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Everyday Resistance, Female Agency, and Identity Politics: Code-Switching as Tactic in *Still Human*[*]

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Abstract

Despite the large population of migrant workers residing and working in cosmopolitan Hong Kong, they have been largely underrepresented or represented negatively in Hong Kong cinema. The 2018 film *Still Human*, however, provides a rather flexible image of migrant workers with the use of code-switching as a pivotal device. Given the fact that Hong Kong is a multilingual society, the use of code-switching by migrant workers *in Still Human* can be interpreted, decoded, and reflected on as a tactic with multiple sociocultural functions and subversive potentials. Hence, this essay aims to examine the tactics and multilayered functions of code-switching in *Still Human*, focusing on three principal perspectives: code-switching as the practice of everyday resistance; code-switching as the manifestation of female agency; and code-switching as the site for identity politics. More crucially, this essay argues that in *Still Human*, the use of code-switching and code-mixing can be seen to enable migrant workers in Hong Kong to resist the structural domination of the global capitalist and neo-liberalist system while reinforcing female agency and autonomy, thereby deconstructing the self/other binary between the peripheral migrant population and the mainstream society.

Keywords

code-switching, migrant workers, tactics, everyday resistance, female agency, identity politics, *Still Human*, Hong Kong cinema, Hong Kong independent cinema

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Introduction

As a global city that embraces transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, Hong Kong has long attracted large numbers of migrant workers from numerous countries—such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand—to work as temporary residents.[1] In cosmopolitan Hong Kong, Cantonese, English, and Mandarin as well as South and Southeast Asian languages are used, establishing it as a multilingual society. Code-switching and code-mixing multiple languages has become common for Hong Kongers and migrant workers from different ethnic groups.[2]

However, despite the large population of migrant workers living and working in Hong Kong, they have been underrepresented in Hong Kong cinema. When they have appeared on screen, they are often depicted with biased or stereotyped images. In mainstream Hong Kong cinema from the 1970s to 2012, ethnic minorities, or non-ethnic Chinese actors and actresses, primarily play unimportant supporting roles or minor figures (Yang 73). In earlier Hong Kong cinema, characters played by ethnic minorities, including those from South or Southeast Asia, have been represented as dangerous figures, "outlaws or fugitives . . . either drug dealers or thieves" (Yang 57) or "bad guys who always appear in the dark with weapons" (Leung 66). Filipina domestic workers and South Asian migrant workers have often been represented as entertainers or comedians, stereotypically associated with being greedy, corrupt, and noisy (Yang 60-61). In the 2004 film *Driving Miss Wealthy* (James Sai-Sang Yuen), the differences between Filipina workers and ethnic-Chinese Hong Kongers are represented vis-à-vis ethnicity, class, and social hierarchy. More notably, since there are few Hong Kong films that focus on the stories of Filipinos in Hong Kong, and it is difficult for them to find roles as main characters, *Driving Miss Wealthy* plays an outsized role in contributing to the negative media representation of Filipino characters in Hong Kong cinema (Yang 61-62).

In comparison with the biased representations of migrant workers in earlier Hong Kong cinema, the 2018 film *Still Human* provides a rather flexible image. Produced by the renowned director Fruit Chan and directed by emerging female director Oliver Siu Kuen Chan, *Still Human* centers on the relationship between Evelyn, a Filipina domestic worker played by Crisel Consunji, and her employer

[1] For instance, around 200,000 Filipina domestic workers have migrated to Hong Kong, becoming temporary residents (Boersma 273).

[2] Brian Hok-Shing Chan points out that due to the British colonial background of the city, code-switching "has been a common feature in the speech of Cantonese-English bilinguals in Hong Kong" (13); Cantonese-English code-mixing has become widespread "not only in everyday communication but also in all discourses" (Setter et al. 98).

