

Reading Colonial Hong Kong

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If the colonized mind is characterized by the belief that colonial modernity is a necessary phase, or indeed an integral part of modernization and “development,” it is apparently not simply a legacy of colonialism. It is also characteristic of many developing, “aspiring,” nations, and some of these may not be former colonies. Walter Mignolo has described “coloniality” as “the darker side of modernity,”¹ but as an inseparable part of the desired goal of modernity, it is not without its “attractions.” This explains coloniality’s persistence. There is no question of decolonial thinking without first unraveling the constructedness of subjectivity under the conditions of colonialism, and now

1) Walter Mignolo, 2000. *Local Histories/ Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p. 22.

global coloniality.

In the case of Hong Kong, a belief in capitalist enterprise and “free” trade, and the dividends of economic prosperity and social stability, is, of course, inherited from colonial times. We take pride in “our” institutions, values and practices, which enable us to connect with the modern world better than any other Chinese city. But China is equally keen to catch up, if only in the economic sphere, so that it can beat the developed countries at their own game. It is fair to say that Hong Kong will be allowed to keep her capitalist system for 50 years after reunification with China, precisely to facilitate the integration of the country with the modern world. If the tolerance of the quasi-colonial reality is the condition for a rising China to join the ranks of the developed nations, the colonial experience to many Hongkongers is what they believe historically distinguishes them from their Mainland compatriots as the most modern of Chinese, if not celebrated savvy global citizens.

Much of Hong Kong’s self-identity is built upon its cherished cosmopolitanism and “manifest destiny,” its desire to become a world city that is the equal of New York and London. This sense of identity and destiny has been accentuated among Hongkongers since their reunification with the Mainland, and most tellingly in the face of the new and intense competition of other Chinese cities with similar aspirations. We are quite certain that we have more than what Matthew Turner has

described as an “identity of lifestyle”²—built for the most part on philistine consumerism, which is what is already happening in China today.

The irony of postcolonial Hong Kong can be observed in the surge of interest in a collective memory (real or contrived) of colonial Hong Kong, so that we are able to recover lost or disappearing core values that defined us and our place in the world. Writing in a special issue of *Postcolonial Studies* on the tenth anniversary of the political handover, Hong Kong’s friend-critic Leo Lee asserts that the colonial past, known for its “cultural hybridity,” is where lies Hong Kong’s cosmopolitan future—unimpressed as he is with our “comfortable parochialism” and accelerating Cantonese monolingualism.³

While the almost nostalgic revisiting of Hong Kong’s colonial past is symptomatic of the colonized mind, I believe that it is by looking into the colonial past, rather than shunning it as political taboo, that we can eventually confront coloniality for what it is, and free ourselves from self-delusion. There are two issues here which I find particularly interesting in my research:

1. Engaging with the colonial reality, past or present, requires understanding the operation of colonial power and politics. It was not something encouraged by the

2) Matthew Turner, 2003. *60s/90s: Dissolving the People*, Pun Ngai and Yee Iai-man (ed.), *Narrating Hong Kong Culture and Identity*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, p. 35.

3) Leo Lee, 2007. Postscript, *Postcolonial Studies*. Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 499-509.

colonial authorities who wanted docile subjects interested only in their economic betterment, not assertive citizens demanding political participation and full citizenship. What was encouraged in British Hong Kong was a Chinese culturalism in the school curriculum, to be used as an ingenious defense against revolutionary Chinese nationalism at critical historical periods; e.g., after the Republican Revolution of 1911, the Communist victory in the Civil War in 1949—and most recently, and with lasting effect, on the first postwar generation of Hongkongers—the Cultural Revolution which began in 1966 and continued for a decade in mainland China.⁴ English was taught according to economic need, but there was no attempt to Anglicize the Chinese subjects, let alone over-educate them in knowledge of the modern world.⁵ For better or worse, Hong Kong was a bastion of Chinese conservatism under British colonial rule. But how could one apprehend one's own culture without apprehending the "world" which subjugated it? We should do well to engage with our colonial past not so much by conserving the colonial buildings—which were no more than a facade of cosmopolitanism in the Hong Kong SAR—as by reflecting on the colonial history which

4) Alastair Pennycook, 1998. *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*. London: Routledge, p. 124.

5) *Ibid.* pp. 110-124.

was not taught in the school curriculum, but nevertheless was the unconscious shaper of our self-identity. The agenda of the self-effacing colonial government must be critiqued before any true decolonization can even begin.

2. As collective memory is necessarily saturated with popular myths and sentimentalism, critical reading may be a better way to deal with our colonial past. It is not a matter of living up to a mythical universal cosmopolitanism under benign British colonialism, but rather facing up to an “exclusive” cosmopolitanism represented by expatriates and the elite class in colonial society. In connection with this, my research on colonial Hong Kong has led to developing a general education course on “Reading Colonialism and the Modern Experience,” which looks into selected literary, critical, and political texts by colonial administrators, foreign and Mainland visitors, expatriate professors and native bilingual elites, from the last 100 years—beginning with the first Chinese Republican revolution and the founding of the University of Hong Kong. A common problem in our classes is that a majority of the material we are being educated in is written in English, which is, of course, not our native tongue. What has been gratifying to me as a teacher, however, is seeing students discover for themselves the “other” Hong Kong as observed and

experienced beyond the rather closed local Chinese community, and more importantly—if I may use Edward Said’s terms here⁶—the “worldliness” of those texts when they were able to read them against their usual beliefs and experience. Whereas the “epistemology of imperialism” essentializes national and cultural identities and forbids the crossing of boundaries, “worldliness” requires the making of connections and enables one to see the colonial situation for what it is. The constructedness of the colonial situation makes for the possibility of change. It is up to the colonial subject as to what he or she chooses to do next.

6) The two terms, “worldliness” and ‘the epistemology of imperialism,” are borrowed from Edward Said’s essay “The Politics of Knowledge,” published in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essay*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000. pp. 372-386.