Article

Cinema Censorship and Media Citizenship in the Hong Kong Film *Ten Years*

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Abstract

Cinema censorship is a relatively unexplored topic in the discipline of surveillance studies. While movies are frequent references throughout the scholarship, such citations tend to be limited to plot and imagery and overlook the ways in which the medium can be subject to state intervention or other forms of censorship and self-censorship. This essay uses the case of the 2015 Hong Kong independent film *Ten Years* to explore how cinema deserves to be considered alongside other media and communications whose vulnerability to institutional control and monitoring are already widely documented by surveillance studies. The film, which reflects Hong Kong residents' critique of mounting Chinese power, was the object of an aggressive vilification and repression campaign by the mainland Chinese government. It also spawned a grassroots defense in which audiences and filmmakers mobilized around the film as a symbol and site of civic discourse and political critique. Using the concepts of participatory media and online activism and connecting *Ten Years* with Hong Kong's 2014 "Umbrella" protests against Chinese rule, this essay shows how cinema invites the same interventions and interactivity as social media and other digital or communications technologies. Indeed, because *Ten Years*' history of populist activism resembles well-known instances of media mobilization such as the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter, this essay demonstrates not only cinema's multiple dimensions of relevance for surveillance studies but also uncovers new global spaces whose film history will diversify surveillance studies.

Introduction

As a reader and occasional contributor to *Surveillance & Society*, I have long been interested in cinema's complicated place within this journal and the surveillance studies field more generally (Fang 2014). Movies are recurring points of reference throughout the scholarship, providing critical fodder not only in humanities-based analyses of their content but also as useful examples to illustrate conceptual ideas probed in more empirical, non-humanities-based research.¹ Yet, in both disciplinary uses, scholarly references to cinema are predominantly drawn from Hollywood and Anglo-European examples, and they tend to be primarily narrative and diegetic in the sense of focusing mostly upon content-based questions of story and plot. This emphasis within surveillance studies' cinematic references reflects the discipline's empirical and materialist focus, but it fails to acknowledge the extent to which surveillance studies has

¹ Within the pages of this journal alone, see Muir (2012), which looks at *Minority Report*; Kammerer (2004), which looks at that film as well as *Enemy of the State* and *Panic Room*; Gad and Hansen (2013) or Zimmer (2011) (later expanded into Zimmer [2015]), whose extensive filmography encompassing early French and American films to late twentieth-century European thrillers and Hollywood actioners still remains sited in the western hemisphere.

diversified geographically to include spaces beyond the US, UK, and other western and First World powers with which the discipline initially began.² Moreover, because few of the scholars studying surveillance outside of film and media studies pay much attention to aesthetics or acknowledge the industrial contingencies inevitable within cinema's production as a capital intensive, distribution-dependent medium, current uses of cinema within surveillance studies overlook the medium's vulnerability to censorship. Despite the fact that communication studies, especially studies of media censorship, have a strong presence within the discipline, cinema censorship remains overlooked as a parallel mode of sociopolitical interaction comparable to social media and other media activity in rendering visible the repressive or internalized dynamics by which state and popular surveillance manifests.

This relative dearth within surveillance studies of cinema censorship and the larger contexts of film reception and aesthetics is further incongruous when considered in light of parallel trends in the related disciplines of area studies and film and media studies. In film and media studies, for example, much contemporary scholarship explores questions of media convergence and medium specificity, which consider the degree to which discrete media and art forms such as film and narrative cinema mirror or are distinguished from other forms of visual, auditory, or data engagement, such as television, video games, or online activity (Jenkins 2006). And in area studies a similar interest in likeness and difference is reshaping Asian studies, as some scholars have begun to prioritize internal regional attributes over antiquated occidentalist emphases upon an east-west binary (Chen 2010; Niranjana and Wang 2015). Both of these comparative approaches within media and area studies have great relevance for surveillance studies. In political science, for example, Paul Amar uses the cases of Brazil and Egypt to show how conflicts between state repression and grassroots mobilization transform global notions of security and stability (Amar 2013). And in network theory, Nicole Starosielski (2015) and Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker (2007) explore the changing nature of sociocultural interaction with information infrastructure, showing how evolving media technologies complicate existing notions of information dissemination and its role in social, global, and individual power.

