

The Networked Storyteller and Her Digital Tale

Film Festivals and Ann Hui's *My Way*

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Abstract

In cooperation with China's Youku online channel, the Hong Kong International Film Festival Society commissioned Ann Hui to make a short film, *My Way*, to be part of an omnibus production, *Beautiful 2012*. In order to be considered for this commission, Hui needed to be acknowledged at international film festivals and be a recognized auteur known in the Asian region and beyond. Without Hui's festival credentials and the reputation of the other directors in the curated production, the collected shorts would have little appeal to other programmers and distributors. Although she has famously resisted the label of "film auteur" in the past, Ann Hui undoubtedly stands as the most celebrated female director based in Hong Kong active before and after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) in 1997.

Given the length of her career as well as the impressive critical and scholarly attention her work has garnered, Hui serves as an exemplary case study of how film festivals play a vital role in the career of a Hong Kong female fiction film director. In the case of *My Way*, the festival circuit permits a specific type of production and digital distribution that enables Hui to craft a network narrative, which places the transition of its protagonist from male to female within a broader community connected through a shared gender identity. By analyzing Ann Hui's presence at the festivals in Venice and Hong Kong, as well as the link between her festival exposure and her Internet success, *My Way* offers insight into the circuitous paths women filmmakers follow in order to tell their stories on transnational screens.

Keywords: Hong Kong International Film Festival, Ann Hui, Hong Kong women filmmakers, queer/LGBTQ plus, digital distribution

All narratives need networks to exist. Economic, social, and cultural systems play their parts in creating the human connections necessary to produce, disseminate, critique, and consume stories. In fact, even if telling oneself a tale, that story relies on linguistic, stylistic, iconic, rhetorical, discursive, aesthetic, symbolic, and many other semiotic networks in order to run through the mind. Film narratives depend on multiple complex and interconnected networks in order to bring plots to the public. Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley, for example, draws on Mark S. Granovetter's work on the "strength of weak ties"¹ to examine the role *guanxi* (personal connections) play in facilitating film networks connecting Taiwan with local and cross-border partners.² In her book *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms*, Patricia White speaks specifically about Asian women filmmakers in terms of "network narratives" as follows:

Neither catalogs of women's contributions to national cinema nor auteurist studies alone can account for the creativity and impact of Asian women's filmmaking today. . . . These regional, gendered dynamics in world film culture generate what I will call network narratives.³

White links these network narratives to feminism and digital technology through Donna Haraway on cyber networks⁴ and Bruno Latour's

1. Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (May 1973): 1360–80.

2. Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley, "Culture Translation Between 'Local' and 'International': The Golden Harvest Award in Taiwan," in *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation*, eds. Chris Berry and Luke Robinson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 57–78.

3. Patricia White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 133.

4. Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–81.

actor-network theory⁵ to the emergence of film festival-network studies. These network narratives create institutional parallels to specific types of storytelling that highlight plots that bring characters together, often unexpectedly, through expansive temporal, spatial, social, and cultural networks.

Acclaimed Hong Kong director Ann Hui, mentioned briefly in White's book, provides one example of a filmmaker enmeshed in overlapping international networks that shape the narratives she presents on screen. Educational, economic, media, and cultural institutions serve as anchors while social connections transform this institutional support into projects and cultural networks link the business of filmmaking to the critical framework that bonds viewers to the story on screen. Studios, guilds, unions, film schools, arts associations, regional media hubs, distribution firms, publicity offices, and various professional networks complement the less formal connections among the viewers of these stories. Cinematic narratives exist at the core of these webs of networked relationships. While it may be tempting to look at networks as open, horizontal, and rhizomatic—following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari⁶—hierarchies, in fact, define networks, and, for women, male domination and gender bias pose limits on their functionality.

Film festivals offer examples of institutions that take pride in providing opportunities for cinematic networks to emerge.⁷ Producers, writers, directors, and performers meet while presenting their own films and watching work by their competitors and potential collaborators; they meet buyers and possible financiers at the markets attached to many festivals; other

5. Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 369–81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40878163>.

6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1987).

7. For example, see this guide to networking at the Berlin International Film Festival: Elizabeth Grenier, "6 Ways to Build Networks in the Film Industry," Deutsche Welle, February 18, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/6-ways-to-build-networks-in-the-film-industry/a-19053827>. For an examination of how these networks function, see Luke Robinson, "Sole Traders, Cultural Brokers, and Chinese-Language Film Festivals in the United Kingdom: The London Taiwan Cinefest and the Chinese Visual Festival," in *Chinese Film Festivals*, 193–213.

programmers and curators may become acquainted with their film in order to pick up their next offering; filmmakers may win awards, creating news items for entertainment and arts journalists; and films cultivate audiences, encourage social media buzz, and possible further scrutiny of film critics, researchers, and educators. Although film festivals can be thought of as forming circuits,⁸ they also provide, as Marijke de Valck notes, “a rhizome or network”⁹ for films, filmmakers, and other film professions. Although women’s involvement in film as an art and industry worldwide dates back to the very genesis of the medium, film festivals fall short of gender balance in most instances. Women, of course, have their own gender-specific networks of film festivals,¹⁰ distributors, and professional organizations dedicated to the women who make movies. As programmers form networks, the growth of women’s and LGBTQI film festivals has brought more women and sexual minorities into the spotlight.¹¹ Within Chinese-language cinema, women, however, still struggle for visibility in festival circles. However, while many women’s film festivals have made their mark, including the Créteil International Women’s Film Festival in France, Women Make Waves in Taiwan, and the Seoul International Women’s Film Festival (SIWFF) in South Korea, none enjoy the global prestige of Cannes (France) or the regional significance of Busan (South Korea), for example.

Film festivals in Asia provide important gateways for directors to enter the global arena, and they are even more vital as regional markets for

8. For more on the festival circuit in relation to the network, see Skadi Loist, “The Film Festival Circuit: Networks, Hierarchies, and Circulation,” in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, eds. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 49–64.

9. Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 102.

10. “9.1.2 Women’s Film Festivals,” Film Festival Research Network, accessed September 30, 2020, <http://www.filmfestivalresearch.org/index.php/ffrn-bibliography/9-specialized-film-festivals/9-1-identity-based-festivals/9-1-2-womens-film-festivals/>.

11. See Stuart Richards, *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

transnational distribution.¹² In addition, the need to match audiences with films that reflect their interests and tastes has become imperative as festivals compete for premieres and jockey for position within the international circuit. To this end, film festivals now encourage production with grants as well as commission films to guarantee premieres of works by recognized global auteurs. The Hubert Bals Fund (HBF), part of the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), offers one example of this.¹³ Established in 1989, it concentrates on providing finishing funds for projects from Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America. Many film festivals have followed, and the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF) Society, for example, commissions filmmakers to produce films to premiere at the festival with an eye on distribution afterward.

