

Institution: University of Salford
Unit of Assessment: D36 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management
Title of case study: Visible Secrets: Hong Kong's Women Filmmakers
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p><i>Visible Secrets</i> is focused on innovation in the development of film culture, demonstrating the following impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing the audience for Chinese cinemas in Manchester, the North-west and the UK; • Re-examining the boundaries of what constitutes a 'Chinese' cinema, changing perceptions of the Hong Kong film industry and in particular, the place of women in the Hong Kong film industry; • Developing new ways of public engagement in the specific context of film curation; • Creating cultural trade and exchange channels between the UK and Hong Kong; in partnership with cinema audiences, directors, the independent cinema sector across the UK and the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office (HKETO).
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The key researchers and positions they held at the institution at the time of the research are as follows: Dr Andrew Willis, Reader in Film Studies, School of Arts and Media (from 1997). <i>Visible Secrets</i> (2009) was a UK-first season of new films of Hong Kong's women filmmakers, developed in partnership with Sarah Perks now Artistic Director, Visual Art and Film at Cornerhouse, Manchester. <i>Visible Secrets</i> is underpinned by the following research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research into Hong Kong films released in the UK over the decade prior to the <i>Visible Secrets</i> programme revealed an emphasis on male directors and action cinema. Very few works by women directors had been released. In 2007 Willis and Perks curated a small season of films and events entitled 'Made in Hong Kong' (Cornerhouse & Chinese Arts Centre Manchester). A season of films and related events which celebrated Hong Kong cinema and filmmaking since the 1997 reunification with the People's Republic of China re-examined the boundaries of what constitutes a 'Chinese' cinema. The research undertaken for this event provided evidence that female filmmakers were under-represented in discourses about Hong Kong cinema. The research for this season and the initial research for <i>Visible Secrets</i> resulted in Willis and Perks editing a special edition of <i>Film International</i> (Number 40, 2009) devoted to Hong Kong Cinema since reunification. [2] • A research visit to Hong Kong in March 2009 included a meeting with representatives from the Hong Kong Film Archive, the Hong Kong Arts Centre, the Hong Kong Independent Film and Video Awards, producer and curator Teresa Kwong and film director Yan Yan Mak. This visit made it clear that 'presence' in Hong Kong was vital in creating a working relationship with industry professionals who would be able to assist in moving the project forward and who could introduce the research team to the film directors whose work they were interested in showcasing. The visit included meetings with sales agents and government representatives of the Hong Kong film industry which were arranged at Filmart, the film industry market place and through attendance at the Asian Film Awards. Overall, this visit provided key knowledge and understanding with regard to new women filmmakers working in the Hong Kong film industry. • The research provided the catalyst for the development of the idea of a season of films from Hong Kong's women filmmakers. Initially, Willis et al had assumed that the season would offer a retrospective of the work of some of the more established names from the Hong Kong industry, such as Clara Law, Mabel Cheung and Ann Hui. However, the Hong Kong research visit led to the research team's discovery of a number of other women directors who offered a fresh take on the cinema of Hong Kong. • Upon tracking down and viewing their films, a new version of the <i>Visible Secrets</i> project began to evolve, one that was much more contemporary and exciting. Here really was a Hong Kong cinema that was relatively unknown in the UK, and the aim became to make a small but significant contribution to UK film culture by developing the profile of the films and to grow further the audience for Hong Kong cinema in Manchester, the North-west and the UK as a

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whole. This research in turn prompted the research team's intention to challenge assumptions, both popular and critical, regarding women and Hong Kong cinema; in particular, the notion that there are very few women directors within the Hong Kong film industry, an impression that has undoubtedly been encouraged over recent years by the limited number of their films which do make it onto the international film festival circuit, and the substantially smaller amount that gain cinema distribution in the UK. [1]