In keeping with this methodological turn away from medium and region specificity, this essay seeks to expand cinema's place in surveillance studies, particularly in terms of censorship as well as the multiple media forms by which cinema can be mobilized to resist censorship. To illustrate these diverse contested multimedia and extradiegetic modes by which cinema both encounters and challenges media surveillance, I focus on the dystopian 2015 Hong Kong independent film *Ten Years*. The film became the subject of local and global attention when media attacks by the former British colony's ruling Chinese government precipitated grassroots efforts by the filmmakers and local activists to keep the film publicly available. Although widely publicized as a flare-up reflecting local resistance to growing Chinese power, the Hong Kong film has not yet been recognized among the widespread disciplinary discussion of media-enabled counter-surveillance, such as that surrounding the Arab Spring or the Black Lives Matter movement. Some of this oversight may stem from surveillance studies' aforementioned preference for Hollywood and Anglo-European films as well as the limited ways that the discipline references film. Yet, as this essay argues, to allow region and medium specificity to consign cinema only to illustrative examples while overlooking the diverse means by which movies influence and enact civic discourse is to overlook how film now belongs to a complex variety of screen-mediated narratives in which media across the globe is both subject to state repression through censorship and through which artists, audiences, and other influencers attempt to circumvent those agencies through multimedia-enabled social organization.

² For surveillance studies' expansion beyond the western world, see Doyle, Lippert, and Lyon (2011), and West and Sanders (2003), as well as this journal's special issues on Latin America (Firmino, Bruno, and Botello 2012) and A Global Surveillance Society (2011). I call this western bias common in the discipline's early decades the "UKUSA paradigm of Western hegemony in surveillance theory" (Fang 2017a: 153).

Indeed, because China is now a global superpower, the media skirmishes that took place over *Ten Years* should be seen not as a regional incident but rather as a case study foreshadowing global media trends. For nearly two decades now, Hollywood's once unchallenged hegemony has been readjusting to China's emergence as the world's largest cinema market (Kokas 2017). If this industrial transformation in film and media signals shifting geopolitical trends at large, actors and actions within these scenarios also model possibilities for retrieving and retaining agency within this new media ecology. In fact, *Ten Years*—which was in production during Hong Kong's "Umbrella" protests, when, for over two months in 2014, local residents held massive peaceful demonstrations to express their dismay over the ruling mainland government's tightening control—continued the spirit of the Umbrella protests both in its content and in the subsequent grassroots mobilization the film precipitated upon release. As I will show, *Ten Years* exemplifies the interactive mix of old and new technologies in sociocultural and political expression that Henry Jenkins (1992) identifies as participatory media, and thus it demonstrates the multiple ways that movies can illuminate surveillance studies beyond mere narrative and visual example. Therefore, the *Ten Years* case study is relevant to more than merely area and discipline specialists. In addition to providing surveillance studies with a valuable glimpse into the still underdocumented but increasingly relevant impact of Chinese media intervention, this case study in twenty-first century cinema censorship and resistance argues for new ways of conceptualizing film's value for surveillance studies' disciplinary focus on repression and agency.

Surveillance, Cinema Censorship, and Media Citizenship

The absence of cinema censorship within surveillance studies is perhaps not surprising, given most current approaches to the topic within film and media studies. Most studies of cinema censorship pursue a conventional, or what might be called "classical," model of surveillance in which the power to excise, repress, or otherwise contain and control film content and dissemination is concentrated within a centralized institution or individual—such as occurs in authoritarian and totalitarian states with strong propaganda as well as in capitalist film industries where private or non-state civic organizations are the driving force in monitoring film content and exhibition.³ Within these seemingly antithetical political and economic contexts, film censorship and self-censorship are remarkably similar. Whether it be Soviet-style agitprop or commercial fare whose largely moral concerns regarding sex and violence are imposed by an industry-run board such as the Motion Picture Association of America, traditional models of cinema censorship resemble Foucault's triangular, panoptic model of surveillance in which institutional power holds a visual monopoly and a comparatively weak or passive audience is relatively unable to exert influence. And because cinema censorship traditionally is conceptualized only within the single medium, cinema censorship thus appears a virtual extension of prison and factory, a disciplinary space corroborated by decades of film theory that emphasizes the prostrate or passive nature of movie audiences immobilized in theater seats and enthralled by illusory images that may have little relation to the actual world.⁴

Such static, monomedial, and unilateral paradigms of cinema censorship, however, ignore cinema's place within an increasingly diverse media landscape that radically expands both the film form and surveillance studies. As surveillance theory widely acknowledges, mass media and digital technologies such as the internet have brought about a dramatic transformation in the sources and conditions of monitoring and control (Andrejevic 2007; Chun 2016). These changes attributed to broadcasting, networking, interactivity, and other media affordances have redefined the disciplines of film and media studies, and

³ For an excellent survey of studies of film censorship across the globe, see leading cinema censorship scholar Lee Grieveson's (2015) annotated bibliography. For an explicitly Foucauldian analysis of cinema censorship, see the seminal Kuhn (1990).

