

*Resistant Narratives  
at the Edge of the Sovereign State:  
Pirate Ocean and Farmer Enclave  
in Hong Kong, 1950s–2010s*

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**Abstract**

This article analyzes how two narratives about Hong Kong function as hidden resistance transcripts against Chinese state sovereignty in different historical periods. First, maritime piracy on southern Chinese coasts has been appropriated in Hong Kong regional narratives to reflect the city's collective imaginary. Pirate gang was regarded as an epitome of the refugee society of the 1950s, projecting liberation from state control. Second, inchoate agrarian narratives under the looming power of the Chinese sovereign state after the 1997 Handover seeks to secure the community as a self-sufficient place. It advocates the revival of farming in order to voice the dissent from the increasingly centralized rule, while embedding sentiment for the locality within a series of modern global discourses, such as ecology movements, organic farming, food sovereignty, and preservation of heritage. The two narratives are hidden transcripts that represent potential events to be reactivated under oppression and to play strategic roles in power politics.

Paradoxically insular and porous, Hong Kong has long been considered an accessible place where fugitives can seek asylum from the control and persecution of state authority. People desperate for refuge traditionally entered the colony with little difficulties due to its special political circumstances. This may be the reason Edward Snowden, after his public disclosure of the US global surveillance program, chose Hong Kong as his first hideout. After the Second World War, the city's prevailing populations were the refugees and escapees from China. Hong Kong's second and third generations saw their community more settled, and they may be more willing to confront the state in order to secure their home.

The historical narratives of many societies have been framed by sovereign states in the modern era. It is difficult to find a history about a community that is not integrated by a nation–state narrative. However, in Hong Kong society, there has been a different mode of depicting the past which avoids collusion with state discourse. Hong Kong as a predominantly Chinese society is constructed within a network of changing and even conflicting representations. These narratives about

Hong Kong can be understood as contradictory voices negotiating with state discourse. Such narratives may be a quiet form of defiance which rarely results in significant political change. They are a varied form of protest or a hidden resistance, though the narratives themselves may be very much based upon the established order. This article attempts to reflect on the limited options offered by these narratives, to uncover hidden resistances by giving them new meaning, and to look for their insurrectionary potential. James C. Scott has said, “the hidden transcript [could be interpreted] as a condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it” (*Domination* 191). The narratives at least help project people’s sense of social autonomy by defying the powerful discourse of the state, and may support the people to gain a sense of (political) autonomy through their symbolic defiance. The narratives could be just daytime fantasies in relation to Hong Kong people’s pragmatic adaptation to the existing realities. They may reinforce one’s subordinate position and confirm the unfair power relations. For instance, in the narrative about Hong Kong pirates, the message is that pirates have to be suppressed by the state in order to maintain a peaceful society, even though pirates are always the point of identification and the real heroes in the narrative. The fantasy about pirates could be understood as a collective longing for freedom symbolized by the open seas.

However, when the imaginary free space has been gradually closed up, the collective phantasm then shifts back to the land which appears to be confining but generates new hope for self-sufficiency. Cosmopolitan Hong Kong has been well known as a non-agricultural dwelling place. The city’s new fantasy of farming reveals its troubled relationship with China, the city’s major supplier of food. The modern nation–state tends to force people and their local communities away from self-sufficiency not only in terms of food supply, but also of consciousness to other-directed dependency (Benjamin). I call such fantasy a “narrative” because it is yet to establish itself as a coherent ideological subjectivation, although it constitutes imaginary relations to the external conditions, or functions as a socially symbolic praxis. The content of such a narrative could be conflicting in itself, revealing how it is a product of diverse collective experience and thinking. The narrative also gestures towards an imaginary liberty in which the captives are unaware they are enthralled in this collective fabulation.

