Rethinking Global Coloniality through the Lens of Hong Kong: Forms of State Control and Democratic Possibilities

WONG, Pak Nung

Department of Applied Social Studies, City University of Hong Kong

Background

Since the Second World War—across Africa, Asia and Latin America—a wave of decolonization, as the result of nationalist struggles, has led to the mythical end of western colonialism through the eradication of colonial administrations and the establishment of sovereign independence within the post-colonial states. Despite this wave, coloniality remains in various forms of political, economic, epistemic, and cultural control, as produced both by agents and structures at transnational and local levels.

Neo-colonialism emerged from various forms of global/transnational control, which shifted the former colonies into brokerage/semi-peripheral states (e.g., Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan) and satellite/peripheral states (e.g., Argentina, D. R. Congo and the Philippines) in relation to the western/metropolitan-centers, thereby constituting a global capitalist hierarchy. The other model that has developed over this time is found in post-Mao socialist China, and Deng Xiaoping's liberalist reforms adopted in the name of an "open door policy" that began in 1978. Since then, China has absorbed foreign capital and technology for its own economic development by first engaging with neighboring semi-peripheral states, the capital-rich ethnic Chinese population in East and Southeast Asia and with the western-metropolitan centers.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union from 1989 to 1991 led to more independent nation-states being formed in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and global capitalism, with its institutions and practices, experienced significant expansion into the Eastern bloc. However, even though Socialist China has been gradually absorbed into the global capitalist system, its staggering economic growth over the past three decades—and its resource-focused diplomatic, economic and increasingly political overseas endeavors—have left several unanswered questions.

Research Questions

As China is presently a regional power within Asia and a world economic power, given its continued growth and expansion into various parts of the world, it has become a major global player in terms of state-sponsored transnational overseas projects. There is therefore a necessity to re-configure China's historically constituted, deep-seated ruling repertoire, especially how it has managed to rule long distances from Peking/Beijing to the inland and coastal frontiers. This project seeks to answer the following questions:

(1) How did the imperial Chinese state rule in the past?
(2) How can we conceive of China's present ruling techniques in terms of the past?
(3) What de-colonial options can Hong Kong propose at global and local levels?
(4) Why is post-British Hong Kong well placed for developing new de-colonial options for China and the world?

This project aims to answer these questions by empirically illustrating representative political lives in pre-British Hong Kong and post-British Hong Kong against the larger late Qing and Socialist Chinese historical contexts.

A Revolution from Within: Rethinking "Global Coloniality"

"[C]oloniality is the hidden side of modernity" and therefore is "constitutive of modernity."[1] Accordingly, since the 16th century, when various European states extended their imperial reach into other parts of the world, "the colonial matrix of power" has operated in four interconnected spheres of life, whereby struggles and conflicts over control and domination for which "the imposition of a particular lifestyle, moral, economic, structure of authority, etc., implies the overcoming, destruction, marginalization of the existing pre-colonial order":[2]

> (1) The struggle for economic control;
> (2) The struggle for control over authority;
> (3) The control of the public sphere;
> (4) The control of knowledge and subjectivity through education and colonizing existing knowledge.

Approaching these forms of control on a global scale, "global coloniality" may therefore have several meanings. First, it entails the conditions and ways that the states and their societies are organized in the global capitalist hierarchy. Second, it entails the dynamics, institutions and practices of neo-colonialism for which the metropolitan states are asymmetrically engaged with semi-peripheral and peripheral states. Third, it involves the forms of

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1) Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009, p. 132.
2) Ibid., pp. 134–135.

power, system, operating mechanisms, structure and agency of transnational control/domination and local reception/resistance for making the global capitalistic circuits possible. Fourth, it includes the practices and strategies for which individual subjectivity and communal inter-subjectivity is, on the one hand, (successfully and otherwise) shaped, and on the other, (successfully and otherwise) the neo-colonial structures and agencies are reconstituted.

