

# *Silencing the Local: Censorship of Ten Years and the Localist Movement in Hong Kong*

Annie Hui

## **Abstract**

In recent years, pro-democracy protests have increasingly challenged the legitimacy of Beijing rule, stressing that the “One Country, Two Systems” form of governance has not been upheld. Echoing the political unrest and the disillusionment of many pro-Hong Kong/anti-China citizens, the Hong Kong film industry has seen a rise in politically motivated works that emphasize the idea of the “local.” This article examines contemporary pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong and questions the role that social activism plays in the formation of individual and group identity in post-handover Hong Kong and how the very idea of the “local” is seen as subversive by the Communist Party of China (CPC).

Through analyzing Hong Kong’s localist discourse in *Ten Years* (2015), a dystopian film that exemplifies the revival of political art and activism in Hong Kong, this article seeks to engage with contemporary developments of localist thought in relation to identity formation in a decolonizing space, to interrogate the dichotomy of the “local” and the “national” in order to understand how the former works to destabilize national narratives, and to examine the plethora of tactics employed by the CPC to silence social movements in Hong Kong, including censorship of film and social media. This article will ultimately argue that the extensive censorship of art and media in and related to Hong Kong reveals that the CPC’s project is to enforce a unified and singular national identity, wherein Hong Kong localist thought is seen to delegitimize state authority and endanger national sovereignty.

## **Social and Political Imaginaries of the Local and the National**

The recent wave of social movements in Hong Kong and their lasting political discourse express a profound opposition to Beijing imposition in many aspects of social life. Since handover in 1997, Hong Kong’s legal and political structures have been sites of contention for localists who feel Beijing has not acted in accordance with the Basic Law, a constitutional decree established as part of the postcolonial imaginary. The recent localist movement in Hong Kong has actively challenged the governing practices and sovereignty of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and have sought to find ways to realize Hong Kong, in its extreme, as an independent nation through greater participation in public spheres of action and through struggles to establish what they consider a truly

liberal–democratic system. In doing so, they are recreating and renegotiating the terms and space of the Hong Kong social imaginary, which is perceived to be increasingly suppressed and displaced from the national narrative of China. With the localist movement gaining momentum, the legitimacy of the CPC is challenged, and, in response, the CPC has enacted a plethora of new legislations, from the National Security Law to the everyday policing of online discussions, to curb localist thinking, particularly in terms of censorship of art and media deemed subversive.

The dichotomy between the “local” versus the “national,” as evidenced in the current resurgence of localism in Hong Kong, brings into light the importance of understanding perceived erosions of cultural identity in relation to political sovereignty in processes of decolonization. For the Hong Kong localists, the word “local” denotes the very way of life that is distinct from the Mainland, be it culturally, politically, or socially. The everyday markers of local life, including lifestyle, language, cuisine, ideology, and the legal system, are emphasized in struggles against the national identity of China. The current social unrest in Hong Kong stems from precisely this distinction of the local in opposition to the national. It is then imperative to consider what these two identifications mean and what spaces they inhabit through the idea of social and political imaginaries. From a constructivist approach, Benedict Anderson argues that the nation is an “imagined political community – imagined both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). It is a sphere in which individuals identify themselves as part of a shared community connected by “deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). He implies with the word “imagined” that nations could simply be conceptualized and invented, noting that a mass political subject’s sense of belonging was mediated by print capitalism and suggesting that language itself is essential in constructing subjectivity, engendered by the objectification made possible by print technology. Beyond the political imaginary, Charles Taylor defines the social imaginary as “that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (23). Such imaginary encompasses “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (23). Here, Taylor emphasizes everyday life and experiences that constitute social living; it is the mutual understanding of the processes of social living that allows norms and ideals to be formed and provides a common understanding within the social imaginary, in turn allowing state legitimacy through common consent (24, 87).

Given these understandings of social and political imaginaries, the current moment in Hong Kong can be interrogated as a clash of social and national imaginaries—the Hong Kong local and the Chinese national, with the former actively resisting incorporation into the latter. Taylor’s

approach to understanding society can serve as a guide for exploring the cultural aspects of Hong Kong's political instability by attending to the unique ways in which the Hong Kong postcolonial social imaginary has been reconfigured when placed within the modern Chinese imaginary. To engage in studies of Hong Kong's "state of being," it is crucial to engage in critical conversations that are "grounded on in-depth discussions of key motivations and principles of Hong Kong's history, values, and community" (Ho et al. 4). As such, examinations into the social imaginary of localist thought in Hong Kong, as expressed through social movements and in popular culture, brings attention to the diverse ways through which citizens make sense of their social life within the confines of the city and of the nation.

This article will focus specifically on the narratives within and surrounding *Ten Years*, a film that highlights not only a dystopian future where the "local" is erased but that also serves as a call to action for political action today by challenging the contradictions in the Chinese imaginary. The film is thus a site of what Jacques Rancière calls dissensus, or "a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible" (140). For Rancière, art and politics are both forms of dissensus that have the capacity to alter what can be seen, thought, or spoken at any given historical moment, thus creating the conditions for reconfiguring the dominant social order (15). Filmed and released during the height of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, *Ten Years* functions as the very site of dissensus and as a vehicle for dissensual transformation, one that presents Hongkongers with a prophetic warning about a dystopian future under Beijing Rule and that threatens Beijing's national project of unification. The film reveals how artists can use their craft to critique perceptions of national identity, to challenge and redefine the nation through a redistribution of the sensible. At the core of the controversies surrounding *Ten Years* is the increased censorship on art and media that are deemed threatening to national security. New censorship laws are, in essence, responses to the increasing dissensus in Hong Kong, and through an examination of *Ten Years* and the censorship that surrounds it, it is possible to further unpack and interrogate the laws that limit freedom of expression and that actively erase the Hong Kong imaginary. In the following, the article will focus on the dichotomy between the "local" and the "national," both in lived reality and as seen in *Ten Years*, in order to examine how China's subsequent censorship of the film reveals its larger project of silencing Hong Kong localist discourse, and how legislation in place to regulate speech, expression and filmmaking works to consolidate state authority and national sovereignty.