Currently, a political deadlock has resulted from growing tensions between Hong Kong and China. After two decades of the Handover, Hong Kong people have gradually come to recognize that the “One Country, Two Systems” model cannot give the special administrative region any high degree of autonomy because of Beijing’s increasing intervention into the city’s internal affairs and its reluctance to carry out real democratic reforms. The tensions became sharper in the twenty-first century because the Chinese nation–state aggressively incorporates Hong Kong to be an integral part of the nation-building project. The top–

down assimilationist process has frightened Hong Kong people and heightened their anxiety of the loss of distinctiveness. Younger generations in Hong Kong became more recalcitrant toward the predatory state government and expressed their discontent in a series of social movements for heritage preservation and environment protection from the late 1990s onward, through the Umbrella Movement in 2014, to the current anti-extradition protests at the time of writing. Stronger affects for maintaining Hong Kong uniqueness have been provoked by the integrationist threat, contributing to the growth of Hong Kong passions of localism and “indigenous” expressions of place-based cultural identity. The image of the Chinese nation-state is increasingly viewed as an alien power, if not colonizer, for many Hong Kongers.

As overt resistance could not bring about the desired effects at the moment, popular expressions tend to spread fears for the city’s future. For example, the widely popular dystopian film *Ten Years* (2015) articulates Hong Kong people’s entrenched fears and paranoia in regard to China’s assimilation, revealing how disoriented and emotional the community has become. We may now need to look for other possibilities—hidden in the recent past or emerging at the moment—in the community in order to retrieve another rupture for the future political struggle. Yet, the search for such a “hidden” or “emergent” narrative could have produced what it is looking for, which is itself a performative process of constructing that which is found.

### **Piracy Narrative and Zhang Baozai**

The first narrative is about maritime pirates. Legends of the pirate Zhang Baozai (Cheung Po Tsai in Cantonese) from the nineteenth century had captured the imagination of Hong Kong people under the British colonial rule. Zhang, whose original name was Zhang Bao, was more loved than feared, to the extent that Hong Kong people nicknamed him intimately with the suffix “zai” (literally means boy, kid, or son). The older generation in Hong Kong can easily name where the caves, hiding places and hidden treasures of this celebrated pirate are located (*Zijyu, Hoenggong*), and new publications still see these locales as attractive tourist spots or historical sites (Cheung; Chu; Chui et al.; Kam; H. W. Leung; W. H. Leung; Yi Dong).

Pirate bands are believed to possess strong military clout and political power, distinct from the Chinese imperial court in terms of controlling sea routes, collecting taxes and governing territories. Chinese pirates—predominantly southerners that the Cantonese population in Hong Kong identified with—operated between Chinese imperial authority and European colonial powers, serving as naval mercenaries to various Chinese dynasties since the Ming dynasty as well as to different European imperialist nations, while giving no persistent political loyalty

to any of them. Pirates were entrepreneurs of violence who sold their services in the monetized economy.

Despite bans on overseas trade during the Ming and Qing dynasties, a tremendous growth of illegal trade with Japan, Southeast Asia and even European countries took place in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Piracy and smuggling were parts of the international trading networks. As licit trade increased, so did illicit trade. The shadow economy of piracy and smuggling had positive economic consequences and helped boost local economies, since it allowed large numbers of excluded, poor, and marginalized people to participate in and benefit from the wider commercial economy. Black markets emerged along the southern coast to trade with pirates and smugglers and to service their ships and crews. Pirates and their collaborators became economic pioneers fostering new commercial opportunities in areas not easily reached by established trading systems and routes. By selling their plunder at bargain prices, pirates brought many goods within the reach of a wider public, and expanded distribution networks. Because many people depended on piracy for their livelihood, it developed into a self-sustaining enterprise and an important and integral part of South China's maritime world in the early modern era.

From its historical origin, Hong Kong's economic development had been a kind of piracy and smuggling, in the sense that Chinese merchants in the port-city defied state orders by collaborating with foreigners to build trading networks. British colonial expansion was largely rendered possible by Hong Kong people's co-operation throughout its history. Joseph MacKay describes how "pirate gangs were able to leverage their autonomy to their advantage, by turns selling their maritime military power to imperial authorities and coercing them with it" (552). These in-between roles and autonomous status were smoothly integrated into the Hong Kong pirate story and had been merged with the comprador role the port-city historically played between China and the West. The Chinese nationalist discourse was inclined to call those Chinese who made the growth of early Hong Kong possible *hanjian*, meaning "traitors." Many of these Chinese, who served as guides, provisioners and builders to the British, were Tanka people (Dan ethnics) or the outcasts who had been prohibited by the state since the eighteenth century from taking the civil service examination or settling on land (Carroll, "Chinese" 17). Collaboration with foreigners has been seen as a most vile moral crime in the nationalist discourse. Piracy narratives probably could not whitewash the suspicion of Hong Kong collaboration with the British colonial power, but could refocus the issue to a liminal moral zone.

