

Postcolonialism, Diaspora, and Alternative Histories

The Cinema of Evans Chan

Edited by Tony Williams

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Chapter One

Introduction to the Work of Evans Chan

Tony Williams

The following collection of essays represents the first critical anthology in English to concentrate on the films of Evans Chan. Chan is well known and respected in Hong Kong not only for his films, but also for his journalism and film criticism. Although his name is not as prominent in the West, outside of art cinemas and university circuits, this has little to do with the merits of his work. Instead, one can look to the contemporary system of film distribution, in which a distinctive trend of art cinema, once widely circulated, is now conspicuous in its absence due to the stifling demands of the contemporary marketplace. The purpose of this anthology is to bring further attention to the significance of Evans Chan and his work noting that his importance lies beyond his role as a director investigating issues within Chinese culture, past and present, but as a global-diasporic talent in our evolving world of the twenty-first century.

All the essays in this volume eloquently and sincerely argue a case for recognizing the unique work Evans Chan has produced so far and which we expect will continue into the future. Readers may ask why Chan's work is important. Some of us remember Robin Wood's early championship of Alfred Hitchcock that initially encompassed only his Hollywood films. People asked at the time: "Why should we take Hitchcock seriously?" Of course, with time, the answer became clear. However, new questions began to emerge, such as "Can Hitchcock be saved from feminism?"¹ To be sure, that question will not be asked of Evans Chan because he has already contributed sensitive and unique portrayals of intelligent women in his films, as the presence of Lindzay Chan and Li Jun demonstrates. Evans Chan is a radically different director from Hitchcock, but while the two have completely different personalities, cultures, cinematic expressions, and national backgrounds, similar issues of interpretation not only link them to one another, but also to other directors that critics hope to bring to the attention of a wider audience. Here the issue is not "Why should we take Evans Chan seriously?", but "In what ways are Chan's films significant and what issues motivate them?" Anyone who has watched the films of Evans Chan will have no doubt about their artistic intentions and serious nature. Yet new critical questions emerge from every viewing that concern the uniquely cultural structures of meaning

operating within them (I use Raymond Williams's term deliberately here) and how they form part of the very complex world we live in today, a world becoming very small in terms of developing access to information and entertainment.

Naturally, I am writing from the perspective of a Western critic whose knowledge of Chinese culture, history, and language is very limited. But from my first viewing of *To Liv(e)*, I was impressed by the artistry and intelligence appearing in this initial film with its full awareness of the historical changes and cultural challenges that we all face today. To this end, the purpose of this anthology is not just an attempt by many voices to answer questions concerning Evans Chan's artistic sensibility as the director considers new projects and gains necessary funding and support to continue his unique interrogative aesthetic exploration into the very nature of China and its complex and cultural legacy that actively operates in our multi-national contemporary world, but also something else. This "something else," which more than deliberately echoes the title of a limited distribution Manchester (UK) journal devoted to new fiction and critical writing by my friend Charles Partington more than forty years ago, represents the purpose of each individual essay. If Robin Wood defined the critical methodology of his mentor F. R. Leavis by the phrase—"Yes, but," each individual essay not only aims to produce cogent arguments concerning the merits of the artistic production under consideration, but also points to future debates where alternative arguments may be made. In this anthology a case is being made, one intended to lead to further discussion by future critics.

During the mid-1960s I saw several newspaper advertisements promoting the first two parts of the Sergio Leone "Dollar" trilogy, "This is the first film of its kind. It won't be the last." This parallels the way all contributors view this anthology, namely as the first stage in a critical engagement with the director and his works. Since Evans Chan is an admirer of Jean-Luc Godard, one of the many writer-directors who would emerge from the pages of *Cahiers du Cinema*, it is natural that his critical supporters see parallels with someone who attempted a new type of cinema (or new understanding of cinema) drawing on the heritage of the past and developing it in new directions.

Although the cinemas of Godard and Chan differ immensely, both directors share a common critical heritage. Both began as critics and Evans Chan continues as a writer today. In *Cahiers du Cinema*, Godard articulated his particular images of a new type of cinema that would develop ideas from the old, especially classical Hollywood, and lead to new forms of cinematic expression, until he later moved into the exclusive political domains of late 1960s essay cinema such as *La Chinoise* (1967), *Le Gai Savoir* (1969), *Le Vent d'Est* (1970), and especially *Letter to Jane* (1972). Even before Godard's full immersion into the political realm, interim work such as *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (1966) combined a unique form of fictional representation and philosophic interrogation often resembling the essayistic explorations of directors such as Chris Marker's *Grin without a Cat* (1977) and *The Last Bolshevik* (1993)

and Orson Welles's *F for Fake* (1974). Due to his particular artistic concerns and budget, Evans Chan has concentrated on his own type of essay cinema throughout most of his career, but the particular path chosen is his own cultural and personal choice. Like any creative talent, Evans Chan is knowledgeable about the heritage of the past, both East and West, but follows his artistic explorations in his own creative manner. The political does exist, but emerges as part of a hybrid tapestry in his work, which mingles different forms of cinema such as fictional representation and essay cinema exploration in a unique cultural interrogation of the complex world of China as it exists today.

