Ten Years as Boundary Object: The Search for Identity and Belonging as 'Hongkongers'

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Abstract: This article examines the complex process of symbolic boundary-making of 'Hongkonger' cultural identities through the lens of the controversial 2015 film Ten Years, which is a celebrated omnibus production comprised of five short segments that picture a dystopic end to Hong Kong's cherished way of life in the year 2025. The article is premised on an interdisciplinary approach engaging with cultural studies and film studies. On one hand, it explores how Ten Years functioned as a boundary object, a vast terrain within which cultural identities of what it means to be a Hongkonger are constructed, banished, imagined, and performed under the rubric of bodily performatives. On the other hand, it offers blurring encounters into unfamiliar and precarious territories where the formation and formulation of Hongkonger identities and sense of belonging are negotiated, evacuated, and inhabited. In the end, the key tropes in Ten Years suggest that boundary work in post-Umbrella Hong Kong affectively negotiates with state-level nationalism advocated by the central government in Beijing through establishing and reformulating notions of 'localism' and Hongkonger identities.

Keywords: blurring boundary, boundary object, China, ethnic boundaries, Hong Kong, Hongkonger identity, Ten Years

Introduction

Currently, research on Hongkongers' identity and belonging does not engage specifically with the symbolic and affective forms of boundary work between the local and mainland Chinese collectives in the semi-autonomous city. In contributing to the literature on cultural studies of film, this work unpacks the dystopian Hong Kong film Ten Years (2015) as a boundary object to analyse the affective performatives of place-based Hongkongers' identities and belonging as a site of boundary work. In doing so, this study also contemplates the role of Ten Years as constructing an existence through a dystopic projection of Hong Kong's future in the face of societal extinction (Jarić et al., 2022), extending claims on the culture and politics of disappearance in Hong Kong (Abbas, 1997) by inscribing the indefinability of Hongkonger identities in a popular culture medium as the aestheticisation of politics.

Analyses of Hong Kong-based film productions often emphasise the efforts taken by the city's inhabitants to construct and reconstruct a perpetually changing postcolonial identity (Yang, 2020). This article follows this pattern, but it sits in the nexus between

theoretical approaches that seek to understand Hongkongers' identities as constructively constituted (Ortmann, 2021) and the representation of the identities as performative (Lowe, 2021). It engages with the scholarship on ethnic boundary work (Wimmer, 2013) to focus on the permeability and mediations of identity boundaries that, according to Zurba (2022, 1), 'extend the concept of boundaries to include interfaces such as those that shape culture, society and epistemology'. To do so, this study situates *Ten Years* as a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989), with its plots operating as vectors for viewing publics in the connection of various social selves towards explorations of common and multifaceted Hongkonger local identities. Focusing on the production's plot as a 'series of cultural movements', Wu (2018, 1122, 1130) draws attention to the film's aesthetic and physical constituents as contestations of its reception amongst viewing publics that were responsible for blurring the boundary between the 'objective' and the 'subjective'. Insofar as the production was responsible for engendering debates across socio-political divides, it is timely for *Ten Years* to be operationalised as a boundary object. It is instructive to examine the central tenets of its works as constitutive of boundary work for performative engagements of identity and belonging with its viewing public. As Larsen (2022, 118) points out, boundary work necessarily requires the existence of boundary objects which need not be tangible or material in stimulating the place-based consciousness of marginalised peoples. In this case, we contend that the film, on one hand, is a boundary object that resonated with shared feelings, anxieties, and aspirations underscoring collaboration and conflict in the search for identity in a new stage of post-coloniality and, on the other hand, navigates the unfamiliar and precarious territories where the formation and formulation of Hongkongers' identities and sense of belonging are simultaneously negotiated and inhabited through the blurring between and within boundaries.

Boundary Work Within/Of Hongkongers' Identities

This article extends Wimmer's conceptualisation of boundary work by situating the affective and symbolic dimensions of cultural mediations. According to Wimmer (2008, 1027), boundary-making constitutes an approach to studying ethnicity through 'a process of constituting and re-configuring groups by defining the boundaries between them' in focusing on how social actors engage, negotiate, and situate these boundaries as modes of ethnicity-making as cultural practices. Although actors' agentic elements are emphasised, shifts and changes in institutions, power, and networks normally precede inclusionary or exclusionary revisions to identity boundaries (Wimmer, 2013). Wimmer's (2008) theoretical journey coalesced into a typology of ethnicity-making comprised of five main strategies: expansion, contraction, the transvaluation of existing orders of ethnic hierarchies, the changing of one's own ethnic identity, or the emphasising of other forms of non-ethnic belonging. While useful in constituting a framework to analyse boundary work, we posit that the typology fails to take into account how feelings of ethnic attachment across situational contexts are the consequences of boundary-making, in what Jenkins (2014, 813) notes as the need for boundary work to focus on the symbolic, affective dimensions of identifications that go beyond the instrumentalist connotations emphasised by Wimmer. In other words, boundary work is more than just a process of strategic positioning and deliberation of one's identity in the social world; it

is also an affective experience to be reconciled with the cultural milieu around oneself. Furthermore, the micro-level cultural processes behind Wimmer's typologies of boundary-making remain under-developed in that they do not consider the intersubjective processes actors engage with in mediating and negotiating boundary work (Lamont, 2014). Thus, Lamont and colleagues have argued that there are also symbolic dimensions to boundary-making that are spatial, visual, temporal, and cognitively relational to moral and political differences that need to be accounted for in order for us to comprehend the dynamics of boundary work as a social practice (Lamont et al., 2015).

