
Ten Years: An Unexpected Watershed of Twenty-first-century Hong Kong Film Industry

By Ruby Cheung

Introduction

Ten Years (year of release: 2015; directors: Kwok Zune, Wong Fei-pang, Jevons Au, Chow Kwun-wai, Ng Kai-leung; original title in traditional Chinese: 十年) is an omnibus film locally made in Hong Kong on a shoestring budget of about HK\$0.5 million (£49,000 or US\$64,000).^[1] With a running time of 104 minutes, it features five short independent films that are dystopias set in Hong Kong in the year 2025. Each of these five shorts was made by a different director. The five film directors only joined the Hong Kong film industry recently and are little known. They belong to the group of Hong Kong SAR New Wave directors, who started making films, and / or garnering a reputation for their works, after 1997.^[2] On the surface, *Ten Years* presents the audience with a bleak picture of what Hong Kong may be like ten years into the future. As the film's publicity slogan implies, it is a wake-up call for complacent Hongkongers who have not yet noticed the challenges — political, economic, social, and cultural — that Sinicisation has brought to this former British Crown Colony. Some scholars designate this challenge as “Mainlandization”, the geopolitical connotation being that Hong Kong is peripheral to China proper and is being forcibly assimilated into the People's Republic of China (PRC).^[3] I use “Sinicisation” here to suggest a more holistic and hegemonic influence of the PRC on Hong Kong, even as the latter continues to take pride in being a major hub of East-West hybridisation, and in having a different historical trajectory from that of the PRC. This essay builds on such associations arising from *Ten Years*, but further explores what the omnibus film signifies in the context of the most recent developments in the Hong Kong film industry. I will first investigate, through this film, the continuous identity negotiations made by Hongkongers, particularly the Hong Kong Chinese. This discussion forms the basis of my discussion and argument that I see *Ten Years* as an unexpected, yet promising, watershed of the Hong Kong film industry's trajectory in the early twenty-first century.

***Ten Years* and Hongkongers' Identity Struggles in All Kinds of “Transitions”**

Hong Kong's multilayered transitions resulting from its sovereignty

transfer did not end instantly at midnight, 30 June 1997, when the official Handover occurred. As I argued elsewhere, the transitions are ongoing processes related to every aspect of Hong Kong.^[4] Thus, *Ten Years* is not based on the mere speculations of the filmmakers. The short films reflect their directors' informed estimates of where Hong Kong might be headed, as the city and its residents continuously and helplessly readjust themselves to the surrounding political-economic, sociocultural changes that started some twenty years ago. The despair and grief of Hongkongers culminated in the seventy-nine-day Umbrella Movement (28 September 2014 - 15 December 2014), which broke out after the Beijing government had effectively refused to the city's residents the right of universal suffrage in choosing their own government head. The Hong Kong Basic Law (Article 45) had originally promised universal suffrage to all eligible Hong Kong voters.

Inspired by the Umbrella Movement, all five directors of *Ten Years* exercised the creative freedom granted them by the film's producers to portray what would happen in the Hong Kong of 2025.^[5] Unlike their predecessors in the first and second Hong Kong New Waves, who were mostly graduates of British and American film schools, and were active in the Hong Kong film industry in the 1980s and 1990s, these five directors are recent graduates of local film schools in Hong Kong. Their points of reference in the post-1997 Hong Kong are very different from those of their predecessors. Unlike the latter, *Ten Years's* directors no longer see Hong Kong as a prosperous global city, whose residents were striving to build a local sociocultural identity of their own towards the end of British colonial rule. The five directors' working environment in the ailing Hong Kong film industry of the new millennium is also drastically different from that of their predecessors, who thrived during the industry's golden period twenty years earlier.^[6] Ackbar Abbas's thought-provoking idea of "culture in a space of disappearance", which explains the worries and anxieties of Hongkongers facing the sovereignty transfer, becomes obsolete in the case of these new filmmakers and their films.^[7]

