

Revisiting a Postcolonial Global City: Hong Kong and Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung*¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the production of contemporary urban space of the global city from the interactions between capital globalization and (post)colonialism. I use Hong Kong director Fruit Chan's city film *Little Cheung* as a case study in order to tease out specific aspects of the postcolonial narrative of the global city and to examine how globalization and post-colonialism affect the production of urban space and urbanites' daily life in contemporary East Asian global cities.

The central argument of the paper is that in the global city, the "localness" in the postcolonial discourse can never be taken for granted, but must be realized as a kind of "construction." As seen in the film, one of the formulative logics of the postcolonial discourse is the naturalization of the global: when urban space replaces rural landscape as the site to anchor one's local consciousness, the spatial geographies of global cities have to be erased or rendered unseen. Therefore, in the film the population flow in the global city becomes naturalized, and another salient sign of the global city, the monumental buildings, is represented as local landmarks rather than a symbol of global capital.

My analysis of *Little Cheung* intends to foreground the dilemma that East Asian cities face. On the one hand, to represent the subalterns, postcolonial narratives have to be written and only in that way can the "local" be recognized. Chan's representation of back streets and alleyways as the central setting of the film is clear evidence of this point. Without such narratives, the subalterns of East Asian cities will remain the invisible other, marginalized in the

grand narrative of contemporary globalization. On the other hand, as seen in Hong Kong's case, to construct an "authentic" local, the first task to tackle in the postcolonial writing is the spatial characteristics of global cities. If the postcolonial writing of the "local" erases the global to such an extent that the representation of the local turns to be a deterritorialized myth, the postcolonial narrative, which originally intends to speak for the local, might at the same time unconsciously facilitate the operation of global metropolises, and hence become an ideological instrument undetected by city-users.

KEY WORDS

global city, postcoloniality, critical geography, Hong Kong, Fruit Chan



Hong Kong and Its (Post)coloniality

In recent years, Hong Kong and its postcolonial present have received much attention among cultural critics. Most of the interpretations suggest the indeterminacy of Hong Kong's postcolonial condition. For example, Rey Chow argues that Hong Kong's return to China simply marks the beginning of another era of colonization instead of putting an end to it: Hong Kong's handover should be understood as a transfer "between colonizers," since the "One Country, Two Systems" means anything but an informed choice by Hong Kong people.² Esther Yau also points out Hong Kong's contradictory mind-set and calls for a careful analysis of local people's changing relationship to China as well as the colonial government in different historical contexts (180–81). For Ackbar Abbas, Hong Kong's postcoloniality is a happening that took place well before 1997: "the eventualities have arrived before the event" ("Other Histories" 304). Specifically, Abbas argues that "[p]ostcoloniality begins, it has already begun, when subjects find themselves thinking and acting in a certain way; in other words, postcoloniality is a tactic and a practice, not a legal-political contract, or a historical accident" (*Culture* 10).

To draw on Abbas's observation, I argue that in the historical development of Hong Kong's postcolonial consciousness the Sino-British Joint Declaration signed in 1984 plays a crucial role in shaping how Hong Kong people define their own identity. A powerful statement reasserting China's sovereignty, the declaration stamped China into the collective cultural and national imagination of Hong

Kong people.³ Starting with this (working) definition, I hope to clarify the interaction between postcolonial writing and the urban space of the global city by closely examining the cultural representation of the postcolonial consciousness rather than the political structures of postcoloniality. As Abbas argues, “[c]ultural forms, too, can perhaps also be regarded as a rebus that projects a city’s desires and fears, although it is likely to be a rebus of a particularly complex kind” (*Culture* 1). By interpreting the cultural forms represented in Fruit Chan’s film *Little Cheung* (2000), the following analysis aims to illustrate the complexity of addressing such postcolonial concerns as the local, the rural, and the subaltern in the global city.

Little Cheung: A Postcolonial Narrative of a Global City

Chan’s postcolonial narrative relies on a surprisingly simple device, the story of a young boy, the Little Cheung of the title. In the film, we follow Cheung, a nine-year-old from the Portland street area in Mong Kok, through a short period in his life, (from Winter 1996 through Summer 1997) that happens to coincide with the Chinese takeover of Hong Kong. As a part-time delivery boy at his father’s restaurant, Little Cheung’s life centers on his family and neighbors. Among them are his grandmother, a Cantonese opera singer in the past; his father, a serious and hard-working restaurant owner; his mother, a regular of the neighborhood mahjong house; Armi, the Filipina maid that takes care of him; neighbors from all walks of life; and his new friend, Fan, an illegal immigrant from China. During the summer of 1997 we see Little Cheung occupying himself at school by learning mandarin Chinese, playing with Tamagochi (his virtual pet), delivering food for tips, and asking around about his disowned, disappeared older brother. In the city, aside from “celebrating the handover,” as Chan ironically puts it, every Hong Konger is concerned with the sickly Cantonese opera-singer Brother Cheung’s family scandal due to a heritage dispute. Before the summer comes to an end, Brother Cheung and grandma pass away, Armi leaves, and Fan is deported back to China.