The pirates evaded state control and garnered power to develop an ambiguous geopolitical relation with the Chinese state and other foreign powers. In this sense, the state can be understood as an agency of coercion and control, not of a voluntary social contract, whereas most human social organizations are non-state and typified by small,

horizontally organized groups that allow higher degree of autonomy, freedom and flexibility. James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* studies how the South Asian highlanders, with their decentralized society, escape the taxation, conscription and labor-extraction from the coercive state. Chinese refugees in Hong Kong may have similar reasons to leave the Mainland. Geographical constraints limit state power: land elevation and extensive ocean physically block the expansion of pre-modern political authority, even though industrialization and modernization have allowed an unprecedented growth of state capacity. The state's peripheries are still zones of refuge and escape, and its borders permeable. Sovereignty at borderlands is not absolute and permanent even to a modern polity.

Those who run away from state control and state power go to the borderlands to form fugitive societies. Their reorganized social structures are usually smaller, less hierarchical, and relatively egalitarian, with relatively weak and impermanent centralized authority. They are also less likely to impose state-like coercion on their members. Social membership is optional, and people join them only for their own benefit. These structures are geared toward preventing reintegration into the state. In Zhang Baozai's legend, pirate society was loosely assumed as an epitome of Hong Kong refugee society of the 1950s. The notion of the pirate gang as a "nation" is not a social-political form with distinct territorial boundaries. No one sees it as a permanent home, and such a view was quite dominant in the refugee generation; even the British colonial power that seized Hong Kong in order to secure trading rights in China remained uninterested in building a long-lasting society. After the Second World War, the British even thought of giving up the colony not just because of its indefensibility against the Chinese state, but also because of the huge influx of refugees that created tremendous burdens to the dismantling colonial power (Mark, "Defence").

A very significant factor in the piracy narrative is the fact that pirate nations rarely operated out of ideological commitment. Pirates looted, seized, racketeered, and conquered for profit, not for the sake of political principle or allegiance. They had none of the ambitions of permanence and exclusivity that characterized state-building projects. They were more like bandits and warlords, although sometimes they could preside over a large group, emulating the political structure of the society from which they escaped, and played irreducibly political roles in some historical times. The state acquiesced, bargained, conceded, cajoled, and paid them until it could eventually bring them to heel. In some historical moments, pirates occasionally appeared centralized, and resembled a shadow empire designed to monopolize trading and raiding at the edge of a dynasty. Precisely because of this strength and plasticity, a pirate imagination inspired the Hong Kong refugee generation who fled from the Chinese state and possessed no citizenship.

After the Qing Empire conquered Taiwan in 1684, the government reversed earlier policies and opened overseas trade (Zhao, *Qing*). Most merchants became strong bulwarks of support for the state and staunch opponents of piracy. Reduction in piracy also came from the government's co-opting of powerful coastal families with close ties to overseas trade into the Qing naval apparatus.

While there have been many stories about Zhang Baozai circulated in fragments in various Hong Kong media (including film and television adaptations),<sup>1</sup> the earliest book on this subject was *Rumors and Truths about Zhang Baozai* by Ye Lingfeng in 1971. Primarily based on materials from local gazettes (*fangzhi* 方誌) and some Western publications (including novels), Ye intended to demystify groundless and false descriptions about the renowned pirate. However, his narrative actually reinforces more than ever the myths of Zhang Baozai and his secret tie with Hong Kong. Although he dismissed all rumors about Zhang's secret hiding places on Hong Kong Island, he confirmed without much evidence that Zhang's real hideout or lair was located on Lantau Island (new research discovery, however, argues that Zhang's base was actually not within Hong Kong territories [see Siu, *Jyutdung*]). Though not exactly a "Robin Hood" figure robbing the rich to give to the poor, Zhang, in Ye's portrayal, was a person with a sense of justice and primitive class consciousness, leading several thousand fleets and twenty thousand followers. The heroic pirate was so powerful that both the Chinese state and European powers saw him a threatening and scary figure. Ye's book vividly depicted the eight-day Battle of Lantau in which Zhang's fleets were able to ward off the powerful joint forces of Qing and Portuguese navies and managed to escape from their enclosure.

