HONG KONG AND CAPITALIST CULTURE:
TWO FILMS AND A CRITIQUE OF TRANSNATIONALISM

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This thesis attempts to track sociocultural dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in recent Hong Kong history, by means of an analysis of capital logic that is derived from Marxist work on the institution of capitalist culture. The investigation is framed by a reading of two recent films from Hong Kong—*_Comrades, Almost a Love Story*_ (1996: dir. Peter Chan) and *Little Cheung* (1999: dir. Fruit Chan)—which, read together, reveal the interconnections between inclusion and exclusion in a particularly clear way.

Several ‘scenes’, ‘events’, or processes in recent Hong Kong history are analysed and brought into relation: the transnationalist discourse of diaspora and mobility that _Comrades_ encodes and its obverse side in _Little Cheung_; the juridico-political framework of the detention camps in which Vietnamese refugees were confined from the 1980s until 2001; the economic incorporation of the Pearl River Delta by Hong Kong industrial and financial enterprises; and the Right of Abode debate since 1997, in which the question of who is included in and who is excluded from the category ‘Hong Kong person’ becomes quite confused. What links these ‘moments’ is a dynamic in which the very attempt to demarcate an inside and an outside throws the boundary into question, and in which the ‘crisis’ to which the determining machinery addresses itself is nothing other than the effect of its own operation, thus creating a self-sustaining ‘state of emergency’ whose dynamism inflects recent Hong Kong history. It is suggested that this dynamic is broadly characteristic of contemporary capitalism, for which Hong Kong serves as an example.
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Hong Kong is a capitalist society. There is nothing controversial in this statement, nothing in it that would raise anyone’s eyebrows. It is more likely to elicit the opposite effect: the lowered eyebrows of the scowl that responds to a statement of the trivially obvious. So, Hong Kong is a capitalist society. But what does this mean, exactly? In what does Hong Kong’s being-capitalist consist? To this properly structural question should be added another, processual question: In what does (or did) Hong Kong’s becoming-capitalist consist? How—through what processes or series of transformations—did it come to be capitalist? Or better, how and in what ways does it remain capitalist? Becoming- and being-capitalist are not, or at least not essentially, related as past and present. Instead, they can be seen in a kind of alternating, shimmering simultaneity, as two aspects of the same ‘process-object,’ rather like the alternating concavity and convexity of this famous and simple diagram:

One takes place in and through the other. The instituting and the institution of ‘Hong Kong capitalism’ that will form this essay’s subject ought always to be kept in view of each other, because a thing’s determination as one or the other is always and necessarily only momentary, and related immediately to the opposite determination.
That Hong Kong should remain capitalist is, in fact, enshrined in the *Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong* (HKAR, 1984: 1–41), Article VI of which states that “The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall maintain the capitalist economic and trade systems previously practiced” for the fifty years stipulated in Section 3(12). An initial paradox appears: How are we to understand the copresence, in Article VII, of Hong Kong’s ability to “decide its monetary and financial policies on its own” and the requirement in the next sentence that it “shall safeguard the free operations of financial business and the free flow of capital” (emphasis added)? What if, before these fifty years are up, it should decide “on its own” not to safeguard the flow of capital? (This is just the first of many paradoxes.) The elision of this possibility constitutes a vision of capitalism as ‘once instituted, forever instituted,’ provided there is no interference from outside. It consigns Hong Kong’s becoming-capitalist irretrievably to the past. Essentially, it attempts to fix—that is, to force the freezing of—the oscillation between process and structure that it will be my task in this essay to track. If, as Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 40) says of “the State” (but this is true of any state, or even any state of affairs), “the instituted institution makes us forget that it issues out of a long series of acts of institution (in the active sense),” we should return—try to remember our way—to a point at which the instituting hasn’t ossified into an institution. But what we will be remembering is not the past; we will simply be trying to keep both in our mind at the same time. (And if it is true that the state—and capitalism, and state-capitalism—“issues out of” acts of instituting and takes the form of a *terminus*, it also immediately dissolves back into these acts, and consists in nothing other than them.)

Two recent films from Hong Kong—*Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (甜蜜蜜, 1996: dir. Peter Chan) and *Little Cheung* (細路祥, 1999: dir. Fruit Chan)—permit one to approximate an
answer to the question of Hong Kong’s ‘current state of capitalism,’ if they are read together, if they are brought into a relation with each other that makes them, in a sense, one text. Bringing them into this relation is the ‘problem’ through which my task can be accomplished. But they are not to be related as process to structure: Although, at one level, Comrades will appear as the capital-process to Little Cheung’s capitalist-structure, it is also true that Comrades finally takes on a structural-generic resolution and that Little Cheung figures the dissolution of structures. They are related, rather, in the manner of a palimpsest: what writes itself as a parable of élite transnationality in Comrades is written simultaneously on another register as the fractured sublocality of Little Cheung. (What seems here to be structured by a global-local opposition—it is only an initial approximation—will itself unravel in the course of the analysis.) Further, what writes itself into the cultural field as these two texts is written again on the registers of the economic, the political, and the social. My path from one film to the other—from the cultural to the cultural—will, of necessity, pass through these other fields. But for all the distance traveled, we won’t actually have gone very far at all: we will end up more or less where we started, but it will look very different.

What I’m after is some characterization of capitalism, or capitalist culture, just now, in its globalizing, postmodern, post-Soviet era existence. If Hong Kong culture and history serve as my examples (in the sense that their being ‘exceptionally’ capitalist makes them ‘exemplary’), this is both necessary and ultimately insufficient, precisely because their exceptionality must militate against their exemplarity. It may be that an insight into ‘capitalism now’ can be found precisely in the incoherencies contained in this tension between example and exception. It will be a matter of unpacking capitalist culture, of letting what is held within it fall out into view, and then of putting it back together in a different way, so that the alternative possibilities of life that
it both generates and occludes can be presented, if only in outline. Ultimately, an anti-capitalist theory must grapple with the ways in which not just commodities but also cultural forms (texts) and subjectivities are 'produced' in, by, and as capitalism, and in turn with how capitalism finds its very life in these forms. This essay is an attempt to think through this problem.
II.

Everybody here is talking about migration... While Hong Kong is every Mainlander’s dream, Hong Kong people’s dream is somewhere else.

— Comrades, Almost a Love Story

When *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* was released in November 1996, it immediately received an enormous amount of public and critical acclaim. It was the highest-grossing local film in Hong Kong theatres that year, and it won almost all of the major awards at the 16th Hong Kong Film Awards,\(^1\) as well as further awards at the Golden Horse Festival in Taiwan in the same year. It has since been treated extensively in a number of academic articles which, in highly honorific terms, read it as an exemplary allegory of rootless, transnational Hong Kong. Sheldon Lu goes so far as to say that “the story of two immigrants in the film is... the story of *every Hong Konger*” (2000: 278, emphasis added). Peter Chan, the film’s director, describes it as, on one level, a story about “the rootlessness of the Chinese as a people, and... their continuing search for a new home,” and on another level “also a reflection on the lives of Hong Kong natives of my generation, people like me who are trying to cope with a deadline called 1997” (quoted in Lo, 2001: 272–73). These dates are certainly salient to an explanation of the film’s extraordinary

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\(^1\) These included best film, best director, best actress, best screenplay, best supporting actor, and best original score. The awards were presented on April 13, 1997.
uptake: 1997 was only two months away when the film was released, and July 1 was just as close
when the Hong Kong Film Awards were presented. But they cannot explain how just this film
could function so strongly to focalize Hong Kong people’s cultural fears and desires at that
moment. Prima facie, in fact, its interpretation as an allegory of Hong Kong might seem rather
odd, since it revolves around a romance between two Mainland Chinese immigrants who
complete their journey in New York, merely passing through Hong Kong on the way. Why is it
that the story that most powerfully captures Hong Kong particularity vis-à-vis its colonial past
and its Chinese future begins and ends elsewhere? The strange series of substitutions in Chan’s
own framing of the film ought also to give us pause: How can one tell the story of two poor
immigrants, Hong Kong natives, and “the Chinese as a people” at once, indeed as the same
story? (That his comments wouldn’t have seemed strange at all in Hong Kong at the time is itself
‘strange,’ at least insofar as it names a problem.) What multi-levelled allegory is being told here?
What kind of film is this, such that it can gather up these three stories into one?

To get at these questions, I will approach Comrades not primarily as a narrative but as a
kind of textual-ideological machine, whose product, so to speak, is a feeling of resolution,
belonging, and satisfaction. Its story (what’s told) and its narrative (the telling) will be treated as
two factors of production, among a host of others. What I am investigating is Comrades’
economy of affective allocation, so to speak: its accomplishment (insofar as it is successful) is to
distribute its audiences’ affective energies among a specific arrangement of discursive points of

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2 We might say as well, following Rey Chow (1993b), its Chinese past and its colonial future (as a colony
of China). Or rather, we might well have said that in 1993. After the fact, and ten years on, for both
historical and intellectual-historical reasons, postcoloniality is far less of a key term in discussions of
Hong Kong. I won’t presume that Chow would still put things this way.

3 For an extended analysis of the story-narrative distinction, see Genette, 1980 & 1990. In the present
context, it is essential to understanding why Comrades’ story begins and ends elsewhere, as noted, but its
narrative begins and ends in Hong Kong (see below, pg. 20).
identification, which thereby come also to serve as factors of production. Before proceeding to a
detailed reading of the film, then, it will be useful to summarize the general features of the
debates and conflicts that organize the cultural field in Hong Kong at the moment of Comrades’
intervention. This will also clarify my approach.

* * *

One of the central problems around which contemporary cultural debates in Hong Kong
have been organized is Hong Kong culture’s position at the intersection of a number of different
and competing conceptions of its ‘proper’ points of association. One dimension comprises the
Chinese nationalist discourse of reunification, which takes on a central significance in the years
leading to and following the transfer of sovereignty. This discourse figures 1997 as the end of
Hong Kong’s long and tragic separation from its true home as a part of China. An entire official
historiography of the Chinese Revolution is hinged on the idea that it brought to an end the
“century of humiliation” that began with the ceding of Hong Kong Island and the Opium War in
1841. In a sense, the transfer of sovereignty becomes the real end of imperialism’s splitting of
China, the final end of a period that began to end fifty years previously. We have, then, two
‘phase-shifted’ periods of approximately 100 years each (1841–1949 and 1898–1997), each its
own kind of century of humiliation.4 Many discussions of Hong Kong culture produced by Hong

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4 In 1898, China ‘leased’ what became the ‘New Territories’ to Britain for 99 years, and Hong Kong took
its current shape. (The transfer coincided with the end of this lease.) The anti-imperialist historiography
invoked here clearly has less currency nowadays than it once did, having been displaced on the Mainland
(and elsewhere) by a hegemonic modernization historiography (Dirlik, 1996: 250–51). But it is dusted off
and redeployed in this specific case. For an example, see the first Hong Kong: Annual Report produced
by the new SAR government in 1997, especially chapters 1 (“A New Era Begins”) and 25 (“History”). An
entire Thesis could be written on the transformation of this last chapter between 1996 and 1997, from a
triumphalist colonial history produced by the British administration to a triumphalist nationalist history,
in a highly generic government document that otherwise remains almost identical.
Kong intellectuals begin (or end) by taking a critical distance from this conception, marking in this distanciation the space for a Hong Kong specificity (e.g., P.K. Leung, 2000 & S. Lu, 2000). Given its emphasis on national wholeness, the nationalist discourse tends to “deny the existence of a separate [Hong Kong] identity and merely recognize[s] it as one part of Chinese culture not unlike other regional cultures, all sharing the overall national characteristics” (P.K. Leung, 2000: 227). (What these ‘overall characteristics’ are is beside the point here.)

On another side is the discourse of Westernization, in which Hong Kong is defined substantially by an embrace of ‘western’ lifestyles, political forms, and institutions that takes it progressively further away from a ‘parochial’ sense of Chineseness. Here, what accounts for Hong Kong’s ‘success’ is the way in which western-style governance and the ‘rule of law’ (implicitly or explicitly posed as an exclusive feature of western political systems) was able effectively to enlist the support of the population, and carried in its wake an embrace of a western-modeled cosmopolitanism (a cultural correlate, apparently, of enlightened colonial governance and a capitalist economy) which is able to reconcile Chinese cultural characteristics (whatever they are) into itself, so that Hong Kong is “uniquely both Eastern and Western” (Turner, 1997: 81). Culturally hybrid, that is, while solidly western politically, the former being the effect and triumph of the latter. This discourse has been more or less eclipsed in recent years by a third, which is on one level a kind of modulation or sublation of its terms: Hong Kong’s historical role as a node in the circulation of transnational capital, and its population’s experience of having left China behind without finding any permanent home to replace it, has positioned it

5 See Turner, 1997 for a discussion of the colonial government’s role in actively manufacturing the westernization of Hong Kong culture beginning in the 1960s. P.K. Leung, 2000 has some reservations about the efficacy of this project in concrete terms (i.e., whether it actually worked), but nevertheless recognizes its importance.
to develop a transnational identity, one which eschews the fixity and stasis of nationalism in favour of the fluidity and flexibility of globalization. Of course, changes within China have tended to bring its historiographical production more in line with modernizationist norms, but the traces of earlier patterns continue to organize the discursive field in important ways. One can already sense how much broader historiographies are wrapped into discussions of Hong Kong culture. At stake is simply the evaluation of the entire post-Revolutionary history of China. Arif Dirlik (1996) provides a useful schematization of the broad forces at work here, and their effects on periodization efforts: In one paradigm (Dirlik’s term)—the anti-imperialist nationalist view—modern Chinese history is primarily organized by western encroachments from the early 19th century on the one hand, and by the people’s struggle for liberation that culminated in the Revolution on the other. A second and third—the “China-centred” and “sinocentric” approaches—take Chinese history to be defined by a deep cyclical pattern of dynastic birth, florescence, and decline. For all their differences, these three paradigms periodize modern Chinese history very similarly. What counts in the first as imperialism functions in the others as a period of dynastic decline culminating in the 1911 Revolution. The intervening period to 1949 functions alternately as a period of collapse, defeat, and resurgence or as a kind of anarchic interregnum between dynasties. But either way, the

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6 Because of its specifically British colonial heritage, it is perhaps better positioned than, say, Taiwan or Singapore, the other terms around which revolved the Greater, or Cultural China debates that had such currency in the early to mid-1990s (see below). Ong, 1999 is perhaps the most significant theoretical articulation of this position, and significantly attempts to reconcile it with the ‘sense of Chineseness’ that has often, she argues, been occluded from the postcolonial discourse of transnationalism and critiques of capitalism. This is entirely reversed in the ‘Confucian revival’ (of which Tu Wei-ming is the most prominent representative), in which Chineseness is what this cosmopolitanism is all about. See also Cheah, 2001.

7 These two paradigms are broadly differentiated by their sites of production (the U.S. and China respectively)
Republican period is essentially *transitional*.

With the unfolding of the Reform Era, a very different paradigm takes the hegemonic lead: modernization. Here, the watershed dates are determined not by the operation of primordial forces or by the agencies of revolution, but by the development of the political and cultural conditions correlated to capitalist development. 1911 or the May 4th Movement from 1919 figure more prominently than either 1839–42 (the Opium War) or 1949, and the Republican era is investigated for the ‘modernist’ impulses that the 1949 Revolution stymied (see, for example, Yeh Wen-hsin’s and Leo Ou-fan Lee’s investigations of Republican Shanghai, 1990 and 1999 respectively). The interruption of China’s normal or natural course of development—that is, the interregnum—is now the Maoist era, and the Reform era is its resumption. What was repudiated by the Revolution (imperialist capitalism) is reframed as development as the Revolution is itself repudiated, in often wildly unhistorical terms, to the extent that it is denied any real historicity at all (Dirlik, 1996: 250–54). The Revolution is seen to be *without effect*, as its effects are occluded by Reform policies and modernizationist historiography.

Numerous ironies arise out of this turnaround, certainly not the least of which is the place and role of capitalism itself in Chinese history. (One must remember that the shifts described here are less a matter of empirical verification or refutation than of paradigmatic transformation.) The argument for endogenous ‘sprouts of capitalism’ in Chinese history first emerged in the mid-1950s among Chinese historians who attempted to explain, in Marxist terms, the success of a peasant-based socialist revolution. These sprouts were detected in long-term trends towards commercialization and the growth of long-distance trade in staple commodities, the development of new forms of land-ownership and tenancy, and of labour markets in urban settings. China,

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8 This paragraph relies primarily on Dirlik, 1982 and Rawski, 1991: 85–88. See also A. Lu, 2000.
then, was on its way towards capitalism when imperialism intervened and (to import a term from world-system analyses) peripheralized China in the capitalist world-economy. This argument disappeared with the Cultural Revolution, but was resurrected with important modifications in the early 1980s, and has been solidifying itself since. The modernization (capitalization) of China is no longer an imperialist project, but embodies instead the very basic inclinations of the Chinese people itself, inclinations that the ‘backward-looking’ Revolution perverted. The same historical evidence is marshalled against a Revolution whose inspiration led to its formulation in the first place.

While articulated from positions outside China, the ‘Confucian revival’ of authors like Tu Wei-ming and Wang Gungwu, and political figures like Lee Kuan Yew (former Prime Minister of Singapore), dovetails powerfully with this shift. Indeed, the very doubling of the terms Greater China and Cultural China implies that the real, authentic embodiment of Chinese culture is not the ‘peasant insularity’ of Communist China itself, but the overseas trading networks of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. ‘Confucian capitalism,’ then, engaged in the project of “recapturing the centre from the periphery” (Dirlik, 1996: 254; see also Tu, 1994 & 1996), represents the true synthesis of Chinese history (though its advocates put it in more guarded, contemporary terminology). Correlates of this externalized but still native capitalism are found in the “indigenous petty capitalism” that has “resurfaced” in the migrant communities and economies of China’s largest cities (e.g., Ma & Xiang, 1998; Zhang, 2001).

Clearly, one’s conception of Hong Kong depends crucially on one’s position in these debates: Hong Kong appears alternately as vestige or vanguard, as the last outpost of imperialist

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9 So, when Peter Chan describes Comrades as a story about “the rootlessness of the Chinese as a people, and... their continuing search for a new home” (see above, pg. 1), the fact that the home of the Chinese is implicitly not China is highly revealing, and places him within this last perspective.
interference in China’s affairs, or the bearer (along with Taiwan) of China’s natural tendencies towards capitalism ‘with Chinese characteristics.’ Somewhere in the middle of these multiple and overlapping forces is Hong Kong itself, whose cultural task in defining itself—its self—at this moment in its history (the run-up to the Handover) is to negotiate between and among these ‘other’ discourses, marking its position not just as apart from each of them, but also as a specific combination—a part—of them. In this sense, as Lo Kwai-cheung notes, “in the case of Hong Kong, the local is the transnational itself in its becoming” (2001: 263). In yet another twist, however, and precisely in the gesture of differentiating themselves from the nationalist discourse that ‘emanates’ from China, discussions of Hong Kong identity themselves take on distinctly nationalistic features (which is not to say that they are necessarily or quite nationalist). They attempt to root themselves in a notion of a ‘Hong Kong people,’ a people whose specificity (and hence, whose claims to corporate political representation and self-determination) can be tracked through its relationship to its own local history and cultural forms. One of the most often cited instances is the city’s cinema, which (alongside, or even in the same moment as, its global or even universal aspects) has a long tradition of exploring Hong Kong’s locality. To the three discourses outlined above, then, must be added a fourth term: the relationships that Hong Kong people have developed to and through their ‘own’ cultural forms, their own local history. These

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10 Except for Macao, of course, which didn’t ‘return’ to China until 1999. But Macao (and by extension, Portugal) has nothing like the international stature of Hong Kong and Britain, and is consequently much less significant to nationalist narratives.

11 Macao figures marginally if at all in this conception as well, perhaps because Macao is historically less of an ethnically Chinese city, and perhaps too because the form of capitalism that developed there is not one that many people are especially prepared to champion.

12 In this sentence, though, the “transnational” functions in a specific and somewhat different way. It is not one term that might be opposed to the nationalist term (which we might then, in order to keep our terms clear, call ‘global capitalism’). Instead, it is the wider field on which these two terms meet and interact, of which neither is master and in which both are immanent.

13 Law, 2001 and P.K. Leung, 2000 both provide excellent historical surveys of this tradition.
relationships cannot be reduced to the interplay of discourses from 'elsewhere.' This is the cultural terrain of the ‘Hong Kong Belonger.’

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We have, then, four dimensions of identification—China, colonialism, the transnational or diasporic, and the local—four constellations of terms that can be organized into a kind of meta-constellation, whose organization itself is the work of the machine I am designating 'Comrades.' But to these must be added still other representational resources which are factored into the artistic project of ‘expressing’ Hong Kong’s particularity, resources which are not geographically defined. One example, the particular relevance of which will become clear shortly, is the experience of nostalgia. Fredric Jameson’s characterization of the nostalgic mode, according to which “the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past... is refracted through the iron law of fashion” whose special form is pastiche (1991: 19), as one in which, moreover, that ‘past’ is either falsified or never existed in the first place, will serve for now as an initial formulation, pending elaboration. Nostalgic films, according to Natalia Chan Sui Hung (2000: 257), comprised probably the most numerically significant portion of Hong Kong cinema in the early and mid-1990s. The hyper-commodification of the past in terms of which the nostalgic unfolds, in which it is expressed, is seen by Rey Chow (1993a: 59–60) to conjoin the specific anxieties circulating in pre-Handover Hong Kong to the far more general ('world-historical') “raiding and idealizing of the past” that plays such a critical role in the consumer culture of Late Capitalism. (In a manner of speaking, Hong Kong people enjoin themselves to the complicated pleasures of nostalgia while partaking in the conditions of economic commodity-circulation and growth.) Another factor—the opposition of city and countryside, of urban and rural life—while
certainly not indigenous to a Chinese context, nevertheless assumes a particular character from
its long and illustrious history as an organizational figure for political conflict in China.\textsuperscript{14} Here,
what begins as a figure for class divisions within Chinese society is refigured into a structural
device through which an historical split between China and Hong Kong is imagined.

