
Article

Interbeing: Affective Release and Kinship in The Last Dance

Interexistencia: liberación afectiva y parentesco en The Last Dance

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Abstract: *Po • deijuk (Po • diyu or The Last Dance*, Anselm Chan, 2024) became the highest-grossing Chinese-language film in the history of Hong Kong cinema as of December 7, 2024. *The Last Dance's* popularity is attributable to its ability to address the anger and frustration accumulated during the COVID-19 pandemic (overtly) and the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (A-ELAB) protests in 2019–20, two events that are considered the crystallization of the problematics of Hong Kong's postcolonial governance. The way the film does so, I argue, is by reopening and rewriting networks of affective flows that have been blocked not only by the recent sociopolitical traumas but also by the interpersonal infrastructure that most Hong Kongers have failed to address. In this light, the film tests the limits of how we have been understanding contemporary Hong Kong cinema in juridico-judicial terms (coloniality-postcoloniality). Instead, it requires a renewed understanding of the interdependent relationships among human beings. In this article, I use Thích Nhất Hạnh's concept of «interbeing» as a framework to rethink how such interdependent relationships and kinship could be understood. For Thích, each being is best understood as a point of convergence of all beings, and what we call an individuated being is already an «interbeing». For me, the concept of interbeing is helpful not only as a hermeneutic model but also to reimagine how Hong Kongers could move beyond the city's oppressive postcolonial conditions by releasing them from their affective blockages and attachments.

Keywords: The Last Dance; postcolonial Hong Kong cinema; interbeing; Hong Kong 2019; kinship

Resumen: *Po • deijuk (Po • diyu or The Last Dance*, Anselm Chan, 2024) se convirtió en la película en chino más taquillera de la historia del cine de Hong Kong el 7 de diciembre de 2024. La popularidad de *The Last Dance* se puede atribuir a su capacidad para tratar la rabia y la frustración (abiertamente) acumuladas durante la pandemia de COVID y durante las protestas contra la propuesta de enmienda a la Ley de Anti-extradición (A-ELAB) en 2019 y 2020, dos acontecimientos que se consideran la cristalización de los problemas de gobernanza del Hong Kong postcolonial. Argumento que el modo en el que la película aborda esto es reabriendo y reescribiendo las redes de flujos afectivos que han sido bloqueados no sólo por los recientes traumas sociopolíticos, sino por una infraestructura interpersonal que la mayoría de los hongkoneses no han sabido abordar. Desde esta perspectiva, la película explora las limitaciones de cómo hemos estado entendiendo el cine hongkonés en términos jurídico-judiciales (colonialidad-postcolonialidad). Al contrario, exige una nueva comprensión de las relaciones interdependientes entre los seres humanos. En este trabajo utilizo el concepto de «interbeing» [inter-ser] de Thích Nhất Hạnh como un marco para repensar cómo pueden ser entendidas las relaciones interdependientes y el parentesco. Para Thích, cada ser se comprende mejor como un punto de convergencia de todos los seres, y lo que consideramos un ser individual es ya un «interbeing». Para mí, el concepto de interbeing es útil no sólo como modelo hermenéutico, sino para reimaginar cómo pueden los hongkoneses ir más allá de las opresivas condiciones postcoloniales liberándolas de sus bloqueos afectivos y adhesiones.

Palabras clave: The Last Dance; cine postcolonial hongkonés; interexistencia; Hong Kong 2019; parentesco

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Supplementary information ↓

INTRODUCTION

Po • deijuk (*Po • diyu* or *The Last Dance*, Anselm Chan, 2024)¹ became the highest-grossing Chinese-language film in the history of Hong Kong cinema on December 7, 2024 (Anonymous, 2024). Outside Hong Kong, the film also enjoyed box-office success in Mainland China, Taiwan, as well as the diasporic communities in Southeast Asia, the United Kingdom, and Europe. Since its theatrical release on November 9, 2024, it became one of the most popular discussion topics in social gatherings both online and in person. Film critics and scholars published written and audiovisual reviews to offer interpretations and criticisms.² As the film and philosophy scholars Eva Man and Tao Kwok-cheung (2024a) argue in their three-episode YouTube discussion, the film has become a «sociocultural phenomenon.» It «addresses a trauma that has long been repressed and transferred to Hong Kongers' political unconscious.»

The Last Dance is about Dominic Ngai (played by the standup comedian Dayo Wong), who begins working as a funeral manager after his wedding planning company went bankrupt during the COVID-19 pandemic. His business partner is an old-fashioned Taoist priest Uncle Man (nicknamed «Hello» Man; played by the seasoned film comedian Michael Hui). In funerals, Man performs a Hong Kong Cantonese rite called *po deijuk* (literally, breaking from hell). The rite itself is choreographed in the style of seventeenth-century ritualistic theater, in which a priest would chant and dance around a brazier while holding a papier-mâché tablet bearing the deceased's name (regarded as the embodiment of the deceased's spirit). The priest would then use a sword to break twelve clay roof tiles around the brazier and then leap over the fire. In the rite, the priest symbolically enters hell on behalf of the deceased's closest relative (traditionally, the eldest son or grandson) to guide their spirit away from the realm of hungry ghosts to a path of becoming a heavenly being.³ The rite is inspired by the Chinese Buddhist *Ullambana* (Yulanpan) *Sūtra* (n.d.) (believed to be translated from Sanskrit to Chinese circa 265–311 CE), which tells the story of the Buddha's disciple Maudgalyāyana (in Sanskrit: Moggallāna in Pāli) travelling to hell in order to save his mother. The tale was later adopted by religious Taoism and was then performed exclusively in the Pearl Delta region by the nineteenth century. In Taoism, women's bodies are considered impure because of menstruation. Hence, *po deijuk* can only be performed by men.