Esther M.K. Cheung and Chu Yiu-wai saw in 2004 that Hong Kong was undergoing a "crisis" and that Hong Kong cinema was a "crisis cinema", when "any departure from 'home' engenders a 'crisis' — a threat to our ontological security".^[8] More than a decade after Cheung and Chu first presented the notion of "crisis cinema", Hong Kong is again in a different phase of development. What it has now is not simply a crisis, but an incomparable scale of difficulty regarding the promised fifty-year transition period of no changes under the "one country, two systems" political framework (according to which Hong Kong is to be allowed a high degree of autonomy from China for fifty years after the political Handover). Whereas this transition period should end in 2047, there are

increasing signs that the “two systems” are already being transformed into “one system” — that of the PRC. The latest of these signs are the Hong Kong government’s proposed amendments to the extradition law, which would allow extradition from Hong Kong to mainland China.[9] In general, “transition” is a neutral term that could refer both to good and bad developments. But the transitions in question involve various uncertainties that provoke anxiety in people, and sometimes actual suffering, to an extent where they may feel diminished and “lost” (in the sense that Chu argues).[10]

In view of Hong Kong’s current plight and uncertain political future in the remaining time of the fifty-year transition period, *Ten Years* represents the filmmakers’ plea to their fellow Hongkongers to give profound thought to their city’s future. Hong Kong is their home — a very dilapidated home in the 2010s, in desperate need of being saved before it is too late. The directors’ short films point out poignantly that Hong Kong’s political and sociocultural deterioration has been a result of twenty years of Sinicisation after the sovereignty transfer, accompanied by many negative socio-political events in the city. Each director deals with a specific area of concern that has long plagued Hongkongers.[11] *Extras* (director: Kwok Zune; original title in traditional Chinese: 無名) alludes to the incompetence of government officials and politicians in defending Hong Kong’s own socio-political benefits, and the negative impacts of the proposed (Chinese) national security law for Hong Kong. *Season of the End* (director: Wong Fei-pang; original title in traditional Chinese: 無名) highlights the helplessness of the city’s conservation, and related environmental, movements. *Dialect* (director: Jevons Au; original title in traditional Chinese: 無名) responds to the local government’s barbaric downplaying of the sociocultural value of the Cantonese Chinese language — the lingua franca of most Chinese Hongkongers — while promoting the Mandarin Chinese language in the local education system. *Self-immolator* (director: Chow Kwun-wai; original title in traditional Chinese: 無名) explores the theme of self-sacrifice against the backdrop of the curbing of all kinds of civic freedoms in Hong Kong, street protests, and the political tabooing of “Hong Kong Independence”. *Local Egg* (director: Ng Ka-leung; original title in traditional Chinese: 無名) laments the marginalisation of localism. It sympathises with the plight of a shrinking local agriculture as Hong Kong’s suburban areas become increasingly urbanised.

Ten Years and the Hong Kong Film Industry

The strong messages conveyed by *Ten Years* echo the anxieties and fears of many Hongkongers. The film proved extremely popular among local cinemagoers, earning HK\$6 million (£590,000 or US\$764,000) at the local Hong Kong box office within two months of its general release. It

grossed more than the earnings of *Star Wars*, shown in roughly the same period, at one of the commercial exhibition outlets in the city.[\[12\]](#) The box office takings enabled *Ten Years*'s filmmakers to recoup twelvefold the film's initial investment. *Ten Years* went on to win the "Best Film" Award at the 35th edition of the Hong Kong Film Awards (the local equivalent of the Academy Awards) in 2016, amidst the mainland Chinese media's boycott on reporting this achievement.[\[13\]](#) From the perspective of the Hong Kong film industry, *Ten Years* has two significant qualities that, I argue, make the film an unexpected, yet positive, watershed in the continuous development of the local film industry.

