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The end of “re-colonization”: on Hong Kong, knowledge, and G.O.D

Hong Kong studies often argue that 1997—a key moment of globalization—marked not re-unification and an end of colonialism but a “re-colonization” at the hands of Beijing. This essay refutes this claim on several grounds and situates it in the context of global knowledge production about China. China in general and even the government in particular enjoy significant, consistent popularity in Hong Kong. And when we interrogate the historiographic and cultural studies claims for a re-colonization we see that this is more often announced than substantiated. The claim is intellectually problematic and, moreover indicates a continuing imbalance/contradiction dating from the colonial/Cold War era in how knowledge about China, and the China–Hong Kong relationship is produced. Such work does not engage mainland perspectives and accounts but rather tends to “other” or orientalize the P.R.C. Globalization has not altered this academic/knowledge imbalance. But this may indeed be changing in the commercial and popular realms. This essay’s final section analyzes the emergence of a Hong Kong–P.R.C. hybrid identity as seen in the design work of G.O.D, a local chain that sells home-goods, clothes, and the like with an avowed emphasis on both local and P.R.C. culture (e.g. Mao era things). All of this taken together suggests an end to the claim of re-colonization. Hong Kong has moved on and is now part of China’s globalization; the realm of knowledge production will, one should think, eventually catch up.

Keywords (separated by '-')
Globalization - Colonization - China - Hong Kong - 1997 handover - Orientalism - Politics of knowledge - Rey Chow
The end of “re-colonization”: on Hong Kong, knowledge, and G.O.D

Daniel Vukovich

Abstract Hong Kong studies often argue that 1997—a key moment of globalization—marked not re-unification and an end of colonialism but a “re-colonization” at the hands of Beijing. This essay refutes this claim on several grounds and situates it in the context of global knowledge production about China. China in general and even the government in particular enjoy significant, consistent popularity in Hong Kong. And when we interrogate the historiographic and cultural studies claims for a re-colonization we see that this is more often announced than substantiated. The claim is intellectually problematic and, moreover indicates a continuing imbalance/contradiction dating from the colonial/Cold War era in how knowledge about China, and the China–Hong Kong relationship is produced. Such work does not engage mainland perspectives and accounts but rather tends to “other” or orientalize the P.R.C. Globalization has not altered this academic/knowledge imbalance. But this may indeed be changing in the commercial and popular realms. This essay’s final section analyzes the emergence of a Hong Kong–P.R.C. hybrid identity as seen in the design work of G.O.D, a local chain that sells home-goods, clothes, and the like with an avowed emphasis on both local and P.R. C. culture (e.g. Mao era things). All of this taken together suggests an end to the claim of re-colonization. Hong Kong has moved on and is now part of China’s globalization; the realm of knowledge production will, one should think, eventually catch up.

Keywords Globalization · Colonization · China · Hong Kong · 1997 handover · Orientalism · Politics of knowledge · Rey Chow
Framing Hong Kong, China

The founding question and constitutive anxiety of Hong Kong studies between 1984 and the then-looming handover date of 1997 was something like, “Will Hong Kong remain free, untrammeled upon by the authoritarian mainland regime?” Fourteen years on the widely acknowledged answer has to be ‘yes,’ or at least ‘as free as it ever was.’ But certainly this fearful question is still around, even in the ever growing field of Hong Kong studies. As any resident of Hong Kong can confirm, this remains one of the first things foreigners will ask when you go abroad. To be sure, the very framing of this question reveals the gap—and hierarchy—between mainland Chinese constructions of reality and those from the outside, or what I and others have elsewhere called a specifically China-centered form of Sinological-orientalism. For while there are certainly overlays between these two realms—the mainland and its outside have always had overlapping histories and imaginings—it is nonetheless clear that most mainland people do not see either China or Hong Kong in the starkly contrasted ways that subtends much Hong Kong and cultural studies. For the latter, Hong Kong is what China is not—a place of light, of relative normalcy, or even exceptional post-modernity. Whereas the mainland is at the very least a problem, if not a place of relative backwardness and sinister intent, where the Party-state presides and confirms the truths of George Orwell.

But what is more, it seems equally clear that—to adopt the words of Akbar Abbas—today to be pro-Hong Kong it is not necessary to be anti-China. Of course this does imply that at some point it was necessary to be anti-China because one was pro-Hong Kong (the Cold War view). This places Hong Kong itself in the situation of the good Chinese subject, full of culture and exotic difference, who needs to be saved, protected or liberated from the bad, deceptive ones across the way who simply must want to “take over” and re-make the island-city even though they have never actually tried. Yet that bit of colonial/Cold War heritage is in a residual phase, held firmly by a vocal but nonetheless shrinking portion of the middle-class and liberal intelligentsia in the Hong Kong region (including the various expatriates). Indeed it is hard not to see the pre-handover fears of the People’s Republic of China treading upon the freedom and wealth of Hong Kong as so much Sinological-orientalist paranoia. In retrospect this view was an unsurprising Cold War