In the film, Man lives with his two grown children. Man's daughter Yuet (played by Michelle Wai) is a paramedic. Even though she learned the ritualistic choreography from her father when she was a child, she is not allowed to perform the rite. In fact, Man constantly reminds her of her body's impurity, which deeply hurts her dignity. Man trained his son Ben (played by Chu Pak Hong) to perform *po deijuk*, though Ben dislikes his profession. He always wants to escape from his father. And when his son is rejected by a top Catholic school in Hong Kong, Ben emigrates with his son and wife to Melbourne. Dominic

¹ Hong Kong film titles are transliterated first in the Cantonese Jyutping system, followed by its Mandarin pinyin equivalence. All Cantonese terms in this article will appear in Jyutping only.

² For professional criticism by journalists and scholars, see, for example, Chen (2024); Ngoi Tan (2024); see also, Yip (2024). For social media comments, see, for example, Douban dianying (2024), where 2030 posts can be found.

³ The choreography of *po deijuk* contains moves that might have been influenced by early modern Cantonese opera Jyutkek, which had a ritualistic origin in the seventeenth century. However, the rite itself contains shamanistic elements and stage conventions that predated the emergence of the Cantonese opera. See Chan (2008, pp. 55–74); see also, Lai (2010, pp. 14–21).

initially treats his work as a business with little regard for the funeral tradition and what it means for the deceased. Because of Dominic's unprofessionalism, Man despises him. Nevertheless, Dominic gradually appreciates his work and begins to realize that his contribution is not to *ciudou* the dead (convey the dead to a better state of being) but instead their loved ones. Man comes to respect Dominic. But then, Man is soon paralyzed by a stroke. Yuet serves as his sole caretaker while Ben is abroad. Yuet tries to understand her father better, though Man remains reticent to express his paternal love. After Man's death, Dominic is entrusted to manage his funeral. Surprising to all the guests, Dominic announces that Yuet would perform *po deijuk* for her father and claims that this is done according to Man's will. After the outraged guests have left the funeral hall, Yuet performs the rite with Ben's assistance.

The Last Dance's popularity is attributable to its ability to address the anger and frustration accumulated during the COVID-19 pandemic (overtly) and the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (A-ELAB) protests in 2019–20, two events that are considered the crystallization of the problematics of Hong Kong's postcolonial governance. The way the film does so, I argue, is by reopening and rewriting networks of affective flows that have been blocked not only by the recent sociopolitical traumas but also by the interpersonal infrastructure that most Hong Kongers have failed to address. In this light, the film tests the limits of how we have been understanding contemporary Hong Kong cinema in juridico-judicial terms (coloniality-postcoloniality). Instead, it requires a renewed understanding of the interdependent relationships among human beings.

In this article, I use the term «affect» according to Baruch (or Benedictus de) Spinoza's definition of *affectus*: a moment when two thoughts, speeches, or actions affect and being affected by one another. The term is sometimes understood as an immediate bodily and mental response to a set of sensorial stimuli prior to subjectivization. In my studies of Buddhist philosophy in relation to Spinoza's thoughts, I argue that Spinoza's *affectus* corresponds to *vedanā* (usually translated as «feeling,» though it is understood as an immediate bodily and mental response to sensorial stimuli) before it is being converted by memories and dispositions into *saññā/samjñā* (perception).⁴ Within this framework, emotions are understood as perceptions, that is, the body's (including its mental domain's) subjectivized responses to affects (Fan, 2022, p. 167; Spinoza, 2000, §3P1C).

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2012), meanwhile, regard a social assemblage as a network of affective intensities. It is in-formed by energetic accumulations because of blockages of desire, failures of diversion, overflows, and lack of channels. Such affective intensities can ripple out in the assemblage to affect other interdependent relationships. In this sense, individuated beings within a social assemblage are nodal points of bodily intensities that are interconnected. Moreover, as Brian Massumi argues, these intensities are often lived and felt by individuals as *moods*, which he calls affective resonance or affective tonality (Massumi, 2013, pp. 65–66 and 112–13). For me, Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of a social assemblage as a network of affective intensities corresponds to Thích Nhất Hạnh's (2006) concept of «interbeing»: a framework to rethink how such interdependent relationships and kinship could be understood. For Thích, each being is best understood as a point of convergence of all beings, and what we call an individuated being is already an «interbeing.» For me, the concept of interbeing is helpful not only as a hermeneutic model but also to reimagine how Hong Kongers could move beyond the city's oppressive postcolonial conditions by releasing them from their affective blockages and attachments.

2019.