3. References to the research

Key outputs

1. Willis A. 2010. 'Cinema curation as practice and research: the Visible Secrets project as a model for collaboration between art cinemas and academics'. *Screen* 51:2 (Summer 2010), 161-167. DOI (REF 2)
2. Willis A 2009, 'Hong Kong Cinema since 1997: troughs and peaks', *Film International*, 7(4), pp.6-17. DOI (REF2)
3. Willis, A & Perks, S 2009, 'Visible Secrets: Hong Kong's women filmmakers', exhibited at: Cornerhouse, Manchester, UK, from 05/10/2009 to 06/11/2009

Key grants

4. **2011-2013:** Research Project for AHRC (OST/OSI Research Councils) Chinese film forum UK, Principal Investigator A Willis £12,842.00 (100%)
5. **2007:** Europe on Screen: Issues in the future distribution and exhibition of European cinema British Academy, £1,315.00. Investigators: A Willis (50%), P Buse (50%).

4. Details of the impact

A founder member of the Chinese Film Forum UK and a member of the board of trustees of Cornerhouse, Willis worked in partnership with Perks (Cornerhouse) to curate and tour this UK-first season of new films. Including a retrospective of the post-2000 films of award winning director Ann Hui, the season offered three other main strands:

- '*This Darling Life*' represented recent documentary work, such as 'Secondary School' (Tammy Cheung, 2003), 'Traces of a Dragon: Jackie Chan and His Lost Family' (Mabel Cheung, 2003), 'The Decameron' (Yan Yan Mak, 2009), and 'This Darling Life' (Angie Chen, 2009);
- The films in the '*Floating Landscapes*' section focused on new directors and debut features and included serious drama as well as more commercially oriented pieces such as 'High Noon' (Heiward Mak, 2008), 'Ming Ming' (Susie Au, 2007) and 'Wonder Women' (Barbara Wong, 2007); and,
- '*Hong Kong Snapshots*' comprised three programmes of short and experimental work programmed for *Visible Secrets* by Teresa Kwong of the Hong Kong Independent Short Film and Video Awards and the Hong Kong Arts Centre.
- The programme introduced new directors to UK audiences and comprised of 18 features, all previously unreleased theatrically in the UK, so prints of each had to be imported from Hong Kong especially for the season. The season offered a response to the under representation of women in the film industry, as well as to the lack of films addressing feminist issues and the fact that the representation of women on screen in Hong Kong cinema is often narrow and stereotypical.
- Following its residency at Cornerhouse during October and early November 2009, the *Visible Secrets* UK tour launched at a gala screening at the Curzon Cinema, Mayfair, London. Films from *Visible Secrets* toured to eleven other UK venues facilitated by the Independent Cinema Office. These included: Edinburgh Filmhouse, Watershed Bristol, Broadway Nottingham, Dundee Contemporary Arts, Chichester Cinema at New Park, Derby QUAD, Eden Court Inverness, Northampton Forum Cinema, Sheffield Showroom and London Riverside Studios. The inclusion of a tour in the project was important in ensuring that audiences across the country had the opportunity to see examples of the kinds of Hong Kong cinema that rarely reach regional UK screens.
- *Visible Secrets* was a successful partnership between various interested organisations with a commitment to new curatorial approaches to Hong Kong cinema and, as such, it provides a

useful model for future collaboration between academic and arts-based institutions operating within the field of film exhibition. As both these sectors are increasingly working within tightening financial constraints, other collaborators for Visible Secrets were sought at an early stage including the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office (HKETO), which provided substantial financial support for the event through the Cornerhouse, whilst crucially leaving control of the programmes' content to the curators. Other enthusiastic supporters included the Confucius Institute and the Chinese Arts Centre in Manchester.

