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## 3 The end of “re-colonization”: on Hong Kong, 4 knowledge, and G.O.D

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8 **Abstract** Hong Kong studies often argue that 1997—a key moment of global-  
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26 globalization; the realm of knowledge production will, one should think, eventually  
27 catch up.

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30 Orientalism · Politics of knowledge · Rey Chow

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## 32 Framing Hong Kong, China

33 The founding question and constitutive anxiety of Hong Kong studies between 1984  
34 and the then-looming handover date of 1997 was something like, “Will Hong Kong  
35 remain free, untrammled upon by the authoritarian mainland regime?”<sup>1</sup> Fourteen  
36 years on the widely acknowledged answer has to be ‘yes,’ or at least ‘as free as it  
37 ever was.’ But certainly this fearful question is still around, even in the ever growing  
38 field of Hong Kong studies.<sup>2</sup> As any resident of Hong Kong can confirm, this  
39 remains one of the first things foreigners will ask when you go abroad. To be sure,  
40 the very framing of this question reveals the gap—and hierarchy—between  
41 mainland Chinese constructions of reality and those from the outside, or what I and  
42 others have elsewhere called a specifically China-centered form of Sinological-  
43 orientalism.<sup>3</sup> For while there are certainly overlays between these two realms—the  
44 mainland and its outside have always had overlapping histories and imaginings—it  
45 is nonetheless clear that most mainland people do *not* see either China or Hong  
46 Kong in the starkly contrasted ways that subtends much Hong Kong and cultural  
47 studies. For the latter, Hong Kong is what China is not—a place of light, of relative  
48 normalcy, or even exceptional post-modernity. Whereas the mainland is at the very  
49 least a *problem*, if not a place of relative backwardness and sinister intent, where the  
50 Party-state presides and confirms the truths of George Orwell.

51 But what is more, it seems equally clear that—to adopt the words of Akbar Abbas  
52 —today to be pro-Hong Kong it is not necessary to be anti-China.<sup>4</sup> Of course this  
53 does imply that at some point it *was* necessary to be anti-China because one was  
54 pro-Hong Kong (the Cold War view). This places Hong Kong itself in the situation  
55 of the good Chinese subject, full of culture and exotic difference, who needs to be  
56 saved, protected or liberated from the bad, deceptive ones across the way who  
57 simply must want to “take over” and re-make the island-city even though they have  
58 never actually tried. Yet that bit of colonial/Cold War heritage is in a residual phase,  
59 held firmly by a vocal but nonetheless shrinking portion of the middle-class and  
60 liberal intelligentsia in the Hong Kong region (including the various expatriates).  
61 Indeed it is hard not to see the pre-handover fears of the People’s Republic of China  
62 treading upon the freedom and wealth of Hong Kong as so much Sinological-  
63 orientalist paranoia. In retrospect this view was an unsurprising Cold War

1FL01 <sup>1</sup> Work on this essay was supported by a GRF award from the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong. I  
1FL02 am grateful for comments by Wang Ning, an anonymous reader, and dialog with Brian Tsui, Ma Ran and  
1FL03 Pan Lu. All errors and heresies remain my own.

2FL01 <sup>2</sup> Hong Kong studies has only proliferated since 1997. And on the telling basis of what gets taught and  
2FL02 published in Hong Kong, it is the predominant field of study in the humanities and social sciences in the  
2FL03 city.

3FL01 <sup>3</sup> See for example Chan (2009) as well as Hevia (2003), though the specific hyphenated phrase is my  
3FL02 own. Of course this is not to make a nativist gesture, whereby the inside/outside difference means the  
3FL03 former is always the right side. The point is that there is a divide and imbalance here—what we might call  
3FL04 an uneven and combined development of global knowledge production ongoing since the advent of  
3FL05 modern colonialism.

4FL01 <sup>4</sup> I am slightly adapting the words of Abbas (2001), the doyen of Hong Kong studies, from his paper at an  
4FL02 American conference on Hong Kong’s handover. It is very much to Abbas’s (2001) credit that he was  
4FL03 willing to call 1997 the non-event that it was as soon as 2001.



64 determination and dubious interpretation of a geo-political reality that no less a  
65 Chinese nationalist than Deng Xiaoping fully understood. It fundamentally misread  
66 the political economy of the situation—that Hong Kong was going to be left alone  
67 for a number of reasons, not the least of which was its status as an example to  
68 Taiwan that the ‘one country, two systems’ model was the best possible resolution  
69 to questions of separatism/independence. Still more important were Hong Kong’s  
70 role as a financial center for the development of global and *Chinese* capitalism and  
71 the larger necessities of capital accumulation on both regional and global scales. In  
72 retrospect what is surprising is that these latter, political–economic conditions were  
73 not given pride of place in speculations about the future of the Hong Kong–P.R.C.  
74 relationship. In sum, as regards the politics proper of the 1997 handover, it would  
75 generally be admitted by even the most committed of Hong Kong cultural studies  
76 ‘activist’-scholars<sup>5</sup> that, in the event, the mainland treatment of Hong Kong—at the  
77 formal and over-arching level of politics proper—has been very much what Deng  
78 Xiaoping promised: hands off, a continuation of the *laissez-faire* party. This is  
79 certainly not the realm of freedom and national liberation, but then these were never  
80 in the cards being held by Deng or the U.K., nor by—it must be said—the local  
81 Chinese comprador class *and* the general population. Whatever Hong Kong’s  
82 political, economic, and social problems are—and there are several—these cannot  
83 reasonably be laid at the feet of a new ‘colonizer,’ unless we are to say that capitalist  
84 class rule and accumulation are synonymous with colonialism.<sup>6</sup>