⁴ The constraining nature of traditional cinema spectatorship is a tenet of early film theory, as established in landmark essays by Baudry (1999) and Mulvey (1999). For one essay specifically describing film spectatorship as Foucauldian, see Stam and Pearson (1986).

they suggest a significantly different surveillance regime in which cinema censorship is just one vector within a vast array of screen-mediated experiences, and the production of and dissemination of media content is accessible by individuals and grassroots organizations as well as by government, corporate, and institutional actors. For example, in the middle of last year, audiences and influencers mobilized in countries such as Russia, Malaysia, and Kuwait both for and against that year's live action reboot of *Beauty and the Beast*, whose widely publicized "gay" subplot was the object of censorship (Kozlov 2017; Luhn 2017; Mumford 2017). Similarly, in Pakistan, the controversial film *Verna*, which was initially banned by government censors for portraying gang rape, benefitted from the current #MeToo movement against sexual harassment, fanning local news coverage and a homegrown #UnbanVerna social media campaign that ultimately resulted in the film's sanctioned exhibition (Zahra-Malik 2017). In both cases, such civic activity regarding film content and exhibition was significantly facilitated through social media, demonstrating the diverse screens that mediate modern cinema experience and the post-classical surveillance regime in which cinema censorship now occurs. To return to the rubrics of surveillance theory, this more nuanced, twenty-first-century version of cinema censorship and its popular resistance might be described as the "synopticism" by which Thomas Mathiesen (1997) emphasizes mass media's modification of Foucauldian panopticism, or Mark Crispin Miller's (1984) famous rephrasing of Orwell into "Big Brother is you, watching." Like Deleuze's (1992) canonical account of control society, this new, rhizomatic model of cinema censorship and resistance mirrors similar accounts of agency within media more generally, whether as Henry Jenkins' (1992) liberatory, enabling notion of participatory media or as the more cynical critiques of prosumer complicity and exploitation in Web 2.0 (Fuchs 2011).

Among world cinema, Sinophone film and media are vivid examples of such alternately liberatory and exploitative possibilities of participatory media, and hence they should be of interest to surveillance studies. As Guobin Yang (2009, 2015) has shown, contemporary China harbors a remarkably dynamic media environment in which the prosperous and globally ascendant nation has embraced digital networking as an integral component of its modernization, and traditional top-down, triangular manifestations of centralized government power often come face to face with subversion from individual netizens and grassroots collectives. Censorship, for example, is well known and widely documented to impact Chinese media content and access through an expansive and ever-innovating surveillance assemblage that includes image- and word-screening software, "net cops" (government employees appointed to scour the web for critical postings), monetary incentives to encourage private citizens to report on similar postings, government coercion on media and technology corporations, and the "Great Firewall," the government's gateway to control the penetration and movement of digital information across the national border (Bamman et al. 2012; Dou 2017; Vuori and Paltemaa 2015). Importantly, however, while these control elements within contemporary Chinese media uphold a classically Orwellian notion of totalitarian China, such technological and methodological diversity facilitating censorship also enables its subversion. Contemporary Chinese netizens seeking to post provocative content and avoid censorship make use of VPNs to bypass the firewall, inventive language and image conventions to evade web scouring and automatic takedown, and microblogs and group messaging software to effect alternate circuits of distribution (Hassid 2012; Qiang 2011; Zheng 2008). The effects of these constant and conflicting agencies within Chinese internet activity are widely debated. Yang, for example, credits this online activism with real democratic transformation, while more cynical critics of mainland media interactivity argue that China's participatory media is a remarkably canny form of control that only gives the appearance of civic participation and critique while effectively distracting from human rights abuses, suppressing collective organization, and coercing consent with government policy (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Leibold 2011; MacKinnon 2011; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011).

To focus more specifically on cinema as a site of participatory media, some of these diverse forms of Chinese media citizenship are portrayed in the 2015 mainland Chinese film *Caught in the Web*, which depicts the experiences of a young woman who becomes the subject of vicious internet trolling while also finding personal solace through her own media postings. The film's Chinese title, *Sou suo*, translates as

“human flesh search” (similar to doxing), and early promotion of the film included actual internet postings created by the film’s publicity team in order to enhance the movie’s verisimilitude—and to which some movie fans continued to add long after the end of the film’s theatrical release.⁵ Yet as noted previously, to rest with only a film’s visual and narrative content as an example of cinematic surveillance is to greatly diminish the complexity of film’s extradiegetic attributes, including the participatory possibilities that *Caught in the Web*’s own extrafilmic online presence affirms. Although *Caught in the Web* was not itself subject to censorship, the film’s dynamic enactment of the very interactive, participatory forms of media production that have elsewhere been used to combat censorship illustrates the diverse multimedia forms to which cinema now belongs. Indeed, for knowing Chinese film viewers, *Caught in the Web*’s extradiegetic vitality is particularly ironic, as its director—celebrated mainland filmmaker Chen Kaige—previously had his internationally acclaimed 1993 film, *Farewell My Concubine*, censored and banned in China (Kristof 1993). Thus, in the government sanctioning and popular vitality of Chen’s more recent film, *Caught in the Web* positions the director’s own career as a model of the new complicity with mainland policy that critics of Sinophone media allege.