The first quality marking *Ten Years* as a crucial turning point is that it is an exemplary work pertaining to a new form of East Asian anthology film, whose omnibus mode of production is in direct descent from pan-Asian horror films like *Three* (year of release: 2002; directors: Kim Jee-woon [South Korea], Nonzee Nimibutr [Thailand], Peter Chan [Hong Kong]; original title in traditional Chinese: 三). While its predecessors in the horror genre were mainly the product of shrewd commercial calculations, the omnibus form of *Ten Years* serves the purpose of political critique.[\[14\]](#) The film has found kindred spirits in other parts of East and Southeast Asia, and has now grown into a socio-political franchise, the "Ten Years International" project, which has spawned Japanese, Taiwanese, and Thai versions in the respective countries.[\[15\]](#)

The second quality of *Ten Years* that makes it a promising watershed in the development of the local film industry is that it has broken the vicious cycle of direct competition with the dominant China-Hong Kong film co-productions for the limited time and space of local theatrical release. Since the signing of the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) between the Beijing government and the local Hong Kong government in 2003, the Hong Kong film industry has moved into a phase of asymmetrical bipolarisation. Most of the Hong Kong-related film projects are big-budget China-Hong Kong co-productions. The annual number of domestically produced Hong Kong films, which were the staple of the entire Hong Kong film industry between the late 1970s and late 1990s, has decreased to a minority in the current Hong Kong film industry.

The competition between locally produced Hong Kong films and China-Hong Kong co-produced films is indicated by the latest film industry figures in Table 1.[\[16\]](#) The second column from the left shows the numbers of locally produced Hong Kong films released in Hong Kong from 2012 to 2017. The third column from the left shows the numbers of China-Hong Kong co-produced films released in Hong Kong over the same period. The numbers seem to indicate that the annual output of these two types of Hong Kong-related films has remained more or less the

same over the time period in question. But if we also look at the market share percentage of these two types of films on the local audience market (in brackets next to the numbers), it becomes clear that while the overall quantity of the film output remains relatively stable, its internal make-up varies substantially over the years.

The years 2012 and 2013 saw the dominance of China-Hong Kong co-produced films, their number being twice that of domestically produced Hong Kong films in 2012, and 20 percent more than the locally produced Hong Kong films in 2013. The years 2014 and 2015 saw this market share gap narrowing down. In 2014 there was only an 8 percent of difference between them, while in 2015 the gap widened again slightly to 15 percent. These local audience market changes coincided with the outbreak of a number of significant political events in Hong Kong. The gap of the market share between the two categories of Hong Kong-related films started to widen yet again in 2016 and 2017.

Moreover, the data noted in Table 1 here are publicly available on the official website of Create Hong Kong (CreateHK), an agency under the management of the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau of the Hong Kong SAR government.^[17] Its main responsibilities include coordinating “Government policy and effort regarding creative industries”, focusing “Government’s resources catering for the promotion and speeding up of the development of creative industries in Hong Kong”, working “closely with the trade to boost the development of creative industries”. Besides the local film industry, CreateHK is also responsible for the design and digital entertainment industries.

Table 1. Number (and Percentage) of Different Types of Hong Kong-related Films Produced and Released in Hong Kong, 2012-17

| Year |
|------|
| 2012 |
| 2013 |

2014

2015

2016

2017

Sources: Hong Kong Motion Picture Industry Association 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 (n.d.)

Since 2012, the compilation of these Hong Kong film industry data has been done by a local film industry organisation, the Hong Kong Motion Picture Industry Association, and financially supported by CreateHK. *Ten Years* was officially recorded as one of the twenty-three domestically produced Hong Kong films in 2015. This in itself is quite an achievement, for several other prominent independent Hong Kong film productions, exhibited via commercial cinema networks at around the same time, never made their way to the local government records. For unknown reasons, they are simply missing there. Most notable among these are *Lessons in Dissent* (year of release: 2014; director: Matthew Torme; original title in traditional Chinese: 課室風雲) and *Yellowing* (year of release: 2016; director: Chan Tze-woon; original title in traditional Chinese: 黃化). Despite its box office success, the domestic theatrical release of *Ten Years* in Hong Kong was abruptly stopped, possibly due to self-censorship on the part of the exhibition sector (which exhibitors would not admit).^[18] Since then, the film has changed its distribution / exhibition strategy. It was subsequently shown at over 200 community screenings (often free of charge), and more than thirty film festivals around the world.^[19]

