

East Goes West - Chinese Filmmakers in the United States

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“Lean In or Bend Over? American Feminism and Hong Kong’s WONDER WOMEN”

Films made by Hong Kong women in America have not received the same attention scholars have given to their male peers such as Wayne Wang, Ronny Yu, Evans Chan, John Woo, Wong Kar-Wai, Peter Chan, and Tsui Hark. However, this is gradually changing, and there have been significant studies of Hong Kong Second Wave directors in America, such as Clara Law and Mabel Cheung, including Staci Ford’s HKUP monograph on Cheung’s *AN AUTUMN’S TALE*, set in New York City. The connections of other notable women directors such as Tang Shu-Shuen and Angie Chen to the United States have also been documented. However, women in the younger generation of Hong Kong filmmakers, who are part of what Mirana Szeto has called the “HKSAR New Wave,” have been neglected. In fact, many in this younger generation have strong ties to America. Several have studied in United States or lived there for extended periods, including Susie Au, Casandra Chan, Pauline Chan, Kit Hui, Crystal Kwok, Aubrey Lam, Flora Lau, Emily Ting, among many others. An argument can be made that their encounter with America had an impact on their development as filmmakers and their vision of women on screen as well. Similar to filmmaker King Hu, who had a lifelong fascination with American culture, but never realized his proposed project on the Chinese railway laborers in the United States, these Hong Kong women filmmakers continue their conversations with American culture when they return to the SAR to make films about Chinese women in the territory.

Before beginning her feature film career in Hong Kong, Barbara Wong, for example, studied film production at New York University’s prestigious Tisch School of the Arts. Although Wong’s features deal with Chinese women, her perspective on female sexuality and incorporation of certain types of feminist discourses in her films place her work in conversation with so-called “American” feminism. Far from a singular or unified political position, American feminism can be characterized by its rich intellectual range as it emerged out of the U.S. Women’s Movement in first, second, and third waves of agitation for female equality. Several strands of these discourses can be discerned in Wong’s work; however, the focus in this presentation rests on mainstream American “liberal” feminism and upwardly mobile career women in the new global economy. Sheryl Sandberg has recently articulated this type of “feminism” in her best-selling book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013). Although produced before Sandberg’s book, Wong’s *WONDER WOMEN* (2007) serves to illustrate the way in which a woman filmmaker from Hong Kong imagines the lives of the territory’s career women through the rhetoric of American feminist attitudes and assumptions. Like many critics of Sandberg and the feminist tradition she represents, Wong sees the problems as well as the promise of these successful business women. In her film, women represent both the trials and tribulations of their gender as well as the vicissitudes of the territory. Using the narrative trope of a woman’s life to connect the key events of Hong Kong’s

first decade as an SAR, including the financial crisis, SARS, evolving relationship with the PRC, among other topics, Barbara Wong sees Hong Kong women responding to the changing place and meaning of “feminism” as the territory positions itself between West and East, the former colonizer Britain and the current sovereign China, with American popular culture providing the imaginative common ground. As debates rage over Hong Kong’s “Western” tendencies in the wake of the Umbrella Movement, this analysis of WONDER WOMEN provides an opportunity to consider the ways in which attitudes about feminism, neoliberalism, and the place of culture in the era of globalization appear on screen in the work of Hong Kong women filmmakers.