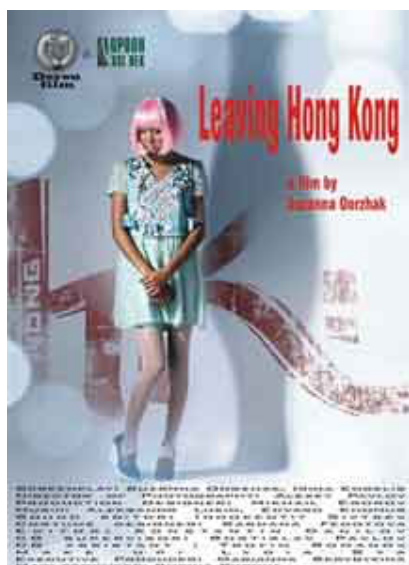


Siuzanna Oorzhak: *Leaving Hong Kong (Pokidaia blagoukhaiushchuiu gavan', 2011)*
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Leaving Hong Kong (Pokidaia blagoukhaiushchuiu gavan', 2011) is the first (and thus far only) feature film directed by Siuzanna Oorzhak.¹ Born in Kyzyl in the Tuvan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (now the Tuva Republic) on 13 August 1980, Oorzhak is the daughter of the highly decorated theater director and film actor Aleksei Oorzhak.² After graduating from Vladimir Norenko's acting course at the St Petersburg State Theater Arts Academy (SPbGATI) in 2003, Oorzhak moved to Yakutsk in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), in order to "find her own artistic style" (Vanina 2012). Realizing that her interest lay in directing rather than in acting, she enrolled at the Arctic State Institute of Culture and Art (AGIKI), graduating in 2006 from the course of the veteran theater director Andrei Borisov, a part-time filmmaker who was also, at that time, the Sakha Republic's long-term Minister of Culture. Oorzhak went on to establish herself as a prize-winning director and she has staged more than 20 productions in prestigious theaters in Yakutsk, Kyzyl, Ufa, Barnaul, Kazan, Moscow, and other cities in Siberia and elsewhere in the Russian Federation. In the late 2000s, Borisov gave Oorzhak her first experience of working in cinema, when he invited her to play the role of Borte, Genghis Khan's first and favorite wife, in his two-hour epic *By the Will of Genghis Khan (Taina Chingis-Khaana, 2009, Mongolia, Russia, USA)*, the first Sakha blockbuster and the first Sakha film to be distributed widely both in Russia and abroad (Damiens 2014: 14).³ Oorzhak has described Borisov as her "second father" and she also credits him for the fact that she herself turned to filmmaking (Zinkevich 2020).⁴



A low-budget project, *Leaving Hong Kong* was the first film produced by the young company Dersu Film (now known as Art Doydu Film). According to Oorzhak (2022), the producer Marianna Skrybykina (aka Marianna Siegen) had to work hard to find companies able to provide sponsorship. Among the local firms that did invest in the film were two advertising agencies, a bakery, a taxi company, a beauty salon, and a dentist. The main sponsor, however, was the Yakutsk-based company Choroon XXI vek (Choroon 21st Century, Anon. n. d.), which since 2001 has imported to the Sakha Republic porcelain copies of traditional Sakha tableware made in factories in China. As Oorzhak (2022) explains, "We had to promote this firm, make sure that everyone heard about it." As we shall see, the commercial context of the film's production adds an interesting layer to its complex thematics.

Leaving Hong Kong was filmed during the summer and autumn of 2010 in Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Yakutsk, with the crew and the actors apparently hitchhiking to China (Vanina 2012). It was the first Sakha film to be shot on a Canon Mark II digital SLR camera (Savvina 2021), the only equipment Oorzhak possessed (Vanina 2012). The image quality achieved on this camera was well-suited to the art-house style that Oorzhak sought, and her film apparently sparked a surge in independent production in Yakutia, as self-taught filmmakers realized that they could make films without expensive equipment (Savvina 2021). There were, however, issues with the sound, which was almost inaudible and therefore had to be re-recorded once the crew arrived back in Yakutsk. While the main actors, all of whom are Sakha (apart from Qi Hong Tao, who plays the young Orlan), spoke Sakha or Russian on set, in the final soundtrack, they all—until the film’s final sequences—speak in dubbed Chinese. Oorzhak (2022) describes how she recruited students who were studying Chinese at Yakutsk State University to dub the actors’ voices and create crowd noise. She also asked friends in China to send her sounds from the underground and the streets via Skype (Vanina 2012).



With its determinedly art-house aesthetics, *Leaving Hong Kong* enjoyed significant success on the festival circuit, most notably at the inaugural Arctic Cinema Film Festival (*Kino Arktiki*), held in September 2011, where it won prizes in three categories: Best Sound Director, Best Female Role, and the Special Jury Prize in the feature film category.⁵ It also won the award for Outstanding Artistic Achievement at the Sixth Monaco Charity Film Festival (2011), but was not successful in its bid to be selected for that year’s Cannes Film Festival. The film soon built up a cult following among Sakha teenagers. Elena Vanina (2012) describes how, during an interview, Oorzhak was surrounded by “girls in manga outfits who look[ed] just like Japanese schoolgirls from a Harajuku side street” and who were all fans of her film.⁶ As is often the case with art-house films, however, *Leaving Hong Kong* was less popular with mass audiences. Its release, on 24 March 2011, was especially anticipated in the Tuva Republic, Oorzhak’s birthplace, after the Russian filmmaker Fedor Bondarchuk encouraged people there to go and see the film (Kondrashova 2011), albeit without having watched it himself (Chadamba 2011). The audience members in at least one Tuvan cinema were left disappointed and baffled, however. In an article revealingly titled “What Did Siuzanna Oorzhak Want to Say?”, Viktoriia Kondrashova (2011), a journalist with the *Tuvinskaia pravda*, describes the general response thus:

I haven’t seen so many puzzled looks in a long time. Especially after watching a film. When the film ended and the closing credits began to roll, the audience stared at the screen expectantly for a minute or two: Was that it...? Then everybody stood up in unison and started walking towards the exit. [...] “I don’t know what the director

wanted to say.” [...] “We didn’t understand anything at all!” [...] I asked a lot of people. I heard a lot of different things, ranging from “rubbish” to an adamant “a waste of money.”