Born in China in 1961, raised in Macao and Hong Kong, Evans Chan relocated to the United States in the mid-1980s and established a New York-based company Riverdrive Productions in 1991. With such a background, Chan has experienced personally the hybrid nature of cosmopolitanism of the global era that motivates all his films. He is a writer as well as a journalist and film critic, and began working for a Hong Kong-based English language newspaper in the early 1980s. During the mid-1980s he studied at the New School for Social Research in New York earning a degree in philosophy. He continued to write on film, dance, drama, literature, and cultural criticism. In 1987, he published a collection of criticism, *Dream Tenants*, and line-produced Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* in 1997. This forms an interesting parallel to the work of veteran Chinese actress Lisa Lu Yan, who has acted in many Hollywood, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese films and who worked as an assistant producer and actor on Peter Bogdanovich's *Saint Jack* (1979), the only Hollywood film shot on location in Singapore. Evans Chan has also directed for the stage as his 2000 New York production of Eileen Chang's 1954 novel *Naked Earth* and his 2003 stage version of *The Life and Times of Wu Zhong Xian* reveal. His critical essays reveal the same degree of intelligence, interrogation, and sophistication that characterize his films, and he is the Chinese translator and editor of *Susan Sontag: Selected Writings* (2005) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2006). It is perhaps a misnomer to label him "The Last of the Chinese" (although this is the title of Chan's 1999 book) as Michael Berry did in his 2005 interview, since he is neither the first nor the last representative of a particular diasporic tradition.² He is a director continuing the diasporic tradition of his culture in his own distinctive manner. Yet, he is not unique in Hong Kong cinema. If we realize that a diverse world exists outside the commercial sector, then we can see him as not only inheriting the legacy of Tang Shu-shuen (who also owed much to the support of Cantonese director Lung Kong in her early career), but also functioning as a contributor to his own form of independent Chinese cinema alongside contemporaries such as Ann Hui, Stanley Kwan, and Patrick Tam, who have all used narrative in their various explorations of their cultural heritage.

From his first film *To Liv(e)* (1992) to his recent explorations of the historical figure Kang Youwei, Evans Chan has utilized the tradition of the film essay to interrogate

key issues of past and recent Chinese history in films such as the mostly fictionalized *Crossings* (1994) and *The Map of Sex and Love* (2001), has incorporated documentary formats in *Journey to Beijing* (1998) and *Adeus Macau* (2000), and has merged fiction and essay in *Datong* (2011) and *Two or Three Things about Kang Youwei* (2012). Yet Evans Chan never relies on one particular form in his work, but combines several creating new types of styles and meaning and often suggestively appropriating a particular concept such as fictional narrative to raise important historical questions relevant to our own time, much as Samuel Fuller once did in his own form of cinema. As Stacilee Ford correctly notes, *Bauhinia* is perhaps the only Chinese film to date to deal with the issue of 9/11 from a complex global perspective, one in which the personal is always integrally related to the historical and cannot be separated from it. If Evans Chan's critical writings exhibit a serious sense of responsibility sadly lacking in certain examples of contemporary Western academic articles, his films exhibit similar qualities. They represent an artistic interaction of aesthetic, cultural, and historical concerns that challenge the spectator to engage in a critical dialogue in a manner akin to the best traditions of the lost world of art cinema, one that operated in both East and West long ago. As critics such as Law Kar and Hector Rodriguez have shown, it is difficult to imagine a time that Hong Kong cinema was not a completely commercial enterprise, but a more diverse environment in which avant-garde and alternative approaches were also supported.³ The work of Evans Chan belongs to this supposedly lost tradition, one initiated by pioneers such as Tang Shu-shuen and the critical community that she once belonged to and influenced.

An Evans Chan film is dialectical in the aesthetic sense of the term employing the best traditions of modernist cinema that bring the spectator into an act of critical engagement in much the same way that the old European art cinema once did. The operation may not be dialectical in the pure Marxist sense of the term, but it involves similar principles and urges every spectator to think not just politically, but historically and culturally. If Andrew Britton once saw Jean-Luc Godard's *Tout Va Bien* (1972) as an attempt to move beyond the stalemate of *Le Vent d'Est* by attempting to engage the spectator in "living historically," Evans Chan's work continues this tradition in his own personal and artistic manner.⁴

Times change. So, too, do critical concepts and aesthetic strategies. But the past is not just a forgotten country but an entity containing its own type of culture and history, which, if impossible to overlay directly upon our current daily concerns, does offer us the possibility of developing new and meaningful legacies. With their interplay of Chinese and Western traditions, the work of Evans Chan offers several possibilities defined by the contexts that have influenced him. As Gina Marchetti points out, "Chan's films operate on many layers similar to palimpsests, many sitting on top of another, some (almost) postcolonial in English, some diasporic and accented in American English, some (almost) post-socialist in Chinese, some modern and part

of the tail end of an international New Wave, other postmodern and part of contemporary global cinema culture.”⁵ They are films aimed at different audiences and calling on multiple frames of reference “for the English-speaking film audience at festivals and art cinemas globally, for the slowly expanding circle of Asian-American film spectators, and for the Chinese-speaking audience seeing the films in relation to the standard Hong Kong commercial product.”⁶