85 From a certain perspective, then, the 1997 handover and its aftermath seems to be  
86 an ideal example of ‘good’ globalization—that is, if the accumulation of capital,  
87 social stability, and the absence of significant political antagonism and conflict are  
88 the goals. The city-government and chief executive (an appointed position with  
89 mainland input, to be sure) are indeed unpopular from time to time. But as the work  
90 of one well-regarded survey organization suggests, overall the political status quo  
91 seems quite secure in public opinion.<sup>7</sup> The Hong Kong populace only began to be  
92 fully politicized after the handover from colonial rule; in a sense this *was* the  
93 liberation of Hong Kong or birth (or re-birth) of its political culture. There is now  
94 some type of protest or demonstration almost every single day in Hong Kong. But  
95 aside from the yearly June 4th and July 1st symbolic commemorations, these are  
96 overwhelmingly of the micro and single-issue/grievance variety and by American  
97 standards are mostly, remarkably polite affairs. This is not to disparage any of them  
98 as trivial. But it does point to a paradox of Hong Kong politics: none of these are  
99 really anti-Beijing or anti-colonial, even on those few occasions (June 4 and June 1

5FL01 <sup>5</sup> For more on the overlap between Hong Kong cultural studies and the small but vocal liberal groups in  
5FL02 Hong Kong, see Erni (2001).

6FL01 <sup>6</sup> A very useful analysis of the differences between colonialism, imperialism and capitalism (as defined  
6FL02 by Marx) can be found in Robert Young.

7FL01 <sup>7</sup> Polls conducted by [Hong Kong University Public Opinion Program](#) show Chief Executive Donald  
7FL02 Tsang’s approval rating usually hovers in the mid 50s in the 2007–2010 period. Tsang is a pro-Beijing  
7FL03 (i.e., pro-business/rentier) figure. This is far from charismatic authority—Tsang famously lacks this and  
7FL04 much else as political figure—but it is also in the same neighborhood as most other national leaders in  
7FL05 western liberal capitalist societies. The rest of the SAR government—including the small groups of  
7FL06 “democrats”—typically fare less well.



100 especially) where “Beijing” is *part* of the explicit subject at hand. As is often shown  
101 in polls and remarked in the media, the popularity of the mainland in general, of the  
102 Beijing government in particular, and of the handover or ‘national reunion’ remains  
103 high—perhaps surprisingly high to outsiders or readers of the south China Morning  
104 Post.<sup>8</sup> Premier Wen Jiabao is something of a celebrity in Hong Kong. The recent  
105 Beijing olympics kicked off a great deal of patriotic fervor all across the city, and of  
106 course the mainland receives a great deal of legitimacy and symbolic support as the  
107 leader and, after the 2009 financial tsunami, the stabilizer if not ‘savior’ of at least  
108 the regional economy. Now into the second decade after re-unification, the mainland  
109 is more popular and legitimized than ever. Barring the unlikely (and not to-be-  
110 wished-for) scenario of the mainland’s political–economic collapse, this will be  
111 even more true in another 10 years, just as the great majority of Hong Kong  
112 residents depend on the mainland for everything from water to employment to  
113 capital gains. In short, as one trio of authors has recently put it, Hong Kong people  
114 are “learning to belong to the nation” at a strikingly rapid and sure pace.<sup>9</sup> This is not  
115 to deny that there are not bad, baleful mainland-Hong Kong relations and effects in  
116 others ways. How could there not be? The sky-high property values due in part to  
117 rich P.R.C. buyers, the resentments over scarce hospital spaces for ‘local’ expectant  
118 mothers as opposed to—again—wealthy mainland ones, the air pollution, and so on.  
119 But again this is capitalism and not colonialism in the Hong Kong case, and the  
120 overall, even dominant ideology is if anything more “pro” China and “pro”  
121 handover than otherwise. (Again, notwithstanding the best efforts of various Hong  
122 Kong/cultural studies avatars in the city and abroad.) What is missing, so far, is a  
123 more anti-capitalist or socialist/Marxist—dare we say Maoist?—stream within the  
124 political culture that can better address the political–economic issues at hand.