The involuntary modification made to the distribution / exhibition plan of *Ten Years* was a blessing in disguise. It gave the film a second chance to expand its target audience base through non-profit grassroots channels and online subscription media platforms. In addition to the importance of “community screenings” for maintaining public awareness of *Ten Years*, the film was at some point “Hong Kong’s single-most downloaded item on iTunes”.[\[20\]](#)

The way in which *Ten Years* broke away from the conventional practice of local commercial distribution / exhibition networks was completely different from what an earlier generation of Hong Kong independent filmmakers, such as Fruit Chan, typically did. Although with independent funding, these earlier Hong Kong independent filmmakers still had to rely on the local commercial distribution and exhibition networks to show their films and make their names known.[\[21\]](#) *Ten Years* thus acted as a pathbreaker for its contemporaries, paving the way for other purely local Hong Kong films (especially those who were refused access to mainstream film distribution / exhibition networks) to use these alternative paths to reach their local audience. Feature-length political documentaries, such as *Yellowing*, *Lost in the Fumes* (year of release: 2017; director: Nora Lam; original title in traditional Chinese: 黃昏), and *Vanished Archives* (year of release: 2017; director: Connie Lo; original title in traditional Chinese: 消失的檔案), have found their images seen and voices heard through such alternative channels of distribution and exhibition.[\[22\]](#)

Conclusion

Whether it is about cinematic representations of identity or its alternative modes of production, distribution, and exhibition, *Ten Years* embodies not despair, but hope for a better future for Hongkongers who care about their hometown, and for loyal admirers of Hong Kong cinema. The film has become a major representative of those self-sustainable indigenous Hong Kong independent film productions of the 2010s. It symbolises a break from some of the bad habits that the said industry has acquired over the years, e.g., the overreliance on China-Hong Kong film co-productions to save the waning Hong Kong film industry. At the same time, *Ten Years* reminds other filmmakers to keep trying and never give up the search for ways of their own. *Ten Years* will definitely not be the last Hong Kong film to represent a change in the trajectory of the Hong Kong film industry. With the seeds it has sown, more and more local Hong Kong films of similar robustness will likely be made.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) *Ten Years: Inside and Outside* (in traditional Chinese), *Ten Years's*

DVD Book (Hong Kong: Ten Years Studio, 2016), 85.

[2] Hong Kong SAR is short for the “Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China”, which became the official name of Hong Kong after its 1997 transfer of sovereignty from the British to the Chinese. See Laikwan Pang, “Trans-national Cinema, Creative Labor, and New Directors in Hong Kong,” *Asia Japan Journal* 4 (2009): 83-86; Mirana May Szeto and Yun-chung Chen, “Hong Kong Cinema in the Age of Neoliberalization and Mainlandization: Hong Kong SAR New Wave as a Cinema of Anxiety,” in *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema*, eds. Esther M.K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti and Esther C.M. Yau (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 89-115; Yiu-Wai Chu, *Found in Transition: Hong Kong Studies in the Age of China* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2018), 122.

[3] See, for example, Szeto and Chen, “Hong Kong Cinema,” 89.

[4] Ruby Cheung, *New Hong Kong Cinema: Transitions to Becoming Chinese in 21st-century East Asia* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016), 16-18.

[5] Nan-Hie In, “Q&A: ‘Ten Years’ Filmmakers on their Surprise Hit and Controversy,” *Forbes*, 28 April 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nanhiein/2016/04/28/ten-years-filmmakers-on-their-surprise-hit-and-controversy-qa> (accessed 26 March 2019).

[6] Chu, *Found in Transition*, 122.

[7] Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1-15.

[8] Esther M.K. Cheung and Chu Yiu-wai, “Introduction: Between Home and World,” in *Between Home and World: A Reader in Hong Kong Cinema*, eds. Esther M.K. Cheung and Chu Yiu-wai (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2004), xv.