Modernism is not dead, but alive in the work of Evans Chan now existing in a new form.⁷ Like any creative talent, Evans Chan is fully aware of the elements that exist outside the text and probes at issues that may not be fully explored. The issue of class is one of them. David Walsh found *The Map of Sex and Love* one of the more interesting films shown at the 2001 Vancouver Film Festival. Despite noting how “observant” it was concerning Hong Kong society, he commented that it had a “despondent air about it” and that the “radical melancholy that pervades the film, while more seductive than many contemporary tomes, wears thin in the end.”⁸ The radical aspect of this film is in fact more than melancholic and the film deals with other issues that Hector Rodriguez and Kenneth Chan reveal in their chapters in this book. It is a film demanding much deeper exploration and critics may find what they are looking for but interwoven within the type of complex structure that Gina Marchetti has often revealed in her critical writings. For example, although *To Liv(e)* may appear to focus exclusively on middle-class characters, it is made clear that they have emerged from impoverished, working-class backgrounds and they owe their mobility to the different era of the late twentieth century when boundaries appear to dissolve. When Rubie visits her family’s home and shop, the mise-en-scene makes clear that she “has not always led a solidly bourgeois existence.”⁹ Other key issues exist in the film but they do not entirely obliterate issues of class, which either exist as elements within the narration or as alternative outside features that require consideration. Each Evans Chan film is unique in itself and one should not ask the director to emphasize one issue above all others. To demand this of him would be equivalent to rejecting Henry James because he does not write about dockworkers in Victorian East End London or Ozu because he does not explore the collective world of a labor union in post-war Japan. We must approach the work as it is presented to us and recognize that what the critic looks for may already exist as an internal element within the text to be seen within the context of the other issues the director explores.

It is tempting to place Evans Chan within convenient frameworks such as post-colonial cinema, queer theory, and postmodernism. A case may be made for any of these as long as it does not ignore his complex approach to these categories. The essays of Evans Chan that have been translated into English reveal someone who, while recognizing the cultural currency of these terms, also recognizes certain problematic issues. In his essay “Postmodernism and Hong Kong Cinema”, Chan notes the danger of rejecting the unfinished enlightenment and emancipatory projects in these

problematic times, finding them more relevant than many adherents of postmodernism do. Throughout this essay, which is as meticulously documented and sophisticated as his films, Chan points out that although postmodernism has emphasized a sexuality agenda that includes the urgent question of gay rights politics, it is also important “to recognize that the need for a workable class politics, which remains as great as ever, has seemed to get short shrift since the rise of new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s.”¹⁰

Whatever the merits of judging Chan’s work in the light of such critical concepts, it is also important to recognize how they differ aesthetically and politically within the world of Asian Cinema specifically and World Cinema in general. In one way or another, his films prompt new analytic concepts and paradigms, which the various contributors to this anthology attempt by approaching the films in the same challenging and responsible manner that the director approaches his subject matter. His recent films, focused on the figure of Kang Youwei and his ideas for a future utopian world, echo an idea articulated by Homi Bhabha, a writer who has explored issues of diaspora, transnationality, and transcultural experience: “For it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity.”¹¹

The essay film has had a long history and its very structure involves the blurring of boundaries so that the supposedly separate realms of documentary and fiction may dissolve and merge into new types of creation.¹² For example, *To Liv(e)* may involve Rubie’s direct address to the camera, but a fictional narrative is part of its structure, a narrative that elaborates on the problems with Liv Ullman’s concept of Hong Kong’s treatment of the boat people. *Crossings* and *The Map of Sex and Love* appear fictional in structure, but these very structures involve issues of contemporary concerns, issues that some say would most appropriately belong to the realm of documentary. However, the documentary is in a state of development and evolution far beyond John Grierson’s idea of a “window on the world,” and the creative concerns of Evans Chan change and develop in every film that he makes.

Corrigan sees the essay film as a productively inventive formula blurring many boundaries

that undo and redo film form, visual perspectives, public geographies, temporal organizations, and notions of truth and judgment within the complexity of experience. With a perplexing and enriching lack of formal rigor, essays and essay films do not usually offer the kinds of pleasure associated with traditional aesthetic forms like narrative or lyrical poetry; they instead lean towards intellectual reflections that often insist on more conceptual or pragmatic responses, well outside the borders of conventional pleasure principles.¹³

In a fascinating exploration of the essay film, Rascaroli sees it as “articulating its rhetorical concerns in a performative manner; by integrating into the text the process

of its own coming into being. Performance as a result, plays a key role in essayistic cinema.”¹⁴ While noting the different ways performance functions in the films of Evans Chan such as *To Liv(e)*, *Crossings*, *The Life and Times of Wu Zhong Xian*, and the Margaret Leng Tan films, it should be noted that different variations of performance operate as strategic signifiers of meaning contributing to the overall structure. Sometimes, such performances may involve extracts from *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* (1948) in *Datong* and *Two or Three Things about Kang Youwei* sometimes projected over the historical characters played by actors in these two films.

In his unique explorations of the essay film, Evans Chan utilizes a particular hybrid sensibility and merges Eastern and Western cultural techniques that also fit into the category of “accented cinema.” Foregrounding a director’s personal experience defined by Hamid Naficy, we remember that the guilt about Nazi gold felt by one character in *The Map of Sex and Love* also parallels an aspect of the director’s own family history. For Naficy, “Exilic discourse needs to counter the move by some postmodern critics to separate the author of the film from the enunciating subject in the film, for exile and authorship are fundamentally intertwined with historical movements of empirical subjects across boundaries of nations.”¹⁵ This statement also applies to a director born in China who lived in Macao during his formative years, moved to Hong Kong, and now resides on New York’s Riverside Drive—a transnational global subject who reflects many of the concerns of the twenty-first century in his films but who also is seriously concerned with issues surrounding history, culture, and national boundaries.

As Rascaroli states in the opening sentence of her afterword, “Essayistic cinema is irreducibly plural.”¹⁶ It takes many forms and, as she concludes, “it is a field in which there is no truth, only truth making.”¹⁷ Overall, it is a cinema of interrogation that aims at communication and negotiation with every spectator.

