

Manipulators, Marginalized, and Mistaken Identity  
Hong Kong's Self-portrait at the Dawn of the 1997 Issue

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In recent years, mention of Hong Kong in the popular press of the United States has typically been accompanied by discussion of the colony's transition from British to Chinese sovereignty. People all over the world watched with great interest as July 1, 1997 came and passed, for many reasons. This turning point not only signified the end of British colonialism and the proud erasure of past embarrassment for the Chinese, but also the beginning of an experiment in the compatibility of capitalism and communism. As the red flag was raised over the city, the people of Hong Kong anxiously stepped into the unknown. The handover did not come as a surprise to Hong Kongers, however. By the time 1997 came, the topic of their uncertain future had been an inescapable part of life in Hong Kong for over fifteen years. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's visit to Peking in September, 1982 began a period of discussion over Hong Kong's fate not only between the global powers, but also among the Hong Kong people. This community of predominantly ethnic Chinese had developed under strikingly different conditions than the people of the mainland. Its unique status between East and West allowed Hong Kong to maintain cultural ties to China while enjoying Western rule-of-law, personal freedoms, and economic opportunity. Years of living this way created a sense of belonging to Hong Kong, as life in the colony grew more and more distinct from life in the People's Republic.<sup>1</sup> However, it took the eruption of the "1997 Problem" and the self-scrutiny of the ensuing public debate for the Hong Kong people to begin to define their identity. This paper's goal is to uncover the identity established by this public discourse, to learn what it meant to belong to Hong Kong.

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<sup>1</sup> This is general premise can be found specifically in Lau Siu-Kai and Kuan Hsin-Chi, The Ethos of the Hong Kong Chinese, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1988, pp 40

While many scholars have addressed the different components that make up this project, each is lacking the proper focus for a treatment of Hong Kong identity formation. These writings fall into two broad categories: those that concern the 1997 transition, and those that cover the issues of Hong Kong society and culture. By way of introduction, a brief look at some of the prominent works will clarify where this paper fits into the existing literature.

The first group contends that the most instructive way of explaining Hong Kong is through an examination of the politics of the transition to Chinese sovereignty. The list of such works is long; for our purposes it will be necessary to point out the different types of scholarship that took this approach. It includes several monographs included among the authoritative general histories of Hong Kong, a number of works produced around the time of the Sino-British negotiations in the early 1980s, and several more recent contributions which concern the politics of the time leading up to the actual transition.<sup>2</sup> Regarding the 1997 issue, almost all of this body of writing focuses on the actors of

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<sup>2</sup> Those among the general histories include Nigel Cameron, *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Oxford University, and Frank Welsh, *A Borrowed Place: The History of Hong Kong*, New York: Kodansha International, 1993 Press, 1991. The negotiations-centered works include Frank Ching, *Hong Kong and China: For Better or For Worse*, New York: China Council of the Asia Society and the Foreign Policy Association, 1985; Gregor Benton, *The Hongkong Crisis*, London: Pluto Press, 1983; David Bonavia, *Hong Kong 1997*, Hong Kong: *South China Morning Post*, 1983; and Joseph Y.S. Cheng (ed) *Hong Kong In Search of a Future*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1984. The list of more recent political accounts is longer (but incomplete): Jamie Allen, *Seeing Red: China's Uncompromising Takeover of Hong Kong*, Singapore: BH Asia, 1997; Judith Brown and Rosemary Foot (ed.), *Hong Kong's Transitions, 1842-1997*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997; Roger Buckley, *Hong Kong: the road to 1997*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; Hungdah Chiu, Y.C. Jao, and Yuan-li Wu (ed.) *The Future of Hong Kong: Toward 1997 and Beyond*, New York: Quorum Books, 1987; John Flowerdew, *The Final Years of British Hong Kong*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998; Kevin Rafferty, *City on the Rocks: Hong Kong's Uncertain Future*, New York: Viking Press, 1989; Mark Roberti, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1994; Ian Scott, *Political Change and the Crisis of Legitimacy in Hong Kong*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989; Steve Shipp, *Hong Kong, China*, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1995; Steve Tsang, *Hong Kong: An Appointment with China*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 1997; Enbao Wang, *Hong Kong, 1997: The Politics of Transition*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995

Britain, China, and the Hong Kong colonial government. Books of this sort describe, for example, how Britain “lost” Hong Kong, how China “took over” Hong Kong, or how the colonial government instituted political reform in the years leading up to 1997. These works fail to look deeper than political or diplomatic documents, to the defining characteristics of Hong Kong as told by the people who lived there. A typical example of such author’s treatment of the Hong Kong people is Frank Ching’s account of the Sino-British negotiations. His reference to the Hong Kong people includes how some prominent local figures figured into the talks, opinion polls, and the people’s economic behavior as recorded in the market. Some authors, such as Ian Scott, address questions about the Hong Kong community, but focus on its political dimensions. While many of these books might be defended on the grounds that their intention is political or diplomatic history, clearly not all fall into this category, especially the general histories. While some do a better job than others depicting Hong Kong society, these writings fail to address how the 1997 issue affected the defining characteristics of the Hong Kong people.

There exists also an eclectic list of works devoted to the more abstract issue of Hong Kong society or culture. Though they do not look closely at the discussion of the 1997 problem as an important stage in the development of Hong Kong identity, these writings have made some substantial contributions to our understanding of the Hong Kong people. Therefore, the criticism leveled at them here is only in light of the new approach employed by this study, which in many respects builds upon the progress of these works.

In sharp contrast to the political-document-based histories noted above are books that are comprised mostly of the words of actual Hong Kong people. Gerd Balke's Hong Kong Voices and Sally Blyth's and Ian Wotherspoon's Hong Kong Remembers allow the people of Hong Kong to speak directly to the reader through published interviews.<sup>3</sup> Blyth and Wotherspoon interview a single person to recall each important event in Hong Kong's history, while Balke questions people of varied backgrounds about the issues facing Hong during the late 1980s. While it is Balke's intent to illustrate a cross-section of life in Hong Kong, Blyth and Wotherspoon tend to include prominent personalities or authorities on the given subject whenever possible. The direct use of interviews provides vivid glimpses into life in Hong Kong. However, this format is constrained in its ability to advance readers' understanding by its failure to analyze the evidence presented and provide a coherent position.

Ann Marie Major and L. Erwin Atwood also base their work on the voice of the Hong Kong people, though in a less direct and more systematic way.<sup>4</sup> Good-bye, Gweilo: Public Opinion and the 1997 Problem concerns similar issues as this paper, namely the reaction of the people in Hong Kong to the controversy over their future. For this reason, it provides part of the foundation of this project. However, the social-scientific methods employed by Major and Atwood do not significantly advance the concept of the Hong Kong identity. For one, the concept of public opinion (assuming it is captured accurately by polls, which may be a large assumption) is at best a single facet in the complex of identity. It can certainly not be relied upon solely to reveal the deeper

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<sup>3</sup> Gerd Balke, Hong Kong Voices. Hong Kong: Longman, 1989; Sally Blyth and Ian Wotherspoon, Hong Kong Remembers. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996

<sup>4</sup> L. Erwin Atwood and Ann Marie Major, Goodbye, Gweilo: Public Opinion and the 1997 Problem in Hong Kong. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1996

characteristics of a community. Additionally, the conversion of subjective and fluid information into the statistical formulas which the authors employ forces compartmentalization, and thus mutation, of the subject matter.

Another piece of writing which contributes a fundamental element to my project but whose aims are different is Ackbar Abbas's Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance.<sup>5</sup> Though not the only writer voicing this position, Abbas articulates clearly that as the 1997 problem came to the fore in the midst of the Sino-British negotiations, the colony felt a push to "sharpen" the Hong Kong identity. The distinctiveness of life in Hong Kong had long been taken for granted, and for the first time appeared to be in danger of being changed. Abbas describes the city's attempt to claim its "cultural space" in the context of the "politics of disappearance" (that is, the arrangements for the end of Hong Kong as it was known.) The "floating" identity that the colony had long held- a function of its history as a temporary home for expatriates and refugees and its continuously changing population of immigrants- was no longer sufficient.<sup>6</sup> The media through which Abbas explores this push to claim cultural space are mainly the arts, including architecture, writing, and film. While these are certainly rich areas of cultural expression. they are not consistent with this study's goal of uncovering identity from the voice of the general population. Hong Kong art may be a reflection of Hong Kong life, but its source is a select few.

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<sup>5</sup> M. Ackbar Abbas. Culture and the Politics of Disappearance, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997

<sup>6</sup> Abbas. pp. 4-13

Also recognizing the sudden scramble for self-definition is The Ethos of the Hong Kong Chinese, by Lau Siu-Kai and Kuan Hsin-Chi.<sup>7</sup> They point out that, faced with uncertainty over the future, people not only clung to the status quo, but sought to define it. The Sino-British negotiations of this time produced much rhetoric about preserving Hong Kong's status quo, and the Joint Declaration signed by China and Britain in 1984 at the close of these talks intended to protect the existing Hong Kong status quo for 50 years under the "one country, two systems" formula. In this context, it makes sense that Hong Kong would be eager to make clear exactly what that status quo way of life entailed. Lau and Kuan note that this feeling was also demonstrated by the simultaneous political awakening of the population from their previous, relatively uninvolved state. This change, too, is attributed to the realization that revolutionary changes were ahead, and so the time was ripe to speak up for Hong Kong.

Lau and Kuan focus entirely on the Hong Kong *Chinese*, which clearly cannot represent the entire Hong Kong identity, which of course includes other ethnic groups. It does provide a good approximation, though, since more than nine tenths of the colony is ethnically Chinese. They argue that this community is a distinct variant of Chinese society. Their intention to reveal this society's "ethos" is an attempt at describing its values and their implications for the behavior of its individuals. They characterize the society by carefully confirming generally accepted ideas about the political passivity and materialistic mindset of the Hong Kong Chinese. This, more than any of the previous literature discussed, resembles a depiction of identity, especially since Lau and Kuan lived in Hong Kong and based their work on interviews conducted in 1985 and 1986.

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<sup>7</sup> Lau Siu-Kai and Kuan Hsin-Chi, The Ethos of the Hong Kong Chinese, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1988



However, they fail to connect the push for self-definition in the years prior to these with their characterization. Instead, they construct the ethos of the Hong Kong Chinese by emphasizing theoretical ideas which allow them to compare Hong Kong to traditional Chinese society.

Among the more careful writers on this subject is Helen Siu, whose work tracing the history of this cultural identity provides a good understanding upon which to build. Siu agrees with Lau and Kuan, and the people of Hong Kong (according to polls) that the “distinct Hong Kong ethos” began to emerge in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> It has been largely attributed to the contributions of the post-war generation. This generation of Hong Kong Chinese received Western education and became the class of professionals which has been a large factor behind the rapid economic growth of the colony. Especially as China turned inward with its own concerns, and the Hong Kong government began to take on a degree of responsibility for the social issues of the time, many in this generation came to identify with Hong Kong more than with China (though this avenue of cultural heritage remains largely intact.) The culture that they identified with was the sophisticated, materialistic, global one that grew out of the colony’s economic explosion.

Siu understands that Hong Kong’s identity cannot be understood quite so simply, and she warns against trying to fit the Hong Kong population into any rigid categories. She notes the same shortfall in the literature as mentioned above: the failure to go beyond the “nationalistic” mindset of a British-Chinese dichotomy, preventing some from appreciating the “Hong Kong cultural universe.”<sup>9</sup> Beyond the nationalistic dichotomy Siu finds a complex set of cultural conditions. The constant addition of immigrants and

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<sup>8</sup> Helen F. Siu, “Hong Kong: Cultural Kaleidoscope on a World Landscape”. from a talk given in The Hong Kong Lectures, The University of Hong Kong, December 7, 1996

refugees have led to a situation in which a “continuous process of disembeddedness and reintegration created a cultural kaleidoscope.”<sup>10</sup> The kaleidoscopic Hong Kong identity includes the overlapping identities of Hong Konger, Cantonese, Chinese, and global citizen. Siu claims this identity is so at least partly because it is fixed to a “territory without clear boundaries.”<sup>11</sup>

If scholars have already addressed the question of Hong Kong’s unique culture, society, or “ethos”, what reason is there to go further? How can this project expand this understanding? The most fundamental way is by looking to the explosion of the 1997 debate in the early 1980s for answers to the question of identity. The details behind this general strategy further reveal how this paper expands the current conception of the Hong Kong people. The remainder of this introduction is concerned with laying out the methodology employed in subsequent chapters. First I establish the concept of identity and the usefulness of defining it this way for the purpose of deepening the reader’s understanding of recent Hong Kong history. Next I turn to the essential subject of discourse. This will include an explanation of the source material the thesis is based upon, as well as an introduction to the first of theoretical tools I will employ, the distinction between “dominant versus outlaw discourse.” These ideas, in turn, lead into the introduction of the second, related concept, the “subaltern.”

