correspondents at large

Dispatch from Hong Kong

SHUANG SHEN

I MOVED TO HONG KONG ABOUT FOURTEEN MONTHS AGO TO TEACH IN A LIBERAL ARTS UNIVERSITY LOCATED IN THE NEW TERRITORIES, ON THE border between Hong Kong and mainland China, about half an hour away by bus. Before coming to Hong Kong, I had taught for a few years in several American institutions, ranging from a community college to a research university. The courses I taught were mostly in Asian American literature, postcolonial literature, and Chinese literature in translation. Immersed as a graduate student and a teacher in American multiculturalism, postcolonialism, and ethnic studies, I have found a great deal of difference between the situation in Hong Kong and the social contexts of the United States and former colonial nations in South Asia, in which most ethnic, multicultural, and postcolonial theories are situated.

If multiculturalism can be evaluated through the superficial marker of multilingualism, then Hong Kong is in some respects more advanced than the United States. For instance, the official policy of language in schools and other public institutions is "Two written languages; Three spoken languages," clearly recognizing the three major languages that are used in the public life of this city: Mandarin, Cantonese, and English. (Considering the extensive use of Cantonese in various areas of the social life here, I think it's more appropriate to refer to it as a language rather than a dialect.) In addition, if one looks at the great variety of multilingual print culture, the city's easy access to the latest cultural products from the West, and, most important, the relative freedom from censorship in the public sphere, then Hong Kong is an enviable place particularly for many people living in mainland China. However, this picture of urban life here is superficial.

The fact that several languages get official recognition does not necessarily imply that there is smooth communication between them. The public life in Hong Kong is in fact decentered and divided. As a bilingual speaker of Mandarin Chinese and English, I did not need long after arriving here to realize that two languages were inadequate

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if I wanted to participate fully in the social life. Of course, many people manage everyday life and even sophisticated intellectual discussions with one language; however, turning on the radio or television or going to a 7-Eleven store to browse through local newspapers makes it clear that one misses a large portion of public discussion by not speaking or reading all three major languages. This is not to count the languages of other minority groups, what one scholar has called "the invisible neighbors" of the Chinese community (Luo Guixiang). In other words, the linguistic policy of multiple languages recognizes the heterogeneity of the languagescape without fundamentally solving the deeply seated problems with communication among language or cultural groups, nor does it completely establish equilibrium among cultures and languages. Chinese-language and English-language Hong Kong literatures, for instance, are read by different groups of readers and studied by different departments in the university.

Underneath these cultural issues is the nagging question of what and how much has changed since the sovereignty of Hong Kong passed from the British to the Chinese government in 1997 (the transition is commonly referred to as the "handover"). For a while before 1997, Hong Kong was the center of global attention because of the ambivalence and uncertainty associated with its future. A more or less unified discourse of Hong Kong's identity was formulated by the joint efforts of several social sectors. Cultural critics such as Rey Chow and Ackbar Abbas helped keep English-language speakers outside Hong Kong up to speed about the uniqueness of Hong Kong's cultural formation and sensibility, which cannot be described with a monolithic notion of "Chineseness." Some critics now are dissatisfied with that discussion of Hong Kong's identity. Mirana Szeto and the cultural critic Luo Yongsheng have argued on different occasions that the discourse of Hong Kong's double marginality, vis-à-vis the West and mainland China, cannot adequately address the internal disparities or the complicated political and social entanglement with mainland China. Szeto writes self-reflexively that "Hong Kong cultural workers were able to jump-start the project of postcolonial cultural examination without even a clear decolonization project. The ruling conglomeration of business and privileged constituencies in Hong Kong remains untouched by postcolonial critique." She points out that the rhetoric of double marginality can be easily exploited by Hong Kong capitalists who fashion Hong Kong into a model of modernity and try to expand its sphere of economic exploitation north to mainland China. Szeto therefore calls for more rigorous self-reflection, particularly about Hong Kong's colonial history, stating that "Hong Kong cultural studies still has a lot to figure out in terms of unrecognized residual and mutant coloniality" (256).