Partly because *Little Cheung* uses Hong Kong’s return to China as

its setting, the film is generally regarded as the director's "national" allegory, an effort to constitute a local identity in response to the political impact of 1997.⁴ In this last episode of his "1997 Trilogy," Chan persistently tells a story of how the handover changes ordinary people's everyday life.⁵ The colonial power pitted against the local is China. Throughout the film Chan shows the audience how China stakes claims on Hong Kong with shots like the street banners saying "Celebrate the Handover" or the school children's mandarin Chinese and civics lessons.

In addition to the apparent political subtext, quite a few critics believe that the film presents a realistic account of street life and stakes out a distinctive Hong Kong identity. For example, Shelly Kraicer points out that "In its focus on the family and the surrounding neighbourhood, the film recalls the classic family neo-realist dramas of an earlier Cantonese cinema."⁶ For Yiu-wai Chu, the film represents a "seemingly pure local identity" (250).

Such arguments then beg the question of how to read beyond the self-evident "national" allegory and identify the particularities of Hong Kong's postcolonial writing. At a time when such ideas as "local" and "authentic" have been problematized, when the desire to possess a "pure local identity" has been debunked as a naïve nostalgic longing, and when "glocalization" (or "localized global") has been appropriated as a *cliché*, we have to ask whether Chan's film embodies a "seemingly pure local identity" told from an "indigenous perspective" (Chu 238, 250). To be precise, how does Chan's artistic representation of the local help us comprehend the challenges in fashioning a national or cultural identity in an age characterized by global flows?

To elucidate the problems facing a postcolonial author in the age of globalization, it is essential to trace the tension between Chan's formulation of a local identity and the operating logic of the global city. Therefore, in what follows the "local reality" as seen in *Little Cheung* is examined in relation to the urban specificity of Hong Kong as a global city. In a sense, Chan is able to present an "authentic" local identity because he pushes front and center the seemingly banal everyday life of a grassroots community. More importantly, such a

representation of the local is made possible by reconfiguring the global space in the local through innovative filmic language and narrative strategies, which not only naturalize foreign laborers and illegal immigrants as neighbors and family, but also displace the monumental space of the global city into the postcolonial place for Hong Kong's identity-formation. That is, the artistic treatment of global city vistas in *Little Cheung* suggests the dilemma of Hong Kong's postcolonial writing: the attempt to compose a counter-narrative against the backdrop of cultural hegemony may also unwittingly re-marginalize the other (foreign laborers and illegal immigrants) in the global city and in turn fall prey to the ideology of "local-centrism."

Front and Center: Politics of Representing the Local

The representation of the mundane everyday in a local community in the film maps out an intelligible and concrete image of Hong Kong, an insider's account of how people in Hong Kong perceive and experience commercial urban spaces on daily basis. In terms of constructing an indigenous cultural identity, Chan's camera captures the local to counter the stock image of Hong Kong as ungrounded capitalist space. For a long time, Hong Kong has been defined negatively: it is "a borrowed time and a borrowed place," "a culture of disappearance," and the epitome of "off-ground economy."⁷ The economic miracle is explained by the theory of "lack," a derogatory rationale that attributes Hong Kong's economic development to its colonized status of lacking political agency, which redirects the libidinal drive to commercialism.⁸ At the very beginning of the film, Chan addresses the meanings of economic development and materialism from a banal, pedestrian perspective. As a smart, precocious kid, Little Cheung opens the film with such remarks:

I understood a lot when I was nine. My father owned a restaurant to make money. The Filipino maid at home was here to make money. My mother played mahjong in the mahjong parlor for money. And Brother Cheung went on TV charity fund-raisers for money. I am no exception. So I have known since little that money is a dream for

everyone. No wonder everyone on the street is especially enterprising.

The protagonist's idea of the entrepreneurial mentality suggests that the "lack" theory might be problematic. As Chow argues, "[w]ith its coloniality, then, economics and commerce *are* Hong Kong's 'origins'" ("Things" 187, emphasis original).