## Establishing the “Local”: Social and Political Disillusionment in Hong Kong

In November 2015, *Ten Years* as an independent film was featured at the Hong Kong Asian Film Festival. It was then released to the public one month later, first appearing in only one cinema, where it grossed more ticket sales than *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (which was released on the same day) and was ranked top ten in Hong Kong’s weekend box office. Within days, the film was further shown in two independent cinema chains to sold-out houses. No longer available in cinemas and with many not having been able to procure tickets, *Ten Years* has since been shown for free in universities and other private screenings organized by social groups and churches (Vélez). Strongly criticized by China’s state media since its release, *Ten Years* has been praised by some as a “surrealist prophetic admonition” (Leong; translation mine) to Hong Kong, and many have seen it as a response to the city’s current conflicts and unique postcolonial identity. Using a range of cinematic techniques and visual styles, the film contains five short sequences that address hypothetical political and social conflicts. As a collaboration of five filmmakers, *Ten Years* is illustrative of the multiple and fractured nature of postcolonial identity. Each vignette speaks to various anxieties faced by many Hong Kong citizens post-Handover.

The short called “Extras” comments on the heavy-handed manipulations of local Hong Kong politics by the CPC, alluding to general skepticism toward the central government and its governing methods. The short film shows local politicians being directed by mainland officials to stage an assassination of Hong Kong Legislative Council members. This, the mainland officials in the short claim, would instill fear in Hong Kong residents, in turn making them desire stricter Beijing control. This short is a reflection of the current social unrest and anxieties in Hong Kong and is a projection of the political disillusionment toward Beijing rule. In addition to depicting mainland manipulation of Hong Kong politics on an informal level, it can also be seen as a commentary on the 2003 proposed amendment to Article 23 of the Basic Law, known as the anti-subversion bill. During the staging of an assassination in the film, one of the characters who is a member of the pro-Beijing camp justified the act by saying that “[i]f they aren’t terrified, they won’t accept the National Security Law,” referring to the bill (*Ten Years*, original English subtitles).

Article 23 was already of concern for post-Handover Hong Kong as mainland China does not have a legal mechanism in place for defining a banned organization or political dissidents. In September 2002, the Hong Kong government released proposals to implement Article 23 of the Basic Law and introduced a National Security (Legislative Provisions) Bill to the Legislative Council in February 2003. These developments sparked intense debate in Hong Kong over the potential impact of the new national security provisions, with critics saying that it could restrict

access to information as well as erode fundamental rights and freedoms, especially with maximum life prison sentences for treason, sedition, theft of state secrets and subversion. In the biggest rally in Hong Kong since 1997, an estimated 500,000 protesters took to the streets to march against the anti-subversion law (or 350,000 at police estimates) (“Huge Protest”). Following this massive demonstration on July 1, 2003—the anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region—the government withdrew its proposed bill.

This protest against Beijing imposition can be seen as the starting point of intense anti-Beijing and pro-democracy sentiments in Hong Kong. Localist activists have since openly and powerfully opposed the imposition of a unified national identity, arguing that a national identity would erase the unique history and culture of Hong Kong. According to the Basic Law, which was established under the Sino–British Joint Declaration in 1984, there is to be “fifty years of no change” after the British handover to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, essentially stating that Hong Kong and China would function under the constitutional principle of “One Country, Two Systems,” with Hong Kong retaining its capitalist economic system, legal and political autonomy, and individual rights and freedoms, as were ensured under British rule (Basic Law, Art. 12–19). It was the said anti-subversion bill that led Hong Kong people to recognize the fragility of “One Country, Two Systems” and “50 years of no change,” and to raise deep concerns and fear for the future of the city. The depiction of overt manipulation in Hong Kong politics by the CPC in *Ten Years* serves as a powerful call for action to prevent such a future, at once noting the current failures of the “One Country, Two Systems” form of governance, while also alluding to calls for independence at the expiry of the Sino–British Joint Declaration in 2047.

Explicitly addressing political tensions and protest, the short “Self-Immolator” is a mockumentary<sup>1</sup> that acts as a sort of homage to social activists and pro-independence protesters, ending with an elderly woman’s self-immolation in front of the British Consulate General Hong Kong. In addition to depicting the significance of resistance in contemporary Hong Kong, this short is also a commentary on the political power that localists are able to wield during public protests. For Beijing, protests and movements such as Occupy Central and the Umbrella Movement indicate local Hongkongers’ intent to institute a new social order and to exert their distinct localist cultural identity, one that the CPC misconstrues as purely political and thus consistently works to suppress in its citizens. The elderly woman’s self-immolation at the end of the short is not only a metaphorical call to action for Hongkongers to organize and take part in protests and resistance movements within

---

<sup>1</sup> Defined as “a facetious or satirical work (such as a film) presented in the style of a documentary” (“Mockumentary”).

the public sphere, but also a threat to Beijing, indicating that the collective political struggle for Hongkongers to define Hong Kong identity will continue and intensify, propelling the typically peaceful Hong Kong into a precarious state of potentially violent protests if the current imposition of nationalist identity continues to ignore the local.