Cheong-wing, played by Anthony Wong. As a social realist film, *Still Human* addresses the motifs of ethnicity, class, gender, and social hierarchy while closely depicting the hopeless life of Cheong-wing, a disabled middle-aged man who was paralyzed because of an incident on a construction site and now lives alone. Moreover, the protagonist Evelyn was aiming to become a professional photographer in the Philippines. However, her family had financial problems, so she had to give up her dream and go to Hong Kong as a domestic worker. As Evelyn starts to take care of Cheong-wing, the two gradually begin to understand and help each other. It should be noted that in contrast to the negative images of ethnic minorities and migrant workers in earlier Hong Kong cinema, Evelyn is portrayed as a talented woman with a bright and positive personality who shows helpfulness and compassion for Cheong-wing as well as determination and female agency.

Hamid Naficy's notion of "accented cinema" highlights the articulation of the diasporic voices of third-world filmmakers through their filmmaking practice (4),[3] and the voices of Filipino workers in Hong Kong are similarly accented by Chan in *Still Human*. Moreover, Gina Marchetti has emphasized the significance of Hong Kong women filmmakers since, as they "position themselves within Hong Kong in a process of transformation from colony to SAR, their contribution to a film culture situated between the local and the global becomes more salient" (238). Also, they "tend to be more self-conscious about their choice of subject matter and approach because they have been marginalized" within the film industry (240). Chan thus provides a subtle observation on the subjectivity and female agency of Filipino workers from the perspective of a female director.

Furthermore, given the recent development of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) cinema after the passage of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) in the post-handover era, Hong Kong scholars Mirana May Szeto and Yun-chung Chen have shed light on the tensions between the Hong Kong-China co-production model and local independent cinema. They posit that Hong Kong SAR cinema can be seen as a site of identity politics wherein younger Hong Kong filmmakers who focus on independent film productions manifest a form of cultural resistance to the "mainlandization" of Hong Kong cinema, the Chinese film market hegemony, and Mandarin-centric cultural dominance ("Mainlandization" 121-22). With regard to the current socio-political milieu of the city, the revival of localism and the rise of the new discourse of local identity have appeared in Hong

[3] For Naficy, the best "accented films" capture the "conditions both of exile and diaspora and of cinema" by "expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers" (4).

Kong over the past decade (Veg 323). Hong Kong independent cinema has also shown its tendency toward re-localization in recent years (Lee 67).

Still Human can be seen as one of the latest films to embody the revival of localism in Hong Kong independent cinema. Shot on location in the Oi Man Estate of Ho Man Tin, one of the famous public housing communities in Kowloon, *Still Human* illustrates the local daily life of Cheong-wing and Evelyn in the midst of Hong Kong urban spaces. The everydayness of Evelyn and Cheong-wing's lives are not only depicted through their behavior and daily routines but also manifested by their conversations and the use of languages—the film reflects on the use of and switching among Cantonese, English, Tagalog, and Mandarin.

In what follows, I will provide a socio-cultural reading of the use and subversive potential of code-switching by various groups in *Still Human*. The film effectively addresses societal issues of ethnicity, gender, and class and the marginal position of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong society. In the first section, I draw on the notion of "everyday resistance" to focus on how code-switching in *Still Human* functions to resist the structural domination of global capitalism and the neo-liberalist system long established in Hong Kong. In the second section, while considering gendered and racial discrimination against minority groups in Hong Kong, I will also explore how female agency and the empowerment process can be triggered by the use of code-switching. In the third section, I offer a socio-political reading of code-switching in *Still Human,* which I interpret not only in relation to the forms of everyday resistance and female agency of migrant workers, but also as the site of identity politics for Hong Kongers who feel anxious and uncertain in the post-handover era.

Through a close analysis of the film, I aim to explore the tactics and multilayered functions of code-switching used by migrant workers in *Still Human*, focusing on three principal perspectives: code-switching as the practice of everyday resistance; code-switching as the manifestation of female agency; and code-switching as the site for identity politics. In doing so, this essay argues that code-switching by migrant workers in the film can be decoded, interpreted, and reflected on as a tactic with multiple socio-cultural functions and subversions. More crucially, the use of code-switching and code-mixing helps these migrant workers resist the domination of the global capitalist system and reinforce female agency and autonomy while eliminating the self/other binary between the peripheral status of marginal groups and mainstream society.

