

Voicing Identity Confusion in Contemporary Hong Kong Writing

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ABSTRACT

Identity has long been a problem in colonial and postcolonial societies. It is particularly so in Hong Kong society, in which there is not only the transition from tradition to modernity, but also the confusion between the East and the West. However, it is this transition as well as confusion that has given Hong Kong writers, writing in English or Chinese, a dynamic space for imagination in creative writing. Over the past half century, Hong Kong has developed from a colonial regional city to a postcolonial metropolis, from Britain's borrowed place to China's gateway to the world, and from a meeting point between the East and the West to a place recognized as the hub of Cantonese culture. Hong Kong people, especially the writers, feel the transition more so today than fifty years ago, not just because of the speed of the transformation, but also because of sudden awakening of Hong Kong as a (post/)colonial anomaly. This paper seeks to address issues of identity construction, search and confusion against the background of Hong Kong's social and political transition in the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. If a nation is an imagined community, then Hong Kong writers' imagination of their relation to a nation is an imagination of an imagined community, in which the Hong Kong imaginary of identity is no more than a linguistic construction in a postmodernist fashion.

KEY WORDS

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postcolonial voices



Hong Kong has been characterized by many critics as being an “anomaly of post-coloniality.”¹ When Britain as a colonial power was ruling Hong Kong before 1997, Hong Kong had in fact become a financial and cultural center in the East-Southeast Asia region. Thus Hong Kong had in effect already developed beyond the control of the British colonial empire. The riots of the late 1960s and subsequent changes in Hong Kong had already given rise to local Chinese tycoons, who emerged as new powers replacing the four “old British pillars” in the financial structure, namely the Hong Kong Bank, Jardine, Swire and Hutchinson.

Following the end of British rule prior to the 1997 hand-over of Hong Kong to China, many Hong Kong citizens who previously considered themselves as “passengers on a bridge,” an image Homi Bhabha used to describe the rootless and “unhomed” (Bhabha 5), have decided to stay on the bridge rather than to go to either end and join the old or new colonizer. In the contemporary literary writings on Hong Kong we find represented the dilemmas and uncertainties, the feeling of disillusionment and frustration of Hong Kongese in the 1970s–1990s. For given their unique situation, the people of Hong Kong are being forced to redefine and reconstruct themselves.

Hong Kong: The Anomaly of Postcoloniality

Hong Kong’s unique case as a “postcolonial anomaly” is clear in the following description from the 1997 issue of the *London Review of Books*:

One of Hong Kong's most profound problems is also one of its greatest achievements. This anomalous place, this old margin between East and West, has in the last decade acquired a cultural and artistic life of its own. In the ritual exchange of flags and empires, this extraordinary fact may be overlooked. And it is all the easier to overlook because Hong Kong's culture has emerged in the absence of all the things that are supposed to make cultures happen.

It doesn't have much of a history—155 years at most—and what it has is largely invisible: the city is in a state of relentless flux, its historic buildings torn down, its street-scapes altered, so that no accumulation of resonances is possible. Even the map of the physical territory is utterly unstable: small islands have been annexed to the larger one by filling in the harbour; frantic reclamation has remoulded the shape of surrounding seas (18).

In many novels published in recent years, Hong Kong is pictured as either a floating city or a crazy city.² Such an image—if we see the common “sense” of these two images—is illuminating not only in its reflection of the geopolitical reality of Hong Kong, but also in its function as a discourse to describe how Hong Kong people are reconstructing themselves. In fact, Hong Kong does not build its culture by accumulation and does not rely on tradition. It is a place where everything floats and nothing seems to have been built on solid ground. The phenomenon that people in Hong Kong must continually talk about their own identity reflects the attempt to search for and forge new identities that can reassure themselves of their relation to the new realities in Hong Kong. Thus what is important is not the “identity” of the Hong Kongese but the process of seeking for new identities. For the people of Hong Kong, identity is not something fixed but something that appears, disappears and reappears.