A more general but substantive illustration of Sinophone cinema censorship and cinema’s capacity to resist or act independently of state control is apparent in the broad contrast of film history and policy between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. Starting in the 1950s, the Hong Kong film industry was a regional leader, owing to the rapid-fire manufacturing and relatively uncensored environment of the laissez-faire capitalist enclave as well as an influx of talent from the once vaunted Shanghai film industry who fled the mainland turmoil of wars and rising Communism (Bordwell 2000; Fu 2003). During this time, Hong Kong cinema was relatively free of censorship, in stark contrast to the mainland, where censorship—long a factor in local film production and exhibition—intensified with the Cultural Revolution, laying the groundwork for the intensely controlled internal film culture associated with high Communism (Lo 1997; Newman 2013; Van den Troost 2017; Xiao 2013). Importantly, however, towards the end of the century these relative positions of censored China and Hong Kong free expression began to alter, as the once influential Hong Kong film industry underwent dramatic contraction due in part to widespread concern about the former British colony’s 1997 reunification with China and especially due to industry anxiety about the impact of mainland censorship upon local filmmaking (Lee 2009). Meanwhile, in mainland China during the first decade of the twenty-first century, filmmakers unwilling to comply with the state’s content requirements in order to gain funding and official licensing for exhibition instead created a vibrant underground scene in which social media and affordable digital technology enabled the production and distribution of unsanctioned work (Jaffee 2006; Nakajima 2006; Pickowicz and Zhang 2006).

Today, however, film policy from an increasingly far-reaching mainland government appears once again to have rewritten film production in both Hong Kong and the mainland; in Hong Kong, the local film industry has survived only by splitting into a bifurcated system whereby most filmmakers practice self-censorship and comply with mainland policy expectations regarding content in order to have access to the lucrative mainland market, while a handful of independent filmmakers settle for infinitely smaller distribution and financial returns (Pang 2007; Szeto and Chen 2012). And although mainland China’s underground cinema might once have resembled a symbolic strike against state authority and the surveillance apparatus traditionally manifested by censorship, that brief flowering of independent film culture was over in little more than a decade; around 2012 the mainland government began to crack down on exhibitors with whom they had previously looked the other way (Suber 2016).

My point here in contrasting Hong Kong and mainland cinema history is to show that while media practices within the different spaces have traditionally reflected their respective sociopolitical cultures,

⁵ On *Caught in the Web*, see Yang (2017). For more on doxing in China, see Herold (2011).

media convergence, and particularly the dynamic agencies afforded by participatory media since the millennium, have made cinema and moving image media important and dynamic fronts in current political tensions—particularly as relations between Hong Kong and mainland China have grown more tense in recent years. The celebrated artist-activist Ai Weiwei is one particularly well-known example of such Sinophone moving image activism. Like many urban Chinese of his generation, Ai is an inveterate microblogger who has drawn upon his followers to help source and publicize his art and video installations. The artist also has benefited from the grassroots efforts of his followers to affect a kind of popular counter-surveillance when his work has been censored or when he has been taken into custody.⁶ In the following, I show how *Ten Years* provides a similar glimpse into mainland cinema censorship and its popular resistance. Moreover, unlike the elite and esoteric nature of Ai's high art activism, *Ten Years*' status as a narrative film incorporates mass audience potentialities that more closely resemble the diffusionary nature of participatory media. Hence, it more productively models grassroots screen activism in a time of authoritarian censorship whose impact is no longer limited to Asia.

Ten Years

Made for less than US \$70,000, *Ten Years* is an omnibus film composed of five separate short stories, each of which imagine what Hong Kong might be like a decade into the future. Working within the premises of speculative fiction and the aesthetic and technical constraints of its shoestring budget, the film's gripping plots and imagery deploy no "sci-fi" special effects but instead extrapolate from current Hong Kong headlines to project an imminent future of insidious repression largely attributed to China. Four of the five short stories explicitly indict China as the source of Hong Kong suffering: in "Extras," a *Dr. Strangelove*-like black comedy about a government conspiracy to augment national security powers, Chinese and Hong Kong officials collaborate to dupe local residents to fear terrorism; in "Dialect," a hardworking Hong Kong taxi driver is gradually sidelined due to his inability to master Putonghua, the mainland's official—but not regionally dominant—language; in "Self-Immolator," a protestor fatally sets herself afire to denounce eroding civil rights since Hong Kong's 1997 reunification with China, while Putonghua-speaking police brutally crack down on suspects, and interviewees speculate on China's accountability; and in "Local Egg," crimson-banded youth scouts reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution's Red Guards (Figure 1) monitor language use and reading habits, admonishing adults in an inversion of Confucian custom symbolic of the sociocultural upheaval to which Hong Kong now seems headed. These alarmist images draw from recent headlines to shape a dystopian forecast that is frightening precisely because of its seemingly unexaggerated probability. The language policies alluded to in both "Dialect" and "Local Egg" recall actual legislation previously proposed in Hong Kong (and enacted in the comparably politically contentious Chinese provinces and territories such as Wuhan and Tibet), as do the allusions to national security law in "Extras" and "Self-Immolator."⁷ In fact, the previously mentioned language, education, and national security legislation that these stories recall also sparked civic demonstrations against China that preceded the 2014 Umbrella protests, further underscoring *Ten Years*'