Although piracy has often been romanticized as a way of life voluntarily chosen to escape oppression and injustice, in Ye's rendition Zhang was the one who had been coerced into becoming a pirate. At fifteen, he was a captive of Zheng Yi, the leader of a large confederacy of pirate fleets and who has kinship relation with the internationally famous pirates Zheng Zhilong and Zheng Chenggong based in Taiwan. Zheng Yi promoted Zhang to be a captain because of his competence, and when Zheng died, the organization was taken over by his wife Zheng Yisao who had an illicit relation with Zhang. Because of this affair, Zhang emerged to be the new leader and later married Zheng Yisao after he surrendered to the Qing court and became an official. Zhang's story thus symbolizes a radical form of protest against poverty and injustice. Ye never glorifies him as a politician who endeavored to remake the world: he was an

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<sup>1</sup> There have been many television and film adaptations of the pirate Zhang Baozai's story since the 1970s in Hong Kong. The recent ones were the television drama series *Captain of Destiny* (2015) produced by Hong Kong Television Broadcast Limited, and the film *The Treasure* (神秘寶藏) directed by Gordon Chan and Ronald Cheng.

ordinary person trying to better his lot, and this made him more popular. In Zhang's legend, women were as powerful as men in the pirate's adventure, adding a new and stimulating dimension to the subversive appeal of piracy by seizing liberty and equalitarianism only reserved for men at the time.

### **Oceanic Imagination and the Origin Myth**

Narratives about piracy and smuggling depart from standard land-centered histories, since the sea is placed at the center rather than at the margin. The focus on the sea transcends geopolitical boundaries to stitch together the diverse histories of China, Japan, and Southeast Asia, and to examine the interconnectedness of the entire East and Southeast Asian region. This region becomes a vast water world of porous borders, flows and seepages, shifting the focus from the discourse dominated by Chinese national interests. The sea is a lawless space beyond land-based civilization, and a transnational space where piracy and smuggling were multi-ethnic and multi-national enterprises going beyond the restricted boundaries of ethnicity and nationality.

Such oceanic imagination of the borderless sea has been picked up by some Hong Kong artists during the impending Handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997. An exhibition entitled "Hong Kong Incarnated – Museum 97: History, Community, Individual" opened at the Hong Kong Arts Centre with the statement "from sea we came." The exhibition reinvented an origin myth for Hong Kong by fabricating and incorporating legends and historical data. Hong Kong people were depicted as descendants of a half-human and half-fish hybrid called Lu Ting (盧亭), with reference to the Tanka (Dan) water-dwelling fishing population that were traditionally discriminated by the Chinese imperial state. Various artists like Jimmy Keung and Hou Chun-ming made museum-style dioramas and pseudo-archaeological relics as historical evidence to mimic and parodize the "neutral official tone" of historical narrative (Clark 64). As the exhibition's curator Oscar Ho explains, "[t]he fabrication was not intended to be a fanciful play of imagination, but a metaphor for the distinctiveness of Hong Kong culture. For example, we stated that our ancestors were from the sea, instead of from the land, as a denial of the cultural linkage with China, which describes itself as the mainland culture" (51).

However, the Lu Ting narrative was much less appealing to the public, because migrating overseas and having a liminal identity (holding different passports) have already become a genuine lived experience to many Hong Kong people.<sup>2</sup> The Sino-British Joint Declaration—which

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<sup>2</sup> The Lu Ting story has been revived by Hong Kong playwright Wong Kwok-kui for his trilogy, *Century-old Dreams of a Fishing Harbor* (漁港夢百年) from 2014 to 2018 to allegorize Hong Kong's political history.