In his memoir, “Some Springs and Autumns Amidst Lights and Shadows” [*Ji dao chunqiu guangying zhong*], Gu Cangwu, the noted Hong Kong poet and journalist, makes the following observation about Hong Kong youth of the 1960s:

For us people growing up in a “floating city,” we were born with a sense of anxiety and uncertainty. . . . We were worried about the Cultural Revolution that occurred in China. The 1967 Riot was only a small-scale re-enactment of the Cultural Revolution, yet many people were so frightened that they fled Hong Kong. The people of the “floating city” were brought back to face history squarely for the first time since the 1950s. Our generation also for the first time seriously thought about our identity and our situation as Hong Kong Chinese. In the journals we edited, we began to explore issues of our Chinese identity and organized many seminars in the style of a “Free University.” But the more we explored, the more we felt puzzled.⁴ (*Beiwanglu* 59)

The image of a floating life and a floating identity, then, marks the discourse used by Hong Kongese in the 1960s to construct themselves in relation to their Chinese identity. It reflects their lack of confidence not only in China but also in themselves.

Hong Kong Chinese: Discourses of a Floating Self in a Floating City

For the people living in a floating city, identity is not just a matter of cultural politics but also an issue of personal anchorage, cultural roots, self-positioning and self-assurance. In contemporary Hong Kong writing there is a similar quest for identity that seeks its roots in Chinese civilization. In the play, *Long qing hua bu kai* (*Dragon Sentiments*), we find expressed strong sentiments about China as the root(s) of one’s ethnic or cultural identity:

Ah-Gun: No matter how many times I have to go to China, I must find out where my hometown is. (*Xianggang de shengyin: Xianggang huajü* 140)

The disillusionment with China urged many Hong Kong writers to look back to Hong Kong and seek their identity in the immediate

reality of the present. Hong Kong in the late 1970s was marked by rapid and large-scale socio-economic and cultural development, with the Mass Transit Railway (MTR)⁵ being built as a signpost to mark the city's transformation from a "floating city" to a highly modernized society, one lying already beyond the "imagination" of colonialism:

What Hong Kong most powerfully suggests is that it is no longer possible to define a culture by the presence or absence of any or all of these markings. For the first time anywhere a vibrant culture has emerged almost entirely from within the elements of mass consumerism. The vast bulk of Hong Kong's population may have come from China bringing language, lore and learning with it. But what is going back to China is patently not what was extracted. It is something else altogether—an identity forged through popular culture. (O'toole 18)

In the midst of this urban transformation came the rise of consumerism and popular culture, a sign of the emergence of many Asian cities beyond the cultural boundaries of colonialism. In his critique of Hong Kong, Gu Cangwu has the following to say in his poem "Taiping Shan shang, Taiping Shan xia" ("From Victoria Peak"):

Oh!
Is this the city in which I have lived
For thirty years?
Were it not that someone mentioned:
We should thank Emperor Dao Guang⁶
I would have forgotten:
This harbour
Has a name
The British Queen
Victoria — Victory!

The weight of a hundred years' history
Crushes on my long-numbered brain

Thunder clapping
My stubborn illness that was healed a long time ago
Is made to re-surge

In the pain:
I see that on an island and on a peninsula
Numerous
Golden poles
have been forced in
Between golden poles
Underneath the golden poles
Spilling blood
The harbour
Dyed fishy red (*Tong lian* 68–70)

An Alternative Identity: Images of China as the Homeland

In their quest for identity, Hong Kong writers began in the 1950s and 1960s by seeing themselves as a “floating cloud” (Gu Cangwu, *Yimu yishi* 371), drifting between China, the homeland, and the open world outside China. Instead of living self-deceptively in the past of their great Chinese cultural tradition, many Hong Kong writers have been awakened to the fact that they have to live in the present and seek their identity in the future. This transformation originated from an inner change in the writers, in their sense of subjectivity. The grand socialist dream of the China of the 1970s, unfortunately, turned out to be a myth.