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1 Work on this essay was supported by a GRF award from the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong. I am grateful for comments by Wang Ning, an anonymous reader, and dialog with Brian Tsui, Ma Ran and Pan Lu. All errors and heresies remain my own.
2 Hong Kong studies has only proliferated since 1997. And on the telling basis of what gets taught and published in Hong Kong, it is the predominant field of study in the humanities and social sciences in the city.
3 See for example Chan (2009) as well as Hevia (2003), though the specific hyphenated phrase is my own. Of course this is not to make a nativist gesture, whereby the inside/outside difference means the former is always the right side. The point is that there is a divide and imbalance here—what we might call an uneven and combined development of global knowledge production ongoing since the advent of modern colonialism.
4 I am slightly adapting the words of Abbas (2001), the doyen of Hong Kong studies, from his paper at an American conference on Hong Kong’s handover. It is very much to Abbas’s (2001) credit that he was willing to call 1997 the non-event that it was as soon as 2001.
determination and dubious interpretation of a geo-political reality that no less a Chinese nationalist than Deng Xiaoping fully understood. It fundamentally misread the political economy of the situation—that Hong Kong was going to be left alone for a number of reasons, not the least of which was its status as an example to Taiwan that the ‘one country, two systems’ model was the best possible resolution to questions of separatism/independence. Still more important were Hong Kong’s role as a financial center for the development of global and Chinese capitalism and the larger necessities of capital accumulation on both regional and global scales. In retrospect what is surprising is that these latter, political–economic conditions were not given pride of place in speculations about the future of the Hong Kong–P.R.C. relationship. In sum, as regards the politics proper of the 1997 handover, it would generally be admitted by even the most committed of Hong Kong cultural studies ‘activist’-scholars that, in the event, the mainland treatment of Hong Kong—at the formal and over-arching level of politics proper—has been very much what Deng Xiaoping promised: hands off, a continuation of the laissez-faire party. This is certainly not the realm of freedom and national liberation, but then these were never in the cards being held by Deng or the U.K., nor by—it must be said—the local Chinese comprador class and the general population. Whatever Hong Kong’s political, economic, and social problems are—and there are several—these cannot reasonably be laid at the feet of a new ‘colonizer,’ unless we are to say that capitalist class rule and accumulation are synonymous with colonialism.

From a certain perspective, then, the 1997 handover and its aftermath seems to be an ideal example of ‘good’ globalization—that is, if the accumulation of capital, social stability, and the absence of significant political antagonism and conflict are the goals. The city-government and chief executive (an appointed position with mainland input, to be sure) are indeed unpopular from time to time. But as the work of one well-regarded survey organization suggests, overall the political status quo seems quite secure in public opinion. The Hong Kong populace only began to be fully politicized after the handover from colonial rule; in a sense this was the liberation of Hong Kong or birth (or re-birth) of its political culture. There is now some type of protest or demonstration almost every single day in Hong Kong. But aside from the yearly June 4th and July 1st symbolic commemorations, these are overwhelmingly of the micro and single-issue/grievance variety and by American standards are mostly, remarkably polite affairs. This is not to disparage any of them as trivial. But it does point to a paradox of Hong Kong politics: none of these are really anti-Beijing or anti-colonial, even on those few occasions (June 4 and June 1
especially) where “Beijing” is part of the explicit subject at hand. As is often shown in polls and remarked in the media, the popularity of the mainland in general, of the Beijing government in particular, and of the handover or ‘national reunion’ remains high—perhaps surprisingly high to outsiders or readers of the south China Morning Post. Premier Wen Jiabao is something of a celebrity in Hong Kong. The recent Beijing Olympics kicked off a great deal of patriotic fervor all across the city, and of course the mainland receives a great deal of legitimacy and symbolic support as the leader and, after the 2009 financial tsunami, the stabilizer if not ‘savior’ of at least the regional economy. Now into the second decade after re-unification, the mainland is more popular and legitimized than ever. Barring the unlikely (and not to-be-wished-for) scenario of the mainland’s political–economic collapse, this will be even more true in another 10 years, just as the great majority of Hong Kong residents depend on the mainland for everything from water to employment to capital gains. In short, as one trio of authors has recently put it, Hong Kong people are “learning to belong to the nation” at a strikingly rapid and sure pace. This is not to deny that there are not bad, baleful mainland-Hong Kong relations and effects in others ways. How could there not be? The sky-high property values due in part to rich P.R.C. buyers, the resentments over scarce hospital spaces for ‘local’ expectant mothers as opposed to—again—wealthy mainland ones, the air pollution, and so on. But again this is capitalism and not colonialism in the Hong Kong case, and the overall, even dominant ideology is if anything more “pro” China and “pro” handover than otherwise. (Again, notwithstanding the best efforts of various Hong Kong/cultural studies avatars in the city and abroad.) What is missing, so far, is a more anti-capitalist or socialist/Marxist—dare we say Maoist?—stream within the political culture that can better address the political–economic issues at hand.

Combined and uneven knowledge production: aftermaths of Cold War colonialism

What interests me in this essay, however, is less this direct political question of 1997s aftermath than two separate but related, theoretical ones: the question of mainland “colonization” of Hong Kong (still professed by some) and the question of the Hong Kong and P.R.C. relationship more generally since 1997. For implicit to that largely unfounded fear of Hong Kong being tread upon is a “theoretical” and political point that continues to subvert Hong Kong studies. From standard historiography to the allegedly “innovative” field of cultural studies, the handover—usually called the “return” in mainland circles—marked not the liberation of Hong Kong from British colonial rule but a re-colonization by the P.R.C. This is precisely the conclusion of a recent conventional historical study of Hong Kong during the

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8FL01 The Bauhinia Foundation Research Centre (an independent if elite policy think tank) recently released a survey showing wide satisfaction (60–68%) with the government’s plan—which is ultimately to say Beijing’s plan already announced some years ago—for political reform in the coming years. I take all of this to suggest a general approval of the status quo and the political role of Beijing.