## 125 **Combined and uneven knowledge production: aftermaths of Cold War** 126 **colonialism**

127 What interests me in this essay, however, is less this direct political question of  
128 1997s aftermath than two separate but related, theoretical ones: the question of  
129 mainland “colonization” of Hong Kong (still professed by some) and the question of  
130 the Hong Kong and P.R.C. relationship more generally since 1997. For implicit to  
131 that largely unfounded fear of Hong Kong being tread upon is a “theoretical” and  
132 political point that continues to subtend Hong Kong studies. From standard  
133 historiography to the allegedly “innovative” field of cultural studies, the handover—  
134 usually called the “return” in mainland circles—marked not the liberation of Hong  
135 Kong from British colonial rule but a *re*-colonization by the P.R.C. This is precisely  
136 the conclusion of a recent conventional historical study of Hong Kong during the

8FL01 <sup>8</sup> The [Bauhinia Foundation Research Centre](#) (an independent if elite policy think tank) recently released  
8FL02 a survey showing wide satisfaction (60–68%) with the government’s plan—which is ultimately to say  
8FL03 Beijing’s plan already announced some years ago—for political reform in the coming years. I take all of  
8FL04 this to suggest a general approval of the status quo and the political role of Beijing.

9FL01 <sup>9</sup> Tai-Lok et al. (2008), while the authors are more ambivalent about this phenomenon than I (or see more  
9FL02 of this ambivalence in the city than I), I am indebted to their study and its excellent detail.



137 century after the Opium War (when the island was conceded as so much plunder):  
138 “although Hong Kong has returned to China, it has not been de-colonized. Rather, it  
139 has been re-colonized, with the metropole simply shifting from London to Beijing”  
140 (Carroll 192). In this essay I want to argue against this equation—1997  
141 handover = re-colonization—on a number of grounds. These will be theoretical  
142 as well as concrete. After interrogating the claims for re-colonization on their own  
143 terms, in the latter portion of this essay I examine a current Hong Kong “identity” as  
144 revealed by the popular art of a local and highly successful designer home-goods  
145 and fashion store, named G.O.D. This extended example is meant to again show that  
146 the “re-colonization” claim is highly untenable and unhelpful for thinking through  
147 the Hong Kong–P.R.C. relationship. But it also serves as an initial analysis of an  
148 emergent identity and relationship to the mainland, reflected in the work of G.O.D.,  
149 that suggests a new identity for the city in general.

150 The first thing to note about the claim that the 1997 handover was a  
151 re-colonization is that it is not so much argued as asserted, presented as an  
152 obviousness. Thus, in the above study there is simply no argument about the post-  
153 1997 regime acting colonially towards Hong Kong. Nor is there a claim about the  
154 relationship being colonial in some legal sense. And nor could there be, since by the  
155 standards of international law there was never any question of Hong Kong  
156 belonging to China. Even the British regime itself frequently remarked that Hong  
157 Kong was living on ‘borrowed time.’ So in lieu of an argument there is simply a  
158 logic of analogy to be taken at face value. Hong Kong was colonized before by an  
159 outsider, and since Beijing is an “outsider” too then Hong Kong is colonized again.  
160 Perhaps the author’s implied link is that Hong Kong has not formed an independent  
161 nation, just as it is not “allowed” to be a (Western) liberal democracy in the manner  
162 of the UK or US. (In fact the city’s ruling constitution or basic law *does* allow for  
163 universal suffrage but the deadline for this, most likely 2020, and the procedural  
164 details for it remain ambiguous and disputed). But this implied rationale for Hong  
165 Kong’s “re-colonization” in its implied “lack” of “democracy” might remain  
166 unstated for the brute facts that Hong Kong has never had a national liberation or  
167 independence movement, just as it has yet to have a large, mass or majority-forming  
168 democracy movement. This is always the proverbial elephant in the room of liberal  
169 Hong Kong studies. What Erni (2001) accurately calls the “progressive” (and I  
170 would add decidedly non-leftist) groups of Hong Kong have yet to become anything  
171 like a social movement or effective political coalition if for no other reason than that  
172 they lack a mass base (392). Indeed in many ways these groups as well as the many  
173 and varied political parties in the city are non- or even anti-political.<sup>10</sup> While Hong  
174 Kong is certainly in the process of becoming a politicized society, the absence of the

10FL01 <sup>10</sup> I mean, again, that they are mostly single-issue based and, as with most of the political parties, they  
10FL02 also substitute chiefly ethical, if not simply ad hominem criticisms and analyzes for political and  
10FL03 structural ones. Aside from sects like the Falun Gong and the local, idiosyncratic anarcho-celebrity Leung  
10FL04 Kwok Hung they do not lay claim to being anti-communist or ask for the overthrow of the CCP. Nor do  
10FL05 they ask for independence or self-rule. I lack the space to pursue this further here. But my point is simply  
10FL06 that they do not fit the type of independence/anti-colonial/eastern European-dissident framework they are  
10FL07 usually inserted into by the mainstream media and “cultural studies.”





175 discourse of social democracy in the local political culture and society (let alone  
176 something more radical) remains the case 13 years after re-unification.

