

## **Green Activism in the City: Hong Kong Independent Ecofilms in the Post-2008 Era<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

More and more people are acutely aware of the pollutants entering the city from the industries in Southern China, more people are “going green,” and discussions of animal rights have become much more prominent. Still, the lack of imminent danger seems to have lulled the citizens of Hong Kong into a comfortable sense that they are, at least temporarily, free from global climate change. Two arenas of ecocritical responsibility will be examined in this paper: alternative communities, with a focus on *Sangwoodgoon*, and the thriving ecocinema scene in Hong Kong. *Sangwoodgoon* combines farming activities with films, art, and performance, creating a platform that connects the aesthetic portrayal of the land with the physical working of the land. It seeks to engage audiences with the land, both as a physical site and as a rich terrain of the imagination. The combination of art appreciation and farm-related activities encourages members to reflect on life and environment, nature and development, the local and the globe.

**Keywords:** climate change, ecocriticism, Hong Kong, independent film, post-2008 era

## Introduction

It is difficult to talk about ecocriticism in the context of Hong Kong. This is not because Hong Kong is immune from global climate change or disasters resulting from human activity. On the contrary, more and more people are acutely aware of the pollutants entering the city from the industries in Southern China, more people are “going green,” and discussions of animal rights have become much more prominent. Still, the lack of imminent danger seems to have lulled the citizens of Hong Kong into a comfortable sense that they are, at least temporarily, free from global climate change. This lack of ecocritical concern exists not only because Hong Kong has been spared major disasters (unlike Japan and Taiwan, which are constantly under the threat of earthquakes) but also because the city’s self-imposed cultural imagination has been premised on a successful economic model that has flourished since the new prosperity of the 1960s. The economic “miracle” of Hong Kong suggests the successful integration of Hong Kong culture into a capitalist narrative in which Euro-American values are globally dominant. Even though capitalist modernization was initiated and introduced from the outside, the people of Hong Kong have embraced capitalism. In his discussion of the globalization of capitalism, Harry Harootunian observes:

capitalism was ‘born of colonization and the world market’ and has subsequently ‘universalized’ history, inasmuch as it has established systematic relations of social interdependence on a global scale that have eventually encompassed noncapitalist societies. In this regard, capitalism has managed to fix a standard of measurement—world time—produced by a ‘single global space of co-existence,’ within which action and events are subject to a single, quantifiable chronology. But because different social practices remain outside this abstract measure, capitalism has not ‘unified’ history.<sup>2</sup>

Hong Kong is under the sway of capitalistic discourse and its adherence to the free market model of economic success has become, according to

theorist Ackbar Abbas, a compensation for its lack of political power.<sup>3</sup> However, there is also the persistence of the established social practices that Harootunian cites, a persistence that is captured in the Hong Kong independent films that will be the subject of my discussion. From the 1960s onwards, Hong Kong, under the British colonial authority, experienced both an extraordinary economic development and a rapid urbanization, emerging as a major metropolis in Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> This economic success continues to shape and dominate the self-image of Hong Kong; the success of the city has become taken-for-granted and its adherence to capitalism has continued beyond the official end of the colonial period.

Since the 1960s, the discourse of both the British colonizers and the Hong Kong postwar boomers has focused on the rise of the “city,” pointing to the rapid changes in urban Hong Kong as a mark of its superiority to the motherland. The future of the city, at the time the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 was signed, was decided without the participation of its inhabitants, who were left with an urgent need to redefine their home and their identity.

Mirroring the political struggle between the local citizens and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government in the post-2008 period is the conflict between the capitalistic logic of urban development and a commitment to a sustainable green style of living. The adherence to green living is widely evident, but we will focus on two manifestations: the formation of organic communities and the rise of ecocinema.