In the scholarship on boundary-making between different Chinese identities, there are rich insights into how boundaries between Taiwanese, Hongkonger, and mainland Chinese migrants are drawn outside their countries of origin (Liu, 2014). Within the expansive pan-Chinese category expressed by the speaking of Mandarin and Han Chinese ancestry rather than national identity, there are contextual and procedural understandings of how the boundaries of self-identification are interfaced by Taiwanese and Hongkongers in the face of political hostility from their mainland Chinese counterparts (Li, 2020). The boundary-making of cultural identities in Hong Kong can be understood in terms of a collective transvaluation of the semi-autonomous region being cognitively experienced as located outside of mainland China (Lilley, 1993). It is nevertheless also possible to shift the focus towards the conceptualisation of other forms of boundary work of Hongkongers' identities through performative elements of how Hongkongers resist demands from Beijing to be politically submissive and docile. In the wider literature, there are growing calls for the performative rather than constructive dimensions of national and ethnic identities to be conceptualised (Lowe, 2021; Montsion & Tan, 2016). This article is a direct response to this call insofar as it interrogates how discursive objects such as films can operate as boundary work informed using bodily performatives to inscribe, negotiate, and articulate ethnic, national, and cultural identities onto oneself and others through a critical analysis of the key tropes in the film *Ten Years*.

Situating *Ten Years*: Hong Kong Cinema and Performative Identities

A number of scholars view Hong Kong cinema as inherently and critically part of Chinese film on account of the long history of collaborations, exchanges, and movement of capital, people, and films between Hong Kong and Shanghai since the 1900s (Desser & Fu, 2002). Recent works on Hong Kong cinema, particularly in the post-Umbrella Movement period have emphasised paradigmatic shifts in cinematic productions and socio-cultural imaginations and engagement (Darvin, 2022; Yu, 2022). Primarily, there has been a strong stream of local consciousness that has permeated and shaped Hong Kong cinema, and this was particularly evident following the Umbrella Movement in 2014. The condition of Hong Kong cinema is indicative of the communal experiences and emotions of Hong Kong society. The cinema serves as a fertile and vibrant space for the negotiation and contestation of ideas and imaginings of home, identity, and the sense of belonging, as well as the vehement fear and anxiety that these elements are either threatened or eroded in the face of the Central Government in Beijing's radical intrusions into Hong Kong's domestic affairs. Debates and discourses

on Hongkongers' identity and localism in cinema present a multitude of modes for the collective commons to engage in a performativity of local revolts and subversions. As Chan (2017) suggested, there is a profound and deep-seated fear among ordinary people in Hong Kong not just about their volatile idea of 'home' but, more importantly, about their future as the political scaffolding of Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) expires in 2047 and 'such engagement takes place through filmic embodiment of various modes of critique centring around the erosion of hope at the core of people's every day, intellectual and affective imagination' (Chan, 2017, 821).

Off-screen, the realities of Hong Kong film production are now characterised by that which has been famously called a culture of disappearance (Abbas, 1997) and nostalgia for the colonial past (Lowe & Tsang, 2018). Stuck in a fledgling anaemic state, Hong Kong cinema remains in an interstitial space and struggles to survive amidst the meteoric rise of (mainland) Chinese cinema. Witnessing an escalating number of co-productions between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong film companies, Sun (2018, 230) remarks that

> these [co-productions] are increasingly devoid of Hong Kong's local identities and sensibilities . . . Hong Kong actors tend to play supporting and minor roles; Cantonese languages, slang, and colloquialisms are almost no longer heard; Hong Kong locations are less visited and presented; themes and topics in films are usually irrelevant to the pulse and future of the SAR.

Be that as it may, Hong Kong cinema, as symptomatic of the ebbs and flows of Hong Kong culture and society, has generated in the last decade an increasing number of politically engaged films confronting the region's vacillating political milieu and status quo, which seek to rethink and reimagine the uncertainty Hong Kong's future. This anxiety about the future lies at the very core of the film *Ten Years* and the claim that the omnibus production was an 'optimistically anti-teleological dystopia' (Carrico, 2017). In Lee's (2018) interview with some of the people behind the film, Ng Ka-leung, producer and filmmaker of the *Local Eggs* segment in *Ten Years*, revealed that the idea behind the film originated about a year before the Umbrella Movement. According to Ng, 'we were thinking whether Hong Kong would have a chance to change' given the political, economic, social, and cultural transformations following the handover, which were they to persist 'would be unbearable'. In other words, the prospect and possibility of losing what is deemed as Hong Kong values and beliefs prompted them to ask about Hong Kong's future, and in the process to imagine a myriad of possibilities for Hong Kong. Ng admits, however, that when the Umbrella Movement broke out just as the five filmmakers finalised their scripts, it was hard to 'feel optimistic' about the future. Ultimately, the film morphed into a bleak and pessimistic augury of what was to come.