The essence of Chan's local lies in the neighborhood he portrays. *Little Cheung* exemplifies a community in the big city. People in the community might come and go; yet for those who stay, it is still the anchor and center of everyday life. Nevertheless, as the story unfolds, we come to realize that the community that promises a sense of belonging and a comfort of being "at home" is actually the same one that witnesses people leaving one after another (Little Cheung's brother, grandma, Armi and Fan). The disintegration of the neighborhood points to the instability of "home" or "the local." Such a fast changing community (the dynamics between mutability and stability, negatively defined and concretely represented, disappearance and reappearance) has to be analyzed in relation to globalization: the chosen local underlines the complicated pattern of transmigration, social integration, and perilous equilibrium in a global city.

Chan's aesthetic choice of the local in the global city deserves careful discussion: what makes Mong Kok a better local setting than any rural area? Does this site adequately represent Hong Kong's localness? Geographically speaking, Hong Kong comprises Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and outlying islands such as Lantau Island and Cheung Chau. From its early history as a major port and fishing post, Hong Kong still preserves traces of that past, particularly in the New Territories and Sai Kung. Even as they have become increasingly urbanized, Hong Kong is never a land without any rural areas. Chan's cinematic option, in fact, has to be put in the perspective of urban spatialization. As the character Fan says in the film, "Little Cheung once told me that people living in the old Hong Kong buildings have a lot of stories. I believe him." To put it another way, *Little Cheung* is literally Chan's Hong Kong story. This story, as well as the Hong Kong

identity it constructs, relies more upon the old mansions than the grassroots fishing villages or offshore islands. As Chu argues, Hong Kong's postcoloniality has to be situated not only in the context of global capitalism but also within the space of the metropolis. Compared with other post-colonies, this highly developed global city cannot cling to a prominent aboriginal culture as its grassroots. Therefore, "the imagination of the rural as the local has to be replaced by the city" (172).

The cultural imagination suggested by Chan's representation of Mong Kok as the authentic local further points to the changing role of the rural in contemporary global cities. On the one hand, Hong Kong's rurality is virtually compressed in the process of modernization and globalization (see how Disneyland and Chek Lap Kok airport have transformed Lantau Island). In terms of cultural identification, rurality is at the same time marginalized, and hence becomes the anonymous "other."⁹ Deviating from the stereotypical Hong Kong, which has long been celebrated as the dazzling "City of Glass," or the glamorous "Pearl of the Orient," the true Hong Kong Chan has in mind is not the fishing villages at the other end of the spectrum, but the old communities in the city. In the same vein as Wong Kar-wai's Chungking Mansion, Chan's anonymous apartment buildings and popular local restaurants have, in the eyes of the insiders, become the authentic Hong Kong.¹⁰ The point of understanding Chan's alternative choice of local is not to argue for the "authentic rural" as a site of postcolonial resistance or naively romanticize the outlying islands and fishing villages for their presumed innocent "origins" that would keep commercialization and globalization at bay. Rather, the film's representation of "rurality in the city" testifies to the fact that the "rural" is never something pure or homogenous. The transformation of the old mansions into the "archetypal home" of Hong Kong residents indeed exemplifies that Hong Kong's identity politics are deeply entwined with the metropolis itself.

Family and Friends: Naturalization of Global People Flows

The rundown buildings situated in the old community cannot

function as the bedrock of Hong Kong's local reality without Chan's powerful portrayal of the inhabitants of the space—the neighborhood centering around the sundry natives and those who join them from outside. These two groups of culturally underrepresented people stand for the subalterns in Chan's postcolonial writing. The former includes Uncle Guong of the newsstand at the street corner, the twin old-timers of the funeral store, Uncle Hoi, his gangster son David, and the strumpet sister, who dotes on Little Cheung.¹¹ They are members rooted in the community, utilized to foreground the local landscape. The Filipina maid Armi and the illegal immigrant Fan belong to the latter. They dramatize global people flow—the illegal immigrants and the transnational laborers, one of the intricate variables pertaining to globalization.

