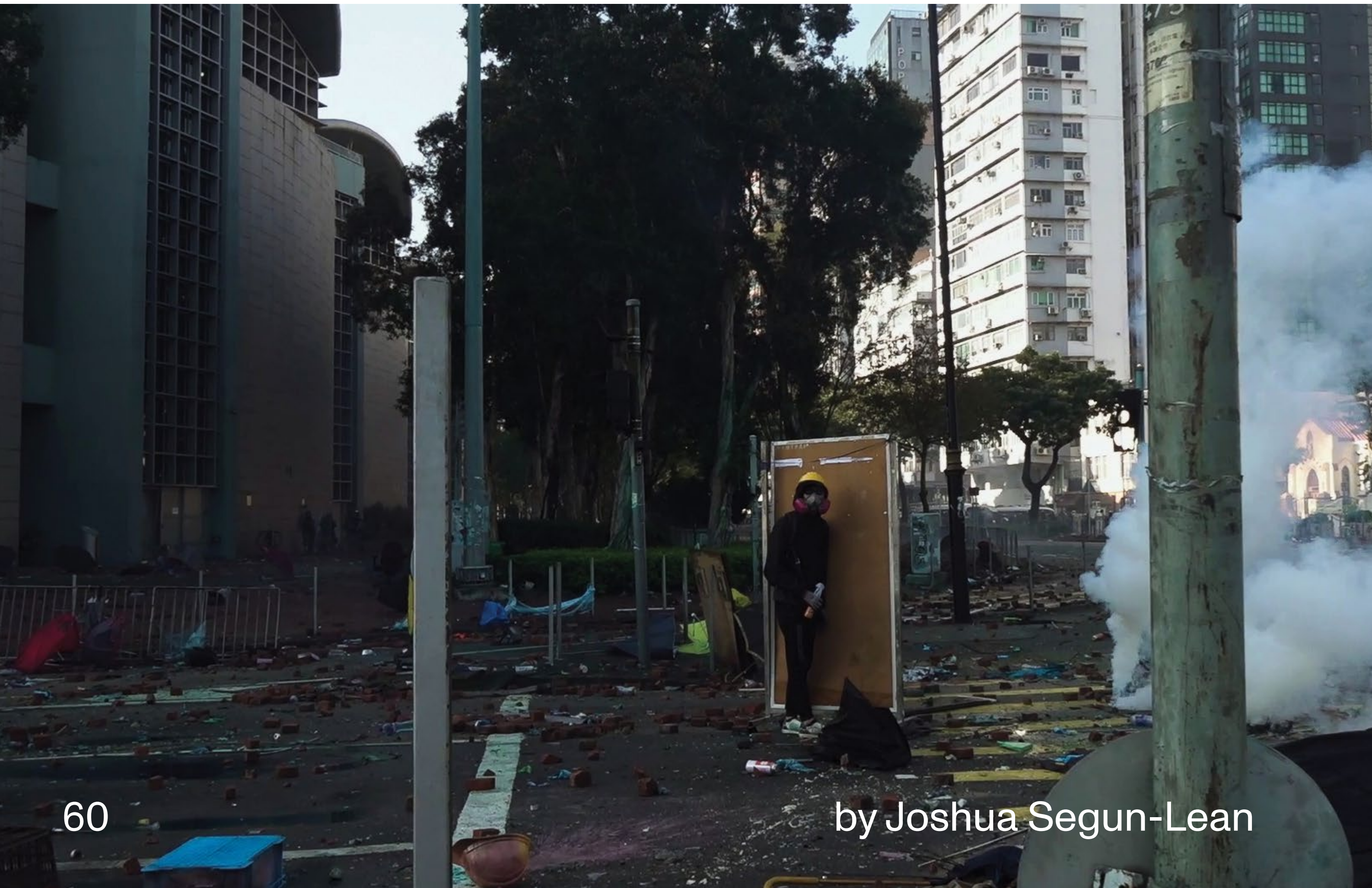
Cinema, Nostalgia, and the Excess That Remains: A Conversation With Tiffany Sia



by Joshua Segun-Lean

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Both: Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, *Inside the Red Brick Wall*, 2020, film still, 88 minutes
COURTESY OF ICARUS FILMS, THE DGENERATE FILMS COLLECTION

