



PROJECT MUSE®

Documenting Anti-colonial Social Movements in Early 1970s
Hong Kong with 16mm

Tom Cunliffe

JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies, Volume 62, Issue 2, Winter
2023, pp. 172-176 (Article)

Published by Michigan Publishing

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2023.0013>

J C M S

Spotlight: Critical Media Pedagogies Scholarship
Ensemble Group, Jay, J. Lerner, S. R. R. R.
Suzanne Dixon, Sarah Choi, Ryan Golden, Nely
Hernandez, and Regina Ling Lee • Spotlight: Motion
Picturebook: *Travels of a Woman* • No. 10
Art-Max: The Digital Body in a Superhero
Context: *Star Wars* • Category III Film
in Post-Handover Hong Kong: Executive
Violence and Its Continuities in *White Paper*
of *Suicide Club* • Jing Jiu Cheng • Subversion:
Hence, Patriarchal Discourse, and Progressive
Aesthetics • *Black Panther's* Historical Young
Ghosts and Black Queerness: *David Cross*
• *Black Panther* in Harlem: The Case of
the Absentee: *Theory*, 1900-1911: *Spotlight*
• *Disability*: *Disability*: *The Mute* Behind
De-Aging *Elton John* • *Portrait* *Animation*
and *Media* *Crisis*: *The Case of America*
Michigan *Spotlight* *in* *Review* *in*
Home *Dynamic* *History* of a *Revolutionary*
Film *Review* *of* *to* *Black* *White*

62

2

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/879177>

Tom Cunliffe

Documenting Anti-colonial Social Movements in Early 1970s Hong Kong with 16mm

In early 1970s Hong Kong, independently made documentaries were rare. Conventional film distribution channels, which opened doors to public screenings, were closed off to independent filmmakers, and financing was difficult for any filmmaker not backed by a big studio.¹ Furthermore, the colonial film censors would ban or censor material they deemed critical of the state; anti-colonial sentiments were especially unwelcome. Into this treacherous terrain stepped the social activists Ng Chun-Yin and Mok Chiu-yu, co-editors of the radical internationalist left-wing *The 70's Biweekly* (70年代雙週刊), a bilingual periodical published in Hong Kong that focused on political issues, social movements, and art.² *The 70's Biweekly's* writers connected various socio-political struggles and problems in their magazine, including global issues of civil rights, feminism, poverty, and the severe, local injustices of the colonial regime.³ In 1971, Ng and Mok decided to extend their publishing project to include filmmaking.

1 Ian Aitken and Michael Ingham, *Hong Kong Documentary Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 174.

2 *The 70's Biweekly* was deeply critical of both the colonial government and the pro-Beijing leftist circles in Hong Kong, and their left-wing position was not a part of the established pro-Beijing left in Hong Kong but more similar to the international New Left.

3 Mok Chiu-yu, interview by Tom Cunliffe and Raymond Tsang, *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (forthcoming).

Tom Cunliffe, "Documenting Anti-colonial Social Movements in Early 1970s Hong Kong with 16mm," *JCMS* 62, no. 2 (Winter 2023): 172–176.

They raised money to make a 16mm documentary titled *Xianggang baowei diaoyutai shiwei shijian* (Protect Diaoyutai movement, Hong Kong Defend Diaoyutai Provisional Action Committee, 1971), which focused on the protests taking place in support of decolonizing the Diaoyu Islands, sometimes known as the Defend Diaoyutai Movement.⁴

This rare independent deployment of 16mm was diametrically opposed to the format's long use as a tool of British colonial rule. The colonial film unit in Hong Kong operated from 1960 to 1973. According to John Lawrence Murray, a public relations officer, it had two main aims: to produce documentaries that could "make people across the world more sympathetic to the Hong Kong cause and . . . [to] inform the people of Hong Kong on how government policies were successfully resolving the Colonies [*sic*] problems."⁵ Scholar Jing Jing Chang describes this as a project to "create a desirable Hong Kong 'colonial' citizenry."⁶ *Xianggang baowei diaoyutai shiwei shijian* documented the underside of this overtly colonial project, revealing legitimate, principled dissent taking place in this anti-colonial movement.

In this essay, I analyze this fifteen-minute silent documentary and its production contexts to demonstrate how filmmakers and activists utilized the lighter, sturdier, and easier-to-handle 16mm format to work outside of the commercial film industry, colonial film unit, and mainstream media complex and document images of resistance to colonial rule. This analysis sheds light on a suppressed anti-colonial, independent filmmaking tradition in Hong Kong, which was enabled by the format of 16mm. That tradition never developed into a fully fledged political filmmaking movement, mainly due to lack of resources and funding. Nevertheless, *Xianggang baowei diaoyutai shiwei shijian* is an important milestone in political documentaries in Hong Kong film history. In hindsight, it is an early emblem of the profusion of political documentaries that would develop through video and digital platforms, notably in the wake of the recent large-scale protests in Hong Kong.