In cooperation with China's Youku online channel, the HKIFF Society commissioned Ann Hui to make a short film, *My Way*, to be part of an omnibus production, *Beautiful 2012*. In order to be considered for this commission, Hui needed to be acknowledged at international film festivals and be a recognized auteur known in the Asian region and beyond. Without Hui's festival credentials and the reputation of the other directors in the curated production, the collected shorts would have little appeal to other programmers and distributors. Although she has famously resisted the label of "film auteur" in the past,¹⁴ Ann Hui undoubtedly stands as the most

12. See Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung, eds., *Film Festival Yearbook 3: Film Festivals and East Asia* (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2011).

13. "About the Hubert Bals Fund," International Film Festival Rotterdam, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://iffrr.com/en/about-hubert-bals-fund>

14. See Patricia Brett Erens, "The Film Work of Ann Hui," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, eds. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 176–96; Elaine Yee Lin Ho, "Women on the Edges of Hong Kong Modernity: The Films of Ann Hui," in *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 162–90; Yuen Man Lam, "'I Am (Not) an Auteur': A Study on Ann Hui's Female Film Authorship as Ethical Subjectivity" (PhD diss., Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2012); and Mirana M. Szeto, "Ann Hui at the Margin of Mainstream Hong Kong Cinema," in *Hong Kong Screenscapes: From the New Wave to the Digital Frontier*, eds. Esther M. K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and See Kam Tan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 51–56.

celebrated female director based in Hong Kong active before and after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) in 1997. Given the length of her career as well as the impressive critical and scholarly attention her work has garnered, Hui serves as an exemplary case study of how film festivals play a vital role in the career of a Hong Kong female fiction film director. In the case of *My Way*, the festival circuit permits a specific type of production and digital distribution that enables Hui to craft a network narrative, which places the transition of its protagonist from male to female within a broader community connected through a shared gender identity.

Unlike her male colleagues, Wong Kar-wai and Stanley Kwan, who have had more success at A-list festivals such as Cannes and Berlin, Hui's international festival career appears to be more modest. However, she has consistently been showcased at European international festivals—A-list as well as second-tier and specialty festivals—and she has received the most prestigious awards available to Chinese-language directors such as the Golden Horse and Hong Kong Film Awards. In fact, when looking at her overall performance, her list of accolades is undoubtedly impressive, as demonstrated by the 2020 life achievement honor she received at the Venice Film Festival.

In the case of *My Way*, the involvement of Youku promised a distribution channel online in China. Having worked across the border in Mainland China and having shown her films at festivals internationally, Hui had the necessary expertise to create a film appealing to both Mainland Chinese viewers and festival regulars. This analysis examines how Ann Hui managed to tell a story about the transgender community in Hong Kong to local festival viewers, Mainland Chinese netizens, and the world online and in movie theaters. It looks at the fit between the tale Hui tells in *My Way* and the off-screen story of the festival connections that enabled her to craft that on-screen networked narrative about the transsexual community in Hong Kong. Hui's formidable network connections through her involvement with international film festivals, such as the Venice Film Festival, and the story

she tells about gender difference and public scrutiny in *My Way* form an intriguing double plot that provides insight into what stories are told by whom for the world to see.

The case of Ann Hui's achievements at international and regional film festivals provides an opportunity to see how a female filmmaker can bring a story about gender and sexual minorities to world audiences. This is, then, simply one story of how a woman director from Hong Kong¹⁵ drew on an elaborate network that took decades to forge in order to narrate the tale of a male-to-female transsexual to an online audience within the Chinese-speaking world. Given the heavy censorship of film in the People's Republic of China (PRC), the great firewall separating Mainland China from the rest of the world, the challenges faced by the LGBTQI community to get their stories told globally, and the difficulties faced by women filmmakers to survive in the industry, this saga in which the on-screen story of gender reassignment parallels its off-screen production provides insight into the challenges that lie at the root of contemporary Chinese cinema. In the case of *My Way*, the film festival as an increasingly important site of film production as well as virtual distribution, exhibition, and marketing becomes a vital part of the story as well.

However, Ann Hui's success in the Sinosphere tells only one part of the story. *My Way* also circulates beyond Hong Kong and adds to Ann Hui's international profile. By analyzing Hui's presence at the festivals in Venice and Hong Kong, as well as the link between her festival exposure and her Internet success, *My Way* offers insight into the circuitous paths women filmmakers follow in order to tell their stories on transnational screens.

15. For a listing of women filmmakers currently active in Hong Kong, see "Hong Kong Women Filmmakers," Wordpress, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://hkwomenfilmmakers.wordpress.com/>.

The Gender of Storytelling in *My Way*: Ann Hui and the Network Narrative

Many networks come into play in the production of Ann Hui's short film *My Way*, commissioned by the Hong Kong International Film Festival and produced by her longtime associate and fellow film director Sylvia Chang. Chang coproduced and starred in Hui's first feature *The Secret* (1979), so artistic and commercial ties link these two creative women across decades. An inaugural work of the Hong Kong New Wave created by exceptional female talent behind as well as in front of the camera, *The Secret* rejuvenated the industry with its cosmopolitan vision and commitment to local stories. Television producer Selina Chow teamed up with then emerging Taiwanese actor-director Sylvia Chang to set up a film production company for *The Secret*, with Hui directing and Chang taking a starring role. Working with scriptwriter Joyce Chan, Hui brought a female-centered investigation of a true-crime story to the screen with elaborate flashbacks used to create suspense as well as provide insight into the psyches of her female protagonists. Scholars such as Cheuk Pak Tong¹⁶ and Ackbar Abbas¹⁷ remark on Hui's distinctive use of the layered flashback, nonlinear narrative structures, cinematic exploration of history and memory, and commitment to women's stories. From *The Secret* to *My Way*, Hui consistently pushes back against conventional ways of seeing gender in all of her films.

Working with Sylvia Chang over the years enables both auteurs to reinforce each other's considerable talents. Chang has particularly strong regional and international connections. She started her acting career in Taiwan in the 1970s and directed her first film in the early 1980s. She moves between Hong Kong and Taiwan, working as an actor, screenwriter, producer, and director, with strong connections throughout the Asian region. Chang

16. Pak Tong Cheuk, *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema, 1978–2000* (Bristol: Intellect, 2008).

17. Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997).

serves as the producer for *My Way*. Both Hui and Chang have strong ties to the HKIFF,¹⁸ so pairing them for this project highlights the significance of this type of production platform as mutually beneficial to filmmakers as well as festival organizers. The short showcases the importance of these networks in providing female filmmakers access to production funds and audiences in order to tell stories about gender identity, domestic life, and sexuality from women's points of view.

