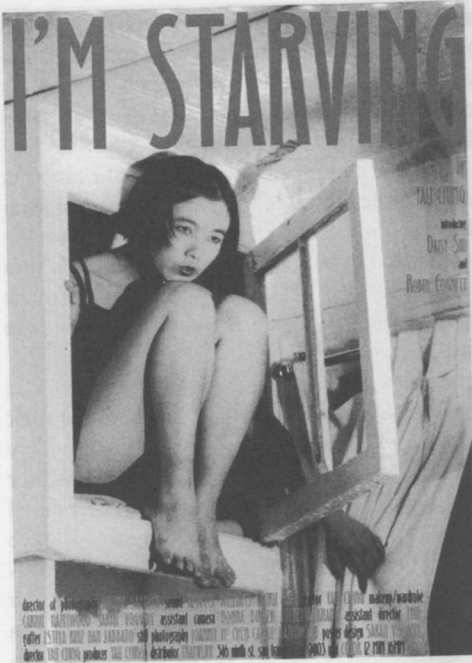
(Re-) inventing Kin

During a recent interview, Yau Ching, mentioned that she made the video *Flow* on her neighbor-friend entirely by chance, as the result of a chain of coincidences and the convergence of many conditions: they happened to be the only two Chinese women living in the building, in fact, next door to each other; they both happened to be artists; both were sick and tired of their landlord (a US-educated Taiwanese Chinese man) who left the pre-war building and its tenants to rot and failed to provide basic utilities, such as heating and hot water, during the freezing New York winters. While they shared the anxieties and freedoms of living as outcasts on the margins of society, they also saw in each other the possibilities of a self in another life: would Wenyi resemble the more Westernized Yau Ching if she stayed in the US for another 10 years? Would Yau Ching have become more like the apparently desperate Wenyi, if her parents had not left China in the late 1940s? In

this way, *Flow* became a venue for Yau Ching to come to terms with her parents' historical constructions and therefore her own. One sees oneself – with multiple possibilities and limitations, colors and tones – in a much sharper light through finding, inventing and reinventing, connecting, breaking up with and imagining one's biological and non-biological kin.

For many in Hong Kong, the 1990s were fraught with intense psychological, emotional and political stress. During this period, many people were subject to identity anxieties (over issues related to their coloniality and/or Chineseness, among other things) that were fed by Communist-phobia, Westernized capitalist confidence in the early 1990s but developed into states of self-deprecating, nationalist, colonized and neo-colonized imaginings in the late 1990s. Immediately before the change of government in 1997, which was originally referred to as the “takeover” and later officially termed the “handover” in English and the “return”/ “reunification” (回歸) in Chinese representations, people in Hong Kong were bombarded with compulsory sinocentric/statist-confirming and patriotic representations in political news and television documentaries. These had overwhelming silencing and self-effacing effects which partly helped to unify an audience that was all too ready to “check out” by embracing “no-sense” (無厘頭) comedies such as, for example, those produced by Stephen Chow and his self-flagellating buddies. Yau Ching's feature-length documentary *Diasporama: Dead Air* (1997), which was based on interviews carried out with families and individuals who had been struggling with issues of localness and migration in Canada, Taiwan, the US and Hong Kong during recent decades, might be revisited in the light of this binary-defined climate of compulsory return versus die-hard checking out. Most of the interviewees were close friends of Yau Ching (some also became close friends of hers as a result of this video) who were working as artists, cultural workers and activists. This very untypical and small sample of Hong Kong migrants, contrary to the common stereotype of Hong Kong immigrant found in Vancouver (or “Hongcouver”): “notorious for tearing down trees in order to keep building houses”, as one subject muses on the video, traces a community of diasporic subjects that are unable to identify comfortably with their “race” (Chinese), their “ethnicity” (Hong Kong) or the many little Hong Kongs outside Hong Kong. In this work, a process of self-interrogation is woven into a journey devoted to questioning the constructs and conditions that govern identity formation and the repetitive failures that many individuals have experienced for several decades in different places and in different forms.¹ The subjects' discomfort with a complete either-or identification might recast Jenny Kwok Wah Lau's (2000) analysis of the Hong Kong colonial subject in new lights. This “schizophrenic triple split subject”, according to Lau, is dispossessed of a collective memory and self-determination; in *Diasporama: Dead Air*, it is precisely in the split state of the subject, and the determined anxieties over *disidentification* that the precious yet precarious sharing of collectivity and self-enabling agency is made possible.

