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New Political Cinema, Asia, and Beyond: TEN YEARS

By Dina Iordanova and Gina Marchetti



In the aftermath of World War II, Japan embraced dystopian fiction and brought what Susan Sontag termed the “imagination of disaster” (1965) to world screens with classics such as *Godzilla* (1954), *Rodan* (1956), and *Mothra* (1961), among others. While the *Ten Years* franchise seems far from these monster fantasies, blending political allegory and social satire in speculative fiction set in the near future or a parallel present has literary as well as cinematic antecedents in Asia. Lao She’s *Cat Country* (1932), for instance, set in a society of cat-people living on Mars standing in for Republican-era China, predates George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) by over a decade. In *Ten Years Thailand*, Wist’s *Catopia* brings the

force of the feline allegory to its critique of that country's struggle with the constraints of the military and the controlling powers of the police. In fact, the *Ten Years* filmmakers, throughout the series, claim the right to be paranoid about a particularly bleak future they see in embryonic form in today's Asia.

Hong Kong's *Ten Years* sets the tone and also, arguably, pushes it to its extreme. Chow Kwun-wai's *Self-Immolator*, for example, engages with hot-button Hong Kong taboos, including the erosion of "One Country, Two Systems" agreed upon by Britain and China in the lead up to the Handover of the colony in 1997, fears of anti-sedition national security legislation, anxieties surrounding Beijing's influence on the territory through its Liaison Office, and the possibility of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) using the People's Liberation Army (PLA) stationed in the HKSAR to quash dissent. Hunger strikes, police violence, and political kidnappings sadly have clear recent antecedents, and the image of the burning umbrella brings the film unmistakably into conversation with Hong Kong's 2014 protests. In fact, all five segments allude directly to issues making headlines in mainland China that ignite Hong Kong fears including political assassinations, the treatment of non-Han minorities, the wanton destruction of heritage sites by real estate developers, contaminated food, laws suppressing Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, and extreme cases of the extraterritorial kidnapping and detention of booksellers. Indeed, the film serves as a superb introduction to the protests against proposed extradition legislation now debated in 2019. Casting a South Asian as the scapegoated "terrorist" in *Extras* also resonates with the plight of the Muslims in Xinjiang currently incarcerated using the same racist logic.

While critics do not see the same urgency in *Ten Years Thailand*, *Japan*, or *Taiwan* that catapulted the first omnibus *Ten Years* to box-office success in 2015, the films collectively voice the angst experienced in a region plagued by economic precariousness, political

upheavals, geopolitical realignments, and seismic cultural shifts. While the places featured in the series suffer from their own local tensions as Chaiworaporn (Thailand), Coates (Japan), Chen (Taiwan), and Cheung (Hong Kong) point out in the essays collected here, the vignettes anthologized in each *Ten Years* collection also speak across borders to issues of common concern throughout Asia and beyond.

Stylistically, too, the films cover the gamut of cinematic expression found in the arthouse as well as popular cinemas of Asia from the “slow cinemas” of Taiwan and Thailand to the triad auctioneers of Hong Kong and the domestic melodramas of classic Japanese cinema so beloved throughout the region. Traces of Yasujiro Ozu, Hirokazu Kore-eda, Wong Kar-Wai, Tsai Ming-liang, and Hou Hsiao-hsien can be found across the *Ten Years* franchise, and, of course, Apichatpong Weerasethakul makes his own contribution to the Thailand omnibus. Several of these filmmakers, in fact, delved into speculative fiction. Notably, Kore-eda’s *After Life* (1998) imagines a limbo between the living and the dead; Wong Kar-Wai’s *2046* (2004) offers its own rather opaque image of Hong Kong’s future; Tsai’s *The Hole* (1998) envisions Taipei plagued by constant rain and a mysterious disease; Hou’s *Millennium Mambo* (2001) projects part of its story ten years into the future; and, Apichatpong’s contribution to *Ten Years*, *Song of the City*, captures the same feeling of temporal disconnection and mystically parallel existences found in his feature films including the recent *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015).

Speculative fiction often turns to youth as bellwethers for future dystopias or as flag-bearers of guarded optimism. The two extremes are seen in *Local Egg* (Hong Kong) in the viciousness of the organized vandals as well as the resistance expressed by a young bookworm committed to reading censored comics. Authoritarian control of uniformed youth finds satiric expression in Chulayarnnon’s *Planetarium* (Thailand) in which discipline

operates like a computer game. Children in Kinoshita's *Mischievous Alliance* (Japan) defy authority to liberate a horse while enduring the pain inflicted on them by a remotely-operated cyber-disciplinary system.

