

BROOKLYN RAIL

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Tiffany Sia's *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*

By Cassie Packard



Tiffany Sia
On and Off-Screen Imaginaries
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At a talk at Dia Chelsea in March, Hong Kong-born, New York-based filmmaker, artist, and writer Tiffany Sia aptly characterized her new book as a “montage on paper.” *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* collates six essays—several of which had earlier versions published in *Film Quarterly* and *October*—penned in the wake of the 2019–2020 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protests in Hong Kong, the subsequent passage of the 2020 National Security Law geared toward quashing dissent, and the arrival of new OFNAA Film Censorship Guidelines in 2021. The essays are intercut with black-and-white stills from recent films by Hong Kong director Chan Tze-woon, the anonymous collective Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, and Sia herself; the essay “No Place” also includes photographs by Vietnamese American photographer An-My Lê, who is cast as a “cinematic thinker working with a still-image medium,” perhaps particularly in light of her photographs of Vietnam War reenactments in the US.

Sia, who departed Hong Kong for the US amid intensifying crackdowns, may be best known for her short film “Never Rest/Unrest” (2020), which eschews norms of advocacy documentary with compiled protest footage at an iPhone’s aspect ratio, including scenes of the protests as seen on the news and banal intervals experienced by protesters. In her essay collection, the equally formidable writer—who previously published two chapbooks, *Salty Wet* 咸濕 (2019) and *Too Salty Too Wet* 更咸更濕 (2021)—braids close readings of the aforementioned films and photographs, which depict the protests or otherwise grapple with politics of place and legacies of the Cold War, with critical theory, family histories, and personal accounts. Her sprawling yet clearly articulated texts consider the ways in which civil unrest, lawfare, and repression have shaped cultural production and the lives of cultural producers in Hong Kong or of the Hong Kong diaspora, offering up sharp insights into an emergent documentary vernacular and its modes of circulation.

Sia sees Hong Kong everywhere. Her essay “A Blurred Conceit”—which interweaves familial narratives with musings on Chinese director King Hu’s *wuxia* films, the sublime landscapes of which provided the basis for Sia’s own film *The Sojourn* (2023)—contains a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Baader–Meinhof phenomenon: a cognitive bias where a person notices a phenomenon with disproportionate frequency. From James Baldwin’s musings on intimacy across distance via Hong Kong and Chicago-based lovers, to Hong Kong’s role as a character in the geopolitical storyline of Laura Poitras’s *CITIZENFOUR* (2014), the special administrative region appears in “unexpected, odd, and sometimes revelatory contexts.” Sia’s practice of locating Hong Kong, explicitly or implicitly, across diverse texts is less a frequency illusion than a robust, diasporic mode of reading and connection-building integral to the book’s structure.

“Handbook of Feelings,” the first essay, opens with a description of Sia’s experience presenting “Never Rest/Unrest” in a friend’s class at a Hong Kong university in October 2020; when they meet a few months later, he informs her that she would likely no longer be able to screen her film there. She describes a paranoid atmosphere of institutional and self-censorship under the National

Security Law, which can be broadly interpreted and applied retroactively or extraterritorially. Documentaries about the protests—the antipode of Hong Kong cinema’s popular police thrillers—often cannot be screened locally. Sia recounts retaliation against a cinema after it presented the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers’ films of protesters storming the Legislative Council Complex and occupying the Hong Kong Polytechnic University; in “Elliptical Returns: Reconfiguring Publics in Former and New Hong Kong Cinema,” she highlights that Chan never heard back from censors regarding official approval to screen *Blue Island* (2022), his hybrid documentary interlacing protest footage with activists’ reenactments of political events in Hong Kong’s history. Instead, he shows it abroad.

“The films themselves become a critical means by which a politicized diaspora maintains a connection to place,” Sia notes, adding that the counterpublic that Hong Kong cinema fosters likewise extends beyond the local. “When the filmmakers, too, are displaced or exiled, or when their works cannot be shown in their place of origin, how can Hong Kong cinema be made and unmade, be understood ‘after place,’ severed from its locus of origin?” she asks.

Sia’s essays feel productively elliptical in the threefold sense of obliqueness, returns, and gaps. On the latter front, “Handbook of Feelings” foregrounds censorship’s traces through redactions; black blocks stand in for the names of people or organizations, and the contents of a protest sticker. (The sticker belongs to the printer of *Too Salty Too Wet*, which was bound with glue rather than thread because the subcontracted binder was spooked by the book’s political contents.) Sia later addresses the use of blurring, another form of redaction, in the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers’ *Taking Back the Legislature* (2020), one of the subjects of “Phantasms of Dissent: Hong Kong’s New Documentary Vernacular.” Protestors’ faces are intermittently blurred, presumably for their protection; as the figures argue about tactics and timing—highlighting the internal fractures that inevitably arise in activist movements—the protective haze even extends to their shoes.

Questions about the stakes of (in)visibility in this historic moment recur across Sia’s essays. How does visibility operate with regards to protest movements that rely on representation—typically manifesting as spectacularized media imagery or the numbing flows of social media feeds—while being violently surveilled and representationally repressed by the state? How is a movement, a place, or a feeling reified through its representations, and how do those representations in turn obfuscate, obscure, abstract, and fictionalize their subject? In “Toward the Invisible,” presented at a symposium on Asian American art and aesthetics, Sia considers visibility in relation to “the open question of the category of ‘Asian American.’” With a nod to lineages of Black abstraction, she challenges the value ascribed to legible representation and muses on how a blank image—here, taken from *What Rules the Invisible* (2022), her film interspersing Hong Kong travelogue footage with her mother’s recounted memories of postwar Hong Kong—“flip[s] the coin of visibility and invisibility, of legibility and illegibility,” acting as “a placeholder for a cultural category that begs to exceed geography and nationalism, that goes against the monumental and beyond the figurative or slick narrative, beyond genre, on its own inconvenient, restless, and bastard terms.” In a similar spirit, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*’ knotty consideration of exilic image-making practices resists easy narratives and neat conclusions: the fixed borders of nations, the forward march of time, the foreclosure of futures.