Essayistic cinema is a cinema of today also because it is the expression of a transnational imagination, one which is more germane to our current interest for filmic phenomena that go beyond the national borders, and that more faithfully describe new territories, not only spatial, but existential, affective, aesthetic, communicative, political. The absence of rules in this field means that essayistic directors are in conversation with one another, rather than with established national and generic practices.¹⁸

Both *Journey to Beijing* and *Adeus Macau* have associations with that essay film form that Corrigan defines as essayistic travels that “highlight and emphasize their own particular experiential encounters.”¹⁹ Yet the major difference between them and the films Corrigan cites such as Godard’s *Notre Musique* (2004), Helke Sanders’s *The All-Around Reduced Personality—Redupers* (1978), Chantal Akerman’s *News from Home* (1977), Wim Wenders’s *Tokyo-Ga* (1985), and Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* (2005) is that Chan’s films reveal a greater awareness of human experience caught

within a changing historical situation with national rather than individual consequences. These and his other films are less refractive essay films in terms of engaging and exploring the cinematic medium in an anti-aesthetic sense, but more exploratory works viewing individual dilemmas within the broader context of culture and history and moving towards some hopeful resolution.²⁰ Rather than emphasizing a diffuse, avant-garde form of subjectivity, the type of essay films that Evans Chan explores is one that, as defined by Philip Lopate, “tracks a person’s thoughts . . . an essay is a search to find out what one thinks about something.”²¹ Whether expressed by fictional characters such as Rubie in *To Liv(e)*, the heroine of *Bauhinia*, or the real life people interviewed in *Journey to Beijing*, *Adeus Macau*, *Sorceress of the New Piano*, *Datong*, and *Two or Three Things about Kang Youwei*, issues of the film are made clear to the viewer. But in the end, the viewer is expected to form his or her own conclusions. The films of Evans Chan thus contain a unique south-east contribution to the development of the essay film.

The essays contained in this collection, written by scholars of different gender, race, and nationality from various exilic positions, though written from different perspectives, are all united “into a kind of solidarity” to bring the work of Evans Chan to a wider audience and prompt further debate. The essay by Amy Lee examines Chan’s unique employment of film essay and political discourse in his first film *To Liv(e)*, which he extends in so many diverse ways in later films. Chan’s second film, *Crossings*, most resembles a feature film with its use of stars like Simon Yam and Anita Yuen. However, it extends the dialogue on transnationality that was first explored in *To Liv(e)*. Tony Williams’s piece is, sadly, one of a very few that have examined this film in the detail it deserves. Hopefully, others will appear in the future. It first appeared in *Asian Cinema* 11.2 (2000) and is reprinted here by kind permission of John A. Lent. Hector Rodriguez’s stimulating essay on Chan’s third film, *The Map of Sex and Love*, first appeared in *Cinemaya* 54/55 (2002). It is republished by kind permission of the editor. Kenneth Chan’s “Absurd Connections, or Cosmopolitan Conviviality in *The Map of Sex and Love*” offers a different type of detailed examination of an intriguing hybrid film that provides viewers with a cinematic meditation combining both pessimism and optimism. Chan’s further use of the essay documentary to focus on the politically changed borders that once separated the colonies of Hong Kong and Macao from Mainland China forms the subject of “Issues of Decolonization: Two Essay Documentaries by Evans Chan” by Tony Williams, which first appeared in *Asian Cinema* 18.1 (2007). I again acknowledge the generosity of John A. Lent in agreeing to this article’s republication. In “Brecht in Hong Kong: Evans Chan’s *The Life and Times of Wu Zhong Xian*,” Gina Marchetti provides penetrating insights into another essay documentary that relates a postmodern present to Hong Kong’s radical past. It is followed by Michael Ingham’s examination of three Evans Chan films that focus upon another avant-garde transnational talent, Margaret Leng Tan, noting key

interrelationships between sound and vision in these particular works. The final essay is Stacilee Ford's exemplary treatment of her experience teaching one of Evans Chan's films in her classroom. It is a rare and very positive example of the interrelationship between pedagogy and reader-reception in terms of the film's tragic historical associations. It also provides a valuable pathway into how one can teach the films of Evans Chan to a student audience in the classroom.

The book concludes with an interview with Evans Chan covering his work to date. While some critics believe that the director is irrelevant to any form of academic discussions of his or her work, it is often forgotten that the director's voice can provide a significant dialogical interplay with the work. In an anthology emphasizing issues of multiplicity and different voices, it is only reasonable to find Chan himself operating as part of the diverse cinematic tapestries and palimpsest he provides within his own films. Hopefully, Evans Chan will continue along the path of his own form of critical cinema that provides a unique form of expression in this new globalized transnational and transcultural world we all inhabit today.

Notes

1. Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 371.
2. Michael Berry, "Evans Chan: The Last of the Chinese," in *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 509–542.
3. See Law Kar, "An Overview of Hong Kong's New Wave Cinema," and Hector Rodriguez, "The Emergence of the Hong Kong New Wave," in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, ed. Esther C. M. Yau (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 31–52, 53–69, especially 57 where he refers to the legacy of Tang Shu-shuen.
4. Andrew Britton, "Living Historically: Two Films by Jean-Luc Godard," *Framework* 3 (1976): 4–15, especially 9 and 15.
5. Gina Marchetti, "Transnational Exchanges, Questions of Culture, and Global Cinema: Defining the Dynamics of Changing Relationships," in *At Full Speed*, 255.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. David Walsh, "Vancouver International Film Festival Part 2—Too Modest by Half," *World Socialist Web Site*, October 31, 2001, <http://www.wsws.org> (accessed June 20, 2013).
9. Gina Marchetti, "Transnational Cinema and Hybrid Identities: *To Liv(e)* and *Crossings*," in *From Tian'anmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens, 1989–1997* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 168.
10. Evans Chan, "Postmodernism and Hong Kong Cinema," <http://www.postmodernculture.com> (accessed July 26, 2014).
11. Homi Bhabha, "Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 170.
12. Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008); and Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After*

Marker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Neither work contains any mention of Evans Chan. Hopefully this will be rectified in later editions since both discuss many interesting parallels to his cinema. See also Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2006). For Jean-Luc Godard's description of himself as an essayist director, see "Interview," in *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard*, eds. Jean Narboni and Tom Milne (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), 171.

