

# Introduction: Mediating borders: New boundaries for Hong Kong studies

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## Abstract

There are myriad methods and tactics to study and examine Hong Kong as a former crown colony and a current Chinese special administrative region. Using the idea of border as a critical tool as well as the subject of critique, this special issue highlights and addresses a political and historical fact that the bordering, debordering and transbordering of Hong Kong, as long taken-for-granted through the media, has never been a fixed and stable boundary. If political binarism and cultural parochialism have walled up Hong Kong cultures from national or transnational transformations, the essays in this special issue seek to initiate new discussions and revisit old discovery of Hong Kong amid the ebb and flow of nationality, transnationality and globality. They respond to cross-border ventures in various ways, offering different views and engaging with one another as to shed light on how the changing borderscape might have impacts on the future development of Hong Kong culture.

## Keywords

Border, nationality, transnationality, globality, Hong Kong studies

## Introduction

There are myriad methods and tactics to study and examine Hong Kong as a former crown colony and a current Chinese special administrative region (SAR). Using the idea of border as a critical tool as well as the subject of critique, this special issue highlights and addresses a political and historical fact that the bordering, debordering, and transbordering of Hong Kong, as long taken-for-granted through the media, has never been a fixed and stable boundary.<sup>1</sup> Bearing in mind what Etienne Balibar (2002) said in his well-known article “What is a Border?,” we do not have any intention to define border: “The theorist who attempts to define what a border is is in danger of going around in circles, as the very representation of the border is the precondition for any

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definition” (p. 76). In line with Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson’s (2013) “border as method” approach (p. 18), border is being seen “not so much a research object as an epistemological viewpoint.” Amid that border invents and disseminates differences, to think of the borderscape of Hong Kong is to see border as always in process, which will generate new possibilities in sustaining and reconfiguring the city’s cultural infrastructure to meet new demands and challenges. If political binarism and cultural parochialism have walled up Hong Kong cultures from national or transnational transformations, this special issue seeks to initiate new discussions and revisit old discovery of Hong Kong amid the ebb and flow of nationality, transnationality, and globality.

Having said that, the authors understand that “[i]f border studies are to be more than a collection of fascinating case studies, or more than a subfield within the parent discipline of its practitioners,” as astutely noted by Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan (2012, p. 14), “they must address a set of unified thematic, conceptual and theoretical concerns and questions.” Situated between two different capitalisms, Hong Kong is arguably one of the best places to show that “bordering—as well as debordering and rebordering—is an ongoing process, which involves changing perceptions, interpretations and practices in everyday life” (Szytniewski & Spierings, 2014, p. 339). The essays in this special issue explore how the changing mediascape would impact Hong Kong Studies as an academic discipline from the perspectives of film, television, popular music, and cultural practices, aiming to contribute productive insights by drawing, to borrow the words from Mezzadra and Neilson (2019, p. 4), “its material inspiration primarily from an investigation of the entanglement of three prevalent areas of contemporary economic (and, we would hasten to add, political) activity: extraction, logistics, and finance.” With the ongoing advent of the Greater Bay Area and Belt and Road Initiative, and the recent openings of Hong Kong—Zhuhai—Macau Bridge and High-Speed Rail system, Hong Kong cultures are here conceived to be more susceptible to unprecedented geopolitical and territorial changes resulting from closer and vibrant connections with the Mainland.

Meanwhile, the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation, introduced by President Xi Jinping (2017) 習近平 at the start of his first term as General Secretary in 2012, remained the central theme of his speech delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on 18 October 2017: “our compatriots in Hong Kong and Macao will share both the historic responsibility of national rejuvenation and the pride of a strong and prosperous China.” He also made it very clear that the development of Hong Kong and Macao was closely tied with that of the Mainland. After the 19th National Congress of the CPC, Beijing had plans to implement new policies toward integrating the SARs into the Mainland, and Hong Kong’s reconfiguration would result in an increasingly marginal, minor position in Beijing’s new blueprint. At a press conference after the 19th National Congress, Zhang Hongsen 張宏森, Deputy Director of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, echoed Xi by saying that “[Xi] clearly pointed out the new direction for building stronger cultural self-confidence and helping socialist culture to flourish. The film industry will follow the guiding principles of the 19th CPC National Congress” (cited from “Press Briefing on Promoting Ideological, Ethical and Cultural Progress,” 2017).