The political commentary within *Ten Years* and its subsequent condemnation from Beijing reveal that localist art can and is a political tool for Hong Kong people to express resistance to a reintegration into China's system of governance. Hong Kong is the product of a rich, multifaceted history that renders local identity difficult to define—a history of colonization by the British, occupation by the Japanese in the second World War, influx of refugees from the mainland after 1949, growth into a multinational city of trade and business, and now return to China. Ackbar Abbas, the prominent postcolonial theorist specializing in Hong Kong studies, notes that such a history together with “[t]he political slogans of the day – ‘Prosperity and stability’ and ‘Fifty years without change’ – are thus belied by an urban landscape that mutates right under our noses, making the question of spatial identity particularly problematic” (64). This is especially salient with the emergence of the localist movement and their notion of the “local,” which is in constant negotiation with the inevitably ever-changing landscape of Hong Kong under Beijing rule. What localists are doing in protest and social movements is recognizing these changes and refusing these mutations by choosing to strengthen the “local,” in essence challenging and problematizing China's claim on the territory.

### **The Local in *Ten Years***

*Ten Years* presents political and economic anxieties on screen, placing them in the context of a disappearing culture that works to affectively connect to citizens' common fears by imagining a future wherein mainland influences are drastic and all-encompassing. In addition to “Extras” and “Self-immolator,” which reflect the political disillusionment of Hong Kong people, the remaining three shorts do something quite different—they comment on the social aspects of a “dying” Hong Kong culture, reflecting the fears of losing cultural symbols of what it means to be Hong Kong Chinese as distinct from mainland Chinese. “Seasons of the End,” the most surreal one of the five shorts, depicts two Hong Kong locals who work in salvage archaeology, collecting artifacts in a disappearing city. Eventually, one of the researchers requests to have himself preserved. “Dialect” centers around a taxi driver who ironically struggles because of his inability to speak Putonghua, echoing ongoing developments in Hong Kong that see Cantonese and traditional Chinese characters being systematically replaced by Putonghua and simplified Chinese on television, in newspapers, and in education. The short presents a future where the inability to speak Putonghua can have

devastating effects on social and home life. Also envisioning a future with tighter mainland control is “Local Egg,” in which Youth Red Guards canvas the streets of Hong Kong in search of subversive behavior, such as certain banned words by the CPC including the word “local” (本土).

The last lines of *Ten Years* capture all too well the call for action during the current political unrest in Hong Kong: simultaneously “already too late” and “not yet begun.” The social and political changes within the city under Beijing rule assumes an aura of inevitability, yet these changes are occurring during a period wherein the city is supposed to be in a state of transitional limbo. Throughout all five vignettes, local space is seen being entrenched by mainland authorities. Each of the stories depicts a Hong Kong space with distinct cultural markers. “Local” does not simply denote those who are from the geographical space of Hong Kong; it implies a multidimensional space of being, of belonging physically, culturally, socially, and psychologically to Hong Kong. What the film as a whole reveals are the deep-rooted fears of losing this cultural identity as Hong Kong continues its processes of decolonization. A survey conducted by the University of Hong Kong’s public opinion program in June 2016 concluded that only 31 per cent of Hong Kong citizens feel proud to be Chinese nationals, a seven-percentage point drop from the previous year, and a record low since the survey was first carried out in 1997. The number of people who are not proud of their Chinese identity, meanwhile, jumped from 56 per cent to 65 per cent (“HKU POP”). As Beijing continues to tighten its grasp on Hong Kong, it seems that Hong Kong citizens are increasingly resisting.

Drawing from the idea of the “local,” the directors of *Ten Years* envision a future of Hong Kong wherein the markers of Hong Kong cultural identity have been, and continue to be, withered down. Exemplifying localist sentiments of self-determination, the film is a political commentary on the effects of passivity during Hong Kong’s reintegration into Chinese sovereignty. The directors, however, do not see their work as expressing a political platform nor do they see themselves as political activists. For Chow Kwun-wai, the director of “Self-immolator,” *Ten Years* was not intentionally made to inspire localist action but was simply a reflection of Hong Kong’s political reality. Ng Ka-leung, the director of “Local Egg” and creator of *Ten Years*, echoes: “Rather than a direct reaction to the Umbrella Movement itself, the film is based on imaginings of the future that came from Hongkongers’ rumination on the events that they have experienced over many years” (Lu and Teng). These experiences include the influx of mainland Chinese immigrants who gain one-way permits and residency rights through a revised immigration system and various new admissions schemes, as well as of mainland tourists. According to the Hong Kong Tourism Board and the Tourism Commission, visitors from the Mainland have increased dramatically, from a total of 6.83 million in 2002 (the earliest available report) to 45.8 million in 2015 (see “HKTB Around the World”;

“Tourism”). Such an increase in tourism from the mainland is, on the one hand, indicative of the opening of borders in line with the idea of “One Country,” and on the other, a main source of anti-mainland sentiments, as in a tightly-packed city like Hong Kong, close encounters are inevitable and daily interactions with mainlanders will certainly exacerbate economic and socio-cultural differences.