13. Corrigan, 4–5.
14. Rascaroli, 94.
15. Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 34.
16. Rascaroli, 189. For some other explorations of essay film, see Nora M. Alter, "The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*," *New German Critique* 68 (1996): 165–192; Philip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay Film," in *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*, ed. Charles Warren (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 243–270; Michael Renov, "Lost, Lost, Lost: Mekas as Essayist," in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 69–89; Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005); and Nora M. Alter, *Chris Marker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
17. Rascaroli, 191.
18. *Ibid.*, 190.
19. Corrigan, 195.
20. For Corrigan's interpretation of his refractive essay cinema concept, see *ibid.*, 181–204.
21. Lopate, 244.

Chapter Ten

An Interview with Evans Chan

Tony Williams

*So far, you've directed a very diverse body of work that defies any attempt to categorize it within any one generic classification. How would you (if possible) define your approach as a filmmaker?**

How I approach a subject tends to be intuitive, so I can't tell you about a definite approach. Maybe a little bit of my background will provide some anchorage points for our discussion.

I started off as a film/cultural critic and a literary columnist, since my first love was literature, particularly, the novel form—James, Conrad, Dostoevsky, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Eileen Chang are works/authors that I'll always go back to for pleasure, and enlightenment. There's always a certain regret in me that I've never become a novelist, though I've published a couple of stories and novella. Basically, there are two reasons: Firstly, I'm not into description, which probably pushes me in the direction of play- or screenwriting rather than novel writing.

Secondly, Hong Kong and Macao, the environments where I grew up, are Cantonese-speaking communities. That factor predetermines the situation that novel writing actually involves acts of “translation,” since for dialogue to be acceptable as literary language, Cantonese will have to be translated into Mandarin/Putonghua, the official lingua franca for Chinese literature. But filtered and translated writing inevitably leaves much of the vernacular, social reality out of (Hong Kong) literature. I think that's why Hong Kong has always been scorned by the Chinese mainland as a “cultural dessert,” because its dearth of “literary” production has been always a given. However, Hong Kong has indeed produced a literary tradition, with fine writers such as Xi Xi, Dung Kai Cheung, and Hon Lai Chu at work today. And it's not surprising that they tend to mine the vein of fantastical writings as spearheaded by Calvino, Borges, and other magic realists.

Obviously, the only way for a dialect to be used unapologetically is in local plays, or film and TV, which can be accompanied by subtitles for international viewings. What I'm getting at is that there is a powerful culturally hegemonic idea of Chinese-ness at

* Note that text in italics is from Tony Williams, while text in roman type is from Evans Chan.

play here, which is northern, Putonghua-driven. Hence, vernacular, i.e., Cantonese-based, filmmaking is also an act of redefining and enlarging the cultural center. After attending the premiere of *Datong: The Great Society* in Hong Kong last year, Sebastian Veg, the director of the French Chinese Research Centre in Hong Kong, told me that the film was a stark reminder that an important historical figure such as Kang Youwei was in fact a Cantonese-speaking southerner, who had a shot at changing the political system of the modern Chinese nation.

Though attracted to literature, I ended up in an undergrad journalism program in Hong Kong. My interest in storytelling led me to some film aesthetic classes, which opened my eyes to the possibility of filmmaking as a viable, challenging narrative medium. Soon I began watching European art films systematically—Bergman, Godard, Antonioni, Bertolucci, Fassbinder, Dreyer, and so on. I don't doubt that they have left an indelible mark in my subconscious. But then I didn't dream of making films myself one day.

In college, I was also drawn to contemporary media and aesthetic theories—McLuhan, Sontag, Benjamin. Later on I took my MA at the New School for Social Research in New York, where my mentor was Jerome Kohn, Hannah Arendt's last teaching assistant who eventually became the editor of her uncollected writings. I read Foucault, Barthes, Bataille. One strong interest was in Marxism, and I ended up reading all three volumes of Marx's *Das Capital* for a class—quite a consciousness-transforming experience.

Given the background outlined above, I'd suggest that my love of literature accounts for my venture into narrative/fiction features. But my training in journalism and brief stint as a journalist in Hong Kong's English press meant that documentary-making came to me naturally too. My interest in Marxism and political philosophy also made my work interventionist, and socially and politically oriented. Such an intellectual bent has also inflected my work toward the discursive, essayistic mode in both fiction and nonfiction. However, I always welcome the challenge of making more popular films, such as my *Crossings*, or the RTHK-commissioned *Bauhinia*.

To those looking at Hong Kong cinema from an outside perspective, you appear to be its only art cinema director. But, in The Life and Times of Wu Zhong Xian (2003), you shot scenes in Club 64 [now defunct] of which the title character was an original investor and you use John Woo's early avant-garde work Deadknot in that film. Do you see yourself belonging to that tradition that began decades ago?