⁶ Among the artist's work combining social media and the moving image, Ai used his personal blog and later his Twitter account to solicit information, assistants, and post findings about his attempts to tally the children killed in the devastating 2008 Sichuan earthquake; recordings of the names of each lost child were later posted on his blog and catalogued in his 2009 documentary on the project. In a different 2012 project, Ai installed video cameras throughout his home to livestream his actions to his website and his then estimated 170,000 followers (Strafella and Berg 2015).

⁷ In Tibet in 2010, students protested government plans for Putonghua to replace Tibetan in education. Although a similar contemporary government plan in Cantonese-dominant Guangdong requiring official broadcasts to switch to Putonghua initially failed, by 2014 the policy was in effect. Jevons Au Man-kit, the screenwriter and director of "Dialect," has explicitly identified the inspiration for his short as both the Wuhan policy and his experiences within the increasingly mainland-dominant film industry. See Chan (2016).

embedding within Hong Kong's real struggle for autonomy and independence that the film fictively portrays.⁸

Figure 1. A new generation of Red Guards police Hong Kong in a scene from *Ten Years*.

As surveillance studies well knows, Hong Kong and China are vivid examples of the return of authoritarianism that has unexpectedly marked this first quarter of the twenty-first century (Hargreaves 2017; Siqueira Cassiano 2017). Yet while most of *Ten Years*' Hong Kong-specific stories offer a telling glimpse into life in an authoritarian regime, the film also makes a strong case for its relevance to populations beyond the region and, indeed, any society increasingly confronting authoritarian control. Consider, for example, "Season of the End," which is the second of *Ten Years*' five stories and an opaque, challenging film that differs from the other four shorts in never specifically mentioning communism or China. (Indeed, if it were not for language, "Season of the End" is devoid of establishing shots and other visual or expository information that would clearly situate the story in Hong Kong). The short inhabits a vaguely post-apocalyptic atmosphere in which a young couple devote themselves to cataloging and preserving all the detritus of daily life amidst what appears to be a desolate urban landscape devoid of other people. For Hong Kong residents, the film's narrative of disappearing culture and the need to preserve its records resonates with the more explicit depiction of censorship in *Ten Years*' final short, "Local Egg," as well as recent history in which local booksellers known for vending publications critical of China were believed to have been abducted by mainland actors.⁹ But because "Season of the End" also

⁸ National security legislation in Hong Kong has been a controversial issue explicitly tied to China since at least 2003, when mainland authorities attempted to enact laws prohibiting sedition against the government. Although anticipated in existing colonial policy and designed to place power in the local government instead of the Chinese state, the proposed law was criticized by many Hong Kong citizens. A July 1, 2003 march to protest the proposed amendment was the largest protest in Hong Kong history since the 1989 gatherings in support for the Tiananmen demonstrations. Annual marches since held every year on the anniversary of the date have evolved into continued demonstrations for democratic elections.

⁹ In 2015, five staff members of a Hong Kong bookstore known for publishing work critical or disparaging of China abruptly disappeared. Throughout their disappearance and, particularly, after some of the missing reappeared or

uses its anonymized universality to invite global identification, the short shows how a mood suggestive of China's increasingly repressive mode of governance also is relevant to the world at large.

In its diegetic content alone, then, *Ten Years* provides compelling cinematic illustration of contemporary fears about censorship. However, as previously noted about cinema's value for surveillance studies, to limit analysis only to film content while overlooking the many other aspects of film production and exhibition is to grossly underestimate the multiple arenas in which cinema is a dynamic site of surveillance society. *Ten Years* is a powerful instance of cinema censorship and media citizenship precisely because of this latter, extradiegetic dimension—that is, how the film's exhibition both realized and resisted the repression portrayed in the film's fictional plots. As might be expected about a film so overtly critical of China, *Ten Years* was from the moment of its release an object of both great local interest and persecution from official Chinese media. During the film's initial release in Hong Kong theaters in late December 2015, *Ten Years* screened to sold-out audiences, in some cinemas even outperforming the current *Star Wars* installment, *The Force Awakens* (Yau 2015). Countering this popular enthusiasm, however, Chinese state media launched an aggressive media attack that refused to acknowledge the film except when condemning it (Cheng 2016). The *Global Times* newspaper, for example, which is widely known to be an organ of the mainland government, denounced *Ten Years* as “absurd,” “pessimistic,” and a “thought virus,” while many other news sources simply did not cover the film at all. The effects of this mainland media attack were significant, despite the fact that the *Ten Years*' Hong Kong audience has access to diverse media sources and might not swallow mainland propaganda wholesale. Despite strong box office returns and a still vibrant local interest in the film, within two weeks of *Ten Years*' initial public exhibition, none of the local cinemas screening the film elected to rebook it (Sala 2016). Although no theater owner or manager explicitly named government pressure as the reason for declining to extend a profitable engagement, *Ten Years*' swift disappearance from local theaters was widely viewed as buckling to a putative mainland-imposed ban.