A careful interpretation of the filmic images and functions of these two types of subaltern characters helps us understand how Chan's postcolonial discourse understates globalization to invent a seemingly unvarnished account of Hong Kong's localness. First of all, the foreign domestic workers and illegal immigrants, the underclass brought about by capital flows, are appropriated on account of the director's deep concern with telling a story of local Hong Kong people. To make the postcolonial narrative of the global city "authentic," Armi and Fan are transformed into a family member and a good neighbor, respectively. In this way, they are not only elements of the hybrid global city, but also part of the local community. The process of naturalizing those who are brought into the local by the global flows partly accounts for Armi's role as a surrogate mother, who takes care of Little Cheung. As we watch, after being punished by the father, Little Cheung turns to the maid rather than to his mother for comfort. The scene that shows Little Cheung crying bitterly, reluctant to let the maid leave after his grandmother passes away, also suggests his attachment to Armi. In the ensuing shots, a flashback to the past before Armi leaves, we see her skillfully cooking in the tiny kitchen and preparing food for Little Cheung, accentuating the child's sense of loss. The intimacy between Little Cheung and the maid further hints at an absent mother-by-blood, who spends more of her time in the mahjong house than with her child.

These details, which accumulate through force of repetition, illustrate the Filipina maid's maternal function.

Like Armi, Fan as an illegal immigrant is naturalized as a next-door girl in Chan's postcolonial narrative. From Little Cheung's point-of-view, Fan is a neighborhood girl, who simply shows up at his doorway, seemingly from nowhere, to take up a delivery job and earn tips just as if they were playing games together. Presented through Little Cheung's limited viewpoint, Fan is not a "little snake," but a girl with a business sense almost as keen as his, though somewhat weirder: "Our activities on the street are strange. But Fan is stranger than I am. She doesn't go to school, but tries to wash dishes like adults do." At first, Little Cheung has no idea why one day Fan suddenly flees two policemen. Cheung tails Fan, but surprisingly never inquires into why she is hiding from the police: "I followed her. When she found me, I didn't remember a thing. I just smiled at her. She smiled back." For Little Cheung, even though he later comes to realize that Fan is an unregistered citizen, the so-called "little snake," she is still his "business partner" as well as a playmate, an identity drastically different from "the little snake" his father has in mind.

As Esther M. K. Cheung notes, the micro-histories of Hong Kong tend to naturalize the history of colonization by "invoking familial and natal images such as 'parents', 'offspring' and 'birth'" (572).¹² Under the façade of a simply rhetorical kinship system (Britain and China as Hong Kong's parents) unfolds the quintessential violence of colonialism: "Natal tropes such as 'birth' and parental 'passion' naturalize and implicitly endorse British imperial history" (572). Following this logic, we should by no means sentimentalize the maternal image of the Filipina maid and the playmate image of the illegal immigrant. The characterization of such a "mother-figure" and "the girl next-door" does enable Filipina maids and unregistered children, who are deprived of adequate cultural representation, to seemingly acquire a positive image and cast away their destined role of the invisible other in the city. However, it is exactly through the images of a loving family member and a good friend that the people flow of the Filipina domestic servants or the illegal immigrants in a global city is

rationalized to fit into the film's postcolonial paradigm of constructing a local community.¹³ I would hasten to add that my attempt here is not to pose a simplified, romanticized account of justice, arguing how domestic laborers and illegal immigrants have been helpless victims exploited by the global capital.¹⁴ At issue is how the naturalization of domestic laborers and illegal immigrants may well write off the power struggles brought about by the international division of labor in accordance to either gender or nationality, or by the concentration of capital. Namely, if we tend to see transnational domestic laborers and illegal immigrants as the mother-earth or the playmate, we may also come to accept these identities as something given and thereby lose the critical distance to identify the problems of uneven development engendered by globalization.

Armi and Fan serve not only as a surrogate mother and a good friend, but also as mirror images, the antithesis to native Hong Kongers. In other words, they are representatives of the outsider, who witness the construction of a local identity. For example, Chan uses Armi's otherness to highlight the key figure of the film, the eminent Cantonese Opera actor, Brother Cheung.¹⁵ Near the beginning of the film, one shot offers an interesting global/local montage of Hong Kong culture: Brother Cheung's performance on TV is juxtaposed in a scene with Armi, the maid singing in her room. The lyrics of the song convey a sense of philosophical/religious optimism: "Don't worry about life's failures. Tomorrow is the rest of your life. The sun will shine for you and light your path. Such is our life in this world." Although the Filipina maid is placed side by side with Brother Cheung in this scene to suggest unity, she is seen only in silhouette. Rather than her physical presence, the political implications of the song against Brother Cheung's performance seem to dominate the scene. Later in another scene the director again implicitly addresses Brother Cheung's seemingly unintelligible peculiarity as an icon of native Hong Kong culture through Armi's perspective. In this sequence of shots Armi is making a phone call in her own room, presumably trying to tell someone at home about the phenomenal Brother Cheung:

They are so crazy about this opera singer. It is all over the place. You know, on TV, magazines. . . . Hong Kong people call this guy Little Cheung, Brother Cheung, all sorts of names. He is really a super star. Very popular. You know when he dies he will get more attention than Deng Xiaoping died. . . . It is more fun than soap opera.

