

Peripheral Vision: Chinese Cultural Studies in Hong Kong

Eric Kit-wai Ma

If cultural studies exhibits the feature of radical contextualism, then any tale about the cultural studies of a particular locale will depend very much on the sociocultural location of the storyteller. As a local who was born and grew up in the formative years of colonial Hong Kong, my tale about Chinese cultural studies will be very much colored by my experiences in Hong Kong and my academic training in the UK. My discursive position enables me to map the forms of cultural studies in Hong Kong with an ethnographic closeness to the specificity of the local academic community. However, my rather restrictive sociocultural position is also preventing me from giving a balanced account of Chinese cultural studies in general terms. In doing so, I would have to erase the internal contradictions between Hong Kong and China, which are two drastically different historical formations. Although Hong Kong is now part of China, there are still strong tensions between centrifugal impulses of localization and internationalization and the centripetal force of resinicization and renationalization (Ma 1999; 2000). Based on a dozen interviews with local scholars, this chapter is a small discursive fragment of Chinese cultural studies narrated from the vantage point of Hong Kong. Instead of recycling theses and bibliographies, I want to contextualize cultural studies in Hong Kong by talking about the ways in which it has been embodied in the biographies of academics and histories of institutions. Thus this is not a chapter about theoretical debates, but a map of how cultural studies has been fostered within and across institutional and cultural spaces. From the peripheral vision of Hong Kong, I will also briefly contrast the forms of cultural studies in Hong Kong with those practiced in Mainland China.

Specificity

Cultural studies in Hong Kong has emerged from the specific sociocultural contexts of decolonization and renationalization. It is carried by individuals

who translate and revise cultural theories in their research and teaching in their particular habitats in Hong Kong. The various brands of cultural studies in the UK engage culture along the elite/popular, mainstream/subcultural, and national/local axes. These emphases have to be reworked to suit the specificity of the Hong Kong case. The first point of contrast is the question of the nation-state. In the postwar decades, Hong Kong was a colony without a nation. In order to avoid political antagonism, both the Chinese and British governments refrained from imposing strong nationalistic imperatives on local culture. This meant that, for many years, Hong Kong people did not have a strong historical or national narrative to situate their own subjectivity. Colonial politics was mysteriously disguised by administrative diversion (Law 1998; Chiu 1997). In the years before and after the sovereignty change, this suppression of national narrative has fueled the desire for reclaiming histories among the general public as well as local intellectuals (Ma 1998). As a result, cultural studies scholars in Hong Kong have been more concerned with articulating local identity and less with resisting state power. This is in quite sharp contrast with the major thrust of cultural studies in Mainland China, where state power is highly visible. Since the early 1990s, the Chinese state has consolidated its power by promoting a consumer culture that fosters and satisfies social desire (Wang 1999; 1998). It has absorbed the power of the market and shored up popular support by the dialectic of occasional coercion and winning of general consent (Ma 2000). Cultural studies in China, which has been gathering weight since the 1990s, has devoted much of its energy in negotiating a discursive space between strong state control and rising market forces.

The second point of contrast is the relevancy of class analysis. Hong Kong experienced a structural expansion in the postwar decades. Compressed economic growth and the opening up of professional sectors promoted upward mobility and obfuscated class lines. Working-class families were relatively less restricted to their class position because of the structural changes brought about by industrialization and technological advancement. Economic transformation and the sudden population increase led to a truncation of whatever class structure had existed previously (Leung 1996). Arguments of cultural studies that stress class resistance cannot be applied directly in the Hong Kong context. This can be contrasted with cultural studies in China, where class analysis is still a legacy of the Left and the recent opening up of capitalist markets has triggered some class related issues such as the exploitation of female workers in many coastal provinces (Tan 1999). However, since the 1990s, class issues have become more visible in Hong Kong as economic inequality has worsened and the structural expansion of the middle sectors has come to a halt after the Asian economic meltdown in 1997. Some social activists affiliated with cultural studies have recently been quite active in attending to issues related to the structural poverty of the Hong Kong working class (Ip & Lam 1999).

