

## From Global Colonialism to Global Coloniality

Kenny Ng

---

Division of Humanities  
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology  
E-mail: hmkng@ust.hk

---

To examine the historical and cultural transitions from “global colonialism” to “global coloniality,” we need to perform more fieldwork and historical research on specific locations and cultural phenomena so as to flesh out contrastive theoretical insights and historical hindsight. We must study specific locations, sites, architectural buildings, artifacts, and objects—under the conceptual umbrella of “locality”—to understand the contesting layers of colonial, local, and national significations, historical traces, and cultural meanings. Further investigation is required to look at the functions and

importance of popular culture and mindsets, populism, everyday practices, cultural nostalgia and memory, visual representation, and the cultural inheritance of architecture and performative forms of understanding in our “post-colonial” states of mind and identities.

Take as one example Hong Kong’s complex film histories, which have often been studied with little attention to the crucial lens of coloniality and its political implications. The study of colonial film censorship in postwar Hong Kong, as one significant example, has shown that while colonial economic policy allowed free trade and encouraged the free flow of capital, resources and commodities, colonial governance continued to impose strict restraints on the exchange of moving images, political ideologies, and cultural ideas. The trajectory from “global colonialism” to “global coloniality” causes us to rethink, and even criticize, the cherished ideas of transnationality and border-crossing that are found within fashionable discourses of globalization, and reminds us of more inflexible territorial boundaries when it comes to political and cultural encounters. While the grand claims of transnational film activities emphasize the erosion of political boundaries and historical obstacles, and favor the free exchange of cinematic representations across a borderless world, an examination of colonial film censorship in the Cold War era tells another story about the predicaments of cross-border film exhibition and cultural exchange during a

highly politicized period.

The colonial government's "divine" right of confidentiality and secrecy lends a historical lens on the current debate concerning informational transparency, social justice, and the people's right to know in the information age. Contrary to most Western models of globalization that have privileged Hong Kong's role in the global economy, by virtue of its economic "freedom," a close study of Hong Kong colonial cultural politics and film censorship reveals that this "freedom" in the cultural sphere—for Hong Kong people to view freely—was actually severely constrained and highly selective under colonial rule. An examination of colonial cultural history will discredit the Hong Kong colonial government's "positive non-intervention myth" in cultural policies, and shed light on the active role of colonialism in Hong Kong's cinematic culture and cultural development. In rewriting colonial Hong Kong film history, one needs to ask in what crucial ways the historical suppression of politics and nationalism on local movie screens could have contributed to a Hong Kong cinematic identity "without a nation." Such reflections lead to further research on the dynamic interplay of Hong Kong cinema with its colonial, international, and Chinese film connections. In a nutshell, any generalizations of transnational film cultures or identities in the present-day discourse of globalization require further study of local politics and real histories in order to examine the frameworks of

different political regimes and their specific socio-economic and cultural realities.

Another singular socio-cultural phenomenon is the hybrid linguistic landscapes (native dialects, national and colonial languages, between the oral and written, the popular and elite) so deeply enmeshed in our colonial histories and cultural developments. Again, there is a strong cinematic point to be made in this case. The regional dynamics and language politics in the movie business resulted in a diversity of Chinese-language films, and in particular the tensions and competitions between Cantonese, Mandarin, and other dialect cinemas (such as Amoy) in the colonial history of Hong Kong. Further research is required to examine the co-existence of the Mandarin and Cantonese dialects within the film industries, together with the political interventions from the “leftist,” “rightist,” and “foreign” interests. Scholars must study how cinema and popular visual culture created multifarious images of pan-Chinese identities, which forged the aspirations for communal cohesion and social modernization for audiences of the Chinese diaspora. The linguistic and dialectal coexistence in colonial social history, vernacular culture, and popular representation can be a productive field of research in investigating how the hybridized linguistic landscapes have generated multicultural meanings and creativity, as much as they are tolerated or simply neglected by the colonial

government. Hong Kong film studies is well placed within the larger colonial cultural history to unravel neglected social and cultural materials in official and unofficial records. Only with proper historicizations can we ask the question: In what ways do we perceive of a “global coloniality” as a constructive cultural framework in dialogue with the ideals of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism?