confirms the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong to China—and the Tiananmen Square Massacre prompted mass emigration of Hongkongers in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, the Lu Ting image could be easily co-opted by the global capitalist discourse with an emphasis on its fluidity and hybridity. The rise of China leads to interstate maritime power contention in the Asia-Pacific, and the Chinese nation-state attempts to claim exclusive-use privileges to specific areas of the sea as seen in the South China Sea disputes. These attempts inhibit popular imaginations about the ocean as a free space. Stephen Chow Sing-chi's environmental comedy *The Mermaid* (2016) could be loosely considered one such example of reiterating the Lu Ting narrative, and tells the story of a clan of mythical half-human, half-fish creatures who are persecuted by a Chinese business mogul attempting to rid a bay of its marine life for property development. Although the characters in the film are not specifically referred to as mainland Chinese or Hongkongers, some of the Hong Kong audience wishfully see the film as an allegory of how Hong Kong people (the mermaids) are severely threatened and oppressed by China.<sup>3</sup>

### **Agrarian Narrative and the Rethinking of Land Use**

There is an inchoate narrative about post-1997 Hong Kong, during which the city has been facing increasing intervention by the Chinese sovereign state, and the escape route is perceived as no longer available. I call this an “agrarian narrative,” which is not only tied to farmland, but more broadly to land use, since land is the most precious and valuable resource in Hong Kong.<sup>4</sup> This narrative is not necessarily understood as the Other of modernity, but is organized around the loose theme of empowering locality to rebuild the community in resistance to China. While advocating farming revival, the narrative is by no means a traditionalist one. It embeds sentiments for the locality within a series of modern global discourses, such as ecology movements, organic farming, food sovereignty, food security, environmentalism, and preservation of heritage.

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<sup>3</sup> Yet, the film's Hong Kong version—with badly dubbed Cantonese which may create distraction to local viewers—obviously shows that Chow primarily had the mainland Chinese market in mind. The film set a new record for grossing 268 million yuan (HK\$318 million) on its opening day in China.

<sup>4</sup> The densely populated Hong Kong is a tiny place (about 1100 square kilometers) with more than seven million residents. The high demand for housing and the scarcity in land resources have already pushed up the prices of residential units. Since the 1980s, Hong Kong's property market has been subject to many speculative bubbles that made property prices skyrocket.



The formation of this narrative might have begun with the preservation movements of the Star Ferry Pier and the Queen's Pier,<sup>5</sup> and was reinforced by the social movement against the construction of the Guangzhou–Shenzhen–Hong Kong Express Rail Link—supposed to facilitate a stronger economic link between Hong Kong and China—which climaxed at the anti-eviction struggle of Choi Yuen Chuen (Vegetable Garden Village). In fact, the discourse on heritage preservation was initiated by the post-1997 Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government, in order to emphasize common cultural origins between Hong Kong and China. The official project of fostering a Hong Kong local identity and sense of belonging within a larger frame of Chinese nationalism was meant to forge loyalty to the Chinese motherland and to de-emphasize Britain's superlative role in Hong Kong development (Carroll, "Displaying"). However, the discourse of heritage preservation has been more often appropriated to resist developmentalism and the exploitative character of capitalism represented by the dominant class and the government.

Choi Yuen Chuen was located at the construction area of the Express Rail Link. At first, some villagers refused to move out because they were dissatisfied by the compensation. As more urban people joined to support the villagers' cause, the resistance gradually became a social movement, and continued in the form of helping evicted villagers to build new homes and promoting alternative visions of life and value in the economic-interest-oriented Hong Kong. The Choi Yuen Chuen protest succeeded in drawing together the urban and the rural. Urban activists, intellectuals, and elite allies (such as artists, journalists, lawyers, scholars, and even entrepreneurs) worked together with rural residents to improve their living conditions, and the course and outcomes of the protest shifted as a result of such collaboration. Many of these activists later joined the farming industry and established their local community farms. The more well-known one is the Mapopo Community Farm, which provides organic produce, sets up farmer markets, organizes guided tours, promotes permaculture, and runs workshops to educate urbanites about farming knowledge and skills. There are other non-government organizations, such as the Land Justice League, whose members consist of mainly activists and preservationists from the Queen's Pier and Choi Yuen Chuen movements, and which aim at instituting democratic land planning systems and recruiting farmers to carry out organic agriculture.

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<sup>5</sup> In 2006 the Hong Kong government planned to demolish these two historic sites in Central for land reclamation and construction of a new highway, which caused strong public reaction. These historic sites represent collective memory, and the opposition movement is considered a budding democracy movement targeting at various neoliberal policies. During the British colonial period, the Queen's Pier was the major ceremonial arrival point for the British royal family and governors. It was ironic, then, that this colonial icon turned into a symbol of citizen movements.