As the children in *Mischievous Alliance* find some relief in the woods beyond the reach of the punishing signal, the link between the fragility of both youth and nature becomes clear. At a moment of extreme crisis for the entire planet, it comes as no surprise that environmental themes play a major role throughout the *Ten Years* collection. Taiwanese aboriginal filmmaker Lekal Sumi sets his film *The Can of Anido* on Taiwan's remote Lanyu (Orchid) Island to underscore the relationship of indigenous rights to the contamination of agricultural land, nuclear policies, and the excesses of capitalism. Lu's *Way Home* also deals with rural Taiwan, the destruction of village life, and the degradation of the natural environment. In Tsou's *942* (also Taiwan) breathable air is at a premium as it is in Fujimura's *The Air We Can't See* (Japan). *Local Egg* (Hong Kong) offers a rare glimpse of Hong Kong's agricultural countryside besieged by intrusive government policies, and Wong's *Season of the End* (Hong Kong) eerily alludes to rapacious urban development that exists on both sides of the Hong Kong-mainland Chinese border.

Season of the End's response to this horrific destruction involves breaking down the quotidian environment into specimens for preservation. The human body serves as the ultimate object for the collection and as the final material resistance to the presumed end of the world. Eschatology and dystopian fantasy go hand in hand, and this theme intersects with grotesque visions of the disruption of the seasonal cycles of nature and human biology—generation and regeneration interrupted, distorted, or destroyed. The fragility of human life parallels the vulnerability of the entire natural world.

Hayakawa's *Plan 75* alludes to the Japanese film versions of *The Ballad of Narayama* (1958 and 1983), based on the 1953 novel, depicting the practice of "ubasute" in which the elderly are abandoned in a remote location, usually a mountainside, to die. *Plan 75* gives senicide a commercial twist by offering financial incentives to the seniors who opt into the "plan."

Given Japan feels the demographic shift in its population more acutely than the rest of Asia, anxieties surrounding the treatment of the elderly dominate *Ten Years Japan*. Although Tsuno's *Data* ostensibly dramatizes the tension between personal privacy and difficulty of erasing digital footprints, it also uncovers the enormous communication divide that separates the generations in Japan when a daughter feels she has the right to invade her deceased mother's privacy in order to get to the bottom of whether or not she had an adulterous affair.

Ishikawa's *Our Beautiful Country* takes an initially humorous look at an elderly female designer addicted to virtual reality war games. However, as she bonds with the propagandist who rejected her poster design for the reinstatement of the military draft in Japan, the genuine prospect of the remilitarization of Japan becomes horrifically clear. The title of the film provides an ironic commentary on historical amnesia involving World War II and the deadly prospects of the resurgence of nationalism in the region. Ironically, the search for peace — imagined as a restful sleep— through technology also has a dark dimension as seen in entries such as Lau's *The Sleep* (Taiwan) and Apichatpong's *Song of the City* (Thailand). These filmmakers imagine a future best experienced while unconscious.

While generational divisions play an important role across the *Ten Years* films, race, ethnicity, class, and gender also make important contributions to the visions of the future presented by the filmmakers. Feminist scholars use the concept of "intersectionality," developed by African-American legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, to analyze the ways in which gender and other aspects of identity add up to more than the sum of their respect parts

in hierarchal societies dominated by bourgeois, Western, white, heterosexual, cisgender men. While class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other markers of difference do not signify in the same way across Asia, the concept of “intersectionality” still may be useful in probing the dystopian futures found in *Ten Years*. Several contributions to *Ten Years Taiwan*, in particular, highlight the ways in which intersectional identities complicate regional visions of the future. Indeed, the Taiwan portmanteau boasts the most diverse collection of directors in the series, including two women, Rina Tsou and Pei-Ju Hsieh, an aboriginal filmmaker, Lekal Sumi, and a Malaysian immigrant Kek Huat Lau.

In Rina Tsou’s *942*, a tear in the fabric of time and place enables a Taiwanese victim of sexual harassment working as a nurse in Indonesia to see her Indonesian counterpart abused by the man who employs her as a domestic helper. The film also includes a brief, but moving scene featuring a lesbian relationship between the young nurse and a fellow hospital employee with whom she shares a dormitory berth. The film manages to comment on heteronormativity, patriarchal privilege, environmental degradation, the feminization and exploitation of migrant labor, class and ethnic hierarchies in Asia as well as on the ongoing struggle of women working in environments in which sexual harassment and gender-based violence are endemic.

Pei-Ju Hsieh’s *A Making Of* takes a seemingly lighter look at the extended Chinese family. As a self-reflexive view of the media industry, it offers a backstage perspective on the making of a commercial hawking frozen dumplings for the Lunar New Year holiday. Looking ten years into the future and assuming same-sex marriages have been recognized (confirmed in May 2019), a gay couple forms part of the family group. However, the commercial shoot cannot be completed because the crew has difficulty finding an infant to complete the multi-generational tableau. Although the film achieves a happy ending by

locating a baby, the allusion to Taiwan's declining birthrate and anxieties surrounding reproduction give the cheery patina of the consumer paradise and nostalgic familial portrait a darker side. With a small push, *A Making Of* could slip over the edge into the dystopian world of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which a dramatic drop in fertility caused by pollution allows a demonically male-dominated culture of absolute patriarchal control of female bodies to thrive.