The 70's Biweekly regularly published articles about two of the major social movements in early 1970s Hong Kong: the Campaign to Make Chinese an Official Language and the Defend Diaoyutai Movement. *The 70's Biweekly's* members also organized street protests for these and intersecting movements including protests against the American invasion of Vietnam.⁷ Although it was a nationalistic campaign, the Defend Diaoyutai Movement was interpreted by *The 70's Biweekly* as being against both American and Japanese imperialism, since the United States had officially "handed over" these islands to Japan in 1970, contradicting China's competing claim for the islands.⁸ Student activists in Hong Kong "voiced their opposition against the

4 Ng and Mok do not take credit for the film; the credited "The Hong Kong Defend Diaoyutai Provisional Action Committee" situates the making of it as a group effort.

5 Ian Aitken, "The Development of Official Film-Making in Hong Kong," *Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 32, no. 4 (2012): 602.

6 Jing Jing Chang, *Screening Communities: Negotiating Narratives of Empire, Nation, and the Cold War in Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 57.

7 Law Kar, interview by Tom Cunliffe and Raymond Tsang, *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (forthcoming).

8 Mok, interview by Cunliffe and Tsang.

Japanese and the United States governments through organising a series of public rallies and protest demonstrations,” and students clashed with police in some of these. Police violence against protestors in one July 1971 rally especially made colonial repression visible, which helped this movement rapidly develop into a campaign against Hong Kong’s colonial establishment.⁹ We can thus see why the socially and politically engaged members of *The 70’s Biweekly*, who were fiercely critical of the colonial regime, were interested in documenting these protests.

The 70’s Biweekly raised HK\$700 for the film stock to record this protest movement and invited two camerapeople to shoot it: Law Kar, an important Hong Kong film critic and amateur filmmaker, and the visual artist and experimental filmmaker Chiu Tak Hak. Law and Chiu used two cameras to film the street demonstration on April 10, 1971, from different angles. Law recounts that independent filmmaking in 16mm was relatively uncommon even into the 1970s in Hong Kong due to its expense and it not being as easy to use as 8mm.¹⁰ There were several 8mm documentaries on social issues and movements produced in 1970s Hong Kong, but this lineage is distinct from that of 16mm documentaries and is not well documented; much more research is required to unearth this parallel practice. The 16mm format was mainly used by those working at TV stations, the colonial film unit, news departments, and the international press in Hong Kong. Several independent filmmakers, including Law, learned from people working those sectors how to handle 16mm cameras and edit film, which led to several experimental short narrative 16mm films in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, 16mm film culture at that time was largely shaped by colonial filmmaking and mainstream media practices. *Xianggang baowei diaoyutai shiwei shijian* utilized the 16mm format and its inherited legacies and turned them back against these colonial structures. Law states that he bought his “very well used Bell and Howell” manual focus 16mm camera secondhand from a Taiwan TV reporter for an extremely reasonable price.¹¹ Like Chiu’s, Law’s camera could not record sound or be attached to a sound recorder, which is why their documentary is silent. Title cards explain each sequence. Law recalls that while some reporters used magnetic sound film to record synchronous sound, that type of camera was much more expensive.¹² In sum, technical, institutional, and political conditions all worked against the rise of independent filmmaking.

The film criticism in *The 70’s Biweekly* was often political in nature. Yu Sau (pen name of Mok Chiu-yu), for instance, writes about the attention Michelangelo Antonioni pays to the hidden violence in capitalist societies in *Zabriskie Point* (1970), connecting the murder of the Black student in this film

9 Benjamin K. P. Leung, “The Student Movement in Hong Kong: Transition to a Democratizing Society,” in *The Dynamics of Social Movement in Hong Kong*, ed. Stephen Wing Kai Chiu and Tai Lok Lui (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000), 214.

10 Law Kar, interview by author, May 18, 2021.

11 Law, interview by author.

12 The lack of sound on the original copy of the film led to some unintended consequences: when the documentary was screened at Hong Kong Baptist University, a Baptist student added his own narration to make it into a piece of nationalistic Maoist propaganda, which upset *The 70’s Biweekly* collective since their political stance was largely critical of the Communist bureaucracy. Mok Chiu-yu, interview by author, May 18, 2021.

to the thousands of Black people who were brutally beaten by police during the US civil rights movement.¹³ Similarly, in articles on several Hong Kong films, *The 70's Biweekly's* writers refer to the colonial Hong Kong government's exploitation of human rights, oppression, or discrimination.¹⁴ They also lament that "in Hong Kong, Chinese people are second class citizens but Chinese women are third class citizens."¹⁵ One writer asks, "Are the films we make justified in the money and time spent on them when so many people in HK are paying for a bowl of white rice with blood, sweat, and tears of humiliations at the hands of heartless exploiters?"¹⁶ The decision to make a film like *Xianggang baowei diaoyutai shiwei shijian*, granting visibility to one of the key anti-colonial and anti-imperialist social movements of its day, is a cinematic extension of the magazine's political criticism.