While what puzzled many writers has been the identity-confusion of Hong Kongese in the 1960s and early 1970s, in 1997, when Hong Kong was ready to revert back to China, there still remained an unresolved puzzlement about identity as evidenced in the play *Wu ren di dai* (*No Man's Land*) by Tsim Sui Man and Tang Shu Wing. Here two prisoners assume the role of clowns and perform in an absurdist manner, making fun of both the mainland Chinese and Taiwanese identities. Yet to the two clowns, who are supposed to be representations of Hong Kong's people, identity cannot be a choice

between Mainland China and Taiwan, and in the process of constructing a separate identity they can only choose as their symbol the “Diaoyu Islands”—a place forsaken by both Mainland China and Taiwan:

J: Everyone has his own world, which is like a ball that rolls here and there and bounces up and down, but it cannot exist by itself apart from us. When we don't move, the world also does not move, but once it moves, we have to move with it. In case we are not careful, the world may fall down and we cannot get hold of it. We may think of changing the world, but it is no longer the world that we originally live in. Even though we may still pretend that the world is the original world we live in, it nevertheless is not the same. Sometimes the world that we play with may also not be the world that we belong to. Where then is the world that we live in? Who is the master of our world? (*Xianggang de shengyin: Xianggang huajü* 96)

The world here that the clown “J” talks about is of course the location or place with which Hong Kongese associate in their identity-construction. This existentialist view of an absurd world, in which one is not one's own master, fully expresses the sense of helplessness in Hong Kong people's uncertainty about their identity and their future.

A look at Hong Kong drama presented in the year 1997 will also show that there is the quest for a postcolonial identity that is quite different from a Mainland Chinese (or even Taiwanese) identity. In the play *Fei ba! lin liu niao, fei ba!* (*Archaeological Bird*), there is a description of Hong Kong in its quest for a unique postcolonial identity:

D: The songs of the Che people attracted many, many more boats to this seaport. But when more and more people came to this place, the Che people suddenly disappeared for reasons unknown. It is like deleting a file in the computer, and no one knows what

happened.

E: The whereabouts of the Che people has become a riddle since. Some people say they had gone to the sea; but the fishermen's descendants think otherwise and say that the Che people could not have been their ancestors: it should be that the fishermen had relocated themselves on the land and then later on they became the Che people. (*Xianggang de shengyin: Xianggang huajü* 210)

By tracing the origin of the Hong Kong people back to the ancient Che clan, which had been long since deleted from the collective memory of the Chinese in the course of recorded history, the play attempts to redefine Hong Kongese as distinct from both the mainland Chinese and the Taiwanese. The redefinition of Hong Kong's people can thus be seen as an effort to construct a new Hong Kong subjectivity. Yet, in the midst of this process of redefinition sparked by China's 1997 take-over there is also a certain tone of sadness and helplessness:

Father: . . . Da . . . da . . . da . . . da . . . da . . . da! Listen, this is the sound of burial. Let the gigantic wheels of the bulldozer rush toward us. Let them run over your ancestors, smash your homes and crush all empty memories. Time is up. A great monument is going to be set up on our dead bodies. Time is up. What are you digging here? Time is up, except for my body, what have you excavated? (*Xianggang de shengyin: Xianggang huajü* 164)

A Search for the Missing Links in Hong Kong's Identity

In the thirty years of Hong Kong's history from the 1960s to the 1990s, literary writing has expressed a persistent quest for identity. The disillusionment with the political reality in China has led to an awakening among many Hong Kong writers to the fact that their future

lies in their immediate present. History is both “remembered history” and “reality” (or “living history”) in contemporary Hong Kongese writing. In studying the cultural critiques and literary works produced in Hong Kong in 1997, one can attain a broader perspective on the complex cultural interplay between West and East, colonizer and colonized, Rightist and Leftist, colonial and the post-colonial resulting in the emergence of a “new” Hong Kong identity since the mid-1980s. The writers’ search for their own cultural identity is actually a process of decolonization, one in which they find dissatisfaction with the old exploitative colonizer, British Hong Kong. This pattern of identity quest has a strong personal tone in many Hong Kong writers, but it can also be seen as a general pattern in Hong Kong people’s collective search for identity. In the play *Archaeological Bird*, such a pattern of identity quest at the Personal-National-Cultural levels can also be discerned. Through the process of archaeological excavation, the play attempts to show the complex relations among personal identity, location, family history, ethnicity and nation. In the scene, entitled “Family Heredity: My Tail,” which parodies the history lesson typical of Hong Kong education, there is an exercise in “filling in the blanks”:

I’m in my _____, I’m about _____ tall, and quite _____ built, but I have rather _____ shoulders.