The third point of contrast is on the question of high culture. Hong Kong has been an immigrant society for many years. More specifically, in the late

1940s and the early 1950s, political refugees from China flooded into the colony, and as a result, the Hong Kong population was increased by more than half within a few years. Hong Kong as we now know it is comprised mainly of mainland migrants and their descendants. As an immigrant society, the cultural makeup of Hong Kong does not privilege an elite culture (Luk 1995). Or to put it in another way, elitist/traditional Chinese culture is recognized only as a remote cultural authority but does not have a dominant discursive power in the everyday life of Hong Kong people. Thus the painstaking valorization of popular culture against the hegemony of high culture in some of the now classic Birmingham projects is not readily relevant in the Hong Kong context. In Hong Kong, the mass culture debate has been less intense. Although the study of popular culture as a decent academic project has still been problematic, popular culture in itself hasn't attracted the kind of contempt from the elite as in other established cultures. In fact, popular culture cut across grassroot and elite classes to become the cradle of a collective local identity in the 1970s and the 1980s (Ma 1999). Without the discipline of and the resistive pressure against high culture, subcultural formations in Hong Kong are less visible. This means a very influential subfield of cultural studies cannot be easily translated into Hong Kong. In contrast, when I attended a cultural studies conference (entitled *Media and Local Cultural Production*) in Beijing for the first time in 1999, my impression was that cultural studies in China, as compared with cultural studies in Hong Kong, exhibits a stronger discursive struggle between elitist and popular culture. Cultural studies in China puts more stress on issues such as the cultural leadership of intellectuals, the legacy of literature and the avant-garde, and the archaeology of the notions of the "mass" and the "people." In contrast, in Hong Kong, the study of high culture and the less than influential role of intellectuals are at best marginal on the research agenda of cultural studies (see the special features on the problematic identity of Hong Kong intellectuals in *Hong Kong Cultural Studies Bulletin*, issue 6, 1996 and issue 2, 1995).

Indigenization

In Hong Kong, cultural studies has emerged in academic discourses and become very visible since the 1990s. However, it has merged with and been reinforced by the historical formation of the study of indigenous Hong Kong culture which has an earlier history than cultural studies. For many years, indigenous Hong Kong culture had been narrated from the point of view of the political and cultural centers of imperial China and, later, Britain. These early narratives of Hong Kong described Hong Kong as a cultural desert and as a barren rock (Wong et al. 1997). Seen as an unworthy academic subject, Hong Kong Studies did not have a visible presence in local colleges and universities. One notable exception was the anthropological tradition of studying the rural areas of Hong Kong (e.g. Ward

1983; Hayes 1983). The anthropological conception of culture as the everyday enabled early anthropologists to avoid the dominant discourse of Hong Kong as a place without (elitist) culture.

In the 1960s, the local generation, which began to experience a strong sense of collectivity, could not find a narrative space to situate their indigenous experiences. This started to change with the first generation of local academics who studied overseas and came back to Hong Kong in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Some of them started to develop research that focused more on local issues. Motivated by a strong identification with local culture, they struggled to find discursive spaces within and beyond academic institutions. Some of the pioneers in Hong Kong Studies fought guerrilla wars in formal universities which privileged established disciplines. They did research on local histories and cultural identities under departments such as education, history, anthropology, literature, and sociology. Their endeavors were not recognized as “decent” research. Nevertheless, in the late 1970s and the 1980s, universities were not policed by strict research assessment technologies, and these pioneers were pretty much left alone to do their own work (see Sinn 1995; Cheung & Tam 1999).

Thus in the 1970s and 1980s, Hong Kong Studies negotiated its path along various institutional inroads. But since the early 1990s, a small fraction of Hong Kong Studies has taken a new turn by merging with cultural studies. One moment of crystallization was a conference organized by Hong Kong University in 1991. The conference was entitled “Hong Kong Culture and Society,” and was organized by a team headed by Elizabeth Sinn from the History Department. This was a very localized (conducted in Cantonese) conference, bringing together scholars from very diverse disciplines as well as professionals from the cultural industries. The conference transgressed academic boundaries and put Hong Kong culture on the research agenda. Participants recalled that the conference had indeed fostered a sense of a community of scholars doing Hong Kong Studies. Although not all papers presented at this conference could be generalized under the umbrella of cultural studies, some use the arguments and language of cultural studies. The introductory papers coined phraseology like “New Directions in Cultural Studies” (Ng 1995) and “Prolegomena on Cultural Studies in Hong Kong” (Chan 1995), calling attention to everyday cultural practices and the complicated articulation of local identities. The conference motivated further engagements, some of which have been developing along the lines of sociohistorical analyses, while others have incorporated cultural studies as a tool of teaching and research. Since the early 1990s, courses introducing cultural studies have been proposed and taught. Some have gathered weight to become cultural studies departments, which I will discuss in the next section.