Toward this end, new relaxation measures were rolled out by the State Film Administration to facilitate the further development of Hong Kong and Macao film industries in April 2019 (“HKSAR Government Welcomes Measures by Relevant Central Authorities to Further Facilitate Entry of Hong Kong Film Industry into Mainland Market,” 2019).<sup>2</sup> Apparently, this sounds attractive enough to many ears, but the measures are basically commercially oriented, designed to enhance the integration of Hong Kong and Macao into the Mainland. No wonder Edward Yau, Hong Kong Secretary

for Commerce and Economic Development, was among the first to respond: “I hope that the film industry will tap the new measures, while continue to leverage existing advantages, to expand mainland and overseas markets and further promote the brand of ‘Hong Kong films’” (“New Measures to Facilitate HK-mainland Film Co-Production,” 2019). The Greater Bay Area has enormous potential to “supercharge an economic dynamo,” as argued by Peter Wong (2019), Deputy Chairman and Chief Executive of The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited. Be that as it may, an economic dynamo is not a guarantee of the brand “Hong Kong films”. There is a telling anecdote related to “Hong Kong films”: shortly before the unveiling of the new relaxation measures for co-productions, young Hong Kong film industry stakeholders issued an open letter to Derek Yee, chairman of the Hong Kong Film Directors’ Guild and Hong Kong Film Awards Association, complaining about the lack of opportunities for local Hong Kong film industry workers because of imported labor from the Mainland, as many Hong Kong films no longer employ local workers, except for production managers and set coordinators. If this is not rectified, there will be no Hong Kong filmmakers in “Hong Kong films” before long (“An Open Letter to Derek Yee, Chairman Hong Kong Film Awards Association,” 2019).

Against this backdrop, Yiu-Wai Chu’s “Hong Kong (in China) Studies: Hong Kong Popular Culture as Example” endeavors to explore how to shed light on a new dimension of future research in this special context: Hong Kong Studies and/as a cultural studies response to the integration of the Greater Bay Area. As noted above, after the 19th National Congress of the CPC, Beijing had plans to roll out new policies toward integrating the SARs of Hong Kong and Macao into the Mainland. The author examines the transmission and transformation of Hong Kong popular culture in the Mainland in this special context. Through the cross-border ventures of Hong Kong cultural industries, he uses the examples of Hong Kong cinema, television, and popular music to explore the implications of a new version of “northbound imaginary”—which no longer aims to change China but to see whether Hong Kong can remain unchanged. Closely related to this issue is the implementation of the Close Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed by the Mainland and Hong Kong in 2003, which has exerted profound impacts on the development of cross-border collaboration as well as Hong Kong cultures, such as Mainland-Hong Kong co-productions in the film industry.

Matthew M.T. Chew’s “Discovering the Digital Stephen Chow: The Transborder Influence of Chow’s Films on the Chinese Internet in the 2010s” focuses on a particular trajectory of cross-border collaboration, uncovering and analyzing the transborder influence of Stephen Chow’s films in China in the 2010s. As astutely argued by the author, this influence takes a new form that operates through the inspiring of various online carnivalesque items co-created by Chinese netizens and cultural producers. Using data collected from primary sources including catchphrases, memes, and web novels, and secondary sources including relevant news reports, online commentaries, and Chinese-language scholarship, the author documents this new form of influence with an investigation of online catchphrases, memes and emojis, and Chinese web novels inspired by Chow’s films. It is argued in the essay that one may interpret this new wave of influence as a fourth fan culture of Chow’s films or as a merger between Hong Kong nonsensical culture with the Chinese online carnival. By way of conclusion, the author also stresses that our scholarly concern on transborder cultural influence from Hong Kong to the Mainland should not be narrowly limited to Chow’s film. Future studies on major parts of the Chinese online carnival not covered by this essay, including, for example, *kuaishou* or mobile games, will help to further illuminate significance of the co-creative efforts of dedicated fans, Chinese netizens, and professional cultural producers.

Touching on a different but related topic, Helena Wu's "Sports as a Lens: The Contours of Local and National Belonging in Post-handover Hong Kong" explores the trajectories of local and national belonging in various forms and degrees through the lens of sport. With an eye to cross-border sports competitions, sport-related events as well as their media representation and repercussion, this essay examines the multifarious articulations of local and national identifications registered in the athletes' and the spectators' performing bodies, their mediated images and embodiments. The author demonstrates how this in turn bespeaks the evolving Hong Kong–China relationship in the larger socio-political context of post-handover Hong Kong. The ultimate goal of this essay, as convincingly spelt out by the author, is to tease out the body and identity politics embedded in the production, mediatization, and narrativization of local–national relations in an array of official and non-official discourses that are disclosed through sports practice and viewing partaken in different cross-border scenarios. While this essay focuses on sports, it echoes nicely with the foregoing discussions on the media culture of Hong Kong. As thoughtfully concluded by the author, the growing audience attention to local athletes and contests that represent Hong Kong is reflected on the growth of sports news platform and filmmakers' and local viewers' interests in sports-related subject.