I have _____ hair. My eyes are _____. I’ve got a rather _____ face, with a _____ chin, a _____ nose. I have _____ lips, and I usually have a _____ expression. My face changes a lot when I _____. I have a _____ forehead: I like to think it looks _____.

I have a Chinese tail, the most special thing on my body that I’ve got from the Chinese heritage. (*Xianggang de shengyin: Xianggang huajü* 247)⁶

The “blanks” that need to be filled in are the missing links between personal identity and ethnicity in contemporary Hong Kong.

The link with Chinese heritage is seen in the play as a “tail,” something redundant (according to Darwin our remote ape ancestors had tails) and indeed absurd which also makes the Hong Kongese feel uneasy about themselves. In another scene, “The Game of the Tail,” the quest for identity is parodied in the style of an absurd game as children chase after their tails (*Xianggang de shengyin: Xianggang huajü* 244). Here then the quest for identity in 1960s–1990s Hong Kong people is seen as a sad, futile game. The use of English in this section of the play has the effect of lamenting the lack of a native language and also ridiculing the heavy reliance on English, a language borrowed from the colonial master, in the construction of identity. It points out the reality of Hong Kong people’s situation, linguistically and culturally, in between the Chinese and English languages.

In many Hong Kong writers’ search for identity, there is also a shift of perspective from seeing the self as the “unhomed” drifting in the floating city of a *colonial* Hong Kong to considering it as the “homely” living in the local “bridging culture” of a *postcolonial* Hong Kong (Bhabha 5–18). In the history of Hong Kong, the city has also been represented as a bridge between the East and the West. Now this is a bridge that joins together, not just one that crosses or is crossed over, one that is “suspended” in-between. When Hong Kong is considered as a “home” and when “the boundary becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing*” (Bhabha 5), Hong Kong writers will have found their own place in the emergence of the new collective identity which, according to Homi Bhabha, is a bridge that “*gathers as a passage that crosses*” (Bhabha 5).

The Discourse of Postcolonial Hong Kong Voices

Archaeological Bird also affirms that Hong Kong is a *place* with a unique ethnic and cultural identity. Yet the play ends with a voice suspended ambivalently between optimism and pessimism:

Voice Over: . . . About our future, we need not have any fear!
. . . Do not give birth to children! Do not buy any

- property!
- ... After the return of sovereignty, we will then become masters of this land!
 - ... Daughter, be careful with your boyfriends. Now Hong Kong people have become Chinese people!
 - ... In this circle, so long as you remain nice, you will become famous!
 - ... If we do not want to have any burden, let's not have it!
 - ... Do not give up so soon. Give more time to other people, and also give more time to ourselves!
 - ... Mum, do not listen to Dad for everything. If you find anything incorrect, you have to raise objections!
 - ... Do it well, I will support you!
 - ... We have to create Hong Kong here and now!⁷
- (Xianggang de shengyin: Xianggang huajü 270)*

Discourse does not just represent the social reality reflected in people's minds; it serves more importantly an instrumental function in shaping ideologies. As Teun A. van Dijk has pointed out.