## IDENTITY: HISTORICALLY-ROOTED SELF-DEFINITION

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 12

<sup>10</sup> Helen F. Siu, “Culture and the Politics of Difference in South China”, *Daedalus*, Vol. 122, No. 2, Spring 1993, pp. 29-32

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 16

A place to begin treating the subject of identity is David Faure's Lineage as a Cultural Invention.<sup>12</sup> Faure describes how village communities in southeast China were established around lineage associations. He ultimately argues that the lineages that provided the organizational basis for these villages, which the villagers identified with, were a product of the actions of the Ming government. Regardless of the actor, the way in which Faure figures into this paper is his recognition that identity cannot be separated from the specific historical conditions of its creation. This supports the idea that scholars should examine specific historical events when attempting to uncover the identity of a people. The identity which this paper reveals, then, is a function of the very peculiar circumstances surrounding the Sino-British negotiations and the public discussion of the 1997 problem. Because Faure argues that one cannot be understood without the other, a look at identity at this time must be rooted in the 1997 issue, and this important moment in Hong Kong's history cannot be understood without looking at the question of identity. Unlike southeast China under the Ming, the people of Hong Kong in this setting, rather than the government, define their own identity. Identity must therefore be self-defined in these circumstances.

Beyond this recognition, what does identity mean when applied to a body of people such as Hong Kong? The authors of the first group of Hong Kong literature, who write largely based upon legal or official sources, might point to the technical definition of what it means to "belong" to Hong Kong, which is based upon such specific criteria as citizenship and a length of residence of seven years. However, use of these factors clearly would not accurately define the identity of belonging, nor would a checklist that

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<sup>12</sup> David Faure, *The Lineage as a Cultural Invention: The Case of the Pearl River Delta*, Modern China, Vol. 15, No. 1, January 1989, pp. 4-36

included such conditions as language, ethnicity, or personal history. Helen Siu's account of Hong Kong as a "cultural kaleidoscope" provides the reason why such an approach does not explain identity. Her relevant point is that the place is made up of people with diverse personal circumstances. In other words, not everyone who identifies with Hong Kong will meet all these criteria, or even most of them. For example, can an accurate concept of identity exclude an immigrant from China who has lived in Hong Kong for fewer than seven years, holds Chinese citizenship papers, and does not speak the local dialect of Cantonese? What about a British expatriate who has lived there all his life? The answer is clearly no, since there are thousands of such people living in Hong Kong, and thousands more with their own particular stories. Though they may not fit the technical definition, if you asked them, many would describe themselves as "Hongkong Belongers." Clearly, a useful concept of Hong Kong identity must reject such a categorical approach.

What should this conception of a collective identity be, then? Philosophers<sup>13</sup> have written that identity is made up of the qualities that allow something to be reidentified, or recognized as the same thing at a different time or place. While this concept is perhaps too analytical for our understanding of a society of people, the basic idea is the same: identity will be taken to mean the defining characteristics of such a society, as the people themselves describe them, in a specific historical setting. In the case of Hong Kong, this might refer to those qualities that describe the community's uniqueness in comparison with that of China, for example, as the colony comes to grips with the approaching transition of sovereignty.

## DISCOURSE CAPTURES A 'MOMENT'

If *identity* refers to the *self-defined essential nature* of a group of people at a given juncture of time, a study of identity requires some way of allowing the people themselves to speak. Among the best records of the people's perspectives on the 1997 issue from the period of the Sino-British negotiations is the daily letters page of the English-language *South China Morning Post*. Of the 61 daily newspapers Hong Kong supported at this time, including six English-language, the *SCMP* is the only major paper to publish letters to the editor.<sup>14</sup> The '1997 debate' here refers to all letters mentioning any aspect of the 1997 issue, that were published between the infamous Peking visit by Margaret Thatcher in September, 1982, and the signing of the Joint Declaration at the conclusion of the talks, in November, 1984.

In these twenty-seven months, the general topic was addressed in approximately one thousand letters. Writers were well aware of the debate in which they engaged. For example, they noted that they had "heard and read, from your paper and elsewhere, numerous comments and suggestions concerning Hongkong after 1997"<sup>15</sup>, that the issue was "illustrated daily in the reports, opinions and correspondence columns of your newspaper".<sup>16</sup> To illustrate the degree to which 1997 permeated society are two letters connecting the issue with small children. Lina Lee describes how her six-year-old neighbor was "crying, appearing very dejected" about the problem. That the boy sobbed, "I don't want 1997" revealed to Lee that "the 1997 fears have not spared a six-year-

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<sup>13</sup> For example, John Locke is famous for his examination of the reidentification problem.

<sup>14</sup> Atwood and Major, pp. 56

<sup>15</sup> *Letter to the Editor*, Frederick T. W. Wu, *SCMP*, 9-28-83

<sup>16</sup> *Watching Belonger*, 6-18-84

old.”<sup>17</sup> An eight-year-old girl actually wrote a letter to the paper, with a proposed solution to the problem. She began with the words, “I have heard the number “1997” very often; I know the problem” showing the degree to which the ominous digits had permeated society.<sup>18</sup> In fact, some were even driven to call for relief “from the oppressive tedium of the 1997 question.”<sup>19</sup> One writer referred to the 1984 Olympics as two weeks in which “Hongkong forgot 1997.”<sup>20</sup>

Some letters even suggest that the discourse of which they were a part had the power to shape the reality of readers, and thus of Hong Kong. One writer actually dates the time when the formative debating began, and attributes the exchange of ideas with redefining Hong Kong. He refers to Thatcher’s “memorable visit in 1982, which contributed so much to make us what we are now.”<sup>21</sup> Additionally, a creative contributor by the name Jutti Sharpe submitted an elaborate metaphor for the experience of Hong Kong in the form of a fairy tale which personified the colonial powers as parents of the child Hong Kong. The discussion over custody between father China and mother Britain represents the Sino-British negotiations. Consider the strength of words with which the following excerpt describes the transformative power of the colony’s reaction to the talks: “For a long time the child said nothing at all, believing that its elders knew best. But as the parents kept on talking and talking, and did not tell the child what they were talking about, the child began to ponder and pine. It certainly left its mark on this beautiful creature.”<sup>22</sup> The ‘pondering’ and ‘pining’ of the ‘child’ are clearly meant to represent the

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<sup>17</sup> Lina Lee, 11-4-83

<sup>18</sup> Priya Vasani (Miss) 8, 12-1-83

<sup>19</sup> Peter Sherwood, 3-20-84

<sup>20</sup> Hal Archer, 8-24-84

<sup>21</sup> Austin Coates, 12-24-82

<sup>22</sup> Jutti Sharpe, 5-21-84

outpouring of ideas, concerns, and opinions of the Hong Kong people – in other words. the very debate we are concerned with. That Sharpe would go as far as to say that this discussion “certainly left its mark” on Hong Kong is strong evidence that the debate took place during a critically formative period in Hong Kong history, and that discourse did create reality in this case. Sharpe recognizes an important, culturally-identifying “moment” taking place.

Though the *SCMP* did not reach everyone in the colony, the discussion it published reflects the issues with which the entire colony grappled, and thus can be used to project the Hong Kong identity. Additionally, since this newspaper is a major window through which the outside world glimpses Hong Kong, this debate was amplified. The identity it establishes is the world’s conception of the Hong Kong people at this stage in their history.

## CONCEPTUAL TOOLS

In addition to approaching Hong Kong identity through a defining moment in Hong Kong history, captured in a public discourse, this project makes new distinctions within the formation of that identity. These refinements are based on the paired concepts of *dominant discourse* and *outlaw discourse*, and *elite voice* and *subaltern voice*. Both are ways of breaking down. through recognition of unequal power relationships, the more homogenous conception of Hong Kong identity that previously existed.

While not the original source of the idea, John Sloop’s and Kent Ono’s work-in-progress on the discourse concerning immigration in California best captures the sense of

dominant versus outlaw discourse relevant to this project.<sup>23</sup> In Sloop's and Ono's own words, "'Dominant discourses' are those understandings, meanings, and judgements that work within the most commonly accepted (and institutionally supported) understandings of what is just or unjust, good and bad; 'outlaw discourses' are those that are incommensurate with the logic of the dominant discourses." Dominant discourse implies a framework of assumptions or rules that are widely accepted because they are promoted by those with the power to influence. Outlaw discourse is not simply opposition to a position staked out within the dominant framework; it must be critical of that very framework and not follow its rules. If outlaw discourse does not "follow a different logic and see the very logic and decision making project of the dominant discourse to be unsound", it is effectively silenced. Without its own unique logic, it is actually part of the dominant discourse, reifying the dominant framework.

Parallel to this concept of voice in unequal power relationships is the question raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"<sup>24</sup> Spivak contributes to a body of literature known as subaltern studies which attempts to revise history by acknowledging the important roles played by those who have been ignored by standard accounts. These scholars have tended to focus on India, another colonial setting with its own unique circumstances. They claim that India's history has been written by, for, and about the elite. By denying that the rest of the people were significant historical actors, subaltern studies claims, elite historical accounts have deprived the subalterns of a will to be themselves and to influence their own fate. Their aim in revising history with a more careful look at these actors is to restore this autonomy. Critics of the subaltern

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<sup>23</sup> John Sloop and Kent Ono, (unfinished manuscript). 1999



school posit that a true history must take into account both elite and subaltern contributions.<sup>25</sup>

Who are the subaltern? The contributors to this body of literature never provide a precise definition. According to Ranajit Guha, this must be decided according to each particular historical case. In the cases examined by these authors, the subaltern share a common characteristic: they are on the bottom of an unequal relationship. Generally, they are subjects of imperialism and their own indigenous elite, and are silenced by the historical accounts which correspond to these two oppressive groups: colonialist histories and nationalist histories, respectively. Typically, the women or underclasses of a colony (namely, India) have been referred to as "subaltern." As the people of Hong Kong begin to flesh out their identity in the following chapter, the importance of Spivak's question will become more clear. The unequal distribution of wealth and influence, and the paternalism of the indigenous elite and the colonial powers make subaltern theory a useful tool for more fully understanding Hong Kong as it wrestled with the 1997 question.

## Chapter One: From Fluid to False Identity

Between 1982 and 1984 Hong Kong attempted to define the essential nature of its society more clearly in the face of the imminent changes of the transition of sovereignty.

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<sup>24</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Nelson, Cary, and Grossberg, Lawrence, Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988

<sup>25</sup> This summary is taken from two reviews: Richard G. Fox, "Selected Subaltern Studies", *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 18, Issue 6 (November, 1989) 886-888 and Walter Hauser, "Selected Subaltern Studies", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, Issue 1, (Feb., 1991), 241-243. These reviewers discuss Selected Subaltern Studies. Guha, Ranajit and Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, which includes contributions by Spivak, Guha, Edward Said, Gyanendra Pandey, Gautam Bhadra, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Shahid Amin, Partha Chatterjee, and David Arnold.