Code-Switching as the Practice of Everyday Resistance

In this section of the essay, I will focus on the use of code-switching in *Still Human* through the prism of the "everyday form of resistance." First, it is necessary to conceptualize the notion of "everyday resistance" as a theoretical point of departure. Resistance is a broad term, able to denote different forms of political action, including civil rights movements, women's rights movements, anti-colonialism movements, and other social movements. In addition to these notable political events that resisted the state or colonial hegemony in history, resistance is also able to imply other contemporary forms of action, like the work of WikiLeaks or the Occupy Wall Street protest (Caygill 207-08). As Michel Foucault suggests, "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (95). In other words, power accompanies resistance and vice versa. Moreover, resistance is characterized not only by violent defiance of power but also by "pluralities of resistance": "mobilizing groups or individuals inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior" (96).

Building upon this idea of "pluralities of resistance," rather than large-scale protest or social movement as a radical form of resistance, I will primarily focus on individual attempts to resist the power of a certain structural institution of the state or law. The individual might incorporate certain non-violent behaviors of resistance based on everyday life, such as the use of languages, body movements, and other behaviors. In terms of Foucault's idea of "pluralities of resistance," he does not particularly describe the form of resistance involved with "mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior" (96) as an "everyday resistance." Yet, he still suggests that this form of resistance is rooted in individuals' everyday life, as "dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds" (96). In this regard, the physical and mental mobility of individuals is a key site of everyday resistance.

Anthropologist James C. Scott also suggests the idea of everyday resistance based on his two-year ethnographical study of peasants in Sedaka, a Malaysian village. Scott asserts that rather than large-scale resistance, these peasants are able to conduct other, more prosaic "*everyday* forms of peasant resistance" (29; emphasis in original). For Scott, this kind of prosaic resistance is a "constant struggle between the

peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them," and "most of the forms this struggle takes stop well short of collective outright defiance" (29). Everyday forms of resistance can be seen as "the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups," which include "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth" (29). Scott further indicates the common features of these "commonplace forms of resistance": "They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms" (29). That is to say, these prosaic, everyday forms of resistance are arbitrary and not targeted or comprehensive, as the individual might have difficulty in organizing collective political action or revolutionary demonstrations.

Cultural theorist Michel de Certeau similarly focuses on the practice of everyday life and the resistance embedded within it. According to de Certeau, everyday life practice can be related to "ways of operating," which include all the detailed activities and behaviors that occur in everyday life, such as ways of "walking, reading, producing, speaking" (30). He stresses that these "ways of operating" are similar to "instructions for use": "they create a certain play in the machine through a stratification of different and interfering kinds of functioning." Thus, by deploying "ways of operating," or "instructions for use," everyday life practice is associated with "plurality" and "creativity" (30). De Certeau also uses the term "tactic" to underscore the feature of the everyday life practice as "an art of the weak" (36-37). These tactics are normally arbitrary, flexible, and hard to determine, and they are often accompanied by mobility. Hence, the tactic as "an art of the weak" can be regarded as a form of resistance against differing powers or dominations.

Forms of everyday resistance can be further understood through de Certeau's concept of the agentic ways of "making do" that are embedded in everyday life practice. Susie Scott argues that "there [are] many opportunities for 'making do' with subversive practices, such as adapting, appropriating or reassembling materials: graffiti-ing a wall, taking an alternative route around an urban space, refusing to conform to the 9-5 working day, and so on" (29-30). The subversive potential of "making do" can remain nuanced and prosaic; it does not need to be substantially emancipatory, as Ben Highmore asserts: "resistance to capitalist globalization doesn't always come in an emancipatory form" (113). Such a notion of "everyday resistance," variously articulated by Foucault, James C. Scott, and de Certeau, helps explain the mechanisms and effects of code-switching in *Still Human*.