A Making Of also spotlights the importance of self-reflexivity across the *Ten Years* collections. Several of the films foreground the process of manufacturing propaganda for government and/or commercial ends (e.g., posters for the military draft in *For Our Beautiful Country*, assisted suicide in *Plan 75*, sleep remedies in *The Sleep* and *Song of the City*). *Song of the City*, in fact, contrasts the sleep salesman's love of folk music with his job pushing sleep remedies. As Anchalee points out, Apichatpong cast a former political detainee in this role to comment on consumerism, culture, and censorship in Thai society. Other films reflect even more directly on the restriction of dissent through censorship including Aditya's *Sunset* (Thailand) in which the military arrives to shut down a suspect art exhibition and Ng's *Local Egg* (Hong Kong) which ends with a scene in an underground library filled with contraband books.

Brechtian alienation effects foreground performance as a metaphor for the roles forced upon the oppressed characters in authoritarian societies of the future. The would-be assassins set up to be killed as terrorists in *Extras* (Hong Kong), for example, cut particularly pitiful figures since they have no idea about the deadly nature of the roles they have been cast to play as "terrorists" to justify the implementation of National Security measures in the territory. The cat-woman in *Catopia* acts the part of the victim to unmask the human hidden among the felines. On set in *A Making Of* all play their parts to create an image of a

harmonious family to mask the disintegration of the environment that may condemn them to be among the last humans on a doomed planet. Under the authoritarian regimes depicted in many of the films, in fact, characters play the parts assigned to them by the machinery of the state—wittingly or unwittingly.

While some critics expressed disappointment at the less direct political critique of *Ten Years Taiwan, Thailand, and Japan*, they may miss the fact that these films address very different audiences. The appearance of a statue of Marshal Sarit Thanarit and the casting of Patiwat Saraiyaem in *Song* may resonate with Thai viewers; however, it may not have as visceral an impact on its audience as the killing of the hapless gangsters (*Extras*), the self-sacrifice of protestors (*Self-Immolator*), or even the inability of a taxi driver to communicate with his son in his native language (*Dialect*) in the Hong Kong film. However, the entire project speaks beyond the specifics of a particular political moment, and even the local egg takes on global significance for audiences threatened by draconian government policies, authoritarian regimes, environmental catastrophe, mindless nationalism and the silencing of any whisper of dissent.

Indeed, there is one more dimension of an intersectional type that we may add on to this exploration of the transnational project that *Ten Years* has become: the festivals that bridge this project to the rest of the world. In the interviews repeatedly the role of the festival in Osaka and that man who rose up in the audience pops up as a moment for inspiration. Is it more or less that the concerns are now within specific countries and due to the reporting of media few are able to follow the logic of local concerns? To what extent can an external viewer understand what is the anxiety about in Hong Kong and why is it that some HK filmmakers compare it to Tibet? To what extent can an external viewer understand the anxiety about Japanese army 75 years after the war? Festivals travel and even though they

provide ghettoized exposure to films they still give platform and reach out. Festivals like the one in Udine or at Lincoln Centre bring the concern to the wider world. We will see the developments next. FESTIVALS TEN YEARS' distribution pattern, extensively discussed in the video material, also has this unique wabi-sabi quality. Those based in Hong Kong marvel at the audience mobilisation that the project generated, both at the theatrical box office, at open air grassroots screenings at spots across the New Territories, as well as online (see the videos with Clarence Tsui, Vivian Lee, and Felix Tsang collected in this issue): Netflix, Google, YouTube.

Is this Asian series, which may still evolve and include further segments, supplying a fresh functional model for political cinema? We would love to see this innovative take used for the production of films like *Ten Years Britain*— wouldn't it be fantastic to see young filmmakers project their vision of the post-Brexit that lies ahead? Or perhaps *Ten Years France*, which could give projections of racial conflict in the banlieues or other inequalities that are kept in the limelight by the jillets jeunes? Or how about all those other countries where populist nationalism mixes with neo-liberalism endorsed by clerics? *Ten Years Poland?* *Ten Years Hungary?* *Ten Years Turkey?* Last but not least, how about *Ten Years USA?*

One would think that the West holds the keys to the anti-utopian tradition, as old here as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and William Cameron Menzies' *Things to Come* (1936, based on H.G. Wells) and that is linked to anti-utopian classics like *1984* (Michael Radford, 1984, based on George Orwell's eponymous novel) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (repeatedly adapted for film and television). Like their Asian counterparts, European and American filmmakers have repeatedly offered takes on dystopian visions of the future. We can only benefit if we bring these visions together, for a comprehensive inventory that would keep the record together rather than compartmentalized by regions that seem to not interact.