In previous work I have argued that political decentralization (within the institutionalization of electoral politics and local governments) has been implemented by the post-Marcos Philippine state to use the local mestizo-cum-chieftains as an economic, political and coercive instrument to pacify armed unrest, enhance state legitimacy, and localize state sovereignty, in conflation with the governing techniques that were developed during the pre-colonial and colonial eras.[3]

In the midst of the state's sprawling into shaping individual subjectivity and communal inter-subjectivity, the governing elite has developed a specific "art of governing the self" in response to emotive undersides, such as disillusionment and depression, which is a result of the political discrepancies between (1) what and how to actually operate on the ground, and, (2) the values and conduct expected by the public. Combining pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial power techniques of various state forms, the post-colonial Philippine state has been able to re-

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3) Wong, 2006.

enact itself through a Catholicized psycho-spiritual power that allows individuals to take care of the soul.[4]

I have argued elsewhere that the post-colonial Philippine state has been able to keep itself intact after the Spanish and U.S. colonial administrations formally ended because of a pre-colonial ability to conduct "internal colonization"; i.e., the institutionalization and extension of a power/knowledge structure (of epistemic and cultural control) to shape how the "life world" may be conducted.[5] Life world here may refer to the social-interactional and context-specific situations where social norms, rules, discourses and identities are openly articulated, freely generated and relatively autonomously shaped outside the realm of the state. Coupled with the state imperatives of money and power, which induce daily competition, social interactions in the life world have been both distorted and facilitated by state-sponsored education and the religious cultivation of value/ideological systems to strengthen state rule. Whereas the excessive and greedy accumulation of power and money on the part of the elite has continued, the life world has generated an alternative social control mechanism which induces an "awakening"; the sudden realization or self-enlightenment of the fact that one has achieved/accumulated so much that it is done at the expense of others.

Thus, the post-colonial state has been conducting a form of

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4) Wong, 2010.
5) Ibid.

"internal colonization" in which a competing set of controls and identities are instilled in their territories and population. Here, "internal colonization" refers to the Asian state's sprawling reaches to shape, dominate and naturalize the inter-subjective landscape of the inhabitants' life world in accordance with the historically-constituted and locally-specific colonial logics that could be traced to the "pre-colonial" era; i.e., Asia before the Europeans.

Alternative Colonial Formations in Asia

Long before China's first unifying state was founded in the Qin Dynasty (221–206 B.C.), archaeological and anthropological evidence suggests that circa 4,000–5,000 B.C., the sea-faring Austronesian-speaking peoples (also known as Malay-Polynesians, including Malay, Filipino, Indonesian and Maori), originally hailing from China's Yangzi river basin, began to settle in Taiwan and spread throughout the Southeast Asian archipelagoes, spreading farther westward along the string of islands reaching Madagascar and eastward across the Pacific islands as far as New Zealand. The impulse behind the Austronesian migration can be reduced to three economic and subsistence drives:[6]

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6) Bellwood 1995, pp. 98–104.

(1) To search for more land and sufficient food supplies as
    mainland China was already occupied by an immense and
    growing population;
(2) To search for new goods for exchange and trade;
(3) To create new settlements in order to perpetuate and
    extend one's own genealogy for future generations.

After the Austronesian rice-producing agriculturalists crossed the Formosa Strait to Taiwan, they moved to the Philippines, Borneo, Sulawesi, and the Moluccas, gradually spreading across the constellation of archipelagos of Southeast Asia. Having developed sophisticated sea-faring skills and non-rice planting techniques, they systematically dispersed from north to south down to the equatorial archipelagos of present-day Indonesia and Papua New Guinea where they met the Papuan-speaking peoples. And later in the Lapita expansion between 1600 B.C. and 1000 B.C., the colonists also moved from Taiwan further east to Melanesia and Polynesia as well as farther west to the island of Malagasy, present-day Madagascar.[7]

Cultural imprints are still found today. For example, the linguistic root of the basic administrative unit in the Philippines—the village (Filipino: barangay)—shares roots with the Malay word "balangay" (Scott 1994). This term refers to a large boat, led by a patron-protector "big-man," usually known as the "chieftain" (datu) in maritime Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands.[8] Such well-built boats could comfortably carry

