The 1990s saw the end of colonial rule in Hong Kong and the city's accelerated development into a 'global city', where Western and Chinese capital vied for both profit and prestige in the run-up to 1997. This prospect and the accompanying social and political misgivings provided a frame of reference and subject matter for some filmmakers to reflect on issues of local history and identity. As I have pointed out in the ‘Introduction’, the search for a local identity has largely remained an unfinished project. In the post-1997 milieu, ‘Hong Kong identity’ is still debated in film criticism and critical writings on Hong Kong as an indicator of the territory’s, and the film industry’s, ongoing negotiation with China and the socioeconomic transformations brought on by globalization.¹ The complexity of local identity articulation in Hong Kong is effectively summed up in Michelle Tsung-yi Huang’s study on the global city with reference to Fruit Chan’s Little Cheung (1999): unlike most other post-colonial cultures, the lack of a ‘native place’ (xiangtu) as a stronghold for resistance has left the old cityspace being the only possible ‘native place archetype’, which also necessitates a remapping of ‘native place’ on to the larger geopolitics of global space.² In this connection, recent theorizations of contemporary identity politics have shed light on the constructed nature of all identities, and Judith Butler’s idea of ‘performativity’ has further put gender and other identity norms into question.³ Inasmuch as identity has always been a slippery term whose meaning is always subject to negotiation, in this digital age it is increasingly a mass-mediated conglomerate of signs and images disseminated through transnational communications networks. It is beyond the scope of this study to offer an analysis of how digital media nowadays have created, shaped, and commodified various types of identities, and whether globalization has (not) undermined more localized forms

V. P. Y. Lee, Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997
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of identity politics in historically underprivileged sites such as former colonized and Third World societies. As far as Hong Kong and its cinema are concerned, this over-determined term today lies not in whether a ‘Hong Kong identity’ has existed, disappeared, or will come into being by discursive consensus, but in a new problematic of the local in the cultural imagination, not in the sense of a positivistic self-assertion as in localism, but of a constructivistic, non-essentializing use of images as a form of historical and cultural critique. This problematic of the local is also a critical response to the fin-de-siècle scenario triggered by the ‘1997 issue’ and the crisis of disappearance, and the concomitant quest for cultural identity as a resistance to disappearance (by ‘re-colonization’?) that underlies the nostalgic imagination in Hong Kong cinema and cultural productions since the mid-1980s. Rather than reiterating what the local is by revisiting familiar formulations of instability, hybridity, and marginality, it emphasizes the polyvalence of the term, that is, how different meanings of the local are generated in various instances when it is invoked, and what implications for the cultural imagination will result from these contending visions and narratives of the local.

All this, of course, cannot be taken for granted, since the history of Hong Kong cinema is itself a product of conflicting social and cultural hegemonies under which the local is always deprived of specificity. But the handover endowed the recent portion of a century-old historical tale with a special flavour mixed with nostalgia, political anxiety, and a disturbing sense of impermanence, all attributable to an apocalyptic apprehension of the end, a fin-de-siècle sentiment that fueled the imagination of the local, or what it means to be local. As 1997 approached, some filmmakers began to turn their attention to the marginal communities and alternative spaces of the city to capture the rhythm and texture of city life undergoing major social and economic transformations, for example Derek Yee Tung-sing’s C’est la vie mon chéri/Xin bu liao qing (1992) and Ann Hui’s Summer Snow/Nüren sishi (1994). The portrayal of everyday life in these movies goes beyond social commentary, a trait inherited from television docu-drama in the 1970s, to focus on issues of subjectivity and historical agency. If, in Benedict Anderson’s often-quoted words, the nation is an imagined community, then identity, too, is an act of the imagination, which by extension is an act of reckoning with its elusiveness, if not ambivalence when engrossed in national and party politics. The versatilities brought on by globalization have further unsettled old forms of national imagination: now the nation is no longer contained within geographical boundaries, but is dispersed into pockets of diasporic localities with overlapping and