[9] Alvin Lum, Tony Cheung, and Jeffie Lam, “Thousands Take to Hong Kong Streets against Proposal to Extradite Suspects to Mainland China,” *South China Morning Post*, 31 March 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3004031/thousands-take-hong-kong-streets-against-proposal-extradite> (accessed 1 April 2019).

[10] Yiu-Wai Chu, *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013), 3-4.

[11] *Ten Years: Inside and Outside*, 2016.

[12]Ilaria Maria Sala, "Ten Years — The Terrifying Vision of Hong Kong that Beijing Wants Obscured," *The Guardian*, 11 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/11/ten-years-the-terrifying-vision-of-hong-kong-that-beijing-wants-obscured> (accessed 26 March 2019).

[13]Tom Grundy, "Dystopian Box Office Hit Ten Years Wins 'Best Film' at 2016 HK Film Awards, as News of Win is Censored in China," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 3 April 2016, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/04/03/dystopian-box-office-hit-ten-years-wins-best-movie-at-2016-hong-kong-film-awards> (accessed 26 March 2019).

[14]Cheung, *New Hong Kong Cinema*, 94-95.

[15]Karen Fang, "Ten Years: What Happened to the Filmmakers behind the Dystopian Hong Kong Indy Film?," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 10 July 2017, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/07/10/ten-years-happened-filmmakers-behind-dystopian-hong-kong-indy-film> (accessed 1 April 2019).

[16]Source: "Publication", under "About Us", Create Hong Kong's official website (English), <https://www.createhk.gov.hk> (accessed 29 April 2019).

[17]Source: Create Hong Kong's official website (English), <https://www.createhk.gov.hk> (accessed 29 April 2019).

[18]Kinling Lo, "Backlash after 'Emotional Win' for Ten Years," *The Standard*, 5 April 2016, <http://www.thestandard.com.hk/section-news.php?id=167917> (accessed 26 March 2019); In, "Q&A: 'Ten Years' Filmmakers," 2016. See also *Ten Years's* weekend box office figures on Box Office Mojo's website (<https://www.boxofficemojo.com>) (accessed 1 April 2019).

[19]Christopher Niem, "Interview: Ten Years Producer Andrew Choi Hopes to Make, and See, More Independent Films," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 30 October 2017, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/10/30/interview-ten-years-producer-andrew-choi-hopes-make-see-independent-films> (accessed 26 March 2019).

[20]Fang, "Ten Years," 2017.

[21]Cheung, *New Hong Kong Cinema*, 115-16.

[22]Michelle Chan, "Hong Kong Film Flirts with Political Controversy," *Nikkei Asian Review*, 14 April 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Arts/Hong-Kong-film-flirts-with-political-controversy> (accessed 1 April 2019); Vivienne Chow, "Guerrilla Tactics as Hong Kong

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Filmography

Lessons in Dissent (year of release: 2014; director: Matthew Torne; original title in traditional Chinese: 課室風雲)

Lost in the Fumes (year of release: 2017; director: Nora Lam; original title in traditional Chinese: 迷霧)

Ten Years (year of release: 2015; directors: Kwok Zune, Wong Fei-pang, Jevons Au, Chow Kwun-wai, Ng Kai-leung; original title in traditional Chinese: 十年):

1. *Extras* (director: Kwok Zune; original title in traditional Chinese: 零時十分)
2. *Season of the End* (director: Wong Fei-pang; original title in traditional Chinese: 終極)
3. *Dialect* (director: Jevons Au; original title in traditional Chinese: 方言)
4. *Self-immolator* (director: Chow Kwun-wai; original title in traditional Chinese: 自焚)
5. *Local Egg* (director: Ng Ka-leung; original title in traditional Chinese: 本地蛋)

Three (year of release: 2002; directors: Kim Jee-woon [South Korea], Nonzee Nimibutr [Thailand], Peter Chan [Hong Kong]; original title in traditional Chinese: 三)

Vanished Archives (year of release: 2017; director: Connie Lo; original title in traditional Chinese: 消失的檔案)

Yellowing (year of release: 2016; director: Chan Tze-woon; original title in traditional Chinese: 黃化)

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