Not all viewers were so dismissive, however. Kondrashova (2011) cites 22-year-old Saisuu Dongak as insisting that the film was far from being “incomprehensible.” The problem, in her view, was that “the audience was lazy and [...] didn’t want to think about [it].” For her part, she did not mind that it lacked “action”; she read it as a “psychological film [...] an expression of love” which affirms that each individual has “freedom of thought, freedom of imagination.” Oiumaa Khomushku, an associate of Oorzhak and an official in the Tuva Republic’s Ministry of Culture, expressed a similar view: “I think her work has turned out well. Unfortunately, we don’t want to think about it or think it through—of course people aren’t happy with it. You have to see the film at least twice to understand it.” About this Khomushku is right: *Leaving Hong Kong* repays repeated viewings, for there is a great deal—at times, perhaps, too much—going on in this quirky and engaging “psychedelic drama” (Kondrashova 2011).



The film’s complexity is due in part to the breadth and density—and the idiosyncratic nature—of its sphere of references and also to its frequent switches in tone. Oorzhak, a self-avowed “pagan” who believes in “the supernatural” (Zinkevich 2020), has spoken in several interviews about where she drew inspiration for the film’s screenplay, which she co-wrote with Irina Engelis.⁷ She cites her interest in Buddhism as one important influence and, specifically, the ancient text known in English as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Anashkin 2011a), which offers guidance on how to transform one’s experience of daily life and on how best to approach the process of dying and accessing the after-death state. She has also talked about how her time in Yakutia influenced her artistic approach, enabling her to develop the “underground and art-house” styles she favored by infusing them with a “national” sensibility; as she puts it: “a national director without national traditions, culture, and roots is not interesting” (Zinkevich 2020).⁸ Indeed, another important influence for the film was Sakha religious beliefs and practices, most notably the *yhyakh* festival, which Oorzhak and Engelis attended together in June 2010 (Khomushku 2011). Held annually around the summer solstice, the ceremony serves to give thanks to the Sakha sky deities, known as *aiyy*, for their benevolence in the old year and to request their continued good favor in the new year. Sacrifices are offered, including fermented mare’s milk, or *kymys*, which is also drunk by all present. In addition to its religious significance, the festival is important for reinforcing social ties (Yegorov-Crate 2020). As Sergei Anashkin (2011a) has observed, the film also references beliefs, images, and objects characteristic of Siberian shamanism and “Tuvan and Sakha fairy-tale folklore.” Finally, Oorzhak (Anashkin 2011a; Dolin 2011) has

described how she wanted to imitate Chinese cinema, in particular East Asian art house and the films of the Hong Kong auteur Wong Kar-wai—known for their non-linear narratives, atmospheric music, and vivid color palettes—, the spiritual films of the South Korean filmmaker Kim Ki-duk, and those of the Taiwan-based Malaysian director Tsai Ming-liang. In addition to characterizing her approach to this cinematic tradition as “imitation”, Oorzhak has also described her film as a “spoof” (Anashkin 2011a) and a “parody” (Oorzhak 2022). A further influence, beyond those mentioned explicitly by Oorzhak, is Taoism—the film’s official publicity materials preface its synopsis with a quotation from Chapter 16 of the *Tao Te Ching*, a Chinese philosophical and religious text written around 400 BC and traditionally credited to the sage Lao Tsu, specifically: “Not knowing the constant is the source of evil deeds / because we have no roots.” (translated by McDonald 1996: 7). The influence of Japanese anime is also clear, and the director’s approach can also be described as woman-centered, if not as explicitly, or consistently, feminist. The film also contains a number of careful and meaningful allusions to well-known Soviet and post-Soviet Russian films. These disparate sources, influences, and approaches all make themselves felt at different points in the film and, while they are all an important part of its thematics and its originality, they become at times so tangled up in each other that it can be hard for the viewer to unravel them and grasp their meaning.



Leaving Hong Kong opens with a soundtrack of breaking waves and haunting music. A beach appears on screen and an old man, expensively dressed in a long camel coat and brown trilby, walks awkwardly along the shoreline, crossing the frame from left to right. He sits on the sand, lights a cigarette and stares out over the water. His face is framed in extreme close-up: eyes weary, skin puffy and lined with wrinkles, graying hair, an air of sadness. A voiceover announces his status as the film’s narrator. “You may accept or reject my story,” he says, “but, alas, you cannot change it. You can change only the way you feel about it.”



This introductory sequence is intercut with fragmented shots of a young woman going about her morning routine. First she pours milk from a plastic bottle into a white mug (barcode sticker still attached), her long black acrylic nails rendering this action slightly awkward; next we see her bare feet, toenails varnished in bright yellow; then her bare stomach, as she fastens her bra; an ornate silver bracelet on a slender wrist; a bobbed, pink, manga-style wig, to which she clips a white fascinator. Finally, we see her kneeling on the beach, behind a young man who is unaware of her presence. This, we assume from the narrator's voiceover, is 'his' Orlandina and he must be the young man. Is this a memory? Or a dream? Perhaps they are spirits or their reincarnations? But, as the narrator explains that Orlandina disappeared, the film's title—*Leaving Hong Kong*—fills the screen and these questions are replaced in the viewer's mind by another: why did she leave the place that the narrator later describes as “the most amazing city in the world”?