The emergence of organic communities, including community farms such as PEACE (Partnership for Eco-Agriculture and the Conservation of Earth – 活耕建養地協會), the Mapopo Community Farm (馬寶寶社區農場), and *Sangwoodgoon* (生活館, literally “House of Living”), heralds an integration of art appreciation (scholarly and aesthetic experience) and active engagement in farming activities (physical and material experience). *Sangwoodgoon*, the focus of this paper, has also been the subject of several recent documentaries. It belongs to the category of “alternative communities,” so called because they are not built on a foundation of familial lineage or cultural history. They began as an alternative to the urban lifestyle that is symbolized by capitalistic logic,

developmental discourse, and a neglect of environmental awareness; they are also a direct result of the anti-government movement. Flexible in operation and small in scale, these communities challenge the massive production promulgated by capitalism and directly resist dependence on the importation of food.

The emergence of these alternative communities in Hong Kong was precipitated by political measures that used patriotism and economic growth as justifications for taking away inhabitants' homes and farmlands. The sacrifice of individual benefits and natural resources was demanded in the name of governmental efficiency. North American ecocritics provide a crucial perspective on this plight. In *Going Away to Think* (2008), Scott Slovic proposes the notion of "ecocritical responsibility," by which he means "various forms of engagement and retreat, in all pursuits of 'responsibility,' in quest of meaningful response to the world as I experience it and gather information about it."<sup>5</sup> Ecocritical responsibility ought to characterize the relationship between humans and nature. Treating nature as an instrument within a capitalist model has led to dire consequences: climate change, pollution, and the mass extinction of species, among others. Failure to learn from these consequences and a blind acceptance of the prolongation of Hong Kong's "economic miracle" leads to a double marginalization. Hong Kong is marginalized by mainland China at the national level; and, without the opportunity to find a sustainable means of development, it will become marginalized globally as well. Re-envisioning our relationship with the land and with sustainable living offers a new way of developing Hong Kong's identity. This ecocritical turn embraces sustainable living, activism, knowledge dissemination, and art: it upholds the necessity of shouldering the "ecocritical responsibility" that will determine the future of Hong Kong.

Two arenas of ecocritical responsibility will be examined in this paper: alternative communities, with a focus on *Sangwoodgoon*, and the thriving ecocinema scene in Hong Kong. *Sangwoodgoon* combines farming activities with films, art, and performance, creating a platform that connects the aesthetic portrayal of the land with the physical working of the land. It seeks to engage audiences with the land, both as

a physical site and as a rich terrain of the imagination. The combination of art appreciation and farm-related activities encourages members to reflect on life and environment, nature and development, the local and the globe. While physical work puts theory into practice, the publication of the community magazine, *Planting Hong Kong* (2016- )<sup>6</sup> provides a forum for intellectual discussion, oral histories, and personal reflections. Patrick Murphy draws attention to the Bakhtinian “dialogical concepts of answerability and otherness,” which address “the referential versus textual problematic.” He continues, “the dialogical concepts of answerability and otherness provide a way of talking about how various movements within nature-oriented literatures ground their action and ground their readers in ethically referential situations aware of difference and responsibility.”<sup>7</sup> Members of the organic community of *Sangwoodgoon* exemplify—through their manner of living, dwelling, and production in the organic community—a new form of living that stresses their responsibility to the community, to nature, and to the world as a whole. The emphasis on connectedness challenges the institutionalization of knowledge within academia: the transmission and expansion of knowledge should occur in everyday life among the general public.

The ecofilms that have become popular in the independent film scene similarly challenge the assumptions of the capitalist economy. One way in which they do so is by depicting the heterogeneous temporalities experienced by their protagonists. The quality of time in nature and farming, as it is portrayed in these filmmakers’ works, is always eventful, in the sense that it is non-linear, changeable, cyclical, and rhythmical. Unlike historians who see the flow of time as being punctuated by significance, actions that irrevocably alter the course of events, young independent filmmakers are more interested in the various ways that time flows and that situations are charged with ambivalence.