We would like to see anti-utopian classics like Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) talked about alongside the work of philosophical political documentarians like Chilean Paricio Guzman, Japanese Kazuo Hara or Indian Anand Pathwardan, but also alongside the work of British visionaries of political gloom such as Adam Curtis (*Pandora's Box*, 1992; *The Power of Nightmares*, 2004), Joshua Oppenheimer (*The Globalization Tapes*, 2003) or Charlie Brooker (*Black Mirror*, 2011-2018).

Widely-seen films made in the West that seem closest to the mood and intention of the *Ten Years* series, albeit all with a different timeframe, include the French *City of Lost Children* (1995, Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro), the British *Code 46* (2003, Michael Winterbottom) and *The Age of Stupid* (2009, Franny Armstrong), as well as American *Idiocracy* (2006, Mike Judge), *Children of Men* (2006, Alfonso Cuarón) and the most recent masterpiece of intersectionality, *Sorry to Bother You* (2018, Boots Riley). However, *Ten Years* also resonates with earlier classics that are set in a loosely designed familiar yet alienated milieu, such as Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), or Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) and *12 Monkeys* (1995). There is resonance here with films such as *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) and Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), but also with Greek Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Lobster* (2015), with the fantasy world of Michel Gondry, the cosmopolitan surrealist Frenchman, as well as with the recent transnational anti-corporate dystopias of Bong Joon-ho, such as *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Okja* (2017). Like in *Ten Years*, in all these films we see ordinary present-day protagonists navigating a world of adversely changing circumstances imposed by authoritarian nationalist, corporate, or militaristic forces. The framework is the same; the framework is globally valid.

The very project of presenting *Ten Years* to what we hope would be a wider international audience is itself an example of an international collaboration, between the Centre for the

Study of Globalization and Cultures at the University of Hong Kong and the Institute for Global Cinema and Creative Cultures at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. Besides commissioning essays from writers with insider knowledge and understanding of the respective countries and cinematic traditions (Ruby Cheung on Hong Kong, Timmy Chen on Taiwan, Anchalee Chaiworaporn on Thailand, and Jenny Coates on Japan), we put the framework of our transcontinental academic collaboration in service of those who speak through the medium of film. We specifically worked with producers and distributors (Andrew Choi, Lorraine Ma, Jevons Au, Felix Tsang), who took part in an in-depth interview conducted by Leiya Lee for the purpose of this dossier. We convened a symposium at the University of Hong Kong in January 2019 that brought producers and academics (Elena Pollacchi) together, and present here video-recorded excerpts of this wide-ranging conversation, featuring specifically the interventions of leading producer Andrew Choi of the *Ten Years Studios*, distributor Felix Tsang of *Golden Scene*, as well as of cultural analyst Prof. Laikwan Pang (Chinese University of Hong Kong), Hong Kong cinema specialist Dr Vivian Lee (City University of Hong Kong), creative writing Prof KC Lo (Hong Kong Baptist University), and seasoned film critic (formerly of *South China Morning Post*) and festival curator Clarence Tsui. They were all asked to highlight those parts of the Ten Years films that particularly touched them.

In putting this dossier together we took an activist stance. We hope that the Ten Years project will receive the exposure and appreciation we believe it asks for in a world that is globalized yet fragmented through the narrow-minded national and regional political anxieties that dominate the media and obscure the bigger picture of what the immediate future holds for us.

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Interested in political cinema, she edited *Film Festivals and Activism* (2012), and subsequently helped filmmakers from various corners of the world to gain better exposure for their work. Dina has given masterclasses on different research subjects and has served on the juries of the main film festivals in Asia, most notably at Busan and Yamagata.

Gina Marchetti teaches courses in film, gender and sexuality, critical theory and cultural studies at the University of Hong Kong. She is the author of *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”*: Race, Sex and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction (University of California Press, 1993), *From Tian’anmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens* (Temple University Press, 2006), and *The Chinese Diaspora on American Screens: Race, Sex, and Cinema* (Temple University Press, 2012), *Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s INFERNAL AFFAIRS—The Trilogy* (Hong Kong University Press, 2007), and *Citing China: Politics, Postmodernism, and World Cinema* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2018). Visit the website <https://hkwomenfilmmakers.wordpress.com/> for more information about her current work on Hong Kong women filmmakers since 1997. To register for her Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on Hong Kong cinema, go to <https://www.edx.org/course/hong-kong-cinema-through-global-lens-hkux-hku06-1x>.