Despite what the narrator claims in this prologue, therefore, and despite the fact that some of the film's main part is presented, via voiceovers, as filtered through his memory, *Leaving Hong Kong* is not only his story. It is also Orlandina's, as the opening shot of the film's main part makes clear. For the first time we see the young woman's face, shot in medium close-up. She sits smoking in a nightclub, bleached hair cropped and spiky, heavily made-up eyes. As if aware of the camera's presence, she lifts her chin and stares straight at it, breaking the fourth wall. While her face is devoid of expression and, therefore, hard to read, this is nonetheless a striking and measured act of direct address, a challenge but also an invitation to the viewer to connect with her and to enter her life, which we do. Thereafter the camera follows Orlandina and we soon come to know her routines. During the week, she works at a ceramics factory, where a woman's voice—distorted and dehumanized by the sound system—announces, at regular intervals, how much time remains before the bored workers can break for lunch. On her days off, she dons brightly colored manga-style dresses and high-heeled shoes and walks alone through the city's busy shopping streets, at least two heads taller than the other passers-by, some of whom cast curious glances at her. She is no aimless *flâneuse*, however; her destination is a public payphone, in the form of a dolphin, that stands in a strangely deserted street.⁹



Each time she arrives there, Orlandina awkwardly taps in a phone number, only to hear a recorded message announcing, in English, that the call cannot be completed as dialed and advising her to check the number and dial again. Each time, Orlandina hangs up and leaves. In the evenings, she visits the same nightclub, drinking and smoking alone at her table. She goes home with the club's young barman and has sex with him, willing it to be over quickly. Then she falls into a drunken sleep and the viewer is given access to her mind, as we witness her recurrent dream: a vast river—over which an unseen craft carries us smoothly, silently and at speed—flanked by a narrow shoreline whose trees are dwarfed by the huge pillars of sheer rock that rise into the seemingly endless sky. White and grey clouds are reflected in the dark water.



As Sergei Anashkin (2011a) notes, “Anyone familiar with the Yakutian landscape can easily identify the land Orlandina is dreaming about”: it is the Lena River and the spectacular Lena Pillars, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2012. Caroline Damiens (2014: 11) has described how, in many Sakha films, locations are used to convey ethnicity, and she has identified the Lena Pillars as a landscape used so insistently in this way—at least since Nikita Arzhakov's *Cranes over Ilmen Lake* (*Zhuravli nad Il'menem*, 2005, Sakha Republic), in which it serves “to represent the fatherland that Sakha soldiers are leaving in order to join the front”—that it has become a Sakha Republic national symbol. Orlandina's dream reveals, therefore, that Hong Kong is not the place of her birth.



The dream comes to an abrupt end when Orlandina awakes alone in her bed. The camera looks down on her as, hungover, she is wracked by a violent need to vomit. Just in time, she makes it to the bathroom. And so begins a new day, which will follow the pattern of all previous days. This, as the first of the film's eight intertitles announces, is a life lived in "Ignorance" (*Nevedenie*), the state that, so Buddhism tell us, perpetuates *samsara*, the never-ending, suffering-laden, repetitive cycle of life, death, and rebirth, which has no beginning or end and which sees people wandering from one life to another life—or, in Orlandina's case, from one day and one outfit to another day and another outfit—with no particular direction or purpose. Orlandina is not alone in living this way. As we watch people and cars rush chaotically along the busy Hong Kong shopping streets, the narrator comments that "People thought they were going forward, but they remained in the same invariably harsh lives."

This is, therefore, the starting point for Orlandina's journey; what follows will trace the transformation not only of her consciousness but also of her identity, her sense of self. The viewer is aided in making sense of the changes she undergoes by the afore-mentioned intertitles, which all bear a single word—always an abstract noun and often a reference to a Buddhist concept—and which combine to provide a commentary on Orlandina's progress and to foreground for the viewer the film's philosophical and metaphorical dimensions. For the moment, however, Orlandina is stuck in the repeating cycle of unreflecting monotony, an unrelenting Groundhog Day of tedious work and unfulfilling play: *samsara*. And so "every morning" this twenty-first-century version of Aleksandr Blok's "unknown woman" (*neznamomka*) takes the same underground train and, every morning, the narrator watches her.



One day, however, he decides “to take action.” He moves closer to Orlandina, covering her hand with his and refusing to let go when she tries to pull free. He exits the train with her, confesses his love, and leads her back to his apartment. It is only now that we learn his name: Orlan. The striking consonance of the protagonists’ names, amplified by the fact that they are the only named characters in the entire film, might be thought to suggest that Orlan and Orlandina are destined for each other.¹⁰ Indeed, this sequence is introduced by an intertitle—the film’s second—bearing the word “Love” (*Liubov*), and it does seem that Orlan is a man for whom Orlandina could feel this emotion. She stays in his apartment after sex, which she noisily enjoys, eating his food (cooked by a neighbor whose love for Orlan is unrequited), sharing with him a mug of something (milk, perhaps?), and chatting—simple but intimate moments that she had never experienced with the barman. Alert to this, Orlandina visits the nightclub for the last time, in order to end her affair with him, also getting drunk and throwing up for the last time. The film’s next intertitle (number three) reads “Birth” (*Rozhdenie*), encouraging the viewer to think that this is the start of a new life for her. Perhaps, as the young daughter of Orlandina’s boss predicts, when she shows off her drawing of Orlandina and Orlan, they will indeed get married, have children and live happily, growing old together and dying on the same day.



One morning, therefore, Orlandina confides in Orlan that she has “strange dreams,” showing that while she does not recognize the landscape, it has made a strong impression on her. Orlan’s response is deflating. “Erotic dreams of me, no doubt,” he smirks. “No,” she says, “they’re full of symbols and signs.” “Boring,” Orlan concludes, before asking Orlandina if she has gone completely mad. “I was only joking,” she replies.