177 This has all happened despite the fact that no one could argue that the city or its  
178 people are controlled by a police-state or even a soft-authoritarianism a la  
179 Singapore. While it was an important part of the British empire, Hong Kong simply  
180 does not fit the mold of, say, India, post-colonial Africa, or Europe. It therefore  
181 poses problems to conventional understandings of political development and socio-  
182 historical change, be these from standard liberal historiography or post-colonial  
183 studies (the latter area being dominated by south Asian histories and contexts above  
184 all). If nothing else, Hong Kong's apparent refusal to follow such paths, even after  
185 1997, speaks to the constructed and arbitrary category of the nation itself  
186 (admittedly a standard insight from post-colonial studies, but one which it violates  
187 in its one-sided demonization of nationalism and the nation tout-court). So too it  
188 calls into relief the parochial nature of stagist notions of political development or the  
189 unquestioned value of liberal democracy. In that sense, rather than seeing Hong  
190 Kong's politics as well as its burgeoning national identification with the mainland as  
191 "failures" or "lacks," we might better see them as challenges to our understandings  
192 of post-colonialism and our implicitly western, liberal shibboleths about politics,  
193 freedom, and so forth. Simply put what many take to be the natural or at least to-be-  
194 wished-for outcomes of globalization in/and China—something called "democ-  
195 racy"—may well be at odds with an incalcitrant socio-political reality among large,  
196 educated, and relatively well off populations on the mainland and Hong Kong.

197 Part of the problem with conventional claims for re-colonization (as above) is  
198 that such work often refuses to engage post-colonial theory even while making  
199 claims about colonization, imperialism, and independence. The failure to interrogate  
200 the naturalness and teleology of the nation-state is a case in point here. So, too an  
201 engagement with Edward Said on the questions of orientalism and positional  
202 superiority would check Carroll's (2005) and Hong Kong studies' general tendency  
203 to situate mainland China as backward, behind, *exceptionally* authoritarian, and in  
204 short as a problem for Hong Kong. For example, because China did not allow  
205 capitalism to flourish it "failed" and is more "backward" whereas Hong Kong  
206 succeeded in this; because it was free of Chinese rule and its vicissitudes up to the  
207 present, Hong Kong "was the most important place of China for more than  
208 150 years (Carroll 191). As we will shortly see, this is the type of hyperbole and  
209 Hong Kong exceptionalism that can be seen in more theoretical, cultural studies  
210 approaches as well. Additionally Franz Fanon is dispatched in this study in one  
211 sentence. The anti-colonial labor historian Cooper (2005) is cited as a critique of  
212 Fanon's argument that the colonized were psychologically and culturally damaged,  
213 endowed with inferiority complexes. But this reverses Cooper's (2005) critical and  
214 Marxist stance on colonialism. For Cooper's (2005) point was not that all colonial  
215 subjects were free of psychic damage from foreign rule; rather some were and as the  
216 case of the labor movement in French Africa shows, these were often working class  
217 (not elite) subjects.<sup>11</sup> It is not Carroll's (2005) defense of a "collaborative,"  
218 beneficent colonialism that is my interest here, however, so much as the force of

11FL01 <sup>11</sup> See Cooper (2005).





219 obviousness about that magically shifting metropole—and the implicit point about  
220 Hong Kong’s loss of an unnamed something.<sup>12</sup> That something is most likely a  
221 political sovereignty which it should ‘naturally’ have yet which to date it has never  
222 quite desired nor tried to obtain. So too one has to see the so-called discovery of  
223 ‘collaborative colonialism’ as of a piece with a longer history of knowledge  
224 production within colonialism or the world system—by which I mean attempts to  
225 rationalize and legitimize colonial rule. In this case it is a message that colonialism  
226 simply was not that bad: neither top-down and draconian nor without ‘participation’  
227 and “collaboration;” in that sense it was a fair deal and perhaps even vaguely  
228 democratic. Within not just British but more broadly western and global intellectual  
229 culture Hong Kong has always been an example of successful or ‘good’ colonialism—  
230 white men (now with local friends!) saving the Chinese from the Chinese to the north,  
231 and bringing prosperity and everything from modernity to post-modernity to the  
232 locals. From this perspective we can say that in the world of discourse and global  
233 knowledge production, Hong Kong has not until recently been a part of *China’s*  
234 globalization but of the U.K.—West’s. To be a part of *China’s* globalization, in other  
235 words, a history of Hong Kong would have to tell some type of story about colonial  
236 war, theft, and restoration/re-unification, if not of the eventual rise of China above and  
237 beyond the U.K.

