

British Colonial Interest in China: Beginnings and Endings

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In examining the colonial experience I am particularly interested in the case of the British empire, and have focused on British colonial interest in China. Because China is a country that was never fully subjected to British colonial rule, unlike India, it is therefore an interesting subject of study, and helps with the understanding of imperial power as a partial or unfinished project. I look at colonial experience within the broader frame of Sino/British relations (with a focus on cultural aspects of this interaction since my main training is in art history), and want to consider the British empire comparatively

as just one empire within a field of empires and power centres, both Western and Asian. To examine an empire in its relation to other empires and sources of authority allows one to focus on the limits of imperial power, to see hegemony as a struggle for mastery in a space of competing discourses that is always incomplete. This interest in the limits of imperial power has also led me to focus on two particular time periods, the first being the period before British imperial ambitions in China were really developed and the second being the period in which they were dismantled. The first of these periods is the eighteenth century, and the second is the period following the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration in which the end of British rule in Hong Kong was agreed. With respect to the latter period I have been particularly interested in investigating art and visual culture during the period immediately before and after the 1997 transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong, but I continue to track developments in the current “post-colonial” phase.¹⁾ I will briefly discuss below my work on the eighteenth century, before focusing at slightly greater length on my investigation of Hong Kong.

1) See my books *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization*, Duke University Press, 2002; *Reclaimed Land: Hong Kong in Transition*, Hong Kong University Press, 2002; *Hong Kong x 24 x 365: A Year in the Life of a City*, Hong Kong University Press, 2007; *Chinese Art and its Encounter with the World*, Hong Kong University Press, 2011 (chapter 6), and my article “Contested Sites: Hong Kong’s Built Environment in the Post-Colonial Era,” *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 10, Issue 4, December 2007, pp. 357 - 377.

Part of the attraction of working on Sino-British interactions in the eighteenth century is the uncovering of a time where familiar discourses of race and the project of imperial expansion in China were yet to be fully articulated, and thus of historicizing the imperial project that would ensue. Much of the European discourse on China in that time was positive in nature, and power relations were not as one-sided as they later became. The familiar reification of the other from later periods is less often found, and Chinese visitors to England were able to interact as equals in polite society. I have studied two such visitors, Loum Kiqua and Chitqua, the former a merchant who was to give a musical performance while in London, and the latter a portrait modeler who worked in London for around two years.²⁾ Able to command good prices for his work, Chitqua even exhibited in the second Royal Academy exhibition and was included in Zoffany's group portrait of that newly established organization's members. Less is known about Loum Kiqua, although he is said to have met King George during his visit, and possibly also encountered Samuel Johnson (Chitqua also met King George as well as such well-known figures as the potter Josiah Wedgwood). In my current work on this period I am investigating how the paradigm of the masquerade governed

2) On Loum Kiqua see my article "An Encounter with Chinese music in mid-18th-century London," *Early Music*, November 2010, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 543-558. On Chitqua see *Chinese Art and its Encounter with the World*, chapter 1.

much interaction with cultural otherness (along with other matters) in eighteenth-century Britain, allowing for a fluid sense of identity, a blurring of the boundaries with otherness. Such fluidity became much contested by the nineteenth century, with a more essentialist model of identity coming to dominate in which distinctness was emphasized. I am also exploring cross-cultural dimensions of the eighteenth-century soundscape, looking at ways in which the meeting of cultures led to changes in the sound environment of both Britain and China.

I have been drawn to the study of Hong Kong's decolonization and its cultural mediation in large part because of the atypical nature of that case. Because there was no independence at the end of colonial rule, but rather the absorption into a larger national entity with a markedly different political system, the normal narrative of autonomous statehood being achieved did not apply in Hong Kong's case. In studying it one can therefore gain insights that might be valuable for the analysis of those cases where there was apparently a post-colonial phase, but where in actual fact one can talk of a persistence or reconfiguring of imperial power.