Orlandina’s dream recurs three times in the first 24 minutes of *Leaving Hong Kong*, punctuating the otherwise depressing picture of her life in this city, whose mind-numbing

repetitiveness is conveyed not only through the plot, but also through details of the *mise-en-scène*. The camera lingers on the rotating potter's wheel at Orlandina's workplace, on the spinning ceiling fans in the factory and in Orlandina's kitchen, and on the hula hoop that belongs to her boss's daughter and which she calls her "magic circle." The camerawork also reinforces this theme. As Orlandina dances at the nightclub, the camera circles her through 360 degrees, a move that it repeats when, after learning that the barman has killed himself, Orlandina sits alone in the street. In an interview (Zinkevich 2020), Oorzhak revealed that the actor with whom she would most like to work is Konstantin Khabenskii, which suggests a further inspiration for her representation of twenty-first-century city life, namely Filipp Iankovskii's 2002 film *In Motion* (*V dvizhenii*, Russia), which stars Khabenskii as the jaded tabloid journalist Sasha Gur'ev, whose ostensibly glamorous city lifestyle is also revealed to mask, superficially, an empty circularity. The camera also frequently circles Khabenskii who, like Orlandina, drinks heavily in fashionable nightclubs and wakes each morning with a terrible hangover and a growing sense of alienation from everyone and everything.



As with the Moscow that Khabenskii's Gur'ev inhabits, so Orlandina's Hong Kong is represented as a place of bright colors and glamour that is ultimately shown to be inauthentic and fake, structured around the inhabitants' insatiable appetite for consumption. Orlandina's striking red swimming costume is rhymed with the can of Coca-Cola that sits next to her on the pool side, for example; her turquoise platform shoes and bright blue eye make-up remind the viewer of the chlorinated water of the swimming pool, with its artificial waves and fake temple décor. Even Orlandina's outlandish manga outfits are shown to be not so much an expression of who she is as inauthentic disguises that draw attention to the fragility of the self that they hide.



This is a world in which money is more important than the joy that friendship with Orlandina brings the young daughter of Orlandina's boss, who—despite hearing of his daughter's loneliness—still forbids her from talking to his employee lest it affect her productivity. Loneliness is, in fact, an emotion expressed by or attributed to all the film's protagonists, and both the barman and Orlan cite it as a reason why they want to be with Orlandina. Yet the film paints a picture of a society in which relationships between men and women are deeply dysfunctional, dominated by physical attraction. "Hi, gorgeous!", the barman yells at Orlandina across the bar, before embracing her and insistently pleading, "Caress me!" Their date at the swimming pool likewise ends with him whispering in her ear about how he plans to undress her and kiss her later.



This tendency to associate women with sex is also shown to be a feature of this society more broadly, as suggested in the sequence when Orlandina and her (male) co-workers break for lunch. The camera focuses on Orlandina as she eats her bowl of rice, but the soundtrack relays the men's banter. Ostensibly discussing their forthcoming birthdays, one man says that he will give his friend some window blinds to prevent his neighbors from seeing him make love to his wife. "Fine," the friend replies, "I'll give you some binoculars, so you can see whose wife it is." This exchange reveals a casual misogyny expressed also through the TV talk show that the barman watches: "All women are hunters," a female guest states, "they only look helpless and pitiful. They ambush their victims and attack them at the most unexpected moments." The barman laughs, perhaps because he knows that he is actually the hunter? While, in the film's opening sequence, Orlandina seems happy to initiate a relationship with him—she stares at him as he stares at her and they exchange encouraging smiles—it soon becomes obvious that he is supplying her, free of charge, with the tumblers of dark bourbon that she downs each evening, intoxicating her in order to seduce her. Likewise, the move that Orlan makes on Orlandina in the underground train—described above—is in fact an assault, and it reminds the viewer that his first name means sea eagle in Russian, a bird described by Anashkin (2011a) as "a feathered predator of all-conquering might." Ultimately, both men are incapable of seeing Orlandina as anything other than their possession and they display an oppressive neediness that leaves no space for Orlandina's own needs. "Don't leave me," the barman pleads (using the verb that features in the film's title) as they share their first hug, a plea that he repeats when she tells him she no longer loves him. Likewise, Orlan is so obsessed with Orlandina that "neither nature, nor people, nor clouds" exist for him anymore: she is his "whole world."



Orlandina’s attempt to tell Orlan about her dreams does, however, mark a turning point in her story, signaled by a fade to black and a fourth intertitle: “Attaining” (*Obretenie*). From this point on, Orlandina will gradually cease to define herself through her relationships with men. Though not yet ready to cut herself entirely free, she withdraws into herself, becoming increasingly obsessed both with her dreams and with an object that had caught her eye during her last visit to the nightclub: a glittering vase standing on the bar. This mass-produced ornament stirs something in Orlandina, but she does not yet know what or why. Her confusion increases when a glamorous tourist (played by Oorzhak herself) walks up to the bar. She holds a fan made from a horsetail, which she casually flicks here and there to keep herself cool. Orlandina stares at this unusual object insistently but as yet incomprehendingly. The next morning, she attempts to work out the significance of these objects, spending time alone in her apartment, sketching different versions of the vase.



Once again, therefore, Sakha culture irrupts into Orlandina’s Hong Kong life. The woman’s horsetail fan is a *dejbiir*, an object both symbolic and practical—being used, for example, during purification rituals at the *yhyakh* festival and day-to-day for swatting mosquitoes (Yegorov-Crate 2021)—and the vase that Orlandina attempts so insistently to sketch is a *choroon* (Anashkin 2011b), the ancient, sacred drinking vessel—made either from clay or, more usually, from carved wood, decorated with abstract motifs (curves, spirals, and coils), and oiled with butter until it takes on a dark-brown polished appearance—that is traditionally used for serving *kymys* at the *yhyakh* festival and which in Sakha culture symbolizes abundance and happiness.¹¹



When she finally achieves a drawing that satisfies her, Orlandina is inspired to undertake another creative act. In a long sequence significantly placed in the middle of the film, she makes a ceramic version of a *choroon* at work. While previous sequences had shown Orlandina to find her job difficult and tedious, her newly found inspiration is transformative: she is suddenly able to shape the clay skillfully and she smiles with pleasure throughout the process. This, along with Orlandina's morning craving for a mug of milk, is thus revealed as another representation of how traces of her homeland and her Sakha identity remain deep within her. Ironically, however, this sequence is also a reminder of the fact that the film's main sponsor was the Yakutsk-based company that imports mass-produced porcelain copies of traditional Sakha tableware—*choroon* among them—from China. In this way, the film's recurrent theme of the danger posed to the authentic by the fake rises to its surface, as Oorzhak highlights, self-consciously, her film's own role in reproducing and commercializing authentic Sakha culture, even as she seeks to valorize it.



