Book Reviews

Cultural Conflict in Hong Kong: Angles on a Coherent Imaginary. Edited by Jason S. Polley, Vinton W. K. Poon, Wee Lian-hee. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 324pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 9789811077654.

Reviewed by Douglas Kerr

"It is difficult to write about Hong Kong," writes one of the editors of this volume at the start of his own essay. It is also quite difficult to write about writing about Hong Kong at the present time, when events now in process are profoundly changing what Hong Kong means. Indeed it is hard to concentrate on a book titled *Cultural Conflict in Hong Kong*, published in 2018, when the terms and grounds of conflict in Hong Kong seem to be changed, or changing, utterly, and with outcomes at present impossible to predict with confidence. Whatever the political fall-out of the events of the summer of 2019—and at the time of writing they could yet be either good or very bad—it is easier to see that Hong Kong's culture, the topic of this book, cannot ever be the same again.

The book examines many of the internal conflicts and contradictions of Hong Kong life, and certainly the city will continue to be a landscape thoroughly striated with the marks of internal differences. But as Hong Kong seemed on an inevitable slide towards the status of just another Chinese city (one meaning of the vaunted "disappearance" rather monotonously predicted in almost all studies of the place since 1997), the recent actions of its citizens have indelibly asserted its difference, even if it turns out to be a difference that will have to be worn ruefully.

This volume, in the words of its Preface, "celebrates as it critiques the current state of Hong Kong society on the 20th anniversary of its handover to China," and claims to be "the first true area studies book of its kind on Hong Kong." Area studies does not have many friends these days, and running up the flag of area studies seems rather a quixotic gesture. It is not easy to see how the current collection qualifies, except in having no disciplinary focus. Is Hong Kong an "area"? Would a book on cultural conflict in Pakistan, or Hungary, be classed as area studies? What the editors are alluding to, presumably, is the field of Hong Kong Studies, a discourse that has developed in recent years a number of institutional footings, including this journal. And not before time. To ponder whether this discourse has in turn developed its own *ethos* (to use a term interestingly explored in an essay in this book), it does not seem unfair to ask to what extent hindsight might find the ferment of the summer of 2019 already potential in the culture examined in *Cultural Conflict in Hong Kong*. The answer, not surprisingly, is mixed.

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This collection of essays is a miscellany, and none the worse for that. An attempt has been made to give this miscellany a structure by grouping the contributions into sections called "Surveillance," "Sousveillance," and "Equiveillance," but these headings do not really succeed in gluing the essays in each section together, and it is often hard to see in what ways these categories apply to the topics they govern. John Wakefield's study of English loanwords in Cantonese opens the "Surveillance" section, but who is being surveilled in this process? Is the idiom of "loan" perhaps misleading here? Is an obligation incurred? "Loanwords"—or guestwords—from another language have become the property of the users of the host language. What optic is being imposed from on high? What are the power dynamics of this process? Who would describe it as a form of surveillance? The drama of loanwords is like a stick-figure epitome compared to the joyfully complex heteroglossia of the work by Hong Kong poets discussed by Tammy Ho Lai-ming in her later essay, "Writing Hong Kong's Ethos." And it is manifestly rather different again from the subject of the next "Surveillance" essay, about "metaphors of Hong Kong" elicited from expatriate writers (beehive, anthill, and so on.)