As I pointed out earlier, in Hong Kong, British cultural studies is not readily applicable to resisting the power of the nation and the elite. However, the intellectual sentiment of cultural studies in valorizing resistance has been assimilated to the particular academic formation of Hong Kong Studies. This is not to

say that cultural studies in Hong Kong is only the study of Hong Kong culture, and that Hong Kong Studies is only conducted in the language of cultural studies. There are many scholars doing Hong Kong Studies without any affiliation with cultural studies. But what is interesting is that, at a certain discursive moment, a number of people who have been studying local culture adopt and appropriate the language of cultural studies to articulate and empower their own work. In fact, a few local scholars tend to liberally and interchangeably use the labels “Hong Kong Cultural Studies,” “Cultural Studies,” and “Hong Kong Studies.” Here, cultural studies is not deployed to deconstruct elitist culture or resist state power, but is adopted to open up the possibility of discussing and describing the once voiceless local culture. Furthermore, various theories of cultural studies have been utilized to make sense of the multifaceted identity politics of the political transition of the 1990s. During this transition period, the imagination of the end of Hong Kong unleashed a series of nostalgic desires and redemptive impulses to save local culture. Key concepts of cultural studies such as cultural imagination, overdetermination, articulation, hegemony, and resistance have triggered the chain reaction of inventing new words and expressions to capture the moment of disappearance and rearticulations of Hong Kong culture before and after 1997 (see Leung 1995; Chan et al. 1994a; Erni, forthcoming). Some local cultural studies scholars even try to rethink the marginalization of Hong Kong culture from the opposite end – they write about the exploitative capitalistic culture of Hong Kong which is fueled by a “northbound imaginary” reproducing itself in cities in mainland China (Law et al. 1997). These academic exercises and self-therapeutic writings have produced provocative papers, which have landed in international conferences and journals and, in return, reinforced further research on the local culture of Hong Kong.

Institutionalization

Since the late 1990s, cultural studies has been formally incorporated into academic institutions as departments offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. The process of institutionalization demonstrates an interesting pattern of complicated struggles with mixed imperatives. There are three major institutional initiatives to build cultural studies programs in local universities, and they are directly or indirectly related to English departments. The first, forerunning initiative was within the English Department at the University of Hong Kong. At first, new courses on local culture and cultural studies met with strong resistance on the ground that Hong Kong University, as the best in the colony, should maintain a high standard of English, especially in the flagship English Department. Research projects, such as those on Hong Kong popular novels and films, were seen as marginal at best and illegitimate at worst. Yet courses and postgraduate research projects on Hong Kong culture continued to be

welcomed by students and finally gathered weight to spin off, in 1989, the new Comparative Literature Department, which is more liberal in redefining the boundaries of literature. The initial proposal of naming this new department a cultural studies department was rejected. Under the name of Comparative Literature, it has been offering cultural studies and literature courses since the early 1990s.

The birth of the Modern Languages and Inter-Cultural Studies Department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong followed a similar pattern. In the early 1990s, a very visible cultural studies project was initiated by a cross-disciplinary team with core members coming from the English Department at the Chinese University. The cultural studies project promoted interdisciplinary collaboration and published the bilingual *Hong Kong Cultural Studies Bulletin*. Selected papers from the bulletin were later published in a series of anthologies by Oxford University Press (e.g. Chan 1997a, 1997b; Law 1997). This was the first collaboration which officially bore the name cultural studies and was funded by a competitive institutional grant offered by the University Grants Committee. Yet work related to this big project was not recognized by the English Department. Conflicts intensified as research students and assistants started to develop more research on local culture. Since most of these studies analyzed cultural texts which were in written Chinese or spoken Cantonese, their legitimacy within the English Department was challenged. The disputes spilled over into a war of words within and outside the department, in the form of protest letters, billboard statements, and a proposal for a new department. Finally, a new department, the Department of Modern Languages and Inter-Cultural Studies, was set up to offer both postgraduate and undergraduate degrees in cultural studies.

A couple of interrelated imperatives motivated the split of cultural studies away from English departments in both universities. It was partly motivated by the colonial imperative to maintain the purity of the English language, but this argument was conflated with the administrative mandate of keeping up the competitive edge of Hong Kong as an English-speaking international city. Besides, the canon of exemplary English literature could not accommodate local culture as a legitimate academic subject. Disciplinary differentiation has become inevitable. However, in the case of the Chinese University, the establishment of the new cultural studies department was not just a heroic story of rebellion. In fact, its birth was partly a result of administrative calculation. The department now comprises different groups of people – members of the former European language sections and dissidents from the English department, all now merged and housed under one new department to streamline administrative resources.