It is impossible, of course, to assign any of these experiences, perspectives, figures, or
points of identification unproblematically to one side or another of any neatly oppositional
debate on Hong Kong culture. Nor is it possible to define any consistent correlations between
political positions and aesthetic choices. Representations of Hong Kong as corrupt or decadent,
for example, can just as easily serve to valorize a culture engaged in healthy self-critique as to
denigrate it in favour of a pastoral imaginary, because cosmopolitanism generally permits (or
even requires as its reflexive condition) its own autocriticism. Similarly, as Sheldon Lu (2000:
276) describes the "localized, small stories of diaspora and displacement" in Hong Kong cinema
as occurring "beneath the sweeping, grand narratives of unity and sovereignty" that issue from
the "dominant" nationalist perspective, we should not see there any meta-comment on the field
of politico-cultural debate, but rather a specific position-taking within this debate. (This is clearly
not to say anything one way or another about its truth or falsity.) As Michel Foucault argues
(albeit in a wildly different context):

\textsuperscript{14} In a general way, this opposition is overlaid by the opposition of Right and Left, respectively (at least
until the post-Revolutionary period, when it takes on another aspect altogether: see Chan, 1994 on the
urban-rural schism in post-1949 China), and can be dated back to at least the Taiping rebellion. Indeed,
the civil war was often framed, by both sides, as a conflict between the city and the countryside, with the
Guomindang finding its principal bases of support among urban dwellers (merchants, financiers,
compradours, etc.), and the Communists framing themselves after 1926 as a peasant-based movement.
Leung Ping-kwan (2000: 28–30) observes that Leftist cultural production from the 1930s to the 1950s
depicted Hong Kong as corrupt and manipulative, and the countryside as the fount of innocence and
virtue. Rightist production depicted the same city as the seat of the rule of law and the countryside as the
bastion of parochial authority, arbitrariness, and the rule of might. (See also Faure & Liu, 2002 and Pang,
2002.)
We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies... with the shifts and reutilizations of identical formulas for contrary objectives that it also includes. (1990: 100–1)

None of the factors of textual production described so far ‘bear’ one discourse or ideology or another; it is their concrete organizations and the relations established between them that characterize the ensemble in which they are put to work. They exist in relation to textual production rather as land, machinery, raw materials, and labour exist in relation to commodity production. Just as these latter elements are organized in the production of Comrades as a commodity, as a thing that moves around in the world, like any other commodity, the former are organized into Comrades as a text. And as a commodity consists in a specific composition of factors of production (expressed abstractly in terms of ‘value’), so too does a text, defined at once as an artifact and as a kind of work, consist in a composition of discursive elements (expressed abstractly as satisfaction).

* * *

According to Natalia Chan Sui Hung, pastiche as a representational form is very closely connected to the nostalgic as a mode and as a “social practice” in Hong Kong (Chan, 2000: 252). Here, it refers to the formation of images of ‘the past’ not through reference to ‘history’—as something that structures experience ‘in depth,’ that operates according to laws and patterns, and that forms the knowledge-object of history as a discipline15—but primarily through the reworking of images themselves, images that dissimulate the complexity of history into a series

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15 German has two very different words that clarify this distinction: Geschichte (what happens) and Historie (the ‘science of history’). With some distortion, these can respectively be translated as ‘history’ and ‘historiology.’
of stylized icons. Pastiche is a kind of ‘surface play’ of images, a process of self-referentiality in which images form the source materials, the archival documents, for more images. Hong Kong nostalgia cinema, then, takes as its historical sources nothing other than images from Hong Kong cinema itself. For Jameson, from whose theorization Chan begins, this is how the attempt to recuperate a missing past becomes, in a cruel twist, an even more profound loss of “genuine historicity,” a trap of “depthlessness” (Jameson, 1991: 6). The ability to recognize sources in a cinematic tradition presupposes prior access to the images and texts that are being referenced; the social nostalgic experience emerges from a shared experience and knowledge of that tradition. It depends on, and is secured by, a hermeneutical operation: the audience imputes an authorial intent to perceived similarities between the referred-to and the referring texts, and formulates it into a necessarily social sense of sharing. This, in turn, becomes a basis for community, a shared sense of ‘getting it.’ Commentary, too, in its multitudinous forms, from criticism to conversation, functions to secure this sense through what it is possible to say uncontroversially, through what a commentary can presuppose and take for granted. This is precisely a means of marking and delineating ‘the local’ as a specific field of experiences, orientations, and memories—again, that of the Hong Kong Belonger.

One of these local traditions, one that Comrades relies on to establish its terms of reference in its first few scenes, is what one might call the ‘A Chaan Tradition.’ The term ‘A Chaan’ (阿燦) derives from a television series aired in 1979, in which it is the familiar name of a Mainlander who comes to Hong Kong, seemingly for the sole purpose of remaining, throughout the duration of the series, the permanent butt of Country Joe jokes. It subsequently became a

16 Of course, one doesn’t have to accept Jameson’s explicitly hierarchical valuation of historicity and nostalgia on precisely this point to appreciate the salient differences in the experiences of each.
slang term for unsophisticated Mainlanders in general, although the tradition itself goes further back: according to Cheng Yu (1990: 98), using the imputed characteristics of Mainlanders as a way to solidify Hong Kong people’s sense of themselves as urbane and modern goes back to at least the 1950s. *Comrades* begins when Li Xiaojun (played by Leon Lai, himself an immigrant) arrives in Kowloon on March 1, 1986. The humour of the first few minutes, during which he stumbles around, gets lost, is confused by escalators, etc., relies not only on a certain audience position towards Mainlanders, but also on knowledge of the ‘A Chaan’ tradition itself. (Early in the film, Xiaojun is called ‘A Chaan’ by a local.)

*Comrades*, though, quickly positions itself on one side rather than the other of the two main patterns of the ‘A Chaan’ tradition: instead of being trapped in his permanent difference as a Mainlander, he is eventually able to assimilate, with the help of Li Qiao (Maggie Cheung), another immigrant who is bound and determined to hide her origins (without always being quite successful). That the accompanying voiceover, in the form of letters home to his girlfriend in China, is told from *his* perspective marks Hong Kong and Hong Kong people as objects, as themselves bearers of peculiar *cultural traits*. But what is at first an object becomes, through emulation, an experience. The two immigrants are gradually incorporated into the body of Hong Kong culture, until at last they can take a lightheartedly disparaging view of other, more recent immigrants with whom they are lining up to apply for public housing (referring to them, for the first time, as ‘they’ rather than ‘we’). A short while later, when Qiao has purchased shares in a property development (with the help of her gangster husband, Pao), she announces: “I’m a Hongkie at last!” *Comrades*, then, is processual and incorporative in its movement rather than fixing and essentializing. The protagonists’ *becoming-cosmopolitan*, which is ultimately marked by ownership of capital, is accomplished by way of their abstraction from the particularity, the
rusticity, of their being-Mainlanders.

Qiao’s explicit desire to fit in and ‘make it’ in Hong Kong (which is, for her, almost a synonym for making money), provides a clue to what binds Comrades together, to what drives it: a ceaseless desire, coupled with—or indeed equivalent to—perpetual movement. Comrades joins a story in time (it takes place over approximately ten years) to a journey across space: Qiao and Xiaojun come to Hong Kong from China, and continue on from there to New York. Overlaid on this journey is an elaborate set of associations, in the unraveling of which one finds precisely the progressive, inclusive mythos that defines this version of Hong Kong cultural identity.

The film’s soundtrack provides a way into this structuring work, as Lo Kwai-cheung (2001: 270–74) notes in a discussion of the film’s extensive use of Teresa Tang’s music. In a striking case of the impact of geopolitical factors on the movement of popular culture and the formation of cultural imaginaries, Tang became phenomenally popular in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s, about ten years after the peak of her popularity in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Her ‘second life’ as a star was tied directly to the beginning of the Reform Era, which provided a new market for cultural products that had ‘expired’ in Greater China. When Qiao and Xiaojun arrive in Hong Kong with their love of Teresa Tang still fresh, this is exactly what ‘gives them away’ as Mainlanders. (Especially Qiao: Xiaojun is rather more starry-eyed and unconcerned about his affection for Tang.) But it also serves another purpose: it not only links Tang’s music to the temporal lag between the Mainland and Hong Kong, but also—at this end of the 1980s—evokes nostalgic feelings among Hong Kong audiences themselves. This can be seen in its diegetic and extradiegetic uses, as both thematic device and ‘mood music’ for the film itself (the two uses occasionally even blurring into one another). This doubled function itself serves two purposes: it figures the Mainland’s present as Hong Kong’s own past (so that Qiao and Xiaojun bring that
late-1960s past into the diegetic, cultural present—1986—with them, and the cultural timeframes of the Mainland and Hong Kong are tied together in a distorted temporal coincidence); on another level, it establishes Tang’s music as itself salient to Hong Kongers’ present—i.e., 1996—understanding of themselves. ‘The past’ and ‘China’ are resolved into Hong Kong’s present precisely by the entry and in the lives of the two Mainland protagonists.

Once Qiao and Xiaojun ‘become’ Hong Kongers, the desire that brought them there immediately begins to lead them away again. We get a sense of how ‘being a Hong Konger’ already opens onto the transnational early in the film, when Qiao explains to Xiaojun the source of her great wealth: she has invested in Japanese Yen and is thus, in her small way, involved in the world of currency speculation. Apparently—according to Qiao—“everybody in Hong Kong does it.” Later, she decides to leave Hong Kong with her husband, who is fleeing an arrest warrant, leaving Xiaojun on the pier (over which plays a song by Teresa Tang); eventually the pair ends up in New York. Meanwhile, Xiaojun watches a television series about Cantonese people in New York, gradually forming the desire that will take him there, following his boss who has gone there to open a restaurant. As the very icon of globality, as the global city, then, New York becomes the ‘future’ towards which the protagonists’ desires have oriented them all along. (There is a certain irony here: Xiaojun, having been drawn unwittingly into this chain of desire—he is clearly less interested in a compulsive forward movement, and he retains stronger ties to his home in China—gets to New York by way of a conscious decision; Qiao, who has been the driving force behind their mutual bildung, finds herself there at the end of a flight from the law.) The restless desire that defines the film’s central characters is shown further, for example, when Xiaojun’s boss announces his desire to open a restaurant in the Empire State

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17 At least her bank balance seems to him to constitute great wealth. That it isn’t especially, and that she says “Haven’t you ever seen a rich girl before?”, is another case of ‘A Chaan’ humour.
Building as he and Xiaojun gaze longingly at it; when Qiao toys with the idea of setting down roots in New York, only to discard it; when, as soon as Qiao gets her Green Card, she plans to return to China.

In the penultimate scene, Teresa Tang dies, and Qiao’s and Xiaojun’s nostalgic sense of loss, their derailed desire for an object which is now gone, leads them both to the same shop window, in which is being shown a retrospective on Tang’s life. They see each other and are reunited, all obstacles to their being together having been removed systematically in a series of apparently accidental but retrospectively vitally important chance events or acts of fate: Xiaojun’s wife leaves him when he tells her about his affair with Qiao; Pao is killed in a seemingly random street attack. Many of the relationships in the film, in fact, figure as so many obstacles to the movement of desire, all of which are progressively removed, and the removal of which is simply the fatedness of their reunion. Qiao’s and Xiaojun’s desires are nothing less than the threads that tie the film together, in an elaborate knot that, as we have seen, gathers up China, Hong Kong, and the world into one story. Their movements along these threads of desire periodically separates them, to be sure, but there is a strong sense of inevitability when, at the end of a series of twists and turns, knottings and unknottings, they are together again. The film is tied off at both ends, as it were, when the last scene returns us to the first, and it turns out that Qiao and Xiaojun arrived in Hong Kong on the very same train, having been bound together, that is, since before leaving China. This return bookends a movie that is profoundly about leaving with two scenes of arrival. In terms of the story, this final scene occurs first, but it is highly significant that, in narrative terms, it occurs last. After almost two hours of leaving, indeed of flight, one arrives (back) in (and as) Hong Kong.

18 This scene also marks the inexorability of his own trajectory: in response to her request that they return to their home village in China, he says, “We can never go back.”
In a sense, then, Hong Kong is a rite of passage for a Chinese people on their way to transnationality. We detect here resonances with the received description of Hong Kong as a ‘port city,’ a space of ‘transience’ or a ‘temporary depot’ (see Abbas, 1997: chap. 1). But there is considerably more to be said about this. Insofar as Comrades is allegorized into the story of Hong Kong people (as it certainly seems to have been), Hong Kong as a cultural entity is unbounded from Hong Kong as a city, as a place. It is characterized, rather, by the movement of desire itself, a kind of overarching desire that resolves into itself a number of seemingly dispersed elements: Chineseness and nationalism, westernization and colonialism, globality, and the local, as well as past, present, and future. This is precisely the ‘sweep’ of the film, its grand gesture of reconciliation. How it manages, finally, to tell three stories at once.

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We should return to the particular trajectory that Qiao and Xiaojun follow: their desire takes them away from China, through Hong Kong, and towards New York. Towards the end of the film, Qiao begins to feel homesick for China and forms a plan to return. (It is at this point too that a group of Cantonese tourists she is guiding around the Statue of Liberty informs her that “Nowadays, everyone’s going the other way.”) In its broadest strokes, this is precisely the spatial movement of Chinese capital through Hong Kong since the Revolution: from China to Hong Kong (the late 1940s to the early 1950s), from Hong Kong to the world (the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s), and then back again into China (with the Reform Era).\(^\text{19}\) Here, a movement of capital is figured as a movement of desire: Qiao and Xiaojun ‘bear’ this desire in much the same manner as, for Marx, capitalists bear capital. Comrades’ romance figures Hong Kong identity as

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\(^{19}\) I will return to this in Chapter IV.
nothing other than capital itself. This is capital detached from its recurrent forms of embodiment (land, machinery, etc.) and released as developmental movement itself—which is, as it happens, exactly where the protagonists find their ‘home’: in a trajectory that escapes the geopolitical terms of a national-territorial imagination.

We have, then, a foundational split: between Hong Kong-the-place and Hong Kong-the-project. The latter is constituted in the overcoming of, the passage through the former. In a word, the project is launched in the exclusion of the place. I have already mentioned the scene in which Xiaojun decides to leave for New York. What finally sets him irreversibly on course is yet another seemingly random occurrence: the dissolution of the community in which he has lived since arriving in Hong Kong. His aunt, who runs a multiethnic brothel, dies; shortly afterwards one of the prostitutes, a Thai woman named Cabbage, contracts AIDS, and she and her British boyfriend (who is also Xiaojun’s English teacher) leave Hong Kong. Admittedly, this might be called a minor scene. It lasts no more than thirty seconds, and is neither foreshadowed nor recollected later. But what exactly happens here? The dissolution of any community that could

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20 The only mention of this scene in the extensive critical commentary on Comrades is the following, from Sheldon Lu (2000: 279): “Xiaojun’s aunt lives in the memory of her elusive love affair with William Holden [who starred in Love is a Many-Splendored Thing (1955) and The World of Susie Wong (1960), both filmed in Hong Kong]... A white tenant in the house... falls in love with another tenant, a prostitute from Thailand. He contracts AIDS from her, and they both have to move out. The differences between these orientalist, interracial romances, between a Eurocentric, idealized past and the harsh present always endangered by life-threatening illnesses... indicate how times have changed in world history. The marriages and partnerships in the film do not last long. Thus it is all the more remarkable to see that a possible reunion between the hero and the heroine is rekindled at the end of the story.” Even more remarkable is how far beyond the film’s interpretive plausibilities this reading takes us. First, there is no indication that the “white tenant” also has AIDS. Second, he leaves Hong Kong with her, and they are never seen again; there are no grounds at all for determining that their relationship “do[es] not last long.” Third, there is similarly no indication that this “interracial” romance is especially orientalist. Orientalist in what sense? Simply by being interracial? And finally, the stated reason for their leaving is that Cabbage is homesick, not that she has AIDS, and there are no grounds for determining the sense in which they “have to” move out.
bind Xiaojun to Hong Kong is finally what frees him to go to New York, and thereby complete
the movement that constitutes him as a Hong Konger. It is its precondition. One identity, that is,
is founded in and by the destruction of another, and the evacuation from Hong Kong of the only
significant non-Chinese characters in the film. The inclusivity that, according to the reading
above, characterizes Hong Kong’s transnational identity rests on the death of a community and
the exclusion of the ethnically-other. The thrust that launches Xiaojun into transnationality is
exactly what pushes the non-Chinese out of the picture, and enables Comrades to function as a
specifically ethnic-Chinese identity machine. (This ‘ethnicization’ of Hong Kong identity will
return to haunt it in Chapter V.)

The non-Chinese may be pushed out of the picture, but their actual exclusion is, in fact,
*included* in the story. Comrades makes—positively—the real and present gesture of exclusion,
and then no more is heard of these characters. We could contrast this ‘representation of
exclusion’ with another exclusion that Comrades operates, an ‘exclusion from representation.’
Here, as opposed to the non-Chinese, which is represented in order to be excluded, *as excluded,*
we (do not) find what is not represented at all, but which we might reasonably expect to find in
what is, after all, an attempt to *mark out* what is uniquely Hong Kong: that is, any reference at all
to *borders.* Nowhere in Comrades is anyone shown actually crossing a border; people just appear
in their various settings, as though the facticity of borders had dissolved. Characters never once
*get to* where they’re going; they are just suddenly there. Indeed, the closest approximation we
find to the imposition of a border is quickly overcome by the sheer pull of desire: When Qiao is
being taken to the airport in New York by U.S. Immigration officials, she sees Xiaojun through
traffic and bolts out of the car in chase. She does not catch up to him in this scene, but she does
evade the Immigration officials and is thus able to stay in New York illegally. Desire, strung
along a trajectory rather than being located in any place or object, is what attaches Qiao and Xiaojun to their real home, which is the trajectory itself. Borders, on the other hand, which are both obstacles to the free movement of desire-capital through spaces and the very things that form spaces in the first place, are occluded from representation.

Where are we know? A putatively inclusive narrative is secured by means of a pair of exclusions: the first takes place within the diegesis itself, the second never ‘takes place’ at all, but subtends it as a kind of invisible sine qua non. To put the paradox in the starkest possible terms: this machine called Comrades, which functions to wrap the non-Chinese (transnationality, etc.) into a conception—a con-ceptus, or grasping-together—of Hong Kong, must also exclude precisely the non-Chinese. It must also exclude the very thing that permits the demarcation of Hong Kong as specific: borders themselves. Finally, then, the transformation of this machine’s product into satisfaction is just like the conversion of any other commodity into its value. The production of a value (exchange-value), of a commodity that possesses the character of being generally exchangeable with any other, that incorporates various factors of production into a common form coded as value, entails (and must entail) the excorporation of three things: surplus-value; waste matter (there is no such thing as a perfectly efficient production process); and the cost of replacing the materials gathered from nature (only extraction costs are resolved into value). From one perspective, then, the ‘product’ of capitalist production is value (abstract exchangeability); from another, it is exploitation, appropriation, and pollution (absolute non-value). Similarly, while Comrades codes Hong Kong identity as a kind of world-citizenship, as borderlessness, as an incorporation of disparate discursive elements into abstract form, it also positively produces and operates a series of exclusions, breaks, and divisions. Just as the externalization of costs is the very condition for the profitability of capital, i.e., for it to function
as capital at all, so too are the exclusions operated by *Comrades* (the inclusion of a specific exclusion and the exclusion of the conditions for inclusion in general) the very condition of *its* inclusivity. It secures the free circulation of desire, so to speak, in the same way as the conditions for the free circulation of capital are secured. Hong Kong’s transnationality (according to *Comrades*, but also—since I don’t simply want to disagree with it—for which *Comrades* stands as an icon) is founded on and as the institution of a *capital logic* that is not finally localizable anywhere, but that must be seen as a mode of processual existence, as a *movement* that inflects the general development of recent Hong Kong history. This latter is the condition of the former. We should, then, try to determine just what this capital logic is.

We are not here concerned with the condition of the colonies. The only thing that interests us is the secret discovered in the New World by the political economy of the Old World, and loudly proclaimed by it: that the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property as well, have for their fundamental condition the annihilation of that private property which rests on the labour of the individual himself, in other words, the expropriation of the worker. (1990: 940)

Volume II, “The Process of Circulation of Capital” (*Der Cirkulationsprozess des Kapitals*) begins with this:

The circuit of capital comprises three stages. As we have depicted them in Volume 1, these form the following series:

*First stage:* The capitalist appears on the commodity and labour markets as a buyer; his money is transformed into commodities, it goes through the act of circulation $M-C$.