Using three independent films as examples, this paper argues that there exists, separate from the unstoppable capitalist drive that has extended into every sphere of life in post-colonial Hong Kong, a pervasive uneasiness in the very texture of the city’s post-urban experience. While capitalism holds sway, this uneasiness is seldom

voiced by Hong Kong citizens; instead, it takes the form of nostalgia for the past and anxiety over the future. *1+1*<sup>8</sup> is a short feature film that follows a grandfather and his little granddaughter on a stroll in the city, where they witness various acts of reckless demolition in the name of urban renewal and attempt to counteract the destruction by planting some “lucky bamboo” at the demolition sites. In this way, plants and planting become the means to resist capitalistic logic. *Open Road after Harvest*<sup>9</sup> records three farmers’ stories in an attempt to highlight the marginalization of agricultural workers in Hong Kong. In *Flowing Stories*,<sup>10</sup> the story of Granny Lau, a matrilineal figure in Ho Chung Village, and the other members of her family, highlights the suppression of both women’s and nature’s voices in the writing of Hong Kong history.

### **Farming as Living and the Tactics of Everyday Life**

As the ecofeminist Greta Gaard points out, “An intersectional ecological-feminist approach frames ... issues in such a way that people can recognize common cause across the boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, species, age, ability, nation—and affords a basis for engaged theory, education, and activism.”<sup>11</sup> In Hong Kong, the links between ecocriticism and activism have become evident in recent years. Since the return of sovereignty to the motherland, Hong Kong activism has been ignited by many issues, the most controversial being the construction of the Guangzhou–Hong Kong high-speed rail line, which was the source of civil resistance from 2009 to 2010. This express train runs from a terminus in West Kowloon and heads north to the Shenzhen/Hong Kong border where it connects with the mainland. The Express Rail Link is predicted to connect Hong Kong with the 16,000-kilometre PRC National High-Speed Rail Network, the largest such network in the world.

In November 2008, the villagers in Choi Yuen received notice that they were required to vacate their village by November 2010. There were no meetings, discussions, or negotiations between the villagers and the government beforehand. The project affected approximately 150 households, representing a population of around 500 and involving

three million square feet of agricultural land. Opposition to the rail line was initiated by media activists, who had been involved in similar campaigns, such as the preservation of the Star Ferry Pier in Edinburgh Place in 2006 and the Queen's Pier in 2007. At the outset, the campaign against the Guangzhou–Hong Kong line focused on saving Choi Yuen village, which had been painstakingly built by its residents over four decades. The villagers' demands to stay in their homes went unheeded by the government. This was widely taken as an example of the sacrifice of the interests of the common people to those of a small coterie of wealthy property developers.

*Sangwoodgoon* was founded during the years of the anti-Guangzhou–Hong Kong high-speed railway line and the Save Choi Yuen Village movements. The founders stated that democracy depends on whether citizens have the freedom to choose and create their own ways of living. The alternative lifestyle it offered was a direct response to the government's lack of social and ecological responsibility. *Sangwoodgoon* is a farm experimenting with organic methods and permaculture design principles. The farm is devoted to food production; and building on this foundation, the members initiated a Food and Farming Film Festival (FFFF) to raise the awareness of food- and agriculture-related topics, both locally and globally, and to explore the most basic components of sustainable living. In their manifesto, the members maintain:

in the modernized, industrialized age, big corporations and governments are intertwined, taking away from each and every one of us, the chance to grow our own food and distancing us further away from the producers. We end up consuming what Alice Water sees as fast, cheap and easy food. Farmers who originally have the power to live sustainably and independently, have become the ones being exploited.<sup>12</sup>

Their aims are to promote sustainable farming as an alternative way of life and, through active engagement with farming, to encourage awareness of local and global environmental concerns.

