

Wu Tsang

Diana d'Arenberg, Hong Kong, 21 April 2016
Photo: Mia Haggi



One of the wonderful things about meeting many artists and writing their stories is that you lose yourself in their world and the world of images that they create. This happened to me on the grey, sleepy Friday afternoon that I went to meet visual artist and filmmaker Wu Tsang, at Spring Workshop in Hong Kong, where she was previewing her new multi-media installation *Duilian* (2016).

Following two three-month residencies at Spring Workshop, where Tsang researched the life and writing of Chinese revolutionary feminist writer Qiu Jin (秋瑾 1875–1907) and her intimate female friend, the calligrapher Wu Zhiying (吳芝瑛 1868–1934), the artist produced a 26-minute film and several installation works centring on the story of their relationship. Although Qiu Jin is a well-known and revered historic figure in China, little is known about her in the West. Even less is known about Wu Zhiying (played by Tsang in the film). A legendary feminist and revolutionary, Qiu Jin was executed for her involvement in a failed uprising against the Qing Dynasty, one of several revolts and uprisings which eventually led to the end of imperial rule and the founding of the Republic of China. Today, Qiu Jin is a symbol of women's independence in China, and a national heroine. Her portrait hangs in the Museum of the First National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party; a lonely heroine in a hall dominated by men.

Sitting in the darkened room in Spring Workshop, I was carried away by the world of poetry and rich visuals Tsang has created onscreen. Transported across water and time, scenes slipped between Qing Dynasty China to present-day Hong Kong. Immersed in Qiu Jin's and Wu Zhiying world of love, loss and sacrifice, the film takes the theme of queer history—or rather its invisibility—as a point of departure. It is a fictitious exploration of a queer relationship, something omitted altogether from the official annals of history. But more than this, perhaps the most important theme in the film is language, and the power it has in shaping our relationship to one another; how it can construct or reconstruct truths and how it shapes history. Through deliberate mistranslations—into Tagalog, Cantonese, English and Malay—of Qiu Jin and Wu Zhiying's poems and historical accounts, an alternative narrative is proposed. It is a stunning interrogation of how language is constructed and used to immortalise, mythologise, or relegate to oblivion.

Tsang is a Los Angeles-based multimedia artist and filmmaker, and was an organiser of LA's Wildness parties, held at an immigrant LGBT bar. LA's nightlife was the subject of Tsang's first feature-length film, a documentary titled *Wildness* (2012). Tsang's works have been shown at London's Tate Modern, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the New Museum (New York), the Hammer Museum and Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), and in the Gwangju Biennale (South Korea).

DD You first came to China in 2005 to reconnect with your ethnic roots—your father was born in Chongqing. It was there that you came across the historical figures of Qiu Jin and Wu Zhiying. Tell me about this?

WT On my first trip to China 12 years ago, I went kind of on a whim to Shaoxing, the small town where Qiu Jin is from. I went with some Chinese lesbian friends who were equally curious to find out more about Qiu Jin. In the museum, we were excited to discover an amazing story about Qiu Jin and her relationship with Wu Zhiying. The true nature of their relationship can never be known, but for me the point is not to claim or label it, but instead to take inspiration from their story. I've done a lot of research and what is most inspiring to me—which I didn't expect 10 years ago—is their writing. It makes me think a lot about how language can escape from its time and from the constraints of society. It can allow us to express desire or ways of being. I am trying to create a language here to communicate with others.

DD I really felt that you had a kinship with the two women, portrayed as they are with such sensitivity. But which of the two did you most relate to, Qiu Jin or Wu Zhiying?

WT I gravitated more towards Wu Zhiying because I can relate to her subtle toughness. On the other hand, Qiu Jin is more of a romantic figure; she's an official communist hero, and a Chinese martyr, so she is more overtly charismatic. I particularly became interested in the pop cultural imagination of Qiu Jin, for example, in the many ways that people have represented her in theatre, film and comic books. Wu Zhiying, on the other hand, is a more obscure figure that you only really

encounter in scholarship, through her writings.

At the time that Qiu Jin was persecuted and executed, in 1907, she was basically a convicted felon and relatively minor figure in the resistance movement. Wu Zhiying played the important role of not only burying her, but of becoming her chief biographer and mourner, at the risk of her own life and reputation. I wanted to explore the idea that histories have subjective origins, which are equally as embedded with desire as they are with context.

DD What do you want the audience to ask themselves through this film?

WT I do have a question about the nature of love. We have love for other people, but then there's also this love for community, or a movement or cause. What motivates that? What draws people to each other, what kind of energy? This comes from my experience as an organiser in the queer community. I always think that desire plays a huge role in making things happen—in making revolution happen. You have to be inspired and turned on to commit to something bigger than yourself.

DD You travelled to China to research the work and it's also where you came across the female wushu group that you then featured in your film. Why not just film in China, instead of Hong Kong? How does Hong Kong inform the film for you?

WT When I set out to do this project ten years ago, I did not specifically have Hong Kong in mind as a site for this story. But living and working there allowed me to see China from a different perspective. People in Hong Kong have a very complex and sometimes contentious relationship

to Chinese identity. There is a hybridity that felt somehow familiar to my own experience of growing up with a (Cantonese-speaking) Chinese dad in America; we were neither Chinese nor American. It's not the same at all as being Hong Kongese, but I guess there is a fluidity and openness to negotiating ethnicity and history that I can appreciate.