The Last Dance never addresses politics openly. Hence, its connection to Hong Kong's postcolonial conditions may not even be apparent to most spectators. However, as Tao Kwok-cheung argues, politics is mentioned in the film by means of its absence (Man and Tao, 2024b). In the opening sequence of the film's narrative (that is, the film's second sequence), the camera is positioned in the passenger seat of a taxi that is approaching the funeral-services district in Hung Hom. In the soundtrack, spectators hear

⁴ Terms common to all schools of Buddhism are rendered in the Pāli/Sanskrit format. If the two spellings are the same, only one term is given, as in *ātman*.

a radio news anchor discussing the economic downturn because of Hong Kong's long COVID lockdown policy. For Tao, most Hong Kong spectators regard the COVID lockdown as secondary to the A-ELAB protests. The absence of any reference to the protests therefore becomes present. To push Tao's idea further, in Jacques Derrida's (1976) terms, the film puts these protests under erasure, and their traces of erasure can always be discerned underneath the overt post-COVID discourse like the effaced text on a palimpsest. Furthermore, the film never indicates who is listening to the radio inside the taxi. Therefore, the anchor's voice is not editorially sutured to a listener within the diegesis (Heath, 1977, pp. 48–76). Instead, it addresses the spectators directly, whose bodies and psyches bear the traumatic traces of these protests, which the government is actively erasing.

On March 29, 2019, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) government introduced the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019 (Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2019). This legislative amendment would have facilitated criminal suspects under the law of Mainland China to be expedited from Hong Kong, a prospect that raised public concerns about its impact on the Mainland Chinese expatriates who sought political refuge in the city (Li, 2019). The bill triggered the largest-scaled pro-democratic protests (officially deemed riots) in Hong Kong history. On July 1, 2019, the pro-independence faction of the protestors, which advocated the use of revolutionary violence rather than civil disobedience, took over the movement and occupied the Legislative Council building. In response, the government escalated the confrontation (Aljazeera, 2019). The bill itself was withdrawn on September 4, 2019 (SCMS Reporters, 2019). However, on June 30, 2020, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China passed the National Security Law (Hong Kong) (hereafter referred to as the NSL): the first time the People's Congress imposed a piece of legislation on the semiautonomous region (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China, 2020). On June 11, 2021, the Office for Film, Newspaper and Article Administration (OFNAA) of Hong Kong introduced a new set of guidelines for film censorship (Peng, 2021). They were then legislated as an amendment to the Movie Screening Ordinance Cap. 392 (November 10, 1988), renamed as the Film Censorship Ordinance (Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2021).

The A-ELAB protests, one may argue, was the culminative point of some Hong Kongers' long-term frustration about the city's postcolonial—or some say, neocolonial—conditions. The Sino-British Joint Declaration (1984) was drafted by Chinese and British diplomats from June to September that year without any participation or even consultation of Hong Kongers.⁵ As Law Wing-sang argues (2007, pp. 132–33), Hong Kong political decisions were largely determined by the city's business elite during the colonial era (1842–1997), whose members turned their allegiance from the British colonizers to the Beijing authority. For more than two decades after 1997, the ruling elite mostly prioritized the maintenance of the British colonial infrastructure by its reluctance to further democratize the city's mode of governance and change Hong Kong's status quo as a tax-free global financial hub. Hong Kong's unhinged neoliberal system had also generated increasing social injustice, which facilitated a growing awareness of a *gungman sewui* (civil society), which sought to voice their dissent through protests and demand access to institutional governance. In 2014, many Hong Kongers brought their demands for an immediate democratization to the street, and the resulting Umbrella Movement, however, was met with police brutality.

Then, from 2014–19, an increasing number of young people who were born after 1997 embraced the idea of *buntou zyujj* (localism), which could be largely understood as an attempt to protect and preserve the Hong Kong Cantonese topolect, culture, and historical heritage; conserve the environment and regulate the city's unhinged neoliberalism; and advocate for a higher degree of autonomy and

⁵ On August 13, 1982, the Hong Kong industrialist Pao Yue-kong (1918–91) wrote to the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (in office 1979–90) to express such a concern. In a lunch meeting with Thatcher on September 8, 1982, Hong Kong Governor Edward Youde (in office 1982–86) conveyed this message to the Prime Minister. Then, on January 21, 1983, Youde wrote to the Hong Kong news media that the Sino-British talks were diplomatic, not democratic, matters. See documents from the National Archive including 10 Downing Street (1982); Pao (1982); Youde (1983). See also, Fan (2019, p. 120).

self-determination from China.⁶ Many localists resented members of the boomer generation, who considered themselves the sole contributors to Hong Kong's economic miracle in the 1980s and were eager to support Beijing's policy of national reintegration. For these localists, even democratic politicians who had invested their energy in constitutional changes belonged to the neocolonial elite. Meanwhile, they saw members of Generation X largely conformists, who were unable to appreciate the stifling political oppression they felt and their poverty under neoliberal marginalization.⁷

After the A-ELAB protests, about 150,000 Hong Kongers had taken advantage of the British National (Overseas) settlement scheme and immigrated to the United Kingdom by October 2024 ([House of Commons Library, 2024](#)). Many of them sold their properties and moved their savings to the U.K., which initiated Hong Kong's economic downturn. Those who remained—including frontline protesters who did not have the financial means to leave—initiated a *laamcaau* (wholesale annihilation) movement. They responded to Beijing's effort to integrate Hong Kong into the Greater (Pearl River Delta) Bay economic region by bringing their businesses to Shenzhen and other neighboring cities. Hong Kong's economic decline and the SAR government's growing deficit had in turn threatened the city's public welfare system, which lowered many boomers' quality of life. To complicate matters, some boomers died during the COVID pandemic, and those who survived began to experience declining health conditions after a long COVID lockdown. The longstanding housing shortage in Hong Kong (which has not been significantly improved, since many Mainland settlers had also established their lives in the city after 2019) means that family members from different generations with polarized political opinions would need to share the same living space. While most people do not discuss their political differences at home, younger family members now feel a need for some form of reconciliation as they take care of their aging or even dying elders.⁸

POST-2019 HONG KONG MAINSTREAM FICTION CINEMA.