My Way appears in the same omnibus film *Beautiful 2012*, with shorts by other auteurs, including Taiwan's Tsai Ming-liang. Ann Hui, of course, knows Tsai, and she appears in a cameo in his film *The River* (1997), so including them together in *Beautiful 2012* reinforces their common ties to the Asian "new" cinemas of Hong Kong and Taiwan. In her contribution, Hui challenges her Mainland Chinese online viewers with a story about a transgender woman, Chow (Francis Ng), as she prepares and undergoes male-to-female sex reassignment surgery. Produced by the HKIFF and shown for free on Youku, *My Way* occupies a liminal creative space somewhere between the "micro movie" and the "festival film." As Adrian Wan describes the phenomenon, Chinese micro movies emerged in the second decade of the twenty-first century:

Tapping into China's rapid internet expansion, filmmakers of all stripes have utilised the online space to get creative or tackle topics that are unlikely to appear on big screens.

The result is a swelling river of micro movies, as short films are called on the mainland, produced by businesses as well as independent directors. Industry observers say about 4,000 micro movies were released in 2012, with the bulk of content appearing on the country's top three video sharing sites - Youku Tudou, Iqiyi (which is owned by Baidu) and Sohu.¹⁹

18. For more on the HKIFF, see Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

19. Adrian Wan, "Chinese Directors Find Greater Freedom Online Making Micro Movies," *South China Morning Post*, January 9, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/1401565/chinese-directors-find-greater-freedom-online-making-micro>.

As a micro movie, *My Way* opens up the screen to exploring Hong Kong's sexual minorities for audiences that may not have access to feature films on topics censored in the PRC. Moreover, *My Way* functions as a festival film as a work by a globally recognized auteur for exhibition on the festival circuit. The short film reflects the growing importance of funding projects designed for initial exhibition at specific film festivals to guarantee premieres by well-known directors to boost festival attendance.²⁰ These films comprise a subset of a broader category of "festival films" designed to be shown primarily within the film festival circuit that Thomas Elsaesser describes:

For these films, international (i.e., European) festivals are the markets that can fix and assign different kinds of value, from touristic, politico-voyeuristic curiosity to auteur status conferred on directors. Festivals such as Berlin and Rotterdam set in motion the circulation of new cultural capital, even beyond the prospect of economic circulation (art cinema distribution, television sale) by motivating critics to write about them and young audiences to study them in university seminars.²¹

Even though she shows her films at international film festivals, Ann Hui does not enjoy the same reputation as fellow director Wong Kar-wai, who creates films with specific festival openings in mind (e.g., *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Cannes).²² While some filmmakers rely almost exclusively on the festival circuit and niche video market for the circulation of their films,

20. For an analysis of another short commissioned by the HKIFF, see Gina Marchetti, "Clara Law's Red Earth: The Hong Kong International Film Festival and the Cultural Politics of the Sponsored Short," in *Chinese Film Festivals*, 259–77.

21. Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 46. See also Bill Nichols, "Global Image Consumption in the Age of Late Capitalism," in *The Film Festivals Reader*, ed. Dina Jordanova (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2015), 29–44 (reprinted from *East-West Film Journal* 8, no. 1 [January 1994]: 68–85).

22. See Gina Marchetti, "In the Mood for Love (2000), Wong Kar-wai," in *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader*, eds. Jeffrey Geiger and R. L. Rutsky (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 966–89.

Ann Hui seldom makes features without a market in mind. This detour into micro cinema marks a departure for her, but it also opens up opportunities through the digital platform as well as the festival circuit with a story that highlights the importance of the networks that connect the transgender community locally in Hong Kong and transnationally throughout the Chinese-speaking world and beyond.

In *My Way*, Hui addresses online viewers who may need to be introduced to her own distinctive narrative style and the performance capabilities of Hong Kong thespians such as Francis Ng. Hui's authorial brand shines through the use of flashbacks, interview techniques, arresting high-angle shots, and an eye for domestic details such as food, which defines characters and the distinctive stories associated with Hong Kong's unique cultural milieu. For cross-border viewers, the city of Hong Kong itself, as well as its sexual minorities, may be quite foreign and in need of some introduction. While Ann Hui has made many films set in the PRC for Mainland Chinese audiences, this short still serves as her calling card for new online audiences. Younger and less sophisticated viewers, as well as those not exposed to her many films that cannot cross the border for political reasons—films such as *Ordinary Heroes*, which partially deals with Hong Kong's response to the 1989 democracy movement in Tian'anmen and its suppression on June Fourth—need an introduction to her storytelling style. The title of the short assures viewers that both the director, through the story of her trans-woman protagonist, will take her own road and do the film her way.

Hong Kong filmmakers, in fact, draw on a rich tradition of folklore, opera, and cinematic antecedents to tell stories about trans characters. Hong Kong cinema history features the celebrated Yam Kim-Fai, a female actor known for playing the male lead in Chinese operas on the stage and screen. In addition, comedies such as Peter Chan's *He's a Woman, She's a Man* (1994), martial arts films such as Tsui Hark's *The Swordsman* (1992–1993) series, and dramas such as Jun Li's *Tracey* (2018) all include stories involving cross-dressing and gender-bending characters. In fact, Esther C. M. Yau sees this androgyny as an essential part of Hong Kong cinema's global viability,

and Ann Hui's *My Way* taps into the "wit, hyperbole, and sentiment" of the "cultural androgyny of Hong Kong movies."²³

In one self-reflexive sequence, *My Way* shows its protagonist Chow (Francis Ng) on a trip to the cinema. This scene parallels the experiences of festival spectators while reminding online viewers of what they may be missing by not being in a physical movie theater. Still self-conscious as a woman in public, Chow asks, with lowered head and soft voice, the ticket seller for help choosing a seat. Wearing dark glasses until safely inside the auditorium, Chow finally manages to put up her feet and enjoy the complete cinematic experience with popcorn and a Coke. The theater may be nearly empty but it offers a secure public place to try new identities and gives online viewers a glimpse of what they are missing. The facsimile of the movie theater offers feelings of privacy to sanction its exploration of the world of transsexuals on screen.

Hui also deals with sexual minorities in her story of a lesbian romance between bisexual single mothers in *All About Love*, and she tackles similar subject matter in *My Way*. Drawing on her background in documentary as well as melodrama and comedy, Hui carefully places the individual stories of her protagonists into the larger networks of the extended family, the LGBTQI community, and the wider urban fabric of Hong Kong. Hui has a keen sense of temporal and spatial perspective, and she brings her viewers close to Chow at some points while creating distance through flashbacks and long shots. By focusing on the challenges faced by a trans woman, Hui comments on the construction of femininity and the suffocating constraints and cruel limitations of the patriarchal family for both men and women.

