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Woman cinematographers are few but powerful in Hong Kong

Calls grow for more females in male-dominated sector of regional film industry

Fisher Yu Jing-ping is one of the most successful and influential cinematographers working in Asian cinema. (Courtesy of Fisher Yu Jing-ping)

MATHEW SCOTT, Contributing writer
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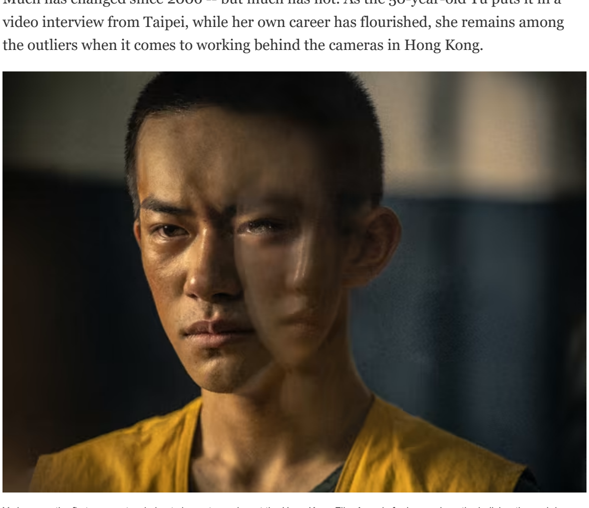
HONG KONG -- Fisher Yu Jing-ping tells a story about how when she first started walking onto film sets in Hong Kong to work behind the cameras, a question would immediately spring to her mind: Where are all the women?

"On film sets there were almost no women," Yu says. "And in the technical areas of film, such as cinematography, there were actually no women at all."

That was in 2006. Since then, Yu has established herself among the most acclaimed and sought-after cinematographers working in Asian cinema -- the first (and so far, only) woman to win the Hong Kong Film Award (HKFA) for best cinematography in the more than 100 years of the city's film industry.

That honor was for Yu's work on Hong Kong director Derek Tsang's Oscar-nominated school bullying drama "Better Days" (2019). More recently, her work has featured in Singaporean filmmaker Anthony Chen's China-set thriller "The Breaking Ice," which premiered in the Un Certain Regard section of the 2023 Cannes Film Festival.

Much has changed since 2006 -- but much has not. As the 50-year-old Yu puts it in a video interview from Taipei, while her own career has flourished, she remains among the outliers when it comes to working behind the cameras in Hong Kong.



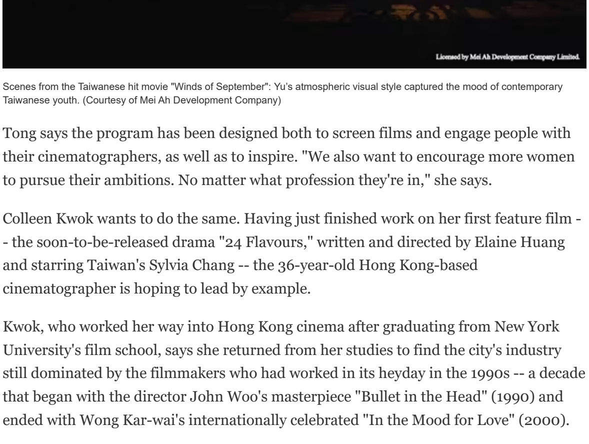
Yu became the first woman to win best cinematographer at the Hong Kong Film Awards for her work on the bullying-themed drama "Better Days." (Courtesy of Far East Film Festival)

"Things are actually much the same," the Taiwanese cinematographer says. "There are just not many women working behind the cameras."

The issue is the focus of a series of "CameraWomen" film screenings and seminars hosted by the Hong Kong Arts Centre (HKAC) that features the work of notable female cinematographers. Virtual post-screening talks have also been held with women such as Austria's Christine A. Maier, who worked on the Oscar-nominated Bosnian War drama "Quo Vadis, Aida?" (2020), directed by Jasmila Zbanic.

Yu will take part in the series on Sept. 20 with a seminar following a screening of Taiwanese director Thomas Lin Shu-yu's youth drama hit "Winds of September" (2008), which helped to launch her own career in feature films.