Understanding post-2019 Hong Kong mainstream fiction films is still a work-in-progress in the field of film and media studies and the emerging Hong Kong studies. Kristof Van Den Troost (2025) argues that with the passing of the NSL and the reintroduction of political censorship, filmmakers and spectators became more prone to treat film texts as political allegories. Van Den Troost bases his argument on a long history of allegorical filmmaking in Hong Kong Cantonese cinema. For him, the British government implemented political censorship from 1953 to 1988 against films that either challenged its colonial authority and the city's capitalist status or potentially damaged the peaceful relationship between the colony and the Chinese hinterland. In his study of the crime film as a genre, he observes that historically, the industry has developed a long tradition of constructing political allegories (especially during the Cold War). Spectators have also cultivated a sensibility to read fiction films allegorically ([Van Den Troost, 2023](#)). Moreover, scholars including Chan Ka-lok and Chu Lap (2008) and Yau Ka-fai (2007, pp. 117–50) have also used allegorical reading as a hermeneutic method to analyze Hong Kong cinema from the 1990s to the early 2000s.

In his reading of *Saugyun jin* (*Shoujuan yan* or *Hand Rolled Cigarette*, Calvin Chan Kin Long, 2020), Van Den Troost (2025) illustrates how the film can be read as a semiotic system that negotiates conflicting notions of Hong Kong identity, which are always caught between its British colonial past and the Chinese neocolonial present. For Van Den Troost, the film goes beyond this binary geopolitical opposition between China and the U.K. by asking in what way a local Hong Kong identity can be fostered. For him, localism and its marginalization under the city's mode of governance have been transferred to the South Asian-Hong Konger character Mani (played by Bipin Karma). Mani's struggle in his ethnically marginalized position serves as an allegory of Hong Kongers' own status between conflicting political and sociocultural forces. His local root, both by birth and in the city's working-class culture, also offers spectators a model of Hong Kong localism that trespasses racial differences.

⁶ For a scholarly discussion of the Umbrella Movement and the rise of localism in its immediate aftermath, see Pang (2020); see also, Fan (2019, pp. 199–209, 233–37).

⁷ For accounts of and reflections on the A-ELAB movement, see, for example, Childe (2020); [Guardians of Hong Kong \(2020\)](#); Law (2021); Richburg and Liu (2020); see also, Tam (2020). For a review of some of these works, see Ng (n.d.). For a sociological discussion of the movement, see Shek (2020).

⁸ Hong Kong's economic decline and its sociopolitical impact have not received any extensive scholarly discussions. Hence, this account is based on the author's observation. For a brief scholarly discussion, see Heo (2025).

Van Den Troost's reading of the character Mani in *Hand Rolled Cigarette* has subtly shifted his hermeneutic register from allegorical to symptomatic: that Mani's marginality generates an affective resonance that is symptomatic of Hong Kong's spectators' affective responses to their own post-2019 struggle. Wayne Wong (forthcoming), in his study of Dayo Wong's comedic performance (including that in *The Last Dance*), argues that his work retains Hong Kongers' pre-1997 sensibility of *déjà disparu*, defined by Ackbar Abbas (1997, p. 25) as «the feeling that what is new and unique about [a] situation is [always] already gone.» Abbas attributes such feeling to a Hong Kong identity that constantly fluctuates not only between China and the U.K., but also in a rapidly changing architectural landscape as well as cultural and energetic flows. For Wayne Wong, Dayo Wong's humor in the film is characterized by his use of irony to capture a sense of loss of a loved one or a nostalgic sensation that is always in the process of disappearing.

Wayne Wong (forthcoming) further uses my concept of «extraterritoriality» to rethink Dayo Wong's politics (Fan, 2019, pp. 9–13). Extraterritoriality refers to the historical position of Hong Kong as a city and community that have been sociopolitically, culturo-linguistically, as well as economically occupied by China and the U.K. These two juridico-judicial powers, meanwhile, have occupied Hong Kong by ostracizing the city and its people from their respective national imaginations. In this sense, Hong Kongers are always at once both Chinese and British and neither Chinese nor British: they instantiate the very structural difference as these two contesting forces put one another under erasure. Wayne Wong points out that prior to 2019, Dayo Wong's standup comedic acts openly addressed and critiqued Hong Kong's extraterritorial position. Meanwhile, in his post-2019 works, his humor is always doubly occupied by what is deemed permissible and impermissible, thus rendering his extraterritorial negotiation from the message (the comedic act or joke) to the process of mediation itself.