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7) Ibid., p. 100.
8) Sahlins 1963; Scott 1992.

more than forty mature individuals of a clan or household for re-settlement purposes. Migrating back and forth within the archipelagic trading-circuits to find unexploited islands as new colonies, the Austronesian civilization represents a pre-historic archetype of human coloniality and alternative inter-continental colonization techniques. Constituted by the Austronesians, this migration pattern enabled their descendants to become a new generation of colonists. But the Austronesian example is just one among numerous alternative colonial formations in Asia, which helps to explain post-independence Malay-Polynesian coloniality, and to contrastively inform the different forms of (potentially) "global" coloniality that have constituted other Asian polities such as Hong Kong and China.

Informed by a combination of Leninist, pre-war German statist, and neo-Marxian strands of thoughts—which are relevant for understanding contemporary Socialist Chinese statecraft and strategic cultures—I consider "internal colonization" to be largely characterized by three monopolization processes conducted by state apparatuses:

(1) The monopolization of the legitimate use of physical force. This leads to the securitization of society, characterized primarily by the threat and use of force and implantation of surveillance systems against the state's "enemy."

(2) The monopolization of symbolic violence. This leads to the state's attempts to endorse, magnify and propagate certain positions and knowledge regimes,

which can also sideline, suppress, and silence other unfavorable knowledge regimes.

(3) The monopolization of control over economic resources. This leads to the state's and its agents' accumulation and appropriation of the means and modes of production, such as land, natural resources, labor and tools.

These internal colonization processes, intersected with the increasingly polycentric global colonial processes, are further complicated by the ontological, political, emotional, and strategic undertakings of the individuals and communities within the sovereign states. However, this may very well open up new possibilities of awakening and democratic transformation.

Global Colonialities in Hong Kong: Past and Present

Situated at China's southern coastal frontier, pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Hong Kong has provided a relevant case to illustrate how state control and global coloniality has gradually sunk roots in Asia. In pre-colonial Hong Kong, the Chinese imperium of the Ming and Qing dynasties successfully established tributary state systems. Originally inhabited by the non-Han tribes known as the "southern barbarians," Hong Kong and the south China territories experienced a gradual ethnic Han migration from the north. These state-sponsored Han settler-clans brought with them specific ways that Peking made its long-

distance ruling and the imperial tributary state possible, which may be considered Chinese imperiality.

Ethnographic evidence in Hong Kong's New Territories suggests that imperial Chinese state rule fit seamlessly with the meritocratic imperial examination system. For example, in Ping Shan of the Yuen Long plains, which included several Ming/Qing period Han clan-settler villages, children were prepared from an early age to engage with the pedagogical institutions and rites of the imperial examination system. Schools, shrines, temples, martial arts courts and pagodas, as well as established rituals, were systematically arranged to induce these settlers and their offspring to devote themselves to the recognized Chinese classics, martial arts training and the state (civil and military) offices, which their predecessors occupied by excelling in the Peking-held imperial examinations. Since then, the ideation and instilled desire that "studying well will bring advancement and fortune in the state hierarchy" has been deeply rooted among the pre-colonial Hong Kong clan settlers' mentality. Through the imperial examination system, pre-colonial Hong Kong's life world was gradually colonized by the imperial Chinese state, for which both symbolic and physical violence were monopolized in the hands of the Han clan-settlers and their representative state officials.

After the Opium Wars (1839-42; 1856-60), with the penetrating capitalistic expansion of the British Empire to the Far East, Hong Kong was created by London to become a commercial port for the British East India Company to trade with