Anti-developmental agency has been gaining momentum since, and soon turned into a form of hostility toward a government proposal to develop the country parks for residential and commercial purposes. The debate on developing Hong Kong's countryside unfolds a long-ignored fact that 40% of Hong Kong's total size has been preserved as country parks since the British colonial era. The Taiwanese essayist Liu Ka-shiang indicates that 75% of Hong Kong is in fact countryside (*Three-fourths*). More precise geographical information has been revealed by environmentalists: only about 25% of Hong Kong belongs to developed areas (including both urban and village areas), almost 50% is categorized as country parks and preservation zones, and the remaining 20–25% is composed of agricultural spaces and greenbelts (S. M. Chow 47–48). The predominance of the countryside not only debunks Hong Kong's prevailing metropolitan image, but also offers a great incentive for many to reimagine the city's agricultural potential.

Those who invent such agrarian narratives are mainly urban elites and intellectuals. They do not exactly have the same risks of subsistence (such as living close to the margin, or even famine) faced by most peasants in (pre-)modern or (pre-)capitalist societies. Although resistant in its tone, the narratives do not share the normative roots of peasant politics of former times (i.e. the subsistence ethic is ruined by the exploitative state and by the unfair system of tenancy and taxation). Indeed, the "indigenous inhabitants" (*yuanjumin*) in Hong Kong are often categorized in this new agrarian narrative as "landlords" or landowners who make significant profits by selling their land to developers and, if there is no buyer, leasing their land to outsiders for other economic purposes. The narrative does not show strong sympathy to acknowledge the historical fact that these indigenous villagers' changing relations to the meaning of land were under the influence of British colonial rule, the expansion of modernity, and other global factors. The term "indigenous inhabitant," which refers to patrilineal descendants of villagers who were living in the New Territories before its lease to Britain in 1898, is actually a construct. It was only in 1972 that "indigenous inhabitant" became an official term used by the British colonial government to promote "small-house" policy (*dingwu*) in exchange for extensive urbanization in the New Territories (Chan, "Politicizing"). Under the impact of marketization, most of the farmland are no longer used for agricultural operation. In other words, the narrative is constructed through the perspective of new settlers, urban migrants, or anyone (including the urban elites) interested in farming. New localism is re-glossed in this agrarian narrative as a moral economy intimately tied to farmland in order to resist market forces represented by the post-1997 authorities. This new localist narrative attempts to imagine a self-sufficient totality of autarkic economy and self-reliant subject, in opposition to the overwhelming dependence on China for its

resources. Such imagination, however, cannot prevent the narrative from stumbling upon contradictions and antinomies.

The narrative calls for a rural revival as local farm produces only occupy 1–2% of the local market share at present. Local farming history is retold with the starting point at the post-Second World War period, during which large numbers of refugees did not all become factory workers, but some lived in the rural areas as farmers. In this narrative, the British colonial government had an active role in supporting local farming; the supportive policy served a strategic reason under the Cold War atmosphere by reducing reliance on China's food supply and alleviating housing and employment problems. Statistically, local vegetable provided 60–70% of Hong Kong's needs in the 1970s (S. C. Chow 46). What the agrarian narrative aspires to is a return to food self-sufficiency as a means to achieve a higher degree of food autonomy and sovereignty, and hence a lesser degree of dependence on China and other sources.

Not necessarily promoting separatism, the narrative remains local(ist), or even parochial, as it has no intention to join forces with the peasant discourse nationally or regionally. In order to persuade the Hong Kong government to support a revival of local farming, the narrative makes reference to a common policy in Chinese cities of maintaining their own food self-sufficiency for security reasons. The narrative starts with a basic demand for a steady supply of healthy and reasonably priced food to the community. Locally produced food that sustains the community is, it is argued, the best way to deter threats from rising food prices, unfair trade policies, environmental pollution, natural disasters, and other food insecurity issues, all around the globe. In this sense, the narrative both encourages a public discussion on the meaning of land, and also urges policy makers to rethink the use of land in Hong Kong.