In recent years, much has been said about the upheavals surrounding changes in power relations that have accelerated the inclusion of Hong Kong identity, culture, and institutions within the boundaries of mainland China's political and legal systems. Beijing's unsuccessful intentions to engineer an embrace towards the mainland have been obvious. The language and colourful imagery of the anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) movement in 2019 directly raised questions about Chinese sovereignty and the overt intention to retrocede Hong Kong from authoritarian rule. More than this, there is a need to work towards understanding how Chinese ethnicity can

be disaggregated and differentiated from China in present day Hong Kong (Chan, 2021). The draconian national security law that Beijing acrimoniously foisted on Hong Kong on 30 June 2020 would irrevocably redraw the boundaries of the city's autonomous legislature and judiciary as in/outside of Beijing's subservience under One Country, Two Systems (Lo, 2021). Prior to this watershed moment and its unfolding reverberations of widespread fear surrounding mass arrests, scholars had opined that belonging in the Hong Kong SAR was already constructed as incompatible with nationalist dictates requiring Hong Kong youth to love the People's Republic of China (Mathews, 2020). Even before the anti-ELAB movement of 2019, the boundaries of Hongkonger identities were reinforced by a collective dissonance towards Beijing's heightened political surveillance that simultaneously expanded to facilitate the boundary-crossing of national 'others' who embodied this stance. An expansion of the boundaries of inclusion was observed in the fact that young Hong Kong Chinese students preferred to accept African asylum-seekers and Western expatriates as Hongkongers over mainland migrants (Mathews, 2018). From an anthropological perspective, identity boundaries are situational and symbolic in relation to the cognitive, interactional processes behind 'how actors see the social world and interpret social experiences' (Brubaker et al., 2004).

The cinematic tropes of identity in *Ten Years* illuminate how – even before the anti-ELAB protests of 2019 – affective performatives of belongingness to Hong Kong were already prevalent as boundary work, with the film's plots situated as a boundary object for different expressions of belongingness to be coalesced. The following section discusses the controversy surrounding the film, *Ten Years*, before introducing its segments and how they provide insights into the boundary work of Hongkongers' identities informed by affective identifications. This serves as a prelude to an analysis of bodily performatives of i) tropes solidifying discrete boundaries of Hongkonger identities in the body and ii) tropes of blurring boundaries between Hongkongers' identities and mainland China's rhetoric of pan-Chineseness without intentions to revise one's identifications.

Ten Years as Boundary Object

Ten Years, an omnibus production, won the title of Best Picture at the 2016 Hong Kong Film Awards. At the time of its release in 2015, the spectre of *Ten Years* was mediated by grievances towards the Umbrella Movement for failing to secure genuine democratic reform. In the interstice between the anti-ELAB movement of 2019 and the Umbrella Movement of 2014, Hong Kong was best described as a liberal authoritarian regime where, aside from tight electoral restrictions, civil liberties, press freedoms, and the right to strike promised in the Basic Law remained largely honoured by the Beijing and SAR governments (Ortmann, 2016, 110). Nevertheless, a gradual erosion of the semi-autonomous city's liberties and disqualification of six elected pro-democracy lawmakers in 2017 were omens of 'One Country' asphyxiating the promised future of 'Two Systems'. Decried for its dystopian prophesies of the future, the film could not escape controversy when pro-establishment voices demanded an overhaul of the voting system responsible for the plaudits bestowed upon the film and its creators (Wu, 2018). Also palpable was the uncanniness emanating from Beijing's swift censorship of *Ten Years* in mainland China shortly after its launch. The political gazetting of *Ten Years* draws attention to the

indomitability of Hongkongers who remain steadfast in challenging the Central Government's policies of mainlandisation.

In using *Ten Years* as a cultural text to analyse boundary work as a form of cultural citizenship in Hong Kong prior to the anti-ELAB protests of 2019, this work rejects a presentist reading that uses the past in the film to serve the purposes of the present. Although we are not suggesting that the widespread popularity of the film was a cause of the anti-ELAB movement or the controversial national security law, media representations of political realities nevertheless play an important role in communicating identitarian affects and influence the political leanings of viewing audiences. Political representations of power relations in popular media productions – such as *Ten Years* – are negotiated by viewing audiences in the construction of identities (Hermes, 2020). To illustrate, in the *Extras* segment of *Ten Years*, director Zune Kwok predicted a false-flag terror event as a crisis that would force Hongkongers to accept security legislation implemented via Article 23 of the Basic Law, the National Security (Legislative Provisions) Bill. A presentist reading suggests the film director underestimated China's ability to abrogate the Basic Law and the autonomy of the Legislative Council in foisting its own security law on the city and its inhabitants, but the director was nevertheless prescient in predicting that the much-dreaded security bill would not materialise without a crisis. The dual crises of the pandemic and anti-ELAB protests legitimated the law's swift implementation. In 2003, Chief Executive Tung Chee-Hwa's efforts to pass Article 23 of the Basic Law were thwarted by public outcry and insufficient support from the Legislative Council (Kaeding, 2017). Evidently, the moral reactions against the law's implementation in 2003 were shaped by a strong sense of identity tied to Hong Kong being separate from the mainland. In *Extras*, the only segment dealing with Article 23 touches raw nerves of identity being mutually exclusive from mainland Chineseness. One might therefore arrive at the conclusion that a national security bill legislated under the Basic Law might have been easier for Hongkongers to accept. The law foisted upon Hong Kong has been decried as a breach of the Basic Law and deliberate transgression of the Joint Declaration of 1984. The state of shock and disbelief surrounding the denial of bail to 47 pro-democracy politicians on trial for national security crimes alongside hundreds of democracy advocates, lawyers, journalists, and students reverberated across Hong Kong society (Lo, 2021).