*Second stage:* Productive consumption by the capitalist of the commodities purchased. He functions as capitalist producer of commodities; his capital passes through the production process. The result: commodities of greater value than their elements of

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1 In the Penguin edition, this is followed by an Appendix, “Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” which originally comprised a draft for a projected Part VII of *Capital I* (Mandel, 1990: 943). First edited, translated, and published in Moscow in 1933, it did not comprise any part of the original editions of *Capital*. 

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production.

*Third stage:* The capitalist returns to the market as a seller; his commodities are transformed into money, they pass through the act of circulation $C-M$.

Thus the formula for the circuit of money capital is $M-C \ldots P \ldots C'-M'$. (1992: 109)

What kind of transition is this?

Marx has passed over a line, so to speak, one that he makes into a break between volumes. Note that Volume I bears the title “The Process of Production of Capital,” rather than, say, “The Process of Capitalist Production.” This title, or rather “The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole” (*Der Gesamtprozess der kapitalistischen Produktion*), is reserved for Volume III. It will centrally be concerned, then, with capital’s and capitalist production’s appearance in the world, and the processes by which this appearance is accomplished. Volume II, on the other hand, begins at the point of this appearance: it starts with the appearance of a capitalist, as bearer of capital, as the managerial-agent form of capital, on a market. The central term in the equation above (Production, which had been the subject of Volume I) is sidelined in favour of circulation, which is, as it were, what happens between the terms. We have passed, then, from production to the market, and from the production of the market to the market as an established thing, a *fait accompli*.

We have similarly passed from the domain of the expropriation of surplus-value (the effect of an unequal exchange) to that of the circulation of values (the exchange of equivalents). Indeed, the condition and the result of the proper functioning of a capitalist market is that, on average and in the long term, commodities exchange *at their values*. The market, for Marx, is

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2 There is an ambiguity here, by which we are unable to determine whether Marx is referring in the title of Volume I to the process through which capital is produced as *capital* or to the process of production that is characteristic of capital. Volume I moves from the latter (chapters 4–22) to the former (23–33).

3 Obviously something’s being both the condition and the result of something involves a certain circularity that will recur throughout this discussion. I will address this towards the end of this chapter, but it will not be my task to resolve it.
emphatically not the ultimate source of profits. (This does not imply that it cannot function to secure ‘superprofits’—that is, the accrual of profits to one particular capital at the expense of another—but it does nothing to augment the total social stock of surplus-value.) It requires the operation of a general standard of formal equivalence, in which the concrete particulars, the ‘natural scientific’ qualities of a commodity are abstracted out so that they can be traded on the basis of a common form: “exchange value is a generality, in which all individuality and peculiarity are negated and extinguished” (Marx, 1993: 157). The elements of a commodity are resolved (‘dissolved’) into its price: Insofar as it is a saleable commodity, that is, insofar as it is generally exchangeable with any other commodity, a third term is presupposed, by which they can be related to one another. This third term—value—conjoins the absolutely singular (the concrete, material commodity: use-value) to the absolutely common (the labour embodied in commodities). The market, then, can in principle incorporate absolutely anything, precisely insofar as and to the extent that it leaves off any trace of its particularity in the act of entering the market in the first place. Which is as much as to say, by the same token, that the market incorporates absolutely nothing but (what has already been made into) itself. The commodity’s character as a use-value, its concrete, natural scientific particularity, must just as necessarily be abstracted out of the moment of trade as it must be perpetually maintained as that moment’s material support.

The abstraction from use-value functions, in a certain Marxist tradition, as a means through which a definition of capitalism may be constructed (e.g., Hilferding, 1966; Sweezy, 1964).⁴ Within this tradition, capitalism may be defined by means of its peculiar relations of production, defined here as market relations. But the historical passage from feudalism to

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⁴ This section relies on Rosdolsky, 1977: 41–50 and 73–95.
capitalism—from unfree labour to the labour market, from “after you make it, we’ll take a portion” to “once you’ve made it, we’ve already taken a portion,” that is, from extraction to exploitation—only gets one to a definition; it does not complete it. For Marx, capitalism consists in the simultaneous disjunction and conjunction of production and the market. Both are required, and required to be arranged in a specific way, for an economic formation to be described as capitalist. The line along which they are differentiated (which is also the line between Volumes I and II) demarcates its two mutually operative spheres: equal exchange between sellers, unequal exchange between capital and labour. These spheres are recursively brought together in the circulation of capital, in the passage of value from one term to the next. We can determine, and have just now determined, the differentia specifica of each, but neither forms the differentia specifica of capitalism as a system.

Something similar occurs in the determination of capitalism in terms of the properties of its ‘unit,’ the commodity. Indeed, this same tradition founds itself in what is seen as Marx’s exclusion of use-value from the conceptual domain of political economy, in A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1970: 28). (This is the passage cited by most commentators, although Marx says much the same thing on numerous occasions.)

To be a use-value is evidently a necessary prerequisite of the commodity, but it is immaterial to the use-value whether it is a commodity. Use-value as such, since it is independent of the determinate economic form, lies outside the sphere of investigation of political economy. It belongs in this sphere only when it is itself a determinate form.

According to Paul Sweezy, this passage divides the commodity into its ‘social’ determinants, that is, “categories which [directly] represent relations between people” (1964: 26), and its ‘material’ determinants. Marx’s putative “strict requirement that the categories of economics must be social categories” (26) is transformed into the exclusion of use-values from economic (social scientific) knowledge. Use-values become natural scientific objects, which are of no use
in determining a social object such as capitalism. But what Marx actually says is that use-value “belongs in this sphere only when it is itself a determinate form,” when, that is, it has been determined as and by a form that belongs to the social. It is use-value as such that is excluded, not use-values in their actual compositions, which will differ in kind according to the mode of production that creates them. The effect of the exclusion of use-values, which founds this tradition, is to determine capitalism as nothing but its ‘properly social’ aspects, rather than as a producer of materialities.

But it is precisely the use-value of labour-power that is consumed in production. This is the very principle of surplus-value in the first instance: that the capitalist purchases this commodity at its exchange-value, and receives in the exchange the capacity to produce more value than it is itself comprised of. The labourer’s labour-power is what is sold as a commodity, at its ‘market rate,’ but the labourer’s labour (the use-value of this commodity) replaces itself and produces surplus-value in the process of consumption. Labour-power’s “superadequation to itself” (Spivak, 1985: 79), its capacity to produce more than it costs to produce, is the very basis for the calculation of surplus-value: There can be no ‘rate’ of surplus-value, and hence no profit whatsoever without this difference between labour-power’s value and its use-value. Without this inequality, no surplus-value; without surplus-value, no profit; and without profit, no capitalism. And hence, no object for Marxist political economy. So it appears that what was excluded from the determination of capitalism is, in fact, reinscribed into its very heart, and becomes, in Gayatri Spivak’s words, a “deconstructive lever... both inside and outside the system of value-

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5 Rudolph Hilferding (1966: 130) puts it like this: “As a natural thing, it is the object of a natural science; as a social thing, it is the object of a social science, the object of political economy. The object of political economy is the social aspect of the commodity, of the good, in so far as it is a symbol of social interconnection. On the other hand, the natural aspect of the commodity, its use value, lies outside the domain of political economy.”
determinations” (1985: 80). What is ushered out the front door, that is, immediately comes back in through the window.

Here we run up against the limit of defining capitalism by means of its characteristic relations of production: There is nothing specific to capitalism about the production of use-values, and to that extent it correctly does not serve to define capitalism; but capitalism certainly involves (the production of) use-values, and in determinate forms, which therefore ought not to be excluded from its description. A differentia specifica, as what demarcates the respective spheres of capital and non-capital, is certainly useful so long as one’s problem is to distinguish them. It is an analytical tool, but not a descriptive tool. By contrast, a description of capitalism would have to reintroduce all those aspects which are divided up in the definition.

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Thusfar I have only outlined in the broadest possible terms the structural forms that the production of capital entails, and through which it passes in the process of its circulation. But I have not yet isolated the specific manner or mode of existence that is called ‘capital’ itself. Each of its forms can, does, and has functioned not as capital: It is already implied that money, insofar as it functions within the sphere of exchange, does not by that very fact function as capital, but simply as means of circulation. Neither can capital inhere in a certain organization of factors of production: merchant capital and industrial capital, for example, entail completely different organizational forms, but they are both capital. So, what is capital?

6 Marx, 1990: 247–57; 1992: 109–43; 1993: 239–50. Spivak (1999: 100) clarifies this: “money and money capital are not identical. But since both are in the money-form, it is easy for the bourgeois economist to cover over this fact and represent industrial capital as nothing but the mysterious reproduction of money.”

7 For an excellent discussion of this in a contemporary setting, see Hamilton & Chang (2003), which discusses the structural differences between ‘producer-based’ production (the Fordist model) and ‘buyer-
The answer lies in the passage from *Capital II*, quoted above: money 'goes through' and commodities 'pass through' the act of circulation. Capital is not any thing that can be isolated in any of the forms it periodically assumes, but the passing through itself. It cannot be shown, pointed to, or presented as such. None of the terms of Marx's equation (C, P, M', etc.) determine capital; capital unites the terms across the space that separates them, as the invisible thread along which they are strung. It is independent of any particular material form, but just as necessarily tied to material embodiment in general (just as the 'money-function' is not tied to any particular currency). In a word, it possesses production. It draws elements into definite relations, but it is not these elements. Capital, like value (the augmentation of which is capital itself), is profoundly, and in the deepest sense, abstract: "Capital in general, as distinct from particular capitals, does indeed appear... only as an abstraction" (Marx, 1993: 746, emphasis in original). This 'incorporation' of capital must be understood literally: capital gets into the various bodies of production, and then moves off again (at which point its forms become means of consumption or mere hoards).

Marx's description of this process, to be sure, is chiefly economic (at least in *Capital*), but there is no reason in principle why capital logic should be necessarily or even primarily economic in nature. And neither must 'the economic' be the level to which discussions of capital logic are ultimately referred. Indeed, Spivak suggests that economic capital may simply represent the most successfully coded instance of capital, due in part to the operation of the money-form based production (the 'post-Fordist' model of multinational buyers like The Gap and Wal-Mart, which contains significant structural analogies to 'pre-Fordist' forms of accumulation that characterize both pre-modern mercantile networks and contemporary East Asian business networks). This latter is not quite yet the 'consumer-based' production of the 'Toyotist' model. Here we have an intimation of a synchronic coexistence of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern forms of accumulation; I return to this on page 38. (This conception defines its modes according to the organizational imperatives and activities of capitalists, which is its ultimate shortcoming.)
We can surely determine capital as economic, narrowly defined, by the mediative operation of money as what permits exchange, but it does not follow that wherever there is capital, there is also money. Other things besides saleable commodities can be produced along capitalist lines, and other things besides money can enable the relating and exchanging of these things. Social narratives (such as Comrades, Almost a Love Story), legal forms, political structures, and subjectivities can each be found to operate (with) its own ‘money-function,’ its own “ad hoc universal equivalent that measures the production of value” (Spivak, 1985: 82, modified slightly). Respectively, we might suggest: desire in the case of narratives; reason in the case of legal forms; citizenship for political forms (I return to this in the next chapter); Spivak suggests “universal humanity” as the “touchstone of value in literature and society” (82), and the phallus in the organization of psychosocial life.9

8 I wonder, though, if reason isn’t in the process of being displaced by human rights as general equivalent. A commodity-exchange theory of law and legal forms was first proposed by Evgeny Pashukanis in 1927 (2002). He argues that the institution of the modern configuration of legal forms and the emergence of the notion of the “reasonable man at law” entails the operation of a specific notion of reason (namely, that of the bourgeois property-owner) as the ‘form of value’ within the legal sphere. It mediates and permits the relation of concrete particulars (legal subjects in all their various specificities) by means of a common term, the “norm [that] generates the legal relation” (86), which is held to be generally and identically distributed. The shift from reason to human rights, which begins some time after Pashukanis wrote, entails a shift in what is held to be common to all of the subjects of the legal relation. Involved here is a shift from mediation on the basis of a supposedly (or more or less) universally distributed capacity to mediation on the basis of possessing a common form (since human rights are supposedly predicated on nothing more than the homeomorphic determination of ‘being human’). Of course, human rights are far from having been secured as a principle of international law; I am not indicating a break, but rather a shift that is still underway.

9 It may appear as though I am missing the point of Spivak’s article, which is precisely to demonstrate the shortcomings of analogizing between ‘gold’ and ‘the phallus’: “No doubt there are general morphological similarities between centralized sign-formations. But in order to see in those similarities the structural essence of the formations thus analogized, it is necessary to exclude the fields of force that make them heterogeneous, indeed discontinuous” (1985: 75). But my problem is not the structural relationship between a ‘universal symbol’ and the field that it organizes (and in any case a general equivalent is not the same as a universal symbol: value is not money). Spivak is engaged in a critique of structures as the freezing of process; my object here is the passage of a process through structures.
In any case, what capitalist production is the production of commodities that are then brought to market: the concrete processes of production continually and necessarily produce exploitation as much as they produce ‘value-added’; and, as I mentioned earlier, production also produces pollution. What operates in the economic as the ‘externalization of costs’ operates in the social as the disappearance—the foreclosure, the ‘effacement,’ or the writing-over—of alternative possibilities of life, of other “subject-effects” (Spivak, 1985: 74). To the material violence that occurs in tandem with the processes of production, then, corresponds an “epistemic violence” (Spivak, 1985: 74) whose effect is the expulsion of these other effects from the calculation of value.

What describes capitalism, finally, is the inscription of two distinct spheres within a single process of valorization: a sphere of production (the factory, the family, the school, all those places where commodities, subjects, selves are made—defined by non-equivalence—whose effect is exploitation and whose mode of operation is domination and right), and of circulation (the market, the law, the public sphere, where commodities and ideas are exchanged—defined by equivalence—whose mode of operation is contract and law). Capital logic passes between these two spheres recursively, just as much as it passes between its various forms. What defines capital, in turn, is to be found in Marx’s “abridged formula of capital” (which is also the real form of a certain kind of capital, i.e., interest-bearing finance capital, “money which begets money”): $M\rightarrow M'$ (1990: 256; see also Arrighi, et. al., 2003: 265).

* * *

Since capitalism occurs only on earth, the growth that is designated by that ‘prime’ symbol has both intensive and extensive aspects. Here we broach the problem of incorporation.
—both of production by capital logic and of regions by capitalism. Incorporation proceeds by way of two conceptually distinct but practically intertwined processes: *formal* and *real* subsumption, the difference between which is nothing other than that between the instituting of a general equivalent and the operationalizing of divisions and exclusions.\(^\text{10}\) Formal subsumption, which is, according to David Harvey (1999: 373), “exercised through the market,” proceeds by way of the monetarization of a region, through and as the “monetary relations [which] have penetrated into every nook and cranny of the world and into almost every aspect of social, even private life.” Monetarization permits the relating of one region to another by means of a common term, a term that must be *instituted*. (“Monetary’ must be understood along the lines I’ve suggested above: it may, and often does, but does not necessarily, proceed via money ‘itself,’ but by way of the relation of general equivalence for which money stands as an icon.) Real subsumption, on the other hand, “requires the conversion of labour into the commodity labour power through primitive accumulation” (373).

Here we have two pairs of terms, presented as processes through which the institution of capitalism takes place: formal vs. real subsumption, and primitive vs. mature accumulation. It is important to determine the relationships between these pairs, because in such a determination lies the concept of capitalist incorporation itself. It is important to note that, although these pairs are related, and although they are both, within themselves, characterized by a certain conceptual and historical successiveness, they are not isomorphic to each other: they name different processes, and correlate to different objects. Anticipating the analysis somewhat, and schematically, one

\(^\text{10}\) Here we are returned fortuitously to the “Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” the Appendix to the Penguin edition of *Capital I* (especially 975–1038), where these terms are first elaborated. In this edition, then, the discussion of formal and real subsumption intercedes between production and the market.
can say that formal and real subsumption are related as circulation (the market) is to production (the factory); primitive and mature accumulation are related as plunder is to exploitation.

The relations of production in which one class exists as the owners of the means of production and another exists as sellers of labour-power are definitive of ‘mature’ capitalism. This labour-power, then, must appear as a commodity in the hands of labourers themselves, in fact as their only commodity, which they may freely sell. What are the conditions for this appearance? As noted above, primitive accumulation names the processes ‘through’ which these conditions are instituted. These processes need not centre on the accrual of means of production into the hands of capitalists, although obviously they often do. What is most centrally involved is the stripping away of the means of production from the people who thereby become sellers of labour-power. (As Marx puts it, “the process... which creates the capital-relation can be nothing other than the process which divorces the worker from the ownership of the conditions of his [sic] own labour” (1990: 874).) Primitive accumulation names the processes through which a ‘labour market’ and ‘free labour’ come into existence; it cannot, therefore, involve the labour market and free labour. Which is not to suggest that it cannot involve markets. The monetarization of a region can certainly play a crucial role in this transformation, and there is no shortage of historical evidence that we can adduce on this point. The ‘opening’ of markets and the sale of commodities from high-productivity to low-productivity regions (whether this takes the form of dumping or not) can have the effect of destroying ‘native industry,’ thereby ‘freeing’ labour to appear as a commodity. The devaluation and collapse of local means of

11 *Ursprüngliche*, the ‘primitive’ in ‘primitive accumulation,’ certainly does not carry any implication of a lower level of sophistication, and need not imply any temporal priority to ‘mature’ accumulation. It is worth noting in this connection that Marx’s chapter on “So-called Primitive Accumulation” concludes *Capital I*, but historically its subject-matter precedes the rest of the volume, rather as *Comrades*’ narrative concludes at the beginning of the story. This displacement is, I think, as significant for the one as it is for the other.
production here *presupposes* formal subsumption, and is part of the process by which *effective* means of production accrue to capitalists. All manner of commodities can be exchanged at the stage of formal subsumption, and this can play into processes of primitive accumulation, but *labour-power is not one of them*. Real subsumption begins where the transformation of labour-power into a commodity is completed.

Conversely, primitive accumulation can proceed by means in addition to the market (in fact, it involves the market only tangentially). It comprises two countervailing tendencies: the stripping of means of production from the labourer, and the accumulation of capital in the hands of the capitalist. These are clearly two aspects of the same process, but they can be accomplished through different means. While labour may be stripped of means of production through the market and devaluation, this may also occur, for example, by *enclosure* (that is, by simply taking it). In the case of contemporary China, that so many people can ‘appear’ as wage-labourers in the industrial coastal areas is not so much because the rural peasantry as such has been stripped of its means of agricultural production (although this happens, and with increasing frequency), but because increases in productivity or population have rendered a segment of them surplus to requirements. In this case, traditional producers are deprived of means of production without any transfer of property taking place. Finally, the accruals of value that result from *unfree* labour (feudalism, slavery, indenture, etc.) can be transformed into productive capital which employs *free* labourers for its utilization. (The ‘illegitimacy’ of its production does not in any way diminish it or the social power that results from its possession.) We find, then, that both primitive

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12 Where Spivak, in another context, says that “today in the post-Soviet world, privatization is the kingpin of economic restructuring for globalization” (1999: 357), we can hear in this privatization an echo of enclosure (to the extent that one could imagine privatization as the enclosure of the twentieth century). This observation has wide applicability, but it may be nowhere more true than in China, where the wholesale liquidation of state-owned enterprises in the reform era (to which I return in the next chapter) strips nothing less than ‘the people’ itself of its assets.
accumulation and formal subsumption set the stage for the emergence of labour-power as a commodity, the effect of which is the passage to real subsumption. But primitive accumulation is by no means reducible to formal subsumption.

We can see, then, that capitalism proceeds at one moment by means of incorporation and at the next by means of excorporation. If capital is, as I’ve argued above, borne along with the processes of production that it organizes, this means that capitalism is never fully, once and for all, accomplished. It is continually instituted into a wider field, and what is called its ‘development’ is simply the result of its conflictual interactions with this field. This instituting entails simultaneously the formation of a domain of formal equality and the formation of a domain of necessary real inequality. Similarly, the incorporation of an area into capitalism operates at one level by means of abstracting from its particularity and giving its products a common monetary form, by which it can be related to the already-existing area, and at another by operating a whole series of divisions, fissures, and exclusions. Paradoxically, the institution of a general equivalent seems to presuppose and, in a sense, maintain differences (since it applies to products rather than to production), while the divisions and destructions that constitute primitive accumulation tend to bring economic forms ever closer to identity. Far from being isomorphic, primitive and mature accumulation and formal and real subsumption are tendential opposites: the first begins with the production of conditions and moves towards the market; the second begins with the market and moves towards production. The inclusiveness of a capitalist economy, then, entails “the active divisiveness of the international division of labour”:

Whereas Solomon Brothers, thanks to computers, ‘earned about $2 million for… 15 minutes of work,’ the entire economic text would not be what it is if it could not write itself as a palimpsest upon another text where a woman in Sri Lanka has to work 2,287 minutes to buy a t-shirt. The ‘post-modern’ and the ‘pre-modern’ are inscribed together. (Spivak, 1985: 88)
It is possible that, for all this obscure argumentation, in the end I haven’t said much. After all, the circularity of equal exchange being both condition and result of a capitalist market has gone unresolved; capitalism can be defined as much by the exclusion of use-value as by its inclusion; no particular organization of material life can be specified for all the cases that the term purports to capture; it can be stretched along no linear temporal trajectory and encompasses in a kind of simultaneity the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern; neither can it be identified in space; and capital itself seems to have been reduced to a ghostly presence. It all seems “to hover vaguely about a concept that is nowhere to be found” (Derrida, 1995: 85). There may, in fact, be no satisfactory concept of capitalism, one that captures exactly what one wants it to and excludes everything else. Each of our attempts to define an object ultimately fails, just as numerous other attempts in the history of Marxism have also failed. As a result, some have wished to expunge the concept from Marxism itself (André Gunder Frank, 1998 is the most contemporary instance). In any case, according to Fernand Braudel (1977: 46), “Marx was virtually unaware of the word.” But it is doubtful that Marxism can do without it. For describing what we are trying here to describe, “one word does come spontaneously to mind: capitalism. Irritated, one shoos it out the door, and almost immediately it climbs in through the window” (Braudel, 1977: 45; recall the discussion of use-value). Ultimately, perhaps, “the best reason for using the word capitalism, no matter how much people run it down, is that no one has found a better word” (46).