Within the framework of a multidisciplinary project on discourse and ideology, a new conception of ideology is being developed in which ideologies are conceived of as the basis of the social representations shared by (the members of) a group. The social position, interests and other vital properties of a group, and its relations to other groups, are thus socio-cognitively represented in such a way that the ideologies shared by its members may monitor the social representations underlying discourse and other social practices. (7)

Viewed from such a perspective, the images of Hong Kong situated around the 1997 hand-over issue are reflective of a discourse that attempts to monitor the social representations; most obvious here is

the desire to reconstruct the subject. Ideology is thus also a matter of discursive formation. In the study of identity, what is interesting is how identity as a psychological process can be discussed in terms of discourse. As Ian Parker puts it:

The object that a discourse refers to may have an independent reality outside discourse, but is given *another* reality by discourse. An example of such an object is the subject who speaks, writes, hears or reads the texts discourses inhabit . . . a subject, a sense of self, is a location constructed within the expressive sphere which finds its voice through the cluster of attributes and responsibilities assigned to it as a variety of object. (9)

Hence, through the construction of a discourse on the 1997 issue, the literary writers discussed in this paper, be they poets or dramatists, have actually voiced their desire to reconstruct the people of Hong Kong as subjects caught in the envisioning of a postcoloniality that is threatened in its very lack of a sense of subjecthood. This lack of a subjecthood results from a language mix that points at the in-betweenness of contemporary Hong Kong identity. The year 1997 marked the end of colonial Hong Kong in a technical sense, but memories of the past—in this case both a more distant “Chinese” past and more recent “British colonial” past—inevitably linger and participate actively, along with the new realities of a futuristic info-tech society, in the on-going process of identity construction.

In Western theory, postcoloniality is defined in terms of two concepts, two socio-political conditions which are complimentary to each other. The first describes postcoloniality as the historical development of a society after colonialism and thus is “temporal-historical.” The second considers postcoloniality as the emergence of new cultural spaces beyond the confines of colonialism, and thus is “spatial” in its theoretical orientation. The case of Hong Kong, however, presents a kind of counter-example since it shows that postcolonial cultural spaces can emerge even in a colonial society prior to its decolonization, or in this case prior to Hong Kong’s return to

China in 1997. Hong Kong's label as an "anomaly of postcoloniality" thus suggests the cultural development of a (post-) modern society, both before and after it was still technically "colonial," beyond its "colonial space." Yet this particular Hong Kongese cultural space is not a space of absolute certainty, not a space that can be defined unequivocally in any single tradition of the West or the East. It is not Chinese, nor is it Western. It is something that is forever re-imagining itself in its disappearance and reconstruction. In Homi Bhabha's terms, the postcoloniality of Hong Kong lies exactly in its in-betweenness as a cultural anomaly. This cultural in-betweenness in the case of Hong Kong has been vividly represented by and through voices that speak of what is "missing."

From a Marxist point of view, the complexity of the emergence of postcolonial cultural spaces in Hong Kong prior to the year 1997 can also be attributed to Hong Kong's peculiar position as a neighbour of China, a situation that juxtaposes a highly capitalized, colonized city with an anti-colonial major power. In Lenin's *State and Revolution*, written at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was already predicted that historical exceptions in the form of anomalies might occur in a small capitalist state, one which had been subjected to the influence and pressure of a big socialist country as neighbour. There have been alternative political voices in Hong Kong throughout the history of its colonization, due not only to the influence of traditional Chinese values among its inhabitants, but also to the rise of local economic and political forces that counter the those of the colonizers. However, the alternative voices that can be found in Hong Kong in the 1980s–1990s are not the same as those that could be found in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The earlier voices yearned for a return to Chinese tradition, as well as to the Chinese motherland, while the voices heard in and around 1997 have shown the puzzlement of identity and loss, nostalgia and the fear of uncertainty.

NOTES

¹ Rey Chow has characterized Hong Kong as an anomaly of

postcoloniality in her various discussions of Hong Kong, for example, "Between Colonizers: Hong Kong's Postcolonial Self-Writing in the 1990s."

² For example, Xi Xi's novel *Fou cheng zhi yi* (*Floating City*).

³ All translations are mine, except when otherwise stated.

⁴ MTR stands for the Mass Transit Railway, the first phase of which was built in 1977–79.

⁵ During Emperor Dao Guang's reign during the Qing Dynasty, Hong Kong was ceded to Britain.

⁶ English in the original.

⁷ The last sentence in the quote is given in English in the original.

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