With Beijing's security law fundamentally blurring discrete boundaries between the city's judiciary and political system characterised by rule of law and Beijing's rule *by* law, the security law legislated by the Central People's Congress needs to be viewed as a strong assertion of the Communist mandarinate's 'One China Policy' and how mainland Chineseness is cognitively expanded in mainland China to include Hongkongers and Taiwanese. As the 'One China Policy' is an expression of irredentist nationalism stressing that Hong Kong and Taiwan are inalienable from the mainland, the boundary of mainland Chineseness is usually maintained by Taiwanese and the Hong Kong Chinese by virtue of its connotations of political hostility. The tensions of Taiwanese and Hong Kong Chinese cultural-political identities in relation to pan-Chineseness encapsulating ancestry and the speaking of Mandarin can also be complicated when unintentional boundary shifts occur in certain situational contexts without the intentions of

Hongkongers or Taiwanese to revise their identifications in more exclusive or inclusive directions (Li, 2016, 678). When researching boundary-making between different Chinese ethnicities, Li (2020) stresses that because ethnic identity and ethnic solidarity are not reducible to each other, boundary crossings can occur on a situational basis even when subjects do not seek pan-ethnic solidarity.

The combination of five short segments in *Ten Years* written by their different directors posit a series of futuristic outcomes in 2025. The generation of the film's content, circulation, and reception allows researchers to capture the repertoire of situational variances in which Hongkongers' identity boundaries are symbolic and affective. With inter-textuality in the characters' many different voices ranging from pro-Beijing politicians, a former police commissioner, and gangsters in Zune Kwok's vignette entitled *Extras* to interview subjects including a university professor and an anti-China secessionist in Kiwi Chow's *Self-Immolator*, the omnibus production in its entirety is a site of heteroglossia. Much can be said about the more complicated aspect of its production, the use of filmic language and different storytelling techniques in identity narratives that indirectly draw attention to inchoate boundaries between Hong Kong and mainland China. For instance, with an eye to the insertion of the elements of a documentary/mockumentary and news footage, the *Self-Immolator* segment presents multiple realities, problematising what is considered the 'real' according to different symbolic perspectives.

In this important vignette, the hybrid nature of a non-Chinese Hongkonger's identity is expressed through the protagonist of South Asian ethnicity named Karen who speaks fluent Cantonese and self-identifies as a Hongkonger willing to commit suicide for the sake of the city's autonomy. Contrarily, in the third segment, *Dialect*, directed by Jervon Au, the self-identity of the young son of a local taxi driver who is a native-born Hongkonger of Chinese descent who has been trained to speak Mandarin in school and in his daily life appears uncertain. By juxtaposing these two vignettes, the film raises questions about the situational and purported un/intentionality of boundary work in Hong Kong being symbolic. In *Season of the End*, director Wong Fei Pang chronicles the disappearance of all things local through the preservation of the body of a taxidermist as a specimen of a Hongkonger. Adding a layer of complexity to boundary work is *Local Egg*, directed by Ka-Leung Ng. While the demand for locally produced eggs is quashed by the government's forced closure of poultry farms, the tastes, sights, and smells of local produce amount to affective identity performatives *in* the body. The combination of different social, economic, and political backgrounds in the film provides viewers with insights into boundary interfaces between Hong Kong Chinese and pan-Chinese ethnic identities when Hongkongers transition across the different cultural milieus of life in their city.

The caveat inserted in this section is that there may be limitations to how the scripts of identity in *Ten Years* can be generalised as boundary-making in Hong Kong. For instance, except for a former police commissioner and pro-establishment figures in *Extras* responsible for engineering the false-flag terror event who might have strongly identified as Hongkongers in the past, there are no scripts affirming Hong Kong Chinese identities that subsequently re-identify with mainland Chineseness. Because the security law's full impact on identity formation might only be revealed in a few years' time, the

existing climate of surveillance provides few incentives for those who practise self-censorship to engage in the free expression of their identities.

Ten Years and Embodied Boundary Work

In theoretically led empirical analyses of identity boundary work, it is necessary to depart from assumptions that dis-identifications of Hong Kong Chinese with the mainland are premised upon 'settled' self-understandings of their identities. While Hong Kong Chinese identities can be broadly homogeneously represented as a negative elaboration of pan-Chineseness, the filmic tropes of identity in *Ten Years* are not reducible to a singular way of dis-identifying with the behavioural stereotypes of mainland migrants. In this section, we locate a filmic trope wherein boundary work of being a Hongkonger is affectively performed *in* and *on* the body in the *Local Egg* and *Season of the End* segments. There is now a robust engagement by scholars of identity with how cooking and dining options culminate in visceral identity performatives *in* the body (Longhurst et al., 2009; Probyn, 2000). For instance, there is a growing awareness of haptic processes of touch and feeling that go into the manufacturing of food as a sensorial form of heritage (Woods & Donaldson, 2022). As a performative and medium of performance, it is also necessary to look beyond food as agentive matter and locate 'the political becoming of citizenship' in relation to food (Roe & Buser, 2016, 587). Food practices can blur cultural boundaries and also reinforce superordinate identities (Reddy & van Dam, 2020). The exclusion of foods with certain qualities of olfaction maintains the symbolic boundary of identities wherein transgressions are perceived as a lack of civility and may even justify repression (Low, 2019). Food consumption is not only a visceral experience but also performs boundary work affectively. Valentine (1999) succinctly argues that while food choices allow certain groups to manage how they collectively feel 'inside', eating inevitably brings the reproduction of the body and self into a constellation of social relations with others. To selectively indulge in the smells or tastes of certain forms of food is to also draw a symbolic boundary using the body.