For example, in 2011, after tensions between Hongkongers and mainland Chinese manifested publicly over the banning of locals from taking photographs outside the fashion brand Dolce and Gabbana’s flagship store in the popular shopping district of Tsim Sha Tsui, Hongkongers quickly began to express their frustrations and anger. This then led to public outcries and an increase in localist rhetoric that magnified differences between mainland China and Hong Kong. A newspaper advertisement showing the image of a locust appeared about two months later in *Apple Daily*, the second best-selling newspaper in Hong Kong (“About”). The inflammatory ad, which shows a locust looking at the Hong Kong skyline, was paid for by an online fundraising campaign on Facebook and local forum site Hong Kong Golden Forum, which received more than 100,000 Hong Kong dollars (US\$12,900) from 800 donors in a week. These online individuals expressed anger over, among other things, the growing number of Chinese mothers who traveled to Hong Kong to give birth in search of Hong Kong’s better medical care and benefits. In large font, the ad states “Hong Kong people, we have endured enough in silence. Are you willing for Hong Kong to spend one million Hong Kong dollars every 18 minutes to raise children born to mainland parents?” (“Netizen”). In addition, the derogatory slur “locust” has appeared on magazine covers, tee-shirts, tote bags, and stickers. The term is also the subject of one satirical song called “Locust World,” in which a man croons: “Invading across the Hong Kong border and taking our land, that’s your specialty. Locust Nation” (iloathelilyallen). This English translated version of the song has been viewed over 400,000 times on YouTube, the Chinese version of the song over 1 million times (Auman).

This vilification of mainland Chinese tourists and immigrants complicate the localist movement, as its extremist rhetoric based on hatred and prejudice can inevitably prove too divisive for effective social movement and political change. According to Craig Calhoun’s critique of the new social movements paradigm and his wariness of a reified notion of identity, “every collective identity is open to both internal subdivision and calls for incorporation into some larger category of primary identity” (27). It is difficult to classify the plethora of protest images and slogans affirming Hong Kong neatly into either an inclusive political notion of democracy or an exclusionary definition of identity. The image of the locust is but one of many, but its use as a derogatory symbol speaks volumes about local Hong Kong anxieties over economic instabilities, disruptions in everyday social life, and cultural disintegration. These new



and crueller outbursts are about far more than shopping and birth tourism; they suggest that antagonism towards the Mainland is deepening into broader notions of cultural belonging and fears of cultural displacement and erasure.

*Ten Years* presents these anxieties in a socio-cultural context, expanding beyond citizens' call for democracy by focusing on local Hong Kong ways of life that are feared to be disappearing. One of such imaginings is the loss of Hong Kong language. For Au, the short called "Dialect" is a reflection of his personal experiences of being ambushed at Hong Kong International Airport by mainland Chinese asking if he speaks "Standard Chinese," or Putonghua (Lu and Teng). On the whole, it is a critique of the national education controversy in 2012, which aimed to "promote Moral and Civic Education" and included the replacement of Cantonese and traditional Chinese characters with Putonghua and simplified ones, and the nurturing of values and attitudes relating to "National Identity" and "Responsibility" among others ("Moral"). By focusing on language, "Dialect" inserts the local into macropolitical narratives that emphasize struggles for political autonomy. In addition to presenting the nuances within Hong Kong's localist sentiments, the short encourages the audience to understand and recognize the current social situation of Hong Kong, to consider more the cultural aspects of decolonization over economic and political ones, and to question whether the space of the "local" in Hong Kong can fit in with the national consciousness of China.

As mentioned, in "Seasons of the End," cultural archeologists lament a dying city, collecting artifacts from around Hong Kong, such as letter boxes, porcelain bowls, sand, and slabs of rock from old housing estates. For the characters, scavenging and preservation is necessary because the city around them is disappearing, with images of ruins flashing up between cut-scenes. The word "taxidermy" appears in the film to describe the work of these characters; perhaps a bit misleading as they primarily are shown scavenging for and preserving objects, and not until the second half do they attempt to preserve a human body. In collecting objects, concepts, and even the human body, the characters engage in a performance of nostalgic idealism, latching onto elements of the past and mourning their perceived loss. When the male archeologist suggests that he himself be preserved, he argues that "[i]f we don't do it thoroughly, how will they understand?" (*Ten Years*). He takes it upon himself to preserve his body as a symbol of Hong Kong, indicating that his very body is an object within the larger imaginings of the city. As political theorist William E. Connolly notes in his discussions on pluralism and territoriality, "the nostalgic idealism of territorial democracy fosters the nostalgic realism of international relations. And vice versa. The nostalgia is for a time in the past when the politics of place could be imagined as a coherent possibility for the future" (135). In "Seasons of the End," the politics of Hong Kong today is imagined to be leading toward the need

for this type of future nostalgia as the Hong Kong individual is seen to be disappearing. The short film echoes the protests for democracy and for a “return” to a past when freedoms within Hong Kong as a British territory were seen to be more guaranteed—a “return” to the past as possibility for the future.

Explicating the idea “local” as envisioned in *Ten Years* is not only an attempt to preserve Hong Kong identity, but also an appeal to audiences to take claim and create a *new* Hong Kong identity separate from the Mainland. This is the reason for the widespread criticism of the film *Ten Years* by mainland authorities—the film as a whole is a warning to Hong Kong citizens about a future that will be if things continue under the current form of Beijing governance and thus incites increased disassociation from the Mainland, in turn threatening the legitimacy of the state.