The Filipina maid's confusion is not so much a sign of her naiveté,¹⁶ but rather a marker that highlights the localness of Brother Cheung and Cantonese Opera, as is witnessed by the persona of a cultural outsider, whose course of life is intimately attached to Hong Kong's living space. If this part is articulated by any of the native people in the film, the director's attempt to construct an indigenous identity, when circumscribed by a tour-guide language and vocabulary of political reference, precariously turns into a superficial self-indulgence of the native. Interestingly, the crane shot Chan uses in this scene to show Armi in a tiny compartmentalized room produces a sense of ambivalence: while the maid occupies a privileged space as a cultural observer, the camera's eye simultaneously suggests her confined and subordinate position of speaking.¹⁷

The gaze of Fan, the illegal immigrant in the neighborhood, has a similar significance as Armi's in a scene where the exasperated father punishes Little Cheung.¹⁸ Like Armi, as an outsider who knows nothing about Brother Cheung, Fan witnesses the construction of a local identity.¹⁹ Immediately after Little Cheung is found by his father after disappearing for a few days, he is stripped off his pants and forced to stand on a rock at the storefront. Little Cheung begins singing one of Brother Cheung's tunes, which he has learned by heart. He sings a few lines before discovering that Fan is staring at him, whereupon he turns around to Fan, which is to say, to the gaze of the camera and the audience. Subsequently, his father warns him not to see Fan anymore, claiming she is a good-for-nothing little snake. Little Cheung refuses to stop singing. The gist of the song is a blind beggar lamenting over his upbringing. Despite the fact that his mother has forsaken the family, his father wants him to keep his parents' love in mind instead of bearing a

grudge against his mother. Accompanied by Little Cheung's song, the lens gradually pan to, and then fixes, on a close-up of Little Cheung's face, followed by a close-up of his buttocks, where the scars left by his father's whipping are still visible. Little Cheung starts to urinate as he sings along, and suddenly it begins raining heavily. With the pouring rain, the song terminates abruptly in the lament, "Only god knows my true pain."

The images and narratives of this climatic episode, in fact, work out an intricate postcolonial allegory, which brings home one of the most important themes of the entire film. On the surface, Little Cheung translates an embarrassing penalty into a spectacle (Ka-Fai Yau 557), thus generating resistance against his father's authority. More significantly, as Ka-Fai Yau notes, it is through such cinematic arrangements that Little Cheung, a nine-year-old Mong Kok boy, merges with Brother Cheung, a once-dazzling Cantonese Opera star. What Little Cheung is singing is the very tune sung by Brother Cheung on TV in the opening shot. This scene thus not only allows Little Cheung to be connected with his grandmother's oral history but also elevates him into a cultural inheritor. That is, Little Cheung's impromptu "performance" foregrounds the formation of a new postcolonial Hong Kong subject (558). The interwoven relationship between the music and the theme can be explained in two ways. The lyrics of the song artistically articulate the thematic betrayal by one's family, the blind beggar telling the unspeakable pain of being abandoned by one's own mother.²⁰ In a textual sense, the betrayal points to Fan and the twin old-timers of the casket shop, who disclose Little Cheung's hiding place and expose him to his father's humiliating punishment. On a symbolic level, if Little Cheung represents the new Hong Kong subject after 1997 as Yau asserts, his performance of Brother Cheung's song reveals the ambiguity of Hong Kong's postcolonial history. Indeed, if Hong Kong is the blind beggar, who is the mother that leaves the child behind? Is it China, the mother land that ceded Hong Kong to Britain after the first Opium War, or Britain, the colonizer that returned Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty at the end of the lease? Both options lead to a plethora of complicated questions

instead of offering a comforting closure. Perhaps the core of Hong Kong's postcolonial ambiguity lies in the problem of not being able to "name the enemy" nor deny the historical reality and experience of being a colony.

