

CULTURE | ARTS

Award-winning Director Brings Hong Kong Love Stories to the Museum

Words by ZABRINA LO | July 15, 2022



COVER A film still featuring the narrator's great grandmother and her lover in Hong Kong's Maritime Miracle (Image: Heiward Mak)

Screened alongside exhibits of real bombs, Siobhán Haughey's Olympic medal and the iconic Si Racha chilli sauce, these love films by Heiward Mak capture love and maritime history in Hong Kong—now and then

 **11** VIEW GALLERY

Heiward Mak is no stranger to making romance films set in Hong Kong: she won best screenplay at the Hong Kong Film Awards for her 2010 rom-com *Love in a Puff*; her 2010 film *Ex* was about the complication of breakups and running into old loves; and *Fagara*, 2019, was her family drama adapted from the Amy Cheung novel.



This year, branching out from her usual cinema career, the Hong Kong director has taken on an unconventional project: making five short films about love and families of past Hong Kong generations, inspired by stories from as far back as 1945. These films, screened at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum, are inspired by true historical incidents from the city's post-World War II period to the modern day. They are a part of the museum's new exhibition, which also showcases naval artefacts, such as an underwater helmet worn by divers who cleared German mines, a defused US bomb from World War II and Si Racha, the famous chilli sauce created by a Vietnamese refugee, and modern exhibits, such as Siobhán Haughey's medals from last year's Fina World Swimming Championships and the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics.



ABOVE 2021 Fina World Swimming Championships, on loan from Siobhán Haughey (Image: Hong Kong Maritime Museum)



ABOVE 2020 Olympics Silver medal, on loan from Siobhán Haughey (Image: Hong Kong Maritime Museum)

Narrated by a fictional young woman from contemporary Hong Kong, the films show how views towards love and familial relationships have shifted over the last century. The narrator's great grandmother entered into an unwanted marriage out of a sense of duty; her grandfather, a sailor, rescued refugees from Vietnam; her father immigrated overseas and left behind his lover; and she, a career-oriented woman today, chooses to let go of her boyfriend.

Mak tells *Tatler* how making films for a museum makes for a refreshing viewing experience, and how she dealt with the subject of love differently this time.



ABOVE Heiward Mak (Image: Heiward Mak)

Are the films a true story of your family?

No, the films aren't directly referring to my family, but there are impressions from my childhood that I've included in the films. I was born in the 1980s. I remember there were many postcards from my uncle who was a sailor. My uncle would only come home every few months. Back then, no one told me about the social conditions that led to his career decision. When I was doing research for this project, I realised that it was common for many locals in the 1950s and 1960s to choose to be a sailor because it was a well-paid job. I also have memories of helping my grandmother tie rope onto plastic lab goggles. There was a huge demand for safety goggles for the local welding industry.



ABOVE A film still featuring the narrator's grandfather as a sailor in Hong Kong's Maritime Miracle (Image: Heiward Mak)

What else have you included? And given how Hong Kong's maritime history is so broad, how do you decide which moments to highlight in the short films?

When I viewed the exhibits and read the brief given to me by Steven Davies, the founding director of the Maritime Museum, one of the strongest feelings I had of old Hong Kong was the dilemma that people faced between making a living and staying with the one they loved. So, I picked this as the theme that connects all the films.

For example, the first film is set against the background of the city's poor economy in the 1940s. It didn't leave people with good livelihood prospects, so many would leave their homeland to try their luck [abroad]. In the film, the great grandmother's lover wonders if she could sail with him to Nanyang to start a new life. This scene may seem like a cliché, but it's a heavy subject. In the grandfather's generation, the grandfather originally decides to be a sailor to make a better living for his family. But after seeing the influx of refugees, he decides his family matters more to him, so he ends up returning home. The other films also centre on my observation of how Hongkongers across generations make similarly tough decisions surrounding love, marriage, family and separation.

Read more: Exclusive: How Tim Yip Celebrates Fringe Cultures in His Experimental Film



ABOVE The narrator's grandmother who stays at home making plastic flowers while the grandfather works at the sea (Image: Heiward Mak)

What challenges did you encounter during filmmaking?

It's impossible to recreate all the details of the past, given our limited budget, and I was very small during the refugee influx period; I could only rely on archival materials, news footage from the past and Ann Hui's 1982 film *Boat People* for reference. I scattered the many artefacts and real-life incidents in the films: the bomb, a diver's helmet, Vietnamese refugees, making plastic flowers and tailoring, to name just a few. What we've created is a sketch of the past.



ABOVE Hong Kong and Kowloon Wharf and Godown Co. piers at Tsim Sha Tsui in the early 1950s (Image: Hong Kong Maritime Museum Collection)

How does film make a museum experience different?

When Steven first approached me, he wasn't looking for me to make films. He wanted me to write a script filled with historical details to narrate the stories as a sort of informative audio guide for the exhibition.

But I thought without visuals to connect audience's understanding with the history, visitors would not be able to picture how people in the past lived. Films are more humanistic and relatable: they are an easier way for visitors to pick up knowledge, put themselves in the shoes of others, and resonate with the feelings of people from generations ago.

In case you missed: [Hong Kong Director Ann Hui Talks Winning The Golden Lion Award And Her Filmmaking Journey](#)



ABOVE A film still featuring the narrator's mother and father dating at the dock (Image: Heiward Mak)

When compared to screening movies in a cinema, what artistic decisions did you have to make for films screened in a museum?

I had to adjust the volume of the different films in the exhibition hall, since the soundbites can overlap.

Unlike in a cinema, screenings in a walkable experience—a museum—require you to design the locations of the screens. While each film is relevant to each of the exhibition sections' historical period, visitors may not stay to finish the few-minutes-long films, and the exhibition areas are more about the history and relics than the people's stories in the films. So, I decided to set up a small screening space in the atrium where visitors can watch all the films in one go.

In terms of plot, the last section of the exhibition is about the future [which displays content related to the developments of the Greater Bay area and the city's sports]. I intentionally set my last film in the present to leave room for the audience to reflect on their own modern values before picturing what the future will be like.



ABOVE The narrator (right) and her ex-boyfriend (Image: Heiward Mak)

Some of the shots look like they reference iconic Hong Kong movies, such as *Rouge*. Are you influenced by any directors or movies?

It wasn't an intentional decision. Our female lead does look like Anita Mui from a certain angle, especially when she puts on red lipstick and traditional bridalwear. I'd say the films' artistic style is more influenced by the French New Wave.

One artistic choice that people may overlook is that the cast for the oldest and most recent generations is the same. I want to suggest that no matter which generation we belong to, we still face the same dilemmas around making love and life decisions. This is what connects all Hongkongers across generations.

Don't miss: Louise Wong and Bill Kong on Canto-Pop Legend Anita Mui's Final Wish and Filming "Anita"



ABOVE A film still featuring the narrator's great grandmother (Image: Heiward Mak)

Has this project inspired you to explore other creative media?

I never thought that I would end up becoming a film director. I studied design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and I've always been interested in installation art. I hope to re-explore this past interest, but I'm also open to different roles in filmmaking—whether that's scriptwriting, producing, directing or even writing the subtitles of a film, which I've done before. As long as I find passion in the project, I'll do whatever it takes to bring it into reality. This persistence and collaboration with different talents—artists, historians and scientists—are what filmmaking is about.

Hong Kong's Maritime Miracle: The Story of our City since 1945 is running from now until October 30. Find out more at hkmaritimemuseum.org



ABOVE Japanese shipping in Hong Kong under attack by US Naval aircraft on January 16, 1945 (Image: Public Records Office, Government Records Service)