More specifically, this identity creation was an expression of uniqueness in the face of a future under the People's Republic of China. Hong Kong's massive neighbor held not only the ancestral roots of the colony's inhabitants, but also a system of government long considered antithetical to Western capitalism, and a recent history of that included factionalism, instability, and violence. Furthermore, Hong Kongers writing to the *SCMP* are aware that China was primarily interested in regaining sovereignty over the people of the colony, and not simply its physical space. One expatriate contributor points out that the land itself is minor compared to the human resources, and so "when China says we want back Hong Kong, it is in fact saying: we want back those people who left us years ago and settled in Hongkong and have prospered."<sup>26</sup> China's apparent intention to absorb the Hong Kong community fueled the effort to establish what made the city-state unique from China. The 1997 issue raised the previously irrelevant question, *who or what is Hong Kong?* Identity formation appears to have been a reaction to the possibility of losing a particular way of life. It was an opportunity to solidify a nebulous entity. For example, David Birnbaum compares the situation to a "mid-life identity crisis", in which "the people around me are becoming less sure of who they are...the world is going through an epidemic loss of identity." Another perspective describes the paradox of the identity crisis: "Even though we have so-called British passports, we are not permitted to stay in the UK. But we are not Chinese either. We live in a nether world. Our undefined nationality embarrasses us."<sup>27</sup> A condition of the identity-formation landscape, then, is a fluid, unclaimed identity. The reason for this fluidity, Birnbaum writes, was the fear of

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<sup>26</sup>V. Hudson Trotter, 8-4-84

<sup>27</sup> Eric Tang, 1-23-83

being engulfed: “We in Hongkong are worried that past 1997 our city will become Xianggang<sup>28</sup> ....I am not reassured.”<sup>29</sup>

## CHINA, FROM HONG KONG: A PARADOX OF PRIDE, FEAR, AND SCORN

For these reasons, what Hong Kong people say about their relation to China is central to their self-definition and so provides a logical place to begin. China appears in the 1997 discourse as an object of cultural or national pride, while at the same time a communist menace, whose people live a primitive lifestyle.

The following letter illustrates the often paradoxical nature of the relationship between China and the Hong Kong Chinese. Though arguing against immediate reunification, Miss Chow Mi-to demonstrates patriotic pride for China and identification with China. Ultimately, however, the way she reconciles her connection to China with her identification with Hong Kong implies condescension for life on the mainland. Chow speaks for Hongkong when she claims that “people appear to be happier the way things are in Hongkong, to what it presently is in China.” However, “This is not to say that we are not patriots”, she adds, describing how proud she is of China’s accomplishments in previous decades. She does not address the internal violence, oppression, starvation and other growing pains China felt during these decades, which include the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, preferring instead to highlight China’s growth as a power: “as a Chinese, it does me proud to see that we have come from a 15<sup>th</sup>-rate nation to be one of the world’s leading powers. Full credit must be given to our leaders and the people.” The language she uses is telling. She obviously feels ties to China, identifying

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<sup>28</sup> A nearby Chinese province.

<sup>29</sup>David Birnbaum, 8-8-84

herself as Chinese, referring to China as “the motherland”, and using “we” and “our” to include herself alongside the billion plus mainlanders. Yet she points out that Hong Kong people are vastly different from people in China, placing the Hong Kong Chinese in something of a paradox. The resolution of the paradox for Mi-To is her observation that “we [Chinese] are the world’s most practical people”, and so naturally choose the place that is best for them. In this case, “the lesser of two evils” is the colonial system in Hongkong under the British. She feels that Hongkong should be reunited with China only at the stage when “one would be able to go from Hongkong to other parts of China and not notice the difference.”<sup>30</sup> The implication here is that China needs to catch up with the development of Hong Kong before they can easily mix. She seems to be claiming a fondness for her cultural heritage tempered by a practical, self-serving connection to life in Hong Kong.

It does not come as a surprise that Chinese nationalism, such as that mentioned by Chow, was among the sentiments expressed by a community so closely tied to China. Hong Kong people are removed from China by only a short distance and a varied amount of time, ranging from that of recent immigrants to ‘native-born’ second or third generation Hong Kongers. However, some alleged that not all the patriotism expressed was genuine, but was instead a selfish ploy by élites to improve their situation. “U.K. Citizen and Hongkong Belonger” finds it “puzzling to see how some canny capitalists and members of the aristocratic families in Hongkong can become overnight ‘patriotic people’ and part of a ‘patriotic united front organization under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.’” The accusation this writer makes is that these wealthy and

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<sup>30</sup>Chow Mi-To, 6-6-83

influential Hongkongers are making a switch out of personal interest, and not because they favor Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought or the dictatorship of the proletariat.

“Honestly,” Citizen wraps up the letter, “there is nothing wrong in one choosing to be a communist, but one must have at least some respect for and conviction and sincerity in his political belief.”<sup>31</sup> Another writer, Patrick Tsoi, levels a direct attack on these “opportunists.” Tsoi links the rise of the “1997 question” to the outburst of “talk about patriotism, nationalism, anti-colonial rule, democratic self-rule” among “a large number of intellectuals.” His contention is that China’s proposal of “Hongkong People Governing Hongkong” is attractive to Hong Kong people, but even more appealing to the “local opportunists” who plan to take over administrating Hong Kong after 1997. And so, in order to please Chinese officials, these intellectuals display phony enthusiasm, disparage anything British to “show off their nationalistic feeling”, silence any objections that might antagonize the Chinese Government, defend China’s position from constructive criticism, and falsely reassure the Hong Kong people with “ungrounded optimism.”<sup>32</sup>

This evidence is supported by another writer, who describes China’s role in this so-called “united front” conspiracy. That role amounts to playing the patriotism ‘card’ in order to unite the Hong Kong people with the mainland against the British influence, and entice elite Hong Kongers to support Peking in exchange for leadership positions in post-1997 Hong Kong. China, in its efforts to promote “Hongkong People Ruling Hongkong” after it resumed sovereignty in 1997, uses patriotism to gather support. Fu Shih-Yu

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<sup>31</sup>U.K. Citizen and Hongkong Belonger, 5-26-83

<sup>32</sup>Patrick Tsoi. 7-17-84

writes that from Peking's point of view, "the future rulers of Hongkong must be patriots." So, "Peking has...been harping on the theme of "patriotism", which is seen as an attempt to appeal for Hongkong belongers' moral support" for a Hongkong-ruled Hongkong. In response to the opportunity to shape the Hong Kong identity (the "identity crisis" or "nether world" previously mentioned), China fought against the creation of a distinct, unique, identity. China would rather emphasize what all Chinese, Hong Kong and mainland, have in common rather than what sets Hong Kong apart, if Hong Kong is to ever be successfully reunited with China. Fu Shih-Yu, who holds many serious reservations about a future under China, claims the patriotism plea is part of China's "united front" tactics, designed to soften up the people of Hongkong."<sup>33</sup>

That "intellectuals", "canny capitalists" and aristocrats, who all clearly fall into an elite category, made such deceptive moves in a bid for their own power should warn readers of the 1997 discourse that perhaps all is not as it seems. If élites would artificially inject patriotic fervor into the debate, and employ other such means to shape the discussion, perhaps the letters page contains other manipulations. This analysis will proceed with a more wary eye.

On some level, feelings of nationalism or patriotism drawing Hong Kong people closer to China had to be resolved with the realities of the transition of sovereignty. According to Chaun Kou, letting these emotions get involved in the decision-making could be bad for Hong Kong: "People tend to sweep unmentionable, mundane dirt under the carpet when nationalism or patriotism is touched upon. But emotion must give way to hard-headed consideration when making the right choice for the most beneficial

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<sup>33</sup>Fu Shih-Yu, 8-7-84

political solution.”<sup>34</sup> Such clear thinking was necessary to evaluate the many troubling possibilities that life under China might bring. For some, such as “Ancient Gweilo”<sup>35</sup>, there is no reason to fear the future: “I, for one, am not overconcerned about future prospects. Nor should any patriotic believer with Chinese blood in his veins.”<sup>36</sup> “Gweilo” trusts the Chinese government and implies that patriotic Hong Kong Chinese ought to as well.

However, there were many who appreciated China while maintaining serious reservations about future arrangements. Mrs. M. Tung writes for Hongkong that “China fails to recognize that it is not welcome here. However fond of China the people here may be, they dread communism. They need to be convinced that there is a future for them with little fear of interference from China.”<sup>37</sup> Another letter points out how “there were many Chinese in Hongkong who would look forward to China regaining sovereignty” but also “many Chinese in Hongkong who regard 1997 with apprehension.” Apparently nationalist support for Chinese sovereignty does not translate directly to a desire for China to transform Hong Kong into a piece of China. Among the reasons for the “apprehension”, the author notes how many of the immigrants that make up the population fled China to begin with, the threats to freedom of thought and expression, and the specter of People’s Liberation Army troops stationed in Hong Kong to “propagate” Mao thought and Marxism.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Chaun Kou, 8-13-84

<sup>35</sup> “Gweilo” is Cantonese slang for foreigner or “foreign devil”, and implies European ancestry.

<sup>36</sup>Ancient Gweilo, 1-15-83

<sup>37</sup> M. Tung (Mrs.) 6-4-84

<sup>38</sup> M. A. A. Crawford, 6-13-84

Most of the anxiety common to many in Hong Kong was based on the ideological conflict with the P.R.C. and the resultant prospects for instability or interference. In general, it is hard to separate the concerns from the ideology of the situation, for they all stem either directly from the conflict between Chinese communism and Hong Kong capitalism, or from problems with the nature of Chinese government. It may be obvious but important to note that the Hong Kong people mainly took issue with Peking, not with the Chinese citizens across the border.<sup>39</sup> This may help explain why they could maintain patriotism or fondness while dreading the transition. The Hongkong University Graduates Forum point to the three main areas of anxiety people held about China: “our haunting and vivid experiences of the capricious nature of Chinese politics since 1949”, the impossibility of “two systems within one nation” because the Chinese constitution “states its intention is to combat capitalism”, and the prospect of interference with Hong Kong freedoms or lifestyle.<sup>40</sup>

For Anny Lai, and readers like her, it boils down to “the crucial issue: communism does not tolerate democracy and capitalism.”<sup>41</sup> This ideological conflict is glaringly obvious, though perhaps exaggerated in the midst of the early 1980s Cold War missile rhetoric, with the cultural revolution fresh in everyone’s memory. Naturally, letters criticize China for its communist dogma. For example, “The Chinese leaders look pretty good with their new Western suits...Now that they have shed the Mao jacket, it’s fine. I will, however, feel a whole lot better when they shed Mao’s narrow-mindedness

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<sup>39</sup> However, there is evidence that many Hong Kong people looked down upon the mainlanders, as suggested by Miss Chow Mi-To’s letter above.

<sup>40</sup> Hongkong University Graduates Forum, 6-1-84

<sup>41</sup> Anny Lai, 11-25-83



and hollow audacity, too,”<sup>42</sup> How did readers expect the different systems to collide?