238 The fact that the 1997 = re-colonization claim is asserted without qualification  
239 tells us something about the force of Sinological-orientalism. For under that  
240 discourse the CCP simply lacks all political and ethical legitimacy as a despotic  
241 state that oppresses “the” Chinese people *in toto*. This re-colonization statement also  
242 reminds us of just who won the Cold War in terms of the production of knowledge  
243 within the world system. This is clearly not a book written from a mainland  
244 perspective; nor is it one for mainland Chinese readers. And surely those people in  
245 Hong Kong who are either “pro-Beijing” or who simply did not benefit from British  
246 colonialism would find little of value in a study that maps (in admirable detail) the  
247 co-operation between local elites—what the Marxist and anti-colonial traditions call  
248 *compradors*—and British colonizers during the first 100 years of their reign. My  
249 point is not that such a study is therefore without value or only for the Anglos and  
250 Anglophiles. Far from it but it is to say that some type of mediation of the mainland  
251 Chinese perspectives and histories (the “pro-Beijing” or “pro-reunification” views,  
252 for lack of better phrases) versus the author’s own is needed here. This presupposes  
253 no conclusions but only a measure of methodological self-consciousness. Surely the  
254 fact that so many people from China view the Hong Kong-mainland relationship  
255 and the 1997 event differently is worth some consideration. This is not, of course, to  
256 invalidate this text’s contributions to the elite historiography of Hong Kong, China,  
257 and British colonialism. But it is also to say that the claim of re-colonization after  
258 1997 is far from demonstrated here. It is only an “obvious” claim that does not need  
259 justification if you speak from within the truth of a conventional, anti-regime

12FL01 <sup>12</sup> “Collaborative” is one of Carroll’s (2005) keywords to describe British colonialism of Hong Kong. For  
12FL02 a similar study along more “theoretical” lines, see Law Wing Sang. It is striking that neither author has  
12FL03 recourse to the more critical, Marxist notion of *compradors*. Whatever else its limitations the Marxist  
12FL04 tradition long knew about “collaborative” colonialism and the politics of class; so too for postcolonial  
12FL05 studies (cf Gayatri Spivak).



260 Sinology that largely elides the self-understanding of Chinese subjects and Chinese  
261 intellectual–political culture, and that can grant no real legitimacy to the P.R.C.

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

276 The influence of the re-colonization claim within Hong Kong cultural studies  
277 hails from a different source, namely the influential work of the U.S.-based but  
278 Hong Kong raised cultural critic Chow (1997). Cultural studies, at least as it  
279 understands itself, is supposed to be a more self-reflexive, theoretical and inter-  
280 disciplinary field than the conventional disciplines. And yet what we find in Chow  
281 (1997) when she writes about the mainland and about Hong Kong–P.R.C. relations,  
282 is just such an unmediated and declarative mode of writing. Here again  
283 obviousnesses are imposed as obviousnesses (the very work of ideology, as  
284 Althusser (1971) once put it).<sup>13</sup> Chow’s (1997) basic claim is that Hong Kong is  
285 “between colonizers”: i.e., between the U.K and the P.R.C. It “must play two  
286 aggressors, Britain and China, against each other, carving out a space where it is  
287 neither the puppet of British colonialism nor of Chinese authoritarianism” (151).  
288 Additionally, the Chinese mainland is “itself as imperialistic as the previous  
289 colonizer” (151). These are certainly sweeping if recognizable claims that reproduce  
290 the representation of China as seen in mainstream Western media outlets,  
291 themselves still powerfully influenced by Cold War narratives. Of course few  
292 would deny that the Chinese state is and has been authoritarian—not as much as  
293 some, but certainly more than others. But it is hard to say, even metaphorically, just  
294 how China has been “imperialistic” towards Hong Kong or Taiwan [to name two  
295 places Chow (1997) mentions in alliance with Tibet]. And an aggressor towards  
296 Hong Kong? That claim speaks to the lingering power of Cold War and British  
297 colonial discourse on the intellectual–political imagination. To be sure the questions  
298 of Chinese colonialism or imperialism in the past as well as the present are  
299 complicated and worthy of debate.<sup>14</sup> The point here is that all such complexities are  
300 missing in Chow’s (1997) work. There is simply a rush there to establish by  
301 implication some type of forced equivalence between Hong Kong, Tibet, and  
302 Taiwan. So too we must mark the antagonistic, adversarial attitude towards the

13FL01 <sup>13</sup> See “Ideology and ideological state apparatuses.”

14FL01 <sup>14</sup> See Sautman and Dryer (2005), and Wang and Tsering (2009).



303 mainland government and society in this type of Hong Kong studies. What is more,  
304 one would be hard pressed to find the same stance in any significant sector of the  
305 population in the region itself.