The third initiative has resulted in the launch of the first full-blown cultural studies program in the territory. It is an outgrowth of the School of General Education at Lingnan College. This former college has recently been upgraded to a university and the new administration has positioned it as a liberal arts

institute. Compatible with this new institutional positioning, cultural studies can serve as a niche for competing against established universities. Thus a new cultural studies department has evolved not as a threat to traditional disciplines but as an edge on the unique identity of the young institution. In contrast with those evolving from English departments, this department originated from General Education, which shares the same educational mandates of enlightenment and empowerment. The department now has faculty members from anthropology, sociology, media studies, comparative literature, and philosophy. Stephen Chan, one of the major architects of the department, was the group leader of the pioneering cultural studies project at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He left the English Department there to join Lingnan's cultural studies program. In the initial stages, the administration might not thoroughly know the what, how, and why of cultural studies, but the simple fact is that it draws a large number of applicants and presents an alternative to classical studies. The setting up of the department is very much in line with the institutional needs of Lingnan University.

The recent institutionalization of cultural studies marks the partial differentiation between cultural studies and Hong Kong Studies. As noted in the previous section, the major form of expression of cultural studies in Hong Kong has been the convergence of cultural studies with Hong Kong Studies. Cultural studies has been appropriated as one of the many tools to legitimize indigenous culture. Yet the sense of urgency triggered by the sovereignty change in 1997 has diminished in recent years. Furthermore, the process of developing cultural studies into a program offering degrees suggests the unavoidable differentiation between a body of theoretical knowledge (cultural studies) and a topic of inquiry (Hong Kong Studies). There were initially two proposals for the cultural studies program at Lingnan University. One was smaller in scale and was a localized program on Hong Kong culture; the other was bigger and more integrative, treating cultural studies as a body of theories and practices and Hong Kong Studies as one of the many topics of cultural analysis. The second option has been adopted. Now the cultural studies program at Lingnan integrates cultural studies with traditional courses in sociology, history, and literature as well as courses in Hong Kong society and culture. On the other hand, the cultural studies department at the Chinese University is comprised of linguistics and European studies. The department tries to build a unique identity by naming itself "Inter-Cultural Studies" to mark the particular in-betweenness of the Hong Kong context. Inter-Cultural Studies, as explained by Kin-yuen Wong, the department chair, stresses the strength of navigating in between different cultures but not privileging any single dominant cultural frame of reference. These institutional setups redirect the attention of some local scholars into the building of courses and curriculums of cultural studies. In the coming years, cultural studies will continue to be a project which valorizes local culture, but there will be a new thrust to transform cultural studies into an education project for local university students.

Camouflage

One interesting observation that has emerged from the interviews is the metamorphism of cultural studies within institutional spaces. Besides those cultural studies programs mentioned above, there are people doing and teaching cultural studies in various departments which do not bear the name of cultural studies. In some departments of local universities, labels such as cultural studies, womens studies, postcolonial studies are still considered to be troublesome by the administration. However, young scholars can smuggle in cultural studies theories under different course titles. They can do cultural studies under the camouflage of traditional courses, general education electives, and topical studies without altering the basic setup of established academic programs. In canonized disciplines such as English and Chinese languages, the tactic of doing cultural studies without naming it provides a space for subversive maneuvering.

Cultural studies can be incorporated into the social sciences relatively more easily than into the humanities. A little bit of cultural studies is welcomed by the social science departments because it attracts students and can be translated into resources. Of course there are subtle resistances. Sometimes cultural studies is seen as soft “discursive” theory, which is fashionable but snooty and speculative. Most receptive to cultural studies are general education units, which embrace cultural studies as one of the tools of empowerment. As noted, the first full-blown cultural studies program was initiated by the School of General Education at Lingnan College (now university). In 1999 the General Education Centre at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University started an annual conference on Hong Kong Culture. Cultural studies is staged as a competitive edge. Generally speaking, my informants can easily propose and teach cultural studies as general education courses.