For Alvin Wong (2025), the established method of understanding Hong Kong's postcoloniality by focusing on the binary geopolitical and governmental opposition between the U.K. and China overlooks the «unruliness» of the infrastructural intersections that cut across geopolitics, especially gender and sexuality. Alvin Wong's study focuses on queer and trans literary, cinematic, and other forms of cultural productions. In so doing, he demonstrates how queer and trans artists, readers, beholders, and spectators challenge and rewrite these geopolitical forces and foster cross-regional connections based on their shared marginality. The anger, frustration, and sense of entrapment negotiated by *The Last Dance*, as I shall demonstrate, cannot be fully grasped without acknowledging the unruliness of the various intersections that are attributable to Hong Kong's post-2019 postcoloniality.

SIK'WAAI AND CINEMATOGRAPHIC SPATIALIZATION.

In the beginning of the film's third act/second segment, the voice of Man reads a letter he wrote to Dominic before his death as the film shows a montage of Dominic caring for his clients and observing how they process their grief by burning papier-mâché offerings for the dead. In the letter, Man confesses that he has hurt Yuet's feeling by constantly reminding her that a woman's body is too filthy to perform *po deijuk* or even touch his ceremonial robe. As an old-fashioned father, he feels uncomfortable to express his love directly to his daughter. He understands why Yuet resents him and may have thought that he hates her. He asks Dominic to urge her to love herself, as Yuet, the name he gave her, means «treasure.» He then asks Dominic to take care of his funeral in a way that can *ciudou* her daughter (convey her to a more peaceful state of being), so that she can *sik'waa*i (release herself from afflictions).

The term *sik'waa*i can be treated as an entry point into our analysis. *Sik'waa*i refers to a release or liberation (*sik*) from desire, anger and frustration, delusional perception, conceit, suspicion, worry, lamentation, and anxiety. This concept originated in Buddhism, which attributes the arising and perishing of afflictions and mental formations to our belief that our existence is grounded in *ātman* (self, nature, essence, or soul). However, if all beings (including sentient beings and seemingly inanimate things) arise and perish interdependently, that the arising of one being depends on the arising of a network of beings and processes of becoming (interbeing), there is no *ātman*. Not only that, existence of a being is contingent on an assemblage of conditions, and when such conditions change or cease to exist, the existence of that being also ceases to manifest itself. In this sense,

life is impermanent, and our inability to accept such impermanence and our interdependency (or interbeingness) generate desire, anger, delusion, and all the other afflictions (SN 47.18).⁹

Sik'waai, however, is not the sole responsibility of an individuated being. A case can be made that if Yuet resents her father because of her inability to understand his position, it is her responsibility to release herself from anger. However, her resentment also arises out of Man's attachment to his self, especially his own dignity as a patriarch. In this sense, Yuet and Man *interbe*. In the absence of any opportunity of mutual reconciliation (in this case, Man passes away), Yuet needs to let their mutual disagreement, misunderstanding, and imperfection be the way they are. She needs to accept that this is their relationship as the way it is. She cannot ask the deceased to make changes, though she can become mindful of their interbeing. By letting go of her own afflictions, she can lessen or stop her suffering and avoid transferring her afflictions to her brother, friends, and loved ones (Shāntideva, 2006; Thich, 2001). In this light, *sik'waai* is not a higher state of being or mental peacefulness to be achieved, but rather «the way it is» to which one returns (Fang, 1978, pp. 1:318–96; Tanabe, 2016). In Taoist terms, this idea is reinterpreted as a return to *ziran*: literally means nature but is best understood as the way it is (Chen, 2004, p. 5; Liu, 2016, p. 273; Yu, 2023, p. 475).¹⁰

The Last Dance can therefore be understood as an image-consciousness (the cinematographic experience itself as perceived and lived through by spectators) that performs the process of *sik'waai*.¹¹ In this sense, narratology (or what Vivian Sobchack calls the semiotic or linguistic level) is secondary to the affective and sensorial levels (or what Sobchack calls «wild meaning») (1992, p. 11).¹² After all, in Buddhism, *sik'waai* is an affective component of *vedanā* (feeling), which enables pre-subjectivized affections and sensations to be converted to a subjectivized *sañña/samjñā* (perception) (Fan, 2022, p. 167; Spinoza, 2000, §3P1C). One can say that if one experiences a change of feeling toward something, one's perception of that something will change accordingly.

Eva Man and Tao Kwok-cheung (2024a) argue that we cannot overlook the film's direct reference to the COVID-19 pandemic in its opening sequence. For Man, during the pandemic, the impermanence and fragility of life become tangible for many people who either lost their relatives and friends or saw images of dying patients or piles of bagged bodies on mass and social media. The government also forbade relatives and friends to bid farewell to their loved ones in hospital or even organize funerals. For Tao, the film offers spectators an opportunity to live through the experience of being with dying patients and dead bodies, as well as the intricacies of managing a funeral. Tao points out that *The Last Dance* thematically or even structurally resonates with Oscar-winning Japanese film *Okuribito* (*Departures*, Takita Yōjirō, 2008).¹³ In *Departures*, Takita always represents well-preserved bodies with no signs of struggle, weariness from illnesses, or bruises. In a sequence in which the protagonists need to clean and dress a decayed body, the camera keeps a distance from the spectators to the well-covered carcass. In *The Last Dance*, however, the deceased bodies show signs of their causes of death, and the camera uses medium shots, medium close-ups, or even close-ups to offer the spectators at least a few seconds to behold them as a way to arrive at a state of *sik'waai*.