The film begins with a close-up of Chow applying mascara in the mirror as an indicator of the character's self-conscious construction of a gendered self. Hui often uses mirrors, windows, doorways, arches, and other visual framing devices in much the same way as French New Wave auteurs, to

23. Esther C. M. Yau, "Introduction: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World," in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, ed. Esther C. M. Yau (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 7.

place physical barriers between spectators and characters. These alienation techniques make viewers aware of the capacity of the filmmaker to create a frame, highlighting the intrinsic voyeurism of the cinema, while also providing critical distance from which to view characters as embodiments of particular ideas. In this case, Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "women are made and not born" comes to mind.²⁴ Practicing a feminine voice, Chow sings and talks to a stuffed bear on a window divan while happily pulling on nylon stockings, legs kicking insouciantly in the air. However, Hui complicates the mood by silhouetting Chow against the flat's window, which opens out onto a drab apartment block characteristic of urban Hong Kong. Inside, Chow can happily be a woman, but the city may not accept this identity. In the scene that follows in the MTR subway, Chow hides behind dark glasses and avoids eye contact.

This gender alienation can be keenly felt in a window-shopping scene, in which Chow remains outside a shop with dresses on display as the camera returns her gaze from the interior (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Chow (Francis Ng) remains outside a shop with dresses on display as the camera returns her gaze from the interior. *Source: My Way*, frame grab.

24. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage, 2011).

Chow does not enter the store, hesitantly waving the frock goodbye while exiting the frame. Later, at the office, Chow's coworkers shun their colleague, and they quickly exit the restroom when she enters. A high-angle shot of Chow pulling down panties to sit on the commode shows an adjacent empty cubicle indicating the character's isolation. Hui has used the high-angle shot in similar ways in her other films, and the technique serves as a key signature of her narrative style. She also often uses cuts to mark abrupt changes in time or mood, and the next shot shows Chow's hand, close up, pruning a green plant in a glass jar. This tender gesture indicates the possibility of endurance and renewal presaging the character's sex reassignment surgery. With a glance in the mirror, Chow adjusts the bra under her dress, ready again to face an unwelcoming world. As the mirror shots show, Chow endures layers of gender scrutiny as she watches herself being watched by female peers who themselves are subject to what Laura Mulvey terms the "male gaze"²⁵ (see figure 2).

This politics of gendered looking becomes the topic of conversation among a group of pre- and postoperative trans women in the following



Figure 2: Chow endures layers of gender scrutiny subject to what Laura Mulvey (1975) terms the "male gaze." Source: *My Way*, frame grab.

25. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

scene. The switch from the isolation of the apartment and the office wash-room cubicle to the networked solidarity of the trans community marks a turning point in the narrative. Similar to an episode in *All About Love* in which characters chat about feminism, bisexuality, and same-sex desire in a lesbian bar, the camerawork, use of available lighting, and ambient sound, as well as the structuring of the conversation as a question-and-answer interview about sex reassignment surgery, allows *My Way* to mimic the authenticity normally reserved for documentary films. For both films, Hui researched Hong Kong's LGBTQI communities in order to create these scenes.

In *My Way*, the characters talk candidly about breast size and shape, hormones, various surgical procedures, pain, and the possibility of death on the operating table. Hui does not shy away from including medical details such as a lineup of the various sizes of the inserts that Chow must use after the operation to create a vaginal opening. Later, Chow's trans friends bring inflatable rings, sanitary napkins, and fruit to the hospital to speed recovery. These details may satisfy outsiders' curiosity, but they also help LGBTQI viewers to see themselves and the concerns of their communities on-screen. Bringing these details into the movie theater as well as the digital realm takes *My Way* beyond the comedies and melodramas in which trans characters remain on the sidelines and the details of gender reassignment surgery receive no mention or little attention.

However, Hui does not limit her short film to Chow's transformation, public acceptance, and support network. Careful in most of her features to show multiple points of view with dialectically opposed interests, the director expands Chow's network to include an ex-wife (Jade Leung) and teenage son as part of the plot. Quotidian concerns complicate Chow's struggle, and the ex-wife has little sympathy for the expenses associated with sex reassignment surgery when she needs to pay maintenance fees on their flat with decreasing proceeds from underperforming stocks. The financial consequences of being a transsexual become concrete as Chow eats noodles out of a pan and drinks from a plastic cup. Flashbacks to arguments about the female clothing Chow's wife discovered point to a materially more prosperous, but

miserable, existence within the confines of a heterosexual marriage. The drained colors of these scenes parallel Chow's etiolated state as the red blood from a cut finger after a botched suicide attempt visually intrudes on the image and precipitates the end to the marriage. Hui excels at the use of flashbacks to create narrative parallels, and this short film does not disappoint in making stunning use of the technique.

By imaginatively taking viewers through the process of Chow's surgery, *My Way* promotes individual, familial, and social healing. Distressed by a male roommate in the hospital before the operation, Chow wakes up next to a smiling woman afterward. Social acceptance comes in the form of a reconciliatory visit from the recovering patient's ex-wife, and the film concludes with Chow walking on the street with confidence, enjoying the company of some lively pigeons and turning to face the camera to take on the world without apologies. The male gaze has been flipped and the cinema expanded to include a wider range of gender perspectives.

Mirana M. Szeto characterizes Ann Hui's career as existing between the "margin and the mainstream,"²⁶ and this celebration of the queer within the context of Youku and the festival circuit pays tribute to Hui's courage to take on new challenges as well as her talent for being accessible beyond the arthouse. Somewhere between documenting LGBTQI discrimination and telling a melodramatic tale of a disintegrating family, *My Way* manages to cover novel subject matter using Hui's considerable cinematic storytelling talents to attract new audiences, with two million views in a single week on Youku.²⁷ However, making this connection to queer cinema and transgender visibility has implications. In *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Sarah Banet-Weiser quotes trans activist Reina Gossett who says

26. Mirana M. Szeto, "Ann Hui at the Margin of Mainstream Hong Kong Cinema," in *Hong Kong Screenscapes*, 51–56.

27. Anna Leach, "Internet-Released Transgender Film Gets 2 Million Views in a Week," *Gay Star News*, April 19, 2012, <https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/internet-released-transgender-film-gets-2-million-views-week190412/>.

that, for the trans community, “visibility is a pillar of criminalization, not a tenet of liberation.”²⁸ Banet-Weiser goes on to critique this visibility online:

Within the *politics* of visibility, bodies that are disenfranchised and marginalized are moved into the spotlight so as to highlight that disenfranchisement and marginalization. Within an economy of visibility, the *spotlight* on their bodies, their visibility, the number of views, is in fact its politics. This spotlight is literally designed for social media such as Instagram, Tumblr, and Snapchat.²⁹

In fact, public discussion of sexual reassignment surgery in Mainland China predates Hui’s film. Jin Xing, a prominent male-to-female dancer, enjoyed considerable celebrity before and after her transition.³⁰ Filmmaker, scholar, and LGBTQI activist Cui Zi’en inaugurated the Beijing Queer Film Festival in 2001,³¹ and, although subject to government constraint, other queer film festivals that feature films about transsexuals link Mainland China to LGBTQI cinema networks in other parts of the Chinese-speaking world and beyond. Digital networks facilitate these cross-border interactions and open pathways for films such as *My Way* to find receptive audiences.