The following is an edited conversation with the filmmaker and writer Tiffany Sia, whose short film *The Sojourn* (2024) had its Canadian première at this year's Toronto International Film Festival, as a part of the "Wavelengths" program. Our conversation considers Hong Kong cinema's relationship to resistance, history, and place in and through the experience of exile—themes Sia explores in her most recent book, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* (2024).

沒有暴徒祇有暴政！
取消
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自由人權

Both: Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, *Taking Back the Legislature*, 2020, film still, 46 min
COURTESY OF ICARUS FILMS, THE DGENERATE FILMS COLLECTION

Joshua Segun-Lean: In "Phantasms of Dissent," the second essay in your recent book *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*, you discuss two films by the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers—a filmmaking collective that has stayed anonymous since 2019, in resistance to the Chinese government's censorship. These two films, *Inside the Red Brick Wall* (2020) and *Taking Back the Legislature* (2020), document the 2019 Hong Kong protests. In your analysis, you emphasize the affective and somatic dimensions of the protests, highlighting the moment when the sense of collective power generated by occupying The Hong Kong Polytechnic University—as seen in *Inside the Red Brick Wall*—becomes one of collective vulnerability, as protesters suspect that they're being trapped. I've been thinking about this scene in relation to political theorist Hagar Kotef's writing on the relationship between mobility and political spaces—specifically how "the moving individual body often serves as a metaphor, a symbol, and a substitute for the body politic."[1]

Tiffany Sia: "Phantasms of Dissent" points less to the body as a collective symbol, representative of a nation or ethnic identity, and more to how bodies become animated by the spirit of politics and History (with a big H), through their spatial relations to state power. It is what these bodies do and where they are. It is in halls of governance and legislative spaces where sovereignty expresses its power through ritual, pageantry, and performance, and how the protest attempts to derive its power by taking back such architecture, interrupting public order and radically deforming state rituals. In describing this, I am referencing the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who, in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), writes about how so much of revolution, in its inversion of political pageantry, is itself part of the political ritual of state power.

In *Taking Back the Legislature*—as protesters occupied Hong Kong's Legislative Council Complex—these spatial relations are extended virtually, captured on camera and circulated to a live audience. Similarly, in *Inside the Red Brick Wall*, images of dissent become powerful sites of public memory. Yet, as you mentioned, a fundamental paradox takes place—one that is perhaps inherent to postcolonial history and its deadlocked futures. Even in taking back these legislative halls and other spaces of state power, after arriving at a necessary and hard-fought turning point, the group is left to question, "What now in a place like this?" They realize they are trapped. These same halls—and the fortress of the university campus—hold colonial legacies and become the very architecture that ensnares them into the asphyxiating embrace of a police kettle. While such acts enter a repertoire of revolution, the protesters' siege is used against them.

Remaining masked and anonymous, the Hong Kong protesters appear as a phantasmic, collective protagonist. When captured on video, their "porousness" (to use Marshall McLuhan's term for thinking about the mediated body in the digital age) only heightens their vulnerability, as evidenced in the risk of revealed faces, and the broader concern over the films' circulation under the gaze of the surveillance state. These images live on to haunt their subjects. What lives on in state narratives co-opts and perverts their legacy.

The theme of revolution at the heart of state rituals reveals the construction of national memory. As policies and lawfare globally target dissent and repress social movements, national anthems like those of the US and China are paradoxically premised on revolutionary change and civic engagement from the battlefield to the streets. Such restless pasts are not easily put to rest. If revolution is cyclical, perhaps it mainly returns in an attempt to resolve itself over and over again. Put differently, revolution's indeterminacy, its history of failure, lull, retreat, creates the conditions for its recurrence.