We witness this in the fifth segment of *Ten Years* where child members of the Youth Guard report a grocer for transgressing the law with his 'local eggs' label. The grocer's swift riposte is: 'Why can I label them as Hong Kong eggs but not local eggs? Why can I use the term "Hong Kong" but not "local"?' This trumped-up ruse is allegorical of an ongoing attack on Hong Kong's local culture as well as Beijing's attempts to destroy the emotional, affective ballasts of Hongkonger identities. The grocer's supplier is forced to shutter his poultry farm because the state wishes to quash the demand for locally produced eggs and poultry. In the words of the supplier to the grocer: 'They say the farm is used against the government, we have complied with their requests . . . they are slowly killing us all'. While the film's tales of a preference for locally produced eggs are centred on business losses in the face of economic mainlandisation, the demand for the more expensive eggs produced in Hong Kong and distrust of cheaper mainland eggs locates boundary work in the body. This form of symbolic boundary work is premised on a moral and political disposition that, as Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2010, 1276) argue, is centred on 'internalising' oppressive regimes in the body and remobilising the body's physical and sensorial capacities to effect political change.

In this vignette, the preference for locally produced eggs creates a symbolic boundary of Hong Kong. When the grocer makes a phone enquiry with a supplier about mainland-sourced eggs, he ends the call with: 'I know it's a lot cheaper, but my customers don't trust that: you can't fool people with cheap eggs . . . what about Thai eggs'? In his despair, the grocer laments to his young son: 'Since you were small you were eating eggs from Cheung's farm, I don't care what others say, there is nothing wrong with eating or selling his eggs'. Evidently, in this film, it is not about the lower cost of imported eggs destroying the livelihoods of local producers when the government goes so far as to authoritatively 'kill' the tastes and aromas of Hong Kong poultry which, as visceral expressions and consumption of the local, can no longer be gastronomically reproduced in the 'gut'. Currently, Hongkongers have the liberty to indulge in the tastes and smells of food and beverages sold by pro-democracy businesses and, vice-versa, the right to boycott dining establishments that are unabashedly supportive of the establishment.

During the eruption of the anti-ELAB movement of 2019 some four years after the film's debut, an overwhelming demand for mooncakes and biscuits with protest slogans sold by pro-democracy confectionaries gained momentum as mobile apps provided pro-democracy and pro-establishment Hongkongers with directories disclosing the political leanings of restaurateurs, confectionary owners, and teashop operators. With businesses remaining politically divided and pro-establishment confectionaries and restaurants facing losses from arson, boycotts, and vandalism during the anti-ELAB protests, symbolic boundaries of Hongkonger identities remained viscerally embodied in the daily mundaneness of food and dining choices. The consumption of pro-democracy smells and tastes of food and drink mobilises collectives around a shared identity through viscera as sensory practice. As symbolic boundary-making, sensory practices of pro-democracy Hongkongers through tastes are also key to maintaining their relationships with each other. In a similar vein, the support expressed by Hongkongers towards commemoration of the June 4 massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989 by way of annual candlelight vigils constitutes a mobilisation of viscera towards single-party rule. The contrived measures implemented to shut down the June 4 Museum ahead of its anniversary in 2021, and the seizure of exhibits and arrest of the Museum's owners under the security law, amount to the state's attempts to suppress affective, visceral responses of Hongkonger identities towards Beijing.

There is a parallel observable in the local egg scenario of *Ten Years* suggesting that while performatives of nativist Hongkonger identity through dining choices constitute visceral resistance and the enactment of cultural-political distance which may elude the draconian security law at present, the capacity of food and dining outlets to unite collectives might be vulnerable to the state's scrutiny and affect control. In the local egg segment, there is a visceral rawness communicated by children clad in the uniform of the Youth Guard throwing eggs at the shutters of a bookstore selling titles critical of the Central People's Government. While the Youth Guard son of the grocer is present, he refuses to participate in the throwing of eggs. Evidently, the sensorium of the raw eggs appears to cause him discomfort. Prior to this, the grocer received a message from his son that the Youth Guard Commander was not required to inform parents of children deployed in covert operations of the state. It is possible to ascertain that eggs thrown at the shop are mainland sourced as they were taken out of a plastic egg carton whereas

locally produced eggs were always represented as loosely packaged. As the bookstore owner begins to clean up the mess, the visual rawness of mainland eggs and eggshells besmirching the shutters scripted into the film arouses viewer reactions towards the encroachment of mainland surveillance (symbolised by the raw eggs) onto the local.

While the filmic scripts suggest that locally produced eggs are superior in taste, appearance, and smell to mainland sourced eggs, they dovetail with findings indicating that certain food preparation processes that involve overcoming the sights and raw tastes of foods can allow marginalised collectives and migrants to 'find their place' or 'feel at home' (Longhurst et al., 2009). As Valentine (1999) explains, people are where they eat. In this final segment of *Ten Years*, the rawness of mainland eggs may speak to commonly expressed stereotypes of mainland migrants as a negative embodiment of the Hong Kong subject. The perceived lack of cultural refinement and inability of wealthy mainlanders to enact bodily performances of the city's Cantonese culture is a theme recurring in the literature which disallows inclusive boundary crossing (Abraham, 2020; Mathews, 2018).