Many were afraid of the unknown element in Chinese politics, which could quickly turn to extremism dangerous to Hong Kong. Expatriate John Hughes writes that

...it would be naïve to presume that the radicals in China have been silenced or are no longer a force to contend with. It would also be naïve to think that political compromise and factional strife are not as prevalent in post-Mao China...the Chinese government is not a monolith and ...its policies towards Hong Kong are subject to numerous internal pressures (presumably from the Left)...compromise, trade-offs, and good old-fashioned power politics will decide how the Chinese evolve a Hong Kong policy.<sup>43</sup>

The anonymous “Watching Belonger” argues that the unpredictability in communist politics has destroyed any hope of credibility. He argues that “the course of communism since 1945” proves this, and lists instances of broken promises in Russian and Chinese history, including “Mao’s 100 flowers that bloomed only to be snuffed out by the cultural revolution....No communist country has yet managed to establish credibility.”<sup>44</sup>

While this last argument may be based upon an oversimplified view of communism, the belief that the Chinese political system threatened Hong Kong’s way of life was widely held and backed up by specific complaints. Y. B. Low-Ito, a consistent contributor, attacks the Chinese government: “they can accuse anyone they want of “brigandage”, capitalist-roaderism, scoundrelism, revisionism, individualism, non-individualism, surrealism, parasitism, etc. or even just writing poetry, a parasitic occupation.”<sup>45</sup> Some such criticisms inadvertently characterize Hong Kong. Yim Char writes that, “China, notwithstanding the much-touted open-door policy since 1979, is still a superannuated autocratic “centrocracy” in which pluralism, relativism, open-

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<sup>42</sup> K. K. Poon, 10-10-83

<sup>43</sup> John Hughes, 6-27-84

<sup>44</sup> Watching Belonger, 4-25-84

<sup>45</sup> Y.B. Low-Ito

mindedness, individualism, and egalitarianism, all vitamins of Hongkong success, are all anathema.”<sup>46</sup> Peter Leung highlights a similar contrast: “In sharp contrast with the totalitarian system in socialist China, the ambience of Hongkong’s society fuels creativity and facilitates the pursuit of personal excellence and in the process, benefits, to a greater or lesser extent, all of society.”<sup>47</sup>

The projection of life under the Chinese juggernaut produced serious anxiety for Hongkongers. R. Wilson Tuet accurately captures a widespread sentiment: “Ever since the 1997 issue first appeared in our daily papers, Hongkong people have been worrying about the political future of the territory.” The credibility problem noted by “Watching Belonger” appears to be a large source this worry, because “despite repeated assurances given by the Chinese authorities...anxiety of local residents still persists....[Hong Kong people] tend to adopt a ‘wait-and-see’ attitude toward such guarantees in view of the changes in line and personalities that have wracked China in the past 30 years.” The concerns of the Hong Kong people that this letter refers to are those concerning rights and freedoms, personal and economic.<sup>48</sup> Anny Lai is also concerned about freedoms under China: “What freedoms can be guaranteed?...[Britain] seems prepared to hand over Hongkong to China, a totalitarian communist state where human rights and various freedoms are denied its people.”<sup>49</sup>

An example of such a potential loss of freedom was apparent when Chinese officials endorsed the idea of domestic mandatory sterilization. T. C. Lai reacts: “...in view of 1997 it becomes obvious that the personal and human rights we cherish and

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<sup>46</sup> Yim Char, 7-21-84

<sup>47</sup> Peter Leung, 8-3-84

<sup>48</sup> R. Wilson Tuet, 7-21-83

<sup>49</sup> Anny Lai, 6-6-84

exercise today, could...suddenly be considered no longer 'reasonable and understandable.'"<sup>50</sup> One anonymous letter-writer identified only as "A Teacher" looks beyond the more obvious possible losses of freedom to the subtle, sinister ones:

"By this freedom, I mean not only the freedom of speech, freedom of the press, religious freedom, and freedom from fear. I also mean the taken-for-granted freedom of telling our best friend what we had for dinner, what TV show we watched the night before and commenting on them without their turning into statements that Red Guards can use against us if another cultural revolution should occur...I should also like to be reassured that there will not be another cultural revolution...."<sup>51</sup>

Many, such as Chung Miu-Ling, claim that Hong Kong has a right to keep its own identity: "The people of Hongkong have always had a lifestyle of their own and no one should want to change it...we have a right to exist as a separate community with our own lifestyle."<sup>52</sup>

As far as how Chinese sovereignty would affect the economy, an important concern in a money-minded city like Hong Kong, most were not worried that the Chinese would directly injure what benefited them. Instead, they worried that either encroachments on personal freedoms would indirectly harm the free market, or that people would lose confidence in China's ability to successfully govern the capitalist system, and move their capital and experience elsewhere.

Critical though they were of China, much of Hong Kong eventually had to come to grips with the future change of sovereignty. Peter Leung, who criticizes the totalitarian state of China above concedes that "practicability and common sense dictate the acceptance of the inevitable..."<sup>53</sup> During the Sino-British Negotiations, China had

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<sup>50</sup> T. C. Lai. 4-5-83

<sup>51</sup> A Teacher. 8-27-83

<sup>52</sup> Chung Miu-Ling (Mrs.), 10-31-83

<sup>53</sup> Peter Leung. 8-3-84

insisted on sovereignty from the beginning, and never budged on this issue. Britain tried to contest this at first, but had no bargaining position, and so, midway through the talks, it became clear to all that sovereignty would indeed revert to China. Of course, the nature of the administration of the territory remained unknown. Many were helpless and voiceless. Some reacted with resignation to Britain 'losing' Hong Kong, for example, Cyrus Fung: "If the Iron Lady's bluff has been called...and our fortunes are sooner or later irrevocably shackled to mother China, why don't we, instead of skirting round the problem and face aside, cut the gordian knot and change our currency to renminbi?"<sup>54</sup>

The general idea was to make everything go more smoothly by accepting this fate.

Others, like Mrs. M. Tung, who accepts China's promise that it will leave Hong Kong's way of life alone for 50 years, sees no problem: "Perhaps we in Hongkong should get used to the idea of Chinese sovereignty over the territory in 1997...If Hongkong can stay the same...who cares about the red flag floating over Hongkong?"<sup>55</sup> This letter seems to express the stereotype, found in the literature, of an economically, rather than politically oriented Hong Kong identity.

## THE HYPOCRISY OF PATERNALISM

From the various images of China in the letters, a common one puts the P.C. in a position of dominance vis-a-vis Hong Kong. They describe China as the 'master' of Hong Kong. The following letter contrasting Hong Kong to China is a good example: "The present administration is good enough for many to risk swimming across shark-infested waters to come...And where do they come from? From the same Government which may one day

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<sup>54</sup> Cyrus S. C. Fung, 6-8-83

<sup>55</sup> M. Tung (Mrs.), 10-19-83

be Hongkong's lord and master."<sup>56</sup> Another example points out a central paradox of the situation, "that Hong Kong will be decolonized by handing it over to another master which happened once to rule here."<sup>57</sup> An expression of the fear of Master China is K. Y. Chan's concern that the master will put him and his family to work for China: "I have absolutely no confidence in the future. I don't want my child and my family ending up in a paddy field."<sup>58</sup> Referring to life under Deng, one writer noticed that, "the phrase 'tremble and obey' seems to strike a chord here."<sup>59</sup>

These fears of Master China point to another important element in the 1997 debate's characterization of Hong Kong: paternalistic relationships. Typically, letters described Hong Kong as the subject of paternalism by China or Britain. The master-slave relationship is only one example of these metaphors. Commonly, Hong Kong was – like a child – nurtured and protected, powerless and ignored, or looked down upon. Either Britain or China or both were billed as the parents, sometimes in a dysfunctional colonial family of sorts. That much of Hong Kong felt as though it was treated as a child reveals some characteristics of the identity that emerged as the territory's political fate was decided. Different letters express helplessness, dependence, resentment, frustration at the circumstances. They also contain some rather rich imagery to help the reader see more clearly Hong Kong's identity-in-formation. An example is the following poem, captioned "Belonger's testament of faith":

Around the age of three  
The first glimmerings of reason began  
To infiltrate the know routine of  
Familiar faces, sounds, sleep, eat, evacuate the bowels.

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<sup>56</sup> Hongkong Born British Subject, 11-28-82

<sup>57</sup> Brandwag, 9-19-84

<sup>58</sup> K. Y. Chan, 5-22-84

<sup>59</sup> Hongkong Belonger Who Hopes to Want to Stay, 6-25-84

Securely hide behind Mama's skirt, avoiding the unknown.  
 The unsampled...yet, somehow I know  
 I am Chinese, this is  
 Hongkong.  
 The adults talked of whence they came.  
 The other world beyond.  
 They swam  
 To greener pastures to build what they sought.  
 Hope. Achieved through unbelievable sweated toil  
 With faith placed only in themselves.  
 A life with goals.  
 I am Chinese, this is  
 Hongkong.  
 Long days of schooling, marshalling the tools  
 Ancestors did not possess.  
 To stand apart. to prove, to show the world  
 We shine on equal terms.  
 We are no freak, we can compete,  
 Hewing identity with each decade.  
 I am Chinese, this is  
 Hongkong.  
 Now, my niche is carved. I contribute  
 To what my parents came to build.  
 My die is cast, the other place is a myth.  
 Would I step backwards in time to join  
 Some band light years behind in thought, belief, and custom?  
 I am Chinese, but this is  
 Hongkong.<sup>60</sup>

The poet, C. W. H., portrays young Hong Kong as totally insulated from the world beyond the protection of its colonial Mama, Britain: "Securely hide behind Mama's skirt, avoiding the unknown." This was certainly not the only reference to Britain as the parent figure, though of course most such letters referred to the paternalistic behavior surrounding the 1997 issue rather than to the nurturing and protection alluded to in the above poem. One of the issues that inspired such comparisons was that of self-governance or representation. Mrs. E. Elliot, a very outspoken contributor to the discourse and a prominent expatriate personality involved in issues of local government,

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<sup>60</sup>C.W.H., 12-8-82

responds to a letter calling for a continued British presence. “Do they honestly want British baby-sitters after 1997...?...our strength lies in ruling our own destiny with justice, and not in crying for colonial mammas.”<sup>61</sup>

Though the letter Elliot responds to seems to ask for Hong Kong to continue to be treated like a child, the discourse much more commonly criticizes such treatment. Another expatriate, David Birbaum, “resent[s the colonial government’s] efforts to put me back in short pants and an Eton jacket.” Writing near the end of the talks, when the “prevailing belief is that the British will solicit our opinion and then do exactly as they intended all along”, Birbaum feels as though he were six years old. He describes this age as one in which one’s opinion is “earnestly solicited with that understanding that it will carry no weight whatsoever.”<sup>62</sup>

A letter from a Hong Kong Chinese, Mrs. Chung Miu-Ling, shows the anger that paternalism provoked in Hong Kong. “The continued efforts of the Hongkong Government...and even the British parliament, to treat the people of Hongkong as children is [sic] infuriating”, she writes, referring to the colonial government’s lack of sincerity and action in moving toward a believer-run civil service. She even compares this attitude to her characterization of Britain’s historical treatment of the Chinese: “the British have notoriously been either condescending or aggressive towards the Chinese and it is time they realised that we are not the ‘down-trodden masses’ of Pearl Buck’s days.... We have the same right to peace, comfort, and the pursuit of happiness as any person in the British Isles or anywhere in the world.”<sup>63</sup> Another letter criticizing the colonial government’s respect for the Hong Kong Chinese in matters of self-government

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<sup>61</sup> E. Elliott (Mrs.), 7-13-84

<sup>62</sup> David Birbaum, 8-31-84

compares the situation to another colonial situation notorious for racism. Because they are “not to be trusted with direct representation”, Hongkongers are “now in the same position as the blacks in South Africa.” The possible reason? A paternalistic, racist view of the people of Hong Kong: “Perhaps our Government considers we are too stupid, or too irresponsible or is it the color of our skins?”<sup>64</sup>

An exchange between Miss Chow Mi-To and S. K. N. Neilson demonstrates firsthand this condescending, perhaps racist, attitude, from within the Hong Kong community. Mi-To wonders why the Hong Kong Chinese need to be used as a “political pawn” between China and Britain. She cites the development of the community, which she argues has integrated the 50% of the Chinese born in Hong Kong with the 50% who were refugees. “I do not see why we cannot be left alone”, she asks.<sup>65</sup> Neilson replies by explaining, quite rightly, how Hong Kong’s politics are inextricably tied to Britain and China. However, he gives no credit to the Hong Kong Chinese for developing as a community, instead crediting the colonial government: “As a community you have come along fine because of the laws passed by Legco and Exco.” Most offensive and arguably racist is Neilson’s paternalistic reason why the Hong Kong Chinese “can’t be left alone. Probably, because if you were, you would not leave yourselves alone, and would destroy Hong Kong.”<sup>66</sup> An anonymous “Observer” offers a similarly diminutive view of the Hong Kong Chinese: “The natives of Hong Kong never seem to appreciate what is good for them. In 1899, when they were extended...[the protection of the England]...they screamed and howled, and had to be forced to accept what was obviously best for them,

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<sup>63</sup> Chung Miu-Ling, 6-5-84

<sup>64</sup> Gau Loi, 9-11-84

<sup>65</sup> Chow Mi-To (Miss), 9-12-84

<sup>66</sup> S. K. N. Neilson, 9-18-84



opium and all....Now, when they are told it was all a big mistake and they can go back to China to the protection and benevolence of Chairman Deng, Gracious Helmsman. they again protest like children being taken for a bath. No wonder they are being scolded in both Peking and London.”<sup>67</sup> This letter is also a clear example of how the identity being forged is closely tied to the specific historical conditions.