The film begins with Evelyn arriving at a local bus stop in Ho Man Tin, and her

employer Cheong-wing then picks her up. Evelyn only speaks English to Cheong-wing, while Cheong-wing can only speak Cantonese alongside a few English words—he uses Google Translate to assist with his English. The first use of code-switching occurs when Cheong-wing asks Evelyn, in very poor English, to give him her passport. Later, Cheong-wing decides to learn English in order to communicate with Evelyn more smoothly. This is the fundamental function of code-switching between Cantonese and English in the film: to accommodate the languages used by others and to facilitate interpersonal relations and communication. Cheong-wing's close friend Fai Cheung (played by Sam Lee) plays another important role by instructing Evelyn about caring for Cheong-wing. In this sequence, spectators can hear Fai Cheung's voice but cannot see him in the frame; he primarily speaks English (with some grammatical errors) while reading the instructions to Evelyn, mixing in a few Cantonese terms (those he cannot express in English). This is the first use of code-mixing in the film, reflecting the multiple languages used by Hong Kongers in their everyday life.

It should be noted that in *Still Human*, the marginalized and peripheral status of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong society is highlighted when Evelyn meets her Filipino friends in the Central district. In this scene, Evelyn and her friends chat about their lives in Tagalog, and her more experienced friends suggest that she needs to pretend to be stupid in order to avoid being overloaded with work—a form of micro-resistance against the unreasonable work demands placed on domestic workers. The use of code-switching occurs as they move from Tagalog to English, then switch back to Tagalog as a social and political tactic that resonates with de Certeau's "art of the weak." For example, Evelyn's friend Loma reveals that she always pretends to be stupid in front of her employers: "Mom, I don't know how to take the MTR. Sir, I don't know my way . . . Do you know what they think of the Filipinos?" (00:11:20-00:11:45). Here, Loma begins in Tagolog, suddenly switches to English, and then reverts to Tagalog. Loma's speech mimics Hong Kong employers who show their arrogance and prejudice toward Filipina domestic workers, and it is articulated through code-switching—a witty form of everyday resistance to the power and structural domination of the global capitalist system, embodied here in the demands of their employers. If we consider this sequence in the Saidian sense,[4] Filipina domestic workers are seen as the inferior "other" by their Hong Kong employers. The rigid dichotomy between self/other and Hong Konger/Filipino has been established and resisted—another of Evelyn's friends asks her not to learn Cantonese, and even if she does, not to let her employers know. Thus, the choice of migrant workers to use

[4] See Said, *Orientalism* and "Orientalism."

certain languages and switch among them can be read as the practice of everyday resistance in *Still Human*.

Spectators can see this practice again in the sequence where Cheong-wing leaves the hospital to find Evelyn lifting weights in order to better assist his disabled body. Here Cheong-wing switches to English and mixes Cantonese with English words and phrases in the process of communication, thereby showing his appreciation of Evelyn's efforts. Cheong-wing has attempted to learn more English through videotapes, displaying his recognition of Evelyn and his willingness to get closer to her—as mentioned above, code-switching and -mixing can also function to facilitate cross-cultural communication and optimize interpersonal relationships. This function is further reinforced in the following scene, when Evelyn realizes that she has been cheated by a market vendor because she is from the Philippines and does not understand Cantonese. She then decides to learn Cantonese from Cheong-wing to fight back, as part of her everyday resistance, against such malicious behavior. Her effort can also be read as mobilizing "the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups" (J. Scott 29), a survival tactic for a member of the migrant community who wants to register her resistance against her perceived helplessness as an outsider and racial discrimination in Hong Kong society.

Cheong-wing therefore begins to teach Evelyn some basic Cantonese words and phrases such as "thank you," explaining when to use such phrases in various situations. Their relationship has been activated and enhanced through code-switching and code-mixing. Later, when Cheong-wing learns about Evelyn's dream of being a photographer, he buys her a professional camera and encourages her to continue to take more photographs. Through such code-switching and everyday actions, the racial and gendered discrimination against Filipina domestic workers has been symbolically contested, and the dichotomy between self/other and peripheral/center has been weakened in the film.