Since December 2014, three *Sangwoodgoon* film festivals have been

held, although this discussion will focus exclusively on the first two. During the inaugural film festival (from December 20, 2014 to January 18, 2015), six independent films from Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, America, and Hong Kong were screened in a range of venues in Hong Kong (see Appendix I). During the second (from January 2 to January 30, 2016), which highlighted the concept of the “soil” as theme, five long and two short documentary films from Japan, Taiwan, America, and Hong Kong were presented (see Appendix II). The films featured at the festival explore issues ranging from agriculture and genetically modified food to community struggles. A quick look at the titles shows that the intention is to increase what Ursula Heise calls “eco-cosmopolitanism.” The films are not confined to issues that affect Hong Kong; they are committed to raising global awareness. In her seminal work *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), Heise stresses the importance of realizing “how different cultural frameworks ... condition quite divergent perceptions of what the local ecology consists of, what it requires from humans, or what an appropriate way of responding to it may be.”<sup>13</sup> We need to understand local concerns when we think about ecology; and Heise’s notion of eco-cosmopolitanism, which argues for “a more nuanced understanding of how both local cultural and ecological systems are imbricated in global ones,” is therefore particularly helpful.<sup>14</sup> Heise’s eco-cosmopolitanism should be viewed not as a call to minimize local considerations but as a means of seeing these considerations as elements in a Latourian network that includes culture, country, language, class, and ecology, among other categories. This positioning of Hong Kong’s problems as part of a global problematic structure is crucial as it encourages the citizens of Hong Kong to realize that their struggles are a reflection of structures, processes, and products that we actively engage with and consume in our day-to-day lives. Alternative communities are invited to see themselves as part of a planetary community.

The organizers of the FFFF maintain: “Documentary is not only a way for agriculture and farmers to express themselves; it is even a form of movement, of engagement and of organization for agriculture, farmers and food, for it is simultaneously analytical, intellectual, tasteful, sensual, passionate and revolutionary” (Foreword from the 1st



*Sangwoodgoon* Food & Farming Film Festival brochure). In addition to airing the documentaries, the organizers contact groups to participate in a variety of post-and extra-screening activities such as discussion panels, food and recipe sharing, farmers' markets, and guided tours. Bringing to bear these different perspectives on food suggests a dynamic process of material expression, evident in exchanges, bodies, and phenomena. It is a space where material ecocriticism successfully integrates with its theoretical dimension—ecocritical activism.

As well as curating the two film festivals, the members of *Sangwoodgoon* publish the magazine *Planting Hong Kong* that is funded entirely by the editors. Its aim is to engage Hong Kongers in academic and social debates to help determine the future of the city. Most of the editors and contributors are organizers of *Sangwoodgoon* or farmers from the Mapopo Community (another alternative community established after the Choi Yuen Village movement).<sup>15</sup>

Given the government's grand development plan for the northeastern part of the New Territories, more small villages will be demolished, more farmland will be reclaimed, and much more of the agricultural sector will disappear. In a city that is as money-obsessed as Hong Kong, many people do not think about what is lost through urban development and politics. Some express outrage when villagers are forced to leave their homes despite the fact that they own the land and are denied the rights promised by the government. The establishment of an alternative community is a way of making heard the voices of these villagers. As one villager commented during an interview, it offers as vision of "working towards a sustainable Hong Kong that can provide for itself." *Planting Hong Kong* is a means of extending the reach of these alternative communities and encouraging outsiders to reflect on the sustainability of Hong Kong's current path.

The content of the magazine reflects this aim. It includes the academic discussion of sustainable development in local farm villages, historical studies of agriculture in post-war Hong Kong, and profiles of the farmers and the college students belonging to the community. It is not a leisure magazine, promoting organic food; it is more clearly focused on raising collective awareness about the need to participate in shaping

Hong Kong's future. *Sangwoodgoon's* activist approach uses the arts as a medium of communication within and between communities and to motivate people to act and change things.