No, I certainly am not the only art director in the Hong Kong scene. I don't think you can say that Wong Kar-wai, Stanley Kwan, or Ann Hui are not art film directors, even though their works may be considered more mainstream or popularly oriented than mine. Mainstream cinema always relies on the star system to guarantee its mass

appeal. Ann Hui et al. worked their way up the TV/film industry, so they are in a much better position to tap into the star system than someone like me, who entered filmmaking sort of accidentally and as an outsider. *Crossings* (1994), my one film that really marshalled the star system, was made shortly before the pre-sale system of the Hong Kong film industry collapsed totally. After that, securing stars and fund-raising have both become more challenging even for seasoned filmmakers (for example, I've heard complaints from Ann Hui). Now the growing absorption of Hong Kong cinema by the mainland market makes fund-raising even more complex because a script has to be approved by the censors as a necessary first step. Peggy Chiao, producer of my most recent film *Datong: The Great Society*, is definitely experienced in negotiating the mainland scene. We're right now exploring some project ideas, but it is tough as hell for artsy projects.

The Life and Times of Wu Zhong Xian is my paean to Hong Kong's pioneers in the social and human rights movement that took off in the colonial 1970s. They—I mean Wu and Mok Chiu Yu, who plays himself as well as the late Wu—are Hong Kong/Chinese activists who participated in the global anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian movement as epitomized in France's May '68. As I've mentioned elsewhere—avant-garde art and radical politics often go hand-in-hand. John Woo emerged from that milieu and he left this interesting short film, *Deadknot*, a unique testament to that trailblazing moment of rebellion and artistic experimentation. Woo has since gone on to become a major director of action films. But if you see his *Deadknot* as a forerunner of my kind of cinema, I feel honored, even though the dearth of work in that vein makes it problematic to even call it a tradition. One interesting link between myself and the Wu gangs is Woo Tze, a member of Wu's 70s' group, who later started *Film Biweekly* magazine. This publication, now defunct, became my first major platform to review films in the 1980s, which led to my own filmmaking. So hidden behind *Wu Zhong Xian* is really the umbilical cord of my aesthetic and political beginning.

In an earlier interview with Michael Berry you mention your translations of Susan Sontag's work. Are there other types of literary influences that you now see as influencing your work and why are you interested in Sontag's works?

There are too many authors for me to mention here who might have shaped my way of looking at the world. But specifically, two novels—Heinrich Boll's *The Clown* and Saul Bellow's *Herzog*—might have influenced the epistolary form of *To Liv(e)*. The theatricalization in my work—from *To Liv(e)* to *Datong: The Great Society*—reflects as much my interest on Brechtian theater as my interest in the performing arts. I've been a lifetime friend of Lin Hwai-min and Willy Tsao, two leaders of the Chinese modern dance scene. And my friendship with the John Cage pianist, Margaret Leng Tan, preceded my filmmaking days.

Susan Sontag's romance with the life of the mind via literature and arts might be the true enduring appeal emanating from her heterogeneous corpus. (But then, how many books/films is one finally remembered for?) As important as some of her essays are, the eerie opaqueness, and the mirroring and imbrications of dream and reality in her first novel *The Benefactor* still fascinate me after all these years. Her appetite in reading and film viewing was voracious, which accounted for her unique credential to straddle both literary and film criticism. I'm drawn to her because of the above-mentioned qualities. I understand that her own filmmaking has been much derided. And I won't defend her first two films. But *Promised Land*, her documentary about Israel during and after the Yom Kippur War—now out on DVD—remains a credible, politically provocative outing. I believe she finally found her own voice as a filmmaker in a little known work commissioned by Italian TV—*Unguided Tour*, based on one of her own stories and set in Venice. It is a lyrical and elegiac film essay with quite a stunning ending worthy of the renowned author of *On Photography*. Of course, I saw that film only once and more than twenty years ago. I could be wrong. Yet the film's incantatory voice-over proclamation—"In the beginning the world is America, at the end is Venice"—is haunting, accentuated by the footage of a flooded Venice back in the days when global warming wasn't such a hot topic. I believe her last film was a BBC-commissioned work about Pina Bausch, which I haven't seen. Now it will be interesting to look that up for comparison with Wim Wenders's *Pina*.

Strictly speaking, I've only translated one book of hers—*Regarding the Pain of Others*. But I've also translated my own interview with her, "Against Postmodern etc.," into Chinese, which I anthologized in my edited volume, *Selected Writings by Susan Sontag* (published by Taiwan's Rye Field), the content of which she designed herself, and which is not analogous to any of her other books in English.¹ Some people told me that I was the first person to translate Sontag into Chinese. I'm not sure about that. At any rate, I translated her essay "Fascinating Fascism" and her short story "Project for a Trip to China" in the early 1980s. I've contributed introductory essays/commentaries to her other books published in Taiwan. I guess I'll continue to do so as long as the editors still want me to.

What actually influenced your decision to make To Liv(e) (1991) as your first film? Did you expect that film to be listed as one of the 100 Greatest Hong Kong Films by Time Out magazine twenty years later?

The *Time Out* listing came as a delightful surprise, especially because the making of *To Liv(e)* was partly an accident. The fact is before I made *To Liv(e)*, I wrote a screenplay for Lawrence Ah Mon, which didn't get produced. I had the feeling that my cinematic vision may seem too personal for other filmmakers to direct. But I didn't have any plan, or resources, to direct a film myself. Then I took my first trip to China in 1989,