### Maintaining the “National”: The Censorship of *Ten Years*

The five shorts in *Ten Years*, produced on a miniscule total budget of US\$65,000, won Best Film at the 2015 Hong Kong Film Awards. The first indication that *Ten Years* was a highly controversial film in the eyes of the CPC was the extensive efforts put into silencing the film in the Mainland by censoring it in cinemas and in all social media platforms. The Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China<sup>2</sup> (CCPPD), an internal division of the CPC in charge of things related to the dissemination of ideology, enforces media censorship and control, and works to ensure that cultural content follows Party lines. Its orders are enforced in China through local offices at provincial, municipal, and county levels. The State Council Information Office (SCIO) is the primary administrative government office that oversees news media, and it is the SCIO that manages the Internet Affairs Bureau, which is responsible for overseeing all websites that publish news (“Agencies”). On February 21 2016, the Internet Affairs Bureau issued a directive to suspend broadcasts of the 2015 Hong Kong Film Awards that would take place in April. This came about three weeks after the announcement of the Award nominees, including the nomination of *Ten Years* for the Best Film category, a film that had already garnered much controversy since its initial release. Publishing the leaked directives was *China Digital Times* (中國數字時代), which renamed the CCPPD as “Ministry of Truth,” an

<sup>2</sup> In its official name, 中華人民共和國宣傳活動 (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Xuanchuan Huodong*), the translation of 宣傳 (*xuanchuan*) can be “dissemination,” “propaganda” or “publicity.” In the 1990s, the CPC began to view the term “propaganda” as negatively portraying the nation. Currently, the most widely used translation is “publicity,” with “information” and “political communication” sporadically seen internationally. See Murong for further examples on China’s focus on semantics.

homage to George Orwell's *1984*. The directive explicitly states that two award shows in Hong Kong and Taiwan were to not to be aired:

Due to social changes in Hong Kong and Taiwan this year, and to prevent adverse effects of speech, film, and television that do not conform to the national condition, all major websites and mobile apps must suspend live and relay broadcasts of the Hong Kong Film Awards in April and of Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards at the end of the year. Major media may continue to report on the Hong Kong and Taiwan awards. (Xiao Qiang; translation mine)

With the Umbrella Movement having just occurred from September through December 2014 and with the growing social demonstrations against Beijing rule, the censorship of *Ten Years* was no doubt a means to extinguish and prevent anti-China narratives. These actions reflect the comprehensive manner by which the CPC seek to establish and maintain the national imaginary.

With the directive from the CCPD, the state television broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV), did not live-broadcast the awards for the first time since 1991. In addition, online film info sites in China, equivalent to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) or Rotten Tomatoes, prevented users from creating pages for the film, and internet blogs and websites deleted all mention of the movie (Hernandez). *Global Times*, China's state-run English-language newspaper, described *Ten Years* as "pessimistic," "totally absurd," and a "virus of the mind," while Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Press* touted it as "a reminder of the power of independent, intelligent filmmaking as a vehicle for social and political critique" (Brzeski and Chu). These reviews reflect the contradiction between national versus local narratives and exemplify larger disagreements commonly seen between China and Hong Kong.

Critical portrayals of Hong Kong are powerful mediums that shape contemporary thought, and the emergence of the localist movement and localist resistance art is crucial for understanding popular thought in a transitioning city disillusioned by changes in all aspects of life. Although the directors of *Ten Years* claim that the film expresses no explicit political intent (Lu and Teng), the film has nevertheless become widely seen as an important example of resistance filmmaking that validates the localist movement. Ideas of the "local" embedded within the film allow audiences to identify with cinematic Hong Kong and, in turn, allow an awakening and transference of current anxieties into action. According to Hong Kong filmmaker Philip Yung, localist films are so called because "their psychological makeup reflects certain elements: the interest of Hong Kong being a priority; the local mentality of the Hong Kong people;

and in some cases, the identity of being a Hong Kong citizen, which overrides the identity of being Chinese” (Chu).<sup>3</sup>

A major part of the localist movement is premised on pro-democracy sentiments and are concerned with freedoms granted under British rule and guaranteed under the Basic Law, particularly those of speech and press. The fear that these freedoms are being grossly violated stems not only from an awareness of censorship in present-day China, but also from recent widely-reported events, notably the disappearance of Causeway Bay booksellers (Lai; Shankar; “UK Asks”), the replacement of Kevin Lau with a pro-establishment journalist as Chief Editor of the liberal-leaning paper *Ming Pao* (明報) (Kuhn; Law; “Hong Kong News”), and the alleged suppression of liberal thought and academic freedom in the rejection of Johannes Chan for the post of pro-vice-chancellor at the University of Hong Kong (Huang; Ng; “Hong Kong University”). These political and economic macro-narratives must not overshadow the struggles on the ground where demonstrators are working not for the state but for the survival of “local” Hong Kong culture. Protesters in Hong Kong see a large web of conspiracy that works to consume Hong Kong and to make it a pawn under China’s rule, beginning with the control of creative outlets. With the CPC’s censorship of *Ten Years*, the film has already proven to have immense political value. Suppressing the mere thought of an alternate world and extensively politicizing imagination reveal how films are seen as tools to dissent in the eyes of the central government.