Not all images of paternalism are quite so insulting, and neither do they all label Britain as the parent. The accounts of the ‘family’ dynamics are the most interesting for looking at the unique identity being described. According to Yau Kwok-Yuk, Hong Kong is “actually a boy with both Chinese and British blood.” Like other writers to make this metaphor, Yau credits Britain with raising the child: “Hongkong is a Chinese cell, but the cell is nourished into a baby and is brought up a boy by Britain – its mother.” In this case, China’s role is reduced to that of a delinquent father, whose only contribution is the initial “cell.” Though he recognizes that “Britain is not a bad mother”, Yau’s point in using this imagery is to argue for cutting the “connection with its mother” because, “We cannot be a dependent boy forever.”<sup>68</sup> Another writer compares the circumstances to the handing over of a young child from its foster mother to its biological mother. “[T]he current of history,” writes an expatriate. “is bringing Hongkong ever closer to mother China’s bosom, as its natural child temporarily taken care of – so well by any human and world standards one cares to measure it – by its British foster mother.”<sup>69</sup> This is not the only comparison of the situation to a foster family, which is an effective vehicle to convey the complex “emotions” of the “child” caught in the middle.

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<sup>67</sup> Observer, 7-5-84

<sup>68</sup> Yau Kwok-Yuk, 12-13-83

<sup>69</sup> Henri Ballerand, 9-5-84

An unconventional piece of writing that depicts the foster-family analogy is a fairy tale that again portrays Hong Kong as a young child, China as his father, and Britain as his foster mother. The newspaper titled it, "Fairy tale ends on Page 1997", and its value to uncovering the Hongkong identity must be compared to that of the poem, "Belonger's testament of faith." It traces the entire story of Hong Kong from its beginning as a tiny, nearly uninhabited island ("small, poor, insignificant child") right up to the latest stage of talks in 1984. The author, Jutti Sharpe, advises that the mysterious, all-important answer to whether "they all lived happily ever after" can be found on "Page 1997."

The child, "whom nobody loved or cared for", was "too weak and far too small to resist" being adopted by a "rich and famous lady." The father "cared little or nothing for the child" and agreed that the rich lady could raise the child, but not keep the child indefinitely. The mother's care and education of her child helped it, as it grew older, to "become both beautiful and very clever." However, the child also "inherited both good and bad things from its father", and it was "obvious to many that the child could never ignore its natural father", because "there were still unbroken bonds and old ways that tied the child and father together." The child was aware of "how very cruel the father could be", and "would rather forget about its father", but eventually "the time came when it was the father's turn to take over the reins and teach the child who it really was." As mother and father talked about how this was to come about, the child wished "its parents would treat it as something a little more mature" by informing it or listening to it. "'Now, now', said the mother, 'trust me.' Said the old father, 'Just sit back and wait.'"<sup>70</sup> This story illustrates the shade of paternalism in which the powers look down upon Hong Kong's

wishes and concerns. Another example is the following satire, which personifies the parent nations as actual leaders Thatcher and Deng: "Why, everyone says he is trying to ensure your stability and prosperity...Stop worrying, you nitwits. Mama Maggy and Papa Deng know best. With parents like that you are still confused[?] Shame on you."<sup>71</sup>

Hong Kong people during this period are not merely the objects of patronizing behavior. Some could be accused of exhibiting this very same attitude toward another group. For example, the above letters from Neilson and "Observer" exemplify expatriate contempt for the Hong Kong Chinese, a form of internal paternalism. Additionally, the very contributors who complain about being treated in such a fashion often present themselves as superior to the mainland Chinese, and by association, to more recent immigrants to Hong Kong. Recall Chow Mi-To's assumption, based on her call that China "catch up" with Hong Kong, that life in China is backward or primitive. Note that K. Y. Chan's fear of being put to work in a "paddy field" reveals the same assumptions: mainland Chinese are simple and uncultured relative to Hong Kong.

The poem, "Belonger's Testament of Faith", contains even more explicit evidence for this paternalistic belief. Part of the author's declaration of belonging to Hong Kong is dismissing "the other world" or "the other place" of China as "a myth." C. W. H. may be ethnically Chinese, but he or she has chosen Hong Kong's way of life. By asking, "Would I step backwards in time to join/ Some band light years away in thought, belief, and custom?", the author describes life in China as extremely primitive compared with Hong Kong. The question is so derogatory as to be rhetorical; to answer it, the author needs only add a slight emphasis to the refrain, "this is Hong Kong." The implication is

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<sup>70</sup> Jutti Sharpe, 5-21-84

<sup>71</sup> Kamlesh Ch. Roy, 10-6-83

that Hong Kong is obviously far superior. What is more, the superiority claimed goes beyond simply economic development, as implied by Chow Mi –To’s call for China to catch up, or K. Y. Chan’s fear of a “paddy field”. This condescension extends all the way to the fields of ideas and culture.

## WHO BELONGS MORE?

"Belonger's Testament of Faith", raises an issue which, by definition, lies near the heart of the Hong Kong identity. The author explains how Hong Kong life has grown so distinct from China that he or she cannot help but identify or associate more closely with Hong Kong than the mainland. This describes the subjective side of the condition of "belonging to Hong Kong."<sup>72</sup> Many writers label themselves "belongers", by which they imply having lived in Hong Kong for a long time, or holding some special connection to the colony. A reason belonging is so important to identity is that describing one's close association to the colony requires some articulation of what is essential to Hong Kong. Additionally, the distinction between people who belong to Hong Kong and people who do not suggests a clarification of who exactly makes up the Hong Kong community. Intuitively, it makes sense to look those who belong the most, at those who most obviously define the Hong Kong way of life, to reveal the Hong Kong identity.

Officially, belonging refers to one’s status with the Immigration department: after seven years of living in Hong Kong, “one can apply to the Immigration Department to become a ‘Hongkong Belonger’”.<sup>73</sup> Since this paper attempts to go beyond such narrow

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<sup>72</sup>This subjective side is in contrast to the more technical aspects of this term that are mentioned in the introduction.

<sup>73</sup>Hongkong Person, 6-11-84

definitions, and to allow people to define their own identity, it makes more sense to ask, *what does it mean to the people of Hong Kong to belong to Hong Kong?* In the discourse under scrutiny here, people who claim to be belongers do so to bolster their credibility in the debate. An example, which also proves that belonging was not restricted to ethnic Chinese, is the declaration by "Pro 1997" that she or he is British, but that "Hong Kong has become my home....I consider myself a Hong Kong believer."<sup>74</sup> Writers repeatedly introduce themselves as belongers, attempt to quantify how much they belong, and use variations on "Hong Kong Belonger" as pseudonyms. This is because belonging suggests both an intimate knowledge of Hong Kong and an emotional attachment to it. The unquestioned assumption in the letters is that some people belong more than others, and that these people, who know and love Hong Kong the most, are most fit to discuss its future. For this reason, who belongs more is a subject of fierce debate.

Writers argue that some people belong more than others by drawing a distinction between the inclusive "Hong Kong people" and the exclusive "Hong Kong believers." One example revolves around a proposal for self-administration under Chinese sovereignty, captured in the repeated phrase of "Hongkong People Governing Hongkong." The anonymous Hongkong Person writes that if believer status "is adopted as a definition of 'Hongkong people'", then newly-established Hongkongers will be eligible to rule Hong Kong. Hongkong Person favors the long-time residents, such as "those of us who stood by the Hongkong Government through rough times during the 1950s and 1960s riots."<sup>75</sup> The implication is that the newer immigrants, even those who

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<sup>74</sup>Pro 1997, 5-17-84

<sup>75</sup>Hongkong Person, 6-11-84

meet the technical definition of having lived in the colony for seven years, belong less than the generation that immigrated following the second World War. And because they belong to a lesser degree, they are less fit to be political leaders and make decisions for the majority, including those who belong more.

The well-established post-war generation, which is credited with much of Hong Kong's economic growth and for developing a greater sense of belonging by authors such as Siu, makes a strong claim for belonging the most, but other generational groups contest this status. Dora Choi writes that her generation, the "more educated offspring" of the post-war generation, is a significant force in making untrue "the belief that local Chinese people are not interested in politics." She claims that this "group of people are more sophisticated and seek a higher quality of life", which she concludes means more political participation. Choi also asserts that "they exhibit a much greater sense of belonging to the local community than their parents."<sup>76</sup> Anonymous "Hoping for Fair Play" denies that these parents, the post-war generation, are Hongkong belongers at all. "Those Chinese (no doubt now holding British passports) who came to Hongkong after - maybe before - communist China took over, but since World War II, have made fortunes here and are very welcome in UK, they are *not* Hongkong belongers." This contributor labels "old Hongkong Chinese families" the "real 'Hongkong belongers' who have done so much for us here in Hongkong.." This writer's conception of those who belong the most are these "great pioneers of the past", whose experience, handed down, had been instrumental to making Hong Kong what it became.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Dora Choi, 10-12-83

<sup>77</sup>Hoping for Fair Play, 8-28-84

In the midst of this contest, one writer offers a critical point of view which points out a contradiction useful to evaluating the issue of belonging in Hong Kong identity. Eric Tang recognizes that “a sense of belonging is without a doubt a crucial bond between a people and their government”, but does not acknowledge that the Hong Kong people have any. In fact he says “there are few countries, however, where this is less evident than Hong Kong.” Tang argues that the Hong Kong people work hard, but not “for the purpose of benefiting society....but to advance their own interests.” These interests include amassing wealth and leaving for “greener pastures overseas”, which “greatly weakens the sense of belonging among us.” The “1997 issue” accelerates their flight, because “their selfishness makes them nervous”, a reference to the shaky confidence in the Hong Kong economy. Tang recognizes that this general lack of a sense of belonging (which echoes an earlier contributor's mention of an identity crisis) leaves a void in Hong Kong. He encouraged people of the community to work for “the cause of Hongkong right away!” Mainly, this consisted of accepting Hongkong as their “home now and forever.”<sup>78</sup>

Though he ostensibly refers to the "Hong Kong people", Tang obviously describes élites, since generally no one but expatriates and the wealthy Hong Kong Chinese were able to leave the colony to settle elsewhere. And since the post-war generation of Hong Kong immigrants are also identified as the wealthy, indigenous elite, an irony is now apparent. By Tang's criteria for belonging, i.e. accepting Hong Kong as one's home (which is entirely consistent with other conceptions of belonging in the discourse), it appears one of the central groups to claim a strong sense of belonging is in

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<sup>78</sup>Eric Tang, 1-23-83

fact the largest destroyers of that sense of belonging. The powerful and secure of Hong Kong base their claim to belonging on having close ties to the community, yet they are the most likely to desert that community faced with threats to their wealth.

## THE CLASS MOBILITY MYTH

In response to claims that élites are the true Hong Kong belongers, an anonymous “Hongkong Belonger” writes that “Hong Kong belongs to the people of Hongkong – the factory workers, transport drivers, labourers, white collar workers, secretaries, businessmen, housewives, amahs and others who go to make the melting pot that is the Colony.” Though more inclusive than most, this view is one of many which express pride in the positive qualities of the Hong Kong people and the resultant success of the colony. The letter continues: “These people are the hardworking, industrious, adaptable and resourceful workforce which has made Hongkong what it is today, a truly remarkable place by any standard.”<sup>79</sup> The following section includes a number of such self-characterizations by the people of Hong Kong. While the theme of a strong work ethic is consistent, and contributors agree that all the hard work has been good for Hong Kong, they disagree on whether it benefits the workers themselves. In other words, Hong Kongers wrestled with the issue of class mobility as they sought to define their identity.