which ended with my evacuation from Hangzhou, after the Tiananmen massacre plunged the entire country into chaos. I witnessed the democratic uprising in Beijing in late May when more than a million people took to the street. The movement and its tragic ending became a massive political awakening for Hong Kong as well as myself, then already a diasporic Chinese intellectual living in New York. My grief had absolutely no connection to any plan of making a film about Tiananmen's impact on Hong Kong. But when Liv Ullmann visited Hong Kong early the following year to condemn the British colony's repatriation of stranded Vietnamese boat people, I felt challenged on various levels. First off, Hong Kong had fallen victim to the big power diplomacy between China, Britain, and the US. When all Western countries closed their doors to the boat people, why should Hong Kong be forced to take them in unconditionally and indefinitely, when accepting such responsibilities translated into an unquestioning caretaking of miseries left behind by a misguided American war and her punitive post-war policies (which included trade sanctions) toward Vietnam? And to be told off by an icon of European high culture, who preached compassion and universal values to a city still reeling from the bloody crackdown in Beijing? As much as I admired Ms. Ullmann's humanitarian concerns, I felt that her position was ill-considered; and she also came across as a bit too holier than thou. The challenge Ms. Ullmann's visit posed for me was not only political, but also cultural and finally artistic—here's this great Bergman actress descending from her pedestal, if only to scold. Some impressions I had, stories I heard about post-Tiananmen Hong Kong, quickly jelled into a screenplay. Then I took a filmmaking workshop at the New School with Arnold Eagle, raised funds—from the generous Willy Tsao, who has provided my projects with various levels of support since then—and made my first film.

This may not be the best platform to revisit the Vietnamese boat people issue. However, I want to point out that the year when the first repatriation operation took place, some 70,000 boat people sought political asylum in Southeast Asia. Three years later, the number dwindled to 41. No humanitarian crisis of note was ever reported about the returnees. This proves that most of the boat people were economic migrants egged on by the West's Cold War rhetoric and false promises. One also can't help feeling that those cries of horror about repatriation were orchestrated as part of a demonization campaign against socialist Vietnam for her sin of humiliating the American empire. Whether Ms. Ullmann was misguided or not is now ancient history. All I want to say is that my admiration of Ms. Ullmann has only grown over the years—my admiration of her as an actress, stage/film director, and veteran human rights activist. She is now known to so many Chinese as the one who gave a reading of an essay by Liu Xiaobo, the absent honoree, at the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize presentation ceremony.

Filmography

1992: *To Liv(e)* (浮世戀曲), 107 minutes

In Cantonese & English with Chinese & English subtitles

Long considered an underground classic, Evans Chan's directorial debut was listed by *Time Out, Hong Kong* as among the 100 Greatest Hong Kong Films in 2012. Upon its North American premiere, *The Hollywood Reporter* wrote: "*To Liv(e)* was inspired by actress Liv Ullmann's 1990 visit to Hong Kong, where she decried the forced deportation of Vietnamese refugees. This, coupled with the Tiananmen Square crackdown the year before, contributes to a dark cloud of apprehension over the British colony . . . With a painter's eye in capturing the bohemian fringe of the Hong Kong art scene, and the mature voice of a seasoned filmmaker, Chan examines love, family, the fate of Hong Kong, and the culture clash between East and West with equal depth and assurance."

Production Company: Riverdrive Productions

Director and Writer: Evans Chan (陳耀成)

Producer: Willy Tsao

Photography: Wong Ping Hung

Editor: Sammy Chow

Music: Milos Raickovich

Cast: Lindzay Chan (Rubie), Fung Kin Chung (John), Josephine Ku (Teresa), Anthony Wong Yiu-Min (Tony), Elsie Tu (herself)

Location: Hong Kong

1994: *Crossings* (錯愛), 94 minutes

In Cantonese & English with English subtitles

Production Company: Riverdrive Productions

Director: Evans Chan

Producer: Willy Tsao

Writers: Joyce Chan, Evans Chan

Photography: Jaimie Silverstein

Editor: Henry Chang

Music: Cui Jian, Kung Chi Shing

Cast: Anita Yuen (Mo-yung), Simon Yam (Benny), Lindzay Chan (Rubie), Ted Brunetti (Joey)

Location: New York

1998: *Journey to Beijing* (北征), 115 minutes

In Cantonese & English with Chinese & English subtitles

The 1997 British handover of Hong Kong was captured in this “remarkable documentary” (Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*) through the prism of a philanthropic walk to raise funds for China’s underprivileged children. Featured on CNN, and a selection by both the Berlin and London film festivals, *Journey to Beijing* was hailed by veteran political commentator, Lee Yee, as a “masterwork about Hong Kong’s decolonisation” (*Apple Daily*). And the PRC activist filmmaker Ying Liang, upon seeing *Journey* fifteen years after the historic event, praised the film’s sweeping exploration of “all major issues affecting the uneven road of democratic advancement” for both Hong Kong and China.

Production Company: Riverdrive Productions

Director: Evans Chan

Producer: Willy Tsao

Photography: David Cheung, Philip Gerrard, Garrett Sokoloff, Wang Jie, Wong Ping Hung, Anthony Yeung

Editors: Evans Chan, Garrett Sokoloff

Interviewers: Evans Chan, Lindzay Chan; Interviewees: David Cheung, S. C. Tam, Paul Lederer, Wong Yu Tat, Christine Loh, Lew Young, Peter Humphrey, Charles Shu, Jon Resniak, Mark Lam, Ken Young, K. K. Ling, Elaine Chim, Lo Fu, Roland Fung, Lao Si Guang, Helen Lai, Lee Yee, Chan Yuen Han, Joanna Chan, Philip Bowring, Martin Lee

Locations: Hong Kong, China, New York

2000: *Adeus Macau* (澳門二千), 52 minutes

The second instalment in Chan’s “China Decolonized” series, *Adeus Macau* focuses on the 1999 Sino-Portuguese handover. “The film unfolds through a series of interviews and visual observation of the cityscape of Macau, including the handover ceremony and demonstrations/street theater by artists critical of the event,” while looking broadly at Macau’s “cultural landscape . . . the distinct Portuguese colonial history . . . Although not as long and elaborate as [its predecessor] *Journey to Beijing*, *Adeus Macau* may, indeed, be a more ‘disarming’ view of the end of European colonialism

in the Pearl River Delta” (Michael Ingham and Gina Marchetti, *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film*).