### **Planting Identity, Farming Activism**

A prominent feature of the political activism of the Protect Choi Yuen Village movement is its advocacy of sowing and planting. Sowing seeds, planting vegetables, and reviving farmland are ways to counteract the demolition of nature brought on by bulldozers and urban renewal policies. The intricate relationship between colonial developmentalism, post-colonial urban renewal policies, and farming is being scrutinized on a large scale for the first time. The boundaries of country parks, formally set out in the Country Parks Ordinance (Cap. 208) that was drafted and passed by the British colonial governor Sir Murray MacLehose in 1976, served as a means of protecting the rich natural resources of Hong Kong. While the uniqueness of Hong Kong's natural species and the wealth of her natural environment were completely disregarded during the process of urbanization, they have recently become evidence of Hong Kong's unique identity. Nature provides roots for a "homeless" Hong Kong, which is having difficulty in accepting a shared ethnic tie with Mainland China. From this perspective, the "ecocritical responsibility" to protect Hong Kong's nature and farmland can be seen as a means of distinguishing and defining Hong Kong's particular identity. Planting and farming reinforce the connections between home and roots, the city and the country, the local and the global. The cultivation of a more responsible and sustainable way of living becomes an active way to resist not only the political regime but also the western model of development. This sense of ecocritical responsibility is also evident in the recent growth of ecocinema.

Awarded the title of best short film at the 2010 Fresh Wave Festival, *1+1* is a 30-minute film directed by Mo Yan-chi Lai. It highlights the connections between growing, seed-sowing, children, and the future of Hong Kong. Using the demolition of the Star Ferry Pier and the Queen's Pier as a backdrop, the story depicts the life of a grandfather

and his young granddaughter in Choi Yuen Village. They travel to cities to plant “lucky bamboo” in areas undergoing urban redevelopment (see Figures 1 and 2). These bamboo plants become powerful symbols, exposing the false hopes of the agenda of development. Grandfather and granddaughter, old and young, stroll in the city: their presence creates a juxtaposition of past and future, destruction and creation, the farm and the politics and materialism of the city (represented by the former Legislative Council building and the busiest intersection of consumerist Mongkok). Rather than feeling displaced and isolated within the crowd, the two seem to be responsive to the smallest positive details, be it the little turtle that they find near the former council building in Central or the street performers in the pedestrian space in Mongkok. The little turtle is emblematic of a slower way of life that contrasts with the speediness associated with the city of Hong Kong. Rather than depicting them as Benjaminian *flâneurs* who participate in the crowd but remain sternly aware of their distance from it, they are shown to seamlessly incorporate moments of pleasure shared with the other people of Hong Kong, creating an optimistic sense of collective bonding. The landmarks of Mongkok may represent the city of Hong Kong as a marketplace, a large department store, or a commodity-filled dream world, but this short film also shows it to be a space where nature and artifice, the organic and the commodified, co-exist. Through planting, the grandfather and granddaughter allow us to reimagine new beginnings and a different future for the city.



Figure 1. Lucky bamboo in Central



Figure 2. Lucky bamboo in the Wanchai District

The burgeoning of independent films, both feature and documentary, on nature and farming suggests that these themes cast a fresh light on the history, economy, and future of Hong Kong. The difficulties encountered by the farmers in Freddie Ho-lun Chan's *Open Road after Harvest* point to the importance of restoring nature and agricultural sustainability, without romanticizing the future of Hong Kong and its farmers. *Open Road after Harvest* is about three middle-aged organic farmers: a peasant leader, whose organization has been politically infiltrated, decides to quit to focus on his farming; a rural woman, who has been fighting against the Northeast New Territories development plan while taking care of her sick husband, decides to combine family life with home farming; and a sixty year-old man, who has hitherto been a truck-driver, decides to change his career in order to live a fearless and free life as a farmer.

This documentary focuses on social issues through personal portraits. Bill Nichols observes that the “[s]ocial issues documentary might seem to go with the expository mode and an earlier movement in documentary, whereas personal portraiture might seem to go with observational or participatory modes and contemporary debates about the politics of identity.”<sup>16</sup> *Open Road at Harvest* can be categorized as a personal portrait film, which puts the individual in the foreground. Still, the film demonstrates the intimate connection between the personal and the political, the way the individual is shaped and repressed by neo-

liberal principles. The urban history of Hong Kong is reflected through personal stories. By highlighting the cyclical nature of the harvest, the documentary challenges the linear timeline associated with capitalism. The unpredictability of nature and the uncertainty of the harvest pierce the myth of the “economic miracle.”