But the conceptual failures are nonetheless productive failures. If I have not succeeded in defining an object, I have at least isolated a series of gestures. Perhaps capitalism ought not to be located in the results of the incoherent and contradictory gestures by which it comes into
existence, but as those gestures themselves. Just as the disjunctions and contradictions within capitalism account for its development, the incoherencies of its concept correspond to the countervailing tendencies in its material life. And this is the whole point: the contradictions cannot be resolved, and this is precisely the dynamic (or rather, the process) of capitalism. Capital logic writes two texts, on two registers, and it is not to be expected that they can be brought onto a single level or into a single concept. For our purposes (and this is not contrary to the preceding argument), from the specific vantage point of the insight I am trying to get to, and proceeding nominalistically, we can call ‘capital’ the relative growth of value, and ‘capitalism’ the institution-instituting of the conditions in which this occurs.

I only seem to be very far away from the simple opposition of two films from Hong Kong that is supposed to be my topic. The ‘capital’ in Comrades, Almost a Love Story can be isolated in the transnationality, the world-citizenship towards which the protagonists are oriented by their incessant desiring; the ‘capitalism’ in the requisite and constitutive exclusions and divisions through which this development occurs, and out of which it emerges. I am now in a position to substantiate the claim with which I ended the previous chapter: that the capital logic that defines Comrades’ transnational version of Hong Kong identity constitutes the cultural aspect of a process that inflects recent Hong Kong history more generally. Before I move on to that discussion, however, some final remarks are in order.

It has not been my task in this chapter to adjudicate or resolve long-standing divisions within Marxism. Nor have I been particularly concerned with marshalling evidence for any of my empirical claims; the argument doesn’t really rely on them in any case. Most importantly, I am not arguing that what is really going on in Comrades is more ‘correctly’ seen in the economistic terms of this chapter, as if it was a kind of pernicious ideological cover-story for
real capitalism. No such base-superstructure opposition is implied. If, by way of this chapter, I move from the cultural to the political-economic, it is not because I see the latter as any more 'foundational' than the former, in any 'in the last analysis' sense. It is because I am trying to determine the common logic involved in the capitalization of Hong Kong, regardless of whether the text in question is cultural, economic, political, or social. Capital logic writes itself into these 'relatively autonomous' spheres, without any one of them forming the ultimate referent. The cultural is not so much the expression or reflection of the economic as they are both the functional requirements of capitalization.
IV.

Anyone who is by nature and not by accident deprived of a state is either of a depraved sort or better than a human being.

— Aristotle

All well-meaning chatter notwithstanding, the idea of a people today is nothing other than the empty support of state identity and is recognized only as such.

— Giorgio Agamben

In early 1979, the government of Hong Kong transformed a pair of unused factory buildings in the New Territories town of Tuen Mun into the San Yick Detention Centre for Vietnamese refugees. This event figures the meeting of two different and longer-term processes, each with their own histories and determinations, and might be said to mark the point of their intertwining. On the one hand, beginning in late 1978, we have the re-opening of certain regions of southern China to significant foreign investment and the consequent transfer of Hong Kong’s manufacturing industries, at first principally to the immediate hinterland of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and more recently into a wider area around the Pearl River Delta. On the other hand, we have the issue of Vietnamese refugees (or migrants, depending on whose terminology one adopts, and when), which first arose in 1975 and was only ‘resolved’ in June 2000, with the final closure of the Pillar Point Detention Centre, also in Tuen Mun, which was
built to house the residents of San Yick when it was closed in 1989. The San Yick buildings, then, form a kind of joint, a physical point of transfer through which passes a process of displacement and incorporation, through which the inside and the outside of Hong Kong change places. What is at stake is the constitution of Hong Kong as a cultural, political, economic, and territorial unity, a constituting whose success is always—and necessarily—confounded by the very strategies intended to secure it. Here too, what ought to be included must equally be excluded, and vice versa. The élite transnational-migratory identity whose 'adequate expression' is written as and in *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* is here confronted by its constitutive conditions, its obverse side: migrant labourers and refugees. And the (cultural) writing of the former is accompanied and enabled by another, more obscure inscription, on another (political and economic) register. My task in this chapter will be to attempt the genealogy of this obscure connection, this impossible unity whose eventual explosion sets the stage for *Little Cheung*.

* * *

The first major, relevant influx of refugees from Vietnam occurred from December 1978 through February 1979, largely as a result of the turmoil resulting from Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and China’s subsequent failed invasion attempt in February.¹ Fleeing persecution in the wake of these conflicts, these first refugees were predominantly ethnic Chinese (Thomas, 2000: 45). This influx coincided almost exactly with a dramatic increase in illegal immigration from China, which followed upon the beginning of the Reform Era in China (see Table 1). The combined pressures of the two—the apparent ‘state of siege’ into which they placed Hong Kong

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¹ The real first wave occurred in 1975, but for substantially different reasons (the abandoning by the U.S. of supporters of the South Vietnamese régime upon victory by the North), and it was basically resolved by 1976.
—contributed to a major change in policy: On October 23, 1980, the ‘reached base’ policy was ended and far stricter controls were placed on immigration. This policy, implemented in 1974 as a way to manage the countervailing necessities of maintaining some form of border control and of providing for the labour needs of the chronically undersupplied manufacturing sector, sat halfway between allowing all Chinese migrants to enter Hong Kong freely and closing the border. Under this policy, people arrested on entry were repatriated immediately, while those who evaded capture long enough to ‘establish residence’ could then apply for the Identity Cards that would enable them to remain in Hong Kong (Lam & Liu, 1998: 13).

Soon afterwards, on July 2, 1982, in an effort to ‘deter’ further arrivals from Vietnam, the government introduced the ‘closed camp’ policy (Davis, 1991: 195). As a result, all new arrivals were quarantined and screened at the Kai Tak Transit Centre before being distributed out to one of the existing or newly-constructed closed camps, which were without exception located well outside the main urban areas of Hong Kong, either on outlying islands or in the industrial areas.

### Table 1: Illegal arrivals from Vietnam and China.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>from Vietnam</th>
<th>from China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>3,743</td>
<td>8,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>8,054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>1,001</td>
<td>8,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>6,609</td>
<td>19,438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>68,748</td>
<td>192,766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>16,788</td>
<td>150,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>9,220</td>
<td>9,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>7,836</td>
<td>11,160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>3,651</td>
<td>7,604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>2,230</td>
<td>12,743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>1,112</td>
<td>16,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>2,055</td>
<td>20,539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>3,395</td>
<td>26,707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>18,417</td>
<td>20,808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>34,622</td>
<td>15,841</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of the New Towns (Figure 1). Previously open centres such as San Yick were closed, and the work permits that refugees had been granted were revoked.² Children born in the camps had been considered legal Hong Kong Belongers, but this ceased to be the case with the new policy (Mushkat, 1980: 178–79). The camps were intended to serve as temporary institutions while positions for the refugees were sought in receiving countries. But as the number of spots shrank they quickly became the more or less permanent home of tens of thousands of ‘stateless persons,’ whose records of citizenship the Vietnamese government regularly claimed to have lost or never

² Envisioning this possibility in 1980, Roda Mushkat imagined that it would probably occur “in the case of an economic crisis accompanied by substantial layoffs” (179). In the event, “this source of relatively cheap labour” (172) became superfluous once Hong Kong companies could set up shop in the Mainland.
to have had in the first place (Far Eastern Economic Review, 163: 62–5, 2000). Whitehead
Detention Centre alone, for example, housed 22,000 people in 1988; in San Yick, 5,000 people
were given 11 square feet of floor space each to live on.

The sense in which the closed camps are ‘permanent’ is crucial to my argument, and will
only become more so. Certainly they are not permanent in the sense of ‘everlasting.’ After all,
the closed camp system was relaxed in 1989; the last Detention Centre (High Island Centre, for
reclassified migrants awaiting a regularly deferred repatriation, not refugees) was closed in 1998;
and the last open camp, Pillar Point, in 2000. But they quickly ceased to be operated as
temporary, and residence in the camps became indefinite. 3 Provision of services was organized
in a way that would permit them to function permanently as hope for resettlement receded into
the unforeseeable future. Regulations for the camps were drawn directly from laws on the
operation of prisons, 4 but the government never conceded that the camps were actually prisons,
as they were never placed under prison legislation and detainees were “not subject to prison
discipline” (Davis, 1991: 14). In 1988, the Secretary for Security in Hong Kong stated that “the
only resemblance between a closed centre and a prison is that both places are used for the
confinement of people. In all other respects… the closed centres operate under a totally different
régime with the refugees given as much freedom as is practically possible within the confines of
their enforced residence” (quoted in Davis, 1991: 198). Which is to say, they were essentially left

3 In this sense, their permanence is analogous to that of the communes or the hukou (household registra-
tion) system in China (though inversely): there, systems that were supposed to structure a person’s life
from birth to death didn’t end up lasting as long as any normal lifetime; here, a transient system that is
supposed to be a ‘disappearing phase’ ends up lasting for years.
4 Section 35(1).3 of the Immigration Ordinance (Cap. 115, Laws of Hong Kong) states: “A person
detained in any place set out in Schedule 1 [‘Places of Detention’] shall receive the same treatment as
that which is accorded to a person committed to prison for safe custody… Rule 188(1)... and, mutatis
mutandis, rules 189 to 207 (inclusive) of the Prison Rules (Cap. 234 sub. leg.) shall apply to him.” (These
rules specifically pertain to the behavioral expectations of inmates.)
just to be there.\footnote{It is perhaps unavoidable and natural that sociological analyses of the camps and detention centres ground themselves in Erving Goffman’s (1961) seminal investigation of ‘total institutions.’ The camps certainly have much in common with them, as should be clear. But here they evince three important differences: almost never did any “single rational plan” (6) govern their operation; it was most often not the case that “all phases of the day’s activities [were] tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next” (ibid.); and there was no ‘rehabilitory’ function—no one claimed or could claim that the camps existed ‘for’ the refugees. In this sense, the aforementioned fact that they were not prisons is crucial.}

The introduction of the closed camp policy also coincided with a change in the ethnic composition of the refugees: from 1981 onwards they were mostly ethnic Vietnamese. Supporters of the policy strenuously denied that this coincidence had any significance (Davis, 1991: 142); where it is conceded it is generally described as a more or less natural consequence of the fact that “98 per cent of the people of Hong Kong are ethnic Chinese and [thus?] more attuned to the needs of their ethnic brethren” (Mushkat, 1980: 170). The closed camp period lasted until June 15, 1988 when, largely in order to circumvent the ongoing and harsh criticisms of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the government changed the automatic designation of new arrivals from ‘refugee’ to (economic) ‘migrant,’ and screening for voluntary or, later, compulsory repatriation was introduced. Since the UNHCR had and has no mandate to oversee a state’s treatment of economic migrants, this terminological change undermined its critical footing in international law (a footing that was in any case very tenuous, as we will see presently).

Not least of the Hong Kong government’s justifications for the detention of Vietnamese refugees was the fact that, after all, they were not Hong Kong Belongers, which status we now encounter in its juridico-political rather than its cultural valence. But it is not simply that they did not possess this legal status: Never between 1975 and 2000 did they in fact have any legal status. Writing on behalf of the Hong Kong Bar Association in 1988, Benjamin Yu notes with some
concern that “the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘Vietnamese refugee’ are not defined under the law, despite many references to these terms in the Immigration Ordinance” (SCMP, 3 Sept 1988).

Indeed, ‘refugee’ is conspicuously absent from the list of definitions that introduce this law (Cap. 115, Sec. 2, “Interpretation”), which all follow this pattern: “adjudicator... means the chief adjudicator, deputy chief adjudicator and any other adjudicator appointed under section 53F.” Of all the terms for agents, the definition of whose interrelations in fact constitutes the law itself, this is the only one that is missing. With the change to the ‘economic migrant’ category and the introduction of the repatriation policy, nothing changes in this respect: still no definition, and previously determined refugees remain refugees.

This omission has its own positive history, and in analysing it one ought not to consider it simply as an oversight or as a legal error whose only mode of existence is as ‘something to be corrected.’ In 1955, Edvard Hambro prepared a report for the UNHCR on The Problem of Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong, chapter 5 of which is devoted to the “Legal Position of Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong.” His focus, however, is on the determination of refugee status under international law, not Hong Kong law. As a result of the post-World War II geopolitical negotiations between Britain and China over the status of Hong Kong—in which, essentially, Hong Kong was traded for diplomatic recognition of the People’s Republic—Britain did not extend to Hong Kong its acceptance of the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees or the 1967 UN Protocol on the Status of Refugees. Britain granted that there would be no ‘refugees’ from China in Hong Kong, which according to the new Beijing government was, in the last analysis, part of China (Mushkat, 1980: 172–73). Hence, no such category. The only obligation that Hong Kong incurs as a result of Britain’s membership in the UN is that it “recognize the international protective function entrusted to the UNHCR and facilitate the performance of that function”
(Mushkat, 1980: 173), which nowhere implies any corrolary recognition of its definition of ‘refugee.’

When the Vietnamese came to fill the position, this categorial exception was appended to a territorial one. Before 1982, children born in the camps were considered Belongers, and there was considerable uncertainty over whether residents of the camps would become permanent residents (a step down from Belonging, but with the right of abode) if they met the conditions outlined in the Immigration Ordinance, namely having resided in Hong Kong for seven years. With the closed camp policy, this problem is resolved: the physical space of the camps is, in a sense, subtracted from that territory which ‘counts’ towards requirements. Henceforth, refugees could live there forever and never attain legalized residence. And when the camps are ‘opened’ in 1988 and (some) residents are once again granted work permits, their continuing residence in the camps still forecloses any possibility of legal integration. Thus, the camps are excepted from the juridico-territorial order of Hong Kong just as the refugee is excepted from its juridico-political order. Vietnamese refugees existed in a kind of state of permanent legal exception: at no point did they attain to the status of ‘legal persons,’ which are the only persons with which a legal order can have any kind of political relation. This is precisely what permits the colonial government to sidestep the provisions and norms of Anglo-Saxon common law (leaving aside non-existent statutory law) regarding indefinite detention and habeas corpus.

It will be profitable to dwell here for a moment, to stop and consider where this erasure, this being-legally-undefined (or: being, legally undefined) leaves us. Since ‘refugee’ is not defined in law, a refugee is simply a person who is called a refugee. In the absence of any criteria, refugee ‘means’ a person who has the name, ‘refugee.’ The name is the definition. If this is the case, if the name itself is the definition of the name, then this tautological, terministic
short-circuiting is nothing other than the operation of pure sovereign power, precisely in a context where power is apparently being legally mediated: the power to decide the exception, the power to make it so that the normal state of affairs on which law depends is actually present, the power to define but, even more, the power to refrain from defining. (I will return to the question of 'sovereignty' below.) What is called Hong Kong's “typically pragmatic approach” (Mushkat, 1980: 172)—this is itself a typical phrase—ought rather to be described as its sovereign prerogative. Here, power has no reference except to itself, no need to refer outside itself for a ground on which to stand. It is itself the ground of its own operation. Its enunciation is immediately law, and in force, without any need to turn itself through any grammatical, gerundive elaboration. Without, that is, any need to unfold into any predication or any 'sphere of operation,' because it is itself that sphere. The determination is made through nothing but the determination itself, a situation that does not hold for any other term in the law. One is not a refugee in virtue of anything except being called a refugee.

For our purposes, though, how should these people be characterized? Lacking any legal status, they are subject to the Hong Kong government (or rather, to its police apparatus and any private security companies that it may choose intermittently to append to itself for assistance), but they are in all respects not subjects of Hong Kong. The camps in which they live are themselves not spaces over which any legal order presides, because they are permanently placed outside that order's sphere. (Incidentally, this explains why not a single guard or Correctional Services Department officer was ever charged in any of the multitudinous 'disturbances' that took place in the camps. They could not be, because in such a situation of managing legal non-persons in legal non-places the notion of 'excess'—as in excessive force—simply makes no sense. The very few attempts to bring charges were either stymied by gubernatorial fiat or
greeted with concerted (and largely successful) protests by CSD officers. With whom one can sympathize, I think, in an odd way: after all, on what basis could charges be brought? There was, in principle, no limit placed on their operations, so what meaning could transgression have?)

The camps, then, are extra-legal spaces, which nonetheless become a permanent presence within the territorial boundaries of Hong Kong. The lives that occur there can only be described as just lives: lives and nothing more, lives denuded of any recognizable legal form, bodies without protection. Here we are back to Goffman’s analysis of total institutions, and able to go beyond it: The fact that the Vietnamese were consistently moved about, organized, divided, and arranged as though they constituted nothing more than an infinitely mouldable and undifferentiated mass ought not, at least in the final analysis, to be attributed to any nefarious motives or programs (although these have their role to play); rather, it is the simple correlate of its extra-legal conditions of existence. The refugees are at one and the same time inside and outside Hong Kong (defined at once as a territory and as a political entity whose boundaries are coterminous with it). Keeping these territorial and legal aspects separate—if only momentarily, while also bearing in mind their superimposition—we should recognize the population of these camps as Hong Kong’s outside on the inside, its ‘excluded interior.’

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While this was taking place, Hong Kong’s manufacturing industries (which were primarily responsible for its rapid economic growth after 1950) were progressively relocating to the just-established SEZs of southern China. Prior to World War II, Hong Kong functioned

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6 This is Joe Thomas’ characterization: “There is a tendency to view all refugees from Vietnam as a homogeneous group, despite major ethnic and ideological differences [among them]” (2000: 177). Here he is simply voicing the common critical rhetoric of the human rights and humanitarian organizations who worked in the camps.
primarily as an entrepôt between China and Britain. In the closing stages of the civil war in China, a substantial population of industrialists and merchants fled to Hong Kong, only shortly to find the border closed to trade after the Korean War. So they reoriented their distribution networks to transnational markets, and transformed the recently arrived refugees from China into an industrial labour force. Notwithstanding a brief recession in the mid-1970s, the development of Hong Kong’s predominantly labour-intensive, low- to medium-technology industries had created by the mid-60s a situation of chronic labour shortage (Skeldon, 1997: 191). (In this context, ‘illegal immigration’ assumed a place within a complex problematic of labour importation and supply that effectively precluded any ‘zero tolerance’ approach, whatever the rhetoric may have been. Hence, eventually, the reached-base policy.)

This problem was finally (or at least substantially) alleviated with the opening of southern China to foreign investment. Beginning in the early 1980s, then, as complementary measures were taken in China to allow for freer migration to the SEZs (I’ll return to this shortly), Hong Kong began its transition from a manufacturing- to a services-based economy. This was accompanied by the turnaround in the flow of capital that I alluded to in my discussion of Comrades. From 1963 to 1980, North America and Western Europe received the bulk of Hong Kong exports, while between 1979 and 1985 the share of exports sent to China jumped from 8 to 55 percent (Meyer, 2000: 190, 194). Further, Hong Kong quickly became a key provider of financial services for China’s infrastructural investments. Its financial districts in Central and Wanchai have come more and more to look like those in other major global cities like New York and Tokyo, replete with the class polarization between high-salary financial professionals and low-wage support workers that Sassen (2001: 256–83) discusses (see also Lin, 2002: 249–50). (The Vietnamese refugees who in 1982 were extracted from an industrial world of work returned
in 1988 to a labour market geared towards the provision of services.)

But this ‘tertiarization’ of Hong Kong is ‘true’ only from one perspective: as Ronald Skeldon notes, it is “not that Hong Kong has ceased to be a manufacturing center. This impression is conveyed simply by the artifact of statistics-gathering regions. The manufacturing labour force has moved to the urban periphery of Hong Kong, which just happens to be across the border in labour-rich China” (1994: 105, emphasis added). Now, China’s putative ‘labour richness’ ought not to be taken completely for granted, since people become labour—or more accurately, labour-power appears as a commodity—only in specific circumstances and through positive processes of change. Hong Kong enterprises could ‘find’ labour in the Pearl River Delta only as a result of the fitful, uneven process of rural decollectivization and the dismantling or privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in Mainland China.\(^7\)

From the mid-1950s until the reform era, the household registration (hukou) system functioned as a basically effective means of regulating internal migration in China.\(^8\) Households were divided into four categories (in order of ‘status’: urban-nonagricultural, urban-agricultural, rural-nonagricultural, and rural-agricultural), and one’s designation substantially determined one’s migration possibilities: a person could move quite easily down the hierarchy (e.g., from urban-nonagricultural to rural-nonagricultural) or, far more often, laterally from one region to another. But movement upwards, especially from rural to urban designations, was extremely difficult and usually only occurred in state-organized attempts to boost the populations of China’s interior cities; migration to large coastal cities was essentially stymied. (Rural collec-

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\(^7\) The abolition of the reached-base policy here acquires an additional function: migration directly into Hong Kong came less and less to be needed as Shenzhen was constructed as an “intervening opportunity” or “cordon sanitaire” (Speak, 1997: 258).