¹ Partly in order to come to terms with her own failure to make films that are accepted and shown in international lesbian and gay film festivals, Yau Ching curated a program of short films and videos for the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film and Video Festival in 1994, called “Not Queer Enough.”



Poster for *I'm Starving*

Before Yau Ching left New York, she made another short film, *I'm Starving*, which was, according to her, meant to be a love letter as well as a farewell gesture to New York. Shot almost entirely within her own apartment, this film told the story of a love affair between a Cantonese-speaking ghost and an African-American woman. The ghost is first shown reading from Chinatown takeout menus that offer items such as sweet and sour chicken and broccoli with scallops and prawns in lobster sauce - items that would only appear on the menu of a restaurant for migrants - but then proceeds to literally devour the menus, bite by bite. This highlights both the incompatibility of migrant food with humanness and the migrants' constant yearning for "comfort" food. After making a series of works that transgressed and combined different genres including experimental documentary, interactive digital media installations and video art, Yau Ching chose the medium of film, in the genre of a ghost narrative, to reconfigure the utter hauntedness of her life, including her desires for food, sex and love. This letter to New York offers, among other things, an examination of containment showing how a multitude of voices haunt, speak through and *within* one genre, one city, one apartment and one (undead) body bound to physical desires she supposedly is no longer entitled to.

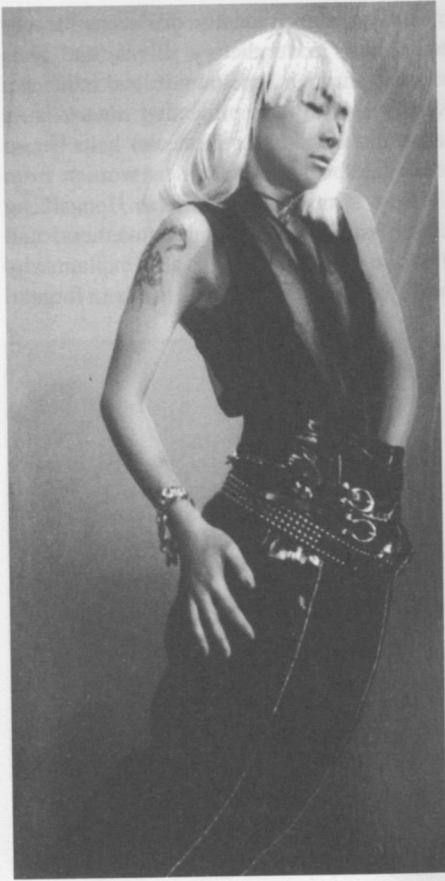
Multiple Hauntedness

Yau Ching's fascination with narrative cinema in the context of the (un)boundness of the body eventually led to *Ho Yuk (Let's Love Hong Kong)*, which was completed in post-1997 neo-colonial Hong Kong and marked her own "return". In contrast to focusing on only one or two "haunted" characters, including a ghost, as was the case in *I'm Starving*, the film, *Ho Yuk*, seems to present a city with many different beings, all haunted, sub-human or non-human in their own ways and trying unceasingly (sometimes desperately)

to connect and/or reject connection. When she takes time off from earning her living as an online stripper, Chan Kwok Chan (陳國產) has a lack of facial and verbal expression that tells of her desperate struggle to exercise control over the hauntedness, the chaos, and the conflicting voices produced by the incompatibilities among her multiple compartmentalized lives, including her job, class, family, sex lives, etc., in a place and time that has put the utmost priority on stability, that is, public control for all (99%) with economic prosperity² only for the very few (1%). Chan's journey through the city is filmed in such a way as to emphasize her restrained physical movement; a stillness speaks to the hauntedness of her working life as a super-feminized cyborg as well as the demands of a city "that is too often measured by speed" (Tang 2011: 137). Many of Chan's personas are set against the backdrop of a fast-moving cityscape: after all, the Cantonese title of the film, *Ho Yuk* (好郁), means "moving very fast".