9FL01 Tai-Lok et al. (2008), while the authors are more ambivalent about this phenomenon than I (or see more of this ambivalence in the city than I), I am indebted to their study and its excellent detail.
century after the Opium War (when the island was conceded as so much plunder):
“although Hong Kong has returned to China, it has not been de-colonized. Rather, it
has been re-colonized, with the metropole simply shifting from London to Beijing”
(Carroll 192). In this essay I want to argue against this equation—1997
handover = re-colonization—on a number of grounds. These will be theoretical
as well as concrete. After interrogating the claims for re-colonization on their own
terms, in the latter portion of this essay I examine a current Hong Kong “identity” as
revealed by the popular art of a local and highly successful designer home-goods
and fashion store, named G.O.D. This extended example is meant to again show that
the “re-colonization” claim is highly untenable and unhelpful for thinking through
the Hong Kong–P.R.C. relationship. But it also serves as an initial analysis of an
emergent identity and relationship to the mainland, reflected in the work of G.O.D.,
that suggests a new identity for the city in general.

The first thing to note about the claim that the 1997 handover was a
re-colonization is that it is not so much argued as asserted, presented as an
obviousness. Thus, in the above study there is simply no argument about the post-
1997 regime acting colonially towards Hong Kong. Nor is there a claim about the
relationship being colonial in some legal sense. And nor could there be, since by the
standards of international law there was never any question of Hong Kong
belonging to China. Even the British regime itself frequently remarked that Hong
Kong was living on ‘borrowed time.’ So in lieu of an argument there is simply a
logic of analogy to be taken at face value. Hong Kong was colonized before by an
outsider, and since Beijing is an “outsider” too then Hong Kong is colonized again.
Perhaps the author’s implied link is that Hong Kong has not formed an independent
nation, just as it is not “allowed” to be a (Western) liberal democracy in the manner
of the UK or US. (In fact the city’s ruling constitution or basic law does allow for
universal suffrage but the deadline for this, most likely 2020, and the procedural
details for it remain ambiguous and disputed). But this implied rationale for Hong
Kong’s “re-colonization” in its implied “lack” of “democracy” might remain
unstated for the brute facts that Hong Kong has never had a national liberation or
independence movement, just as it has yet to have a large, mass or majority-forming
democracy movement. This is always the proverbial elephant in the room of liberal
Hong Kong studies. What Erni (2001) accurately calls the “progressive” (and I
would add decidedly non-leftist) groups of Hong Kong have yet to become anything
like a social movement or effective political coalition if for no other reason than that
they lack a mass base (392). Indeed in many ways these groups as well as the many
and varied political parties in the city are non- or even anti-political.10 While Hong
Kong is certainly in the process of becoming a politicized society, the absence of the

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10 I mean, again, that they are mostly single-issue based and, as with most of the political parties, they
also substitute chiefly ethical, if not simply ad hominem criticisms and analyzes for political and
structural ones. Aside from sects like the Falun Gong and the local, idiosyncratic anarcho-celebrity Leung
Kwok Hung they do not lay claim to being anti-communist or ask for the overthrow of the CCP. Nor do
they ask for independence or self-rule. I lack the space to pursue this further here. But my point is simply
that they do not fit the type of independence/anti-colonial/eastern European-dissident framework they are
usually inserted into by the mainstream media and “cultural studies.”
discourse of social democracy in the local political culture and society (let alone something more radical) remains the case 13 years after re-unification.

This has all happened despite the fact that no one could argue that the city or its people are controlled by a police-state or even a soft-authoritarianism a la Singapore. While it was an important part of the British empire, Hong Kong simply does not fit the mold of, say, India, post-colonial Africa, or Europe. It therefore poses problems to conventional understandings of political development and socio-historical change, be these from standard liberal historiography or post-colonial studies (the latter area being dominated by south Asian histories and contexts above all). If nothing else, Hong Kong’s apparent refusal to follow such paths, even after 1997, speaks to the constructed and arbitrary category of the nation itself (admittedly a standard insight from post-colonial studies, but one which it violates in its one-sided demonization of nationalism and the nation tout-court). So too it calls into relief the parochial nature of stagist notions of political development or the unquestioned value of liberal democracy. In that sense, rather than seeing Hong Kong’s politics as well as its burgeoning national identification with the mainland as “failures” or “lacks,” we might better see them as challenges to our understandings of post-colonialism and our implicitly western, liberal shibboleths about politics, freedom, and so forth. Simply put what many take to be the natural or at least to-be-wished-for outcomes of globalization in/and China—something called “democracy”—may well be at odds with an incalcitrant socio-political reality among large, educated, and relatively well off populations on the mainland and Hong Kong.