JS: Further on in your book, your interest in how revolutionary pasts become foundational to state narratives is worked through cinema's own relationship to pastness—to the encumbrances and escapes nostalgia makes possible—as well as cinema's often complex relationship with the state. But you also show how, specifically in the context of contemporary Hong Kong cinema, both the past and the state as seemingly stable phenomena are brought closer to, and complicated by, “minor” histories. These histories, marked by synthesis, diffusion, and impermanence, reveal “aftermaths and recollections that cannot be put to rest.”[2] To what extent are these residues a function of, on the one hand, the desire to mourn Hong Kong (as you explore in your 2019 publication *Salty Wet*) and, on the other, the inability to locate the exact moment in which Hong Kong, either as abstraction or concrete reality, became an object of loss? You also take up the latter function in your *Too Salty Too Wet* (2020) publication.

TS: Part of this desire to escape from a past-bound, or even object-bound, position is a desire to cease mourning a place as lost, to stop being undone by it all, and to no longer be caught in the dead ends of looking back. Instead, for *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*, I became interested in what historical events and cinema share: contingency. This contingency forces a reckoning with multiplicity and contradiction, with the unstoppable and complicated flow of events. While this interest may be born from a sense of personal loss, it gestures to broad political realities, and how politics and history are never discretely compartmentalized in how we live them. These shapes of loss appear in one’s personal life or one’s family history, though I do not really go into any of that in my work—save for a few recent exceptions. I will not even touch the personal publicly (at least not until I’m older).

These emotional currents surrounding my work guide their sensibilities and their ethics, but I also don’t think the personal needs to be explicit to properly elucidate its relationship to politics. I think we need to go further than merely accepting the aphorism that the personal is political. We need to demonstrate the different forms this relationship takes. So many of my aesthetic decisions arrive at the modulation of what is shown and what isn’t, but despite this obscuring and exposing, it’s amazing how much certain motifs and feelings are absolutely undeniable, and are felt no matter how hard I might try to stop myself from communicating them. They find their way. They are always informing the stakes of the political, atomizing and shaping our lives in difficult ways. As an artist interested in visual rendition as a kind of historiography, I am interested in tracing what affect accompanies events and histories—this is the most elusive yet perhaps most critical project of rendering historical time in aesthetic form.

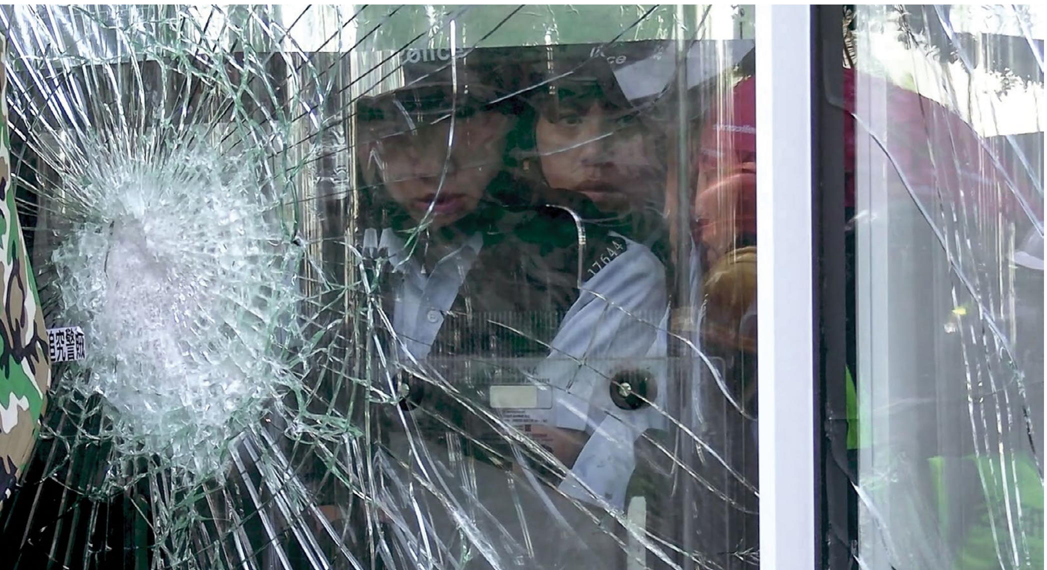
Cinema as a context and a form became an interesting way for me to think about the cathection of desire, of politics, and of the personal, as an at-once shared feeling, projected image, and political unconscious. It is on-screen that nostalgia is at its most convenient. Consider, for instance, Hong Kong through its golden age of cinema, which (depending on the generation you ask) spans the distinct eras of the ’80s to ’90s, or the ’60s to ’70s. These periods are the most coherent and cohesive in film—tragically and tantalizingly calcified. Looking back upon them will not change our present, nor will it help us understand that time. In reality, history’s shapes are harder to pin down, and its events elude any single telling. It is as film theorist Bill Nichols—via Fredric Jameson—elaborates regarding the use of re-enactment in documentary and non-fiction filmmaking:

> Questions of magnitude are always questions that run not so much against the grain as beyond it. […] They signal, through hysteria on the one hand and bureaucratic numbness on the other, the radical difference between discursive system (language) and experience, or its aggregation, history. “History is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise. […] History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis.” A magnitude of excess remains. It is a specter haunting what can be said or written.[3]

There is a tendency to turn to aesthetic forms to rediscover the spirit of a period, as we often do when we look back at Hong Kong cinema’s golden age(s)—or to draw on a more widely known example, French cinema of 1968. We seek, in these, a historiography that fulfils our desire for narrative cohesion. A cohesion that idealizes the past and obscures its continuity in the present. But, as Nichols says, there is a magnitude of excess that remains. It will always resist the tropes ready-made through nostalgia. This is at the very core of my practice and was certainly at the heart of *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*.

JS: I’m reminded of a few passages early in the book in which you describe the immediate aftermath of the passing of Hong Kong’s National Security Law in 2020. Intended to curtail forms of expression deemed “threatening” by the state, the law creates an increasingly unnerving climate of suspicion and panic among cultural workers, many of whom are your peers. You go on to describe how in order to determine levels of personal exposure to surveillance and criminalization, artists and filmmakers keep tabs on each other, judging their relative safety by the relative safety of others. There is a sense here of how exceptional circumstances sometimes demand new modes of assessing and sharing risk, and of communicating with each other when everyday speech becomes fraught. Strange, portentous gaps appear between what is said and what is understood. Language is displaced by, to return to Nichols, a magnitude of excess. I wonder if this displacement, and perhaps a distrust in what can be conveyed in language and in acts of translation, informed your decision to leave much of the Mandarin in your recent film, *The Sojourn*, without subtitles?

TS: Two nights ago, I went to the cinema. Johnnie To was there in person to introduce *Exiled* (2006), the first film in his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. He spoke in Cantonese and was accompanied by a translator. Upon stepping up to the podium to introduce his films, To said something along the lines of: “These films are a testament to my immense affection and respect for cinema.” I went to the cinema alone, the way I like it. And though it was full, it felt incredibly intimate to share the open secret of a common dialect within an English-language space. In a joke, he alluded to the possibility that there were state informants likely present among the audience that evening. That observation—in its sardonic nuance, at once warning and mocking—went over the heads of most of the New York audience once translated into English.



Something came over me when I heard him speak on-stage in Cantonese—I wept. Accompanying him in the room was this sense of a place that I knew, of a Hong Kong that is either painfully distant to me or does not exist anymore. That notion suddenly felt palpable in the cinema. And it was through language, and his physical presence as one of the most important auteurs of cinema (and especially of Hong Kong cinema), that in that moment, I became overwhelmed.