Except for those who are now formally committed to cultural studies within institutional settings, many of my informants were ambivalent towards cultural studies. They did not mind doing cultural studies “part-time” and wearing that hat for a while, as long as the relevant theories and practices were useful in their own research and teaching. But they are more comfortable navigating in between disciplinary and institutional spaces, using cultural studies as theoretical leverage for their own pursuits. They take cultural studies as an enabler for them to give a voice to Hong Kong’s marginal yet energetic local identity, to explore the academically illegitimate subject of popular culture, to take pleasure in transgressing disciplines, and to fuel their humanistic desire for social and cultural intervention. They are attracted to cultural studies because of its in-betweenness and ambiguity. However, their alliance with cultural studies is contingent and situational and some maintain a fairly critical distance. A few say they don’t understand some esoteric forms of cultural studies but have participated in relevant collaborative projects anyway; others say they are

happy with the cultural studies tag but do not want to commit to it because to them, cultural studies, as an academic fashion, may not last long. They are more concerned with their own research interests than committing to just one trend of thought. These tendencies of refusing to be defined are in fact compatible with cultural studies' basic tenets of flexible and reflexive incorporation of whatever is useful in the war of positions to make minute advances on various cultural fronts.

Transgression

It is difficult to disentangle biography and academic formation or the personal inclination of intellectuals and the discursive impact of cultural studies in the academic community of Hong Kong. Despite some very obvious differences, the dozen informants I interviewed exhibit a converging academic temperament. Most of them had impulses to transgress academic boundaries, negate the orthodox, redefine the canon, and reset the academic agenda. At the same time, they refrained from describing and prescribing a definition for cultural studies, especially when they referred to the kind of cultural studies they were doing.

A few of my informants were quite rebellious against the intelligentsia established in Hong Kong in their college years. The extreme form can be an outright dismissal of local university education. Some say that their formal training in Hong Kong universities was dull and irrelevant. One of them critically redefines his undergraduate training in philosophy by the theoretical language of cultural studies. He says that the well-respected neo-Confucianists at the Chinese University were actually intellectuals who migrated from the political center of China in the north to the peripheral colony in the south. From within the marginality of Hong Kong, they imagined, essentialized, idealized, and regenerated Chinese Culture under the name of neo-Confucianism. Of course, not many of my informants were as critical. Some were quite moderate in commenting on their academic training in Hong Kong. They came into contact with Western cultural theories by reading books outside the regular curriculum. Many of them were student activists. Their involvement in student publications, social movements, and public forums prompted them to borrow and apply theories old and new from various local and Western sources. Since there has been no formal cultural studies program in Hong Kong and abroad until very recently, cultural studies has been appropriated in very diverse ways, mostly in a contingent and do-it-yourself fashion.

Most of my informants also have an intellectual history of transgressing the boundaries of their own discipline. As I mentioned in the first section, they reset the research agenda by putting Hong Kong cultural studies into the map of colonial education. Most of them expressed the desire to borrow concepts and methods from other disciplines. They think that relying on just one discipline is

too restrictive in the analysis and critique of cultural phenomena which are oftentimes multifaceted and interdisciplinary in nature. One informant, trained in comparative literature, started to do ethnography some ten years ago. She thought that textually based research was “dead.” She has appropriated sociological and anthropological methods in her recent research and sees textual research as too speculative. Another informant, also from comparative literature, thought that limiting oneself to the study of classical texts is a dead end for the discipline since it cannot take care of the ongoing popular cultural texts of the times. People from media studies, including myself, are not satisfied with the professionalization of media studies which reduces the social aspects of communication issues into a mere mediacentric problematic. People in sociology are self-critical of the grand narrative of social theory; instead, they use cultural studies as a tool to explore the everydayness of sociocultural routines. Those committed to early critical theories find cultural studies fascinating because it enables them to deviate from the fixation on macropolitical economy and to engage in critique of elitist as well as consumer culture. Besides transgressing their own disciplinary boundaries, my informants tended to want to transgress the boundaries of academic institutions and engage culture in public forums. At different points of time in their career, they participated in cultural criticism, social networking, and all sorts of educational and civic projects.

Yet these initiatives should not be romanticized. As one of my informants aptly pointed out, the interdisciplinarity of cultural studies in Hong Kong is more personal than collective. It is a rather personal endeavor of traveling and temporarily dwelling in different theoretical terrains. Still a lone researcher, the interdisciplinary culturalist appropriates different approaches in different academic ecologies. Interdisciplinarity seems to be more of an individual reflexive act than a commitment to developing interdisciplinary networks. What really surprised me in those interviews was how little communication and interaction there was among peers. Some told me that there is virtually no academic exchange between colleagues. One talked about the frustration of organizing a big and “successful” cross-disciplinary conference but ending up without substantial exchanges between participants from relevant fields. Transgressing boundaries involves highly selective appropriation of a narrow range of exotic theories, leaving out the difficult and unfamiliar core, and then returning to the comfortable academic habitat of one’s own discipline. The situation would change, as cultural studies departments are now formally appointing faculty members from diverse disciplines under the same roof. But it is always good to be reminded that academic transgression is more often an imagined ideal. This is not to negate interdisciplinary initiatives such as the cultural studies conferences and joint projects organized by various parties in Hong Kong. However, these joint ventures so far have mostly been effective in providing a space for cross-disciplinary awareness and fostering a sense of the collective identity of an imagined interdisciplinary community of cultural studies scholars.