The symbolic significance that Oorzhak attaches to clay and to the handmade links her film with Kira Muratova's *Getting to Know the Big Wide World* (*Poznavaia belyi svet*, 1978, USSR), in which an early sequence shows the three protagonists (Liuba, Misha, and Kolia), workers on a Soviet construction site, watching a potter craft a pot from clay that Misha has gleaned from the site. This sequence—which Masha Shpolberg (2019) has described as “redolent with [...] nostalgia for a world where people exist in organic connection to one another and the natural environment”—establishes in Muratova's film the same value-laden opposition between the industrial and the handmade, the modern and the traditional, the mass-produced and the unique, the manmade and the natural that runs throughout *Leaving Hong Kong*. Other elements connect the two films, suggesting that these allusions are intended. For example, Orlandina has much in common with Muratova's Liuba. Both women are manual workers (Liuba is a plasterer), both find themselves in a love triangle with two

men (though in Liuba's case only one, Kolia, is possessive), and both enjoy dressing up in glamorous (and often incongruous) outfits and bright blue eye make-up. There are also striking formal similarities in the way that they are introduced to the viewer in their respective films. Compare my description—above—of Oorzhak's introduction of Orlandina in the prologue sequence of *Leaving Hong Kong* with Emma Widdis's (2005) description of the way we meet Liuba in the opening sequence of Muratova's film: "We encounter her first, indeed, through a strategy of dislocation. [...]. [T]he spectator must first piece that body together—from shots of her shoes, then her legs—before any vision of Liuba's full physical self is offered." Perhaps even more significant, however, are the connections between Orlandina and Muratova's unconventional, out-of-place, authentic Misha, who shares Orlandina's love of milk, who also has a symbolic parent (the potter) and who is, like Orlandina, an amateur potter, driven to create as a way of expressing powerful feelings.¹² Thus, in the same way that Orlandina demonstrates her deep connection to her Sakha heritage by handcrafting a *choroon*, so Misha shows his love for Liuba by presenting her, at the end of the film, with a pot that he has made by hand. This pot may well be, as Misha himself puts it, "crooked, no good", but—as Muratova and Oorzhak both tell us—the external aesthetics of these two symbolic objects are not where their value resides.



A fifth intertitle makes explicit the desire we witness in Orlandina as she makes the *choroon*: "Aspiration" (*Stremlenie*) for something more than the life she lives. When she subsequently learns that the barman has killed himself, she weeps in the street and is haunted by his ghost until a chance shopping spree with her boss's daughter both cheers and saves her. While the young girl admires the racks of fashionable, machine-made T-shirts, Orlandina's gaze alights on an unusual and unique hand-embroidered apron ("from abroad", the shopkeeper tells her), which she ties backwards round her waist. It resembles those worn by Siberian shamans and causes her young companion much hilarity. Orlandina shrugs. "I like it," she insists; "It's my amulet." From this point on, she is no longer followed by the barman's ghost.



Thereafter, Orlandina also distances herself from Orlan and they fight. Her growing awareness that this possessive man is no good for her is represented—in intertitle number six—as a moment of “Enlightenment” (*Ozarenie*). It is an awakening that is not so much religious or spiritual, however, as cautiously feminist. When she subsequently fails to turn up for a date, Orlan discovers that her phone number has been disconnected. Returning home drunk, he spends the night with his lovelorn neighbor, in an amusing sequence that—through its soundtrack of the adagio from the climactic *pas de deux* danced by the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier in Act II of Tchaikovsky’s *The Nutcracker*—parodies Orlan’s role as a romantic hero and perhaps also the concept of romantic love itself.¹³ The sequence’s concluding shot of the picture that is propped above the ecstatic neighbor’s bed—a mass-produced soft-focus image of the dew-speckled petals of a pink rose—serves the same purpose. Meanwhile, life in Hong Kong continues as always. After a series of shots of people rushing round the busy streets, the screen fades to black.



The film’s Buddhist sensibility—first hinted at in the design of the swimming pool that Orlandina visited with the barman and developed through the intertitles—is gradually made explicit in other ways: a real temple stands opposite the dolphin payphone; Orlandina prays before a shrine while awaiting Orlan; and she enters a temple after learning of the barman’s death. In its final fifteen minutes, however, *Leaving Hong Kong* shifts its focus fully to the Sakha themes at which it has also previously only hinted: the power of nature and the majestic Arctic landscape, the importance of tradition, ceremony, and language, and the nurturing force of inter-generational relationships and kinship, understood in the broadest sense. We never learn when or why Orlandina left the Sakha Republic to make her home in Hong Kong, but this does not matter. What is important is that she retains a deep and powerful connection to her place of birth, what the film’s description refers to as a “genetic memory.” Orlandina’s embrace of this pull is represented, via the seventh intertitle, as her “Liberation” (*Osvobozhdenie*), what Buddhists would term *moksha*: liberation from rebirth and the end of the cycle of *samsara*.



Before Orlandina can free herself, however, she must once again run the gauntlet of the Hong Kong crowd she is leaving behind. Wearing a bright red tutu and impossibly high heels, she walks down the street—towards the camera, indicating her newfound sense of power and confidence –, smiling to herself and oblivious to the cat calls thrown her way by passers-by, who question her identity in ugly and aggressive ways: “Crazy person!”, “Is it a boy or a girl?”, “What a freak!”, “Some sort of drug addict.”, “A man in a dress!”, “She’s cute.”, “Some kind of alien creature.”, “A trans person.”, “I used to know a girl who wore a tutu in the street; she ended up in an asylum.”