Writers to the SCMP overwhelmingly characterize Hong Kong as built upon the hard work of its people, who possess a very impressive list of qualities. The poet cited above, C. W. H., refers to this strong work ethic by describing the struggles of a generation of immigrants: “Hope. Achieved through unbelievable sweated toil./With faith placed only in themselves.” Chow Mi-To, along with many others, gives the people



of Hong Kong credit for turning “a plot of worthless land into one of the most modern cities within the past 100 years.” She cites “our own resourcefulness”, ability to cope, and “drive, heart, and forgiveness.”<sup>80</sup> Expatriate Peter Newman chooses “strength, resilience, creativity and wisdom” to depict the people of Hong Kong when trying to predict their future.<sup>81</sup> Many letters had glowing opinions of their fellow citizens. For example, specific to the Hong Kong Chinese, “I am proud of what I have seen created here over the years, largely by the hard work and determination of the Chinese...”<sup>82</sup> or more generally, “citizens of Hongkong are people of integrity and pride.”<sup>83</sup>

The anonymous “Hongkong Belonger” quoted above was not the only contributor who recognized the efforts of non-elite portions of society. Another believer argues that Hong Kong has “hundreds of ordinary men and women whose talent, diligence, confidence and pride (yes, pride) have contributed to make this place tick.”<sup>84</sup> Fu Shih-Yu specifically applauds the contributions of immigrants: “These freedom seekers, as hardworking and intelligent as other fellow citizens here have helped turn Hongkong into an enviable paradise which has won world acclaim as the “Pearl of the Orient” – a real dream come true.”<sup>85</sup> That Fu feels the need to defend this portion of Hong Kong society, apparently from charges that they are lazy or stupid, may reflect a widespread bias against more recent immigrants, related to the paternalistic attitude shown in the previous section.

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<sup>79</sup> Hongkong Belonger, 10-10-83

<sup>80</sup> Chow Mi-To, 7-20-83

<sup>81</sup> Peter Newman, 11-10-82

<sup>82</sup> I. V. Brooke, 12-13-82

<sup>83</sup> Sandy Chan Mei-San, 12-5-82

<sup>84</sup> A Hongkong Belonger, 12-14-82

<sup>85</sup> Fu Shih-Yu, 8-15-84

If, as these letters suggest, and a letter by David Chan Wah-Tsang argues, “highly motivated people” are the reason for the economic performance of Hong Kong, then what makes these people so uniquely motivated? Historians such as Lau and Kuan partially explain the element of materialism in Hong Kong society by describing a mentality among immigrants of seeing Hong Kong as a place to make money.<sup>86</sup> Letters confirm this interpretation. Chan Wah-Tsang’s answer is that Hong Kong people are “efficient and ambitious because they want to keep improving their material life. Every little bit of their effort is counted in the highly competitive community.”<sup>87</sup> Anonymous “Sesame” credits the “entrepreneurial drive of its people, which Hongkong has in abundance” for the prosperity of the colony.<sup>88</sup> As “very successful businessman” expatriate Gregory Cowper puts it, “We all come to Hongkong to make money. If any reader would deny this, then I would question his integrity.”<sup>89</sup> Based on these descriptions, which claim to include all members of the Hong Kong society, Philip Kwong may be accurate in his portrayal of the place as “a highly competitive society which survives on its economic system.”<sup>90</sup>

However, this may be a hasty conclusion to draw. K. Y. Chan replies directly to Cowper: “This statement applies only to a small minority. The majority slave away under crippling conditions barely eking out a living.”<sup>91</sup> Though Cowper seems to intend that people who come to Hong Kong come with the *goal* of making money, and do not all actually succeed, Chan’s point is about class mobility. Conscious of the millions hard-

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<sup>86</sup> Lau and Kuan, pp. 40

<sup>87</sup> David Chan Wah-Tsang, 12-20-82

<sup>88</sup> Sesame, 1-16-83

<sup>89</sup> Gregory Cowper, 5-16-84

<sup>90</sup> Philip Kwong, 8-8-84

<sup>91</sup> K. Y. Chan, 5-22-84

working, ordinary people who make up most of Hong Kong, he is perhaps angered at the suggestion that everyone can come to Hong Kong and make an easy fortune. Another contributor aware of the unequal distribution of wealth in the colony is C. W. H., who vividly illustrates the gap with the following poem, captioned, "Contrast these lifestyles":

Race the Benz across to Kowloon,  
We have dined and are replete.  
Fly over suspended roadways,  
We have Hongkong at our feet.

*Underneath the concrete bridges,  
Huddle piteous human form.  
Hiding from the cold Northeaster,  
Clutching tatters to keep warm.*

Darkened nightclub waits in Kowloon,  
For a merry party throng.  
Champagne, brandy, willing ladies,  
Soft sweet music, tender song.

*Stirs a windswept ragged bundle.  
Hands like ice probe plastic bags.  
Dustbin gleanings are all eaten.  
Retreats within his tattered rags.*

Morning comes, the party's over.  
Off to high-rise harbour view.  
Put it down to "entertainment,"  
This is only just our due.

*Morning comes beneath the bridges.  
Noise of traffic shatters ears.  
Cold and stiff pathetic bundle,  
God's the only one who hears.<sup>92</sup>*

The debate over social mobility is not unique to the colony, but is critical to capturing the Hong Kong identity given C. W. H.'s extreme juxtaposition of "ragged bundle[s]" with Mercedes Benzes. In many cases, class arguments took on a fiercely ideological turn in Hong Kong, whose border with China is like a fault zone where two

world systems scrape alongside one another. For example, "Hongkong Belonger" who identifies himself as "an ordinary Hongkong citizen" and "a man in the street", and "neither a capitalist nor a labourer but only a middle-class wage earner", warns of the inevitable class conflict when Hong Kong falls under the sovereignty of China. "The rivalry between local capitalists and local leftwing labourers may not be easily resolved, since capitalism always involves exploitation", Belonger writes, predicting that, after the change in sovereignty, "our leftwing citizens will regard themselves as the masters of Hongkong...their obsession to overthrow the existing capitalist structure...will bring in its wake the inevitable consequence of social conflict...some radicals [may] try to seize power...by inciting the working class and students based on the obvious unfairness of capitalism."<sup>93</sup> This point of view exemplifies the extreme nature of this debate, especially within the context of an ultra-capitalist territory moving under the control of a nation that only recently halted violence against 'capitalist-roaders.'

From a similarly leftist perspective, L. K. Y. criticizes "a system which allows a small number of people, both of Chinese descent and Europeans, to live in luxurious, spacious private houses,...while those who have provided the labour which created that massive wealth are forced to live in squatter huts and sub-standard accommodation."<sup>94</sup> In response, Mrs. M. Tung defends Hong Kong capitalism, and its class mobility, speaking for all of Hong Kong in the process: "It is fortunate that the majority of Hongkong do not share his view and are eager to keep Hongkong the way it is now. How dull would life be if everyone was the same!...the wealthy people of Hongkong are here to show us that hard work and leadership can be rewarding both materially and

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<sup>92</sup> C. W. H., 6-25-83

<sup>93</sup> Hongkong Belonger, 5-17-84

otherwise...many of them have started from scratch and worked themselves to the top...our capitalist system offers opportunities for all.”<sup>95</sup> Her assumption is that the playing field upon which those who rose “to the top” is still a level one for all the newer, uneducated immigrants who start at the bottom of the Hong Kong economy, or for all the working and middle class people who have little hope of getting ahead by the 1980s. The majority who are “barely eking out a living” suggest that if the conditions were favorable to class mobility when the influx of post-war immigrants arrived, they are no longer.

In the face of such compelling evidence, what reason might someone such as Tung have for claiming that everyone in Hong Kong has the potential to rise “to the top”? Most obviously is her staunch ideological defense of capitalism over communism. In fact, Tung closes her letter by attacking communism, which is “failing everywhere” and “does not allow people to flourish.” The voicing of such an opinion is understandable given Hong Kong’s uncertain future in the early 1980s. However, by projecting the capitalist ethic onto the “majority of Hong Kong”, Tung behaves similar to writers who claim, for example, that their group belongs more. She effectively draws a line between beliefs that fall inside the Hong Kong identity, and those whose do not. Tung is not alone in her efforts to claim the space of identity for the elite position; this chapter highlights multiple fronts on which this discursive battle is waged.

## CONCLUSION: ELITE MANIPULATIONS CONSTRUCT IDENTITY

This chapter began with the goal of turning to a particular page in the history of Hong Kong and asking the characters of the story to describe themselves. Given that

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<sup>94</sup> L. K. Y., 12-3-83

<sup>95</sup> M. Tung (Mrs.), 12-12-83

identity cannot be understood in a vacuum, but must be anchored in a specific setting, what generalizations can be drawn about the identity that emerges from this turbulent period? Since the Hong Kong community is a paradox of cultural, ethnic, and national identities, it makes sense that the emerging identity is full of contradictions. Pride and fondness for China are a real part of this identity. However, these sentiments are opposed by other real elements: strong fears of changes in the Hong Kong way of life, false proclamations of patriotism by élites for selfish power interests, and a diminutive view of Chinese people. Though it may be hypocritical for the wealthy in Hong Kong tend to look down on the less sophisticated people across the border, this does not change the fact that the Hong Kong community was itself treated like a child by actors another rung up the ladder. Efforts by élites to declare themselves at the heart of the Hong Kong identity, by belonging the most or supporting the proper ideology, dovetail closely with their paternalistic view of mainlanders and more recent immigrants. That is because this shaping of the discourse in favor of élites is also an effort to marginalize newer immigrants (fresh arrivals from “backward” China) and working class leftists. Even the description of Hong Kong people with such positive characteristics as “industrious” is used to prop up the elite-serving myth of class mobility. By labeling such groups as “other”, the dominant élites place themselves at the center of the Hong Kong identity, reinforcing their elite status.

Now it is appropriate to apply some of the theoretical tools cited in the introduction. Faure’s conception of identity as inseparable from specific circumstances of its establishment is based upon the creation of lineages by the Ming for land use and tax purposes. This project attempted to depart from this conception in terms of the actors

who form the identity. At the outset, we assumed that during this time of public outspokenness, the general population would determine the Hong Kong identity, rather than some powerful actor from above. However, this belief turns out to be only partially correct: in fact, the identity is created by members of the general population who are also in positions of power. At the crucial historical juncture of 1982-1984, the Hong Kong identity is largely a construction of élites. Since “élites” is a breathable category, made up of a variety of people who often disagree, the identity created is not a monolithic entity. It is, however, unified in its attempt to preserve elite status, power, and wealth.

Sloop’s and Ono’s writing also help in understanding this interpretation. They argue that the postmodern world, with its unclear “Other”, often makes identity a contingent, slippery concept. They also recognize that certain specific cultural conditions may further blur identity. However unclear the concept of identity becomes, “the power of rhetoric and the need for stability continue to encourage its reestablishment elsewhere.” During moments when identity is fluid, some are frightened enough to “seek discourses that provide a more stable and more secure sense of identity for self and other.” Specifically, the authors describe how citizens of California, who saw their way of life threatened by illegal immigrants, used public discourse to oversimplify the line between self and other by conflating all Hispanic-looking people as illegal immigrants.<sup>96</sup> Readers may recall from earlier in this chapter David Birnbaum’s description of the emergence of the 1997 issue as an “identity crisis”, or Eric Tang’s comparison to being in a “nether world.” It appears that this period is one in which identity becomes more fluid, where people are unsure of who their community is made up of, and who is the “Other.” The identity creation by élites, then, can be seen as an attempt to fill this void, to draw

sharp boundaries between Hong Kong belongers and the rest of the population. Elite efforts are aimed at marginalizing those who threaten elite status. Disparaging the mainland Chinese and the recent immigrants preserves the status that comes with being well-established in Hong Kong. Attacking leftists and insisting on the ease of class mobility preserves the system which supports their wealth. The manipulation of the discourse, whether through false patriotism for power ends, or false reassurances and silencing to keep market confidence, serve as further examples of the Machiavellian ethic behind the elite construction of Hong Kong identity.

## **Chapter Two: Whispers From Below**

If élites in fact constructed what is read by history as the 1980s identity of Hong Kong, this image of Hong Kong is incomplete and misleading. It leaves a majority of the population unaccounted for. While it may be the way that much of the world sees the colony, it is not the *truest* identity according to the working definition established in the introduction. The characterization of Hong Kong described in the previous chapter is rooted in the circumstances of the time, but not in the voice of the general population. This chapter takes a closer look at these scattered voices and evaluates to what degree they posed a challenge to the paradigm of the professionals, businesspeople, expatriates, political leaders, and other élites. It begins by reconsidering the usefulness of the source material in light of chapter one. After it recognizes the impediments to non-elite voice, it considers how this voice impacts identity. Finally, the chapter concludes by evaluating

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<sup>96</sup> Sloop and Ono, pp. 4-6



the discourse with help from the theoretical tools, and suggesting potential areas for future research.