From a different perspective on a similar issue, Weng Kit Chan's "Beyond Nationhood: Border and Coming of Age in Hong Kong Cinema" probes into another important topic in the cross-border imaginary of Hong Kong cinema. The essay begins with the 1950s of Hong Kong, when a communal imagination was found to be oscillating in between the sovereignty of a British colony and the reality of a Chinese territory. Tracing the development of the influx of immigrants from the Mainland and the subsequent establishment of a border during the 1950s, the author unearths the subtle transformations of mass cultural productions brought along by the changing demographic composition of the city. Juxtaposing two films bearing the same Chinese title—Fung Fung's *The Kid* (1950) and Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung* (1999)—he explores the correlation between border, community, and nationality through the life adventures of the child protagonists in two different decades. The transitions and explorations are entangled with a political and territorial border that polarizes our Sinophonic imagination in the ongoing present of Mainland–Hong Kong division. According to the author, whether this piece of land was once desecrated by colonialism or this reclaimed territory is now alienated by renationalization, the formation of childhood serves as a critical lens to examine the meaning of border and nation from the colonial to the postcolonial eras of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's increasingly marginal, minor position in the Mainland has become a predicament as well as condition for the SAR, and it has, therefore, become more pertinent for Hong Kong Studies to consider how to move forward (Chu, 2018). In his speech delivered after he inaugurated the new Hong Kong administration on the final day of his 3-day visit to Hong Kong to mark the 20th anniversary of the resumption of Chinese sovereignty, Xi Jinping (2017) addressed Hong Kong as a "plural society" with "different views and even major differences on some issues," but he also warned that "any attempt to endanger China's sovereignty and security, challenge the power of the central government," or to "use Hong Kong to carry out infiltration and sabotage against the Mainland is an act that crosses the red line and is absolutely impermissible." While Beijing has become more proactive, if not tougher, in incorporating the SARs into the Mainland, whether the plurality of Hong Kong culture and society will disappear or not is a key question to ask. At this particular juncture, integration with the Mainland, whether Hong Kong likes it or not, has become a topic very important for the consideration of the future of Hong Kong culture and the city per se. Furthermore, according to the official website of the Greater Bay Area administered by the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau (2019): "we will facilitate the development of

industries in which Hong Kong's strengths lie in the Greater Bay Area, capitalizing on Hong Kong's strengths to serve the country's needs." Given the emphasis on the development of industries (to be fair, the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau does have something to say about culture, but the statement on "Arts & Culture, Creative Industries and Intellectual Property" focuses mainly on industries, not culture), finance, trade, and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education are being held in esteem in Hong Kong as well as the Greater Bay Area; thus, a cultural studies response to the blueprint has to be in order, or else it cannot but be further marginalized.

The essays in these special issues have responded to cross-border ventures in various ways, offering different views and engaging with one another as to shed light on how the changing borderscape might have impacts on the future development of Hong Kong culture. Further researches on the paradigm shift of Mainland–Hong Kong cross-border cooperation in the cultural realm will lead to a larger project on the transmission and transformation of Hong Kong culture in the Mainland. Theoretical innovations lie in its turn away from the Mainland–Hong Kong dichotomy, shifting the emphasis on the study of Hong Kong culture to cultural translations across the border. In the long run, the research into the paradigm shift of Mainland–Hong Kong cross-border ventures in the cultural realm will also hopefully throw light on a larger project on the transformation of Hong Kong Studies as an academic discipline along its transforming borders.

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## Notes

1. The theme of this special issue was inspired by a guest panel organized for the First Annual Meeting of Society for Hong Kong Studies held on 22 June 2019 at the University of Hong Kong. I am indebted to Weng Kit Chan for using the idea of bordering as the main subject of the panel.
2. The five relaxation measures are the following: (1) to remove the restriction on the number of Hong Kong people participating in Mainland film productions; (2) to remove the restriction on percentage of artistes and requirement of Mainland-related plots in motion pictures jointly produced by the Mainland and Hong Kong (Mainland–Hong Kong co-productions); (3) to waive the fees for establishing Mainland–Hong Kong co-production projects; (4) to allow Hong Kong films and film practitioners to apply for nomination for awards in Mainland film festivals; and (5) to allow Hong Kong film companies to apply for incentives for distributing and promoting outstanding Mainland motion pictures and Mainland–Hong Kong co-productions in Hong Kong, Macao and overseas.

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