In this climatic scene, with the depiction of Little Cheung's response to his father's punishment, the director successfully constructs an imaginative identity characterized by the local's resistance against the hegemonic rule. Little Cheung's singing, a performance that defies both his father's authority and the onlookers' gaze, could be as powerful as Rabelais's "laughter," both of which challenge authority. Nonetheless, this postcolonial writing is far removed from a grand narrative; rather, it is something interrupted, something that has eventually flowed away (the urine and the rain). Here the body politics, registered by the boy's pissing and the exposure of his penis, has a double meaning: on the one hand, it is a raw moment of vulgarity, emphasizing the grassroots culture. As Achille Mbembe observes, the word "vulgar," etymologically, has associations with the crowd (129).²¹ Matthew Arnold also points out that "vulgar" implies a bird's-eye view from the stance of a "high" culture, a perspective that despises the money-seeking and cultureless horde.²² On the other hand, set against the sublime generated through the formulation of a cultural identity, excretion transcribes both an irony and despondency, implying the gloom and doom of Chan's postcolonial writing, a narrative footnoted by the lamentation of "only god knows my true pain" and the "obscene sublime" in the torrential rain.²³

This sublime cultural nationalism written against the local neighborhood of Mong Kok is seen through Armi's and Fan's gaze: they are the sympathetic others who direct the audience's attention to Brother Cheung and Little Cheung, the local heroes of the film. The images and functions of Armi and Fan suggest that Chan's cultural mapping of the local actually incorporates a fundamental rationale, which presumably *naturalizes* the global cities' uneven-development propensity for the sake of asserting the primacy of the localness.

You Are What You See: Global Monumental Space and Postcolonial Identity Formation

If the population flow in the global city becomes naturalized in the film, another salient sign of the global city, the monumental space, is displaced into Hong Kong's postcolonial identity imagination, hence converted into an invisible symbol in Chan's postcolonial self-writing. The episode that precisely signifies this transformation of spatial symbols is the scene where Little Cheung and Fan tour Kowloon, stopping by the Tsim Sha Tsui Promenade to look at Hong Kong Island. Little Cheung, after being punished by his father, runs away from home and disappears for a couple of days. One day he stealthily sends someone to find Fan, who is presently doing dishes as usual. What follows is a cut where Little Cheung and Fan, along with Fan's younger sister, go for a bicycle ride. On their way from Mong Kok to Kowloon, Little Cheung, as a local, assumes the role of a tour guide, saying, "This is Kowloon City. There are a lot to eat and a lot of airplanes." The happy triad arrives at the Promenade, greeted by the seascape of the Victoria Harbor, and faces the myriad of skyscrapers on Hong Kong Island across from them. Little Cheung resumes his tour-guide role and tells Fan, "That's the peak, that's Bank of China. This is Central State Square, the tallest building in Hong Kong." Fan retorts, "My teacher says the Bank of China is the tallest." The pair is caught in a standoff until they see the HMS Tamar, whereupon Fan happily remarks, "I know. It will belong to People's Liberation Army." Little Cheung goes on to introduce the Convention and Exhibition Center, but Fan replies with a smiling face, "Hong Kong will belong to us when Chairman Jiang comes." Little Cheung disputes this claim, "It's already ours!" Afterwards, the two kids verbally joust for three rounds. Their tournament concludes with Fan's exclamation to the sea, half mock prayer, half shout, "Hong Kong is ours!"

With an episode of no more than a few minutes, Chan successfully presents the handover in a fairly direct way. The political intention of this dialogue is self-evident. The director assumes the role of a ventriloquist, articulating the "97-Complex" and specifying what

is at stake, i.e., the question of to whom Hong Kong should belong. The “innocent kids” speak what the adults are afraid to say. More importantly, China is not presented as a pure ideological symbol; rather, here it assumes the form of a bank, the nexus of capital flow. The argument between the two kids may appear like mere child’s talk, yet a closer look exposes that what this “child’s talk” underwrites is an unchallenged assumption: skyscrapers are what define Hong Kong. Ironically, these monumental buildings that have shaped and still shape Hong Kong’s identity are less a unique feature of the city than a basic feature Hong Kong shares with other global metropolises. In other words, these landmarks of the city are marked by their function as linkage in the network of global capital flows. Regardless of the director’s arduous attempt to concentrate on constructing Hong Kong’s local icons, this climatic scene seems to betray his intention and confirms the fact that Hong Kong’s identity cannot be defined at the grassroots: skyscrapers, despite their globality, play a key role in pinning down Hong Kong-ness in Chan’s postcolonial narrative. Like the naturalized foreign laborers and illegal immigrants, the landmark buildings in Central are transformed and re-coded as an integral part of the local identity. Indeed, in the film the decrepit community in Mong Kok and the glittering skyscrapers in Central ultimately compete against each other, both claiming themselves to be the inimitable authentic Hong Kong. This complexity might be something that Chan’s story, one that focuses on Brother Cheung and the local restaurant, desires to conceal but never succeeds.