The documentary juxtaposes different modes of being and temporality. Trying to both accommodate the natural cycle and situate oneself in the present creates internal divisions. The conflicting tendencies are evident in the plight of one of the farmers, Yu-wing Wong, who is torn between the capitalistic cycle of commodification and the reconciliation with nature necessary for farming. The documentary depicts Hong Kong through a mixture of heterogeneous codes typical of a modern city (mass media, institutional structures, everyday survival, the yearning for temporary happiness and freedom). The lived experiences of these three farmers offer the vision of a different mode of temporality that is not entirely dominated by the totalization and rationalization of capitalism. The farmers turn away from the conditions of a commercially-oriented lifestyle in the prosperous financial hub of Hong Kong and towards a world of contemplative reflection. The turn to farming is seen by both farmers and filmmaker as a form of resistance.

Jessey Tsang's *Ho Chung Tetralogy* is less concerned about farming activities and the future of Hong Kong. Instead, it focuses on village history and diasporic lives, which also challenge the developmental myth. The tetralogy includes the interactive web piece *All about Ho Chung* [蠔涌] (2007), the short film *The Life and Times of Ho Chung Village* [河上風光] (2010), the feature film *Big Blue Lake* [大藍湖] (2011), and the documentary *Flowing Stories* (2014). During the 1960s and 70s, when the colonial government had no excuse not to rebuild Hong Kong after the political turmoil of the workers' strikes and the Cultural Revolution in Mainland China, many of the more well-off villagers from the New Territories (who were entitled to land ownership) chose to leave Hong Kong altogether. The urgency with which village people left Hong Kong, envisaging better lives in Europe, belied the Hong Kong economic success story. In *Flowing Stories*, the fourth film in the tetralogy, Jessey Tsang revisits her home, presents us with an alternative view of Hong

Kong, and challenges urban discourse by mobilizing water as a trope.<sup>17</sup> By depicting the recurrent reunions and partings of villagers and the intimate details of their lives, *Flowing Stories* examines the effects of colonial and neo-liberal history, and the course of urban and rural development in Hong Kong. *Flowing Stories* challenges the domination of the urban landscape in Hong Kong cinema by shifting the focus to the countryside and village life that have been underrepresented in mainstream cinema. The documentary's ecocritical perspective highlights the restrictive focus on urban development in the age of globalization.

*Flowing Stories* charts the divergent paths followed by Tsang's neighbors, descendants of the matriarch, Granny Lau Tam-kiu Yu. In the film, Granny Lau recollects her family's hardscrabble beginnings, and her descendants recount their struggles in adapting to life abroad. The absence of any strong male figures in Granny Lau's family is typical; many women in colonial Hong Kong sacrificed their happiness to provide better opportunities for their family members. Granny Lau's daughters and sons have settled in France and the U.K. Some treat their host country as home; others are perpetually burdened by a sense of displacement, which is only assuaged when they return home for the village festival that is held once every ten years. The festival continues certain traditions that have been passed down through the generations, acting as a testament to family bonding. *Flowing Stories* relies on interviews to provide a record of personal histories or narratives that reflect the larger moments of Hong Kong history.

Granny Lau's life has been shaped by the misogynistic attitudes of a tradition that openly states its contempt for women. Hong Kong women in the 1960s were considered irrelevant to the course of a history that was thoroughly patriarchal. Women were oppressed and controlled; any efforts to escape the domestic sphere were belittled. Their intellectual and productive work was rarely recognized. Tsang's film superimposes three time frames: a time of the traditional patriarchal scorn for women; a time where some changes have been brought about by independent women entering the labour market; and the fantasy time that offers greater opportunities for fulfillment. The film depicts the coexistence and succession of different modes of thinking and temporality, and how they

engage with each other.