- The success of the collaboration suggests new ways in which academics can have an impact on wider film culture. Mark Cosgrove, Head of Programming at the Watershed Media Centre, Bristol, suggests that academics can bring *"a deeper more historically and critically engaged perspective' to such initiatives. There's a mutual benefit in that such initiatives would result in the industry-facing side of the partnership having more academic weight – and analysis – and the academy having a better grounding in, and understanding of, the immediate issues facing the industry. The business of film culture has never fully maximized the impact that can result from a connection between the study of cinema in both institutional and aesthetic terms and film exhibition."*
- Three of the directors featured in the season (Angie Chen, Tsang Tsui Shan and Ivy Ho) visited Manchester to discuss their work and women's place in the Hong Kong film industry with Cornerhouse audiences. Further supporting and contextualising materials for the season were made available via the Cornerhouse website and included a series of podcasts, including interviews with Chen, Tsang and Ho, online film reviews and a special interview with Ann Hui.
- Stephen Teo, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore and Author of the landmark *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (BFI Publishing) endorsed the season, stating that: *"The programme is an excellent one and offers a good and rare opportunity for people in the UK to see work by Hong Kong women filmmakers. The films are very well chosen and they cover a comprehensive range of recent output. I congratulate the programmers for organizing the season and highly recommend it to film buffs and filmgoers in general who see film as a window on society and as a mirror of one's soul."*
- Visible Secrets was the catalyst for the creation of the Chinese Film Forum UK and Willis presented a paper focused on the Visible Secrets projects at the *New Forms of Cinema Exhibition* conference at the launch symposium of the Chinese Film Forum UK at the Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester in February 2010. Both Willis (representing University of Salford) and Perks are founding members and the Hong Kong directors Angie Chen and Jessey Tsang who were guests at *Visible Secrets*, returned to Manchester to introduce UK premieres of their next works: *Big Blue Lake* (Jessey Tsang, Hong Kong 2011) + Q&A, 6 July 2012 and *One Tree, Three Lives* (Angie Chen) + Q&A, 22 October 2012.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- a) The season's tour was facilitated by the Independent Cinema Office. Their website contains details of the tour including all venues:

<http://www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/films/visible-secrets>

An example of a venue taking a selection of the films was Watershed in Bristol. Willis also introduced the film 'Wonder Women' at the venue.

<http://www.watershed.co.uk/whatson/season/123/visible-secrets-hong-kongs-women-filmmakers/>

- b) The season was referred to in a range of print and on-line publications including Podcast on Fire who also discussed the season and interviewed visiting director Ivy Ho: <http://podcastonfire.com/category/audio/interviews-audio/page/2/>. They stated, *'Manchester you lucky devils. This autumn, Manchester's Cornerhouse will showcase the work of female directors from Hong Kong as part of Visible Secrets: Hong Kong's Women Filmmakers. The season will celebrate the imagination and vibrancy of these directors and their work through an exciting programme of screenings, events and special guests.'*

Other references included:

http://www.theboltonnews.co.uk/leisure/cinema/interviews/4672207.Female_directors_celebrated_at_cinema/?ref=rss

<http://londonfeministfilmfestival.com/women-film/women-behind-the-camera/quotes/> (Who

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mention interview with Ann Hui by Willis and Perks that was part of the supporting material posted on Cornerhouse website for the event)

- c) The Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office London saw the season as an important part of their strategic work. The film season and tour were highlighted in a report on the work of the HKETOs across the world.

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr09-10/english/panels/ci/papers/ci0615cb1-2191-3-e.pdf> (page 15)

Miss Sarah Wu (Director General of HKETO London) praised this series at the opening screening. *"This series with over 20 films made by female directors from Hong Kong since 2000 is the first of its kind to be presented. It is exciting to see the series on tour to Belfast, Bristol, Cardiff, Newcastle, Leicester, London, Sheffield and Edinburgh. Ivy Ho, who directed 'Claustrophobia' will come for a gala screening at Curzon Mayfair London on November 2 and at Cornerhouse, Manchester, on November 3".*

(<http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200910/14/P200910140282.htm>)

- d) Artistic Director, Visual Art and Film at Cornerhouse: *"Corroboration of the Visible Secrets Project, making a small but significant contribution to UK film culture by developing the profile of the films and growing the audience for Hong Kong cinema in Manchester, the North-west and the UK as a whole and challenging assumptions regarding women and Hong Kong cinema".*