This trope of identitarian boundary work *in*/*on* the body can similarly be found in the *Season of the End* segment. In the opening of this vignette, it is reported that some Hongkongers stubbornly refused to relocate and ended up dying in their cherished homes and neighbourhoods which were bulldozed. The main protagonist of this segment is a male taxidermist who, along with his female partner, is actively sifting through the rubble of forced demolitions for specimens to preserve through taxidermy. This segment foretells a tragic end to outcries over the local government's failure to consult the public about plans to destroy historical landmarks and much-loved places symbolising the city's transformation from space to 'our place'. It is allegorical of the imminent death of all things local, and the challenges faced in preserving memories of nostalgic places in the past. The Queen's Pier, for example, was a nostalgic spatial structure demolished despite strong demands that it be preserved as an integral reminder of the city's local heritage (Chen & Szeto, 2015; Henderson, 2008). While urban regeneration in land scarce Hong Kong occurs at a dizzying pace and is necessary for maintaining its competitive image as Asia's global city, the Hong Kong government is selective in demolishing places that allow people to relive positive feelings of nostalgia, coloniality, and localism that are deemed barriers to the cultural and economic integration with the mainland.

In *Season of the End*, the curation of broken cups, saucers, plates, and identity cards can be conceptualised as an aesthetic assemblage of Hong Kong's distinctively local past. Although there is nothing quintessentially Hong Kong about the plates or cups found in the rubble, they constitute affective objects of the past that fuse objects and the lost spaces occupied by the users (subjects) of these objects as one. In arguing that because affective objects are sensed rather than universally recognised, Akoury (2020, 957) highlights that 'the superimposition of subject and world embodied is circumstantial for the conditions of perception'. Here, the curation of archaeological specimens through the metaphor of taxidermy is intentionally affective because taxidermy seeks to imbue dead beings with a living appearance. Thus, specimens can be affectively perceived as being alive. In Hong Kong, colonial places and institutions set in place by the British to legitimise imperial rule for over half a century created a peculiar, yet syncretic, Hong Kong identity that discursively erased visible appearances of 'colony' (Chun, 2019, 419). This explains why certain places and the institutional affordances enjoyed by Hongkongers under colonial rule such as the separation of powers and rule of law remain vigorously defended

as 'the local' in the face of an unstoppable mainlandisation. There have also been visceral and affective resonances in authoritarian decisions to redevelop iconic local places. Demolitions despite appeals from Hongkongers forcibly unmake subjectivities of identification with mainland China in the affective realm of the visceral. This was evident in the authorities riding roughshod over the peaceful hunger strikes of Local Action, a localist conservation group that protested vociferously against the planned demolition of Queen's Pier in 2007 (Ng et al., 2010). Hunger strikes are a performative against the pernicious destruction of local places amounting to a participation in the common sensoria of a hungry, empty stomach: a site of resistance in the body.

Towards the closure of *Season of the End*, there are vignettes of how the body parts of the taxidermist affectively perform symbolic boundary work when he asks his female partner to preserve his body as the specimen of a Hongkonger. First, specimens of his hair, fingernails, and toenails are assiduously collected and stored after he intentionally exercises on an elliptical so that his sweat can be curated in a test tube. The protagonist in this short segment later allows his partner to draw incisional markings on his body with a marker pen. He is later given food mixed with coagulants intended to accelerate the embalming process, which he consumes. When the taxidermist dies, his partner completes the taxidermic process by first using tape to demarcate his dying position on the floor. The curation of the hair, fingernails, sweat specimens, and body of the taxidermist in its totality as preserved specimens of a Hongkonger tells of how the Hong Kong body and its parts which are phenotypically distinguishable from mainland Chinese ones affectively perform boundary work when they are intentionally invested with a sense of non-immutability in relation to pan-Chineseness. The differentiation of the sweat specimens of a Hongkonger from mainland Chinese, for example, when without olfactory qualities, can communicate the moral effect of suffering and repression. As a sensorial inventory of identity, sweat creates moral and political distance from the boundaries of mainland Chineseness. When these body parts such as fingernails, hair, and sweat are preserved as specimens, the symbolic boundary of Hongkongers' identity is affectively solidified by virtue of how the lost past, albeit dead, has the eternal appearance of being alive. The situationally specific conditions that precipitate this intentional form of symbolic boundary work on how the body 'speaks' without utterances can be located against the backdrop of a strong sense of helplessness, political surveillance, and the destruction of cherished places.

Blurring Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese Boundaries

Whereas the preceding section examined how the symbolic boundaries of Hong Kong Chinese identities were voluntarily maintained through bodily performatives in two segments of *Ten Years*, it is instructive to address the situational variances in which Hong Kong Chinese identities interface with the boundaries of mainland Chineseness. To complicate matters, there are also findings indicating that mainland Chinese migrants of higher socioeconomic status in the semi-autonomous city do not necessarily exemplify a stronger degree of national belonging to the mainland (Jang et al., 2021). Thus, while it is not wrong to say that Sinophobia has resulted in the marginalisation of Chinese mainlanders representing political and economic power in Hong Kong, it is important to acknowledge that this is often the result of the government's strategic use of mainland

migrants to suppress the pro-democracy movement in local politics (Wong et al., 2018). The nativist emphasis on the city's unique history, Cantonese culture, and institutions inherited from colonial rule which maintain the boundaries of Hong Kong as a semi-autonomous region is vulnerable to being reduced to Sinophobia. However, often the only intentions of Hongkongers are to slow down the inevitable forces of cultural-political mainlandisation. Therefore, the porosity of boundaries between Hongkongers and mainlanders depends on situational contexts.