This post-urban gaze and the self-reflection it elicits is at the heart of *Flowing Stories*. Self-reflection is encouraged by the film's portrayal of the opposition between the country and the city, and between stagnation and movement. Using high-speed photography to capture the flow of water, Tsang animates photographs in an effort to bring the past and the natural world to life. Nature is never out there (as it is in Hollywood movies); it is always here. Only by grappling with our relationship with nature can we engage in meaningful dialogue and mediate differences. Through the traditional festival that is linked closely to nature, Ho Chung village is transformed into a representational space—a space that does not merely purport to restore the past of the villages but rather gives the younger generation an opportunity to reconnect with nature and to envision a future in harmony with the land. While containing many sepia-tinged photographs of nature, the documentary begins with footage of bulldozers turning riverbanks into wastelands. In a note at the end of the film, we are told that a Shaolin temple will be constructed in the village in the next few years—another instance of urban development pitted against the preservation of nature.

The traditional festival of *Taiping Qingjiao* (太平清醮: “The Purest Sacrifice Celebrated for the Great Peace”) is held every ten years in village of Ho Chung. Migrants returning for the festival recall their past and feel themselves renewed by making contact with their roots, a process that has given strength to the people of Hong Kong in times of crisis. It is interesting to note that this form of renewal can only be achieved through summoning the poetic powers of water. The detailed depiction of the traditional festival and its rituals links the village with its more glorious past. The festival thus appears in stark contrast to the empty mundane routines of work and chores in the diasporic life. The cycle of the festival—taking place only every ten years—links the villagers with their childhood memories and offers a brief escape from the usual routine where capitalism determines the way communities exist. These moments of reprieve are presented as opportunities to resist the dominance of a purely capitalist logic.

The documentary adopts a participatory mode, showing Tsang



in front of the camera (see Figure 3). We also hear interviewees complain of the usual hardships faced by migrants—homesickness, a sense of personal alienation and the difficulties in adapting to their new surroundings. These intrusions into the scene and into the more distanced objectivity of the documentary do not produce confusion. The alternation between different types of shots—between the experience of viewing nature through the eye of the camera and of seeing and hearing the filmmaker and residents accounts of experiencing a nature that is often ignored or dismissed as an unearned privilege—appears unforced. The invitation to join hands, to share emotions, and to connect with one another suggests the larger impact that nature provides for identification and solidarity. Rather than indulging in the western model of colonial development in the post-colonial period, nature becomes the space through which a renewed identity shared by all the people of Hong Kong can fully emerge.

The film also reminds the audience that the transition from the old to the new Hong Kong requires constant negotiation. In today's globalized world, we need to acquire a more fluid understanding of our relation to our community, our past, and the larger world. What happens in Ho Chung Village and the lives of villagers more widely is emblematic of the past and future of Hong Kong. In a self-reflexive way, *Flowing Stories* urges the audience to be aware that the mediated images of the past



Figure 3. A view of the filmmaker and a laborer



are often too fixed and too reductive. Key scenes reinforce this notion, especially in the various references the film makes to the act of looking. The urgency to capture a place on camera is revealed by the melancholic transformation of horizons of fields and hills into the city skyline. Films can teach their audiences how to see the world. Rather than accepting change as inevitable, *Flowing Stories* hints at ways to overcome unwelcome developments. Through the stories of Granny Lau and her family, the film encourages the audience to see the world and cinema anew: they are made up not primarily of objects, substances, structures, and representations, but of relational processes, encounters, and events like the flowing and drifting of water.

As we watch a film, we are drawn into a certain experience, a relational experience involving us with the world of the visual. In turn, the film-viewing experience changes, however slightly, our own experience of the world *outside* the film. Only through a conscious shift of perspective will the audience (and, by extension, the people of Hong Kong) be able to free themselves from conventions and labels, and gain the creative vision to chart a different path.

## Conclusion

Heise insists: “The challenge for environmentalist thinking, then, is to shift the core of its cultural imagination from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet.”<sup>18</sup> It is much too early to determine whether an alternative organic community can help shift the cultural imagination of Hong Kong from an economic metropolis to an environmentally-friendly and self-sufficient city, but the ecocritical turn advocated by such communities provides a vision beyond the capitalist model. This vision is of a malleable and flexible space where artistic production is in harmony with physical and material experience, a space capable of effecting a change in dominant ideologies and raising social awareness.