Part of the problem with conventional claims for re-colonization (as above) is that such work often refuses to engage post-colonial theory even while making claims about colonization, imperialism, and independence. The failure to interrogate the naturalness and teleology of the nation-state is a case in point here. So, too an engagement with Edward Said on the questions of orientalism and positional superiority would check Carroll’s (2005) and Hong Kong studies’ general tendency to situate mainland China as backward, behind, exceptionally authoritarian, and in short as a problem for Hong Kong. For example, because China did not allow capitalism to flourish it “failed” and is more “backward” whereas Hong Kong succeeded in this; because it was free of Chinese rule and its vicissitudes up to the present, Hong Kong “was the most important place of China for more than 150 years (Carroll 191). As we will shortly see, this is the type of hyperbole and Hong Kong exceptionalism that can been in more theoretical, cultural studies approaches as well. Additionally Franz Fanon is dispatched in this study in one sentence. The anti-colonial labor historian Cooper (2005) is cited as a critique of Fanon’s argument that the colonized were psychologically and culturally damaged, endowed with inferiority complexes. But this reverses Cooper’s (2005) critical and Marxist stance on colonialism. For Cooper’s (2005) point was not that all colonial subjects were free of psychic damage from foreign rule; rather some were and as the case of the labor movement in French Africa shows, these were often working class (not elite) subjects.11 It is not Carroll’s (2005) defense of a “collaborative,” beneficent colonialism that is my interest here, however, so much as the force of

obviousness about that magically shifting metropole—and the implicit point about Hong Kong’s loss of an unnamed something. That something is most likely a political sovereignty which it should ‘naturally’ have yet which to date it has never quite desired nor tried to obtain. So too one has to see the so-called discovery of ‘collaborative colonialism’ as of a piece with a longer history of knowledge production within colonialism or the world system—by which I mean attempts to rationalize and legitimize colonial rule. In this case it is a message that colonialism simply was not that bad: neither top–down and draconian nor without ‘participation’ and “collaboration;” in that sense it was a fair deal and perhaps even vaguely democratic. Within not just British but more broadly western and global intellectual culture Hong Kong has always been an example of successful or ‘good’ colonialism—white men (now with local friends!) saving the Chinese from the Chinese to the north, and bringing prosperity and everything from modernity to post-modernity to the locals. From this perspective we can say that in the world of discourse and global knowledge production, Hong Kong has not until recently been a part of China’s globalization but of the U.K.—West’s. To be a part of China’s globalization, in other words, a history of Hong Kong would have to tell some type of story about colonial war, theft, and restoration/re-unification, if not of the eventual rise of China above and beyond the U.K.

The fact that the 1997 = re-colonization claim is asserted without qualification tells us something about the force of Sinological-orientalism. For under that discourse the CCP simply lacks all political and ethical legitimacy as a despotist state that oppresses “the” Chinese people in toto. This re-colonization statement also reminds us of just who won the Cold War in terms of the production of knowledge within the world system. This is clearly not a book written from a mainland perspective; nor is it one for mainland Chinese readers. And surely those people in Hong Kong who are either “pro-Beijing” or who simply did not benefit from British colonialism would find little of value in a study that maps (in admirable detail) the co-operation between local elites—what the Marxist and anti-colonial traditions call compradors—and British colonizers during the first 100 years of their reign. My point is not that such a study is therefore without value or only for the Anglos and Anglophiles. Far from it but it is to say that some type of mediation of the mainland Chinese perspectives and histories (the “pro-Beijing” or “pro-reunification” views, for lack of better phrases) versus the author’s own is needed here. This presupposes no conclusions but only a measure of methodological self-consciousness. Surely the fact that so many people from China view the Hong Kong-mainland relationship and the 1997 event differently is worth some consideration. This is not, of course, to invalidate this text’s contributions to the elite historiography of Hong Kong, China, and British colonialism. But it is also to say that the claim of re-colonization after 1997 is far from demonstrated here. It is only an “obvious” claim that does not need justification if you speak from within the truth of a conventional, anti-regime

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12 “Collaborative” is one of Carroll’s (2005) keywords to describe British colonialism of Hong Kong. For a similar study along more “theoretical” lines, see Law Wing Sang. It is striking that neither author has recourse to the more critical, Marxist notion of compradors. Whatever else its limitations the Marxist tradition long knew about “collaborative” colonialism and the politics of class; so too for postcolonial studies (cf Gayatri Spivak).
Sinology that largely elides the self-understanding of Chinese subjects and Chinese intellectual–political culture, and that can grant no real legitimacy to the P.R.C.

What is of further interest here, however, is what this might tell us about the place of China and Hong Kong in globalization, specifically in terms of the knowledge about China that is produced in the world. For it is also knowledge and scholarship that gets globalized as the world moves. One of the expectations of the rise of China in an age of intensified globalization would be, one should hope, a “Sinification” of knowledge production and an end of orientalism—that is, that mainland and not only diasporic Chinese knowledges and perspectives would gain some type of legitimacy (some ‘standing’ so to speak) and increased circulation within the world system and its intellectual–political culture. We need this so as to have a more inclusive ‘conversation of mankind’ and a more balanced production of knowledge on a global scale, not least to deal with the world-wide problems that cannot, after all, be resolved without mainland Chinese participation. And we must note that the “1997 = re-colonization” claim of Carroll (2005) and others belies such hope for “Sinification” and a more balanced global production of knowledge.