Reaching the payphone, Orlandina again dials her remembered number and this time her call is answered. A woman’s voice, speaking Sakha (the first time this language has been heard in the film), says, “Hello, I’m listening!” According to Sakha belief (Yegorov-Crate 2020), the power of language is so great that it has its own spirit, or *ichchi*, and, indeed, this voice acts as a summons for Orlandina. The next shot shows her holding her self-made *choroon* and walking purposefully across a bridge, of which the supporting arches might be felt to replicate the ceremonial arches (*aan aartyk*) positioned at the entrance of *yhyakh* festival grounds to represent the boundary between the world of the Sakha sky deities and the mortal realm (Yegorov-Crate 2020).



Orlandina stops and, as she looks out over the water, the Hong Kong landscape is replaced by one that is snow-covered. In Sakha culture, as people pass beneath the ceremonial *yhyakh* arch they are purified by greeters who lightly brush them with a horsetail *dejbiir*. In Orlandina’s case, however, a horse neighs and trots into sight. Orlandina follows the animal, to which ritual Sakha culture attaches sacral values (Petrova 2012), into the snowy landscape. The horse jumps and disappears. Orlandina hesitates; she is at the edge of a cliff looking down over the frozen River Lena, a group of twelve ghostly horsemen and women circling on the bank. Then she also jumps. Suicide? A leap of faith? A visual evocation of her escape

from *samsara* to *moksha*? Moments from her life in Hong Kong with the barman and Orlan flash across the screen. Her *choroon* smashes and Orlandina lies on the shore, dead, we assume.



According to traditional Sakha belief, the human soul is composed of three connected parts. They are, as the filmmaker Liubov' Borisova (2021) explains, “*Ije kut* (Mother-soul), that which is passed on from one’s parents: heredity, traditions, culture”; “*Buor kut* (Earth-soul)—the material part, the physical body” and “*Salgyn kut* (Air-soul)—the intellect, the mind, the communicative and social part.” When a person dies, the three parts of their soul are disconnected and go their separate ways: the Earth-soul goes with the person’s body into the earth, the Air-soul becomes air, and the Mother-soul returns to “the Upper World, to its creator, the supreme deity *Ürüng Ajyy Tojon*.” What we witness next, therefore, is “the miraculous journey” of Orlandina’s Air-soul as it leaves her Earth-soul behind (Borisova 2021). A man dressed in Sakha furs walks over to her dead body. “At last you’ve appeared,” he says, in Sakha, and Orlandina opens her eyes. He carries her to a boat, and she sails along the Lena River, as in her dreams.



Unlike in the Hong Kong sequences, the color palette in this part of the film is soft and muted, dominated by natural shades of brown, gray, blue, and white, as Orlandina’s dreams had been. On arriving at her destination, Orlandina is greeted by an old woman dressed in traditional Sakha winter robes, talismanic jewelry, and the intricately embroidered hat known as a *d’abaka*, which, “shaped like an hourglass, representing the female torso”, embodies femininity (Yegorov-Crate 2021). She is accompanied by an old man who holds an authentic wooden *choroon*. “Mother,” Orlandina says in Sakha, “I have returned.” The actress cast in this role is Stepanida Borisova, one of the most renowned actresses of the Sakha Theatre and a famed singer of *tojuk*—traditional Sakha greeting songs—one of which is used in the film’s soundtrack at this point. As the wife of Andrei Borisov—Oorzhak’s “second father”, we recall—she is a suitable mother figure on many levels, but especially the symbolic. She

stands as a physical embodiment of the missing third part of Orlandina’s soul: *Ije kut*, the Mother-soul, the most important part of all, according to Aleksei Medvedev (2021b), without which life is impossible, for it represents “all that we inherit and that stays with us, unchanged, for our whole life.” The Mother-soul is the Sakha equivalent of the Taoist “constant”—evoked, we recall, in the film’s publicity materials—the source of a person’s “roots.” The old woman hands Orlandina the *choroon* (a replacement for the version she had made in Hong Kong) which is filled with *kymys*. Orlandina drinks, then follows her symbolic mother to a table where a group of aging Sakha people are eating. Orlandina takes her place at one end, opposite a version of herself dressed in Sakha clothes, who sits between the mother and father figures. She smiles and Orlandina smiles back. The sequence’s final shot shows her dressed in full Sakha furs, holding a *choroon* and standing next to an ancient stone stela that has the form of a woman. Orlandina is smiling and, as at the start of the film, she once again looks straight at the camera.



The film does not end here, however. The eighth and final intertitle, which bears the word “Forgiveness” (*Proshchenie*), fills the screen and we return to the aged Orlan, who is still sitting on the beach. It is not, however, clear who is forgiving and/or being forgiven and for what. The ambiguity is likely deliberate, for the narrator refuses to elaborate: “I’m not going to tell you the whole story.” But we are offered snippets that suggest an alternative explanation for Orlandina’s disappearance, both more prosaic and more violent than the mythical-poetic ending we have just witnessed. As the couple’s rows escalate, Orlan’s neighbor, fearing that they will kill each other, calls the police, who arrest Orlan and imprison him. There is no sign of Orlandina. Is this sequence, or, indeed, the whole film, a confession? Did Orlan kill her? Or is it what he now sees, with the benefit of hindsight and age, might have happened had she not left him? This remains unclear, for the film ends with the narrator’s affirmation that “nothing had, in fact, died.” Then, in a reprise of the film’s opening shot, the beach appears on screen again and the narrator walks awkwardly along the shoreline, this time crossing the frame from right to left. This circular conclusion leaves the viewer with the feeling that, unlike Orlandina, Orlan is still not reconciled with his past self.



Leaving Hong Kong is a complex, sometimes chaotic, film, which deserves more sustained critical attention than it has so far received. At times its vision and tone are disturbing, serious, bleak, and self-absorbed, at others they are light-hearted, playful, life-affirming and self-aware. As Kondrashova (2011)—the journalist who reported the Tuvan audience’s bemused incomprehension of the film—suggests, in it we can find “a thousand meanings” and each individual viewer will find something that “stretches a thread between their soul and the soul of the film.” For this viewer, the film’s most powerful thread is not the story narrated by the old Orlan, who dismissively announces, in the concluding voiceover, his realization that he has retained his capacity to love and that it did not depend on “that woman.” Nor is it the Buddhist lesson that appears on the screen before the closing credits, urging viewers to shun ignorance, egotism, and earthly passions in favor of a life of peace and calm. Rather, it is the radiant smile of Orlandina, as she takes her seat at the Sakha feast table.