Decontextualization

Most people doing cultural studies have a strong commitment to locality. Cultural studies is an academic commitment in the broadest sense. It involves funding, publication, circulation of ideas, and various sorts of cultural engagement. Some cultural studies people are more concerned with theoretical exploration; others are driven by the desire for social and cultural intervention. The imperatives of social intervention on the one hand and academic endeavors on the other can be mutually reinforcing. But in the particular context of Hong Kong, the two are sometimes contradictory and mutually negating. In recent years, academic activities in local universities have been monitored by very restrictive measures. There has been stronger pressure for academics to publish in English and in international journals rather than local and regional journals. Publishing in Chinese, in some cases, can be academically suicidal. This control of academic production has produced a very strange cultural studies contour in Hong Kong.

As an international city and a former British colony, English is taught in schools and used in the business sector. However, most people in Hong Kong speak Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese in their everyday life. The most vibrant forms of popular culture are mostly in Cantonese. English of course is an integral part of Hong Kong culture and is hybridized with the local dialect. Hong Kong people are quite famous for incorporating broken English expressions into their Cantonese. Thus we have a local culture which is embodied and expressed by the hybridized languages of Cantonese, Mandarin, and English. But if we map out the discursive power of these languages, Cantonese is most powerful in the everyday, and English, and increasingly Mandarin, are more powerful in the political and economic sectors. English has more cultural capital in the elitist sense, while Cantonese is more dynamic in the everyday.

Doing cultural studies, doing it in English, and writing for competitive international journals mean that one has to translate Hong Kong's hybrid culture into English and then generalize and exoticize it for the international academic community. This transnationalizing is neither necessarily good nor bad. Theorizing and generalizing cultural studies can add to the diversity of cultural analyses. These exercises encourage intercultural sensitivity by exoticizing the domestic and domesticating Western theories to explain local particularities (e.g. Abbas 1997). However, in the case of Hong Kong, the international pull is far greater than the commitment to locality. The disciplinary techniques of forced retirement, naming of inactive researchers, and denial of tenure are rewarding high theorization and punishing local commitment.

Thus there is a differential of visibility of different brands of Hong Kong cultural studies in the international and local academic communities. Those who are committed to the locality and conduct their work in Chinese are less visible, while those fluent in the dominant theoretical (and English) language are more visible on the international scene. Outsiders may not know much about the work

of activists in Hong Kong who write cultural criticism in newspapers, display exhibits, organize study groups, record and analyze the life histories of marginal communities, publish oral histories of old women and migrants, and map out the city space of old districts (e.g. Kowk 1999; New Women 1998; Choi 1998; Leung 1996; Man 1997). This work is committed to the local culture but is quite invisible and often not recognized as rigorous academic activities by the university administration.

Here I am not playing the card of identity politics by drawing lines between insiders and outsider. I simply want to point out a particular form of discursive contour quite different from, say, the early Birmingham trajectories, of which the research outputs were targeted primarily to engage and intervene in local culture, but of course had theoretical relevancy to international academic communities at large. In Hong Kong, the academic energies of cultural studies have been diverted to fit into the international picture. For instance, speaking from my personal experience, I channel my energy into writing, quite often with much difficulty, in English, and getting my works published in international journals. On the other hand, I am reluctant to accept invitations to write in Chinese. My habit is to reserve my best hours to write in English, and then write in Chinese when I am exhausted. And I usually reserve the “left overs” of my research for Chinese outlets. If cultural studies is a project which gives a voice to the voiceless, then doing cultural studies in Hong Kong is giving a very strange voice to Hong Kong indeed. The primary audiences of academic output are international journal reviewers and not local scholars and laymen.