The influence of the re-colonization claim within Hong Kong cultural studies hails from a different source, namely the influential work of the U.S.-based but Hong Kong raised cultural critic Chow (1997). Cultural studies, at least as it understands itself, is supposed to be a more self-reflexive, theoretical and inter-disciplinary field than the conventional disciplines. And yet what we find in Chow (1997) when she writes about the mainland and about Hong Kong–P.R.C. relations, is just such an unmediated and declarative mode of writing. Here again obviousnesses are imposed as obviousnesses (the very work of ideology, as Althusser (1971) once put it). Chow’s (1997) basic claim is that Hong Kong is “between colonizers” : i.e., between the U.K and the P.R.C. It “must play two aggressors, Britain and China, against each other, carving out a space where it is neither the puppet of British colonialism nor of Chinese authoritarianism” (151). Additionally, the Chinese mainland is “itself as imperialistic as the previous colonizer” (151). These are certainly sweeping if recognizable claims that reproduce the representation of China as seen in mainstream Western media outlets, themselves still powerfully influenced by Cold War narratives. Of course few would deny that the Chinese state is and has been authoritarian—not as much as some, but certainly more than others. But it is hard to say, even metaphorically, just how China has been “imperialistic” towards Hong Kong or Taiwan [to name two places Chow (1997) mentions in alliance with Tibet]. And an aggressor towards Hong Kong? That claim speaks to the lingering power of Cold War and British colonial discourse on the intellectual–political imagination. To be sure the questions of Chinese colonialism or imperialism in the past as well as the present are complicated and worthy of debate. The point here is that all such complexities are missing in Chow’s (1997) work. There is simply a rush there to establish by implication some type of forced equivalence between Hong Kong, Tibet, and Taiwan. So too we must mark the antagonistic, adversarial attitude towards the

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13FL01 See “Ideology and ideological state apparatuses.”
14FL01 See Sautman and Dryer (2005), and Wang and Tsering (2009).
mainland government and society in this type of Hong Kong studies. What is more, one would be hard pressed to find the same stance in any significant sector of the population in the region itself.

For Chow (1997) Hong Kong’s identity is hybrid and impure, and therefore admirable in ethical and “theoretical” terms. These are also of course what makes the city an ideal type in the study of globalization. But it is also somehow a victim and trapped subject. There is much to be said about Chow’s (1997) characterizations of Hong Kong, particularly the city’s exceptionality in relation to the rest of the former British empire and the mainland. Indeed at one point Chow (1997) will claim that Hong Kong is at the center of (Chinese? global?) history and culture: “for the past 150 years (it has) lived at the forefront of ‘Chinese’ consciousness of ‘Chinese’ modernity, while the reality of modernity-as-post-coloniality has been repressed among mainland Chinese” (157).15 Yet this claim to centrality within Chinese history is earlier contradicted by the claim for Hong Kong’s inherent outsider status vis a vis the mainland: “what is self-writing for China is definitely not self-writing for Hong Kong; the restoration of China’s territorial propriety in/through Hong Kong does not amount to Hong Kong’s repossession of its own cultural agency” (153, my emphasis). There is also the attribution of victimhood status for this remarkably affluent, relatively small, and disproportionately influential city that, for better and for worse, has largely been spared the ravages of war, national liberation, and class struggle: it “does not have the privilege of an independence to which it can look forward” (151). As with the above study by Carroll (2005), what remains unspoken here to a global and not local audience is that there has never been an independence movement in Hong Kong. Save perhaps for the brief but remarkable riots in 1966 and 1967 led by pro-Communist leftists, who by no means desired independence either.16 The question that is again begged here, then, is something like: what does it mean to proffer independence from colonialism and for “democracy” to a population that seems strikingly uninterested in such things? This may violate any number of cherished notions about progress, liberal democracy, and the natural desire for “freedom.” But, still, why is Hong Kong studies, particularly its cultural studies and “theoretical” wing, so invested in political forms and values that its putative constituency remains unconcerned with themselves? Is that not a bit like colonial anthropology? What we would seem to have here is not only an elision of mainland perspectives/knowledge in regard to China itself. In the matters of politics and “re-colonization” it is also an elision of popular and mainstream attitudes in Hong Kong. Thus, what would seem to be globalizing here is a recognizably western and “liberal,” if not ultimately British discourse. It is also worth recalling here that while dating from the later 1990s, Chow’s (1997) “re-colonization” claim remains quite influential in Hong Kong cultural studies and is frequently placed on student syllabi.

In the absence of straight-forward argumentation about an alleged Chinese colonization of its own territory, what we have are bold declarations and a

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15FL01 While only “semi”-colonial, one must add that, contra Chow (1997), few countries are more “aware” of their own histories as both colonial and post-colonial than China.
15FL02 16FL01 For background, see Bickers and Yep (2009).
consistently, one-sidedly negative representation of the P.R.C. The argument about re-colonization, in other words, proceeds less through qualification and direct reasoning than through the characterization of the mainland government as unambiguously evil and repressive. Such characterizations, in Chow’s (1997) hands, even extend to mainland intellectuals and “the” people in general. Thus, Chow (1997) argues that Hong Kong culture “has always been dismissed by the mainland Chinese as too westernized and thus inauthentic” (154, my emphasis). So too “Hong Kong in general is usually viewed with disdain by most mainland Chinese as a symbol of decadence, artificiality, and contamination” (155, my emphasis). There is also the clear imputation that many—most?—mainland Chinese are likely to see Hong Kong people as “traitors” because the latter do no share a quasi-fascist “nostalgia for ever receding origins” (155). Given the sheer size, complexity, and diversity of China—counter to orientalist notions of its conformity and homogeneity—it is entirely possible that some mainland people indeed feel and say the objectionable things about Hong Kong that Chow (1997) attributes to them. That she attributes to virtually all of them. But such large and sweeping generalizations—entirely undocumented and unqualified—are highly misleading and unhelpful. And at the level of flat, declarative assertion that Chow (1997) is working from it is equally possible to reverse all of these judgments: that most mainland Chinese really like Hong Kong, that they certainly flock there on holiday, and that they even try hard to emigrate there. There is however a strict quota on such immigration imposed by the local Hong Kong government. Perhaps more difficult for some to fathom is yet another possibility: that many mainland Chinese intellectuals and citizens simply do not care about Hong Kong. Such indifference may or may not be a problem, depending on the context, but it seems nothing if not normal.