The spatial form upon which the political significance of this scene is constructed helps us grasp the entangled relationship between Hong Kong as a global city and its attempt to formulate a viable identity for itself. The meanings of the skyscrapers in Hong Kong should be interpreted beyond a mere background against which the 97-Complex is written. To put it another way, if Chan presents the local neighborhood in Mong Kok as the authentic Hong Kong, why doesn’t he let the kids argue over the ownership of Hong Kong right in front of the restaurant run by Little Cheung’s father? Evidently, the dramatic impact yielded by this quarrel scene has everything to do with the

spatial background it is situated in. The skyline of the Victoria Harbor has always been a metropolitan spectacle to put Hong Kong under the spotlight, a garish advertisement for "The Pearl of the Orient." We could say that the skyscrapers, which shimmer with the neon signs of transnational corporations, endow Hong Kong as a global city with a most lurid and powerful sign. On top of this, these skyscrapers often become a global sublime to foster a collective will.²⁴ For example, in Fan's mind, Hong Kong is not the anonymous back-street corners in which she lives or works, but the transnational skyscrapers fixed in front of her eyes from across the harbor. This kind of imagination registers less a misconception of an illegal immigrant, who presumably does not have a full picture of Hong Kong, than a common group consciousness shared among Hong Kong residents. According to the result of a questionnaire that attempted to determine how residents saw their city, Hong Kong residents rate the top five tourist sites in this order as follows: the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank, the Convention and Exhibition Center, the Bank of China, the Legislative Council Building and the Victoria Harbor.²⁵ Except for the British Legislative Council Building, the rest of these scenes show us architecture built by global capital for the purpose of flexible accumulation. Paradoxically, these monumental spatial expressions that ordinary city-users (legal or not) identify with actually reduce the amount of living space available in everyday life.²⁶

In the film, Fan and Little Cheung argue over if the Bank of China or the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank (standing at the head of Statue Square) is the tallest building in Hong Kong. These two world-renown edifices help us appreciate the significance of monumental space, the concrete-and-steel of global capital, in a postcolonial paradigm. The Hong Kong Shanghai Bank, designed by British architect Norman Foster, and the adjacent Bank of China, by I. M. Pei, can be seen as two political totems magically erected by Hong Kong's former colonizer and China. Owning the highest building in Hong Kong, the Beijing regime, with a legible and controllable panoramic view, not only demonstrates its upper hand over Britain, but also reminds Hong Kong residents, the British government, and all the international forces, of

China's sovereignty over Hong Kong since 1997. However, we cannot ignore the fact that in terms of its practical function, this bamboo-shaped 72-story skyscraper prophesies that China is about to thrive in the new global economy. The Bank of China, just like the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank and all the other financial towers in the world, will continue to be the material base for global capital to accumulate, operate, and circulate. In this vein, Fan and Little Cheung's shouts not only allegorize the political antagonism between national hegemony and local consciousness, but also reveal the fact that, apart from local communities and nation-state apparatuses, global capital has continually played a crucial role in Hong Kong's identity politics.

Conclusion

With this investigation into the production of local identity in *Little Cheung*, I hope to illustrate that in the global city, the "localness" in the postcolonial discourse can never be taken for granted, but must be realized as a kind of "construction." As seen in the film, one of the crucial formulative logics is the naturalization of the global. When the rural imagination is replaced by cities, which have become the space to anchor local identity, the spatial geographies of global cities have to be erased or rendered unseen. Such an analysis of *Little Cheung* intends to foreground the dilemma a postcolonial global city might face. On the one hand, to represent the subalterns, postcolonial narratives have to be written and only in that way can the "local" be recognized. Chan's back streets and alleys are clear evidence of this point. But for such a narrative to exist, those among the underclass of the global city will need to remain the invisible other buried beneath the grand narrative of contemporary globalization. On the other hand, to construct an "authentic" local, the first task for the postcolonial writer to manage is the spatial characteristics of global cities. If one's writing of the local dogmatically clings to postcolonial discourse, the "local" may turn out to be a deterritorialized myth, which dissociates the Mong Kok restaurant in Chan's film from the flows of global capital. If that is the case, a postcolonial narrative, which originally intends to speak for the

local, might at the same time unconsciously facilitate the operation of global metropolises, and hence become an ideological instrument undetected by city-users. My interpretation of Fruit Chan's film as a case study therefore addresses the internal tensions inscribed in Hong Kong. Neither the identity politics of the postcolonial discourse nor the monumental space of the global cities are sufficient ground to ground an analysis of postcolonial global cities. More research has to be conducted to bring to light the complicated interaction between postcoloniality and globalization.