We filmed most of *Duilian* on a boat in a Hong Kong harbour. My thinking on that was that I really wanted to create a world that was floating between different time periods: between the past and the present, but also between Hong Kong and China, because I think being in Hong Kong has been a significant way for me to reflect on Chinese identity and nationalism and come at it from a critical perspective. My father's family left China in 1949 during the Chinese Communist Revolution, and their first stop was Hong Kong, along with a flood of other political refugees. Considering this idea of a counter-narrative or counter-identity or stories, Hong Kong feels really appropriate to this project. Also, there is a diversity of voices in the film—different people I've encountered during the making of the project who I invited to do translations with me. Everyone is coming from the queer community perspective, and all Hong Kong-based.

I read the *South China Morning Post* one day, and they were talking about how the Communist Party [of China] is making it illegal to distort history, and I thought, that's interesting because I believe history is by nature a distortion. I was thinking about how in Hong Kong there is palpable anxiety about what's going to happen to the city in relation to mainland China: anxiety about censorship and freedom of speech and a way of life. There's a sense of antagonism, a sense of urgency and

questioning about what's going to happen.

DD In your work, there's a theme of different worlds: the afterworld alluded to with the installation at Spring, *One life, not preserved* (2016); the world of contemporary Hong Kong; and Qing Dynasty China. This creates identity slippages: the idea of being able to float between one world and another, of exploring different sides of one's identity. What is the importance of identity to your films and to your work as an artist in general?

WT Actually, when I started this project, I had a very specific narrative in mind that was tied to identity. It was supposed to be a story about two women who wanted to be together at a time when it was forbidden. But then through a lot of research, I discovered that queer relationships in China at that time were not exactly a big deal. At the turn of the century, there were all kinds of female relationships and they weren't even private; they were just defined in different terms of intimacy and desire. In that sense, the identity categories that we have now just don't apply, and I found that to be inspiring. Qiu Jin is, for me, a sort of 'trans' hero. Not only did she dress in men's clothing and carry a sword, presenting a very public masculine persona of a 'knight errant'—but in a deeper sense, she created a way of being that didn't exist at the time. And not only her—the community of strong women that surrounded her were breaking all kinds of conventions, travelling independently and advocating for women's education and equal roles in society. Love was just one layer of their struggle to define themselves and exist in a time when it wasn't easy to be a woman.

DD You're saying the relationship wasn't a big deal at the time, yet that part of



One life, not preserved (2016), Wu Tsang. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong. Photo: MC
 一身不自保 (2016), 曾吳. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong. Photo: MC



Duilian (2016), Wu Tsang. Courtesy of the artist, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin.



Duilian (2016), Wu Tsang. Photo: MC 一身不自保 (2016), 曾吳. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong. Photo: MC

her history has been wilfully neglected. By doing this film, you are trying to address this and fill in the gaps in this history. I feel that there are moments in which you pick up the thread of your trans-activism in the film. There is a quote in the film, 'Since the revolution has failed in our community, it's time to brandish our swords'. Is this a reference to address the history of the queer community?

WT [Laughing] Yeah, I agree. I'm laughing though because that particular line of poetry came out of a mistranslation. The full line in the film is 'Since the revolution has failed our community, all we can do is brandish our swords, and sing karaoke with snot and tears!' By 'mistranslation' I am referring to a process of playful collective translation that grew out of social activities at Spring Workshop. Through a series of gatherings with different people, we collectively 'mis'-translated Qiu Jin and Wu's poetry. The point of the social gathering was not to accurately translate the poetry, because the group was very mixed: i.e. people had varying degrees of familiarity to traditional Chinese poetry (from not being able to speak or read Chinese, to being traditional Chinese poetry experts). What was important to me was not that we be accurate, but that we use the poetry as a starting point to talk about our own experiences.

So with this line about 'the revolution has failed our community', I also wanted to talk about the current situation. For example, in the US, and I would argue globally, including Hong Kong, many people are coming to critique and question the mainstream LGBT movement as being a kind of failure. The movement has become consolidated under a very normative framework of visibility and inclusion.

DD This project has been a ten-year commitment and it's quite a part of your life. What is it that inspired you to do this project? Is it a desire to do justice to Qiu Jin's story, to bring into the spotlight the marginalised and neglected parts of her history?

WT I don't consider Qiu Jin to be marginal, but I am interested in how that word 'marginal' operates in relation to identity; it presumes that there is a centre. Qiu Jin is a vessel, like the film genre itself. Her story as a martyr or hero, or even her tragic love story, provides a structure, a kind of formula, to say a lot of deeper things.

A lot of my work uses performance as a way to get at something real. The play-acting becomes a way in which we unconsciously reveal ourselves. That's why the aspect of community involvement, and the collective creation of content which led to the script, is not so much about telling a historically accurate story, as it is about creating a portrait of the world around us.

I feel very sensitive and aware of the fact that with anything to do with queer identity, people tend to gravitate and focus on that, but if there's one thing I hope people take away, it would be how language defines what is and what's not possible; how we are bound by it, but also how we can escape through it or from it. I do not want to claim Qiu Jin as a queer person or queer hero, but instead to tell our story in parallel to her story. Hopefully that is the real conversation.