The queer component of Hui’s *All About Love* and *My Way* opens up other networks for distribution, exhibition, and critique as well. With the rise of what B. Ruby Rich labelled “new queer cinema” in a 1992 essay in New York City’s *The Village Voice*,³² festival programmers outside of established LGBTQI community circuits began to take notice of the

28. Quoted in Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 26.

29. Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*, 27. Italics in the original.

30. Lisa Cam and Laramie Mok, “Who Is Jin Xing, China’s Only Transgender Celebrity?” *South China Morning Post*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/people-events/article/2173609/who-jin-xing-chinas-only-transgender-celebrity>.

31. Hongwei Bao, “Queer as Catachresis: The Beijing Queer Film Festival in Cultural Translation,” in *Chinese Film Festivals*, 79–100.

32. B. Ruby Rich, “A Queer Sensation,” *Village Voice* (1992): 41–44.

mainstream appeal of stories revolving around the lives of sexual minorities. This translated into the success of films such as Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). For Hong Kong cinema, Wong Kar-wai's Best Director win at Cannes in 1997 with the gay romance *Happy Together* marked a milestone at the world's most prestigious international film festival. In her 2001 article, Helen Leung speaks eloquently about the importance of the "queerscape" to the transnational circulation of LGBTQI-themed cinema from Hong Kong.³³ Ann Hui's entry into New Queer Cinema takes a different route by exploring the neglected topics of bisexuality, lesbian romance, and sex reassignment surgery for male-to-female transsexuals. Because of this, these stories circulate within queer film circles as well.

Although there is certainly some overlap with the HKIFF,³⁴ queer film circuits cultivate different viewers with divergent interests. Hong Kong, for example, boasts the oldest lesbian and gay film festival in Asia. Edward Lam inaugurated the first Hong Kong Tongzhi Film Festival (Hong Kong Lesbian & Gay Film Festival) in 1989, coining a term *tongzhi* as a play on the Chinese word for "comrade" that continues to be used to hail LGBTQI people throughout the Chinese-speaking world to this day. Raymond Yeung, Shu Kei, and Wouter Barendrecht of Fortissimo reestablished the festival in 2000, and Denise Tang presented the first sidebar devoted to lesbian films in 2003. In her 2009 article "Demand for Cultural Representation: Emerging Independent Film and Video on Lesbian Desires,"³⁵ Tang discusses the history of the Hong Kong Lesbian & Gay Film Festival and

33. Helen Hok-sze Leung, "Queerscapes in Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema," *positions: asia critique* 9, no. 2 (2001): 423–47, Project MUSE, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/27984>.

34. For more on small festivals in Hong Kong, see Esther C. M. Yau, "What Can Small Festivals Do? Toward Film Festivals as Testimony to Expanded Civic Engagement in Post-Handover Hong Kong," in *Chinese Film Festivals*, 141–67.

35. Denise Tse Shang Tang, "Demand for Cultural Representation: Emerging Independent Film and Video on Lesbian Desires," in *Futures of Chinese Cinema: Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures*, eds. Olivia Khoo and Sean Metzger (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), 169–90.

explores some of the reasons for the neglect of work by and about women. However, as she notes, women filmmakers are gaining more attention in Asian queer-film circles, and this opens up possibilities for Hong Kong female directors.

A film such as Hui's *My Way* then, through its networked narrative, brings together various strands running through international festival circuits, digital production and distribution, and the dynamic relationship between stories about gender and sexual minorities that expose audiences to ways of seeing outside of the male mainstream. Unearthing the journey from the European film festival to Youku opens up another dimension of Ann Hui's networked story.

Ann Hui and the Venice Film Festival

At the seventy-seventh Venice Film Festival in 2020, Ann Hui became the first female director to receive the Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award. Hui has been honored with life achievement awards at the 2015 Asian Film Awards in Hong Kong as well as its major rival the Busan International Film Festival in Korea in 2014 in order "to acknowledge her contribution to Asian cinema and to recognize her spirit that produced outstanding works of the generation."³⁶ However, Venice marks a new high in her career. In an interview, she stated:

After getting this prize, if I get to be more well known, I will hope to use this influence to work more for the Hong Kong film industry. . . . Now is an unprecedented low. There is no investment and people are at a loss as to

36. Clifford Coonan, "Busan Fest to Honor Hong Kong's Ann Hui as Asian Filmmaker of the Year," *Hollywood Reporter*, March 8, 2014, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/busan-fest-honor-hong-kongs-723064>.

what to do. Younger filmmakers are having a very, very difficult time. And if I can help to raise money for them, I will try to do that.³⁷

This comment underscores Hui's generosity of spirit in hoping to use the added clout the prestigious award confers in order to help aspiring filmmakers. However, Hui also tacitly acknowledges two important facts of feature filmmaking. First, motion pictures need money to make it to the screen, and, second, connections matter in the film business. In his magisterial *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu recognizes three fungible forms of "capital": economic, social, and cultural.³⁸ After receiving this honor at the oldest film festival in the world, Hui plans to use her social capital as a well-connected celebrity auteur to raise economic capital from investors in order to create cultural capital in the form of new films, which promise to be profitable in order to continue the cycle. As Bourdieu notes, institutions undergird this system linking social class, economic fortune, and aesthetic taste together. Ann Hui has distinguished herself by receiving this award at Venice, and this institutional boost may allow her to help others in her network.

However, Ann Hui's success at Venice tells only part of the story. Favoring the "male genius" at odds with the system, the roles played by collaboration, networking, and institutional support fall by the wayside of what Jean-François Lyotard might call this "grand narrative" of the history of cinema when narrating the tale of the success of female directors.³⁹ At the margins of a male-dominated industry, women rely on these collaborative networks to get their stories told. When looking at the careers of

37. James Mottram, "Venice 2020: Ann Hui on Saving the Hong Kong Film Industry, and her Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement," *South China Morning Post*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3101038/venice-2020-ann-hui-saving-hong-kong-film-industry-and-her>.

38. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 114.

39. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

female filmmakers such as Ann Hui, connections among women stand out within male-defined and dominated production, distribution, and exhibition circuits. Arguably, at a time of rapid change and crisis, these networks take on even greater significance as a means of survival in a particularly precarious industry.

As Hui notes in the interview cited here, the industry is at an “unprecedented low.” Hui has directed several films that reflect directly on the vicissitudes of film production, including the semiautobiographical *Song of the Exile* (1992); *The Stuntwoman/Ah Kam* (1996); and *A Simple Life* (2011), based on a memoir by producer Roger Lee, so she has told the story of highs and lows of the industry on more than one occasion. In Hui’s on-screen reflections on the movie industry, Hong Kong cinema suffers through the 1967 riots, the waning popularity of martial arts action, and the growing influence of the Mainland Chinese market. Moreover, even before the COVID-19 crisis shut down production as well as theatrical exhibition, the digital revolution had eroded traditional patterns of film production, distribution, and exhibition through streaming services’ move into filmmaking. Many film festivals, in particular, experienced an existential crisis when determining whether to allow films such as Martin Scorsese’s *The Irishman* (2019) or Alfonso Cuarón’s *Roma* (2018), made primarily for streaming rather than theatrical release, to compete.

Given their marginal status in the industry worldwide, women have been hit particularly hard by the global pandemic.⁴⁰ However, at this low point, Ann Hui shoots to the top. At a time when the festivals scale back and the industry hits rock bottom, women fill the gaps. For Venice, this

40. Although the extent of the impact on women in film has yet to be determined, preliminary studies indicate a gender divide. See Manori Ravindran, “Women in Film and TV Falling through the Cracks in U.K.’s Coronavirus Crisis,” *Variety*, April 3, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/biz/entertainment-industry/women-in-film-and-tv-falling-through-the-cracks-in-u-k-s-coronavirus-crisis-1234570229/>; and Anne Cohen, “How Women In Hollywood Are Dealing with Their Sets Being Shut Down,” *Refinery29*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/03/9585542/hollywood-women-coronavirus-stories>.

makes perfect sense. In the wake of #MeToo and the reevaluation of gender bias and sexual harassment in the motion-picture business globally, Venice's poor record on including women in competition came under fire in recent years.⁴¹ In addition, the Venice Film Festival received unwelcome publicity as the backdrop for some of Harvey Weinstein's sexual crimes reported by journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey.⁴²

One of Weinstein's victims, Rowena Chiu, illustrates the darker side of the cinematic networks connecting Venice and Hong Kong. After harassing her in Venice and settling with her, Weinstein transferred Chiu to his Miramax offices in Hong Kong. Chiu, whose family emigrated from Hong Kong to the United Kingdom before she was born, left the position after realizing Weinstein had little real interest in her professional development. As the 2020 COVID-19 crisis put the brakes on many productions, limiting competition as well as the extravagance of the events on the Lido, the scaled-down seventy-seventh Venice Film Festival provided the ideal opportunity for the festival to make amends by celebrating women.

In addition to recognizing Ann Hui in 2020, the festival also honored female actor Tilda Swinton, and female director Chloé Zhao took away the best picture honor for *Nomadland*, awarded by a gender-balanced jury headed by actress Cate Blanchett. The fact that two of the women given top prizes at the festival were born in China may have something to do with the fact that Venice's programmer for Chinese and Korean films, Elena Pollacchi, is female. A scholar of Chinese language and culture, Pollacchi also hosted a festival masterclass with Ann Hui on September 9, 2020,⁴³ and

41. Nick Vivarelli, "Women's Groups Blast Venice Film Festival for Lack of Female Representation," *Variety*, August 10, 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/film/news/venice-film-festival-under-fire-women-directors-1202901723/>.

42. Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story that Helped Ignite a Movement* (London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2019).

43. "Masterclass with Ann Hui," La Biennale di Venezia, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/cinema/2020/program-cinema-2020-pass-holders/masterclass-ann-hui-2020-09-09-15-00>.

Hui's most recent film, *Love After Love*, had its premiere at the 2020 festival as well.

The choice of Ann Hui makes considerable sense because of the director's long history of involvement with Venice as one of the very few female directors from the Chinese-speaking world to return to the festival on more than one occasion. However, before attracting the attention of Venice programmers, Hui enjoyed some success at other European film festivals. For example, her second feature, *The Spooky Bunch* (1980), screened as part of the "Berlin Panorama," which is an official, but noncompetitive part of the Berlinale devoted to broadening the offerings of the festival.⁴⁴ This screening helped to establish Hui's early link to Berlin, where she headed the jury in 1996 and has had screenings in competition (although no major awards) for features such as *Ordinary Heroes* (1999).

Another feature, *Summer Snow* (1995), also did well in Berlin, garnering some minor awards (as well as a major win for Josephine Siao as best actress) but drew more attention later at the Créteil International Women's Film Festival in France by winning the Grand Prix. Hui has not consistently exhibited her work at festivals devoted to female filmmakers; however, in this case, a major win at likely the most prestigious festival for women filmmakers in the world boosted her standing as a major international talent. It further contributed to her ranking among the most prolific and acclaimed female directors in the world. Although, until recently, Hui has denied any support for feminism, she does admit to a particular interest in stories about women. *Summer Snow*, which could be classified as a "woman's film" or female-centered melodrama, also did exceedingly well regionally—winning major awards at the inaugural Golden Bauhinia Awards in Hong Kong as well as at the Golden Horse Awards, the Hong Kong Film Awards, and the Hong Kong Film Critics Society Awards.

44. "Panorama Regulations 2012," Internationale Filmfestspiele, accessed September 30, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20120401104955/https://www.berlinale.de/en/branche/_filmanmeldung/richtlinien_panorama/index.html.