On one level, then, Orlandina’s story is a modern-day parable that, in addition to exploring questions connected to identity and relationships between men and women, makes both a political and an artistic statement. *Leaving Hong Kong* is, ultimately, a woman-centered film about the importance of Sakha culture and national identity and about the power of art in general and of cinema in particular not only to protect this but also to (re)construct it. In its representation of a “semi-mythical Sakha dimension” (Rizonomad 2014), the film encompasses all four of the characteristics that Damiens (2014: 5; 6; 7; 11) identifies as key identity markers: the Sakha language; “culture bearing items”, such as “traditional objects [and] costumes”; representations of Sakha people; and poetic images of the landscape of their “ancestral homeland”, what she terms an “ethnoscape.”¹⁴ Thus, while the teenaged girls who swarmed round Oorzhak as Vanina (2012) interviewed her might not wish to look past Orlandina’s bright manga clothes and her exotic Hong Kong lifestyle, for those who do the film’s message is clear. “We are not nationalists,” Oorzhak told Vanina (2012), “but we know that soon China will conquer the whole world and small peoples like the Even, the Tuvan, and the Sakha will simply disappear from the face of the earth. Because of globalization we see only pop-culture instead of original culture. If things keep going like this, in fifty years there will be nothing left here.” *Leaving Hong Kong* is Oorzhak’s vibrant contribution to Sakha cinema’s national project of ensuring that this erasure is not allowed to come to pass. It is an interesting irony that it was money provided by a company that imports from China mass-produced copies of traditional Sakha cultural objects that enabled Oorzhak to mount this powerful cinematic challenge.¹⁵

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Leaving Hong Kong, Sakha Republic, 2011
Color, 58 minutes
Director: Siuzanna Oorzhak

Screenplay: Siuzanna Oorzhak, Irina Engelis
 Cinematography: Aleksei Pavlov
 Production design: Mikhail Egorov
 Costume design: Sardana Fedotova
 Make-up: Lidiia Sia
 Sound: Innokentii Sivtsev
 Editing: Konstantin Danilov
 Music: Aleksandr Lukin, Eduard Khomus
 Computer graphics: Rostislav Pavlov, Trofim Romanov
 Cast: Aleksanda Solov'eva, Qi Hong Tao, Stepan Anisimov, Tuiara Popova, Il'iana Pavlova, Stepanida Borisova, Stanislav Potapov
 Executive producer: Marianna Skrybykina (aka Marianna Siegen)
 Producer: Sof'ia Popova
 Production company: Dersu Film, with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Spiritual Development of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)

¹ The literal translation of the film's Russian title is *Leaving the Fragrant Harbour*, itself a literal translation of the Cantonese name Hong Kong, which reflects the city's past as a major trading post for incense. Translations from Russian are mine, unless otherwise stated.

² Aleksei Oorzhak (14 July 1952—19 November 2020) joined the V. Kok-oola Music and Drama Theater in Kyzyl in 1978, as an actor and director. In 1987 he founded the Kuzel Youth Theater, acting as the company's artistic director until 1993, when he was promoted to chief director of the V. Kok-oola Music and Drama Theater, a position he retained until his death. He also had minor acting roles in several films, including Viktor Zhivolub's *Dance of the Eagle* (*Ezirniñ samy*, Russian title: *Tanets orla*, 1975, USSR), Igor' Sheshukov's *The Last Hunt* (*Posledniaia okhota*, 1979, USSR), Evgenii Sherstobitov's *We Take Everything Upon Ourselves* (*Berem vse na sebja*, 1980, USSR) and Andrei Borisov's *By the Will of Genghis Khan* (*Taina Chingis-Khaana*, 2009, Mongolia, Russia, USA, also known as *Po veleniiu Chingiskhana*). His awards include Honored Artist of the Tuva Republic (1996), People's Artist of the Tuva Republic (2002), and Honored Artist of the Russian Federation (2004). Oorzhak's mother, Raisa Mongushevna, worked for the State Communications Agency as a switchboard operator at a long-distance telephone exchange, which perhaps gave Oorzhak the idea for the film's magical payphone.

³ Since 2016, an increasing number of Sakha feature films have received international distribution. For example, in spring 2016, Aleksei Ambros'ev's *Lost* (*Mummuttar*, 2015) was released in Kazakhstan, and Kostas Marsan's *My Murderer* (*Sajsary küölge*, 2016) was dubbed into Russian for release in Russia and other CIS countries. In 2019 Stepan Burnashev's *First Love* (*Mangnajgy taptal*, 2015) was released in limited distribution in France. I am grateful to Caroline Damiens for providing this information. 2016 was also the year in which Sakha feature films began to enjoy success at international film festivals, after Dmitrii Davydov's *Bonfire* (*Koster na vetru*) won Best Feature at Toronto's imagineNATIVE Film Festival, thus becoming the first Sakha film to win an international award. In 2018, Eduard Novikov's *Lord Eagle* (*Tojon kyyl*, Russian title: *Tsar ptitsa*, 2018) won the main prize at both the Moscow International Film Festival and the Asian World Film Festival, where Liubov' Borisova's *The Sun Above Me Never Sets* (*Min ürdüber kün khahan da kiirbet*, Russian title: *Nado mnoi solntse ne saditsia*, 2019) won the following year; in 2020, Dmitrii Davydov's *The Scarecrow* (*Pugalo*, 2020) became the first Sakha film to win the coveted Grand Prix at the Sochi Open Russian Film Festival (aka Kinotavr, Russia's largest and most prestigious national film festival) and Stepan Burnashev's *Black Snow* (*Khara khaar*, 2020) did the same at Russia's Window on Europe festival (Beumers 2021; McGinity-Peebles 2021). In 2021, Vladimir Munkuev's *Russian* (*Nuuchcha*, 2021) won the Grand Prix Crystal Globe at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival's East of the West competition and the Best Director award at Kinotavr.