Code-Switching as the Manifestation of Female Agency

In Hong Kong, the employment of Filipina domestic workers is conducted through two-year contracts, and some domestic workers choose to stay for "multiple contracts," thus facing a state of "permanent temporariness" that has generated a great deal of uncertainty (Boersma 273). Such uncertainty positions them in a subordinate status in terms of ethnicity, class, and gender, and they often encounter disparagement not only from Hong Kong society but even from their Filipino families, as seen in *Still Human*. For instance, at the beginning of the film, Evelyn is talking with her

mother on the phone in her tiny room, switching from English to Tagalog. It becomes clear that the merciless mother wants her daughter to give up her dream of being a professional photographer so she can instead work in Hong Kong and send her earnings back to the Philippines—a process of deprivation that destroys her autonomy under the logics of patriarchal society and global capitalism.

In *Still Human*, the marginalized and peripheral status of Filipina domestic workers is demonstrated in a sequence that embodies the structural domination of the neoliberal capitalist system in Hong Kong society. One day, Cheong-wing accidentally falls down and Evelyn fails to catch him; as a result, he is sent to the hospital, where Evelyn meets his sister (played by Cecilia Yip) and his close friend Fai Cheung. Cheong-wing's sister is quite angry at Evelyn and faults her for the accident. Code-switching from Cantonese, she warns Evelyn in perfectly fluent English, "Just make sure you do your job carefully; otherwise, you will be fired" (00:18:07-00:18:12). Hence, Cheong-wing's sister can be read as a symbolic figure who plays the role of the superior, thereby manifesting the power of the employers and other Hong Kongers who show bias and discrimination toward Filipina domestic workers. Crucially, her use of code-switching from Cantonese to English functions as a form of domination that reinforces the binary between the peripheral (migrant domestic workers) and the central (Hong Kongers).

Evelyn's status of being subject to and restricted by patriarchal and neo-capitalist society is also demonstrated when she decides to file a transnational lawsuit against her spouse and seek divorce. When Evelyn eventually wins the lawsuit, her mother calls once again to ask Evelyn to send money back to the Philippines—otherwise, she will not meet her daughter again. Evelyn cries, and then Cheong-wing appears and talks to her mother. The use of code-switching and code-mixing is prominent:

> Cheong-wing [in English]: "Why don't you love your daughter? Why?"
> Evelyn's mother [in English]: "Who is it?"
> Cheong-wing [in English]: "I am the boss."
> Evelyn's mother [switching to Cantonese, with the phrase "take care" in English]: "Hi, I worked in Hong Kong for twenty years. Thank you for hiring my daughter. But I don't want her to be there anymore. She has to come home, and *take care* of her family, rather than spending her money on divorce and photography." (01:12:58-01:13:23)

In this nuanced dialogue that reveals Evelyn's mother's experience of working in

Hong Kong for many years and her fluency in Cantonese, her use of code-mixing reflects that Cantonese is normally mixed with English phrases and words in Hong Kong (K. Chan, "Being" 76). Her use of "take care" in English poignantly manifests the ideological domination of patriarchal society—the predominating idea that a woman is expected to take care of her family instead of fulfilling her own ambitions. Given the emphasis on the English phrase, Evelyn is recognized as a gendered object who belongs to her family, rather than being an empowering individual with female agency.

If gender bias and racial discrimination toward Filipina migrant workers can be seen in the film as the *structure* rigidly formulated in Hong Kong, the corresponding subversive female agency of these migrant workers is articulated and proclaimed through the use of code-switching. The film's narrative reaches a climax when Evelyn is encouraged to send her photographs to a competition, where she wins the special mention prize. In order to celebrate Evelyn's achievement, she and Cheong-wing decide to dress up and participate in the award ceremony together. Crucially, the above-mentioned *structure* established by the supposed superiority of Hong Kong people over the Filipina migrant workers is manifested in the award ceremony itself. When Evelyn wins the prize, a young Hong Kong woman standing behind Cheong-wing complains about it, code-switching from Cantonese to English: "she is just a Filipina domestic worker [in Cantonese]. How can a maid be qualified? Crazy! [in English]" (01:27:31-01:27:36). Cheong-wing is quite upset by these malicious words from this Hong Kong young lady, a figure who embodies racial discrimination toward the diasporic migrant workers in the midst of Hong Kong society.