Production Company: Riverdrive Productions

Director: Evans Chan

Producer: Willy Tsao

Photography: Nicholas Sun, Ron Schreiber

Editors: Evans Chan, Betty Lee

Music: Lam Bun Ching and others

Interviewer: Evans Chan; Interviewees: Lucian Pye, Ng Siu San, Liu Wing Yee, Chu Iao Ian, Law Kar, Harald Bruning, Jane Lei, Lam Bun Ching, Joao Manuel Amorim, Mok Chiu Yu, Leung Kwok Hung

Location: Macao

2001: *The Map of Sex and Love* (情色地圖), 140 minutes

In Cantonese & English with English subtitles

Production Company: Riverdrive Productions

Director and Writer: Evans Chan

Producer: Willy Tsao

Photography: O Sing Pui

Editor: Garrett Sokoloff

Music: Milos Raickovich

Cast: Bernardo Chow (Wei Ming), Cherie Ho (Mimi), Victor Ma (Larry), Lindzay Chan (Janice)

Location: Hong Kong

2002: *Bauhinia* (紫荊), 50 minutes

In Cantonese & English with Chinese & English subtitles

In the aftermath of September 11, film student Bauhinia (Li Jun) attempts to edit her thesis project on female infanticide brought about by China’s one-child policy in a New York room overlooking the wreckage left by the fallen Twin Towers, while faced with an unexpected pregnancy of her own. Evans Chan melts “the fictional and real world boundaries to create a space that haunts not only its characters but the audience as well . . . he captures a side of post-9/11 New York unfiltered by pop media, thus consequently more truthful to the human condition” (Christopher Claxton, Hawaii International Film Festival).

Production Company: Riverdrive Productions

Director and Writer: Evans Chan

Producer: Stella Sze

Photography: Mai Iskander

Editor: Garrett Sokoloff

Music: Milos Raickovich

Cast: Li Jun (Bauhinia), Ka Shing (Jack), Li Yiling (interviewee), Chan Ping Chiu (school-friend), Elizabeth Summerlin (Liz)

Location: New York

2002: *The Life and Times of Wu Zhong Xian* (吳仲賢的故事), 72 minutes

In Cantonese with English subtitles

Based on an activist play, *The Life and Times of Wu Zhong Xian* evokes the saga of a radical generation shaping the political awakening of a localized Hong Kong identity in the 1970s, the impact of which can still be felt in the seething popular activism in the ex-colony today. The film “manages to convey a sweeping sense of Chinese countercultural activity (such as a young John Woo’s experimental filmmaking) throughout the decades; the cumulative effect is a profound sense of the perils by which ordinary people attempt to change the system” (Scott Foundas, *Variety*).

Production Company: Riverdrive Productions

Director: Evans Chan

Executive Producers: The Asian People’s Theatre Festival Society, Willy Tsao

Writers: Mok Chiu Yu, Evans Chan

Photographer: O Sing Pui

Music: John Huie

Participants: Mok Chiu Yu, Lindzay Chan

Location: Hong Kong

2004: *Sorceress of the New Piano: The Artistry of Margaret Leng Tan* (靈琴新韻), 90 minutes

Production Company: Riverdrive Productions

Director, Writer, and Editor: Evans Chan

Executive Producers: Russell Friedman, Willy Tsao

Director of Photography: Gabrielle Weiss

Music: Margaret Leng Tan

Locations: USA, Singapore, Hong Kong

2004: *George Crumb: Makrokosmos I & II* (宏宇), 140 minutes

Credits: as *Sorceress of the New Piano*

Location: New York

2005: *Subway, New York* (紐約地鐵), 7 minutes 16 seconds

Production Company: RTHK

Director, Producer, and Editor: Evans Chan
Director of Photography: Gabrielle Weiss
Music: Missy Misdemeanour Elliott
Participants: Ka Shing, Li Jun
Location: New York
Filmed on DVD as part of a RTHK series *Four Subways*

2011: *Datong: The Great Society* (大同：康有為在瑞典), 118 minutes

In Cantonese & English with English subtitles

Production Company: Riverdrive Productions
Director and Writer: Evans Chan
Producer: Peggy Chiao
Photography: King Wing-Cheong Wong
Editor: Mary Stephen
Music: Charles Teo, Lindzay Chan
Cast: Chiang Ching (Narrator), Liu Kai Chi (Kang Youwei), Lindzay Chan (Kang Tung Pih), Ben Yeung (Liang Qichao); Interviewees: Marianne Bastid-Bruguière, Chow Kai-Wing, Arif Dirlik, Hung Ho-Fung, Jane Leung Larsen, Göran Malmqvist
Locations: Hong Kong, China, Sweden, Taiwan, USA

2012: *Two or Three Things about Kang Youwei* (康有為二三事), 46 minutes

In Cantonese & English with English subtitles

Production Company: Riverdrive Productions
Director, Writer, and Editor: Evans Chan
Producer: Peggy Chiao
Photography: King Wing-Cheong Wong, Igo Mikler
Music: Lindzay Chan, Charles Teo
Cast: Chiang Ching (Narrator/interviewee), Liu Kai Chi (Kang Youwei), Lindzay Chan (Kang Tung Pih), Ben Yeung (Liang Qichao)
Locations: Sweden, USA

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