In 1983, Cannes showed Hui's *Boat People* out of competition. Even though *The Spooky Bunch* and *Boat People* were not eligible for awards, these screenings broadened the director's international reputation. The screening of *Boat People*, in particular, created considerable controversy, given its negative perspective on Vietnam, a former French colony and site of deeply ambivalent feelings in the years following the reunification of the country in 1975 and the ensuing refugee crisis in the South China Sea.⁴⁵ However, as one of the first films allowed to shoot on location in the PRC after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), *Boat People* also established Hui as a Hong Kong director adept at working across the border. In fact, Hui, born in Anshan in Manchuria, turned to Mainland China to make films set largely or exclusively in the People's Republic such as *My American Grandson* (1991), *Eighteen Springs* (1997), *Jade Goddess of Mercy* (2003), *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* (2007), *Night and Fog* (2009), *The Golden Era* (2014), *Our Time will Come* (2017), and *Love After Love* (2020). As China became an increasingly important film market in the post-Mao era as well as a source of acclaimed films from Fifth and Sixth Generation directors, Hui's position as a Hong Kong New Wave⁴⁶ filmmaker with considerable expertise in the People's Republic of China made her stand out even more in international circles. This long association with networks connecting Mainland China to the European film festival circuit put Hui in an ideal position to push gender boundaries in *My Way*.

In 2003, Ann Hui served on the jury in Venice and, in 2014, headed the Horizons section of the seventy-first Venice Film Festival. *A Simple Life* (2011) won critical acclaim and several awards at the sixty-eighth iteration of the festival. Ann Hui's *The Golden Era* (2014) closed the seventy-first

45. Julian Stringer, "Boat People: Second Thoughts on Text and Context," in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 15–22.

46. For more on the Hong Kong New Wave, see Gina Marchetti, "The Hong Kong New Wave," in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Somerset: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 95–117. See also Ching Yau, *Filming Margins—Tang Shu Shuen, A Forgotten Hong Kong Woman Director* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).

Venice Film Festival.⁴⁷ Curator Elena Pollacchi, with the linguistic skills and cultural expertise to showcase the work of a director such as Ann Hui, provided a path for her.

A Simple Life, *The Golden Era*, and *Love After Love* tell stories about women. *A Simple Life* narrates the tale of film producer Roger Lee Yan-Lam (played by actor Andy Lau on screen) and his elderly housekeeper Chung Chun-Tao (Ah Tao/Peach), played by actor Deanie Ip, as she transitions from domestic service to a nursing home because of a debilitating stroke. Deanie Ip won the prestigious Volpi Cup for best actress at the festival, and *A Simple Life* also secured various other awards, including the La Navicella Award (for “human values”), the Equal Opportunities Award, and Honorable Mention for the Roman Catholic SIGNIS award.⁴⁸ With its location shooting and focus on a working-class woman, *A Simple Life* spoke to the director’s aesthetic debt to Italian neorealism at a time when the festival’s commitment to bringing Chinese-language cinema to the world had been established with successes such as Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *A City of Sadness*, the Golden Lion winner in 1989, and Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life*, which won the Golden Lion in 2006.

Ann Hui’s *The Golden Era* (2014) closed the seventy-first Venice Film Festival. A biography of noted female writer Xiao Hong, who was born in Northeast China (like Hui) and died in Hong Kong (where Hui now lives), the film looks at the relatively short career of one of China’s most celebrated leftwing novelists of the Republican era. The decision for Venice to spotlight this particular feature owes much to Hui’s talents and connections. It is difficult to imagine the other film on the exact same subject, Xiao

47. For a discussion of *The Golden Era* in relation to soft power, see Gina Marchetti, “The Feminine Touch: Chinese Soft Power Politics and Hong Kong Women Filmmakers,” in *Screening China’s Soft Power*, eds. Paola Voci and Hui Luo (New York: Routledge, 2018), 229–51.

48. For a detailed discussion of *A Simple Life* and the festival circuit, see Ruby Cheung, “A Chinese Diasporic Festival Film in the Making? The Interesting Case of Ann Hui’s *A Simple Life*,” in *Chinese Cinemas: International Perspectives*, eds. Felicia Chan and Andy Willis (New York: Routledge, 2016), 167–80.

Hong—*Falling Flowers* (2012) by Huo Jianqi, for example—being given this coveted spot at the Venice Film Festival. However, it was a gamble—in spite of having Tang Wei, best known for her controversial, erotic performance in Ang Lee’s *Lust, Caution* (2007), in the lead—and the critical response has been mixed. Guy Lodge of *Variety* summarizes the general view: “Ann Hui’s lengthy Venice closer is a handsome but unilluminating biopic of trailblazing Chinese writer Xiao Hong.”⁴⁹

The film Ann Hui brought to Venice in 2020, also shown out of competition, *Love After Love* (2020), which has much in common with war-era set *The Golden Era*, received mixed reviews. Jessica Kiang, writing for *Variety*, calls it a “pretty but empty melodrama.”⁵⁰ Based on an Eileen Chang story, the film has been compared to Ang Lee’s Chang adaptation *Lust, Caution* (2007).⁵¹ Of course, Ann Hui directed two other adaptations of Eileen Chang novels as well, *Love in a Fallen City* (1984) and *Eighteen Springs* (1997). Although coming from different generations, Chang and Hui share some common experiences. Chang lived in Japanese-occupied Shanghai while Hui’s Japanese mother and Chinese father met during the war, and both were drawn to stories set in that period. Moreover, both Hui and Chang studied at the University of Hong Kong, which helped shape their cosmopolitan outlook through English-language higher education in what was then a British colony. Hui worked with renowned female author Wang Anyi on the script.

49. Guy Lodge, “Venice Film Review: ‘The Golden Era,’” *Variety*, September 6, 2014, <http://variety.com/2014/film/festivals/venice-film-review-the-golden-era-1201298611/>.

50. Jessica Kiang, “‘Love After Love’ Review: Ann Hui’s Pretty, Empty Melodrama Set in Pre-War Hong Kong,” *Variety*, September 8, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/reviews/love-after-love-review-ann-hui-1234762087/>. The review in the *Hollywood Reporter* is kinder: Boyd Van Hoeij, “‘Love After Love’ (‘Di Yu Lu Xiang’): Film Review, Venice 2020,” *Hollywood Reporter*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/love-after-love-di-yu-lu-xiang-film-review-venice-2020-4060111/>.

51. Laramie Mok, “Ann Hui’s *Love After Love*, Ang Lee’s *Lust, Caution* and 4 More Films Adapted from Eileen Chang Books, 25 Years after the Celebrated Chinese Writer’s Death,” *South China Morning Post*, September 7, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3100486/ann-huis-love-after-love-ang-lees-lust-caution-and-4-more>.