306 For Chow (1997) Hong Kong’s identity is hybrid and impure, and therefore  
307 admirable in ethical and “theoretical” terms. These are also of course what makes  
308 the city an ideal type in the study of globalization. But it is also somehow a victim  
309 and trapped subject. There is much to be said about Chow’s (1997) characterizations  
310 of Hong Kong, particularly the city’s *exceptionalism* in relation to the rest of the  
311 former British empire and the mainland. Indeed at one point Chow (1997) will claim  
312 that Hong Kong is at the center of (Chinese? global?) history and culture: “for the  
313 past 150 years (it has) lived at the forefront of ‘Chinese’ consciousness of ‘Chinese’  
314 modernity, while the reality of modernity-as-post-coloniality has been repressed  
315 among mainland Chinese” (157).<sup>15</sup> Yet this claim to centrality within Chinese  
316 history is earlier contradicted by the claim for Hong Kong’s inherent outsider status  
317 vis a vis the mainland: “what is self-writing for China is *definitely* not self-writing  
318 for Hong Kong; the restoration of China’s territorial propriety in/through Hong  
319 Kong does not amount to Hong Kong’s repossession of its own cultural agency”  
320 (153, my emphasis). There is also the attribution of victimhood status for this  
321 remarkably affluent, relatively small, and disproportionately influential city that, for  
322 better and for worse, has largely been spared the ravages of war, national liberation,  
323 and class struggle: it “does not have the privilege of an independence to which it can  
324 look forward” (151). As with the above study by Carroll (2005), what remains  
325 unspoken here to a *global* and not local audience is that there has *never* been an  
326 independence movement in Hong Kong. Save perhaps for the brief but remarkable  
327 riots in 1966 and 1967 led by pro-Communist leftists, who by no means desired  
328 independence either.<sup>16</sup> The question that is again begged here, then, is something  
329 like: what does it mean to proffer independence from colonialism and for  
330 “democracy” to a population that seems strikingly uninterested in such things? This  
331 may violate any number of cherished notions about progress, liberal democracy, and  
332 the natural desire for “freedom.” But, still, why is Hong Kong studies, particularly  
333 its cultural studies and “theoretical” wing, so invested in political forms and values  
334 that its putative constituency remains unconcerned with themselves? Is that not a bit  
335 like colonial anthropology? What we would seem to have here is not only an elision  
336 of mainland perspectives/knowledge in regard to China itself. In the matters of  
337 politics and “re-colonization” it is also an elision of popular and mainstream  
338 attitudes in Hong Kong. Thus, what would seem to be globalizing here is a  
339 recognizably western and “liberal,” if not ultimately British discourse. It is also  
340 worth recalling here that while dating from the later 1990s, Chow’s (1997) “re-  
341 colonization” claim remains quite influential in Hong Kong cultural studies and is  
342 frequently placed on student syllabi.

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

15FL01 <sup>15</sup> While only ‘semi’-colonial, one must add that, contra Chow (1997), few countries are more “aware” of  
15FL02 their own histories as both colonial and post-colonial than China.

16FL01 <sup>16</sup> For background, see Bickers and Yep (2009).



345 consistently, one-sidedly negative representation of the P.R.C. The argument about  
346 re-colonization, in other words, proceeds less through qualification and direct  
347 reasoning than through the characterization of the mainland government as  
348 unambiguously evil and repressive. Such characterizations, in Chow's (1997) hands,  
349 even extend to mainland intellectuals and "the" people in general. Thus, Chow  
350 (1997) argues that Hong Kong culture "has *always* been dismissed by *the* mainland  
351 Chinese as too westernized and thus inauthentic" (154, my emphasis). So too "Hong  
352 Kong in general is usually viewed with disdain by most mainland Chinese as a  
353 symbol of decadence, artificiality, and contamination" (155, my emphasis). There is  
354 also the clear imputation that many—most?—mainland Chinese are likely to see  
355 Hong Kong people as "traitors" because the latter do not share a quasi-fascist  
356 "nostalgia for ever receding origins" (155).<sup>17</sup> Given the sheer size, complexity, and  
357 diversity of China—counter to orientalist notions of its conformity and homogeneity  
358—it is entirely possible that some mainland people indeed feel and say the  
359 objectionable things about Hong Kong that Chow (1997) attributes to them. That  
360 she attributes to virtually all of them. But such large and sweeping generalizations—  
361 entirely undocumented and unqualified—are highly misleading and unhelpful. And  
362 at the level of flat, declarative assertion that Chow (1997) is working from it is  
363 equally possible to reverse all of these judgments: that most mainland Chinese  
364 really like Hong Kong, that they certainly flock there on holiday, and that they even  
365 try hard to emigrate there. There is however a strict quota on such immigration  
366 imposed by the local Hong Kong government. Perhaps more difficult for some to  
367 fathom is yet another possibility: that many mainland Chinese intellectuals and  
368 citizens simply do not care about Hong Kong. Such indifference may or may not be  
369 a problem, depending on the context, but it seems nothing if not normal.

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

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

17FL01 <sup>17</sup> I should note that "fascism" in Chow's (1997) book is just this inflated, where there is even the  
17FL02 suggestion that (American) multiculturalism contains a "fascist longing in our midst." Whatever the  
17FL03 problems of multicultural discourse, this is simply not one of them.



387 clearly winning the battle of knowledge production. While Hong Kong in general  
388 seems pleased with ‘Beijing’ and rushes to develop its economic and cultural  
389 relationships with the mainland (including university exchanges for example), Hong  
390 Kong studies, be it cultural studies’ faux-radicalism or more conventional historicism,  
391 seems much less so. There is, in other words, an obvious discrepancy and  
392 contradiction between the academic realm on the one hand and on the other the  
393 more popular as well as mainstream knowledges, beliefs and desires on the ground in  
394 Hong Kong (and mainland Chinese) society. Hong Kong culture, economy, and  
395 society grow closer to China while Hong Kong studies primarily sees an adversarial  
396 and politically objectionable relationship. That is, again, the same relationship to  
397 China that was dominant in the colonial era of knowledge production.