Despite its title, To's *Exiled* is not a political film. But perhaps true to that generation of Hong Kong filmmakers, To speaks volumes through euphemism and allusion. He is also more direct than the peers of his generation (especially when speaking in person). And the decision to open a retrospective of his through a film titled *Exiled* says more than he could or was able to explain in words on-stage or even on-screen.

I had a similar experience when I watched Chan Tze-woon's *Blue Island* (2022) in the same theatre. Tze-woon and I are friends, and when I saw him outside the cinema, I burst into tears and walked away because I couldn't face him. I don't cry often! But perhaps in the absence of return, Hong Kong has remained vivid, or perhaps was only ever vivid, in cinema. I feel most connected to it in the cinema.

I grew up in a multi-dialect home, a fact that perhaps marks the "no place"-ness of my family. Besides Cantonese and Mandarin, which I understand, my parents speak Shanghainese and Hokkien but never taught them to me. These were the dialects my parents used to shield their adult secrets. Unlike Mandarin and Cantonese, Shanghainese and Hokkien are colloquial and have no standard written forms. They are alive mostly in sound. Even when these dialects are written with Chinese characters, their distinct patterns can only be approximated, leaving out an excess of meaning that instead persists in the domains of flirting, hustling, clever quips, sarcastic one-liners, whining, or other forms of casual conversation. It is difficult to translate all their tone, humour, and nuance. Dialect, and its ongoing improvisations and customs, resists formal rendition.

The Sojourn, in its idiosyncratic subtitling, pushes toward this unknowing and ambiguity. I wanted the viewer to rely on the sound of someone's voice, to watch for hand movements and small shifts in facial expressions. The English intertitles burned upon the image offer only a translation that emphasizes its own partiality.

JS: Do you think cinema's capacity to preserve these forms of familial and cultural memory—that are, for many displaced peoples, bound up with vanished or disjointed pasts—is related to its capacity to hold, or conjure, imagined futures? In other words, does cinema have, for you, a utopic quality?

TS: It's so interesting you brought up utopia—this came up in a separate conversation just a week ago. I think the promise of utopia is dangerous, and often about concealment, diversion, and obfuscation. For the diaspora, the draw of the return to the homeland is a constant fantasy: a vessel for belonging, unification, and restoration that is fraught, and whose tacit implications obscure the violence of willing that vision into reality. It's no coincidence that the fantasy of the homeland is often materialized as an ethnonational political project. This impossibility of return can only realize itself through violent means.

Cinema's utopic quality should also be approached with caution, for differ-

"IT'S BEEN RAINING FOR AROUND TEN DAYS.
AH, TAIPEI..."

Both: Tiffany Sia, *The Sojourn,* 2023, video still, 32 min
COURTESY OF: THE ARTIST, FELIX GAUDLITZ, VIENNA, AND MAXWELL GRAHAM, NEW YORK

ent reasons. Sure, it is a place for a kind of collectivity that sutures loss and memory, but these moving images are temporary. They are projected. They remain as light. We can orient ourselves to them, but we do not enter them. This—the tantalizing nearness of film's utopian promise, its elusive political horizon—is the tragic irony of cinema. Yet, in contrast to nostalgia or utopia, it is the ineffable and the elusive already present in vernacular forms, in dialect, and in everyday life that I am interested in getting closer to.

Tiffany Sia is an artist, filmmaker, and writer who was born in Hong Kong and currently lives and works in New York. Her films have screened at TIFF Toronto International Film Festival, MoMA Doc Fortnight, New York Film Festival, Flaherty Film Seminar, and elsewhere. Her essays have appeared in *Film Quarterly, October,* and *LUX Moving Image*. Sia's first collection of essays, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries,* was published by Primary Information in 2024.

Joshua Segun-Lean's writing has appeared in *Republic Journal, The Brooklyn Rail*, and elsewhere.

Endnotes

1 Hagar Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

2 Tiffany Sia, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* (New York: Primary Information, 2024), 110.

3 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 231.