In binary terms, mediated representations of Mandarin's simple characters as inferior to the complex characters of Cantonese indirectly communicate negative connotations of mainland migrants and their cultures (Lin & Jackson, 2021). While Article 9 of the Basic Law does not spell out Cantonese as the rather vague official 'Chinese language' of Hong Kong, being Cantonese and fluent in Cantonese are essential markers of identity in the semi-autonomous region. In the educational curriculum, the emphasis on the importance of speaking Mandarin, which encourages youth to internalise love for the mainland, has not been successful (Lin & Jackson, 2021). The admission by Hongkongers that they react negatively to the speaking of Mandarin resonates with claims of the purported mutual exclusivity between nativist Hong Kong Chinese and mainland Chinese identities (Lowe & Ortmann, 2020). In determining the centrality of speaking Cantonese or Mandarin in the maintenance or crossing of boundaries between Chinese identities, Li (2016) highlights the productivity of drawing an analytical distinction between mainland and pan-Chinese boundaries, with the former referring to the geo-territorial identity, while the latter refers to a negotiated form of situational ethnic-motivated identity. This way, any aversions to Mandarin need not be simplistically reduced to a refusal to cross the mainland Chinese boundary or nationally identify with China. Politics aside, because Chinese culture cannot be separated from Hong Kong's culture, in addition to the empirical realities of pro-democracy Hong Kong youth affirming rather than denying their Chinese heritage (Ortmann, 2021), there need to be possibilities for a variety of situations where Hongkongers would willingly speak Mandarin and cross the boundaries into pan-Chinese identities – instead of mainland Chinese – without any intention to revise their Hong Kong Chinese identifications.

To achieve socioeconomic mobility, it is possible, for example, for Hongkongers to be selective in terms of when they may willingly wish to demonstrate fluency in Mandarin. In the *Dialect* segment of *Ten Years*, the young son of a taxi driver is struggling to develop fluency in Mandarin, which his mother views as a vehicle for socioeconomic mobility. Without mincing words, his mother says to her husband: 'Do not speak to our son in Cantonese anymore, his upcoming Mandarin exams are very important . . . you should consider taking lessons from his tutor'. Although the taxi driver's son speaks to him in Cantonese when his mother is not around, there is a scene in which he speaks to his father in Mandarin when he requests permission to go to the home of his classmate, who is presumably from the mainland. When it becomes apparent that his classmate's parents' car is a Mercedes Benz and symbolic of economic ascendancy, the taxi driver acquiesces to his son's request. Because there are no empirical vignettes suggesting that the young son self-identified as mainland Chinese or that ethnic solidarity was sought with his classmates, it would be more appropriate to treat his speaking of Mandarin as a voluntary crossing of the pan-Chinese boundary without the discernible intention of dis-

identifying as Hong Kong Chinese. In this segment, a female passenger picked up by the taxi driver holds a phone conversation with her employer, who calls for her dismissal due to her lack of fluency in Mandarin. Although she condescendingly asks the taxi driver if he understands Cantonese when he is slow in responding to her instructions to go to Hong Hum, these scripts of the *Dialect* segment indicate that taxi drivers and ordinary Hongkongers who cannot achieve fluency in Mandarin will eventually suffer economic marginalisation.

Because the reluctance to speak Mandarin has often been negatively construed by mainland Chinese as a refusal to embrace economic opportunities, it would be an overgeneralisation to represent an insistence on speaking Cantonese as an expression of Sinophobia. As the emotional and affective elements of belonging exist together in language where the attack on language amounts to an attack of emotion (Roche, 2021), the subduing of language is tantamount to the 'killing' of Hongkongers' identity and belongingness. In the *Dialect* segment of *Ten Years*, the unfortunate denouement is that Hongkongers who can only speak Cantonese are not only economically marginalised but also susceptible to being socially ostracised. While the segment can be interpreted from the different angle of Hongkongers lacking motivation to learn Mandarin, Roche (2019, 495) explains that Beijing's policy on Mandarin is contradictory as it is an 'unnative' tongue of the Han Chinese weaponised against the flourishing of superfluous linguistic and ethnic diversity. Mandarin is also used by the Central People's Government to police and quash Tibetan language activism (Roche, 2021).

In a similar vein, Mandarin language policies and discouragement of speaking Cantonese could be viewed as an attempt to eradicate the city's distinctively local culture. In the mainland, Roche (2019, 493) identifies the subordination of all other languages to Mandarin as a 'language death machine' erasing the visibility and consciousness of its victims' group identities. As Mandarin language policy strategically homogenises Chinese identity, the speaking of Mandarin by the Hong Kong Chinese need only be represented as a boundary-crossing into the pan-Chinese category. Pan-Chineseness is also adopted by ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia who speak Mandarin but nationally dis-identify with mainland China (Li, 2016). Indeed, the fraught relations between Cantonese and Mandarin and debates over whether the traditional characters of Cantonese are a more accurate preservation of Han culture reflect an urgent need to protect the local Cantonese culture and language from the onslaught of homogenisation processes that suffuse Han Chinese exceptionalism and the speaking of Mandarin with loyalty to the Communist Party.