⁴ In September 2021, Oorzhak surprised audiences and cultural commentators when she left her position as chief director at the Tuva National Musical and Drama Theater to develop the Bravo Theater Studio, in Kyzyl, which she had founded initially as a children's theater group and where, since March 2022, she has run voice coaching classes for adults, teenagers, and children, online and in person. See Orzhak (2022).

⁵ In 2013, the festival was renamed the Yakutsk International Film Festival (YIFF), when it began showing films from around the world while still centering the Arctic region and "circumpolar countries", such as the Russian Federation, Canada, Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Denmark, thus locating Sakha cinema in a global

context (Damiens 2015). Since 2015, the YIFF's focus has changed again and it currently has an international programming policy with no distinctive focus on the Arctic or Polar regions.

⁶ Harajuku is an area of Tokyo famous for its many side streets of fashionable shops, boutiques, street food and fast food outlets and regarded as the center of Japan's teenage culture.

⁷ Irina Engelis (b. 1980 in the village of Cherskii, Nizhnekolymsk District, Yakut ASSR) graduated from St Petersburg State University of Culture and Arts with a degree in cultural studies in 2002. From 2002 to 2005 she worked as the assistant to the rector of the Arctic State Institute of Culture and Arts and in 2007 moved to a specialist post in the Ministry of Culture and Spiritual Development of the Sakha Republic, where she is in charge of supporting and developing Sakha cinematography, as executive director of the YIFF, for which she designed the original gold "snow glasses" logo and prize, described by Anton Dolin (2011) as "symbolizing the fusion of ancient Sakha traditions with the latest film technology." Engelis was also an assistant director on Borisov's *By the Will of Genghis Khan*.

⁸ As Damiens (2014: 2) explains, in Russian the adjective "national" is "closer in meaning to 'ethnic,' but reflects the Russo-Soviet custom of distinguishing between nationality (ethnicity) and citizenship."

⁹ Aleksandra Solov'eva, the striking young woman who plays Orlandina and on whose performance the film depends for much of its power, is not a professional actress; in 2010 she was a student at the Yakutsk State Agricultural Academy (IaGSKhA), when Oorzhak happened to notice her in the street and invited her to appear in the film (Dolin 2011).

¹⁰ Anashkin (2011a) suggests that the unusual name Orlandina is a derivative of Orlando and perhaps taken from Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel of the same title, famously adapted for the screen by the British filmmaker Sally Potter in 1992. He also proposes, more persuasively, that it might be a reference to the hugely popular song "Orlandina", first released in 1991 by the all-woman band "Kolibri" and wildly popular in Russia for more than a decade: between 1992 and 2006, it featured on no less than five albums by four different artists (Wikipedia 2022). In the song, Orlandina tells the unnamed male narrator "I'll go with you if you call me / I'll be yours", which mirrors Orlandina's reaction to Orlan's advances in the underground. Another possible source for her name is a St Petersburg music club called Orlandina, after the song, which opened in 2001, when Oorzhak was a student in the city. Julian Graffy has also noted (in an email to the author on March 29, 2022) that "Orlandina could be translated (from Russian) as an adjective meaning 'Orlan's woman'", which makes it another expression of Orlan's possessiveness. In this connection it is noteworthy that, after Orlandina has left Orlan, she is never again addressed by this name, but only by terms of endearment such as "my sweet one."

¹¹ For information about the three main types of *choroon*, the meanings of their different designs and their significance as part of the *yh yakh* festival, see Jochelson (2018) and Argounova-Low (2018).

¹² When Misha gives the clay to the potter he addresses him as "father." Liuba subsequently asks the potter if Misha is his son, to which the old man replies, "It's just a form of expression."

¹³ A great deal more could be said about how Oorzhak uses Orlan (and the barman) to parody different types of male protagonists familiar from the films of East Asian auteur filmmakers. More could also be said about other aspects of Oorzhak's imitation, or parody, of this cinematic tradition and of specific films within it, such as Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994, Hong Kong), from which Oorzhak appears to borrow numerous elements, including but not limited to: the lovelorn hero; the quirky short-haired heroine; the technique of foregrounding mood through color; the inconclusive narrative and blurred plot; the confessional off-screen monologue; atmospheric urban rain; shots of McDonalds restaurants; and the approximation of his favored technological technique of step-printing (attempted in the sequence in which Orlandina travels to work by rickshaw on the day she ends her relationship with the barman), which creates the effect that the protagonist is moving in slow motion by comparison with everything else and which serves, first, to represent the protagonist as detached from the world around them and, second, to emphasize the importance of the moment they are in.

¹⁴ Damiens (2014) has described how, throughout the 1990s, 2000s, and early 2010s, the Sakha Republic's cinema institutions "strongly insist[ed] on their national anchoring [...], advocat[ing] the development of a strictly Yakut cinema", thus adhering to Sakhafil'm statutes by displaying "Yakut cultures, traditions and views" and thereby "contributing to their preservation." In this way, she argues, in this period Sakha cinema was "destined to [sic] the internal market." For analysis, from the program director of the YIFF, Aleksei Medvedev, of how Sakha cinema has, in the last few years, shifted to become more global in its outlook and aspirations, "rethinking its cultural baggage, trying to fit into the modern world", see Medvedev (2021a).

¹⁵ As Julian Graffy has noted (in an email to the author on March 29, 2022), a further (extra-filmic) irony is that Oorzhak invariably speaks of her concern to challenge Chinese cultural imperialism in Russian, the language of the imperial and colonial state that has suppressed many aspects of Sakha culture and identity, not least the Sakha language. As Adelaide McGinity-Peebles (2021) reports, despite the fact that Sakha shares official language status with Russian in the Sakha Republic, "less than half the population speak Sakha as their first language and it is classed as having 'vulnerable' status by UNESCO."