\(^8\) The following is necessarily schematic, and leaves out significant transformations, retrenchments, experiments, and abrupt turnabouts. For more detailed accounts, see Chan, 1994; Chan & Zhang, 1999; Cheng & Selden, 1994; Davin, 1999; and Lary, 1999.
tives were expected to produce their own necessities, while urban dwellers' needs were heavily subsidized by the state; any movement up the household registration hierarchy was discouraged as an expense for a state that wished rather to devote its resources to rapid industrialization.)

With the reform era, through a combination of state action and force majeure, this system began to break apart. The dissolution of rural communes and the institution of the household responsibility system; the emergence, often on an ad hoc basis, of new residence categories in the early 1980s (such as the 'self-supplied grain household' designation or 'temporary residence' permits); the 'blue seal,' or 'urban hukou for sale' system in the late 1980s (Woon, 1999: 477–81)—all produced, in cumulative fashion, the 'floating population,' detached from any means of production except their own labour-power, approximately 12 million of whom are currently employed in Hong Kong-owned or -managed enterprises in the Pearl River Delta.9

Certainly this process hasn't occurred smoothly or evenly, even from the perspective of the state and the managers who 'direct' it. A centralizing retrenchment took place in China between 1988 and 1991: Shenzhen and Guangdong in particular undertook major campaigns to expel migrant workers, as the 'self-supplied grain household' category lost its official sanction and temporary residence permits were revoked.10 This was reversed again by 1993. 'Negative' measures (e.g., the dissembling of Guangdong's previously mainly agricultural economy) have occurred in tandem with 'positive' ones (the industrialization of the countryside and the importation of labour from as far away as Sichuan Province), and not always—or even often—harmoniously (Lin, 2002: 251).

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9 From Notes, 2003. This figure is almost double that of the total population of Hong Kong itself, and 4 to 5 times the total manufacturing workforce that ever existed there. Further, it is only a small percentage of the total migrant labour force in the region.
10 Such expulsions have continued to occur, for example in Beijing in 1995, with the destruction of Zhejiang Village—actually an entire city within the city populated by migrant communities from Zhejiang Province (see Zhang, 2001).
The result has not been the formation of a set of large cities with adjacent agricultural or labour-supplying hinterlands (as was the regional pattern in Europe’s industrialization). Rather, after an initial concentration in the Shenzhen and Zhuhai SEZs, production has more recently been spatially dispersed in the countryside, and cities in the Delta have either gone into relative decline (Guangzhou) or been made firmly subsidiary to Hong Kong (Huizhou, Foshan, Zhaoqing, whose main functions are as managerial field offices of Hong Kong firms) (Lin, 2002: 249–50). Factory districts—which had functioned as labour-supplying hinterlands through legal or illegal immigration—resemble previously industrial areas in Hong Kong, which are increasingly service-oriented; previously external areas are now the labour suppliers (Skeldon, 1997: 204; Speak, 1997: 274–75; Chan, 1999: 63, 65). This process should be described less as an exteriorization than as an outward expansion of the economic field that ‘Hong Kong’ governs and as an incorporation of a previously external area into a single system of production, the ‘Hong Kong–Guangdong nexus.’

For all this, however, the political divisions remain in force, and when not in force, then potentially enforceable. This fact, this ‘discrepancy’ between policy and reality, is not at all a simple regrettable mismatch existing only to be ameliorated: it has an entirely positive function. It is not a contradiction that the political-economic system of production here can resolve, but the very definition of the system itself. The spatial organization of production certainly does not exhaust the harmonizations in the region: as wages have risen and factory régimes have become more ‘lenient’ in Hong Kong, wages and discipline in Hong Kong-owned and -managed factories in Guangdong are more or less what they were in Hong Kong in the 1960s.\footnote{We might, in fact, see this as a version of the temporal disjunction we encountered in the movement of cultural products in the discussion of Comrades.} The “localistic despotism” of Guangdong factories (Lee, 1998: 109–36), in which native-place
networks are reengineered into hierarchical mechanisms for the division of labour (*ibid.*: 6), is made possible by the profound detachment of the migrant workers from any effective political protection, and the dissolving in any case of the institutions that might provide it. In the case of native workers being shifted from agricultural to industrial work, it is highly significant (as will become clear shortly) that they are, in the Chinese phrase, “entering the factory but not the city” (*jinchang bujincheng*: 進廠 不進城).

This process is precisely the inverse of the detention of Vietnamese refugees. Like them, economic migrants in Guangdong have no legal status within the political order of Hong Kong, but they are nonetheless (in fact, all the more) *included* in its economic apparatus. They are subject to the economic power of Hong Kong, and to the administrative power that arises from companies’ clientelist relations to government agencies in China (Lee, 1998: 55–62), but they are obviously not subjects of Hong Kong. The factories and company-owned dormitories in which they work and live are outside of the jurisdiction of any Hong Kong government, but well within the sovereign prerogative of the Hong Kong managers who operate them. Insofar as these people are neither Belongers nor citizens of Hong Kong, insofar as they have not “entered the city”—insofar, that is, that they too have no legal existence—they ought also to be described as just lives, as a sort of raw, infinitely malleable mass of capacities to which no political relation is possible. They are, so to speak, the inside on the outside, Hong Kong’s ‘included exterior.’

The transformation of the San Yick factory buildings into the San Yick Detention Centre, then, emblematizes the process by which the interior and the exterior of the political order of Hong Kong are repetitively turned into one another and transposed, precisely by the strategy that seeks to secure or maintain that order. How are we to understand these two processes together? Both concern the appearance and management of what should not (but which also *must*) exist.
within any well-defined territorial and political entity: persons without citizenship, persons
denuded of recognizable form (literally, *de-formed* people). On the one hand, located outside any
legal order, in a permanent state of exception, we find the Vietnamese refugees, who come
increasingly to be treated as *purely administrable bodies*, to be moved about, joined and divided,
disposed of as one would dispose of cattle. On the other hand, located inside the circuits of
economic exchange whose regularity and enforceability it is the job of Hong Kong’s political
machinery to ensure (recall its obligations from the Introduction, pg. 2 above), we find the
migrant workers across the border, who come by way of detachment and cultural difference to be
treated as *purely labouring bodies*, to be assigned, placed, distributed, disposed of as one would
dispose of raw materials and machinery. To the first group, the only possible relation is the
unmediated application of *force*; to the second, it is the application of *management techniques*.
(The increasing militarization of refugee camp operations and the shift in the mid-1990s from
expulsion to management of migrant workers ought to be considered in this light.)

We are at, so to speak, the two extremes of the state, ‘super-’ and ‘sub-,’ whose concrete
materializations and real operations are shown to be strangely similar. Here we can join together
into one analysis the ‘abstraction’ of sovereignty from the state, the “denationalizing of national
territory” by transnational financial processes and institutions that Saskia Sassen discusses under
the rubric of “economic citizenship” (e.g., 1996: 33–62) and the ‘subtraction’ from the state’s
legal order—the ‘delegalizing’—of those exceptional spaces that Giorgio Agamben calls
“camps” (e.g., 1998: 166–80). What falls upon non-legalized life, upon ‘exceptional life,’ life in
its simple, denuded form as it encounters the state without being included in it, is nothing other
than *pure sovereign power*. What is centrally involved in each case is the operation or non-

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12 Or perhaps, documents: after the San Yick Centre was closed, it was renovated and became the home
operation of the legalized status of personhood that citizenship creates, or the *citizenship-function*, which is to all appearances the only concept we have for the limiting of sovereign power. Perhaps, then, we should turn now to this function.

* * *

First and foremost, the modern notion of citizenship designates a form of political relation which arises out of a particular set of historical conflicts.\(^{13}\) The drive towards its modern conceptualization will be seen to be a nascent European bourgeoisie’s struggle against royal power, but it is not the effect of any simple bourgeois ‘victory.’ It is inextricably bound up with the development of modern states and their relations with the cities that were progressively incorporated into them. It will be useful, then, to begin with Charles Tilly’s effort to “rethink European state formation in terms of the interplay of cities and states” (1989: 570). He begins by making a distinction between cities as “containers and distribution points for capital” and states as “containers and deployers of coercive means, especially armed force” (565). The transformation of the multitudinous and dispersed proto-states of feudal Europe into a much smaller number of “magnified war machines” (566) by the late-medieval period entailed an exponential growth

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\(^{13}\) Few political concepts have been the subject of so much academic interest in recent years. The veritable explosion of interest in citizenship has been traced to any number or a combination of world-historical events and processes: the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reorganization of newly-independent Eastern European countries; the European Union and the supranationalization of other political bodies; economic globalization, the collapse of Keynesianism and rise of neoliberalism, attacks on the welfare state, and the development of system-wide resistance to the world hegemony of institutions like the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO; the formalization and theorization of the ‘new social movements’; and so on. Aspects of the concept have been allocated to one discipline or another (history, sociology, philosophy, psychology, etc.), and different traditions (liberalism, republicanism, feminism, socialism, etc.) have emphasized one feature or another. The only commonality seems to be the idea that it is central to the constitution of modern political organization. The following discussion, then, will necessarily sideline features of citizenship that some see as central, and must also be schematic.
in the resource-demands that states were making on cities and populations. By the Thirty Years War (1618–48), which was brought to an end by the Treaties of Westphalia, these demands had become onerous enough for the bourgeoisie—which had been financing it—to demand protection from royal power's prerogative of war in exchange for continued credit services. The Westphalian system instituted the modern inter-state system, but as important as this was the legalization of the principle that civilians are not party to disputes between sovereigns. A whole sphere of economic activity—precisely, manufacture and trade—was removed from the orbit of royal power. (We see here the first institutionalization of the opposition of state and society, which will be crucial to understanding modern citizenship.) According to Giovanni Arrighi (1994: 43), “the most important application of this principle was in the field of commerce. In the treaties that followed the Settlement of Westphalia a clause was inserted that aimed at restoring freedom of commerce.”

This freedom of commerce had first been established with the municipal charters granted to late-medieval cities (Weber, 1962: 91–5), which built up around it the legal architecture (contract law, formal equality, etc.) and social forms ('urban community') in which modern citizenship finds its first expression. This independence was lost, then regained. The next phase begins with the progressive incorporation into states of structures that had emerged in a municipal setting. A complex dialectic developed in which the concentration of capital contributed to and reinforced concentration of means of coercion, which in turn provided the conditions for the further concentration of capital, and this is where the modern state begins. Different states followed widely divergent paths, but there is nonetheless a remarkable convergence: the state comes to be characterized by high concentrations of both capital and means of coercion (Tilly, 1989: 569). The successive macro-phases of state-capital interaction in the modern world, which
begin at this point—mercantilism, free-trade imperialism, Keynesianism and its correlate social
formation, the welfare state, neoliberalism—are the broad forms taken by this dialectic, which is
not at all a question of one's triumph over the other, but of alternations in their relative organiza-
tional capacities.

For our purposes, the most important aspect of this series of compromises and mutual
amplifications is the state's gradual internalization of the legal forms, concepts, and forms of
social organization that had come to characterize urban life. The centralization of juridical power
into the state also followed divergent paths, but again with roughly similar results (see Bourdieu,
1998: 47–51). The notion of formal equality before the law had emerged in the cities as part of
the conditions and regulations of trade. With the abstraction of trade from royal power, and the
simultaneous marking of the division between state and society, come the conditions for the
forms of sociability and positive institutions that define the 'bourgeois public sphere,' whose
function is increasingly to enable and coordinate the formulation of demands to be brought to the
state. 'Society,' then, becomes a form of horizontal linkage between persons which is contrasted
to the vertical linkages of the sovereignty-relation. With the reincorporation of cities into states,14
this formal equality comes to be coded as national citizenship. The simultaneous emergence of
the legal notions of 'sociability' and of 'natural rights' in the works of jurists, legal theorists, and
philosophers from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries (e.g., Bodin, Grotius, Pufendorf,
Rousseau, Diderot), despite their widely divergent perspectives and areas of interest, should be
seen as a way of coding the social, political, and economic forms of association characteristic of
the bourgeoisie into the legal terms in which they are recognized by the state. Citizenship—and

14 Tilly (1989: 574) illustrates this: “Suppose, for purposes of counting, we take any entity having a
recognized sovereign, its own distinct armed force, and its own formally-designated ambassadors as a
state. Numerically, cities of ten thousand or more went from about one for every three such states in
1500 to two or three per state in 1800 to roughly 180 per state today.”
its correlate, (civil) society—is transferred from its urban provenance into the state, and comes to be the mark of belonging within and being protected by its legal order. Further, one is thereby protected from the ‘excesses’ of sovereign power. In the process of being mythically organized into a kind of ‘counter-sovereignty,’ then, the ‘people’ (the term given to this new association) become the very seat of sovereignty. Rather than being condensed into the figure of the king, sovereignty—the power to make law, puissance absolue et perpétuelle, as Bodin puts it—is dispersed into the social body.

To this new status corresponds that unique structure of positive institutions and forms of sociability called the ‘bourgeois public sphere.’ Central to the development of late-medieval urban citizenship was the conjuratio, or the “oath of membership” (Weber, 1961: 319; 1962: 108), whereby the creation—the conjuring—of a “corporation” was the effect of a freely-entered act of association, an act whose medium was speech. Crucial to the conjugationes was the pledge to defend the corporation at all costs, even to the detriment of one’s own fortune, because it was the condition of one’s having fortune in the first place (1962: 110–11). These, according to Jürgen Habermas, dovetailed with the emergence of the properly social structures of the public sphere: civil society, private associations, print culture, the salons and coffee-houses, etc. (1998: 31–43). With the aforementioned transfer of sovereignty to ‘the people,’ when the state becomes the instrument of popular sovereignty rather than of monarchic sovereignty—that is, when citizenship is nationalized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—political functions are appended to the public sphere, through a “functional conversion” of the forums for discus-

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15 I cite Habermas here not only because of his prominent position in contemporary debates about civil society, the state, and citizenship, but also because I think his conceptualization most closely approximates the modern state’s own position on the matter (as Bourdieu might put it, it is a case of “the state think[ing] itself through those who attempt to think it” [1998: 36]). Which is both its greatest strength and its ultimate weakness as a critical theory. It is certainly not my contention that he is exactly wrong about the public sphere.
sion that had developed in civil society (1998: 51). National citizenship retains this character of the 'public interest,' which is determined and coordinated by means of institutions regulating rational speech. But the public sphere's relation to the state is no longer simply or primarily negative: the freedom from state interference is conjoined to the freedom to participate in the making of law (e.g., in the Abbé Sieyes' 1789 pamphlet, Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État?). The various national assemblies and parliaments are thereby made into the highest law-making bodies (and whether or not the 'crown' is retained, as in England). The generalization of this function into the 'free and public use of reason,' conceived as a universal (or at least potentially universal) capacity, is for Habermas nothing less than the ideal-historical principle of this sphere (if not yet its reality): It is what the public sphere irrevocably brings to the world. Since the medium of this reason is speech, the principal and proper function of the institutional framework of the public sphere is to guarantee the ability to speak in public, as a citizen, just so long as one speaks in the interest of the public good, rather than for one's 'pre-political' or cultural interests ('life-worlds' in Habermas' vocabulary).

Modern citizenship comes into being as the effect of a process of abstraction and generalization—on the crest of the incorporations and generalizations in which the modern state appears. Just as Habermas locates the emergence and evolution of the public sphere and its attendant concepts and structures at the (final) crest of that "great, historically momentous dynamic of abstraction from local, to dynastic, to national to democratic consciousness" (2001: 56), so too one's participation in it, one entry, is predicated on—or rather, takes place precisely in—one's abstraction from the particularistic attributions of value that characterize cultural life.

16 The mutual presupposition of the citizen and the state can be seen as well in a formulation by E.W. Böckenförde (quoted in Habermas, 1997: 431): "The state put[s] individuals and society into a state of civil liberty, and it maintain[s] them in this state through the creation and enforcement of the new general legal order" (emphasis added).
into the general ("universal") domain of legal equality. (And vice versa: the public sphere acts as the very engine of that abstraction.) This formal, legal, general equality, at least in principle, recognizes only what is absolutely common to all while remaining an 'inalienable' feature of each individual: the capacity to speak reasonably. (It bears noting that this inalienability has two sides: it certainly cannot be taken away, but just as certainly one cannot rid oneself of it. And when this possibility does arise in the early twentieth century, with the passing of laws providing for active or passive 'denationalization,' it marks an unbelievably momentous shift in the order of the nation-state: What had once been left out could now be pushed out.)

Citizenship, then, like value, conjoins the absolutely singular to the absolutely common, and thus forms the link between the political field and its unit or instantiation. It is nothing other than this accession that constitutes the citizen, and that puts bodies (now in possession of this additional, supplementary status) into the political relation itself. (This is how 'public affairs,' which ought properly to concern all citizens, also concern only citizens.) The line at which one passes from mere cultural or biological life into legal or political life is citizenship: this is what guarantees one's 'right to speak,' one's very existence as a political (i.e., protectable) life.

In this way, the state inscribes into itself an essentially Aristotelian distinction: it makes the investment of individual speech by a supposedly universal Reason into its principle of inclusion. Once the reason of the property owners who constituted the public sphere was generalized into Reason-pure-and-simple, once they were collapsed into one another, citizenship became the mark of accession to humanity as such.\textsuperscript{17} The transition from just life to political life is the passage from voice to language: a metaphysical or natural scientific definition is conjoined

\textsuperscript{17} Habermas puts it like this: "The fully developed public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple" (1998: 56). To a certain extent, the welfare state can be conceived as an attempt to make this fiction real.
to a political definition. In fact, they are conditions of each other:

Humans are the only living beings \( [z\ddot{o}e] \) who possess reasoned speech \([logos]\). Voice \([phon\ddot{e}]\), of course, serves to indicate what is painful and pleasant; that is why it is found in other living beings, because their nature has reached the point where they can perceive what is painful and pleasant and express these to each other. Speech serves to make plain what is advantageous and harmful and so also what is just and unjust. For it is a peculiarity of humans, in contrast to the other animals, to have perception of good and bad, just and unjust, and the like; and community in these things makes a household and a city. (Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a, translation modified.)

The line, the *border*, at which one passes from locution to reason is, according to this tradition, both where the state begins and where humanity begins (this is the meaning of the first epigraph to this chapter). In a revealing formulation, Hannah Arendt notes that “the rise of the city-state meant that man received besides his private life a sort of second life, his *bios politikos*” (2000: 183, emphasis added). For the modern state, citizenship conjures a political life, a life with which it is possible to have a political relation. This life *rests on* while remaining irreducibly *divided from* the simple, denuded just-life that ‘precedes’ it while being maintained as a material precondition throughout its existence.

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The genealogy I’ve traced so far primarily concerns the ‘properly’ political or civil aspects of citizenship. But something peculiar occurs when the state becomes the *nation*-state, and again when it is a colonial power: to the political relation is added a *birth* relation and a *sovereign* relation. Clearly the modern state is considerably more than just a civil order, which need not in principle be territorially delimited. The emergence of territorially bounded and mutually exclusive political orders simultaneously marks the emergence of the ‘native’ into the sphere of politics. As Agamben argues, “*Nation-State* means a state that makes nativity or birth (*nascitas*)”—that is, the sheer fact of having been born here—“the foundation of its own
sovereignty... [With it,] birth comes into being immediately as nation, so that there may not be any difference between the two moments” (1996a: 162). For these ‘moments’ to be conflated, certain transformations in the politico-cultural imagining of the state had to occur. Even if that conflation wasn’t ‘caused’ by them, it certainly involved them.

It cannot be said that late-medieval and early-modern urban citizenship had nothing to do with nativity or birth—many cities marked the difference between native and acceded citizens—but this was not what it was centrally about: the rights and duties of acceded citizens were not substantially different than those of natives. Even more important is the sense that this distinction had: one wasn’t an acceded citizen in virtue of having been born elsewhere, but in virtue of buying into the corporation; by contrast, native citizenship was not an effect of birth, but of inheritance (Nicholas, 1997: 58–60). Citizenship, attributed through ownership of property, was in this sense itself a kind of property, a capital asset—part of one’s patrimoine, which until the second half of the eighteenth century essentially meant ‘capital goods’ (Braudel, 1977: 49). The passage of citizenship from an aspect of a lineage-imagination into a national-territorial one was carried through to completion by the identification of the patrie with the territory itself: “The French Revolution vastly extended the territorialization of the nation by obliterating foreign and ecclesiastical jurisdictions and by identifying the patrie with its land, rather than with the French monarch” (Bossenga, 1997: 227). Belonging was still, in a sense, an inheritance, but one that issued immediately from birth.