China and neighboring polities. In order to maintain Hong Kong as a commercial hub and strategic point for British interests in the Far East, socio-political stability in Hong Kong was regarded as a necessity. Without radically altering the pre-colonial socio-political structure and cultural system, the British recycled the Chinese "imperial examination systems" into a technique of colonial rule. By establishing the elitist educational system and the civil servant examination system, the British ruling elite successfully compelled Hong Kong's population to study hard and maintain English culture throughout the system. While skillfully retaining an emphasis on classical Chinese culture in Hong Kong's primary and secondary school curriculums, contemporary Chinese nationalism, inclining either to the nationalist China regime (of Taipei) or the communist China regime (of Beijing), were discouraged. High-achievers in Hong Kong's colonial educational and civil examination systems were then absorbed as integral parts of the British colonial bureaucracy in Hong Kong, enjoying high social status and prestige. In parallel with the pre-colonial imperiality, they were established in Hong Kong's successes, reminiscent of the "studying well will bring advancement and fortune in the state hierarchy" mentality that was already instilled by the pre-colonial Chinese imperial examination system. As a result, "internal colonization" in Hong Kong during the British colonial period was brought to a further stage, so that Hong Kong's pre-colonial imperiality was transformed and fully integrated into

the transnational circuits of global coloniality of metropolitan capitalism.

From the 1980s until now, China's rapid rise can be viewed as the Chinese Communist Party self-transforming itself in order to utilize metropolitan capitalism for the purposes of economic development, modernization and the legitimization of engineering projects. This self-transformation can be summed up in the pragmatist motto "groping the stone across the river," which refers to the unprecedented and experimental blending of state socialism and market capitalism. Hong Kong's post-colonial experience with China, since the 1997 reversion of sovereignty, has been witness to this alternative and continually morphing form of Asian global coloniality. As an international financial center, Hong Kong has become a major platform for China's enterprises to accumulate capital, conduct investments and extend overseas resource-led expeditions. Located on the semi-periphery, Hong Kong continues to serve as an Asian nexus for metropolitan capitalist networks, and has become a critical platform for socialist China's global capitalist networks. Maintaining Hong Kong's socio-political stability is critical in order for Hong Kong to retain its status as a nexus for competing global capitalist networks, and these developments will have significant implications for Hong Kong's democratic future.

In line with China's state-building project of internal colonization, Hong Kong's post-1997 political democratization, conducted during the post-colonial regime, contains two major

features which should both defend and advance Hong Kong's position as being the primary base of China's global capitalist network. First, the British civil bureaucracy constitutes a well-established interest group, which has consistently perpetuated Chinese imperiality as a way to induce Hong Kong people to study hard and to revere the civil examination system. This has allowed a continuity in the grooming and absorption of sectors within Hong Kong, particularly pro-Beijing political parties, interest groups, professional bodies and individuals. While there is room for party politics, this continuity was intended to generate political pressure on the colonial-created civil bureaucracy, so that the civil servants would easily fall in line with Beijing's agendas and interests. Such a socialist united-front was first enacted during the British era, when the British had full command over the civil bureaucracy, and China actively supported pro-Beijing parties/groups and individuals. Presently, it is used to ensure Hong Kong's socio-political stability as China's international financial center and Hong Kong's socio-economic integration with the Mainland.

Second, up to this point electoral contests have been polarized by the "nationalist" and "pan-democratic," camps—at least as viewed from the vantage point of the Mainland authority. The candidacy for Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region must be endorsed by a limited selection of Beijing-associated individuals. In other words, Hong Kong's process of democratization has been carefully engineered by

Beijing. While Mainland officials remain skeptical about Hong Kong becoming fully democratized and the possibility for universal suffrage, influenced by western liberal-democratic ideas and the worsening economic disparity, Hong Kong's population consistently voices a demand for political democratization as a means to close the widening rich-poor gap, and to defend Hong Kong's local identities vis-à-vis Beijing's relatively authoritarian stance. Approaching this issue from the context of internal colonization, it would be in Beijing's interests to see Hong Kong defend its core values of civil liberty, rule of law and incorruptibility, which constitutes the institutional pillars of Hong Kong as a haven of global capitalism and international finance. However, it will not be in Beijing's interests to see Hong Kong embark upon a plan of full democratization, as this would have an unpredictable impact on Hong Kong's socio-political stability, which is the foundation for its role as an international financial center and China's platform for global capitalist networks.

In summation, as China's global reach continues to extend, Hong Kong's democratic future will remain contested and unsettled. Through this contestation and resistance, Hong Kong's life world will also closely witness what a "global China" will mean to the world, as an alternative form of global coloniality continues to take shape.

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