### Enforcing Nationalism and a Slew of Legislation

China has shown itself to consistently aim to foster Hong Kong’s reunification with the Mainland in all social, political, and economic realms. This was made clear with the passing of a new National Security Law in July of 2015 that for the first time includes Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, which is indicative of China’s growing power in regional and global affairs. The law, allegedly not to be directly implemented in Hong Kong, has reinvigorated concerns from pro-democracy localist groups about the autonomy of Hong Kong and whether this law will pressure for the re-enactment of Article 23.

It is always important to understand the language of Beijing, as its political rhetoric places much emphasis on semantics and double meanings. The vague language in the National Security Law, and that in the Basic Law, often contradict each other and lack clarity, placing Hong Kong in a precarious situation wherein localists feel their rights and

---

<sup>3</sup> Yung’s crime thriller, *Port of Call* (踏血尋梅), revolves around the murder of a Chinese immigrant by a disenfranchised Hong Kong local, and is generally seen as an example of how localist sentiments are expressed in larger-budget films of other genres.

freedoms could be violated or denied at any moment. For example, Article 15 of the 2015 National Security Law concerns preventing and punishing “any conduct that betrays the country, splits the country, incites rebellion, subverts or incites the subversion of the people’s democratic dictatorship” (Huang), which are very broad strokes when life imprisonment is a possible punishment. Nicholas Bequelin, Amnesty International’s Regional Director for East Asia, criticizes the new law, stating that the definition of “national security” is “virtually limitless” and that the law “gives a blank cheque to the government to punish and monitor anyone it does not like – human rights activists, government critics and other opposition voices” (qtd. in “China”).

The proposed Article 23 of the Basic Law contains the same vague language. A person commits the offence of sedition, secession, or subversion if they “[use] force or serious criminal means that seriously endangers the stability of the People’s Republic of China or by engaging in war” to “disestablish the basic system” of the PRC or to overthrow or intimidate the Central Government (“Legislative Council Brief”). Subversion, as defined in Article 23, also includes “serious damage to property” and interfering with electronic systems, also an example of “serious criminal means” (“National Security Bill”). This raises the question of where civil disobedience falls within the scope of punishable crimes. Without clear language or adequate safeguards, the Beijing government could arbitrarily regard peaceful expression of opinion in public or on the Internet as threats to “national security” and prosecute those who speak out (subversion is punishable by life imprisonment). Interpretations and reinterpretations of laws and policies are thus fundamental parts of Beijing’s governance, as evident though the interpretation of the Basic Law, and are key sites of resistance for localist activists. Legislation from the CPC, as obvious measures to ensure state authority and national sovereignty, are key in understanding the Party’s current views of nationalism.

Another major legislation that alarmed localist activists in Hong Kong and particularly localist filmmakers was one that strengthened Beijing oversight of the film industry. With the Chinese film industry’s yearly revenue on track to surpass Hollywood’s (Sun), this new legislation hints at increasing censorship and restrictions for local and foreign producers and investors. The draft of this new film industry rulebook, officially called the “Film Industry Promotion Law” (中國電影產業促進法), was approved by the National People’s Congress Standing Committee in November 2016. This legal framework enforces new rules for market access, assessing artist competencies, subsidizing cinemas to reserve two-thirds of screening slots for domestic productions, and censorship, essentially changing the economic and ideological conditions within which domestic and foreign film industries operate. In the draft’s summary description, the main goal regarding the safeguard of

nationalism is stated as “preserving cultural security, carrying forward core socialist values” (“Dianying”). According to the draft:

- (i) films that deal with “significant topics,” such as national security, religious or ethnic groups, military, or diplomacy, must be submitted to government officials for review (Art. 17);
- (ii) films must be a tool to “bring about social benefit consistent with economic benefits” (Art. 3);
- (iii) films that are deemed to be “inciting ethnic hatred and ethnic discrimination, violating ethnic customs, distorting ethnic history” are entirely banned (Art. 20, Sec. 3);
- (iv) films must not promote religious fanaticism, pornography, gambling, drug abuse, violence nor teach criminal method (Art. 20, Sec. 4-5); and
- (v) films must “serve the people and serve socialism, and prohibit content that violates basic principles of the Constitution, endangers national security or harms social morality.” (“Dianying”)

Like the National Security Law, the Film Industry Promotion Law indicates that filmmakers’ freedom of speech and expression may become limited. The work of localists and of *Ten Years* thus emphasize cultural security rather than political security.

With the controversy surrounding *Ten Years* and the localist movement, as well as the CPC’s tactics on enforcing censorship and nationalism, it becomes apparent that the current unrest in Hong Kong is more than simply about democratic values, political sovereignty, and economic conditions. In this regard, the localist movement epitomizes what Jürgen Habermas terms “new” social movements of the postwar period. Habermas argues that contemporary attacks on “old foundations” of the world have triggered new types of protest and action, no longer arising “in areas of material reproduction, [nor] channeled through parties and organizations”; rather, “the new conflicts arise in areas of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization” (33). It is, then, about the use of Cantonese and traditional Chinese characters; about protecting fishball vendors on the street who were targeted in a government crackdown against hawkers during the 2016 Lunar New Year; about securing hospital spaces for local mothers-to-be amid increasing numbers of mainland mothers choosing to give birth in Hong Kong; about preventing local shops from being replaced by jewelers, pharmacies and milk powder shops because of mainland demand; about ensuring primary school spaces for local students. It is, in short, about Hong Kong identity and its local way of life; about the basic rights and freedoms of the Hong Kong local—those who live in and belong to Hong Kong.