While Stephen Chow's comedies have a completely different pacing and tone from Yau Ching's works, they are characterized by sudden and rapid plot changes and slapstick performances with characters falling from stairs and railings. These works, albeit widely popular in the local and regional Chinese-speaking societies, are sometimes criticized for being unconvincing by scholars and critics and this has contributed to the poor critical reception that is generally awarded to "no-sense" comedies. Chow's personas have tactically and speedily assimilated technology and/or kungfu into his personal transformation and induced paroxysms of laughter to disguise nausea and danger produced by such changes. Chow's skill in generating laughter and effecting vertiginous changes in performance styles, tones and physicality, not to mention identity and politics, is an essential component in his surviving narratives. In contrast, Yau Ching's works do not tend to generate much laughter, but they do seem to share a similar trait of self-distancing from realism. Chan Kwok Chan swings between a fast-changing series of technologized, highly acted-up images (not unlike Chow's characters) and this repressed wordless being (so unlike Chow's characters), with unconvincing imaginary realities (such as earthquakes in Hong Kong) who is depicted sliding through apparently realist, long takes of Hong Kong streets and public housing projects, foregrounds not only the surreality of the scenes (and perhaps the surreality of "reality" itself) but also her own inability to change or make any appropriate responses, whether these be to the social or to the destabilized and de-centred selves. Would realism, which calls for a compulsive gaze on the social, be too unbearable for both filmmakers, since the socio-political apparatus craves to devour the always already shaky selves (I'm Starving!) at every turn? Or, could cyborg-ization, laughter, no-sense and no-feel all be read as survival strategies, essential for maintaining a critical distance, that allow for and manage intelligibility, sanity and emotional integrity?

² "Stability and prosperity" has been adopted as the most repeated phrase in mainstream political discourse to explain the "success" of Hong Kong in the past 30 years. Ref: "Premier Hua Guofeng visited Britain and had a meeting with Margaret Thatcher. Both of them expressed their concern to maintain the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfer_of_sovereignty_over_Hong_Kong.



One of Chan Kwok Chan's Personas in
Ho Yuk (Let's Love Hong Kong)

One symptom of Hong Kong's deeply rooted coloniality is that people here invest heavily in trying to catch up with and flaunt their knowledge of the latest EuroAmerican-dominated fashion and technology trends, as a way of suppressing or fleeing from (although, of course, they end up performing more than anything else) their backwardness or thirdworldness. Nicole, in *Ho Yuk*, as a multilingual, pan-Chinese middle-class advertising executive, embodies the anxiety and fatigue created by this symptom. For Nicole, Chan Kwok Chan, the cyborg, is technologized desire par excellence; Nicole's desire for Chan is easily comprehensible. But why would Zero be attracted to Chan; they both look quite butchy or "TB"/"androgynous" in Hong Kong terms. I asked Yau Ching for an explanation, but she seemed to be lost for an answer. While Zero literally lives off the leftovers of advanced capitalism, collecting and selling recycled cell phones in the streets, second hand put-together cars and cheap sex toys in Temple Street to boys looking for a sleazy joint, Chan sells mediated representations of her body against the backdrop of a self-glorifying nation and glamorous city. In this sense, not only are they of the same sex, but their forms of sub-humanness are kin as well. It could be said that Zero

actually sees a suppressed or future self in Chan as she gradually discovers the co-existence of and constant negotiation between Chan's contradictory selves, and feels attracted to the way Chan performs these negotiations through her slowness and reticence, something Zero cannot quite afford to do. Would desiring and projecting onto Chan's struggling image offer Zero a sense of camaraderie and comfort that can help her to survive her own sub-humanness? Seen in this light, the migrant sex worker from Mainland China, normatively considered the lowest form of human life in Hong Kong society, appears to be most able to reconcile herself with her sub-humanness, and therefore serves as an important counterpoint in the film. This might also explain why Chan stays with her: the omnipresent Zero reminds her of everything she needs to forget.