My rather strange cultural studies engagement can be put into sharper focus when compared with the practice of a Beijing cultural studies group. I attended a Beijing cultural studies conference for the first time in 1999. I was very impressed by the work of the Beijing cultural studies group led by Dai Jinhua, who is well informed in Western theories but does her research, writing, and teaching in Chinese. She creatively invents and revises cultural studies concepts and theories and domesticates them into the Chinese language (Dai 1999; Wang et al. 2000). Her works are very influential in creating new discursive spaces in the specific locality of Beijing. At the same time, she has been engaging in academic exchanges with international academic networks outside China. In contrast, institutional pressure causes cultural studies in Hong Kong to lopsidedly privilege the international and undermine the local. The power of cultural studies to engage the local is hampered by the distorted dynamic of this form of academic decontextualization.

Postscript

I was asked to write a chapter on cultural studies in Asia. Soon I found that the task was beyond by ability. Asian countries have wildly different social, political, and cultural formations, and it is quite impossible to generalize the

cultural studies of the criss-crossing cultures in Asia. In doing so, much would have to be generalized and flattened. Thus I have limited myself to a small fragment of Asian cultural studies as illustrated in the case of Hong Kong. However, the configuration of a fragment may be relevant to the imagination of the whole.

In the UK and the United States, the political economies of culture are relatively stable when compared with the Asian countries, where cultural formations are more dynamic and unstable. Cultural studies in the transitional societies of Asia may merge with the particular cultural formation in very specific ways in particular historical moments. In Hong Kong, the rise of local consciousness has been a primary cultural formation in the 1970s and the 1980s, and the study of this particular formation was partly triggered by, in Abbas's terms (1997), the cultural politics of disappearance in the runup to 1997. Thus cultural studies in Hong Kong have been articulated with this concern for local identity in prominence. But localized issues such as the institutionalization of cultural studies in universities, the potentialities of and barriers to interdisciplinarity, the tension between local commitment and international networking, and the mediation of cultural studies in the dominant international language of English, are not confined to the specific case of Hong Kong, and are of different degrees of relevance to cultural studies in other Asian countries.

I will end this chapter with a poem written by a cultural studies scholar in Hong Kong. For twenty some years, Ping-kwan Leung, a poet, novelist, columnist, and professor, has been transgressing disciplinary and institutional boundaries to talk about the story of Hong Kong through his creative and academic writing. In an exhibition in 1995, he placed his poems besides the fragments of a Northern Song Dynasty fish-shaped pot. This supposedly Northern pot is in fact dressed in the artistic style of the South. By creating this discursive space, he dramatically narrates a story of how the pottery of the marginalized South has been incorporated to become the art of the homogenizing North, how Hong Kong's locality can be erased by the Chinese totality, and how the rereading of a tiny fragment can contribute to the understanding of the whole.

"Fragments of a Northern Song Dynasty Fish-shaped Pot"

Were they excavated from Chaozhou mountain kilns in the south
Or from Ling Ding Isle off Tuen Mun [Hong Kong]
Salvaged?

A single fragment of fish scales leads us to imagine
Fins, jaw, and the mouth
The pot's maw wide open?

Did they set sail in those days from a southern harbor,
Along with incense, rhino horns, and elephants tusks,
To the country of the lions?

Did they rest beside a half chrysanthemum, or a finger of Buddha
Keeping company with the big ears of a cocker Spaniel
Other bits and pieces of history?

Those empowered to write history, with a stroke of the pen, incorporated
The southern kilns into those of the north, producing
A complete history

The fragments say: Please carefully study our grain
Don't read us into
Your history

Did the missing parts travel across the oceans, to be found
Perhaps on the Java seabed, or in the Philippines –
In the museum of art and artifacts?

With no respect for different developments, how can one trace the past?
With no understanding of the absent, how can one imagine
A whole fish?

Ping Kwan Leung, 1995 (trans. Martha Cheung)

Notes

I would like to thank the local scholars who were so generous in giving me their time for long interviews.

References

- Abbas, A. (1997). *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Chan, H. M. (1995). "Popular Culture and Political Society: Prolegomena on Cultural Studies in Hong Kong." In E. Sinn (ed.), *Culture and Society in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Centre for Asian Studies.
- Chan, S. C. K. (ed.) (1997a). *Cultural Imaginary and Ideology: Contemporary Hong Kong Culture and Politics Review*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press (in Chinese).
- Chan, S. C. K. (ed.) (1997b). *The Practice of Affect: Studies in Hong Kong Popular Song Lyrics*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press (in Chinese).
- Chan, S. C. K. et al. (eds.) (1994a). "Special Topic: Cultural Studies in Hong Kong." *Hong Kong Cultural Studies Bulletin*, 1: 4–12.