As markers of identity and the right to belong to Hong Kong, 'old' South Asian settlers, and 'new' asylum seekers fluent in Cantonese and self-identifying as Hongkongers fulfil the prerequisite of crossing into the Hongkonger identity boundaries. Recent research highlights that South Asian youth identifications as Hongkongers are fair rather than strong (Ng et al., 2019). In the *Self-Immolator* segment of *Ten Years*, the South Asian teenager called Karen is rudely told to go back to Pakistan when she canvasses a newsstand owner to support the pro-independence movement. Despite the assertion that she is an acculturated and assimilated Hongkonger born in the city, Karen was curtly told to leave him alone. In this situation, the stranger will not entertain any discussion of Hong Kong's political future because of her non-Chinese background; Karen is effectively denied entry into the Hongkonger boundary. Despite this, her

Hong Kong Chinese boyfriend and her other male friends with pro-independence leanings willingly treat Karen as an acculturated Hongkonger. In accordance with Wimmer's (2013) schema of boundary-making, there is situational boundary expansion to include Karen due to the political outlook she shares with her friends. In another scene, Karen and her male friends render assistance to an elderly and frail Hong Kong Chinese woman overcome by police tear gas in a street demonstration. After recovering, the elderly woman watches in horror at Karen's helplessness when she is restrained from intervening as the riot police beat her male friend. The old woman then proceeds to set herself alight in front of the British Consulate. Karen's sacrifices for the pro-democracy movement and willingness to die for the city could also be viewed as sufficient to impel the elderly local Chinese woman to sacrifice her life for Hong Kong's youth.

Tying these examples together, the above analyses depict how the various actors in *Ten Years* negotiate between their Hongkongers' identities through language and politics. The various forms of affective experiences of these negotiations are mediated with the socioeconomic dimensions of Hong Kong's future of co-existence with and under China. As Wimmer (2013) suggests, boundary work offers the agent opportunities to negotiate their ethnic and cultural identities in response to their grounded experiences to stay relevant or secure socioeconomic opportunities or standing within communities or societies. Here, we show that these negotiations not only open the porousness of Hongkonger and Chinese identities as ethnic identities, but also demonstrate the cultural, economic, and political implications of claiming or disavowing the various layers of one's Hongkonger identity. Furthermore, the significant takeaway from *Ten Years*' instances of blurring as boundary work is also the film's affective use of dystopia to unravel the characters' experiences with their own local identities, which echoes Abbas' (1997) iteration of Hong Kong, and by extension, Hongkongers' identity, as indefinable. By framing dystopia as both the performative encounters of loss through 'authentic' Hongkongers' language, culture, ways of life, and the embodied selves, and hybridity through the renegotiation of what it means to be a Hongkonger, *Ten Years* translates Abbas' politics of disappearance into an exercise of eking out existence through the risk and experience of social extinction (Jarić et al., 2022). This expression is emotively powerful, for it subverts existing claims of belonging by Hong Kong and its people under the Chinese government by focusing on excavating and reviving the modalities and discourses surrounding what it means to be authentically a Hongkonger (Yu, 2022), constantly contemplating extinction as a mode of existence.

Conclusion

As of the present, some eight years after *Ten Years* was released, the future of Hong Kong society and its negotiated identities remains under both uncertainty and great scrutiny, as pressure mounts by the Beijing government to whittle down local resistance to its grip on the city. We have seen watershed changes with the national security legislation of 2020, coupled with restrictions brought about in response to the Covid-19 pandemic designed to bring an end to protests in the city (Lowe & Ortmann, 2022). In more ways than one, the production becomes a stark reminder of the dystopian realities of Hong Kong as a global city.

Around the time that *Ten Years* debuted in 2015, after the Umbrella Movement of 2014 and prior to the watershed anti-ELAB movement of 2019, young Hongkongers who had never experienced national belongingness to the Chinese nation were already engaging in hopeful, affective performatives of Hong Kong as 'nation' (Mathews, 2018; 2020). While this highly contested place-based identity was splintered along generational lines during the Umbrella Movement, Hongkonger identities in the present ought to be represented as capable of being both in/outside China, while encapsulating different explorations that blur ethnic, national, and cultural boundaries. It is therefore necessary to postulate the possibility of Hong Kong's semi-autonomous status allowing for instances when Hongkongers will interface with the moral and political boundaries of mainland Chinese identities without revising their identities in more inclusive or exclusive directions.

This article utilised the *Ten Years* omnibus production to provide a theoretically informed empirical examination of the affective boundary-making of Hongkongers' identity formation within the city itself. While Hongkongers, as the amalgamation of national, ethnic, and cultural identities in flux, are susceptible to being simplistically represented as oppositional to certain boundary markers of mainland Chineseness such as speaking Mandarin and political orientation, this article's use of vignettes from various segments of *Ten Years* through two overarching filmic tropes suggests that symbolic boundary work can be affectively performed in/on the body by way of language use as well as the shared feelings experienced from food and aesthetic consumption to form hybridised and blurring forms of identity boundaries. In the first filmic trope, the boundary work is affectively embodied using inventories of sensoria such as the raw egg in *Local Egg* and the taxidermic curation of bodily specimens in *Season of the End*. The symbolic boundaries conveyed through the body dovetail with wider debates on how bodily feelings derived from the body's engagements with viscera maintain moral boundaries between collectives (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2010). The marshalling of tastes and smells of foods as sensorial practice that creates cultural and political distance opens debates on how affective boundary work in the present which enjoins the past and the current uncertainties could culminate in the making of a heritage that assigns certain sensorial cultures to the boundary of incivility. The second trope suggests that although fluency in Cantonese is an important marker of identity and belonging to Hong Kong, the vignettes in *Dialect* suggest that Hongkongers who willingly speak Mandarin for economic purposes may be more likely to embody a pan-Chinese identity without crossing the mainland Chinese identity boundary. For non-Chinese Hongkongers, there are vignettes in *Self-Immolator* that suggest that fluency in Cantonese and the embodiment of a sense of solidarity through hopes of a democratic future can result in the blurring and expansion of the Hongkonger category to include visibly distinctive ethnicities such as South Asian residents living in the city.

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