Chan Kwok Chan's Cyborg Persona
against the Hong Kong Cityscape in
Ho Yuk (Let's Love Hong Kong)

The Cleaning Lady Speaks

In *We Are Alive*, during an interview, a girl in detention asks Yau Ching who she is and what she is doing there; Yau replies: "I'm the new cleaner here". Yau Ching claims that this is her most autobiographical work. Ghosts from her adolescence resurface in the form of teenagers locked up in facilities in Japan, Macau and Hong Kong, speaking to a present that has deprived them of humanness. And for the first time in her work, Yau Ching facilitates and formulates a glimpse into the meanings and the blissfulness – however temporary – of breaking down political, social and psychological barriers in order to reconnect with a human kin of outcasts, in a world where extreme institutionalized violence and exclusions are commonplace. These are Yau Ching's viewpoints; they epitomize her usual self-centeredness. I would, however, suggest that the young people represented in *We Are Alive* do not only reveal the suppressed adolescence of Yau Ching herself, something that she tends to over-identify with, but also remind us, the audience, that most of us are so *unlike* these young people, how we strive to be functional and autonomous,

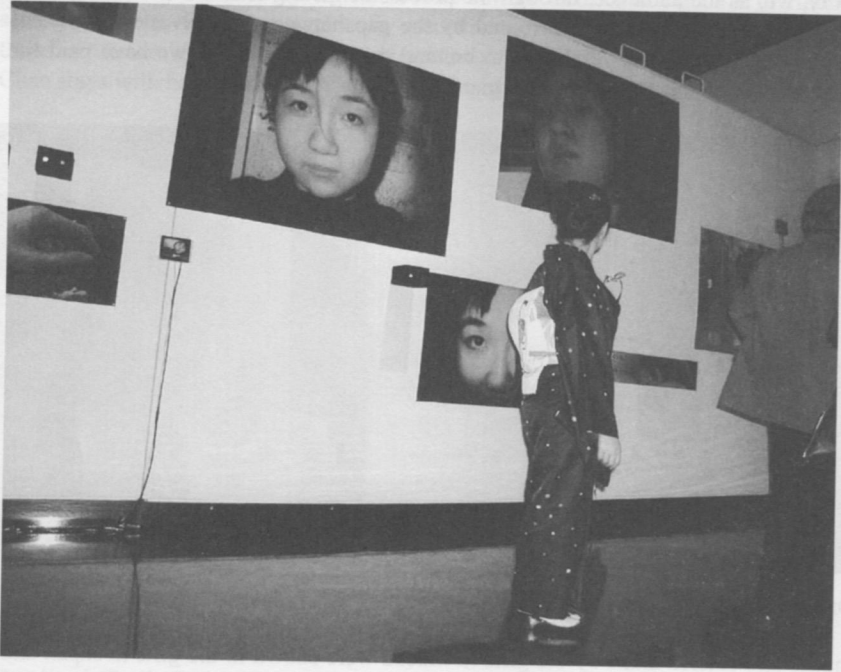
upwardly mobile and modern or, in other words, to be accepted as "normal" in our societies today. It is perhaps this resistance to being kin with them and our efforts to mark ourselves as different from them that has resulted in these young people being where they are. Like the two characters in *Flow*, the teenagers and Yau Ching in *We Are Alive* also see in each other many could-be selves that are as yet unrealized. Similarly to Nicole who, upon meeting the flesh-and-blood Chan Kwok Chan, had to light a cigarette and walk away, we, as the audience, through the process of getting to know the teenagers in *We Are Alive*, are momentarily confronted by the gap between the selves we have not become and the others we have chosen to be, and the enormous price we have paid for living with and pretending not to see this gap.