The second act of the film is structured around the preparation of four dead bodies, and they challenge our attachment to the body and kinship. One of Dominic's earlier clients is a young woman called Yan Yan (played by Rosa María Velasco), and her title «Miss» suggests that she is a single mother. Yan wants Dominic's team to clean her young son's dead body, put it inside a vacuumed bag, and place it within a coffin made with Phoebe zhennan (which is known for its ability to preserve a body). Instead of a burial, Yan has arranged to install the coffin in a *jizong* (coffin home). These procedures are irrational, as they fall short of preserving or mummifying the boy's body. Her request has in fact been refused by all

⁹ The parenthetical reference here follows the standard Pāli canon referencing system. SN stands for *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Connected Discourses).

¹⁰ *Ziran* is a general Chinese-language term, which is rendered in pinyin.

¹¹ Seeing a photographic image as an image-consciousness is proposed in Sartre (1940, pp. 14–18), an idea famously adopted by Bazin (1958, pp. 15–16). See also, Fan (2022, pp. 1–9).

¹² Sobchack refers to Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. xix).

¹³ In my conversation with Anselm Chan, *The Last Dance* was inspired by the loss of his grandmother, not by *Departures*.

other funeral managers in the industry. Dominic takes her business. When Man and his own assistants complain, Dominic tells them in neoliberal terms: that as a service provider, their sole responsibility is to prepare the corpse as per their client's instructions.

The sequence in which Dominic and Ben (who is later replaced by Man) prepare the cadaver in the morgue begins with a medium close-up of Yan from her side, with her face backlit by a small window on the wall (near the ceiling) in the background. The room is lit by these small windows near the ceiling with an overall blue and grey tonality. This close-up, however, is not editorially sutured to a long shot of the area where the body preparation takes place. Instead, the film cuts to a high-angle long shot of that area through a plastic strip curtain. The camera observes the body preparation from one of the upper corners of the room, as though it took the perspective of the boy's spirit that lingers there. The camera then cranes down to an over-the-shoulder shot of Yan to achieve an establishing shot not from her perspective, but from a spectator's perspective behind her (see [Figure 1](#)). As Dominic and Ben open the body bag, they cover their noses and step away, a gesture that conveys the unbearable smell of the cadaver. The preparation process is shot mostly in long shots with straight-on angles, with occasional medium shots and medium close-ups of Yan trying to cross the curtain to embrace her child. When Dominic lifts the body (which is 3D-printed based on the actor Duncan Yeung's body), the camera reveals from a long shot that the muscle tissues of its back have been melting. Ben then dashes out of the room.



Figure 1. The morgue scene in *The Last Dance*.
Source: *Po deijuk (The Last Dance)*, Anselm Chan, 2024).

Then, when Dominic struggles alone with the preparation, Man enters the room to his rescue. Once they start working together, the camera provides close-ups of the process of sanitizing and bandaging, as well as medium close-ups of Dominic and Man as they care for the deceased's body, shot with more light coming from the windows. The camerawork and *mise-en-scène* of this sequence therefore posits all the characters in a fully embodied and sensorially rich milieu, where the being of each person (including the deceased) is a point of convergence of all beings. At first, they are all there for their personal agendas: Yan's attachment to the boy's body; Dominic and Ben's attachment to money; and probably, the deceased's attachment to the human world. And the camerawork and *mise-en-scène* impart the senses of longing, lamentation, disgust, or even anger to the spectators' bodies by journeying around their perspectives. However, it is not until Man's arrival that they all focus on the caring of the boy's body not as a process of preservation but rather as a rite that enables everyone to *sik'waai*.

In fact, that evening, in front of a storefront Taoist ceremonial parlor, Dominic gladly tells Man that he feels, for the first time since he has entered the profession, that he has helped somebody. Man then corrects him bluntly. By preventing the boy's body from having a proper burial, his spirit now lingers in the human world with his longing for his mother, instead of transitioning through hell into transmigration (reincarnation). For Man, our life journeys are comparable to taking a bus together to our respective

destinations. When the boy reached his destination, he was supposed to disembark, and Yan was supposed to let go. Man himself also needed to let go when his wife died. Our excessive attachment to kinship (a form of interdependent relationship) is therefore detrimental not only to our own life journeys, but also to our loved ones'. The film then cuts to a close-up of Man's hands playing the bowed string instrument *erhu*, and the camera then tilts up to the medium close-up of his face. This shot then dissolves to a moving medium close-up as the camera follows Ben, in his ceremonial robe, holding the boy's tablet while singing a tune in the style of the Cantonese *naamjam*. The name *naamjam* means «southern tune.» The *naamjam* emerged in the 1880s as a form of popular music. Unlike the *Jyutkek* (Cantonese opera), which is largely based on thematic variations of tunes inherited from the Kunqu and Peking opera, the *naamjam* stems from local tunes popular in the Pearl River Delta (including Hong Kong) (Liang, 1988).

The lyrics address the boy directly, which gently tells him what to expect in hell and how to advance to a legendary bridge beyond which he would proceed to his transmigration. When Ben moves around the room in a half circle, the camera catches a glimpse of the boy's portrait on the altar (also in medium close-up), as though he were one of the live participants in the room (see Figure 2). After dissolving back to a close-up of Man and a medium close-up of Ben, the film dissolves to a medium close-up of Dominic, who first watches the ceremony with a look of regret and then lowers his eyes to contemplate on his own role in this business. This scene marks the turning point of his character, as he realizes that his job is to *ciudou* the living, so that they can arrive at a state of *sik'waai*. By the end of the film's second act, when Man realizes that Dominic has arrived at such an insight, they bond by singing together a popular *naamjam*, «Haaktou cauhan» (Resentful lamentation of a wayfarer on his autumn journey). Here, the *naamjam* assumes a sociopolitical connotation: that all Hong Kongers, no matter which generations to which they belong or what political beliefs they hold, are wayfarers who have no place of belonging, though they embark on a journey together on the same bus.