A moment in *Xianggang baowei diaoyutai shiwei shijian* connecting this protest with other international protests and liberation movements occurs when viewers see a man in the crowd of protestors holding a poster of the Black Power fist. Widely understood as anti-capitalist and anti-racist in America, this symbol became a clear statement against the racist status quo and colonialism in Hong Kong. Just after a title card appears indicating that twenty-one people were arrested for protesting on April 10, 1971, we see the police clashing with the protestors. Flurries of movement fill the screen as police are shown making these arrests. The handheld 16mm cameras capture these images from within the center of the action, often between the police and the protestors, aided by the relative lightness of the apparatus. The 16mm camera shakes and swerves, recording many police running and grabbing protestors and putting them into a police truck. At one moment, it appears as though a police officer tries to block the camera with his hand. This was a direct, "on-the-ground" style of documentary film shooting; the effect of this plunges the viewer into the center of the action, which forges a sense of identification with the peaceful protestors who are being arrested.

After these arrests, *Xianggang baowei diaoyutai shiwei shijian* shows protestors who have moved to Hong Kong's Central Police Station to demonstrate solidarity with their arrested comrades. A large group gathers by the iron gates of the police station, and protestors talk with police who are behind iron bars. The camera pans several times from right to left between these two groups, depicting the power of the police and powerlessness of the protestors. Later in the evening of April 10, a press conference was held about the day's events with some of the protest organizers. The film ends at the courthouse with many protestors waiting outside the trial before a title card informs viewers that the twenty-one activists arrested all pleaded not guilty and that the trial was adjourned to a later date. Overtly negative represen-

13 Yu Sau, "Antonioni's America: Meiguo weming de miewang" [Antonioni's America: The destruction of American civilization], *The 70's Biweekly*, no. 9 (June 16, 1970): 7.

14 Langzi, "Zuotian, jintian, mingtian" [Yesterday, today, tomorrow], *The 70's Biweekly*, no. 17 (January 1, 1971): 29.

15 Yu Sau, "Cong Tang shu xuan de dongfuren shuodao funv jiefang" [From Tang Shu-Shuen's *The Arch* to women's liberation], *The 70's Biweekly*, no. 15 (November 16, 1970): 13.

16 Y, "Invitation to HK's Young Filmmakers: Stop What You Are Doing!," *The 70's Biweekly*, no. 16 (December 12, 1970): 14–15.

tations of the police in film were still expressly forbidden in Hong Kong in the early 1970s, as the police were a symbol of the colonial authority. The camera's presence at each of these scenes was thus an act of defiance.

After some adjustments and re-editing, two prints of *Xianggang baowei diaoyutai shiwei shijian* entered into a kind of clandestine circulation. One copy was sent to the United States, where protests over the Diaoyu Islands were also taking place, thus placing it on the international 16mm circuit. The other copy was screened at universities within Hong Kong or in private locations. The first time the film was officially exhibited in Hong Kong was at the 1988 edition of the Hong Kong International Film Festival, where it played as part of a retrospective that included newsreels and short documentaries about Hong Kong. By the late 1980s, colonial film censorship had loosened, and the Diaoyutai issue had receded from public view, which also eased the film's path to public exhibition.

Xianggang baowei diaoyutai shiwei shijian remains one of the few extant documentaries that provides concrete evidence of social movements confronting the colonial government in Hong Kong in the early 1970s. The 16mm camera afforded the opportunity to capture and document colonial police repression against, and arrests of, peaceful protestors. Official news departments, the colonial film unit, and the foreign press in Hong Kong usually used 16mm, but it is deployed in *Xianggang baowei diaoyutai shiwei shijian* to counter corporate and colonial government agencies. Thus, the format also functions to oppose the ways in which cinema and other media including television and newspapers were instrumentalized as tools and symbols of liberal capitalism and colonial benevolence. In the wake of the recent 2019 uprising and implementation of the National Security Law, the labor activist Au Loong-yu recently wrote that if there is any possibility of a democratic left in Hong Kong today, the histories of earlier waves of leftists in Hong Kong (including *The 70's Biweekly* collective) must be taken into account.¹⁷ Due to the industrial and political barriers in Hong Kong, 16mm only played a minor role in this history, but Au's statement points toward the need to further explore how 16mm was utilized by not only states and colonial capitalist powers but also those attempting to provide alternative decolonial perspectives. Analyzing independent 16mm films such as *Xianggang baowei diaoyutai shiwei shijian* can contribute to helping us rethink both Hong Kong's (colonial) history and the alternative histories of 16mm film.

Tom Cunliffe is a lecturer in East Asian film and media studies at University College London. His essays have appeared in journals including *Film History*, *Frame-work*, and *Screen*. He is currently co-editing a special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* on Hong Kong left-wing cinema from the 1950s to the 1970s, and is working on a book about the filmmaker Lung Kong.

17 Au Loong-yu, foreword to *Reorienting Hong Kong's Resistance: Leftism, Decoloniality, and Internationalism*, ed. Wen Liu, J. N. Chien, Christina Chung, and Ellie Tse (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), ix.