Following Habermas' new social movement theory, Hong Kong localists can be interpreted as struggling to have their own distinctive cultures to be recognized within the public sphere. They are forming social and political groups that work to establish Hong Kong identity and to highlight cultural differences. Their struggles thus concern "how to defend or reinstate endangered ways of life [... and] the grammar of forms of life" (Habermas 33). The resurgence of localism in Hong Kong must be understood not simply as "anti-China," but more importantly, as "pro-Hong Kong." For Habermas, such "independence movements struggling for regional, linguistic, cultural or religious autonomy are also of international significance" (34). New national security laws as well as censorship laws on film and media approved by the CPC could be interpreted as tactics employed to silence Hong Kong local identity, and rather than just focusing on the legal, political, and economic ramifications of such legislation, it is equally pertinent to interrogate their impact on cultural and social levels.

## Conclusion

What it means to be Hong Kong or a Hongkonger is at stake under the current Beijing governance. Hong Kong citizens have responded to this uncertainty with radical social activism and political demands, at its extreme calling for complete independence. Historically, the identity of Hong Kong locals has been one of fragmentation and alienation under British rule—neither a Chinese nor a British national. At this current moment in Hong Kong's transition back to Chinese sovereignty, the issue of identity becomes magnified, almost as if the loss of "British" as an identifier causes Hongkongers to double-down on the idea of a local Hong Kong as distinct from China. Not only is the political space of Hong Kong in transitional limbo, the identities of local Hongkongers are also caught between a disappearing British Chinese identity—one that has already been proven elusive as an identifier—and an emerging mainland Chinese identity. By presenting a future that is forcibly denied of Hong Kong's unique culture, *Ten Years* empowers localist movements by refusing the idea of a unified and singular national identity in line with the Mainland and by attempting to make clear what Hong Kong identity truly is.

The real danger Hong Kong's localist movement poses to China is its move toward anti-hegemonic rhetoric that diversifies the meaning of nationality, that destabilizes the "One Country" that China so very much relies on to exert its power over post-handover Hong Kong. The directors of *Ten Years*, a film that exemplifies localist discourse, are putting forward another version of what it means to be Chinese, directly challenging China's nationalism. The censorship of the film is a statement and show of state power, revealing the extensive tactics the CPC will employ in order to maintain legitimacy throughout the region.

As evident through the silencing of the “local,” the CPC’s vision for Hong Kong is one of full integration and assimilation, which, for many Hongkongers, ultimately indicates a future precisely like that envisioned in *Ten Years*.

## References

- Abbas, Ackbar. *Hong Kong Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.
- “About That Hong Kong ‘Locust’ Ad...” *The Wall Street Journal*. 1 Feb. 2012. Web. 2 Mar. 2019.
- “Agencies Responsible for Censorship in China.” *Congressional–Executive Commission on China*. n.d. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York, NY: Verso, 1983. Print.
- Auman. “(Gaodeng Yinyue Tai) Huangchong Tianxia MV (Yuanqu: Fushishan xia) [(高登音樂台) 蝗蟲天下 MV (原曲：富士山下)].” *YouTube*. 27 Feb. 2011. Web. 20 Aug. 2019.
- The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China*. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Brzeski, Patrick, and Karen Chu. “China Bans Broadcasts of Hong Kong Film Awards After Indie Political Movie Scores Nomination.” *Hollywood Reporter*. 22 Feb. 2016. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Butler, Judith. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. Print.
- Calhoun, Craig. “Social Theory and the Politics of Identity.” *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Ed. Craig Calhoun. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. 9–36. Print.
- “China: Scrap Draconian New National Security Law.” *Amnesty International*. 1 July 2015. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Chu, Karen. “AFM: How Hong Kong Localist Filmmakers Are Reclaiming Their Identity.” *Hollywood Reporter*. 3 Nov. 2016. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Connolly, William E. *The Ethos of Pluralization*. Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1995. Print.
- Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China (Revised). *China’s National People’s Congress*. 1 Oct. 1997. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Dean, Jodi. *Crowds and Party*. New York: Verso, 2016. Print.
- “Dianying ChanYe Cuijin Fa (Cao’an)” [電影產業促進法(草案); Film Industry Promotion Law (Draft)].” *China Law Translate*. 6 Nov. 2015. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Habermas, Jürgen. “New Social Movements.” *Telos* 49 (1981): 33–37. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Hernandez, Vittorio. “Nomination of Futuristic Film ‘Ten Years’ in HK Film Awards Angers China; CCTV & Tencent Will Not Air Show on April 3.” *Yibada*. 23 Feb. 2016. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.