By portraying different temporalities, the independent films discussed in this paper challenge the subservience to the doctrine of developmentalism and the overall dominance of the urban lifestyle

in Hong Kong and the rest of the world. Nature's cycles, memories of the past, and visions of alternate futures all puncture the claims of developmentalism. They challenge the reliance on linear time, and on views of time and spaces as commodities. The greening of the independent film scene and everyday life opens up many possibilities and new alliances that move activism beyond the political realm.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper presented at the 2017 *Situations* International Conference, a conference organized by the Department of English at Yonsei University and Yonsei Institute for English Studies on Jeju Island, Korea, November 3-4, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Ackbar Abbas, "The Last Emporium: Verse and Cultural Space," in *City at the End of Time*, ed. Ping-Kwan Leung (Hong Kong: Twilight Books in association with Department of Comparative Literature, University of Hong Kong, 1992), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Kwai-Cheung Lo, "Liu Yichang and the Temporalities of Capitalist Modernity." *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 10, no. 1 (2010): 162-76.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Slovic, *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Planting Hong Kong* [種植香港]. Established and founded by editor Yik-tin Yuen, two issues of *Planting Hong Kong* have been published since 2016. The first issue "The Beginning of Autumn" was published in October 2016, and the second issue "Summer Solstice" was published in July 2017. Further information of the magazine can be found on the following website: [www.plantinghk.com](http://www.plantinghk.com). Yik-tin Yuen, ed., "Summer Solstice," *Planting Hong Kong*, no. 2 (Hong Kong: Planting Hong Kong, 2017); "The Beginning of Autumn," *Planting Hong Kong*, no. 1 (Hong Kong: Planting Hong Kong, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Murphy, *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies* (New York: Lexington Books, 2009), 33.

<sup>8</sup> *1+1*, directed by Mo Yan-chi Lai (Hong Kong: 2010), 36 mins.

<sup>9</sup> *Open Road after Harvest* [收割, 開路], directed by Freddie Ho-lun Chan (Hong Kong: 2015), 100 mins.

<sup>10</sup> *Flowing Stories* [河上變村], directed by Tsui-shan Tsang (Hong Kong: 2015), 110 mins.

<sup>11</sup> Greta Gaard, "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism." *Feminist Formations* 23, no.2 (2011): 44.

<sup>12</sup> Further information can be found on their website: <https://sangwoodgoon.wordpress.com/filmfestival/>.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Serpil Oppermann, "Ecocriticism's Phobic Relations with Theory," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17, no. 4 (2010): 768.

<sup>14</sup> Ursula K Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 59.

<sup>15</sup> A more detailed discussion on the Mapopo Community can be found in Kaming Wu, "Farming against Real Estate Dominance: The Ma Shi Po Community Farm in Hong Kong," in *Green Asia: Ecocultures, Sustainable Lifestyles, and Ethical Consumption* (London: Routledge, 2017), 169-84.

<sup>16</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 243.

<sup>17</sup> Jessey Tsang studied sound design at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts' School of Film and Television before she entered the MFA program in Media Design and Technology at the City University of Hong Kong. After graduating in 2005, she worked towards realizing her first feature film project—the indie production *Lovers on the Road* (2008). Tsang has worked as assistant director, location sound assistant, and production coordinator in commercial films such as *Lust, Caution* (2007), *The Mummy 3* (2008), and *Strawberry Cliff* (2011). A frequent nominee and award winner at IFVA (Hong Kong Independent Short Film and Video Awards), Tsang has been recognized for several films: *Lonely Planet* (Silver Award, "Open Category," 10th IFVA, 2005), *All about My Ho Chung* (Special Mention, "Single-Screen-Based Interactive Media category," 12th IFVA, 2007), and *The Life and Times of Ho Chung Village* (Special Mention, "Open Category," 15th IFVA, 2010). Her repeated return to the setting of Ho Chung village where she grew up suggests that she is compelled to search for her identity in her first home.

<sup>18</sup> Heise, *Sense of Place*, 55.