What forms of self-expression are open to Hong Kong people under an irksome orthodoxy imposed from above? Hong Kong's filmmakers perhaps show the way. Films are among the most expensive media of artistic expression, and are therefore most liable to outside pressure, political or commercial. Since filmmaking came under the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement, Hong Kong directors who want to benefit commercially from the arrangement have had to operate according to the protocols that come with it. This has led a filmmaker like Ann Hui to address mainland Chinese historical themes as a way of commenting obliquely on Hong Kong's own history. This is the subject of Jessica Yeung Siu-yin's essay here. The essay is hamstrung by its author's need to recruit a team of authorities to bolster her use of the word "allegory." As often happens, this soon leads to a traffic jam of terms attached to other terms which confuse first the reader and eventually the author ("Benjamin's baroque allegory [formulated in 1928] echoes Abbas's argument [made in 2007]"), and lead her to make statements that are hard to make sense of ("The significance of allegory before 1997 is to provoke, instead of pinning down images of Hong Kong, thereby avoiding the disappearance of Hong Kong's subjectivity through decadence"). It is a pity we have to struggle through a great deal of this before reaching the essay's simple, and convincing, point about Hui's cinema, which is that "the merits of the allegorical cinema lie in carving out a rhetorical space for Hong Kong filmmakers to continue telling Hong Kong stories" in the prevailing political and commercial environment. This argument could stand up on its own without the rather ancestor-worshipping, and distracting, system of

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buttresses furnished for it. There may be a lesson here for Hong Kong Studies.

Jeffrey Clapp's sprightly essay about Edward Snowden in Hong Kong is a contrast. What did Snowden think he was doing when he sought and found refuge in Hong Kong in June 2013? In his mind was Hong Kong a PRC outpost, a postmodern metropolis, an oriental haven from the US surveillance state? Rather unexpectedly, Clapp discovers that what Snowden sought and found was a place of unconditional Derridean hospitality, under the improbable championship of the then Chief Executive, C. Y. Leung. It was a moment when Hong Kong was itself to best effect. Snowden passed on; it was perhaps fortunate that he did so before there was a chance of that hospitality showing its other Derridean face, of hostipitality.

Michael Cheuk Ka-chi bravely takes on the question of authenticity in global hip hop music, in variations and generations of North American hip hop, and its localization at the hands of the Hong Kong outfit LMF (Lazy Mother Fucka). "How does one define 'real' in music, though? In the context of Hong Kong culture, what is hip hop authenticity?" While I am prevented by ignorance from attempting an answer, I would observe that when a fetish of identity politics (authenticity) collides with a fetish of postmodernism (anti-foundational indeterminacy) it is best to get out of the way.

Though they are dispersed among the book's three sections, the linguistic essays in the collection constitute a group, because they all address the ways that forms of the English language live in a Chinese society. Janice Wong Wing-sze makes the strong point, with which her fellow linguists all in different ways concur, that the question of language and languages is a crucial parameter in the drama of identity. The stresses and strains of the city's multilingualism are elided in the government's utopian policy that Hong Kong should become "biliterate and trilingual." Cantonese is an enormously important and emotional issue in the city's struggle for at least cultural independence. But what about English, once colonial, now global? Does the acquisition of that language come at a price? And what English, after all? The high stakes of this question are suggested in the paired titles of essays by Qin Chuan, "Becoming Hong Kong-Like: The Role of Hong Kong English in the Acquisition of English Phonology by Hong Kong Students," and Janice Wong, "Struggling to become Non-Hong-Kong-Like: The Necessity and Effectiveness of Training Hong Kong Youngsters' Perception and Production of General American English Vowel Contrasts." You have to feel sorry for Hong Kong school students, for whom learning to pronounce words, which is hard enough, is also a minefield bristling with ideological hazards. In order to "sound native," as one of the contributors puts it rather brutally, is it necessary for a Hongkonger to mortify her Hong Kong identity?