- Chan, S. C. K. et al. (eds.) (1994b). "An Annotated Bibliography of Studies in Hong Kong Popular Culture in the Past Twenty Years (1974–94)." *Hong Kong Cultural Studies Bulletin*, 1: 13–19.
- Cheung, S. C. H. and M. S. M. Tam (eds.) (1999). *Culture and Society of Hong Kong: A Bibliography*. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong.
- Chiu, F. Y. L. (1997). "Politics and the Body Social in Colonial Hong Kong." In T. Barlow (ed.), *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Choi, P. K. (ed.) (1998). *6:30 pm Every Evening – Female Workers in Evening Schools of the 1970s*. Hong Kong: Step Forward Press (in Chinese).
- Dai, J. (1999). *You zai jingzhong* (still in the mirror). Beijing: Knowledge Press (in Chinese).
- Erni, J. (ed.) (forthcoming). *Cultural Studies*, Special issue on Hong Kong.
- Hayes, J. (1983). *The Rural Communities of Hong Kong: Studies and Themes*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- Kowk, J. Y. C. (1999). *Ageing in the Community: Research on the Designing of Everyday Life Environment for the Elderly*. Hong Kong: School of Design, Polytechnic University of Hong Kong.
- Ip, I. C. and O. W. Lam (eds.) (1999). *Street Corners 1* (in Chinese), Special issue: poor people are lazy people?
- Law, W. S. (ed.) (1997). *Whose City: Civic Culture and Political Discourse in Post-war Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press (in Chinese).
- Law, W. S. (1998). "Managerializing Colonialism." In K. H. Chen (ed.), *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Law, W. S. et al. (1997). "Northbound Imagery: Repositioning Hong Kong Postcolonial Discourse." In S. C. K. Chan (ed.), *Cultural Imaginary and Ideology: Contemporary Hong Kong Culture and Politics Review*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press (in Chinese).
- Leung, B. K. P. (1996). *Perspectives on Hong Kong Society*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- Leung, P. K. (ed.) (1995). *Today Literary Magazine 28* (in Chinese). Issue feature: Hong Kong Culture.
- Luk, B. H. K. (1995). "Hong Kong History and Hong Kong Culture." In E. Sinn (ed.), *Culture and Society in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies (in Chinese).
- Leung, F. (1996). *Wenhua lache* (Cultural Chit Chat). Hong Kong: Hong Kong Humanities Press (in Chinese).
- Ma, Eric Kit-wai (1998). "Re-inventing Hong Kong: Memory, Identity and Television." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 1(3): 329–49.
- Ma, Eric Kit-wai (1999). *Culture, Politics and Television in Hong Kong*. London: Routledge.
- Ma, Eric Kit-wai (2000a). "Rethinking Media Studies: The Case of China." In J. Curran and M. J. Park (eds.), *Dewesternizing Media Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Ma, Eric Kit-wai (2000b). "Re-nationalization & Me: My Hong Kong Story After 1997." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1(1): 173–9.
- Man, S. W. (ed.) (1997). *Hong Kong Cultural Studies Bulletin 7*. Special issue: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights.

- New Women Association (1998). *Laughters and Tears: Oral Histories of Old Ladies*. Hong Kong: New Women Association (in Chinese).
- Ng, C. H. (1995). "New Directions in Cultural Studies." In E. Sinn (ed.), *Culture and Society in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Centre for Asian Studies.
- Sinn, E. (ed.) (1995) *Culture and Society in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Centre for Asian Studies.
- Tan, S. (1999). "Working Female Workers and their Personal Letters." Paper presented at the conference, Media and Local Cultural Production, Beijing, Dec. 13–15 (in Chinese).
- Wang, J. (1998). "Public Culture and Popular Culture: Metropolitan China at the Turn of the New Century." Paper presented at the conference, Modern and Contemporary Chinese Popular Culture, Duke University, May 8–9.
- Wang, J. (1999). "The State Question in Chinese Popular Cultural Studies." Paper presented at the conference, Media and Local Cultural Production, Beijing, Dec. 13–15.
- Wang, J. et al. (eds.) (2000). *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*. London & New York: Verso.
- Ward, B. (1983). *Through Other Eyes: Essays in Understanding "Conscious models."* Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Wong, W. C. et al. (eds.) (1997). *Hong Kong Un-imagined: History, Culture and Future*. Taipei, Taiwan: Rye Field Publishing Company (in Chinese).