- "HKU POP Releases HKSAR Anniversary Survey and Forecasts July 1 Rally Study Arrangements." *Public Opinion Programme, The University of Hong Kong*. 30 June 2016. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Ho, Tammy, et al. "Hong Kong Studies: A Beginning." *Hong Kong Studies* 1 (2018): 1–6. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- "Hong Kong News Editor Kevin Lau Improving after Attack." *BBC News*. 28 Feb. 2014. Web. 12 Aug. 2019.
- Hong Kong Tourism Board. "HKTB Around the World: Regional Reports 2002–2003." *Annual Report 2002/2003*. n.d. PDF. 15 Aug. 2018.
- "Hong Kong University Purge: Pro-Beijing Forces Target a Top School's Leaders to Intimidate Professors." *The Wall Street Journal*. 7 Oct. 2015. Web. 12 Aug. 2019.
- Huang, Joyce. "Beijing Seen as Meddling in Hong Kong University Election." *Voice of America*. 1 Oct. 2015. Web. 12 Aug. 2019.
- Huang Panyue, ed. "National Security Law of the People's Republic of China (2015) [Effective]." *Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China*. 3 Mar. 2017. Web. 2 Mar. 2019.
- "Huge Protest Fills HK Streets." *CNN International*. 2 July 2003. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- iloathelilyallen. "Huangchong tianxia [蝗蟲天下] Locust World (Subtitled with English)." *YouTube*. 13 Jan. 2012. Web. 20 Aug. 2019.
- Kuhn, Anthony. "Violence and Other Threats Raise Press Freedom Fears in Hong Kong." *NPR*. 16 July. 2014. Web. 12 Aug. 2019.
- Kuo, Lily. "The Uglier Side of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement Pits Chinese Against Chinese." *Quartz*. 2 Nov. 2014. Web. 2 Mar. 2019.
- Lai, Catherine. "Sweden Summons China Ambassador after Bookseller Gui Minahi Reportedly Seized from Train in front of Diplomats." *Hong Kong Free Press*. 23 Jan. 2018. Web. 12 Aug. 2019.
- Law, Fiona. "Editor's Removal Sparks Worries about Press Freedom in Hong Kong." *The Wall Street Journal*. 9 Jan. 2014. Web. 12 Aug. 2019.
- "Legislative Council Brief: National Security (Legislative Provisions) Bill." *HKSAR Proposals to Implement Article 23 of the Basic Law*. 20 Feb. 2003. Web. 2 Mar. 2019.
- Leong, Ionghin. "(Ting Bo Jinxiang Jiang) 'Shi Nian' Yuyan Xianggang Weilai; Deng CNN fu zao Huanshi Henpi" [[停播金像獎]《十年》預言香港未來 登CNN 復遭《環時》狠批; (Canceling the Broadcast of the Hong Kong Film Award) 'Ten Years' Predicts the Future of Hong Kong; Made it onto CNN and then Criticized by *Global Times*]. *HK01*. 20 Feb. 2016. Web. 15 Aug. 2019.
- Lu Chiahao, and Teng Weiwei. "Interview: Directors Discuss Ten Years and Future of Hong Kong." *The Taipei Times*. 12 July 2016. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- "Mockumentary." Merriam-Webster.com. *Merriam-Webster*. Web. 28 Aug. 2019.
- "Moral, Civic and National Education." *Education Bureau: The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region*. 30 Nov. 2016. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Murong Xuecun. "The New Face of Chinese Propaganda." *The New York Times*. 20 Dec. 2013. Web. 18 Aug. 2018.
- "National Security (Legislative Provisions) Bill." *HKSAR Basic Law*. n.d. PDF. 2 Mar. 2019.

- Ng, Joyce. "Johannes Chan's Appointment Vote at Hong Kong University: Why It's a Big Deal." *South China Morning Post*. 29 Sep. 2015. Web. 12 Aug. 2019.
- "Netizen Criticise Hong Kong New Monday Magazine's Anti Locust Cover." *Dictionary of Politically Incorrect Hong Kong Cantonese*. WordPress. 10 Feb. 2012. Web. 2 Mar. 2019.
- Pollack, Barbara. "The State of Hong Kong's Art Scene." *Artnews*. 6 Jan. 2015. Web. 2 Mar. 2019.
- Port of Call*. Dir. Philip Yung. Perf. Aaron Kwok, Elaine Jin, Patrick Tam. Mei Ah Entertainment, 2015. DVD.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus*. London: Continuum, 2010. Print.
- Sataline, Suzanne. "Will Hong Kong's Protest Art be Saved?" *The Boston Globe*. 16 Nov. 2014. Web. 2 Mar. 2019.
- Shankar, Sneha. "China Confirms 3 Missing HK Booksellers Detained for 'Illegal Activities,' European Parliament Demands Immediate Release." *International Business Times*. 5 Feb. 2016. Web. 12 Aug. 2019.
- Sun, Rebecca. "Hollywood and China: A Fad or Future of the Film Industry?" *Hollywood Reporter*. 25 Apr. 2016. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. Print.
- Ten Years*. Dir. Kwok Zune, Wong Fei Pang, Jevons Au, Chow Kwun Wai, Ng Ka Leung. Perf. Peter Chan, Wong Ching, Lau Ho Chi. Ten Years Studio, 2015. DVD.
- Tourism Commission. "Tourism Performance in 2015." Tourism Commission, Commerce and Economic Development Bureau. *The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region*. 29 Aug. 2016. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- "UK Asks China What It Knows of Missing Hong Kong Briton." *BBC News*. 5 Jan. 2016. Web. 12 Aug. 2019.
- Xiao Qiang. "Zhenli Bu: Xianggang Dianying Jinxiang Jiang he Niandi Taiwan Jinma Jiang" [真理部：香港電影金像獎和年底台灣金馬獎；Department of Truth: The Hong Kong Film Awards and the Taiwan Golden Horse Award at the End of the Year]. *China Digital Times*. 21 Feb. 2016. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
- Vélez, Diva. "New York Asian 2016 Interview: TEN YEARS Creators on Running Afoul of Mainland Chinese Government and Future of Hong Kong." *Screen Anarchy*. 12 July 2016. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.