The larger point here though is not the truth or falsity of the one, single Hong Kong–P.R.C relationship for the reason that there are many of these. And it may only be now, with the greater integration of the territory with the mainland that we can even sensibly speak of a primary, over-arching relationship between this periphery and its center. The point to examining Chow’s (1997) influential work then is about knowledge production during the current moment of globalization and re-integration of Hong Kong with the mainland. More specifically it is about the continued globalization or circulation of an “anti” or “othering” view of the mainland within Hong Kong and the west. As with Carroll’s (2005) history, this is not work that is written to speak to a mainland audience. It is much more for those who see the socio-political and economic entity that is China in strongly negative and antagonistic ways. This is notable in academic work that is in no small part about China and not just Hong Kong.

Surely this should necessitate an engagement, even in the form of interrogation, of mainland perspectives and analyzes of the handover as well as the previous 150 years relationship? This speaks to an uneven production of knowledge within this Hong Kong–P.R.C. relationship. In short, the ‘anti-Beijing’ and ‘re-colonizationists’ are

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17FL01 I should note that “fascism” in Chow’s (1997) book is just this inflated, where there is even the suggestion that (American) multiculturalism contains a “fascist longing in our midst.” Whatever the problems of multicultural discourse, this is simply not one of them.
clearly winning the battle of knowledge production. While Hong Kong in general seems pleased with ‘Beijing’ and rushes to develop its economic and cultural relationships with the mainland (including university exchanges for example), Hong Kong studies, be it cultural studies’ faux-radicalism or more conventional historicism, seems much less so. There is, in other words, an obvious discrepancy and contradiction between the academic realm on the one hand and on the other the more popular as well as mainstream knowledges, beliefs and desires on the ground in Hong Kong (and mainland Chinese) society. Hong Kong culture, economy and society grow closer to China while Hong Kong studies primarily sees an adversarial and politically objectionable relationship. That is, again, the same relationship to China that was dominant in the colonial era of knowledge production.

This contradiction exists not because the Hong Kong academic field is objective and rigorous and the mainland one, as well as the ‘field’ of non-academic knowledges and desires are not. This is what my interrogation of the above texts is meant to show. There must be a number of reasons for this contradiction or gap—just as there are a number of issues to mine in the relations between knowledge, society, and the contexts of scholarship. Space precludes us from pursuing these in any detail. But we can say that all such questions, and the differences between Hong Kong studies’ Hong Kong and China and those held by many others, are not matters of the truth but of truths. Or in other words what we have are positions within different, competing discourses (“pro-” and “anti-” China or Hong Kong, as well as the assorted places between these two alternatives). From this standpoint what is lacking in such Hong Kong studies work is neither objectivity nor a proper kowtowing to popular or majoritarian knowledges and desires in China or in Hong Kong. Nor do I wish to suggest that analysis has to rest or end with the self-understanding of Hong Kong and/or Chinese subjects—even though I think any adequate analysis of culture and history necessarily has to engage this dimension.

What is lacking is some type of mediation between all of these spheres. And the replacement of flat, declarative assertions about re-colonization with a dialectical or otherwise multi-perspectival analysis that can at least take seriously mainland China’s permission to narrate its own social, political, and colonial history in its own way. It is that intellectual–political culture that remains to be globalized or to enter the conversation within Hong Kong studies, but it would also appear to be one that is nigh upon us.

In interrogating these representative Hong Kong studies texts, I have emphasized the dubious nature of the claims to a mainland “re-colonization” of its small but important territory in the south China Sea. The 1997 handover must be seen as one of the bigger moments of contemporary globalization for both places, and I have argued that this cannot be seen as a colonial relationship. Not only is that an intellectually problematic claim, it seems quite at odds with the allegedly subjected population’s views and desires. In the space that remains I want to now examine what seems to be an emergent, post-1997 Hong Kong identity and cultural form. This is meant to again show the untenable nature of the 1997 = re-colonization equation, but moreover to also map a new development within Hong Kong culture that reflects its burgeoning and largely peaceful, content, and “hybrid” relationship with the modern and contemporary P.R.C.
G.O.D speaks? On Hong Kong, S.A.R. and the P.R.C

Perhaps the best route to examine what is changing in this relationship is not a detour through academic texts but an examination of one important entity in arguably Hong Kong’s premier past-time: shopping. As is well known, Hong Kong’s is a consumer culture virtually without peer. One of its most successful stores since the 1997 reunification has been the design-based one, G.O.D. The acronym in English stands for “Goods of Desire” but in Cantonese pronunciation the three letters mean “to live better.” The chain now has three storefronts in the city, plus a separate clothing boutique, and it regularly participates in art exhibitions and urban conservancy projects. G.O.D.’s cofounder Douglas Young (an architect by training) has stated repeatedly that his aim is to establish—in essence to recover and preserve—a uniquely Hong Kong identity for his customers and for the population at large. (The need for such preservation flows not from mainland control but from the enormous power of property developers and their financiers as well as their local government supporters). G.O.D. does this through producing and marketing products that stake a claim to things that in some sense are specifically, if not definitively “Hong Kong” in their form of appearance. Perhaps the most ubiquitous sign here is the use of photos and icons of the old Hong Kong, which are then either reproduced or used as prints to be placed on mostly casual clothing, bed and kitchen linens, tote bags, mousepads, and so forth. One such example are the photos of the densely packed, working class tenements buildings of the Yaumatei neighborhood/district. While many (but not all) such buildings have been torn down they nonetheless remain perhaps the quintessential image of Hong Kong for ordinary Hong Kong people who either lived in them at one point or whose forbears did. This is of course a very different image of Hong Kong than the spectacular and touristy photos of the Hong Kong–Kowloon skyline as seen from high above.