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Given these complexities and perils, linguists need to develop some sensitive instruments to examine the phenomenon. Phonology is a highly sophisticated subject with a complex descriptive technical language. Its analytical tools are not always of commensurate delicacy, however, to judge by Qin Chuan's study of "The Acceptability of HKE [Hong Kong English] Pronunciations." This essay is based on a questionnaire administered to Hong Kong undergraduate students, surely most linguistically-surveyed population on earth. Do Hong Kong people "accept" the typical pronunciations of Hong Kong English? In this experiment, variations in pronunciation were offered to the surveyees, but the question they had to answer about each item seems to have been: "*I like the way it is pronounced. Strongly disagree—1—2—3—4—5—Strongly disagree* [sic; presumably "Strongly agree"]." It could be argued that this methodology is naïve. Professed liking is taken as an index of acceptability of the pronunciation examples. But can we not agree, with the gigantic example of Facebook before us, that "like" is problematic? In this questionnaire I might tick "like" because I think I speak like this, or because I do not speak like this, or because this is how the teacher says it or does not, or because I like the sound of the speaker's voice, or because this is the first or last word I have been asked to listen to, or because I like English, or even because of what the word means. For my part, I think I would find it difficult to decide whether I like the pronunciation of a word in a discourse vacuum. Liking is an event, and in any case to like something is not the same thing as to find it acceptable (though I am not entirely sure what acceptable means: and what if I do not accept it?).

In another essay here, Vinton W. K. Poon draws on another language attitude survey—ten years old, however, which is surprising in view of the fact that it deals with fast-changing computer-mediated communication—in which respondents were asked for their views on the normalcy or otherwise of items of language use. "How normal is it for Hong Kong people to have such a conversation?" they were asked. This begs a lot of questions. "Normal" may mean something specific to the linguist, and Poon tells us about three kinds of linguistic norm: formal, contextual, and identity. But in ordinary language "normal" is not a flat descriptive term. And the surveyees are asked to undertake the heroic task of distinguishing whether a given sample is perfectly normal, fairly normal, fairly abnormal, or completely abnormal. (To see the problem, ask yourself why it is okay to say "perfectly normal" but not "perfectly abnormal.") Because of the imbrication of language with identity issues, these are not just phonological decisions, and this raises the question of just what information we may be eliciting when we ask someone to pass judgement on normalcy or acceptability.

Other contributors plough different furrows. My personal favorite is the essay by Ng Kum-hoon and Wee Lian-hee about the Old Master Q strip-cartoons of Wong Chak (Wang Ze). The authors make the case for

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the sense of "unfathomable *Unheimlichkeit*" or uncanniness which is the aftertaste left by these extraordinary little stories, for all their usually farcical content. Though the cartoonist grew up on the mainland, you would be hard pressed to find anything more "Hong Kong" than these tiny narratives—robust, even crude, inventive, droll, good-humored. They deserve a prominent place in the invisible museum of Hong Kong culture whose diversity would include the films of Ann Hui and the poets whose work is discussed, and usefully reproduced, by Tammy Ho in her essay "Writing Hong Kong's Ethos." In talking about Anglophone poets, Ho writes: "A Hong Kong poet writing about the affairs of China is itself an act performed at the margin, geographically and politically, and using a marginal language to do this is doubly removed, but the act is no less powerful and poignant for that and, more to the point, can be performed." Long may this continue.

Inevitably this miscellany reflects the interests and passions of its contributors. It leaves many fascinating aspects of Hong Kong culture uncovered, even unmentioned, and furthermore the city it discusses has dramatically disappeared—in a different sense now—in the upheavals of present times. Perhaps there will be a follow-up volume. If there is, I can suggest a couple of topics that it would be interesting to include to get a fuller picture of Hong Kong's cultural conflicts, and the way these have evolved in the recent struggle. One would be journalism, a vital part of culture that makes no appearance in these pieces, except marginally in Jeffrey Clapp's Snowden essay. The editors' home of Hong Kong Baptist University has a long tradition of the study of journalism so it would not be hard to find expert contributors there. Another possible topic is violence. For decades the Hong Kong film industry led the world in staging scenes of violence, in kung fu and crime stories, and Hong Kong films often had and have an extraordinary degree of violent action (including some pretty revolting violence against women). Blood-boltered though they were, it seems in retrospect that there was a degree of strange innocence in these spectacles, even at their most extreme, and all the time the threat of actual violence for most people was vanishingly small, and Hong Kong itself continued to be one of the very safest cities on earth. In these times the case is altered, and the shock of violence has actually invaded the everyday culture of many Hong Kong people. How is violence experienced, and understood, in a now tragically violent city?

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