NOTES

¹ The author thanks Dr. Chi-she Li and Dr. Douglas Berman for their insightful comments and suggestions.

² See Chow, "Between Colonizers" and "King Kong."

³ See <http://www.info.gov.hk/trans/jd/jd2.htm>.

⁴ See Ka-fai Yau and Laikwan Pang.

⁵ Chan's "1997 Trilogy" includes *Made in Hong Kong*, *The Longest Summer* and *Little Cheung*.

⁶ <http://www.chinesecinemas.org/littlecheung.html>.

⁷ For example, Frank Welsh's book is entitled *A Borrowed Place: The History of Hong Kong*. Jean Chesneaux uses "off-ground economy" to define Hong Kong, and Abbas argues that Hong Kong culture is dominated by "the politics of disappearance."

⁸ Hong Kong's economic success is also appropriated as an easy label to legitimize its image of "cultural wasteland." See Chow's "Things" for the theory of "lack."

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the rural areas in Hong Kong, see Esther M.K. Cheung and James Hayes.

¹⁰ For Wong Kar-wai, Chungking Mansion in Tsim Sha Tsui best articulates Hong Kong's urban space, see Tsung-yi Huang ("Hong Kong Blue").

¹¹ Ka-Fai Yau has contended that one of the distinctive features of Chan's films is that culturally speaking, his selections over themes and characters bring to light the "the underrepresented" (543).

¹² The transformation of Hong Kong's colonial history demonstrates "Roland Barthes's idea of how a myth is constructed by transforming history into nature, through the process of naturalization" (Cheung 572).

¹³ For an insightful analysis of how domestic laborers stake a claim on Hong Kong's public space, see Lisa Law.

¹⁴ See Katherine Gibson, Lisa Law and Deirdre McKay.

¹⁵ Chan says the film is dedicated to Brother Cheung. The last shot of the film shows "To our beloved Brother Cheung." Besides, the mirroring shots of Brother Cheung's performance on TV that start and end the film again demonstrate the importance of Brother Cheung as a cultural icon.

¹⁶ She is characterized as practical, smart, and talented.

¹⁷ In addition to the Filipina maids, there are foreign laborers working in the restaurant run by David and Uncle Hoi such as the guy nicknamed "Curry Boy." Unlike Armi, they are more like "extras" in the film, without a story of their own. In the scene where two resentful foreign laborers come to David to vent their vengeance illustrates again the strategy of representing the local by highlighting the otherness of the outsiders. David sends his gangsters to take care of the workers. They come back to report what the Indians want: "They complained that we know no loyalty and commitment." David talks back in contempt: "What do these Indians know about Chinese loyalty?"

¹⁸ Her immediate reaction to Cheung's physical punishment is not presented in this film. Yet, after that scene, Fan has become the omniscient narrator in the film, who tells the story of Little Cheung's life after his grandmother has passed away and the Filipina maid left. Fan's gaze thus turns to be identical with the camera's eyes, through which the director shows the audience the local life-world of Hong Kong.

¹⁹ Fan once asks Cheung's grandma who Brother Cheung is.

²⁰ For the theme of betrayal in the film, see Ka-Fai Yau, 559.

²¹ "Vulgus," the Latin root of the word "vulgarity," refers to the crowd. For a detailed account of vulgarity and crowd, see Achille Mbembe.

²² For Arnold's interpretation of vulgarity, see *Culture and Anarchy*.

²³ Chan explained in an interview that the vulgarity as seen in the scene of making David "the vampire tea" with a used tampon is mainly for dramatic effects. (<http://www.newactionfilms.com/littlecheung/director.htm>). Yet, if we consider the vulgar scene in the context of constructing a local identity,

vulgarity is less a vehicle for poetic justice than an aesthetic strategy to highlight the grassroots and the folk culture.

²⁴ For the forms, functions and meanings of monumental buildings, see Henri Lefebvre, 143, 221–22.

²⁵ See Ka Yee Janice Wong.

²⁶ See the first chapter of my book, *Walking Between Slums and Skyscrapers*.

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