In this scene, when the camera captures Cheong-wing's anger, Cassandra, the chairwoman of the photography competition, suddenly appears and says to him: "Don't mind her. She [Evelyn] is definitely qualified [in English]" (01:27:38-01:27:42). It should be noted that these warm and supportive words show Cassandra's good intentions toward Cheong-wing and her kindness to Evelyn. In contrast to the malicious Hong Kong woman, Cassandra plays the role of the empowered female who recognizes Evelyn's potential and acknowledges her achievement in photography. Moreover, as the plot develops, Cassandra plays a crucial role in encouraging Evelyn to chase her dream, inviting her to join her studio and work with her. As an empowered and empowering figure, Cassandra effectively articulates female agency while facilitating an emancipation process through which Evelyn can construct her self-awareness and autonomy, regardless of the biased and unreasonable demands imposed on Filipinas by patriarchal and racial domination.

Another key figure who embodies female agency and reinforces the

empowerment of migrant workers appears in the next scene of the awards ceremony, when Evelyn meets an elegant lady in front of a prize-winning photograph. Again, the use of code-switching is prominent:

> The Lady [in English]: "Very powerful photo, isn't it?"
> Evelyn [in English]: "Yes, humans can be so fragile."
> The Lady [in English]: "But even at the most fragile moments, don't forget, we can be very strong. Congratulations on your award!"
> Evelyn [in English]: "Thank you."
> The Lady [in Tagalog]: "I saw your photo, it was great. I was also a domestic worker many years ago. That doesn't limit what you can become."
> She continues [in English]: "Keep going. The sky is the limit." (01:28:30-01:29:09)

After the conversation, Evelyn realizes that this lady is Professor Carmen, who is also from the Philippines and used to be a domestic worker in Hong Kong. By switching from English to Tagalog, Professor Carmen shows her affinity and intimacy with Evelyn, articulating female agency with her extraordinary strength, persistence, and competence—Evelyn is empowered by both her words and the code-switching. Evelyn's potential and female agency have also been manifested by her negotiation of racial and gender discrimination, as well as by her talent and accomplishment in photography. Crucially, in *Still Human*, code-switching, which accompanies all these achievements, can be seen as a pivotal device that triggers the empowerment process and emancipation of the restricted Filipina domestic workers, thereby challenging the rigid patriarchal and racialized *structure* for the migrant workers in the society of Hong Kong.

Chan, the film's director, reveals that Evelyn is adapted from a real figure: Xyza Cruz Bacani, a prize-winning Filipina photographer who was a domestic worker in Hong Kong for nearly ten years. She never gave up on her dreams and finally became a professional documentary photographer. During the filming process of *Still Human*, Chan invited Bacani to teach the actor who portrays her, Crisel Consunji, how to take a photo, and Bacani also provided her work to be shown in the film. Bacani received a prize from the HIPA awards and was featured by Forbes and BBC (Hsiang)—a true success story manifesting both female agency and subversive potential. Moreover, the leading actress of *Still Human*, Consunji, who engages in art education for children, theater performance, and social activism, is another true success story for

female agency. In an interview, when she recounts her diasporic experience moving from the Philippines to Hong Kong, she emphasizes the significance of supporting and empowering migrant workers. She also acknowledges the efforts made by Chan, as *Still Human* provides a "fair representation" rather than a "misrepresentation" of female migrant workers. For Consunji, the film gives voice to migrant workers, and this can be also reckoned as "a tool for progress in society": "[with the film], we, as Filipinos, are not only given a voice but also a chance to be recognized as a part of Hong Kong society" (qtd. in Kończak). Hence, female agency and the diasporic voices of migrant workers are manifested not only in the film's narrative but also unfold through the real-life success stories of these Filipino heroines—the female photographer Bacani and the leading actress Consunji—in the actual social context associated with the film.