Figure 2. The *ciudou* ceremony for the boy.
Source: *Po deijuk* (*The Last Dance*, Anselm Chan, 2024).

Before I discuss the film's sociopolitical dimension in relation to kinship, I want to reemphasize the way its camerawork and *mise-en-scène* enables the spectators to embark on a journey together with the characters as interbeings. This idea comes from the Hong Kong film scholar Lam Nin-tung, who argued in the early 1980s that many Chinese filmmakers who worked in Shanghai and Hong Kong adopted—either consciously and structurally or unconsciously and infrastructurally—aesthetics of *xieyi* (sketching ideation) that can be traced back to the Six Dynasties (220 or 222–589).¹⁴ For Lam, these filmmakers do not privilege the perspective of a singular protagonist, nor do they posit the spectator as a transcendental subject in the style of the Quattrocento painting. Instead, the camera enables a spectator's body (including their mental domain) to image a milieu (image-consciousness) in which their

¹⁴ *Xieyi* is a general Chinese-language term and is rendered in pinyin.

body is a part. In this milieu, the camera journeys with the spectator to assume various perspectival positions. In fact, the body and its associated milieu are a spatializing process, thus enabling the spectator to become mindful of their body and the bodies of all other beings (again, including inanimate things) as interbeings (Lam, 2024, pp. 99–138): a state or nonstate of nondifferentiation or a moment of *sik'waa'i*.

KINSHIP

In *The Last Dance*, Man's family is dysfunctional and oppressive, which can be conveniently read as an allegory of the parental-styled governance of the SAR and Beijing governments, especially after 2019. Evan Man, however, points out that an allegorical reading of Man's family overlooks the affect of oppressiveness the film imparts to the spectators' bodies (again, including their mental domains). For her, Uncle Man's poker-faced demeanor, irritability, and sarcasm may be conveyed by the actor Michael Hui comedically, though Man would have been an impossible father for the family (Man and Tao, 2024a; Man and Tao, 2024b). Besides, he endlessly reminds Yuet of her body's impurity as well as dismisses her individuality and professional achievement. He also ostracizes her from the family tradition that she admires. Meanwhile, Man also dismisses Ben for being useless, unaccomplished, and unprofessional. When Man finds out that Ben has been baptized to help his own son to get into a top Catholic school, Man calls Ben a shame. What is at stake is not how much Man's family allegorizes a Hong Kong from where everyone wants to escape, but instead how it embodies the very oppressive affective tonality from which no one could possibly escape—even when one moves away physically. This is because a physical escape does not sever one's kinship from the interdependent relations that constitute the family (in the film) or community (Hong Kong at large). Hence, unless one addresses kinship as a problematic, one cannot arrive at a state of *sik'waa'i*.

In February 2025, I hosted the Q&A session for the film's Dutch premier at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. An audience member asked Michelle Wai what the most difficult scene is for her. Her answer is the scene in which Yuet shampoos Man, who is now paralyzed from the waist down because of a stroke. The sequence begins with a close-up of Man from a high angle about forty-five degrees from the front, while Yuet's hands are shampooing his hair from his back. The camera angle does not assume either of the character's perspective but instead suggests the presence of a spectator as part of the milieu. Man asks Michelle if she has received any news from Ben, who has recently moved to Melbourne. The camera then cuts to a medium close-up of Yuet from a low angle and the same position it assumed in the previous shot. As Man complains about Ben's being unaccomplished in life, the camera tilts down back to Man's close-up. The presence of the camera/spectator's body journeying closely in the same milieu with Yuet and Man is both intimate and uncomfortable. Then, the film cuts to a medium shot of both characters from the door of the shower room. Yuet tries to persuade Man to understand Ben, as Ben moves to Australia only because Ben wants his son to have a better future.

At this point, Man says sarcastically that Ben is perhaps smarter than him, since Ben has the courage to rebel against him. The film cuts at the end of his sentence to Yuet's medium close-up. Here, Yuet pauses a few seconds in silence, sighs, and then asks if Man is angry with Ben for failing to exercise his trade. The film then cuts to a slightly low-angled medium close-up of Man from his front. Man is initially unable to respond immediately. He then says that Ben is inept. As the film returns to the medium shot of the two characters, Man explains that he taught Ben the rite of *po deijuk* simply because he was worried that he would fail at school and would eventually need a trade in his life. At this point, Yuet keeps stretching the same spot at the back of Man's head. When the film cuts back to her medium close-up, Yuet takes another pause and asks Man if he has been angry with her, since she has brought shame to him and his family. She swallows her saliva a couple of times in anticipation of his response. The film cuts back to a frontal medium close-up of both of them (see Figure 3). In this shot, the journeying spectator is privileged to see Man's discomfort from his facial expression, while Yuet is waiting anxiously behind him without seeing how he reacts. Nonetheless, instead of answering her, Man instructs her to rinse his hair, since his head is getting cold.