398 This contradiction exists not because the Hong Kong academic field is objective  
399 and rigorous and the mainland one, as well as the ‘field’ of non-academic  
400 knowledges and desires are not. This is what my interrogation of the above texts is  
401 meant to show. There must be a number of reasons for this contradiction or gap—  
402 just as there are a number of issues to mine in the relations between knowledge,  
403 society, and the contexts of scholarship. Space precludes us from pursuing these in  
404 any detail. But we can say that all such questions, and the differences between Hong  
405 Kong studies’ Hong Kong and China and those held by many others, are not matters  
406 of the truth but of truths. Or in other words what we have are positions within  
407 different, competing discourses (“pro-” and “anti-” China or Hong Kong, as well as  
408 the assorted places between these two alternatives). From this standpoint what is  
409 lacking in such Hong Kong studies work is neither objectivity nor a proper  
410 kowtowing to popular or majoritarian knowledges and desires in China or in Hong  
411 Kong. Nor do I wish to suggest that analysis has to rest or end with the self-  
412 understanding of Hong Kong and/or Chinese subjects—even though I think any  
413 adequate analysis of culture and history necessarily has to engage this dimension.  
414 What is lacking is some type of mediation between all of these spheres. And the  
415 replacement of flat, declarative assertions about re-colonization with a dialectical or  
416 otherwise multi-perspectival analysis that can at least take seriously mainland  
417 China’s permission to narrate its own social, political, and colonial history in its  
418 own way. It is *that* intellectual–political culture that remains to be globalized or to  
419 enter the conversation within Hong Kong studies, but it would also appear to be one  
420 that is nigh upon us.

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



433 **G.O.D speaks? On Hong Kong, S.A.R. and the P.R.C**

434 Perhaps the best route to examine what is changing in this relationship is not a  
435 detour through academic texts but an examination of one important entity in  
436 arguably Hong Kong's premier past-time: shopping. As is well known, Hong  
437 Kong's is a consumer culture virtually without peer. One of its most successful  
438 stores since the 1997 reunification has been the design-based one, G.O.D.<sup>18</sup> The  
439 acronym in English stands for "Goods of Desire" but in Cantonese pronunciation the  
440 three letters mean "to live better." The chain now has three storefronts in the city,  
441 plus a separate clothing boutique, and it regularly participates in art exhibitions and  
442 urban conservancy projects. G.O.D.'s cofounder Douglas Young (an architect by  
443 training) has stated repeatedly that his aim is to establish—in essence to recover and  
444 preserve—a uniquely Hong Kong identity for his customers and for the population  
445 at large. (The need for such preservation flows not from mainland control but from  
446 the enormous power of property developers and their financiers as well as their local  
447 government supporters). G.O.D. does this through producing and marketing  
448 products that stake a claim to things that in some sense are specifically, if not  
449 definitively "Hong Kong" in their form of appearance. Perhaps the most ubiquitous  
450 sign here is the use of photos and icons of the old Hong Kong, which are then either  
451 reproduced or used as prints to be placed on mostly casual clothing, bed and kitchen  
452 linens, tote bags, mousepads, and so forth. One such example are the photos of the  
453 densely packed, working class tenements buildings of the Yaumatei neighborhood/  
454 district. While many (but not all) such buildings have been torn down they  
455 nonetheless remain perhaps the quintessential image of Hong Kong for ordinary  
456 Hong Kong people who either lived in them at one point or whose forbears did. This  
457 is of course a very different image of Hong Kong than the spectacular and touristy  
458 photos of the Hong Kong–Kowloon skyline as seen from high above.

459 Other examples include Chinese style—as opposed to Western or IKEA—  
460 folding stools and tables to help conserve space in the city's cramped flats. There are  
461 also mock-ups of old products from long past Hong Kong companies (tea bowls,  
462 wet market bags, and so on). A final example would be the occasional use of  
463 specifically Hong Kong Cantonese language in various items. For instance even the  
464 character *di*, the "D" of G.O.D., only exists in Hong Kong Chinese. "Delay No  
465 Mall," the name of its clothing boutique and a frequent slogan on t-shirts and so  
466 forth, sounds like a popular, extremely vulgar curse in local Cantonese (something  
467 about mothers and sex). In sum, the design-project has been quite successful  
468 commercially and critically even after the financial tsunami of 2008. It continues  
469 strong sales and wins awards for its more artistic efforts. Note too that the store and  
470 Young's project dates from the *post*-colonial era of the late 1990s, as if it were not  
471 possible to have such a project until after the British finally left. *Contra* Chow  
472 (1997), then, from the basis of this admittedly brief but I think apt example it would  
473 be hard to argue that Hong Kong is being victimized or its identity being rendered  
474 vulnerable thanks to Beijing and reunification.

18FL01 <sup>18</sup> For an excellent overview of G.O.D. and design identity in Hong Kong stores, see Clark (2009).