Code-Switching as the Site for Identity Politics

Linguistic anthropologist Monica Heller argues that the study of code-switching can be associated with the politics of languages, with language practices functioning vis-à-vis "the creation, exercise, maintenance or change of relations of power" (163-64). Focusing on the language practices and contested conventions of the dominant Anglophone and subordinated Francophone groups in Quebec, Heller emphasizes that "code-switching may be a means of re-defining conventions of language choice as part of a process of re-defining relations of power" (172). In the case of Hong Kong, code-switching can be also seen as a site of power relations. As Ka Long Roy Chan points out, given the fact that Hong Kong is a postcolonial city, critical focus on the use of languages there has primarily been on bilingual code-switching between Cantonese and English. Yet, due to the increasing cross-border interaction and contact with mainland China, alongside the compulsory Mandarin curriculum in schools, a new form of trilingual code-switching has appeared ("Trilingual" 1). In post-handover Hong Kong cinema, the politics of languages and their social hierarchies have also been examined and proclaimed. In the comedic film *Vulgaria* (Ho-cheung Pang, 2012), for instance, vulgar Cantonese is represented as a weapon that can challenge the orthodox and canonized hegemony of Mandarin and the mainland Chinese (Lin 17). In the renowned omnibus political film *Ten Years* (2015), composed of five shorts, the marginalization of Cantonese is articulated in *Dialect* (Jevons Au), in which a Hong Kong taxi driver is forbidden to use Cantonese and forced to use Mandarin under the domination of the mainlanders. This suggests that Hong Kong's local values and cultures, including the Cantonese

language, have been gradually erased in the post-handover era (Shi 106). In Hong Kong, switching between multiple languages can be seen as a contested site for identity politics, in which Hong Kong trilingual speakers are constantly negotiating their use of languages in-between Cantonese, English, and Mandarin—an entanglement and contestation between localization, globalization, and re-nationalization in a changing socio-political milieu.

In *Still Human*, it should be noted that the use of code-switching among multiple languages not only contests the self/other binary between Hong Kong employer and Filipina migrant employee, but also manifests the social hierarchies and identity politics of post-handover Hong Kong society. Considering the portrayal of Cheong-wing, especially his social context and his relation with his family, it is essential to dissect its underlying meaning regarding the socio-political milieu of post-handover Hong Kong. He is a middle-aged Hong Konger who is paralyzed and lives in public housing, and he is portrayed as a figure who suffers from this physical impairment and economic instability. His melancholic personality and self-abasement can be seen as metonymically applying to the average Hong Konger, who feels uncertainty and anxiety in the shadow of post-handover societal vicissitudes. Furthermore, Cheong-wing is depicted as a man who has been physically and mentally isolated from his family since he was severely injured on a construction site. As a consequence, he is divorced from his wife, and she later marries a rich man from Beijing. In this new configuration of the family, Cheong-wing's son Chun-yin (played by Himmy Ting-him Wong) gets a "new" Chinese father capable of supporting his education in New York. Through flashbacks, spectators can learn that Chun-yin was an excellent student in Hong Kong. However, his relationship with his father changes after the accident. After he is paralyzed and disabled, Cheong-wing feels that he has failed as a good father, and he regrets being unable to pay for his talented son to study abroad and provide him with a brighter future.

Code-switching is also a contested site of identity politics in *Still Human*. In the scene where Cheong-wing is video-chatting with Chun-yin, he first uses English in greeting to show that he has been studying a new language, then switches to Cantonese in their subsequent conversation. Later, Cheong-wing's ex-wife joins the conversation, using Cantonese. In the midst of this Cantonese chat, the "new" Chinese father of Cheong-wing's son suddenly interrupts in Mandarin, and Cheong-wing and his son correspondingly reply in that language. Since code-switching is a conscious process for a certain purpose, Cheong-wing and Chun-yin's switch from Cantonese to Mandarin manifests the intricacies of an entire social

hierarchy and identity politics in post-handover Hong Kong. As Heller claims, "code-switching may be part of a process of eventually successful assimilation," which can be "seen at the level of individuals as a process of language learning or collectively as one of language shift" (171). That is, Cantonese users—here the "disabled" Hong Konger Cheong-wing and his son—are depicted as catering or surrendering to the dominance of the Mandarin user, the "new father" with political and economic power.