Figure 3. The spectator is privileged to know Man's reaction after Yuet has asked him a lifelong question.
Source: *Po deijuk (The Last Dance)*, Anselm Chan, 2024).

Wai said in the Q&A session that for her, Yuet has wanted to ask this question throughout her entire life, and it takes her a lifetime of courage to verbalize it. In preparation for this scene, Wai spent months rehearsing this question as well as different possible responses in her own head, in a way similar to how Yuet must have done so all the time. This is a question many Hong Kongers are or were eager to ask their parents, as generations of parents have been acculturated to refrain themselves from expressing their love to their children. Furthermore, many younger spectators are also eager to ask members of the older generation—including the governing elite—if they resent them so much that they need to punish them by denying them a democratic future, or even by incarcerating some of their friends and loved ones. They want to ask if the older generation has indeed thought that they have brought shame to a city that they all call home. What is at stake, however, is not the allegory between the dysfunctional father-daughter relationship in the film and the larger one between the government and the governed. Rather, it is the tension between the oppressive affective tonality that is intimately felt by everyone in the milieu (including the journeying spectator) and a longing for restoring love, mutual care, and a more equitable form of kinship that is nearly impossible for everyone to put into words.

Family is seen in Hong Kong as the basis of neo-Confucian governance. However, it is best seen as what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2012) regard as a point of affective intensities. Again, these intensities are in-formed by energetic accumulations because of blockages of desire, failures of diversion, overflows, and lack of channels. Such affective intensities can ripple out infrastructurally to affect other interdependent relationships. As Even Man points out, Yuet maintains a sexual relationship with a married man, an emergency room doctor (played by Edward Ma), and she turns down his proposal to go on a date with him (Man and Tao, 2024a). Meanwhile, Lin, the owner of a soup joint, provides her with maternal love. Yet, Yuet, much like her father, never articulates her love for Lin. Dominic himself suggests that her wife get an abortion after he has learned about her pregnancy, as he considers bringing a life to this world as an unethical act to the child (in the extended version of the film, this is attributed to Dominic's being abandoned by his own father). The only functional kinship in the film is the one between Soso (played by Rachel Leung) and her deceased lesbian lover Heyman (played by Katrina Chan). Though the functionality of their relationship is denied and oppressed by Heyman's heterosexual husband and a neo-Confucian understanding of family and kinship that privileges the forms and appearances of sexual normativity and the notion of the family as a reproductive infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

The Last Dance's popularity is certainly attributable to its ability to address the anger and frustration accumulated during the COVID-19 pandemic (overtly) and the A-ELAB protests in 2019–20. However, the way the film does so, as I argued in the beginning of this article, is by re-opening and rewriting networks of affective flows that have been blocked not only by the recent sociopolitical traumas but also by the very social and interpersonal infrastructure that most Hong Kongers have failed to address. The film addresses these blockages and failures not allegorically, but rather by engaging with the affective tonality that constitutes the spectators' own sense of longing, anger and frustration, delusion, worry, and anxiety.

The Last Dance also challenges the way we have been understanding contemporary Hong Kong cinema in juridico-judicial terms (coloniality-postcoloniality). It is true that the affective tonality is part and parcel of Hong Kong's postcolonial conditions. However, the film tries to access a more deep-structural level that constitutes the unruly energetic flows and infrastructural blockages. It does so by reexamining and renewing our understanding of the interdependent relationships among human beings: that each being is best understood as a point of convergence of all beings, and what we call an individuated being is already an «interbeing.» The film does not stop at representing the oppressiveness of the familial and sociopolitical environment that actively affects the energetic flows in a network of interbeings. It uses the camera and *mise-en-scène* to enable the spectators to be with these interbeings and to partake of the spatialization of the milieu: to be mindful of its unruliness so as to rebuild it.

By the end of the film, Dominic entrusts Yuet to perform *po deijuk* for her father, with the gentle assistance offered by Ben. Michelle Wai spent six months rehearsing the choreography for this scene, after having been rejected by many Taoist masters who, like those in the film, considered a woman's body impure. In the film, before Yuet performs the rite, many Taoist masters who attend the funeral question Dominic's decision, and Dominic claims that Man himself asked Yuet to perform the rite for him, so that she can *sik'waai*. He then presents Man's letter to him to Yuet as evidence. In an earlier sequence, as I pointed out, the spectators hear Man's letter to Dominic, in which he never asks Yuet to perform the rite. He only asks Dominic to find the best way for Yuet and Ben to *sik'waai*. In our private conversation, Anselm Chan points out that the film deliberately makes Dominic's claim unreliable. It can in fact be considered a shared lie between Dominic or even Chan himself and the spectators. However, for everyone in the narrative and in the audience, believing in Man's decision to let Yuet perform *po deijuk*, whether as a piece of fiction or as the truth, is an ethical decision to everyone as an interbeing. It effectively enables Yuet and Ben to release their afflictions toward each other and in relation to their father; it enables Dominic to be prepared to become a father; and it enables the spectators to come to release themselves from the need to seeking answers from themselves and from the others. In the shampooing scene, Man never answers Yuet's question, and Man's letter does not answer that question either. The answer has always been with Yuet herself, and to *sik'waai* is to release oneself from seeking answers from others, and instead by rendering the act of questioning the self and the other no longer important or even meaningful.

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