#### FORUM RECONSIDERED: THE OBSTACLES TO NON-ELITE PUBLIC VOICE

Since this paper originally sought to hear the Hong Kong people tell who they are and what they are about, and instead heard largely from a portion of society that claimed to know Hong Kong best, might this imply a problem with the choice of source? There are some indications that the public forum chosen was not ideal, and of course there are arguments in its defense. Ultimately, whatever shortcomings of the *South China Morning Post* letters page this debate reveals must be considered part of the process of discovery. The project can then progress from this realization.

One problem with the newspaper forum is raised by Atwood and Major's assessment of "public opinion and the 1997 problem in Hong Kong." According to Atwood and Major, the content of mass media may reflect public opinion, but this linkage is questionable. They instead use the concept developed by Noelle Neumann of "published" opinion to make clear that what is printed is not necessarily the opinion held by the general public. The reason it is not an exact match is that, generally, only political and economic élites' views are considered by the press.<sup>97</sup> In defense of the approach taken here, Noelle-Neumann's concept of "published" opinion, as used by Atwood and Major, considers news coverage and editorials, not letters to the editor. While it makes sense that newspapers would tend to consider elite views in their own writing, thus insulating "published" from public viewpoints, anyone is theoretically free to send letters to the editor.

However, the *South China Morning Post* is specifically recognized as primarily serving the expatriate and indigenous elite communities. To the newspaper's credit, the statistical study Atwood and Major conduct on Hong Kong newspapers confirms the existing notion that the SCMP seeks more "balanced" coverage than other papers in Hong Kong. While all of the papers studied gave disproportionate weight to the views of government officials and business leaders, the SCMP was the only paper to "emphasize the voices of unofficials, special interest groups, and individuals."<sup>98</sup> Though the newspaper is one of few to print letters, and offers a broader range of perspectives than typical news coverage, the charge against it is still injurious to any claims that it represents a cross-section of Hong Kong society.

The elite tendencies of the *Post* must be considered in a broader perspective. William T. Rowe's application of Jurgen Habermas' "public sphere" concept to modern China de-emphasizes the importance of this tendency. The reason is that the entire public sphere is historically "a creation of the bourgeois class." By public sphere, Rowe refers to the conceptual category that originated as "the abstract counterpart to public authority" and has grown with communications to include a large number of media, foremost among which is "the daily press." At its outset, the public sphere approximated reality by identifying the interests of the "propertied, literate, articulate, primarily urban" class with that of the general interest. Even with the changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the public sphere still merely approximates the general interest.<sup>99</sup> It appears that almost no public source can provide a true cross-section of a society.

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<sup>97</sup> Atwood and Major, pp. 19

<sup>98</sup> Atwood and Major, pp. 56

<sup>99</sup> William T. Rowe, "The Public Sphere in Modern China." *Modern China*, Vol. 16, No. 3, July 1990, pp. 309-314

The *South China Morning Post*'s letters page in the context of Hong Kong illustrates one of the general reasons for this shortcoming of the public sphere. At a very basic level, lesser educated people are less inclined to write letters than others. Regardless of whether they can read and write, people of some backgrounds may not prefer to. They may not even consider it as a medium to voice their thoughts. Or they may lack confidence in their ability to present a professional-looking letter. The following advisory from the *Post*'s letters page could easily intimidate or discourage would-be writers: “[t]ypewritten letters will be preferred to handwritten ones, particularly those illegibly scrawled and difficult to decipher”, and that “while pseudonyms will be accepted, they will rate a lower priority than those letters that are signed with the correspondent’s real name for publication.”<sup>100</sup>

This parameter may have discouraged many who feared deportation or retribution. This is especially true for the more recent immigrants, according to one letter: “Over half the citizens here, both Chinese and others, were not born here and live under the Damocles sword of summary deportation. Is it any wonder the people prefer to keep silent?”<sup>101</sup> One expatriate, who wrote to criticize the paper for publishing pseudonyms, was attacked by Sam Cheung, who argued that such a view showed “a lack of genuine understanding of the mentality of the Hong Kong people.” In a colony with no representative government, Cheung feared offending “the authorities, the police, the influential friends of my boss, etc.”, which he claimed were “genuine fears from actual

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<sup>100</sup>This message appears daily on the letters page of the *South China Morning Post*.

<sup>101</sup> Lionel Houghton, 10-7-83

experience.”<sup>102</sup> Luckily for such people, the *Post* did publish pseudonyms, although the newspaper admitted discriminating against their publication.

The *Post* has another specific impediment to the full participation of the population: the language gap. Since the colony is contiguous with China and maintains an overwhelming majority of ethnic Chinese, it might seem obvious that many there would fail to embrace English, especially the newer immigrants. Hong Kong in fact has its own dialect of Cantonese. However, everyone who is educated in Hong Kong is taught English, and so at the outset there may have been grounds to presume that an English forum could canvas most of Hong Kong. From the previous chapter, it is now clear that this approach risks leaving out the very people whom many in the Hong Kong elite would prefer be left out.

For the picture of Hong Kong’s identity to be complete, it is imperative every effort be made not to abandon the non-elite members of the community. It is also imperative that this paper not abandon the approach with which it began. The most basic reason is that the *Post* is the only major Hong Kong paper that publishes letters. Beyond this matter of logistics lies a better reason. Finishing out the project by evaluating the impact of the non-elite and subaltern voice on the Hong Kong identity is the most meaningful way to proceed. It evokes a compelling symmetry: after hearing the elite perspective ‘shouted’, what makes more sense than to listen carefully for ‘whispers’? Since arguably no public forum can represent the society completely, an elite-dominated forum is at least as good as any to examine the voice of the general population, as long as the biases are kept in mind. From one perspective, it is the most important forum for non-élites to be heard. One reason for this is that the discourse, and thus the identity

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<sup>102</sup> Sam Cheung, 11-16-83

created, is seen by the rest of the world. Also, the more obstacles that this 'quiet' voice overcomes to be heard, the more substantial it is, and the voices that remain hidden behind it are likely to be. In this way, the many conditions that work against this 'quiet' voice only make it more important to be heard in this medium, and place it in sharper contrast to the elite position.

Listening for the 'quiet' voices is similar to the goal of subaltern studies. In this 1980s Hong Kong context, "subaltern" is operationally defined as a person who has been ignored or muffled in some way. The closer the voice is to the 'ground' – that is, humble, and anchored in the real world of ordinary people, etc. – the better. This is because a sharper contrast of this voice with the 'loud' (who are, as has been shown, often arrogant and out of touch with regular people) shows the subaltern able to overcome greater obstacles, and thus makes it a stronger voice.

Efforts by elite voices to silence the general population illustrate well the conflict which makes this question so compelling. These efforts are largely aimed at keeping confidence up and the negotiations running smoothly, which are necessary to keep the jittery stock market healthy. T. L. Tsim criticizes Hongkongers for having the "1997 Fever, of wanting to contribute, to play a part." He sees a danger in too many people beyond the "community leaders and businessmen" trying to get "in on the act", because the voices of ordinary people are too ignorant to be considered: "most people may be very good, very competent in their chosen field of life, but they are out of depth when it comes to dealing with China." Because, for Tsim, "the risk of getting it wrong with so many political amateurs about" is great, he would rather the regular people of Hong Kong stay quiet on their future, "keep faith, get on with our own jobs and leave the political

future of Hong Kong to the professionals.”<sup>103</sup> In other words, do not rock the boat.

Regardless of his motives, Tsim would keep silent all those contributing to define the Hong Kong identity (before it is engulfed) by sharing concerns, inquiries, suggestions, and even verse.

Another writer who was critical of people speaking out, because of the effect on the confidence of the Hong Kong people, was Eric Tang. Dismissing the concerns as “unreasonable fear over the 1997 issue”, he claims that 1997 “does not perform the role of shaking our city. Rumours and apprehension are the real problems as a result. Some members of our society are the ones who shake their home. In fact, we are not helping matters by frightening ourselves.”<sup>104</sup> Whether or not Hong Kong would be better off without these threats to its confidence, Tang’s message, like Tsim’s, is for people to stay quiet and not spread unnecessary fear.

Some élites even spoke out directly against the role of the ordinary Hongkonger. Mrs. Claire Harris, arguing against increased democratic participation, writes that, “Of all the possible methods, surely the worst is to leave the decision in the hands of the man-in-the-street. What does he know about politics, diplomacy, law, economics, international relations, sociology, etc.? Plainly, he does not know enough to enable him to have a hand in the choosing of those who govern us.” Rather than give him this power, the government “should, of course, take the wishes of the man-in-the-street into account.”<sup>105</sup>

Another writer, discussing the issues of nationality and rights of abode, mocked the sophistication of the average Hong Konger by claiming to be “fairly sure that the vast

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<sup>103</sup> T. L. Tsim, 5-13-83

<sup>104</sup> Eric Tang, 6-7-83

<sup>105</sup> Claire Harris (Mrs.), 4-30-84

majority of our present over-populated territory are unaware of where the UK is.”<sup>106</sup>

These are more examples of paternalistic attitudes expressed in order to keep power in the same hands.

#### INDIRECT SUBALTERN VOICE?

Despite these forces, the letters clearly contained some examples of non-elite discourse. An obvious example is L. K. Y.’s criticism of Hong Kong capitalism and élites. However, while there was obviously plenty of faultfinding of élites, it is rarely clear that it comes from subalterns, or even general non-élites. These complaints were key to recognizing the problem; the previous chapter would not have been possible without them. But as that chapter also noted, the “elite voice”, or “elite paradigm” was by no means monolithic. There were competing elite interests, and people siding with the “ordinary Hong Kong people” who more closely resembled elite status. A large part of the recognition of the elite manipulation of the discourse was due to the elite voice itself. In a similar manner, the clearest articulation of Hong Kong’s ‘quiet’ voice also came from people who cannot accurately be labeled subaltern.

Many writers recognized that the everyday Hong Kong people were totally without a voice in their future. The discourse described a ‘silent majority’ who could or would not make itself heard. Describing “the men and women who now live in hopelessness”. Peggy Sheldon speaks for the subaltern. “Many people feel powerless. They do not know how to bring change in their lives”. are “left out of the decision-making process...almost ignored”, and so develop “anger and fear and a sense of alienation.” She asks some thought-provoking questions about the people she speaks of:

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<sup>106</sup> Hoping for Fair Play. 8-28-84

“Can people laugh when they feel helpless, when there is no hope in them? Can they even believe there is a light side? In my opinion, not while there is no one really hearing their pleas for change, equality, and for some balance in power.” The answer, she writes, lies in her belief that “the view of those who feel angry, rejected, alienated and ignored must be taken seriously.” She urges the community to “value one another...our opinions and our personhood.”<sup>107</sup> These words reveal an important part of what it means to be subaltern in Hong Kong: to be denied respect for one’s personhood, as are many of the groups who were marginalized or treated paternalistically.