In subsequent scenes, Chun-yin invites his father to participate in his graduation ceremony in New York, but Cheong-wing is determined not to join. In the face of the economic superiority of the Chinese stepfather, he feels ashamed of his "inferior" status. This shift poignantly manifests the "structure of feeling under conditions of anxiety and uncertainty, through which such subjects recognize and organize themselves" in a quest for new Hong Kong identities under the shadow of Chinese authority (Ip 6). Such a structure of feeling can be further understood in relation to the notion of "Hong Kong SAR cinema as a cinema of anxiety," an idea raised by Szeto and Chen. They argue that in Hong Kong SAR cinema, "this anxiety has to do with neoliberalization and mainlandization drastically altering Hong Kong reality in uncanny ways" ("Hong Kong" 90). For Cheong-wing, who can be allegorically read as the incarnation of disabled Hong Kongers, the fear of deterioration and helplessness, and the danger of being replaced by his son's stepfather, constantly haunt him. Hence, he attempts (in a dream) to end his life by jumping off his building. It should be noted that the director arranges an empty shot for this scene, capturing the sky from the bottom of the building—the camera then begins to continuously rotate and gradually move upwards to a level higher than the building. More crucially, this shot metaphorically suggests the resurrection of Cheong-wing: a process of fall to rebirth, foreshadowing the end of the film when Chun-yin decides to go back to Hong Kong and reunite with him. This can also be read as a form of the reconstruction and reaffirmation of Hong Kong identity.

Conclusion

With the revival of localism in Hong Kong independent cinema during the post-handover era, filmmakers have turned to focus on the city itself. As Ackbar Abbas presciently stated in 1997, "the new Hong Kong cinema deserves attention because it has finally found a worthy subject—it has found Hong Kong itself as the subject" (23). A group of young filmmakers have recently embarked on an effort to capture "new Hong Kong stories" that focus on various societal issues, and many of them depict the stories of diasporic migrant workers in Hong Kong. In addition to

Chan's *Still Human*, Ming-kai Leung and Kate Reilly's *Memories to Choke On, Drinks to Wash Them Down* (2019) illustrates the close relationship between a domestic helper from Indonesia and her employer in the first part of the film, while Kelvin Kin Long Chan addresses the situation of South Asian ethnic minorities in his crime film *Hand Rolled Cigarette* (2020). By foregrounding the autonomy and diasporic voices of migrant workers and ethnic minorities with the use of code-switching and code-mixing, these young filmmakers of Hong Kong independent cinema continue to reflect on the multilingualism and transnationalism of Hong Kong society. Such practices reinforce the emphasis on localism in Hong Kong independent cinema, and they can further be seen as constructing a discourse of cultural resistance against the Chinese- and Mandarin-centered hegemony that characterizes the Hong Kong-China co-production model (Szeto and Chen, "Mainlandization" 119) and Hong Kong in a broader, socio-political sense.

Through the use of code-switching and code-mixing, *Still Human* provides an example that embodies the revival of localism and diasporic voices in Hong Kong independent cinema. Through a close analysis of the film, I have explored the ways in which code-switching can be viewed as a tactic in the practice of everyday resistance, as the manifestation of female agency, and as a site for identity politics. Furthermore, this essay provides multilayered contributions to the field. First, it offers a perspective for the interpretation of code-switching in *Still Human* in relation to multiple socio-cultural and socio-political functions with subversive potentials. Second, it contributes to filling in the research gap by focusing on a film that manifests female agency and their empowerment process with the use of code-switching by migrant workers, who have been generally underrepresented or represented in a biased manner in previous Hong Kong cinema. Finally, this essay argues that in *Still Human*, the self/other dichotomy of the peripheral migrant workers and the central mainstream society can be challenged and deconstructed, thereby revealing how code-switching and code-mixing deployed by the migrant workers can be used as tactics of resistance in the wake of the structural dominations of the global capitalist system and the gendered and racial discrimination within Hong Kong society.

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