Perhaps not surprisingly, because the censorship surrounding *Ten Years* ironically realized the media control that the film portrays fictively, this perception of mainland-induced theatrical blackballing and Hong Kong's commercial self-censorship only intensified local popular interest (Wong 2016b). Much like underground filmmakers in mainland China, the *Ten Years* filmmakers countered the blackballing by working with civic activists to circumvent commercial theaters by screening the film for free at various venues; they also often appeared at the screenings and participated in post-screening discussions. These developments, which resemble Ai Weiwei's activism in combining artist-initiated and grassroots efforts, came to a head in late March and early April of 2016, when *Ten Years* was a “Best Picture” nominee at the annual Hong Kong Film Awards. In an inspiring scene of cinema activism, a city-wide “*Ten Years* day” was held on April 1, the Friday before the awards ceremony, as the film was screened at nearly forty venues around Hong Kong. (In some cases, the film was projected on the walls of municipal government buildings and under freeway underpasses [Figure 2], and a post-screening filmmaker discussion was livestreamed to all locales [Wrong 2016]). But in equally disheartening instances of government censorship and citizen self-censorship, as *Ten Years* was expected to be named Best Picture at the awards ceremony that Sunday, a number of film stars declined the normally coveted, high-profile role of announcing the Best Picture winner, and several online and broadcast news sources in both Hong Kong and China chose not to cover the event (Zhao and Lam 2016). Indeed, of the few broadcasts that did carry the awards show, transmission abruptly cut at the climactic moment of the award announcement, and subsequent on-air discussion of the ceremony made no further mention of the Best Picture winner (Wong 2016a).

were heard from in mainland China, the men were widely thought to have been abducted in retaliation for the store's sales of books critical of Chinese policy.

Figure 2. One of the many free public screenings of *Ten Years* on April 1, 2016.

As demonstrated by both its state proscription and subsequent civic response, then, *Ten Years* exemplifies cinema's multiple resonances for surveillance studies. While the mainland government's media assault and repression of *Ten Years* are heavy-handed reminders of the Communist practices of information control that the film portrays, grassroots and artist activism around *Ten Years* also shows how a film can challenge repressive surveillance—particularly through material agencies beyond representational content as well as participatory activities and the very multimedia forms that are often used to suppress it. This capacity within today's multimedia cinema culture upends conventional assumptions about film censorship's unilaterally stifling effects as well as cinema's increasingly antiquated status in an age of online diversion. Indeed, it proves that while digital and online media rescaled magnitudes and contexts of mass engagement, the comparatively low-tech twentieth-century form of narrative film remains more dynamic and less passive than previously thought.

Indeed, with specific regard to the geopolitics of Sinophone cinema, *Ten Years* presents an intriguing case study in the ongoing contest between the Chinese government's media sophistication and the corresponding ingenuity of its citizens, including Hong Kong. For example, even before precipitating public gatherings, as an independent film by young filmmakers accustomed to working with very small budgets, *Ten Years* exemplified the small portion of Hong Kong film production that seeks an alternative to mainland cinematic control. But unlike the commercial and exhibitionary compromises accepted by both mainland underground filmmakers and Hong Kong independents, *Ten Years* spun its censorship into remarkable commercial success. Already profitable within the first weeks of its initial theatrical release, *Ten Years* reaped more economic dividends as its many free public screenings helped maintain and spread interest in the film. Thus, after the Hong Kong Film Awards, *Ten Years* was authorized for streaming sales later in 2016, briefly becoming iTunes' single-most downloaded item in Hong Kong—and, once again,

beating out *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* in online sales (Lee 2016).¹⁰ Moreover, such commercial success in Hong Kong contrasted starkly with China where, presumably to appease government policy, Apple temporarily shut down its newly launched iTunes and iBooks services at the time of *Ten Years*' streaming release in Hong Kong (Wen 2016).

