

Coloniality in Postcolonial Hong Kong

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Compared with colonialism, which tends to have distinct temporal, spatial, and institutional attributes, coloniality is a much more versatile and enduring condition that extends beyond the end of colonial rule. In Hong Kong, coloniality is the result of the dual processes of British colonialism and a political decolonization that brought into being the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) under the so-called “one-country, two systems.”

In Hong Kong society, the positive and negative implications of the colonial legacy are constantly at play at different levels of public discourse and social life. Given the duality of its

manifestation before and after 1997, coloniality has less to do with a particular regime, but remains a persistent and deeply ingrained mentality and system of values and beliefs in public governance that has infiltrated social, cultural, and economic practices in the postcolonial era.

Coloniality, therefore, is a pervasive force and its implications extend beyond the more visible forms of power. It does not exist as a singular, isolated phenomenon but within a network of social, political, and cultural relations. In other words, it is better understood as a relational network of people and groups that give tangible forms and expressions to the dynamics between individual agency and an institutionalized official culture that seeks to regulate such agency.

Hong Kong presents an intriguing case for the study of coloniality due to the lack of a consistent and clearly elaborated cultural policy since colonial times. As an (ex-)colonial city, cultural institutions—which encompass museums, the performing arts, urban and heritage conservation, sports venues, swimming pools, parks and community centres—are the remit of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, a wonderfully revealing name in which all things cultural are bracketed by leisure and services.

In a nutshell, the systemically diffused structure of these institutions has successfully created a public image for Hong Kong that is largely consistent with the “Pearl of the Orient”

slogan from colonial times. As such, so-called “local identity” is a clichéd hybrid where East and West, modernity and tradition, past and present are seamlessly harmonized in the image of a vaguely recognizable, and much loathed, “flying dragon” logo. Inevitably, certain traits of this identity have infiltrated the cultural imagination of the city: in films, TV dramas, popular music, TV commercials and other mass media products. At the same time, the tourist-packed junk cruise that sails along Victoria Harbour every day remains an iconic reminder of the city’s humble origins and miraculous transformation under British colonial rule.

While local identity, or at least an officially sanctioned one, has been shaped and reshaped to legitimize the interests of the prevailing regime, a critical reading of the symbolic capital of the official culture, post-1997, reveals that the British colonial legacy has been selectively extrapolated to foster a common “heritage” called the “Hong Kong Story” or “Hong Kong Spirit,” a catch-all and feel-good expression that has circulated in a wide range of media contexts from political speeches and propaganda to social activism and popular entertainment. Recently, this type of “heritage” has been used to cover the less palatable portions of the past with a sugarcoating referred to as “collective memory”—a free-for-all cliché with little concrete meaning.

In post-handover Hong Kong, it seems that 150 years of colonial rule has tinted the relationship between the city and the

nation. It is also true that the relative freedom and liberty in the absence of democracy over the last one and a half centuries has resulted in a general acquiescence to power and political indifference, perhaps until just recently, when escalating social tensions and a widening wealth gap have sent wake-up calls to the local population who are beginning to see the political roots of their apparently “economic” plight. Political roots, yes, but in Hong Kong politics can too easily exist without due attention to history and culture. At least this seems to be the present-day case. A long tradition of civic culture has prevented major violent outbursts of public discontent. This impressive gentility has animated media reports on, and public reaction to, a series of alleged/proven cases of misconduct in public office during the recent Chief Executive election, as the fiasco moved toward its melodramatic climax on March 25, 2012. The biting sense of humor and the grotesque images of the notorious public figures circulating via political posters on the Internet can be cathartic for many, but they lack the critical depth of engaging political criticism required to make a lasting impact. Despite the heated debates that made headline news almost every day, Hong Kong people have shown an amazing capacity for humor and indifference: it is an indifference to the Nation as a substitute for dissent, or any hope for a better Hong Kong. As mass protests are escalating into more emotionally charged confrontations with the police, they are nonetheless “respected” by the authorities as

a “way of life,” a public relations tagline in policy statements, and a festival celebrated every July 1.

Coloniality, thus, has a complex manifestation in Hong Kong: it has produced a civic culture that is averse to violence and radical politics, a polity of complacent and law-abiding citizens, and a pragmatic, resilient, and largely non-unionized labor force at the service of a capitalist economy. Most of all, it has distanced the thoughts and feelings of the people from “national affairs.” Occasionally, we do hear passionate articulations of nationhood, for instance at the mass protests in the wake of June 4th 1989, and the annual memorial gatherings thereafter, and no less the massive charity rallies after every major natural disaster on the Mainland. But at the level of everyday life the nation is kept at a certain psychological distance despite the looming presence of the nation in economic and political affairs.

What does this tell us about the prospect of resistance and decolonial thinking in Hong Kong? This is an open-ended question that warrants both critical reflection and critical *imagination*.

At the very least, it must be acknowledged that coloniality has not disappeared after national reunification, but is displaced, appropriated and perpetuated under the peculiar conditions of “one country, two systems.” In other words, the transition from colonization to decolonization has been a process wrought with ambivalences, a process that complicates rather than eliminates

pre-existing colonial relations through the apparatuses of a “new” power, the nation-state. An awareness of coloniality as a complex network of social, political, economic and cultural relations should still inform critical interventions within and outside academia, especially at a time when what counts as “knowledge” is determined by the technocratic benchmarks of the global market, the brave new world of economic imperialism in the 21st century.

Decolonial thinking can be conceived as a way of reinhabiting the world through a re-imagination of the historical and cultural configurations of the living present. In the context of Hong Kong, the living present is crisscrossed by remnants of colonial ideology and the ambivalence of a “national(ized) future”; that is, a double hegemony. For decolonial thinking to be conceivable and practicable in such a situation, the complicity between the colonial and the national must be duly acknowledged and scrutinized, so much so that their mutual implications and intertwinements will be revealed, critiqued, and contested. In so doing, the historical and the cultural will inform and transform the constricted understanding of the political, not as an exclusive membership club but as a free, discursive and *imaginative* space that is accessible, in principle, to all.