Simply looking at Ann Hui's Venice successes, the importance of women's networks emerges involving female actors such as Deanie Ip and Tang Wei, scriptwriters such as Wang Anyi, and curators such as Elena Pollacchi—all successes based on stories about women. However, when asked about being a female pioneer in the industry, Hui demurs:

I don't feel very proud that I'm among men working. . . . I don't feel it's an advantage or a disadvantage. That is maybe why I survived. I don't go around feeling I'm a woman and I'm different. I try to do what the guys do. I even carry the equipment when necessary.⁵²

When asked in a 2010 interview whether she resented the label of “female director,” she replied:

For a time I did. In the 1980s, when feminism came to Hong Kong, I was often invited to share my sob stories as a woman director. And I couldn't tell any! So people were very dissatisfied. I was, too, frustrated. Why were they always asking me about sob stories? I didn't have any! If I had I would certainly have told. Perhaps I was too tomboyish, so everyone treated me as one of the guys on set. I might be an exception. Eventually I stopped minding being called a female director. I thought, whatever.⁵³

Her 2020 award in Venice represents the tip of the iceberg of carefully constructed and maintained networks among women as well as men who have made a career of telling stories about women in an industry that favors male heroes engaged in traditionally masculine pursuits in films made primarily by men. Hui's closest connections to important men in the film industry link her to King Hu, Xie Jin, and Stanley Kwan, directors known

52. Mottram, “Venice 2020.”

53. Karen Chu, “Q&A: Ann Hui,” *Hollywood Reporter*, October 11, 2010, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/qampa-ann-hui-29010>.

for their interest in female-centered stories. Hui, of course, is aware of her propensity for telling women's stories, as she says in an interview:

The reason that I so often tell women's stories in my movies is because I find it very easy to put myself in their shoes. For me, my identity as a woman does not mean feminism, but a way of thinking and a perspective of looking at the world. I cannot avoid that.⁵⁴

Although she resists ties to feminism, Hui not only narrates stories about women, she gravitates toward tales about gender injustice and the negative impact of sexual inequality and bias on society. *My Way* provides only one example of the importance of gender to her success as a storyteller and as a fixture on the film festival circuit.

Conclusion: The Continuing Difficulty of Telling Women's Stories on Global Screens

Ann Hui's recognition at the Venice Film Festival in 2020 marks a new high for her career as well as an important first for the world's oldest film festival. However, Hui has also suffered setbacks. *Our Time Will Come* (2017), the follow-up to *The Golden Era*, was scheduled to open the Shanghai International Film Festival,⁵⁵ also celebrating the twentieth anniversary of its establishment as an A-list award-granting international film festival in 1997.⁵⁶ However, *Our Time Will Come* did not open the festival. Instead,

54. Pang Li, "Ann Hui, a Director Who Captures Ordinary Women's Lives," China.org.cn, April 15, 2020, http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2010-04/15/content_19820089.htm.

55. For a comparison of the Hong Kong and Shanghai festivals, see Ran Ma, "Programming China at the Hong Kong International Film Festival and the Shanghai International Film Festival," in *Chinese Film Festivals*, 237–58.

56. Zhaoyu Zhu, "The Political Prism: The 20th Shanghai International Film Festival," *Senses of Cinema* 84 (2017), <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/festival-reports/20th-shanghai-international-film-festival/>.

another feature, *The Chinese Widow* by Danish director Bille August, also set in China during the same time period covering the anti-Japanese war, occupied the opening slot.⁵⁷ With no reason given for the change, it is difficult to speculate on the rationale for replacing a film by a Hong Kong woman with one by a Danish man.

Despite her achievements, Ann Hui clearly still struggles for recognition. Serving on juries at major festivals shows that she has been accepted as a reliable voice within international film circles; however, Bille August—who won the Palme d’Or at Cannes twice, served on the jury at the Beijing International Film Festival, and heads a studio in Hangzhou, Tianpeng Media—clearly has more clout.⁵⁸ European men continue to make their mark in a global system that marginalizes Asian women. Nevertheless, Ann Hui’s extensive production networks as well as her strong ties to international festivals indicate possible avenues for women’s development as directors in world cinema.

Since the accusations against Harvey Weinstein went viral in 2017,⁵⁹ #MeToo continues to roil the global film industry and beyond. As the consummate “networker” at film festivals such as Cannes and behind the scenes mover and shaker at major awards such as the Oscars, Weinstein’s navigation of these film networks likely enabled his sexual predation. Women in film stood up, not only as individual victims but as a group. Through the digital presence of #MeToo and #TimesUp, women’s voices became amplified throughout the entertainment industry and beyond. In 2018, women took their dissatisfaction to the red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival.⁶⁰

57. Liz Shackleton, “‘The Chinese Widow’ to Replace ‘Our Time Will Come’ as Shanghai Film Festival Opener,” *Screen Daily*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.screendaily.com/news/the-chinese-widow-to-replace-our-time-will-come-as-siff-opener/5118986.article>.

58. Yao Cheng, “Academy Award-Winning Director Bille August Opens His Studio in Hangzhou,” *Asia Pacific Arts*, April 10, 2011, http://asiapacificarts.usc.edu/article@apa-academy-award-winning-director-bille-august-opens-his-studio-in-hangzhou_17467.aspx.html.

59. Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

60. Neil Smith, “Cannes 2018: Female Stars Protest on Red Carpet for Equal Rights,” *BBC*, May 12, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-44095914>.

Cate Blanchett, the head of the jury in Venice in 2020, was a vocal leader criticizing the Cannes Film Festival in 2018. Overseeing the award of Venice's Golden Lion to Chloé Zhao at the same festival in which Ann Hui was duly honored should give Blanchett reason for optimism. As film festivals serve as a conduit for the industry's attitudes, values, and ideologies through motion pictures as well as the people who make them, this celebration of women in 2020 helps to counter what Sylvia J. Martin terms "Harvey Weinstein's transpacific processes of power"⁶¹ that link Hong Kong as well as Hollywood to the festival circuit. Digital networks connect micro festival films such as *My Way* as well as massive feminist movements such as #MeToo. Just as *My Way* managed to cross the Chinese Internet firewall to tell a story about the transgender community, #MeToo disguised as "mi tu" (characters translated as "rice bunny") to get around Mainland Chinese Internet censorship facilitates the formation of networks across the Chinese-speaking world.⁶²

However, even with the digital connectivity of these new networks, female filmmakers struggle not just in Asia but around the world to tell their stories. In the case of Hong Kong, women filmmakers take advantage of various networks to build not only their own careers, but enable the stories by other women to find an audience. This has helped to diversify Hong Kong's film culture, assisting the cross-fertilization that keeps the local industry healthy by allowing a variety of narratives by women (as well as men) to be distributed, discussed, debated, and digested domestically as well as beyond the territory's borders.

61. Sylvia J. Martin, "Anthropology's Prophecy for #MeToo: From Hollywood to Hong Kong." *Visual Anthropology Review* 37 (2021): 138.

62. Simina Mistreanu, "China's #MeToo Activists Have Transformed a Generation," *Foreign Policy*, January 10, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/10/chinas-metoo-activists-have-transformed-a-generation/>.

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