We find, then, an uneasy conjunction: the effect of a state necessity (the immediate embrace of a population by means of nativity) coexists with the effect of a political-economic ideology (the limitation of legitimate political relations to the voluntary and contractual). This is nothing other than the constitutive paradox of the nation-state. The former clearly embraces a
considerably wider field than the latter, and this mismatch, this gap between citizenship's universal or natural foundation and its limited real distribution is nothing less than the impulsion towards its continual extension. In this sense it retains its character as 'capital,' but that is not what centrally concerns us here. More important is that the state here incorporates into its own functioning what it must just as necessarily exclude from itself. Insofar as it is a legal order, it pushes out just-life as prepolitical; insofar as it is a territorial order, it inscribes just-life as its "earthly foundation" (Agamben, 1996a: 162). Whether the nation comes into being immediately as the correlate of a biological domain (as 'race' or 'the race'), or whether it is carried in a certain form of culture (as 'ethnicity') is, to a certain extent, irrelevant as far as the state is concerned, since both are similarly and irretrievably prepolitical. 18 "Rights"—that property of the citizen—"are attributed to human beings only to the degree that they are the immediately vanishing presupposition (and, in fact, the presupposition that must never come to light as such) of the citizen" (Agamben, 1996a: 162). The just-life of the human being, then, is immediately—at birth—covered over by the legal life of the citizen. Each person within such a political order, then, is at once both 'of the state' and permanently and essentially 'stateless.'

Étienne Balibar's recent observation, according to which "the 'imperial-national' states did not merely have 'citizens'; they also had 'subjects'" (2002: 79), is therefore essentially correct, and in a greater number of ways than he himself explores. This distinction does not simply mark that between 'metropoles' and 'colonials' (Balibar's concern, if not necessarily his implication), but also—within each human being—the difference between legal existence and

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18 In any case, according to Stuart Hall (1995), race and ethnicity ultimately boil down to the same thing, at least at the level of their functioning: if one scratches the surface of ethnicity, one immediately finds race—which is to say, a differentiation at the level of biology ('reproduction'). Their utilization is perfectly circular: where one falters, the other picks up. (The classification of migrants from Vietnam into 'ethnic Chinese' and 'ethnic Vietnamese,' then, is simultaneously or alternately a racial distinction.)
simple biological existence. (Colonial subjects had a *kind* of legal existence, as we will see, albeit not a ‘fully-developed’ kind, and this in no way hindered the operation of *this* distinction.) Precisely because just-life is what must be excluded in the formation of a legal order; precisely too because this life constitutes the irreducible and ineliminable earthly foundation of power; and finally because the ‘protection’ of this life (as well as protection from the dangers it poses) is one of the principal ongoing rationalizations for the state’s existence, each member of a political order thus defined is ‘subject’ at once to a legal (‘contractual’) and a ‘natural,’ alegal, sovereign form of power. The points of application of these forms of power are, respectively, the legalized person and the ‘biologized’ person. A political order whose mode of existence is nothing other than the conjunction and recombination of these two forms of power, and whose formative principle, whose very conceptualization requires their strict separation—the modern, colonial nation-state is this political order—cannot but operate in two directions at once. It cannot avoid pushing out what it ought to include and pulling in what it ought to exclude, which is precisely what we saw the political order called ‘Hong Kong’ doing in the first part of this chapter. The observation that Hong Kong has never been a nation-state in any ‘proper’ sense, therefore, should not deflect our attention away from the fact that it has much in common with one. At the level of ‘international relations,’ at which sovereignties are recognized by something like the UN, it is obviously not a nation-state. But it can be seen nevertheless to engage and enact a certain (specific?—I won’t say unique) configuration of its elements.

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As a British colony and now as a Special Administrative Region of China, Hong Kong has never really had citizens, in the sense that modern citizens exist at the intersection of civil
rights (freedoms of) and political rights (freedoms to). Under British rule, the nearest approximation was the Hong Kong Belonger, whose ‘citizenship’ consisted essentially in being “a permanent resident with right of abode” (Ghai, 2001: 143). Nowadays, Hong Kong people retain this right, but it exists in an uneasy juxtaposition to the ‘nationality’ which is supposed to underpin it: Not every person with right of abode in Hong Kong also possesses Chinese nationality, and not every Chinese national in Hong Kong possesses right of abode. Different criteria apply in the determination of each. Further, the Joint Declaration (1984) enacts one set of criteria, the pre-existing British colonial law lays out another, which is different again than what the Basic Law says, which itself is not exactly consistent with Chinese law. As we saw above in the case of Vietnamese refugees and migrant workers in Guangdong, this particular circumstance ought not to be seen as an anomaly or as a state of legal irreality, as though the multiplicity and inconsistency of determinations meant that any definition had to be held in abeyance until they were resolved. Rather, the particular character of citizenship in Hong Kong exists in this distribution, and in the diverse traditions from which it emerges. A brief history is in order.

The term ‘Belonger’ was brought into existence in the flurry of legislation that accompanied Britain’s resumption of authority in Hong Kong at the end of World War II. At this point it was entirely devoid of civil and political rights, being confined to the right to stay in Hong Kong without fear of deportation (Ghai, 2001: 148). In the late 1960s, in the face of a wave of strikes, protests, and riots of sufficient severity to require active suppression, the colonial government overhauled its administrative and police apparatuses. What followed, according to the prevailing story, was the remarkable political stability to which Hong Kong’s economic success can largely be attributed.\(^{19}\) In its Annual Report for 1973, the government officially

\(^{19}\) The phrase ‘remarkable stability’ occurs so often in the literature of state-society relations in Hong Kong that citation would be meaningless.
marked this transformation. It is worth quoting at some length.

The easy relationship which exists in Hong Kong between government and governed has frequently been misinterpreted as being due to paternalistic administrators, who know instinctively what is best for the public good, and a politically disinterested population content that its officials should continue to labour under this illusion.

Whatever the situation may once have been, this is certainly not the case today. This chapter is concerned with the present relationship between the government and the population. It is about the different kinds of machinery and organization that have been evolved to ensure that though the government may not be elected it should be responsive, and that though the public may not elect they should participate...

The machinery of government is supported by a wide range of advisory boards and committees concerned with particular aspects of policy and representing the varied civic interests involved. At present there are about 120 of these bodies on which views other than those of the government are represented. Most major policy decisions either emanate from their recommendations or are referred to them for comment and advice.

This advisory system constitutes a versatile framework for sampling public opinion and provides a mechanism which has enabled the government to anticipate, and sometimes to stimulate, the relatively recent upsurge of popular interest in the way Hong Kong is governed.

Although belated in its appearance, a new spirit of awareness has developed among the people, of a force such as dispels the image of indifference to government. (*HKAR*, 1973: 1)

One of the most interesting aspects of this passage has to be the way in which a colonial state herein ties its own legitimacy to the elicitation, gathering, and organization of the population's *speech*, to its 'representations.' This architecture has formed the basis for one of the major interpretations of Hong Kong's 'stability,' the "administrative absorption of politics in Hong Kong" model (*King*, 1975—the date of this article is clearly not insignificant), the essential features of which are the "administerisation" of politics as opposed to the "politicisation of administration" (*King*, 1975: 133), and the "cooption of business elites into the bureaucracy" (129). The relevance of this development to the matter of citizenship is to be seen in the simultaneous *non-existence of anything like civil society*. Civil society was not and could not be an independent social domain which functioned to coordinate demands (obviously it would be facile to suggest that there 'should have been' such a domain); rather, civil associations were established and incorporated on an *ad hoc* basis, and distributed among the various advisory boards
which were themselves government organs. We cannot even speak properly of a ‘parcelization’ of civil society, since civil associations came into existence essentially as correlates of the state. Nonetheless, the state in Hong Kong is quite unable to function without giving a form of rationality to ‘reasonable’ public demands. Participation in these bodies then became a kind of crucible of de facto citizenship. Or rather, an apparatus of pseudo-citizenship.

This is not to suggest that grass-roots political activity was absent; quite the contrary. But the bureaucratic management of demands was remarkably supple, and steered activism into administrative channels before it could cohere outside of those channels. One of the movements that emerged into and took shape within this framework was the Campaign for Chinese as an Official Language. The first emergence of this movement was in the early 1970s, but it didn’t get anywhere until its second incarnation in the 1980s (Ming, 2000: 25). When it succeeded in the late 1980s—just at the moment when the legal wrangling between Britain and China over post-1997 Hong Kong was getting underway—all new Hong Kong laws were promulgated in both English and Chinese, and older laws began to be translated. When translators went in search of a Chinese equivalent to the English ‘citizenship,’ what they found was gongmin shenfen (公民身份), a term that had emerged in China in the early twentieth century precisely as a translation of the Western concept.

This term took shape in the constitutional debates among and between reformers and revolutionaries in the last years of the Qing dynasty, debates which evolved between the poles of ‘the nation’ or ‘the people,’ and ‘the state.’ The first hint of the term can probably be found in Yan Fu, the prominent reformer whose translations of Darwin and Spencer added a cultural-evolutionist urgency to what many saw as the threat of extinction faced by a Chinese culture ruled by an antiquated imperial system. In 1895 (immediately after China’s defeat in the Sino-
Japanese War), he wrote: “Chinese practice nepotism while Westerners esteem the meritorious; Chinese order the empire with filial piety while Westerners rule through public-spiritedness” (quoted in Liu & Liu, 1997: 41). The term translated as public-spiritedness is gongde (公德), which can also be translated as ‘civic virtue.’ In the debates that led to the Provisional Constitution of the Republic in 1911, where it was first legally enshrined, the term gongmin shenfen was developed to capture the constellation of meanings that had accrued to the ‘citizen’ in the West. In a sense, this is simply a reflection of the fact that “consciousness of citizenship did not develop naturally out of the history of Chinese society and intellectual culture. Rather, it came as fully formed theory and institutions from the West” (Liu & Liu, 1997: 41).

To be sure, modern China is no liberal-democratic state, and one shouldn’t expect Chinese citizenship to be identical to Western citizenship. But if we look at the term gongmin shenfen, we discover there a particular view on the matter that is recognizable in terms of the

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20 Two things bear noting here: 1. We need not take at face value the idea of citizenship’s being ‘fully formed’ by the early twentieth century; clearly it was not, even if such a concept had any meaning outside of a teleological conception of its history. According to T.H. Marshall (1992/[1950])—from whose investigation many contemporary theorizations of citizenship begin—the confluence of the civil, political, and social aspects of citizenship (supposedly characteristic of the welfare state) wasn’t accomplished until the middle of the twentieth century: “when the institutions on which the three elements of citizenship depended parted company, it became possible for each to go its separate way... It is only in the present century, in fact I might say only within the last few months, that the three runners have come abreast of each other” (Marshall, 1950: 9). Since he is speaking in a British context, he is probably referring to the British Nationality Act of 1948, where ‘citizen’ makes its first appearance in British law (Ghai, 2001: 145). And this conjunction is undoubtedly in the process of coming apart again today (see Sassen, 1995: 34). 2. The emergence of citizenship in the Chinese context was attended by the same kind of discourse of the ‘monstrous monarch’ as had emerged in England and France around their own revolutions. In 1915, the reformer and political philosopher Liang Qichao wrote that “while [republicanism] was fermenting, revolutionaries slandered the emperor, comparing him to an evil spirit” (quoted in Liu & Liu, 1997: 53). But the really vituperative discourse of monstrosity attached to the empress dowager, Cixi, just as in England in 1649 it focused on Henrietta Maria rather than James I, and in France in 1789 on Marie Antoinette rather than Louis XVI. It is interesting that in the transmutation of sovereignty from the monarch to ‘the people,’ the real demonization of sovereignty and its unfettered, brutal power tends to be twice displaced, onto a) a woman, and b) someone who is not the actual monarch.
present discussion. The first character—公—designates not just ‘civic,’ but also what is public, common, or open to all (rather like the öffent in the German öffentlichkeit). The second—民—means ‘the people,’ but not the people in any kind of ‘natural’ existence, but rather specifically as opposed to the government. The two together are the term for ‘citizenry,’ which is to be distinguished from the ‘nation’ (guomin: 國民). The third character—身—conjoins what in English is two concepts: at one moment, one’s person, at another, one’s body. Finally, the last—份—refers to the act of dividing or sharing among, of distributing. But it can also function as a noun designating a part or a portion, a component of a larger whole (like partage in French). For our purposes, we might gloss in either of these ways: “the infinitely extendable legal state of one’s body, as part of the social body, being publicly subject to the state”; or “being a part of the civic body.” The citizen’s legal existence and the person’s biological existence are here conjoined in that third character, while remaining as separate and distinct as the meanings of any multivalenced term.

Citizenship in China exists in a close relationship to nationality (Ghai, 1999: 147)—something that is not the case in Hong Kong. But the Chinese term for Belonger—benturen (本土人)—which is an invention of the British administration, does encode something akin to nationality, without ascribing it to Belongers. The first character—本—here means ‘source’ or ‘origin,’ so: ‘that from which something arises.’ The second—士—refers to the ‘earth’ or the ‘soil,’ as well as the condition of something’s being local or native. The third—人—simply means ‘person.’ So: a person whose status as native originates (or is fictively imagined or deemed to originate) in their coming from Hong Kong soil. Being a Belonger is what marks one as potentially incorporable within the institutional apparatus for the elicitation and reception of speech that I discussed in the previous section. No such apparatus ever existed for Vietnamese
refugees, and nothing like it has existed so far for migrant workers in Guangdong. (At this point, the idea seems farfetched.) As far the Hong Kong state is concerned, they are mute. That is, dumb.

Here we can see Hong Kong’s engagement with the forms and procedures that define the nation-state, chief among which is the institution of legal life, defined in terms of general interest and common (that is, abstract) property, over and against just-life, defined in terms of brute, particular(istic) materiality. The Belonger straddles the line between the citizen and the subject, state-life and just-life. Which is only to say that it presupposes that line while blurring it, that this line functions all the more as it becomes a ‘space’ (and therefore, in fact, no longer a line) in which a whole population finds its legal home. Colonial Hong Kong is a political system with very few citizens (indeed, the citizenry is exactly coextensive with the administration itself), many Belongers, and an even greater number of just-lives (since this ‘mass’ is defined as the sum of ‘natural characteristics’ of legally existing persons and the total of all non-legally existing persons). What is left when speech is subtracted from the relation of power is simple, denuded, protean life: the pre-human, ‘mere’ animality. This is what is herded into Hong Kong’s refugee camps, and what is managed in Guangdong’s factories. This ‘mass,’ which is defined only as a

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21 Agamben defines this ‘legal life’ as “a form of life abstractly codified as a social-juridical identity” (1996b: 153).

22 In a discussion of ‘the animal’ in philosophy, whose pertinence here is probably more associative than argumentative, Jacques Derrida writes: “I think I understand what this means, this ‘[life and but] nothing more’; I can understand it on the surface, in terms of what it means, but at the same time I understand nothing. I will always ask myself whether this fiction, this simulacrum, this myth, this legend, this phantasm of what is offered as a pure concept (life in its pure state—which can probably be no more than a pseudo-concept) is not precisely pure philosophy become a symptom of the history that concerns us [me] here [and here]” (2002: 391). Earlier in this essay (375), he marks an aspect of the transition to modernity in that from Montaigne (for whom it is entirely obvious that animals can speak) to Descartes (for whom it is equally obvious that they can’t). This transition is really another face of that in which the modern state is formed.
correlate of the state’s existence and in tandem with its operations, is not the target of any juridico-legal power, but of biopower. Biopower ought to be seen as the transmutation of pure, pre-modern sovereign power into the modern democratic world.

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In the second half of the eighteenth century, according to Michel Foucault (2003a: 239–63), a kind of machinery emerged to address exactly this mass. This machinery—this set of “mechanisms, techniques, and technologies” (241) to which Foucault gives the name, biopower—takes as its object not the legal person as the bearer of rights (which is the object of ‘political theory’), nor the individual person as the bearer of a set of capacities and potentials (the object of ‘disciplinary’ power), but rather “man-as-living-being” or “man-as-species” (242). (It is important to note that these mechanisms are not those of biopower, as though they were instruments in the hands of people who would ‘exercise’ them. Biopower is not exercised by anyone through them; it is the name given to their very operation.) In contrast to disciplinary power, which emerges earlier and whose mechanisms it invests and modulates, biopower is “not individualizing but... massifying, that is, directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-species” (243). Its first gesture is to isolate the large-scale and long-term aleatory and statistical phenomena to which a group of people existing over time is subject (birth and death rates, illnesses, endemics rather than epidemics, diets, infirmities, old age, reproduction, degeneration, etc.). In that very isolation, it carves out an object for itself: neither ‘society’ nor the ‘individual body,’ but the population in its very biological life, as a natural-scientific object. Around and in this object is established the biopolitical apparatus, whose functional principle is not control or victory, but public hygiene, and whose techniques include statistics bureaus, state-centred
charitable institutions (refigured for their new function), insurance and savings schemes (actuarial tables, etc.), centres for disease control (epidemiological maps, etc.), working-class housing projects, clinics, birth control policies, campaigns to teach hygiene, the elimination of hazardous swamps at the margins of the city, etc.  

Generally speaking, the scale of these phenomena and these projects necessitates their incorporation into the state, which is the only thing capable of taking hold of and elaborating them. Here, too, we find the principle for the general distribution of powers: disciplinary power, which takes the body as its object, is distributed into extra- (or quasi-) statist institutions, while biopower is taken into the state (2003a: 250). The biopolitical ‘problem,’ therefore, both presupposes a certain critical mass of state centralization, and furthers it along. The object of biopower is not people or even bodies, but biological processes—people figure only as the seats or carriers of these processes. Biopower sidesteps the juridically codified existence of the legal subject by taking as its object the brute materiality of the population, the very same materiality that had been ‘definitively surpassed’ in the development of the state’s legal order. In this sense, something that Foucault mentions only to set aside—transformations in the political theory of ‘right’ (241)—can be seen to be of critical importance.

The eighteenth century elaboration of the modern state as legitimately comprised of an abstract legal and contractual order was specifically opposed to the conception of monarchic sovereignty as willful, arbitrary, obscene, and above all, unrestrained—that is, alegal. With the transition from monarchic to popular sovereignty, with the placing of the state in the hands of ‘the people’ (which occurred in different ways and at different times), the conception of politics

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23 For a more in-depth institutional history of this apparatus in Europe and the United States, see Desrosièrè (1998, esp. chapters 5 and 6), and for Britain, Szreter (1996). I will connect this to Hong Kong shortly.
as the sheer conflict of forces, as war, was necessarily disavowed: “the very notion of war was eventually eliminated from historical analysis by the principle of national universality” (2003a: 239). Whence “our modern habit of representing the political realm in terms of citizens’ rights, free will, and social contracts” (Agamben, 1998: 106). We have seen how the transition from the spectacular rule of the sovereign to the peaceful rule of the people, from alegal to legal order, was simultaneously conceived as a development from the pre-human to the human, so that humanity was identified with the Reason whose outward form was rational law. The fundamental characteristic of sovereign power—the power to make law, to decide on the state of exception—does not disappear, however: it is transmuted into the biopolitical apparatus. What was the relation between monarch and people becomes, with popular sovereignty, the relation between the legalized people and the biological, pre-human domain that forms its material substrate. In addition to the means of coercion, cities, a multitude of legal orders and forms, and territory, then, what the modern state incorporated through the mechanism of the ‘sovereignty of the people’ was also “the ancient right of power to take life or let live” (1990: 136).

War, then, the unrestrained exercise of force as an instrumental principle, is no longer a monarchical prerogative, but something that can only be unleashing in the interests of protecting the people. As Foucault puts it, “wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone” (1990: 137). The field of battle is confined to the protection of the people, and the oppositional term is no longer so much the enemy as the threat. The abstraction of humanity into rational law, into legal form, constitutes the condition for the definition of biopower’s domain: it is the ‘leftover’ which demands continual intervention precisely in the name and at the insistence of the citizenry. Again, what is disavowed at one level is simultaneously retained and transmuted into a concrete biopolitical
apparatus at another level. The right to kill, the “murderous function of the State” (Foucault, 2003a: 256), is thereby inscribed into the machinery of a political order whose legitimacy is hitched to the preservation and protection of the life of the people. But this killing power (which can also be imagined as a kind of gesture of legal death, an active *delegalization* of life that is tantamount to death insofar as one is placed outside of the state’s protection) does not and cannot appear as murder, since it is applied to a pre-human domain.

The inhabitants of this pre-political, extra-legal domain (the biological), having been identified as what the state must manage, administer, and improve (on behalf of the citizenry), *as what is the state’s to handle without there being any legal relation between the two terms*, as simple, denuded just-life without any recognizable form or entitlement, having already been ‘made dead,’ *may be killed* without any murder having taken place (Agamben, 1998: 8). In which case, we should add a fourth term—the *de jure* or *de facto* stateless human life—to the series of lives that may be killed but not murdered: enemies (as in the case of war), threats to society (as in criminals and abnormals), and animals (that paradigmatic just-life whose mode of existence is exactly equivalent to what has been surpassed in the transition to rational humanity). Bodies without citizenship, bodies unrecognized by the state, being already dead, are the easiest to kill of all, because killing them severs no contractual relation, whether between states and citizens or between states and other states. If actual death or serious injury occurs (as it did on numerous occasions in the Vietnamese camps, and as it continues to in Guangdong factories), it is only a kind of second death, a subsidiary event to the first death or injury, which is enacted by delegalization, by the reduction to just-life. And if the state can kill this thing—if, in fact, this thing is already dead to the state as soon as it appears as just-life—so too can it surely quarantine

24 At this point, to limit one’s critique of the camps in Hong Kong to the observation that the refugees were ‘treated like animals’ solves nothing, because why indeed should animals be treated like animals?
it, corral it from place to place by means of militarized police actions, expel it, and so on. As
Agamben notes in a discussion of the “political theology” of Carl Schmitt (from whose work all
of this discussion of sovereignty ultimately derives), no legal order can be applied to chaos: a
‘normal situation’ must already obtain in order for legal order to operate. The establishment
of this normal situation, as well as its maintenance (that is, its protection) is not anything that the
legal order in question can perform, because it ‘precedes’ its emergence. This establishment-
establishing is the work of sovereign power (Agamben, 1998: 17). (This needs to be seen in the
light of the discussion of capitalism in the preceding chapter.)