A Young Man's Self-Portrait in *We Are Alive*

The images and sounds made by the girls in Macau were shown to the girls in Japan and the works made by the detained youths in Macau and Japan were also shown to the boys in Hong Kong. The young people taking part in each workshop saw and learned from the previous work of young people who were in similar situations but in different parts of East Asia. These provided mirror images for them to register the humanity of the other and the selves, which showed them not only that they were not alone in their confined worlds, but also spoke out strongly against the prevailing stereotypical images of delinquents as "criminals" that are often internalized as stigmatized self-images by the young people themselves. The snowball method of screenings gave the workshop participants an idea of the context in which their work would be shown in the future and also an imaginary audience/community with which they could communicate. The creative process seems to become most productive when these repressed selves, who have been deprived of many rights with regard to freedom, choice and privacy (most of which those outside the criminal justice system tend to take for granted), begin to register an opportunity for self-(re)definition and to imagine an existence beyond the immediate environment as well as the possibility of being able to communicate with otherwise inaccessible subjects. This process enables subjects from different cultures and different languages to inspire and seduce each other, all in the eyes of the beholders to the extent that they are also easily able to identify with and fantasize about becoming part of this

community. Injecting appropriated iconography, images and sounds from East Asian popular culture into an otherwise deadpan “talking heads” documentary (which includes in particular many outtakes, highlighting again the *indirectness* of the apparent “directness”) on subjects who are not normally allowed to talk, *We Are Alive* carves out an inter-Asian playground of outcast youth by exploring strategies for redefining self-referentiality and socio-political referentiality.



Exhibition View from “Right Behind You” (media installation, Yau Ching, 2004) with Visitor, Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art, Japan

Many in One Returns

After making films and videos for more than two decades, where is Yau Ching now going with her work? Three years ago, while undergoing the final stages of *We Are Alive* and, as usual, planning many different projects all at the same time, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Surgery and chemotherapy then forced her to come face to face with the fragility of the human body and the limitations of herself programmed as this highly modernized machine. During this time, her father revisited her dreams quite often. He had passed away more than ten years previously but had never seemed so alive to her. By the time she was born, her father, having worked for the British Gurkha Army all his life, had been thoroughly disillusioned by the harsh reality of life as a second-class, colonized citizen in Hong Kong. The spiritual absence of her father in her life became the prototype for the idiosyncratic and distant father of Chan Kwok Chan in *Ho Yuk*. To what extent could Yau’s persistent engagement with the politics of representation and governmentality in her work be read as desperate efforts to compensate for her parents’ (much more determined) depoliticization? Although she has invested a great deal of effort in

examining the relationship between family memories and political histories (as in *Flow* and *Diasporama*, for example), it is noteworthy that she has still shied away from directly interrogating her own family history, including the ways she has embodied this history, in her film/video work.

I had the good fortune to interview Yau's eighty-year-old mother and discovered that she used to tell Yau, when she was little, stories of her growing up as an orphan in a large feudalistic family headed by a matriarch. To escape from the oppressive intricacies of this family network, Yau's mother ran away with a man who had been educated by American missionaries in Southern China and was infused with Westernized ideals. They both fled to the British colony of Hong Kong in the late 1940s, not only to escape communist rule but also (perhaps more importantly) from a rotten, corrupt old world. The missionary college, where Yau's father had been educated, later relocated to Hong Kong, and Yau Ching joined this college as a faculty member some fifty years later.

How do histories of generations long gone continue to speak through one's body in the present and future tenses? How do historical narratives overshadow and intertwine with one's work and life; how have one's parents' past un/disciplined emotions and psyches survived through one's modernized body (however much this might be denied), and how has one been programmed to alienate one's present/body in order to conspire in perpetuating a futurist myth? How does the biological intertwine with the cultural, and how might im/personal narratives, from a distinctly south-east Chinese (second generation Hong Kong) angle, reframe broader socio-political discourses in modern China? In using her film and video work to reformulate different relationships with repressed histories and desires, Yau Ching continues to make work into tools for survival and through re-assembling these tools as if they are her new body parts, she attempts to understand the ongoing struggle to be (in/sub)human, as if it is not her own.

References

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