Because Hong Kong was never going to be independent, was never going to become (like Singapore, say) a separate nation, the normal rhetoric of national liberation with its goal of autonomous statehood never governed the way resistance to colonial power was envisaged in the territory. Indeed the use of

national rhetoric in relation to Hong Kong belonged to the Chinese authorities who were assuming sovereignty over the territory, and a narrative of national wholeness being recovered (of which Hong Kong people were the object not the subject) was mobilized for a domestic audience in the Mainland as a whole in order to encourage a sense of patriotic belonging and to help deliver consent for one-party rule. In this context local identity had to develop in Hong Kong in conflict with a national frame rather than with the help of it, and new or atypical resources had to be found for strategies of liberation from a colonial power which was being reconfigured rather than eliminated. This localized identity was particularly to find expression after the agreement for Hong Kong's 1997 return to Chinese sovereignty was reached in 1984, and was further intensified following the repression of the Tiananmen protests in 1989.

Taking the form of a mental decolonization, Hong Kong identity didn't need to wait for the actual political transition, but was able to choose its own timetable. Ungrounded in nature, often expressed negatively as a dis-identification from both British and Chinese national narratives, Hong Kong identity employed cultural or semiotic resources more than the conventional tools of political expression, and it was especially visible in artistic expressions of the pre-handover period. As much fabricated as found, this local sense of selfhood was assembled in an act of collective bricolage, with lived memory

being more important than textbook history (which belongs rather to nations than cities), and popular culture being more central than high culture—which could be imported from the West (and thus be potentially deracinating) or already co-opted to a national story (like ink painting, which tends to speak the artist who uses it as part of a Chinese cultural narrative).

Given the absence of a simple story of before and after independence in Hong Kong's decolonization narrative, the non-existence of any real post-colonial era, temporal sequence was often complicated in thinking about the ending of British rule which came in 1997. Because the date of the handover was fixed so long in advance (unlike other major political events of that era, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall), a future perfect tense seemed to infect pre-handover thinking, with people able to imagine their present situation as if looking back from a future that had already occurred. This can be seen in several artworks of the time, such as Holly Lee's *Bauhinia, in front of Hong Kong harbor, circa 1997* (1997), which presents an image covered in a digitally-fabricated network of craquelure, implying that we are viewing it at some time in a far distant future where its handover-related date has become a matter of uncertainty.³⁾

3) On this and other handover period artworks dealing with temporal themes (for example by Lee Ka-sing and Danny Yung), see *Hong Kong Art*, especially chapter 2.

One post-handover artwork which also plays with the complicated sense of Hong Kong time is Luke Ching's video *Flag Rising* (uploaded to YouTube in 2007), which features a flag ceremony in which a Chinese national flag is being taken down, but because the sequence has been presented in reverse the flag appears to be rising.⁴⁾ Further play with time in the pre-handover period occurred with Poon Sing Lui's performance piece of 16 September 1996, where he covered a statue of Queen Victoria in Victoria Park with red paint, giving through the Communist signification attached to red a sense that the handover had come unexpectedly early to Hong Kong.⁵⁾ This act by a Mainland-trained artist was poorly received in Hong Kong, since British colonial signifiers such as that statue were already perceived as having lost any potential oppressive power. Hong Kong people had moved on from a colonial mentality, and any Victorian era self-confidence about projecting imperial ideology was in any case very much a thing of the past: in the lame duck post-1984 (very) late colonial era, colonial ideology was reluctant to speak its name.

Indeed, starting from the late pre-handover period it was often the case that the colonial past and its relics were being

4) Other artworks of the same era which also play with reversal or otherwise engage with temporality were included in the exhibition *Time After Time: A Hong Kong Contemporary Art Exhibition on Time*, Basement, Hollywood Centre, Sheung Wan, 24/8 - 17/9/2007. Curators were Chang Tsong-zung and Jasper Lau.