The quasi-legal existence of Hong Kong Belongers is precisely what shelters them from
the worst effects of Hong Kong’s political-economic machinery. They are protected to the extent
that the registration of their speech is the basis for the political relation. In the present context,
what is said to the state is equally important: The ‘demand for protection,’ so crucial to the
operation of the state’s biopolitical machinery, comes directly from the people of Hong Kong
(or at least, from their ‘representatives’). In the Proceedings of a pair of Hong Kong Legislative
Council meetings in 1988 and 1990, for example, questions from the floor to the Governor-in-
Council chiefly concern what the government will do to protect local residents in Tuen Mun
from the ‘consequences’ of ending the closed camp policy (HKLC, 1988). The many local pro-
tests around the issue of Vietnamese children entering local schools, or against allowing refugees
to work, hinged on a figuration of the refugees as carriers of disease, violence, and death—in a
word, as threats. (I will address the threat posed by the Pearl River Delta in the next chapter.)

The space that the camp occupies, as thoroughly delegalized space, is formed exactly
where the sovereign right to kill, the biopolitical function of protection, and the ‘state of emer-
gency’ link up and coincide exactly. It is not simply that it is ‘called into existence’ by the
demands of the citizenry; rather, the conditions for the camp are created in the very process that
founds the citizenry in the first place. It is the very abstraction of life into legal form that leaves
the residue that will come to occupy the camp. *The citizen and the just-life are mutually constitutive.* In a sense, biopower arrives on the back of, in the background to, *sur le fond de* the citizen. But the forms of power that attach to each are also mutually exclusive. It should be clear by now
that the distinction between legal life and just-life (which appears to biopower as biological life)
is not one that the state finds ready-made. It is not a distinction that the state simply *addresses.* It is nothing less than the positive gesture of the modern state’s coming into being. It is what the
state produces in the very gesture of equally necessarily disavowing it. Just as, for Foucault
(1990), sexuality must be implanted into bodies (that is, a certain unity of features must be
‘discovered’ in them) before it can become the anchor point for a form of power, so too must a
biological life be *imputed* to a population, so that it may be excluded in its becoming a citizenry.
Agamben (1998: 105) puts it like this:

> The state of nature [in which ‘man is a wolf to man’] is not a real epoch chronologically
> prior to the foundation of the City but a principle internal to the City, which appears at the
> moment the City is considered *tanquam dissoluta,* ‘as if it were dissolved’ (in this sense,
> therefore, the state of nature is something like a state of exception).

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Returning, then, to Hong Kong, and to the exclusions that enable *Comrades, Almost a
Love Story* to function as an inclusive narrative of transnationality. The processes that institute
the ‘transcendence’ of space that inheres in the transnational conception of Hong Kong cultural
identity simultaneously entail the fracturing, breaking, excepting, and dividing of space that we
have been following in this chapter. (In this sense, this chapter is a kind of wedge driven into the
operation of *Comrades’* narrative machinery.) We have seen that the abstract, transnational
identity of Comrades’ protagonists is, significantly, founded in the destruction of a community, a death, and a disease. If we seize upon that minor, forgettable scene in which Xiaojun decides to go to New York, if we ‘poke’ Comrades just at the moment that it launches into space, that Xiaojun and Qiao become ‘astronauts’—dakongren (大空人): this term can mean both ‘people in space’ and ‘empty people’—what ‘falls out’ is the contents of this chapter. The elaboration of Hong Kong-the-project actively engages the wreckage of Hong Kong-the-place. And so, on the obverse side of Comrades’ transnationalism is the social field that Little Cheung takes as its point of departure, a social field that is not a triumph but a catastrophe.
There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

— Walter Benjamin

You think you can get away? We’ll always catch you!

— Little Cheung

Since July 1, 1997, one issue in particular—right of abode—has focalized the processes in which any attempt to fix one border immediately confounds another, in which any attempt to exclude something from a definition of Hong Kong lets in something else that shouldn’t be included. This problem erupts exactly at the point of collision of the countervailing necessities of maintaining Hong Kong’s social and economic privileges and autonomy vis-à-vis China and of bringing into one place the familial, ethnic, biological unity of the ‘people’ whose ‘territory’ it is. It marks the point at which the processes of inclusion and exclusion, of exceptionalizing and incorporating-as-excluded that I’ve been tracking, turn on the very people they were supposed to protect, and begin to break apart the possibility of imagining the local as a unified field. Since nothing less than Hong Kong’s autonomy is at stake—the very thing that makes an identity conceivable—an extraordinary array of issues, problems, and problems are packed into the immediate field of discourse surrounding the right of abode. Attempts to resolve them reveal what can only be described as a kind of governmental ‘Gödel’s disease’ whose symptomatology
is nothing other than recent Hong Kong history: any definition of Hong Kong creates a zone of indistinction, about which it is not possible to determine whether it is inside or outside the thing so defined, and any resolution of this border-case immediately creates yet another zone of indistinction whose resolution is equally urgent. Finally, then, on the cusp of our return to the cultural field—the reading of Little Cheung with which I will conclude—we encounter a social field in which the state of emergency is becoming the rule. Precisely the category in whose name and for the protection of whom Hong Kong’s biopolitical machinery had been elaborated—Hong Kong Belongers—is suddenly thrown into confusion, into a state of incoherence which stymies any attempt to assign a proper object to each mode of power. And this confusion is generated by nothing other than the incongruent operations of the very mechanisms that were intended to secure its stability. The result is a protectionism which, far from being reducible to a kind of state of psychological reactivity, ought rather to be viewed as an apparatus of control, turned against the people who were supposed to be protected by it. This social field is precisely the obverse of the one figured by Comrades, Almost a Love Story, in which is written not movement, desire, and escape, but stagnation, frustration, and entrapment.

* * *

The legal seeds of the right of abode problem were laid in the Basic Law of Hong Kong, negotiated jointly between China and Britain, and approved by the National People’s Congress (NPC) in 1990. Article 24 of the Basic Law elaborates the following categories of people who ‘have’ the right of abode in Hong Kong (defined as “the right to land in Hong Kong, the right to be freed from any condition of stay in Hong Kong, and the right not to be deported and removed from Hong Kong” (Chiu, 2001: 155)—appended to these are the rights to attend school, seek
employment, apply for social services, etc.):

24.1 Chinese citizens born in Hong Kong before or after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region;
24.2 Chinese citizens who have ordinarily resided in Hong Kong for a continuous period of not less than seven years before or after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region;
24.3 Persons of Chinese nationality born outside Hong Kong of those residents listed in categories (1) and (2);
24.4 Persons not of Chinese nationality who have entered Hong Kong with valid travel documents, who have ordinarily resided in Hong Kong for a continuous period of not less than seven years, and who have taken Hong Kong as their place of permanent residence before or after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region;
24.5 Persons under twenty-one years of age born in Hong Kong of those residents listed in category (4) before or after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region;
24.6 Persons other than those residents listed in categories (1) to (5), who, before the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, had the right of abode in Hong Kong only.

The third category, which in 1997 became the crux of the issue, was probably intended to allow for the children of returning emigrants to qualify for right of abode (Lary, 2001: 5). But shortly after the Basic Law was approved by the NPC, in 1991, a General Household Survey in Hong Kong estimated that some 95,200 permanent residents had married spouses in China, and that there were approximately 310,200 Mainland children of these residents who would have right of abode upon the establishment of the HKSAR (Lam & Liu, 1998: 21). This was the first intimation of the ‘threat’ of an overwhelming and instantaneous influx of (mostly poor) Mainland children into Hong Kong, a conception that played into already existing fears over the transition. (The estimate only grew between 1991 and 1997, and in 1999 it ballooned to horrendous proportions, as we will see.) Faced with this unintended consequence of a clause that hadn’t at the time of drafting seemed ambiguous in the least, the HKSAR Preparatory Committee interpreted this clause to mean that parents had to possess right of abode at the time of the child’s birth for the child to qualify. Unfortunately, however, this interpretation, besides being open to
challenge in Hong Kong courts (as in fact happened), did not exclude *enough* people to succeed in assuaging Hong Kongers’ fears.

In the year or so before the Handover, there was a significant increase in illegal immigration to Hong Kong, and it came retrospectively to appear to be organized around having the children of Hong Kong permanent residents physically in Hong Kong on July 1. (By November 1996, the situation had become ‘sufficiently urgent’ that the Guangdong Public Security and Border Defense Departments engaged in an unprecedented level of coordination against illegal immigration [*Ta Kung Pao*, November 14, 1996: A4].) The very notion of a ‘right’ is crucial to understanding the dynamics here. It was generally understood in Hong Kong, and by the parents who brought or sent their children to Hong Kong before and immediately after July 1, that the right of abode was ‘unfettered’ or unconditional. That is, as of July 1, people legally defined as having right of abode were immediately entitled either to arrive or to remain in Hong Kong (i.e., if the claimants were of Chinese nationality, their having or not having ‘valid travel documents’ —a condition placed only on non-Chinese nationals—was immaterial). On July 10, however, the new administration amended the Immigration Ordinance to stipulate that claimants required authorization to exit China from the relevant provincial Bureau of Entry and Exit Administration (Chiu, 2001: 155). Further, this ‘Certificate of Entitlement’ amendment, which also required that claimants convince authorities on the Mainland that they actually were children of Hong Kong residents, was made retroactive to July 1. Effectively, claimants now in Hong Kong would

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1 This more or less successful attempt to seal the border can be seen in counterposition to the introduction, in 1995, of measures to ease significantly travel from Hong Kong to Guangdong for holders of Hong Kong permanent identity cards (computerized document processing, special business-travel counters, etc.) (*HKAR*, 1996: 396).

2 This obviously concerned Guangdong primarily, but also Fujian and Guangxi, and to a lesser extent Hunan and Jiangxi provinces.
have to leave, reapply, and then queue up for re-entry (which could take years at the established daily quotas).

Appeals were quickly launched, and Hong Kong’s appeals process allows for residency-claimants to remain in Hong Kong until their claims are decided. In October 1997, the High Court upheld the government’s decision to enforce queuing, and thereby created the first of a number of legal anomalies: according to Yash Ghai (2001: 152), it amounted to a situation in which people who were nonetheless citizens of Hong Kong—this aspect of the issue was never denied—had no right to be there. Claimants had right of abode, but could not exercise it. (It would be like having Canadian citizenship without the right to be in Canada.) This decision was then referred to the Court of Final Appeal (CFA), and this is where the real drama begins.

On January 29, 1999, the CFA ruled in favour of a group of right of abode claimants on a number of points: it ruled that the Certificate of Entitlement scheme could not be made retroactive to July 1; it denied the government’s interpretation that parents needed to be permanent residents at the time of the child’s birth; finally, it denied that the child had to be born in a ‘legitimate’ marriage (thus, in effect, defining the right of abode biologically) (Hong, 2000: 167–70). The government quickly decided to hold this decision in abeyance until it could estimate the costs of admitting every person who would be entitled to right of abode under this new interpretation. In April and May, 1999, it conducted another survey and estimated that as many as 1.67 million people could qualify. (This figure was disputed, but it did form a basis for subsequent developments, and if it was formulated in bad faith as a scare-tactic—as some suggested—it wasn’t entirely unsuccessful. In this respect, its truth or falsity is entirely secondary.) In May, the government announced that it would seek an interpretation of Article 24 from the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPCSC); in June, the NPCSC ruled in favour of
the government and overturned the CFA’s decision on the grounds that it was based on a faulty interpretation. The next time the issue came before the CFA, in December, it reversed its previous decision. Subsequent decisions continued to affirm this interpretation, according to which right of abode is refracted through the procedure of *affirming* that right, by which one acquires the Permanent Identity Card that serves as the *mark* of that status.

A second anomaly arose when the appeals process was exhausted, whereupon the claimants were *subject to removal*. That is, the right not to be removed from Hong Kong, which follows from having right of abode, was stripped away from people who possessed it according to the Basic Law, which itself went unamended. The prospect of deportation led, in July and August, 2000, to ‘violent protests’ by claimants (I am suspending judgement on this media characterization), which culminated in the torching of an Immigration Department office on August 3, as a result of which 2 people died and 48 others were injured. The efforts of claimants to marshal social support for their struggle have been less and less successful since then.

Such, at any rate, is the basic legal and political history of the issue. What this does not yet convey is the range of anxieties, uncertainties, frustrations, and hostilities that were cathected to right of abode. One of the most often cited arguments against immediate entry was simply the cost of integration, of providing services like health and education to all of the claimants. At stake here is the maintenance of the economic privilege that defines Hong Kong *vis-à-vis* China—precisely the privilege that the ‘one country, two systems’ framework was designed to ensure. The ‘natural’ superiority of the capitalist system that supposedly accounted for Hong Kong’s wealth would be diminished substantially, if not entirely negated, by the resource demands of these poor children of working-class families. (China’s own stake in the fortification of the border was framed in terms of the ‘stability’ that was seen as the *sine qua non* of Hong
Kong’s role as a portal for foreign domestic investment into southern China.) The expulsion or turning away of right of abode claimants was a matter of ‘keeping Guangdong out of Hong Kong.’ That is, of externalizing welfare costs, while maintaining and strengthening the increasingly unhindered ability of Hong Kong to invest there. What the ‘one country, two systems’ framework effectively ensures, then, is that Guangdong remains the place from which surplus-value is extracted, and that it doesn’t become a place to which Hong Kong has any monetary obligation.

On the other hand, right of abode claimants (insofar as they are ‘legitimate’) are the children of Hong Kong permanent residents. Here we broach what was probably the most ‘divisive’ aspect of the issue: the status of the family as a social-organizational unit in Hong Kong. Since World War II, Hong Kong has passed through an accelerated version of the ‘demographic transition’ associated with modernization theory. Birth rates have declined rapidly, and the organizational form has shifted (at least among the ‘middle classes’) from the extended familial network to the nuclear, affective family unit (Lary, 2001: 5). Exceptions to the operation of this social norm emerged at both poles of Hong Kong’s social hierarchy: on one side was a monster (the supposedly large, archaic family systems of poor men who crossed the border to find wives and ended up having too many children); on the other, a specter (the ‘little wife’

The conjunction of an attainment to a political status through “procedures for affirming the right of abode” by means of an extra-political biological determination occurs with the introduction of DNA testing (albeit in less than ideal conditions) in 1999 as a way of verifying claims of descent. Since DNA testing is broadly characteristic of criminal investigations, one might see this as a kind of de facto criminalization of claimants. The temporality is complex here: if a claim is not verified, then it comes retrospectively to be determined as fraudulent (or, less likely, mistaken), and it is fitting that the claimant has been subjected to the procedure; if a claim is verified, then the claimant ought never to have been subjected to the procedure in the first place.

On Hong Kong’s demographic transition, see Lam & Liu, 1998; on modernization theory and the eugenic provenance of the concept of demographic transition, see Greenhalgh, 1996. For a study of the Chinese ‘case,’ see Lavely, et. al., 1990.
arrangement, in which businessmen and managers with families in Hong Kong set up second families on the Mainland). This last category was probably the smallest, but it became the site of a disproportionate amount of concern, not least because of the apparent retention of archaic polygamous practices in the very moral body of Hong Kong’s res publica. Each constituted its own kind of threat to Hong Kong’s westernized (modernized), cosmopolitan self-representation. (It all resembles nothing so much as ‘degeneration’ and ‘decadence.’) When the CFA ruled against the government’s attempts to limit and delay entry (family reunion was one of the reasons given by the court for its decision), this moral discourse was forced into a double bind (accepting the terms of the problem as it was posed): either it could support the CFA and the ultimate juridical and legal autonomy of Hong Kong vis-à-vis China, and thereby sacrifice the economic status that differentiates Hong Kong from China, or it could support the government’s decision to refer the matter to the NPCSC for an interpretation and, in retaining the conditions for economic power, sacrifice the very juridical autonomy and ‘rule of law’ that supposedly differentiates Hong Kong from China at a political level (the highest arbiter of law in Hong Kong having thus been overridden).

This, then, is the paradox, which appears here as an impossible and vexed situation: if right of abode claimants are Hong Kong people, then they ought to be admitted and the political-economic and cultural assignment of poverty to China and wealth to Hong Kong goes out the window; if they are not Hong Kong people, then the terms of the Basic Law are effectively suspended. In the attempt to resolve this paradox, Hong Kong is immediately placed in another: the maintenance of one boundary can be achieved only by appeal to an ‘external’ sovereign decision (i.e., by the dissolving of another boundary), whose exteriorization was the point and function of the boundary in the first place. What is thrown into the air in the same series of
gestures is the very possibility of determining who does and who does not 'belong' in Hong Kong. As the borders around the concept 'people who belong in Hong Kong' become indistinct, so too does the principle according to which one could assign people to the categories of 'protected' and 'threatening.' As one boundary dissolves, another is thrown up in another place in order to cope with the consequences, which only creates a further zone of indistinction. This is really what is referred to as the 'divisiveness' of the issue (the 'divided public opinion' to which this usually refers being only one aspect). And if it is not quite where the frustration that attends it comes from, it may be what it consists in. One result of which is the spasms of violence such as those that punctuate, and in punctuating define, the world of *Little Cheung*.

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Such was the social field into which *Little Cheung* was released in December, 1999. The eponymous Cheung, a young boy who lives in Mongkok with his family, works delivering food for his family's restaurant. In the course of his routine, he meets and befriends Fan, a girl whose father is a poor, disabled Hong Kong permanent resident. Fan, who was born in China, is working in Hong Kong illegally, having overstayed her entrance permit, washing dishes in an alley behind another restaurant. *Little Cheung* takes place in the months immediately preceding the Handover (although the sense of subsequent developments pervades the film), and Fan hopes to be in Hong Kong at that point, so she can claim right of abode. The film revolves around their burgeoning friendship and their attempts to maintain it in the face of the active opposition of those around them (chiefly, Cheung's father and the Immigration Department). On the face of things, it will undoubtedly seem odd to juxtapose *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* and *Little Cheung*, as they certainly tell very different stories. Where *Comrades* moves from China through
Hong Kong to New York (and, at least implicitly, back again), *Little Cheung* takes place almost entirely within a few blocks of Mongkok. (The one exception, to which I will return, only takes Cheung and Fan as far as the ferry pier in Tsim Sha Tsui—that is, still in Kowloon, and never as far as Hong Kong Island.) *Comrades* takes place over ten years, *Little Cheung* over just a few months. But there are a number of ironic similarities between the two films, which I will begin my discussion of *Little Cheung* by addressing. I am not in a position to say whether these similarities are intentional on the part of Fruit Chan (i.e., whether they exactly count as ‘allusions’), but it doesn’t matter, since my problem is not to define two directors’ respective views of Hong Kong, but to track transformations in the cultural fields to which the films respectively belong.

Both films revolve around a male-female dyad, in whose relationships one can track the presence or incorporation of ‘the Mainland,’ or ‘China,’ or ‘the past,’ in Hong Kong. Between the two films, however, the functional assignments are reversed: Xiaojun is to Fan as Qiao is to Cheung. The Xiaojun-Fan pair figures ‘China,’ the Qiao-Cheung pair ‘Hong Kong.’ (To be sure, Qiao is not a Hong Kong native, but she is from the outset ‘less foreign,’ and she is the first to become a Hongkie. And since her *becoming* a Hongkie is precisely what makes her one, she has, in a sense, been one from the start.) With this initial formulation in mind, we can begin to see the ‘deviations’ that *Little Cheung* brings to the world of *Comrades*.

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*Further, where *Comrades* rose to the heights of public, critical, and academic acclaim, *Little Cheung* sank like a stone into quick obscurity. In contrast to the lavish attention paid to *Comrades*, the only (cursory) mention of *Little Cheung* that I’ve come across in English-language Hong Kong film criticism mentions it only in the context of a series of other films that are rigorously localized, in that their categorial feature is that they “are used to reinforce neighborhood identification” (Yau, 2001: 12). There is no mention of right of abode—without which *Little Cheung* is virtually uninterpretable. This is perhaps understandable in the context of a collection whose focus is on the transnationality of Hong Kong cinema, marketed to people who are unlikely to have any knowledge of the local political or social situation. But then, this occlusion is precisely the issue.*
At one point, Cheung’s bicycle is taken by an older employee, and he is forced to use another that is clearly too big for him to make his deliveries. There are several scenes in *Comrades* in which Xiaojun (the ‘A Chaan’) rides his own bicycle—“with a Mainlander’s skill,” according to Lo Kwai-cheung (2001: 271)—which, as Qiao is quick to inform him, sets him apart: “No one in Hong Kong would offer anyone a ride on a bicycle.” Despite this (and despite the congestion of Hong Kong streets), in these scenes the sounds of the city fade away below songs by Teresa Tang and space, seemingly magically, opens up around Xiaojun for him to manoeuvre in: he glides and swerves, whipping his bike as though he were riding a horse. Cheung, though, never manages even a modicum of grace: his initial rides are conspicuously punctuated by awkward falls and painful crashes, which occur as he tries to navigate down narrow, messy alleys and crowded streets.