"People's general idea of cinematography is that it's traditionally a male profession," says the HKAC's Jacqueline Tong, program manager for moving images. "Yet women have been contributing to the field since the beginning of film, and widespread recognition of their work is still overdue. Today, women cinematographers are still a minority, and people are also curious about their experiences and thoughts."



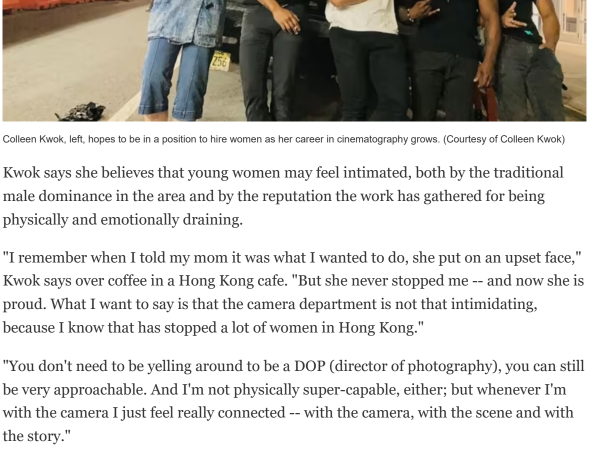
Scenes from the Taiwanese hit movie "Winds of September": Yu's atmospheric visual style captured the mood of contemporary Taiwanese youth. (Courtesy of Mei Ah Development Company)

Tong says the program has been designed both to screen films and engage people with their cinematographers, as well as to inspire. "We also want to encourage more women to pursue their ambitions. No matter what profession they're in," she says.

Colleen Kwok wants to do the same. Having just finished work on her first feature film - - the soon-to-be-released drama "24 Flavours," written and directed by Elaine Huang and starring Taiwan's Sylvia Chang -- the 36-year-old Hong Kong-based cinematographer is hoping to lead by example.

Kwok, who worked her way into Hong Kong cinema after graduating from New York University's film school, says she returned from her studies to find the city's industry still dominated by the filmmakers who had worked in its heyday in the 1990s -- a decade that began with the director John Woo's masterpiece "Bullet in the Head" (1990) and ended with Wong Kar-wai's internationally celebrated "In the Mood for Love" (2000).

While no exact figure is available for the number of women working behind the camera in Hong Kong cinema, Kwok says that by her reckoning there are only "two or three" in current feature film productions. Yu's estimate was the same.



Colleen Kwok, left, hopes to be in a position to hire women as her career in cinematography grows. (Courtesy of Colleen Kwok)

Kwok says she believes that young women may feel intimated, both by the traditional male dominance in the area and by the reputation the work has gathered for being physically and emotionally draining.

"I remember when I told my mom it was what I wanted to do, she put on an upset face," Kwok says over coffee in a Hong Kong cafe. "But she never stopped me -- and now she is proud. What I want to say is that the camera department is not that intimidating, because I know that has stopped a lot of women in Hong Kong."

"You don't need to be yelling around to be a DOP (director of photography), you can still be very approachable. And I'm not physically super-capable, either; but whenever I'm with the camera I just feel really connected -- with the camera, with the scene and with the story."

Last year Kwok's in-development project "The Stars The Sun The Moon," first released as a short film in 2014, picked up the top prize for a Hong Kong project at the city's Hong Kong-Asia Film Financing Forum, and as her career grows she hopes to be in a position to hire women, and perhaps even to form a support association for female cinematographers.

Yu behind the camera during a recent film shoot. (Courtesy of Fisher Yu Jing-ping)

Yu was lured to Hong Kong when the actress Karena Lam introduced the work she had been doing as a photographer to the director Susie Au, who was working on the action-romance film "Ming Ming" (2006).

"I didn't really think much about it at the time -- I just was excited to work," she says of the lack of women on the technical side of the production. "Thinking back now I suppose I was actually very brave, as I didn't really have much experience in cinematography. But I want to encourage women to not be scared and just go ahead and ask questions and to be really hands-on in doing the work themselves."

The rewards can be significant for those who do. Yu's HKFA award came during the COVID-19 pandemic while she was in Europe, driving to a production meeting and listening in by phone. Her producer started screaming the news that she had won.

"It was kind of a scary thing because it means more pressure to do better," says Yu. "But I was also very happy. I hope that winning awards can encourage women in the industry to overlook all the gender biases and prejudice. As long as you love the job, just try your best. I think that's the answer for us all."

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