

Tiffany Sia
ON AND OFF-SCREEN IMAGINARIES
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Received wisdom states that under the illiberal regime (whatever that might mean), artists take to metaphor to speak politically, a tactic noted neo-conservative avant la letter Leo Strauss termed “writing between the lines.” Under the liberal regime (meaning, of course, democratic-capitalist), artists speak politics openly and forcefully. The received wisdom does not hold for the last half century of Hong Kong cinema as portrayed by Tiffany Sia in her first collection of essays. During its Golden Age, which occurred as Hong Kong was on the cusp of leaving its status as British protectorate, political speech was guarded, deeply submerged in the text. Today, with 1997 gone and a Hong Kong of “one country, two systems” come, a new generation has begun to make films political enough to earn them the enmity of the state.

Inside the Red Brick Wall (2020) and *Taking Back the Legislature* (2020), both released by the anonymous collective Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, center on political actions, the siege and occupation of Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the storming of the Legislative Council respectively. Chan Tze-woon’s *Blue Island* (2022) focuses less on bodies against symbolic architecture and more on the “minor characters of history”, situating “activists in constructed historical scenarios”. Deeply concerned with questions of identification and identity, the three films equally engage with Hong Kong politics and the contemporary documentary’s formal and ethical concerns.

Sia, herself a filmmaker and artist, extends these politics and concerns across her own practice, criticism, and familial/personal histories. She writes about King Hu and Ann Hui’s filmic productions, An-My Lê’s photography, and the fates of her friends’ political engagements with the same urgency, all the while returning to the questions, “Who can afford to live out their political ideals? And what price must they pay?”

Hong Kong returns again and again as a site of transition in transition, a place of exile and a place to be in exile from. If there is hope in the kids who “believed in riot” in 1989 and today, there is also hope that “the conception of identity as an open-ended process carves out an ontological exit from a fixed place”.

Sia’s prose is clear, complex, and calculated, capable of lulling and stinging. The opening essay, “Handbook of Feelings” (2022), contains the most heartbreaking final sentence I’ve read in a piece of criticism.