Postcolonial criticism presents itself as a critique of residual coloniality, particularly of the elements that are perpetuated by the postcolonial nation-state, and the transition in Hong Kong from coloniality to postcoloniality, if it has occurred, is even more ambivalent than it is in most postcolonial nation-states. Luo Yongsheng reminds us that Hong Kong's official status as a colony was tenuous to begin with and that after 1949 the Chinese nation-state perceived Hong Kong not *entirely* as a colony but as a locality inside its territory whose status could be partially determined by the Chinese nation-state (78). In other words, prolonging the lifespan of coloniality in Hong Kong was a politically strategic move, as the fate of the 1967 riot and anti-imperialist movement testifies. Since nationalism and colonialism did not stand in opposition to each other, the handover in 1997 should be considered a moment of renationalization, rather than decolonization, according to Luo Yongsheng and other local critics. As a matter of fact, Wang Huilin, a local legal expert and writer for the media, states that today Hong

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Kong is still at the political stage of decolonization: "Hong Kong's political structure is similar to that in many former colonies before they acquired independence. This is the time when the seeds of democracy are still in fermentation and anti-British forces are still being formed" (58; my trans.).

While these remarks may not imply political, social, and cultural alienation from Chineseness, they do convey the discontent with and distrust of the governance of the Special Administration Region (SAR) and express the local residents' frustration over the lack of self-determination and independence. Szeto tells us, "In the year after Hong Kong changed from British to Chinese sovereignty, there was an average of three demonstrations a day, massive or small. In 2001–2, there was an average of six a day" (255). Another local cultural critic, Liang Wendao, wrote that in April of 2007, around the ten-year anniversary of the handover, a poll conducted by Hong Kong University on identity issues in Hong Kong showed that forty-one percent of the interviewees preferred the identity of a SAR resident; twenty-one percent did not indicate strong preference for any identity; and thirty-one percent preferred the identity of "a colonial subject before 1997" (my trans.). Liang argues that the last figure, striking as it is, may not indicate that these people do not identify with Chineseness or have no patriotic feelings. However, this figure shows that some people do not distinctly separate the colonial and the national stage of Hong Kong's history. Their perception of continuity calls for a more rigorous investigation of the nature of Hong Kong's coloniality and its lingering effect on contemporary social life.

The tenuousness of Hong Kong's transition already implies that a particular sense of time and space represented by its literature and culture is key to locating the linkage between cultural forms and social history. Although issues of time and place are constitutive elements of postcolonial epistemology, as we can see in such typical postcolonial fiction as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, postcolonial epistemology is usually set against that of the nation-state. Time and space in Hong Kong literature and culture are quite different from the epistemology of the Chinese nation-state, but one cannot say that responses toward the epistemologies of the British or the Chinese nation-state are solely determinant of Hong Kong's particular sense of time and space. Hong Kong's epistemology also responds to the city's unique social history as an entry port where rapid flows of capital, commodities, culture, and human beings quickly change people's living environments and their senses of history and home. Since, at least until recently, Hong Kong has been more susceptible to the influence of global capitalism than Britain and China have been, one cannot gain full access to the epistemology of Hong Kong by merely deconstructing colonialist or nationalist ideology. Perhaps we can think of the city's unique sense of time and space as reacting against but not entirely determined by colonial or national epistemologies. An errant tendency is perhaps one of the most important qualities that distinguish Hong Kong cultural criticism from standard postcolonial criticism.

Because of the ambiguity of the city's identity and the complexity of its history, studies of Hong Kong culture and literature often call for a creative amalgamation of multiple theories and perspectives drawn from different fields, such as postcolonial studies, history, urban studies, diaspora studies, and Chinese studies. Hong Kong is not an easy fit in any of these academic disciplines. Even though contemporary cultural criticism of Hong Kong still relies heavily on Western theory, many local scholars have become aware of the danger of using certain catch phrases, such as *hybridity*, *postmodern*, or even *postcolonial*, to describe their own cultural history. At the same time, reflections on the unique setup of higher education institutions in Hong Kong (more prone

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to influence from the government and the economy than are those in the United States) and on their relation to knowledge formation are beginning to emerge from local critics. All these developments, which point toward the potential formation of a local knowledge framework, concur with local social activism. A recent activist event took place in late 2006 and early 2007 when students, cultural workers, and other citizens took possession of the Star Ferry Pier and the Queen's Pier, preventing the government from demolishing these landmarks for the purpose of urban renewal and development. This kind of activist movement symbolizes a real democratic urge from below and to a certain extent can change urban space and history. Therefore, I think it's important that scholars outside Hong Kong be informed about the city's social and cultural developments and accurately understand Hong Kong's particular history of colonialism and process of decolonization.

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