Other examples include Chinese style—as opposed to Western or IKEA—folding stools and tables to help conserve space in the city’s cramped flats. There are also mock-ups of old products from long past Hong Kong companies (tea bowls, wet market bags, and so on). A final example would be the occasional use of specifically Hong Kong Cantonese language in various items. For instance even the character di, the “D” of G.O.D., only exists in Hong Kong Chinese. “Delay No Mall,” the name of its clothing boutique and a frequent slogan on t-shirts and so forth, sounds like a popular, extremely vulgar curse in local Cantonese (something about mothers and sex). In sum, the design-project has been quite successful commercially and critically even after the financial tsunami of 2008. It continues strong sales and wins awards for its more artistic efforts. Note too that the store and Young’s project dates from the post-colonial era of the late 1990s, as if it were not possible to have such a project until after the British finally left. Contra Chow (1997), then, from the basis of this admittedly brief but I think apt example it would be hard to argue that Hong Kong is being victimized or its identity being rendered vulnerable thanks to Beijing and reunification.

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For an excellent overview of G.O.D. and design identity in Hong Kong stores, see Clark (2009).
What is of still greater significance here, for the present purposes, is that the store’s ‘mission’ now fully includes the specifically mainland and indeed P.R.C. reservoir of Mao era iconography, slogans, and the like. This is no doubt in part, but arguably only in part due to mainland immigration and tourism—as well as to thousands of tourists and expats who with good reason are convinced that they are traveling to China and not just Hong Kong. These “Maoist” or P.R.C. images and signs are at least as ubiquitous as, for example, the Yaumatei images. Thus the worker–peasant–soldier esthetic of the Cultural Revolution makes an appearance via images lifted directly from that era’s numerous, beautiful posters of fierce and/or smiling Maoist cadres and citizens engaged in various activities from farming to marching. As with the Yaumatei images these famous poster images—immediately recognizable to the student of China and the GPCR—appear on t-shirts, linens, postcards, and sundry household and decorative items. Alternatively one can find Mao’s calligraphy on t-shirts and other things (“serve the people,” “great leap forward,” and “rusticated youth” are prime examples). There are also old images and slogans from various “propaganda” efforts to conserve water, eliminate pests/Schistosomiasis, and more generally to be a part of the revolution and the forging of the new China. What one often does not find on such Mao era signs are the original, radical captions exhorting the masses to stand with the workers and peasants, unite against imperialism, combat bureaucracy, capitalism, revisionism and so forth. This may be due to fear of copyright as much as to the Cold War heritage, or to what in Hong Kong would seem too jarring to its dominant, laissez-faire ideology.

The removal of such slogans marks an unsurprising if still unfortunate depoliticization. Of course even this can be seen as in part a mainland influence vis a vis political culture (depoliticization of Mao, the revolution, and so on in the name of technocratic managerialism “beyond” politics). But it is also in this same evisceration of political content that we can find something of a Hong Kong–P.R.C. blend made out of the former revolutionary signs. This depoliticization is characteristically Hong Kong, or Hong Kong’s colonial heritage until recently. (It was part of the former regime’s standard rhetoric that Hong Kong people were simply uninterested in or ignorant about politics; they indeed made this true as best they could). It is also increasingly characteristic of contemporary appropriations of “Maoist” signs in the mainland itself—with the exception of course of explicitly leftists usages—where the revolutionary past is so often merely commodified or taken up in fairly banal if nationalist-patriotic ways. It also fits with Hong Kong’s culturalism vis a vis the mainland. The city tends to celebrate Chinese culture in general if dear terms, while holding modern Chinese history or politics at bay. This is partly because of that British colonial education system that preached the a

19 They are also more numerous than the more “purely” Asian commodities, like small pieces of furniture from Thailand or vases from India. While G.O.D. is also trying to produce an “Asian” identity for Hong Kong (see their website boilerplate), this is clearly a more nascent project and it is an inescapably “Chinese” and mainland-inflected store/brand.

20 An excellent case study of this phenomenon through the example of Hong Kong University can be found in Faure (2003).

21 Barme’s (1996) volume remains the best source for material on the various Mao crazes through the 1980s and 90s.
political, and rarely taught modern Chinese history at all. It thus opened up a
discursive space for things P.R.C. to later on—post-1997—seem fresh, attractive or
interesting to at least some people/consumers. This type of development can, one
should hope, only be seen as a good thing—even if it is also true that many older
generations had originally fled the mainland as a result of poverty, revolution
(including 1966–1976), and war. The point is that what is new here, in the Hong
Kong context, is that it is now okay to signify and take up “Maoist” signs.