The reasons for *Ten Years*' extraordinary reception, thus, are a combination of contemporary geopolitics and the prescience with which its actual censorship legitimated the film's quasi-paranoid depictions of authoritarian information control. As a cautionary tale, the film is explicit about its goal of preventing the film's dystopian imagery from becoming reality. *Ten Years*' final image is a title card whose words "already too late?" (*wai si ji maan/ wei shi yi wan*) slowly pixelate and disappear, to be replaced with the words "not too late" (*wai si mei maan/ wei shi wei wan*). This animation—an explicit reminder that the ominous images the film portrays are not inevitable—heightens the fiction film's association with recent and current events, particularly the 2014 Umbrella Protests. As previously mentioned, *Ten Years* was in production during the protests, and although the initial project was first conceptualized several months before the protests broke out, the filmmakers have been transparent about the Umbrella movement's impact on the developing film (Saran 2016). "Self-Immolator" is most explicit in this regard, including scenes of urban riots in which student protestors are assaulted by balaclaved security and climaxing with an image of an unfurling umbrella. Equally important, "Self-Immolator" portrays a charismatic student protagonist clearly based on Joshua Wong Chi-fung, the teenaged activist leader most closely associated with the Umbrella cause (and, in a further instance of *Ten Years*' prescience, in 2017 he was temporarily jailed—like the fictional protagonist in the short—although Wong's arrest, sentencing, and imprisonment had not yet happened at the time of the film's making).

In fact, aspects of the Umbrella movement persist through all of the *Ten Years* stories, which may not be as explicit in their references as "Self-Immolator," but, like that short, all also feature youthful protagonists. These young protagonists—who range from a twenty-something unemployed South Asian recruited by government conspirators in "Extras," to the young couple in "Season of the End," and to school-age sons in "Dialect" and "Local Egg"—recall the student-led history of the Umbrella protests and also are surrogates of the filmmakers themselves (none of whom were over 40 at the time of shooting). This mirroring of art and contemporary politics throughout *Ten Years* both is central to its diegetic depiction of local resistance to state surveillance and demonstrates how the film's diegetic content prophesied or precipitated real political action. As the film fell victim to precisely the censorship and government suppression it portrayed, *Ten Years* became the inspiration for Umbrella-like civic activism. By "Ten Years" day, with screening locations coterminous with the territory itself (Figure 3) and post-screening discussions operating as modern-day coffeehouses in providing putative sites of civic discourse, the historic Hong Kong film tangibly demonstrated cinema's potential as participatory media and the political mobilization that censorship often inadvertently starts.

¹⁰ Streaming sales of *Ten Years* are particularly impressive when considered in light of piracy, as well as user confusion regarding a Hollywood film with the same title ("China Downloaders," 2016).

included among ongoing interest in participatory media and media activism. Although *Ten Years* is undoubtedly unique, it nevertheless documents the multiple ways that cinema can challenge the very strictures imposed in order to contain it. For example, early into the film's conceptualization—which was possible because of a charitable arts grant, as is the case with so many independent Hong Kong movies today—the *Ten Years* filmmakers used the longstanding industry practice of establishing a project-specific production company in order to create legal separation between the film and its major financing source, which was actually a Christian missionary organization closely involved in the mainland. And in the aftermath of *Ten Years*' controversial success, when rumors abounded about an alleged blacklist discouraging industry employment for some of the *Ten Years* filmmakers and when ongoing dissent over the Best Picture award prompted agitation to revise the award voting system, neither filmmakers nor their supporters have backed down (Chu 2016; Fang 2017b). In fact, although at least one of the *Ten Years* filmmakers lost work and all of the directors have refrained from visiting the mainland since their film's release, some of the *Ten Years* directors have since chosen to turn their efforts outward; now they are focused on a "*Ten Years* International" project, in which they are collaborating with independent filmmakers in other Asian countries to reproduce the omnibus format for other local circumstances ("Hong Kong," 2017).

In a contrarian account of participatory media, Malcolm Gladwell and Evgeny Morozov both have argued that social media often functions as a diffusionary diversion for real political action (Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2011). Citing the Arab Spring, Morozov and Gladwell claim that social media failed to deliver on its perceived goals of mobilizing political action and critique, and instead it rerouted popular sentiment into vociferous but ultimately meaningless action that achieved little change and sometimes actually enforced existing power. Chinese media obviously have much in common with this model, and, in corroboration with this perspective, more cynical scholars and critics of internet democratization in China point out that the mainland government's control of social media is more concerned with preventing mobilization than with actual critique. As H. Christoph Steinhardt (2015) notes, this practice of tolerating modes for civic participation while minimizing actual opportunities for change can be highly effective. Indeed, as Bryan Druzin and Jessica Li (2016) claim about Hong Kong's Umbrella protests in particular, the eventual petering out of public support for the movement and an arguable failure to enact any real change presages an increasingly sophisticated authoritarian state whose media machinations only grow more ominous—particularly in a place like Hong Kong, whose comparatively greater freedoms, technological resources, and traditions of public critique historically have been deemed closer to western countries than those of mainland China and the Global South.