When Xiaojun arrives in New York, he takes up this practice once again, and it is exactly his skill that prevents Qiao from reaching him when she eludes the American immigration authorities to chase after him. However, this scene effectively serves two purposes, which are nothing other than generic features of romance: it *defers* their eventual reunion (Qiao does not catch up to Xiaojun), and it also *ensures* that reunion (Qiao eludes the authorities and stays in New York). The non-fulfillment of Qiao’s desire appears here simply as a functional requirement of its eventual fulfillment. Further, as the object of her desire moves away from her, the *process of desiring*—the film’s real hero—is triggered once again. Compare this to the penultimate scene in *Little Cheung*: Cheung sees Fan being arrested (she will be deported) and grabs his (still too large) bike to give chase, so that he can say goodbye. Just at that moment, though, an ambulance appears in the neighborhood to take to hospital another character who has developed diabetes as

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6 The apparent respect but actual condescension in this culturally-othering observation is strangely out of place in the context of an essay that is otherwise very astute on the matter of cultural othering.
a result of an extreme depression that was triggered by a joke that Cheung played on him and the social ostracism that resulted. As Cheung chases after the police van in which Fan is being transported, the congestion and confusion of the streets prevents Cheung from catching up. Finally, the police van and the ambulance cross paths just as Fan sees Cheung pedaling frantically, but mistakenly after the ambulance. She, in turn, believes that he means to be chasing the ambulance. She steels herself to her fate, and says in voiceover: “That was the end of our friendship.” And, in fact, they do not see each other again. Thus, what functions in *Comrades* to establish the conditions for the protagonists’ eventual reunion functions here as nothing more than a final frustration.

The nostalgic bond between stars of the past and their audiences also structures both films, but in opposite ways. Recall that Qiao and Xiaojun are reunited upon the death of Teresa Tang. The televised retrospective on her life to which they are both drawn is permeated by an evocation of her (and by extension Hong Kong’s own former) innocence: it holds her up as an kind of unblemished icon, and Qiao’s and Xiaojun’s gravitation towards it is what finally brings them together. (They are, as it were, literally triangulated by their desires at the shop window before the image of their dead icon, whose image is nonetheless full of life. As this image falls away or is, in a sense, mummified, they turn to see each other.) Whatever may have been the actual circumstances of Tang’s death, it is at the moment of its televising recuperated as a figure of hope. *Little Cheung*, too, is structured by a community’s fascination with the demise of another cultural icon, Brother Cheung (from whom Cheung gets his name), a Cantonese opera-film star of the 1940s and 50s. Cheung’s grandmother, with whom he spends a great deal of time (she is, in a sense, the medium through which Cheung encounters Hong Kong’s culture and history), had a relationship with Brother Cheung when they were both performing in opera films
in the 1940s. (Just as Xiaojun’s Aunt Rosie may or may not have had an affair with William Holden when he was filming Love is a Many-Splendored Thing [1955] in Hong Kong, we are never sure of the nature of Grandma’s relationship with Brother Cheung.) But instead of triggering a nostalgic response, the televised coverage of Brother Cheung’s imminent death fascinates the people in Cheung’s neighborhood precisely because of the internecine family squabbling that erupts over the inheritance of his estate, a dispute that Brother Cheung is unable to mediate. Here too, the differences that inflect the structural similarities between the films have an ironizing function: the hopeful gaze that Hong Kong people direct towards popular icons is here focused on nothing more than the sad spectacle of a faded star whose life is falling apart (and away) around him.

The structural differences between the two movies are equally instructive. Little Cheung figures the dissolution of the family as a social-organizational unit in a manner altogether different than Comrades. Recall the shifting family patterns through which Qiao and Xiaojun pass in Comrades. Their journey begins with their independent decisions to leave their families behind in China to come to Hong Kong; this initial unmooring (which is accomplished to a greater degree for Qiao than for Xiaojun—one never hears anything at all about Qiao’s family) is the precondition of their story. After arriving in Hong Kong, they each enter into ad hoc, transient, family-like living arrangements, Xiaojun with his Aunt Rosie and the multiethnic tenants of her brothel-cum-rooming house, Qiao with Pao, the gangster. (For all its apparently genuine affection, Qiao is ‘compelled’ into this marriage by the loss of her ‘fortune’ in a stock market crash.) These families are not permanent in any sense: they progressively fall away behind them, serving as passageways to somewhere else, to a final reunion that involves nobody but themselves. Cheung’s family, by contrast, is not a passageway at all: it is a pervasive, though
nonetheless fractured and fracturing, context of control. He does not move through or away from his family; it shifts and reconfigures itself around him, according primarily to the requirements of maintaining order against the forces that threaten it.

At the beginning of the film, Cheung’s father has disowned his older brother. We, like Cheung, are never given an explanation for this decision, being left to infer some egregious disobedience. Each time he tries to get the story from his grandmother, his father intervenes. The threat of expulsion from the family hangs over Cheung throughout the film, and Cheung faces his father’s threats (“Do you want to end up like your brother?”) as nothing less than a kind of social death (“I told you: you have no brother”). It is as though, beyond or outside the family, there is only a ghostlike non- or semi-existence. But the contrast being drawn between the family systems of the respective films is certainly not that of the transience of ‘non-traditional,’ ad hoc arrangements on the one hand and the oppressive, ‘traditional’ Chinese family on the other. By no means is Cheung’s family ‘traditional.’ Rather, it is a site in which tensions between and among traditional, ‘modern,’ ad hoc, local(izing) and transnational(izing) forms contend against each other, tensions whose cumulative effect, sometimes amplifying and sometimes cancelling each other, seems only increasingly to isolate Cheung. His relationship with his grandmother, which is in certain respects encouraged by his parents, has also become a site of considerable stress, not only because she threatens to violate the epistemic ban placed on Cheung’s brother, but also because Cheung’s parents are regularly striving to organize his affections around themselves: whenever something goes wrong for Cheung, they are the first to offer themselves as support, even when their demands are the very source of his problems. One of Cheung’s closest bonds is with his family’s Filipino maid, Armi. The first time Cheung is publicly punished by his father, his mother offers to comfort him, but he runs instead into Armi’s arms,
who is returning just at that moment from an errand for the family. We see here a tension between the distributed affective network of a traditional Chinese jia (household); the ‘modern,’ middle-class norm of the enclosed, inward-looking nuclear family, in which affective bonds are circumscribed, intense, and compacted; and finally, the operation of the transnational forces that allocate domestic service to migrant Southeast Asian women. (Where, in Comrades, Hong Kong’s transnationality is figured as a movement beyond its borders, as emigration, here it is internalized into Hong Kong’s most ‘intimate’ spaces.) It is not so much that Cheung’s family exists at the ‘intersection’ of these forces, but that it is distributed among and pulled apart in every direction by them, but without any of the openings thus created being capable of functioning as escape-routes for Cheung, who remains trapped.

The dissolution of the family systems in the two films (although in Little Cheung it is more a fracturing than a dissolving) has precisely inverse consequences: In Comrades, the evacuation of non-Chinese people from Hong Kong functions to launch Xiaojun into transnationality; in Little Cheung, the expulsion of an eldest son establishes the conditions for Cheung’s entrapment within his family. This is clearly not an insignificant substitution. In the first case, the falling apart of the family is recuperated into an eventual resolution; in the second, it triggers violent, self-perpetuating outbursts of parental control whose effect is fragmentation. Precisely the figure (Cheung) in whose interests and for whose protection the practices of control are supposedly enacted becomes a primary target of those very strategies. The second epigraph to this chapter is not directed at Fan, as one might have expected, but at Cheung, whose situation is thereby analogized to Fan’s.

Fan, though, does lead a concretely ‘transnational’ existence: Where, in Comrades, the facticity of political borders has dissolved, in Little Cheung the Hong Kong–China border is of
crucial importance. Although it also goes unrepresented, at least directly, it is the very principle of Fan's precarious existence, always looming large as an organizational fact and threat. It is what positions her, inside Hong Kong, within the liminal realm of illegality. Even though this border supposedly defines nothing more than the territorial edges of Hong Kong—that is, it is not in Hong Kong, any more than it is in the Mainland—it nonetheless divides up the space of Hong Kong in an entirely positive way: it divides presence, being-here, into legal and illegal. Thus, something that should do no more than define the form of Hong Kong—i.e., that can form no part of its substance or content—plays an active, structuring role within its territorial boundaries (form and content here becoming indistinct). Fan passes back and forth across the border, sometimes 'voluntarily,' sometimes not, never coming to rest on either side.\(^7\) And there is yet another border, this time thrown up around Cheung. Not only is his life bounded on all sides by his family, but his family itself is defined by the imposition of a border: there is a line that his brother may not cross, which is coextensive with the neighborhood itself, in which he may not be seen.

The strongest link between Comrades and Little Cheung, though, even if—or precisely because—it is a strictly negative or inverse connection, is their respective explorations of migration and desire, or of the place and role of desire in experiences of migration. Cheung desires strongly to know what happened to his brother, whose nomadic existence at the margins of Cheung's memory and outside the boundaries of the family system, whose 'rootlessness,' is the result not of any decision to leave, but of an overt expulsion. Where desire and migration are inextricably conjoined in Comrades, Cheung's desire is perpetually frustrated and leads only to his further confinement, and his brother's nomadic life, his migratory movement away from the

\(^7\) One could reasonably wonder about the extent to which a 10-year-old's cross-border movements could ever be quite voluntary. In any case, though, she wishes to stay.
family, has nothing to do with desire. Similarly with Fan: her greatest hope is simply to stay in Hong Kong, but she is repeatedly and in a variety of circumstances shuttled back and forth across the border with China: she desires to stay—to not migrate—but can’t, and her cross-border movements are not what she desires. Desire in Little Cheung does not take people on a developmental journey and it doesn’t bring them together; in fact, it does little more than add to the disappointment when their relationships are torn apart by the force of social protectionism. For instance, in an effort to prevent Cheung, who has run away in reaction to being denied his brother’s story yet again, from following in his brother’s footsteps, Cheung’s father rides into the alley where Fan works and demands that she tell him where he is. When she initially refuses, he threatens to report her to the police (which would, of course, mean her prompt deportation). Fan gives in and reveals Cheung’s hiding spot. He is punished by having his pants removed and being forced to stand on a block in the street, whereupon he sings a song from one of Brother Cheung’s opera-films. It is worth citing in full.

The cold is making me tremble
    It pierces into my heart.
My heart aches and I am freezing,
    My legs give out and I stumble
    As I stagger,
    I feel my body teeter and totter.

I hope you ladies and gentlemen
    Will find it in your hearts to be generous.
My heart is broken,
    My luck ran out.
The wheel of fortune turned
    And I ended up blind.
Madam, please help me
    Can you spare a little change?

My emotions run high; I’m at the end of my rope
There is no hope.
    Just let my life expire.
One should regret nothing in life and death

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Except I regret that my father has not returned
He told me before he left:
His wife is my mother, no matter what.
I should not hate her for her betrayal.

Only God knows my true pain.

By the time Cheung is able to forgive Fan, she has been deported anyway, in the scene I discussed above.

In Comrades, the open, external spaces of Hong Kong are there to be crossed; in Little Cheung, there is precisely (and no more than) one such space: the Star Ferry pier in Tsim Sha Tsui, on which Fan announces to Cheung her desire to stay in Hong Kong, to be granted permanent legal residence. They are framed by Hong Kong’s skyline across Victoria Harbour in the distance, which makes its only appearance in this scene, which is narratively broken in two. The first time we see them at the pier, they are pointing out major buildings to each other. Fan says, “Premier Jiang says this will be ours after the Handover,” and then yells “Hong Kong is ours!” Cheung, in turn, yells “It’s not yours, it’s ours!” They yell back and forth; the next shot is of Cheung giving Fan a gift: a Tamagotchi that he has saved up to purchase for her. The apparent divisiveness of the Handover, then, here simply fizzles. In a sense, the content of their contradictory statements is nullified in the experience of yelling together: divisive words function to secure a connection between the two children.

Interjected between this scene and its resumption several minutes later are scenes of illegal immigrants being rounded up for deportation. It is in the return to this scene that Fan’s

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8 Little Cheung is certainly not entirely free of allusions to the history of Hong Kong cinema (recall the discussion of nostalgia in Chapter 1), but its citations—images of illegal immigrants crouched over in alleys in the process of being arrested—are culled not from the history of genre films but from the tradition of socially engaged documentary filmmaking that P.K. Leung, 2000 traces back to the New Wave of the late 1970s.
desire to stay in Hong Kong is articulated. She counts down from ten, and she, her younger sister, and Cheung all yell “Victory!” (shengli, 勝利). In a final and bitter irony, this occurs immediately after a scene in which her father tells Cheung that she has been deported, and returns to him his gift to her, as a kind of final gift-in-return. Finally, Cheung’s grandmother also dies—or more exactly, she tells him about his brother’s birth and then literally vanishes—and Armi leaves to find other work. All of Cheung’s closest bonds are thereby severed, and he is left effectively (or rather, affectively) alone. Where Comrades’ story of Hong Kong, through its allegorizing of Qiao’s and Xiaojun’s affair, figures the binding together of China, Hong Kong, and the world into an identity whose fundamental premise is movement as a virtual (at any rate, generic) necessity, Little Cheung figures Hong Kong as a place of division and estrangement. Nothing ‘comes together’ at the end; in fact, quite the contrary. Cheung and Fan are not reconciled. The knots that could conceivably bind them together, that could develop out of their simply being there together, are cut away. The propositional content of their exchange on the pier returns to destroy the relationship, the emergent community, that its phatic form had made possible. Fan’s home is nowhere—her existence ‘in transit’ is rather different than Qiao’s and Xiaojun’s—while Cheung’s is rended and unstable, with figurative walls being thrown up all around him: “Don’t associate with Fan—She’s an illegal!”; “Don’t ask about your brother, or you’ll end up just like him!”

There is no final cumulative gesture in Little Cheung, nothing that might gather its elements together into something like an identity. Instead, the conjunction of political and cultural anxieties (which attach to the Handover, but are not determined by it), economic formations and social transformations such as I have discussed in previous chapters, and the destabilization of the category ‘Hong Kong Belonger’ that follows on the heels of right of abode
forms a cultural space of non-identity. *Little Cheung* figures the inexorable falling apart that attends the coming together that *Comrades* enacts. It is what one finds if one stays with the exclusions through which *Comrades*’ transnational romance comes into being, instead of passing over them with it. It is, simply, its obverse side.

* * *

*Little Cheung*, for all its figuration of destruction, nevertheless contains within it the sparest trace, the faintest outline, of a form of community that is *not* founded upon divisions and exclusions, in a scene that I’ve just mentioned. What exactly happens when the fractious antagonism of conflicting ownership-claims dissolves into and overlaps with an exchange of a gift? In that scene on the pier, a form of community is rendered precisely through and in the articulation of a conflictual content. Fan and Cheung are *divided together*. It is not as though they simply don’t understand the stakes of the antagonism that, for a moment, passes through or possesses their speech; everything in their experiences teaches them that it is very real. Their community takes place at a level quite different than any simple ‘ignoring’ of the antagonism that is *right there in their words*. Neither does it issue directly from the sheer experience of yelling across the harbour, as though they could have been yelling anything at all, or nothing—sheer locution or voice. Rather, their community—which is, in a sense, both wordless and spoken—is formed precisely along the line at which voice passes into speech. It is an experience that is “*no longer* the experience of mere sound and *not yet* the experience of a meaning” (Agamben, 1999: 42). It is rather like Walter Benjamin’s answer to the question, “What does language communicate?” (1999 [1916]: 63): besides communicating a propositional content, besides even functioning as a medium of action, language also communicates the sheer fact of communicating, indeed the very
experience of communicability. The gift of the Tamagotchi, which is then given back, marks the occurrence of this other gift.

When Cheung mistakes the ambulance that is carrying someone he unwittingly hurt to the hospital for the police van in which Fan is being deported, and when he bursts into the ambulance to say goodbye, another mistake occurs: the man in the ambulance mistakenly believes that Cheung has come to express concern for him (which nobody else has done). Cheung accidentally gives this wounded man the gift of momentary comfort. This fragmentary connection must not be diminished. It hints precisely at a form of community that arises out of the very destruction of community. This community does not ‘take place’ on either side of a divide, but emerges along that line. Neither does it seek its foundations in any ‘prior’, ‘formal’, or ‘natural’ state of affairs. It is, in Helen Leung’s words, “an accidental community of strangers, whose unexpected sojourns across each other’s boundaries result in small illuminations” (H. Leung, 2002: 15), a new (non-)community “predicated on patience, spontaneity, and mutuality” (16). That this community is non-formal, indeed non-formalizable, does not make it any less profound. It is a radical form of community that occurs within the domain to exclusionary practices and policies, but that does not take them on as its own task. (Cheung’s father, on the other hand, has transfigured these divisions into a calling.)

That the very utterances that divide the social and political field in which Fan and Cheung live can be experienced at this level, and thereby serve as the occasion for a community that is neither many nor one, neither divided nor unified, is an event of the highest significance, even though it is barely discernable below the noise of protectionism and its claims. Drawing out and giving shape to this conception is beyond the scope of the present essay, which is in any case not concerned to elaborate ‘alternatives’ to the pervasive and multi-aspectual capitalization of
Hong Kong and its *environs*. That is for future work. It suffices that we are now in a position to relate *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* and *Little Cheung* as (transnational) capital is related to (local) capitalism. If one attends carefully to *Comrades*’ *purchase of transnationality*—something is gained by way of the loss of something else—and if one sees in the moment of purchase, paradoxically, the exclusion of the ethnically other and the dissolving of the borders whose maintenance is nonetheless required, one finds oneself in the *wreckage* that *Little Cheung* figures. The worlds of these two films, then, are certainly absolutely distant from each other, but also absolutely proximate, like writing on two sides of a page at once.
VI.

The exception explains the universal and itself. After a while, one becomes disgusted with the endless chatter about the universal. There are exceptions. If they cannot be explained, then neither can the universal be explained. Usually the difficulty is not noticed because the universal is thought about not with passion but with a comfortable superficiality. The exception, on the other hand, thinks the universal with intense passion.

— Søren Kierkegaard

War, however, is undertaken in order to secure peace.

— Hugo de Grotius

I have attempted in this essay to bring a number of disparate and normally differentiated phenomena into relation, and to see them all in the same light. This series is not to be related as a set of homologues, but rather as a ‘chain of signification’:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>global</th>
<th>polis</th>
<th>value</th>
<th>citizen</th>
<th>logos</th>
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<tr>
<td>local</td>
<td>oikos</td>
<td>use-value</td>
<td>subject</td>
<td>phonē</td>
<td>bios</td>
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(Clearly the argument has nothing to do with privileging the lower over the upper series.) I have attempted to make the exceptions to Hong Kong’s normal state of affairs—the ‘outlyers’ in every sense of the word—everywhere into what defines it. And this is related to my effort to see Hong Kong as both exceptionally and exemplarily capitalist: I have tried to ‘show’ Hong Kong by exception instead of by example, just as I have tried to show ‘capitalism now’ by way of the
‘Hong Kong’ that is, in relation to it, both normal and abnormal. (It is like trying to show a line by indicating the points that do not lie along it.) If the general can only be shown by means of the particular—that is, if the law is abstracted from every fact but has its life in nothing other than those facts, if it is brought into being by withdrawing from the world but can only be illustrated in its applying to the world—then the status of an ‘example’ or an ‘exception’ is in any case difficult to determine. As soon as one ‘shows’ a rule, it disappears. The exceptions to the rule of Hong Kong (refugees and migrant workers) have served to illustrate Hong Kong’s specificity—in that sense, they are precisely ‘examples.’ On the other hand, examples of Hong Kong (natives, Belongers), this category having been thrown into confusion, no longer serve to ‘illustrate’ Hong Kong—in that sense, they are nothing other than ‘exceptions.’ The oscillation between these two positions is experienced as the danger of landing on the wrong side of a murderous state-apparatus, of ‘falling out.’

It is ultimately a question of the ways in which ‘people in Hong Kong’ belong to the set ‘Hong Kong’ (as example or as exception)—the decision on which is ‘fatal’ in the sense that it substantially determines one’s fate. A question, too, of the ways in which ‘Hong Kong’ belongs to the set ‘capitalism.’ And finally, it is a question of the ways in which ‘we’ belong to the capitalism that takes us as its task, and that we in turn take as our own task, as what we gravitate towards. We ‘come to be’ managers or workers, natives or refugees, Chinese or Vietnamese, Americans or Iraqis, and this being-becoming occurs through and into the process-object that is capitalism now.

What I hope to have made ‘clear,’ at least, is that the crystalline purity of exchange and freedom figured by the discourse of transnational capitalism is accompanied at every moment by a generalized catastrophe, and that attempts to bring the consequences of this fact under control
themselves create the conditions for further catastrophes. In this sense, what Walter Benjamin said of Europe in 1940 seems precisely to characterize postcolonial Hong Kong: that “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (1968: 257). Indeed, it is a case of the state of emergency becoming the rule. This is the point at which the exception and the normal state of affairs become indistinguishable—the point, that is, that Giorgio Agamben (1998: 12) identifies as simply the vanishing point of modern politics (where ‘vanishing point’ designates simultaneously the point towards which it converges, its completion, and its end or dissolution).

The extent to which the state of exception has become the rule, to which it has slipped imperceptibly into the background, to which the urgency of dealing with one crisis after another has obscured the continuity between crises—in short, the extent to which it has come to be “in force, but without significance” (Agamben, 1998: 51)—may in fact constitute a properly postmodern index of capitalist development. Or, perhaps better: an index of the development of postmodern capitalism.
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