In this sense the appropriation of Mao era signs is not simply ‘uncreative’
imitation of the mainland and its markets for Mao era ‘kitsch.’ It would be too easy
to read it that way: a cheap appeal to ‘mainlander’ tourists. For there is simply no
shortage of Mao era iconographic ‘nostalgia’ in China. G.O.D.’s appropriation of
‘Red’ imagery and artifacts—as with its Shanxi style furniture, say—fits Hong Kong
and its emergent identity as another, obviously Cantonese yet different city on the
coast of southern China. I do not see how one can object to this emergence, which
after all was very long in the making. Unless one believes in Hong Kong
exceptionalism, and/or the necessity of liberal capitalist democracy, and/or the good
old days in the exclusive mid-levels neighborhoods of Central district. Even the
depoliticization of Maoism in G.O.D. should be seen in context. Compared to the
strident anti-communism and Cold War orientalism so prevalent in Hong Kong
under the British and during China studies’ heyday, this willingness to embrace
mainland revolutionary iconography, howsoever ambiguously, is a step in the right
direction. A small but not insignificant step towards a Chinese political culture that
can openly and frankly come to terms with and build on its revolutionary heritages,
including the pursuit of a Chinese, alternative order of things.22 And truth be told,
there was always a constituency in Hong Kong that supported the Party and nation
across the border.23 And 10 years from now, this will be even larger than it is now.

This emergent identity may not mark a repossession of a lost, past, or future
culture that is uniquely Hong Kong’s—as Chow (1997) among others paradoxically
seems to desire, despite her or their professed, ‘post-modern’ preferences for
hybridity and impure origins. Authentic inauthenticity: what Hong Kong is, for its
‘post-modern’ scholar-defenders.24 Nationalists and communists in other words—a
population of considerable millions across the P.R.C. and Hong Kong—are not to be
part of this authentically inauthentic, hybrid identity as it is imagined by a great deal
of Hong Kong studies. But the new form does stake a claim on a culture or at least
design identity that is both Hong Kong and China—i.e., and the P.R.C. in all its
modern complexity, diversity, riches, and poverties as well as it storiied past under
Mao. Faced as it has been with irredeemably clichéd positions like the “East meets
West” or “Gateway to China,” this turn towards not just mainland markets but
mainland history, culture, and politics may prove to be the city’s opportunity to

22 On Chinese Maoism/revolution as a form of alternative modernity, see Liu (2004).
23 The 2007 Hong Kong film directed by Samson Chiu Leung-Chun, “Mr. Cinema” (老港正傳) details
such a group of local people over the course of 40 years. Within the city, it is no secret that over the years
there were significant populations of Guomindang and Communist “sympathizers,” alongside the more
indifferent demographic. For a detailed history of actual Party activity in the city, and therefore of China–
Hong Kong history, see Loh (2010).
24 For more on this sensibility, see Grossberg (1992).
actually be a part of something larger than itself. Something deeper than a consumer
culture, bank, movie theater, or occidentalist fantasy of the city’s exceptionalism. In
sum, the Hong Kong–P.R.C. identity is both a marketing ploy or commodity-sign
and a nascent, bona fide cultural phenomenon. It reflects a real, shared history—
albeit a sometimes conflicted and distant one prior to 1997. What something like G.
O.D. represents, then, is not a re-possession or re-colonization but a re-imagined
community within Hong Kong and as part of the larger, political entity known as the
nation-state. And in so far as this G.O.D./identity phenomenon also marks an
appropriation of knowledge (specifically that Hong Kong is a part of China and its
national history) it also represents a challenge to academic work on the city. It
renders that area ‘academic’ in the pejorative sense of the term: impractical, merely
hypothetical, and ‘behind the times.’

Much contemporary theory and analysis of globalization, informed as it is by post-
modern and anti-dialectical currents from France and the U.S., does not have good
things to say about the nation-state and nationalism. But for all their problems these
last are far too real, far too seemingly necessary, and far too popular to make their
historical exit any time soon. And for a place like Hong Kong—which has always
lacked them—the desire to realize being part of a nation-state will not simply go away
despite the best efforts of the ‘free Hong Kong’ partisans (who merely want their own,
native nation and imagined community) and Hong Kong studies scholars. This Hong
Kong–P.R.C. hybrid is going to last and will have to be reckoned with by a Hong Kong
and China studies that dislikes the Party, Mao, and the nation far more than the Hong
Kong people do, let alone their mainland compatriots. What is more, given the rapid
re-integration and mutual development of the region and the mainland, this short story
about G.O.D. that I have begun to offer may well be the shape of things to come: of
Hong Kong’s identity as another, unusual but not exceptionally different city in the
south of China. There are certainly lesser fates and worse opportunities.

All of this will, eventually, have to have an impact on knowledge production within
the city. The national, main Hong Kong–China relationship—with all due allowances
for the plurality of other such relationships at a micro level—will have to be
constructed and written in non-opposed and non-antagonistic ways within the
academy. Not exclusively but substantially. Because it is being imagined and written
in those ways on the ground. Hong Kong will now be part of China’s globalization.
Mainland immigration to Hong Kong, China-to-Hong Kong and China-elsewhere
university exchanges are crucial here, as is an expanding mainland academy more
generally. There is also of course the relative decline of the global power of US–UK
intellectual–political culture and knowledge production which follows, howsoever
slowly, the larger economic declines. What the post-1997 aftermath tells us is that in
fundamental ways globalization is about the superstructure following the base.

References