475 What is of still greater significance here, for the present purposes, is that the store’s  
476 ‘mission’ now fully includes the specifically mainland and indeed P.R.C. reservoir of  
477 images, signs, and meanings. In recent years that project now includes a great deal of  
478 Mao era iconography, slogans, and the like. This is no doubt in part, but arguably only in  
479 part due to mainland immigration and tourism—as well as to thousands of tourists and  
480 expats who with good reason are convinced that they are traveling to China and not just  
481 Hong Kong. These “Maoist” or P.R.C. images and signs are at least as ubiquitous as, for  
482 example, the Yaumatei images.<sup>19</sup> Thus the worker–peasant–soldier esthetic of the  
483 Cultural Revolution makes an appearance via images lifted directly from that era’s  
484 numerous, beautiful posters of fierce and/or smiling Maoist cadres and citizens engaged  
485 in various activities from farming to marching. As with the Yaumatei images these  
486 famous poster images—immediately recognizable to the student of China and the  
487 GPCR—appear on t-shirts, linens, postcards, and sundry household and decorative  
488 items. Alternatively one can find Mao’s calligraphy on t-shirts and other things (“serve  
489 the people,” “great leap forward,” and “rusticated youth” are prime examples). There  
490 are also old images and slogans from various “propaganda” efforts to conserve water,  
491 eliminate pests/Schistosomiasis, and more generally to be a part of the revolution and  
492 the forging of the new China. What one often does *not* find on such Mao era signs are the  
493 original, radical captions exhorting the masses to stand with the workers and peasants,  
494 unite against imperialism, combat bureaucracy, capitalism, revisionism and so forth.  
495 This may be due to fear of copyright as much as to the Cold War heritage, or to what in  
496 Hong Kong would seem too jarring to its dominant, laissez-faire ideology.

497 The removal of such slogans marks an unsurprising if still unfortunate  
498 depoliticization. Of course even this can be seen as in part a mainland influence  
499 vis a vis political culture (depoliticization of Mao, the revolution, and so on in the  
500 name of technocratic managerialism “beyond” politics). But it is also in this same  
501 evisceration of political content that we can find something of a Hong Kong–P.R.C.  
502 blend made out of the former revolutionary signs. This depoliticization is  
503 characteristically Hong Kong, or Hong Kong’s colonial heritage until recently. (It  
504 was part of the former regime’s standard rhetoric that Hong Kong people were  
505 simply uninterested in or ignorant about politics; they indeed made this true as best  
506 they could).<sup>20</sup> It is also increasingly characteristic of contemporary appropriations  
507 of “Maoist” signs in the mainland itself—with the exception of course of explicitly  
508 leftist usages—where the revolutionary past is so often merely commodified or  
509 taken up in fairly banal if nationalist-patriotic ways.<sup>21</sup> It also fits with Hong Kong’s  
510 culturalism vis a vis the mainland. The city tends to celebrate Chinese culture in  
511 general if dear terms, while holding modern Chinese history or politics at bay.  
512 This is partly because of that British colonial education system that preached the a

19FL01 <sup>19</sup> They are also more numerous than the more “purely” Asian commodities, like small pieces of  
19FL02 furniture from Thailand or vases from India. While G.O.D. is also trying to produce an “Asian” identity  
19FL03 for Hong Kong (see their website boilerplate), this is clearly a more nascent project and it is an  
19FL04 inescapably “Chinese” and mainland-inflected store/brand.

20FL01 <sup>20</sup> An excellent case study of this phenomenon through the example of Hong Kong University can be  
20FL02 found in Faure (2003).

21FL01 <sup>21</sup> Barne’s (1996) volume remains the best source for material on the various Mao crazes through the  
21FL02 1980s and 90s.





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

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

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

22FL01 <sup>22</sup> On Chinese Maoism/revolution as a form of alternative modernity, see Liu (2004).

23FL01 <sup>23</sup> The 2007 Hong Kong film directed by Samson Chiu Leung-Chun, “Mr. Cinema” (老港正傳) details  
23FL02 such a group of local people over the course of 40 years. Within the city, it is no secret that over the years  
23FL03 there were significant populations of Guomindang and Communist “sympathizers,” alongside the more  
23FL04 indifferent demographic. For a detailed history of actual Party activity in the city, and therefore of China-  
23FL05 Hong Kong history, see Loh (2010).

24FL01 <sup>24</sup> For more on this sensibility, see Grossberg (1992).



552 actually be a part of something larger than itself. Something deeper than a consumer  
553 culture, bank, movie theater, or occidentalist fantasy of the city's exceptionalism. In  
554 sum, the Hong Kong–P.R.C. identity is both a marketing ploy or commodity-sign  
555 and a nascent, *bona fide* cultural phenomenon. It reflects a real, shared history—  
556 albeit a sometimes conflicted and distant one prior to 1997. What something like G.  
557 O.D. represents, then, is not a re-possession or re-colonization but a re-imagined  
558 community within Hong Kong and as part of the larger, political entity known as the  
559 nation-state. And in so far as this G.O.D./identity phenomenon also marks an  
560 appropriation of knowledge (specifically that Hong Kong is a part of China and its  
561 national history) it also represents a challenge to academic work on the city. It  
562 renders that area 'academic' in the pejorative sense of the term: impractical, merely  
563 hypothetical, and 'behind the times.'

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

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

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