The peasant has become a symbol of the oppressed in China and in the world. As peasantry in Hong Kong seems to have vanished for a long time, assuming a peasant persona to tell the story and to convey the correlated life values is like mythology. Hong Kong's modernization process may be able to drive away peasantry from career options, but cannot get rid of the food and land issues closely related to peasantry. The agrarian narrative seems to drag from behind China's march toward urbanization and Hong Kong's integration into its nation-building project. When the Chinese state now represents the major driving force in urbanization and actively implements orderly migration from the rural to the urban (Miller, *China's*), Hong Kong's reinvention of peasantry may carry a certain rebellious meaning. But unlike the pirate narrative, the emerging agrarian one is not exactly built upon a personage. For obvious reasons, the narrative calls those who cultivate land "farmers" (*nongfu*), not "peasants" (*nongmin*), implying a higher degree of personal

autonomy and freedom as well as the unbinding relation to land.<sup>6</sup> Labor and possession have been kept apart. Indeed, the narrative has strong implications for public ownership, seeing land as something beyond private property.

The construction of a self-sustainable subject position and the promotion of farming revival function as counter-strategies against developmentalist priorities backed by powerful businesses and state interests to reap large profits from land. Economic development has much to do with land, capital and labor—all these fundamental means of production that give rise to land expropriations, thefts, corruption and conflicts. The agrarian narrative targets privatization of land ownership for economic growth and advocates more government intervention in the use of land, in order to strengthen its collective purpose for better representing public rights and interests.

The agrarian narrative seemingly re-imagines the meaning of “popular resistance,” by means of which the poor and the weak are fighting against those elites with political and economic power and status. However, the activists involved in this narrative do not necessarily belong to the marginalized class and do not lack access to institutional politics. Those who promote this narrative actually employ government channels and established values to persuade concerned elites and authorities to support their claims. It may be in tension with the official discourse, but it is in reality only in dispute with certain authorities, while at the same time affirming and using other authorities and prevailing values (e.g. community building, social participation, green living, food safety, etc.) to pursue its ends. It is a somewhat sanctioned resistance that makes use of recognized principles and influential allies to put pressure on the powerful and dominant class.

Parochial though it may seem, the agrarian narrative may have an international aspiration in the sense that it borrows ideas from international peasant and farming movements, such as the permaculture movement, which advocate food sovereignty in the face of the globalization of an industrialized and liberalized model of agriculture under big corporations and centralized state control. It also echoes the anti-globalization movement and the critique of neoliberalism—particularly the protests organized by the South Korean peasants during the World Trade Organization summit held in Hong Kong in 2005—and adopts an ecology movement approach by emphasizing a reflection on human–environment relations as well as bringing rural politics to urban living and governance.

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<sup>6</sup> Yuen Yik-tin, founder of the Mapopo Community Farm, emphasizes that they are “modern farmers” (*xiandai nongfu*) because to cultivate land in Hong Kong, one must have modern knowledge to deal with the problems created by modernization (Yuen, *Tinjyun*).

The agrarian narrative carries some utopian thinking in the sense that it may have idealized farming and village life with a faculty of moral pathos. But, under the increasingly intensifying stratification of the post-industrial society in the new century, longing for an alternative rural life and the image of a self-sufficient farmer could hardly serve as a unified point of identification to integrate class, gender and other forms of social differentiation. While questioning modernization theory as well as unsustainable neoliberal vision of capitalist agriculture, the narrative imagines a revived rural society and politics particularly through democratic self-governance as an alternative model of social organization. What has been relatively downplayed, however, is that capital has always already penetrated the countryside, and class relations are deeply rooted there.

The contemporary world is becoming more and more under the control of nation states. A free and autonomous zone looks rather unlikely when state control is getting more free-floating and flexible. Increasing bureaucratization of human activity, as well as goal-oriented organizations and actions, traps us in an iron cage of rule-based control, with Chinese-style authoritarianism of particular relevance. A totally administered world is perhaps the inherent nature of modernization. Non-state narratives may be criticized as fantasies, and yet they continue to thrive as possibilities that allow something to be reproduced in oblivion, motivate people to leave the status quo, and encourage social empowerment over the state. Neither cynicism nor utopian ideals, narratives of Hong Kong may have the potential to create the political will to change while accommodating to practical realities. Ways out may then become possible.

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