One way in which the issue of the voiceless came up was in response to various attempts at collecting the majority’s opinion through surveys. Through criticism of these surveys, P. Y. Sun recognizes that a large portion of Hong Kong felt helpless and were therefore silent: “An unenthusiastic response to public surveys does not necessarily indicate a lack of public concern. Only that many feel they are entirely helpless even if they expressed their opinion. That feeling is: as the trump card is in the hands of Peking, why bother?”<sup>108</sup> A writer of the pseudonym “Hongkong Born British Subject” points out a reason (already alluded to) why polls are inadequate to provide a voice for the general population: fear. “The Chinese people, representing an overwhelming majority of the population, are always reluctant to come out openly and say they prefer Hongkong to remain under the present British Administration. Is it possible that they fear reprisals after 1997? If they have to put their names and addresses on the survey forms, we may never get the truth.”<sup>109</sup> Another points out a “snag” in a phone poll which left many voiceless:

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<sup>107</sup> Peggy Sheldon, 4-9-83

<sup>108</sup> P. Y. Sun, 6-19-84

<sup>109</sup> Hongkong Born British Subject, 11-28-82



“how about the three million or so Hong Kong people who don’t have a telephone? Apparently a truly silent majority.”<sup>110</sup>

The people writing who described this “silent majority” do not always claim to be part of it. If the characterization that most of this group is Chinese is weighed, the expatriate letters that discuss them would not appear to be a *direct* subaltern voice. However, these writers still spoke up for the need of the subaltern to be heard, providing an *indirect* voice. One example of such an indirect subaltern voice describes how all of Hong Kong must participate in deciding the future of the colony. The letter reads, “[t]he common sense and intuitive perceptions of [Hong Kong’s] less educated citizens are needed along with the experience and trained minds of its educated leaders.” The two writers who make this contribution clearly would not identify themselves in this group of lesser- educated people, and in fact say much to reinforce the elite status quo. For example, they call for more “input” to be sought from “international business leaders.” However, they recognize the existence of, and to some degree the importance of, the subaltern wishes.<sup>111</sup> Another expatriate letter which indirectly speaks for the subaltern, and is critical of the system which muffles them, is John Walden’s. He recognizes that the “status quo we are seeking to perpetuate, work a lot better for the uppercrust and the professional classes than they do for the rest of Hongkong.” He calls “one of the great failings of British colonialism in Hongkong” the fact that the élites’ contentedness with their opportunity to profit –the “thunder of self-applause” – was able to “drown the voice

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<sup>110</sup> W. M. Sulke. 8-17-84

<sup>111</sup> Mairi Maeks. Buryl Payne. 2-20-84

from the ground.”<sup>112</sup> Even though he would not consider himself on the “ground”, Walden helps to establish subaltern voice.

It is now clear that the ordinary people of Hong Kong, and even the silent among them, are represented in the discourse. However, this does not settle the original question of whether this indirect ‘voice’ really impacts the identity that emerges from the discourse. Phrased in terms of Spivak’s essay, do the subaltern really “speak” in that abstract level of the 1997 debate which helped to solidify the Hong Kong identity for this period of history?

Based on the evidence presented, the most clear answer is no. One could perhaps argue that the very presence of the of the non-elite position in the discourse constitutes an imprint on the identity being formed. Further, the fact that these views were visible enough to be collected and evaluated by academia years later might also suggest “speaking.” However, this interpretation must be rejected flatly. To accept that a portion of society speaks through the words of others, or contributes its part to the identity of the larger group, is to risk essentializing or otherwise mistaking it. The lessons of chapter one should not be forgotten. It may be impossible to tell when a person from another group is misrepresenting the subaltern. For example, a number of people level accusations at the local political body which attempts to represent Hong Kong late in the talks, known as UMELCO. They accuse the body of being out of touch with the regular Hong Kong people, of acting to secure their its future political power without fear of the consequences, because its expatriate members' elite status allows them the freedom to leave before 1997. Given this now-familiar pattern of the powerful maneuvering to protect their interests, one may be suspicious to read J. Lau’s claim that UMELCO “have

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<sup>112</sup> John Walden. 7-20-84

really spoken the minds of many people, and I dare say the majority, of Hongkong, particularly those who, for one reason or another, do not normally like to speak up.”<sup>113</sup> If Lau seeks to protect the elite interests that UMELCO is accused of serving, he could employ no better strategy than to co-opt the subaltern voice. Even if this is not the writer’s intention, it still serves as a clear example of how the subaltern might be misrepresented. Additionally, even people who seem to support the subaltern may in fact be reinforcing their own elite status by referring to a vague underclass. Such a subtle attempt at marginalization would be very much in line with the elite tactics witnessed in chapter one.

#### VIEW FROM THE GROUND

Though indirect subaltern voice must be rejected, this leaves open the question of more direct perspectives. However, it is questionable whether such points of view can be found in the discourse under examination. Of course there are examples of people who call themselves “ordinary Hong Kong people”, or middle or working class, or leftist or communist. But as noted earlier, the most powerful examples are from the truly ‘quiet’, which often means people who have been overlooked. This quality makes such people nearly impossible to find in the discourse. The many conditions working to muffle them may have succeeded completely. Since there is difficulty identifying the precise background of the contributors, we may never know whether there is a true subaltern perspective expressed in the *SCMP*’s 1997 debate.

There are, however, a few examples which appear to be genuine subaltern voice. Jutti Sharpe, the author of the 1997 fairy tale, is an example of a letter-writer who speaks

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<sup>113</sup> J. Lau, 6-6-84

more directly for the voice of the subaltern. "I am not an academic and I only have grassroots knowledge of the problem," she introduces herself. Though it is hard to know for sure what she intends by "grassroot", it implies a position close to the 'ground', or the world of ordinary people. She complains that ordinary people are ignored in favor of expert opinion, asserting that "bureaucrats and pedantic academics should spend a little more time at the grassroots level to understand the problem", and criticizes the practice of considering the views of experts "to arrive at the same conclusion that ordinary people, who have no expert knowledge, have regarded as facts for years."<sup>114</sup> According to Sharpe, the view from the ground on issues important to Hong Kong is clear, but no one will listen.

Mrs. Chung Miu-Ling describes herself in contrast to the "rich, the prospective rich, and the ones who hope to be rich", who "are simply hoping that they can milk the cow dry before 1997. Then depart." She includes herself in a group she calls "the rest", by which she means those who have no option to leave Hong Kong. "The rest", she writes, "are waiting anxiously, praying fervently that the terror and peril that marked life in many cities in China in past years will not be experienced by them and their families after 1997...I am one of the rest." Apparently, among the qualities raised by this example of subaltern voice are a feeling of terror and a reliance on faith: "Can anyone assuage my fears or calm my worries? I can only be thankful that I have faith in a divine will: if not I shall go mad with anxiety." However, Chung describes others among "the rest" who lack her buoy of faith and "are so weary and troubled with life today that they have no hope for the morrow, whatever it may have in store."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Jutti Sharpe, 3-19-84

<sup>115</sup> Chung Miu-Ling (Mrs.), 2-11-83

Cyrus S. C. Fung may be another example of a subaltern voice that made it into the discourse. He establishes his ordinary person's perspective, complains of how no one listens to him, and critiques the élites who oppress him. "They don't come any more grassroots than I", Fung describes himself. However, he is indignant that he has "still not been asked by anybody who is anybody at all what [he] think[s] of 1997." Critical sarcasm is apparent in the way he points out the absurd gap between those with prestige and power and those not considered important. Specifically, he laments not being "approached about being nominated" a part of a delegation to Peking, as many élites were, to express Hong Kong's views to China. "You name it, and I've not been asked it. I feel unimportant, unwanted, unloved, and - unasked." These kind of statements define what it means to be subaltern. Beneath the sarcastic rhetoric on his feelings, Fung clearly understands himself to be part of a group to whom no one will listen, because they are nobodies. He jokes about the value of credentials on whether people listen to a Hong Konger on 1997: "It may come in handy to have a decoration or two in these unsettling times. For if you are a member of some empire or another, and pay your dues regularly, they can't deny you access..." Fung describes the discursive tactics applied by élites to marginalize and mute the subaltern voice: "In the Philippines, I would have been shot, and in Russia, jailed. Here I can rant and rave and still rest assured that whatever I say will be taken down and then thrown away. I can say what I like and just be labeled irresponsible, ill-informed, ignorant, or at the lunatic fringe."

Fung fights back in the war of words against élites. He launches a scathing attack on the departing elite, mocking their culture of affluence and claims of belonging to Hong Kong: "The sound of furious rubber-stamping harmonising with the scream of

Cathay Pacific departing one-way ticket specials with occasional chorus of –“I belong to Hong Kong...when I get a couple of drinks on a Saturday, Hongkong belongs to me” would surely bring nostalgic tears to my eyes.”<sup>116</sup> This letter exemplifies a subaltern strategy of satire.

However, since it was written in jest, Fung’s letter may not actually be a true example of subaltern voice. Perhaps it was an intellectual siding with the voiceless and claiming to be among them for effect. Though it is likely that Fung is who he says he is, his letter is long and sophisticated. Additionally, recall that he contributed another letter only two months earlier asserting that people should come to grips with the change of sovereignty. So while he is probably among the millions of ordinary Hong Kong people who have no say and no ability to leave, he is at the educated end of the subaltern spectrum.

One letter of a different nature did make it though, aiding in the more complete construction of subaltern identity. The brevity, defiant message, and humble pseudonym of the following letter make it the most clearly subaltern letter out of the whole discussion of 1997. It decries how unimportant the ordinary people are to the powers, but argues for the strength of the ordinary, of the small, of the subaltern. They are the ones who deserve a larger share of the Hong Kong identity. The size of a postage stamp, the letter was nearly unnoticeable, tucked between other, larger, more sophisticated and important letters. In it, "Little Man" speaks up with confidence for the strength of the overlooked silent majority.

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<sup>116</sup> Cyrus S. C. Fung, 9-16-83

### Real Trump

Show Peking and London who really holds the trump card – the faceless, nameless men and women, like so many of us here, who make Hongkong tick.

LITTLE MAN<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION: THE OTHER CONFIRM THE DOMINANT

Whether or not these few letters demonstrate actual subaltern voice is ultimately not important to the question of “speaking” as it has been defined here. The Hong Kong subaltern do not, and cannot, impact the identity under creation through their part in this 1997 debate. The reason is analogous to Spivak’s contention that the subaltern cannot “speak” in the “language” of their oppressors. In the specific historical circumstances of early 1980s Hong Kong, this metaphoric language is made up of the elite-favoring, English-language newspaper forum, with all the norms and formats of letter-writing, including literacy, inclination to write, typewriting, grammar, etc. By speaking in this language even a true subaltern cannot claim a piece of the Hong Kong identity, because the medium itself supports the paradigm, and therefore the identity, of the elite. Every effort to counter the system only legitimizes it, because the act of being so obviously opposed to it simply confirms what is dominant.

Sloop and Ono’s distinction between dominant and outlaw discourse get at this very point. Any subaltern who succeeds in contesting the elite claim to identity in such a forum as the *South China Morning Post* letters page has used the dominant discourse. This tactic buys into a number of widely accepted understandings, such as the benefits of capitalism, the value of “stability and prosperity” to Hong Kong, the definition of belonging, etc. This means such a subaltern claim to identity is stripped of its own

system of logic, which includes whatever essential qualities or values this group may have contributed to the Hong Kong identity, and instead reinforces the dominant logic. For example, consider the people whose different conceptions of what is just would be lost if their message was delivered through an elite newspaper letters page. These could include any number of people, whether communists, anarchists, and radicals, or simply grassroots people with different perspectives on the future, or what it means to be from Hong Kong.

At best, these people's "outlaw" framework or logic becomes irrelevant, like that of "Little Man", whose powerful message was symbolically tucked into a tiny corner. At worst, the opposition to the dominant system of the outlaw-in-dominant-discourse actually strengthens the dominant structure by helping to show that it is indeed dominant. Fung is a good example: his opposition causes him to be labeled "irresponsible, ill-informed, ignorant, or at the lunatic fringe." These labels all place Fung in the position of *other* relative to the dominant set of understandings, which are responsible, informed, knowledgeable, and sane.

The failure of subaltern voice to claim a piece of the identity created by this discourse is a failure of tactics. Even the two relatively unconventional subaltern voices, Fung and "Little Man", accepted too many dominant assumptions. They failed to be outlaw enough. This might prompt the question of whether it is possible to convey outlaw discourse through the medium of the *South China Morning Post*. Two examples show both the possibility and the difficulty of this task. One way might be altering the content of a batch of newspapers by computer hacking or other guerrilla techniques.

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<sup>117</sup> Little Man, 5-21-84



Another way might be to act out the outlaw message so boldly in the physical world that the newspaper is forced to report on it.

Most outlaw discourse, however, is likely to be found outside such a medium. One item this paper has shown is where *not* to look for subaltern voice or outlaw discourse. This suggests that future research attempting to reveal these should look at such public forums as graffiti. It might be revealing to follow a 1997 debate scrawled on restroom walls.

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