5) See *Hong Kong Art*, pp. 118 - 119.

appropriated as material for fashioning a local sense of identity. Memory became a resource for fabricating a local sense of lived history in contradistinction to the textbook national narrative of wholeness recovered, with photography being a tool for capturing traces of the disappearing past in both artistic practice and popular usage. Whereas a Hong Kong identity looked backwards in time, Chinese national and British colonial rhetorics tended to emphasize the future. Architecture and the built environment became a major battleground of identity issues in the post-handover period, with commercial and governmental construction determined to create an amnesiac cityscape full of upward-sprouting symbols of prosperity and progress in which both the colonial era of Hong Kong and the trauma of 4 June 1989 could be forgotten. Against this was a discourse of heritage preservation, which came to a head in late 2006 with protests against the demolition of the old Star Ferry terminal and Queen's Pier, in which new political actors emerged, often in their teens and twenties and organizing themselves outside the structures provided by mainstream political parties.⁶⁾

The sensitivity of memory to the post-handover order can be exemplified by the case of the handover ceremony itself, for which no appropriate place could be found in the pre-existing cityscape of Hong Kong. Instead a venue had to be constructed

6) See "Contested Sites."

on newly-reclaimed land (the extension to the Convention and Exhibition Centre in Wanchai) which was in a 'virgin' state and thus not haunted by any inappropriate colonial era associations when it was used for the official ceremony in which sovereignty was transferred. As the concern for preservation grew in Hong Kong, a development the local post-handover government seemed completely unprepared for, they too eventually made a U-turn, trying to appropriate and tame this new discourse of 'collective memory'. One example of the result is the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Park near the waterfront in Sheung Wan, which has a fake historical connection to the founder of the Chinese Republic since it is built on reclaimed land that Sun himself could never have visited. Even the appointment of Sir Donald Tsang (a former deputy to last British colonial Governor Chris Patten and thus not a natural choice for Beijing) as Hong Kong's second Chief Executive had been a kind of turning back from the forward-looking moment of the early post-handover period in the face of the forced resignation of the first Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa in the wake of the massive street protest against his government which occurred on 1 July 2003.⁷⁾ I am particularly

7) A counterpart to this imaginary political turning back to the colonial era (which was supposed to provide Hong Kong people with a leader they would feel comfortable with) was Patten's introduction of a fragile pseudo-democratization of the Legislative Council in the period just prior to the handover—which one can characterize as a leap forward to an imaginary "decolonization." This desperate measure to retain a fragment of legitimacy following the destabilizing effect of June 1989 was offered at no cost to the British themselves since they were about to leave and wouldn't have to face

interested in such moments of flashback or partial regression to the colonial, which occur in a variety of situations. In recent anti-government rallies (but not in the early post-colonial era) one sometimes sees protesters using the colonial-era Hong Kong flag, for instance, and (to introduce a non-Hong Kong-related example which nevertheless belongs to the same time frame as the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984), the Falklands/Malvinas conflict of 1982 worked to encourage in Britain a mood of nostalgic fake reprise of an actually-lost era of Imperial grandeur. An analogous imaginary return to the past could also be argued as a factor in the case of pre-handover Hong Kong emigration to Canada and Australia—places which still have the Queen’s head on coins or other British signifiers that would be familiar to a resident of colonial-era Hong Kong. Was such emigration in part a desire to escape Hong Kong’s approaching future in favour of a return to an imaginary colonial past—but one improved by democracy?

I hope to investigate further the discrepancies and irregularities in the temporality of Hong Kong’s decolonization process which I have been briefly hinting at here, and also look at parallel issues of a spatial nature, too. Discussion of the construction of the Convention and Exhibition Centre extension and of heritage battles has already revealed that spatial issues are as complicated as temporal ones, and this is perhaps

the consequences of a broadening of political participation.

especially the case in a place where colonial rule was not simply imposed (spatially) on top of an existing population, but where that population largely arrived from elsewhere in response to the pre-existing colonial presence. I have already looked at the way Hong Kong's civic level identity in the nominally post-colonial era has been 'haunted' spatially by the threat of other cities such as Singapore and Shanghai, which are seen as potential rivals, or cities further afield which might be seen as possible role models for its development, and believe there is more that can be said along these lines in a culturally-conceived take on Hong Kong's recent history.⁸⁾

8) See *Chinese Art and its Encounter with the World*, chapter 6.