Within the specific medium of cinema, however, *Ten Years*' take-up as a site of participatory media and media citizenship challenges these more cynical accounts of censorship, counter-surveillance, and media activism. One of the key attributes of participatory media is its feedback loop, wherein media consumption precipitates derivative products of consumer production, which itself inspire new responses from the original media makers. For *Ten Years* this feedback loop may have been most obvious in how the *Ten Years* filmmakers adapted their exhibition channels in response to public demand. But it is also evident in the filmmakers' collaborations with other Asian peers as well as how the controversy has gripped audiences in neighboring Sinophone markets with similar compromises between prosperity and free expression, such as Singapore (Chan 2016). Within Hong Kong film in particular, one useful precedent to *Ten Years* might be the once banned 1980 movie *Dangerous Encounter-Ist Kind*, whose nihilist depiction of youthful terrorists became a rare case of film censorship in Hong Kong, to which director Tsui Hark responded by reediting and reshooting footage in ways that covertly intensified the film's political critique (Tan 1996). However, while *Dangerous Encounter* parallels earlier observations about censorship's generative impact on Hollywood (Lewis 2002), a more intriguingly contemporary analogy to *Ten Years*' multimedia activism is the censorship of Chinese internet novels, which Thomas Chen (2015) shows have developed as print restrictions on provocative content have mobilized authors to find new ways around gatekeepers and have even inspired audiences to add their own content. Similarly, this case study of *Ten*

Years demonstrates the manifold different ways in which cinema and cinema censorship can illuminate surveillance studies far beyond the mere uses of plot and imagery by which movies typically figure in scholarship. In the specific case of *Ten Years*, the grassroots backlash against the official and unofficial forms of repression and attack on the film shows the possibilities for alternate paths of film consumption and exhibition as well as how new media renews and renovates traditional cinematic pathways and the civic discourse that surrounds it.

Conclusion

To summarize, because cinema resembles news reporting and social media in being vulnerable to censorship, cinema provides surveillance studies with a rewarding field of inquiry. Unlike the illustrative and primarily representational ways by which movies previously have been most commonly referenced in surveillance studies, exploring how cinema is both subject to censorship and a site of social mobilization highlights the material and extradiegetic ways by which narrative film invites surveillance studies' traditional disciplinary focus on control, repression, and resistance. In the particular case study of *Ten Years*, for example, diegetic film content clearly influenced by the Umbrella Movement also gained extradiegetic resonance as civic and political actions surrounding the film's exhibition effectively reprised the critique and dissent that the by-then extinguished Umbrella Movement previously tried to express. Indeed, by demonstrating how cinema also functions as a site of participatory media, the case of *Ten Years* upends traditional Foucauldian models of cinema censorship articulated by Annette Kuhn and others, further expanding our understanding of how cinema censorship exemplifies surveillance, counter-surveillance, media activism, and media control.

Finally, I began this article by noting the insights and opportunities awaiting surveillance studies should the discipline utilize cinema to the full potential of its global diversity and extradiegetic impact. Most of this essay explores the latter, but implicit in my reference to a Hong Kong film (and Sinophone media more generally) also is the former, which asserts the relevance for surveillance studies of spaces beyond western, First World familiarity. As everyone now recognizes, China is a major player in the twenty-first century balance of power, and its political practices are based upon very different notions of surveillance and control than those of western surveillance discourse. This distinct and powerful surveillance culture already manifests in global media through Hollywood's catering to Chinese audiences and state policy and shows that while many in the West might like to pretend that we enjoy freedoms and liberties unknown in China, China's current influence on the world stage means that it is equally likely that the opposite is true. This is precisely why Hong Kong—a media-rich environment once known for the freest press in Asia as well as a prolific, inventive, and often irreverent cinema admired worldwide—is such an important case study. If cinema's capacity as a form of participatory media retrieves its importance within a supposedly "post-cinematic" age, Hong Kong cinema presents a valuable test case of surveillance, censorship, and media freedom in a world increasingly dominated by Chinese economic, political, military, and technological clout.

Acknowledgments

This paper was previously presented at the University of Virginia and the University of Pennsylvania; I would like to thank Aynne Kokas and Peter Decherney for arranging those opportunities and the audiences for their insightful questions. I am grateful to the *Ten Years* filmmakers and producers Andrew Choi, Jevons Au, Ng Ka-leung, and Kiwi Chow Kwun-wai for their participation in a screening and discussion at the Education University of Hong Kong and to Jeffrey Clapp for hosting that event. I am also grateful to Jennifer Whitson and the anonymous reviewers at *Surveillance & Society* whose astute comments helped bring this essay to its current form.

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