Occupy Central: Towards A Geography of Presence

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Abstract

Occupy Central was a 79-day experiment in urban identity. Occupy—the Umbrella Revolution of 2014—rearranged space on the streets of Hong Kong. This rearranging suggests a geography of presence. Such a geography will explain how spaces of transit become spaces of meaning, how impersonal landscapes become imbued with memory. This paper takes up the warring ideologies—the accommodating and the discontented—as well as the range of lived experiences the erupted during Occupy. It connects the events of Occupy to Hong Kong's core identity: its Chineseness, its status as a world city, and its postcolonial legacy. On the political level Occupy seemed doomed to fail. Yet on the level of signification it subverted an urban landscape through a reimagining of presence.

Keywords: Occupy Central, umbrella movement, world city, Chineseness, urban landscape

Introduction

Occupy Central. Occupy Hong Kong. Occupy Wall Street. All popular movements of frustration and conscious civil disobedience. Eruptions. The Hong Kong version in 2014, now also called the Umbrella Movement, was a call for democracy. The various Occupy Wall Streets of 2011 called for change in the world capitalist system. And the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East demanded reform. All were civil disobedience actions spurred on by young people with little faith in their existing governance.

They all share something else: a concern with place. They understood that to grab space was to grab attention. The space of occupation—Wall Street, Berkeley Park, Tahrir Square—somehow added to the significance of the action.

To occupy implies presence. In the language of military action you forcibly take control, you dominate. As a political action this is the sense intended. But in everyday speech to occupy also means something softer, a *being in* space. You occupy your seat. The everyday sense is still operative whenever the politico-militant sense comes to the fore. The message is: by taking over this space we have your attention. *Now* you see us: we can no longer be denied.

This essay is an exploration--of this sense of being seen, of presence. Using Hong Kong's Occupy Central movement, I will make three transits: first, the events; second, the major ideological positions; and, third, theoretical positions and what they can reveal about the meaning of space in Hong Kong.

From Non-place to Someplace

Some spaces reflect heightened significance in our imaginations. These are 'someplaces'. Other spaces are limited to impersonal transit, what Marc Auge calls non-places.[1] Postmodern life is filled with non-places—airports, bus tops, waiting halls. Moving through such spaces feels like wading through white noise; we feel less, our senses are somehow deadened, and our faces are blank. As a category non-places remind us of the theoretical intransitivity of the city, that rattling locomotive running along so many tracks at the same time. My fascination is in the vector of *meaning,* how meaning is created and recreated using urban space.

And here is a working hypothesis—that meaning is created when *landscape,* the backdrop, combines with *action* to create *markers* in the mind, tracers that crystallize, eventually, into *memories.*

My memories of Hong Kong, of concrete boxes, of steel frames, and neon; of people living cheek-by-jowl, stony-faced; of sweat-drenched shirts and frigid air-conditioning; of three-story, compact New Territory villages; of parkland trails; and all the rest you know to lie beyond—the heaving green ridges, stained wharfs and graceful bridges the ships at anchor; the ferries tracing soft furrows through gray waters; and overhead a constant commerce of aircraft. These are the landscapes of Hong Kong.

[1] Marc Auge, Trans. John Howe. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London, New York: Verso, 1995).

These personal landscapes make up part of the collective cityscape, backdrop to the events of 2014. Occupy Central was a social force, yes, but it was also a newborn, and a colossus. And with trembling hands this infant picked three non-place corridors of transit—of Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mongkok—and molded them into spaces drenched with significance.

Admiralty

The original plan was to occupy the international finance district, Central. As events played out the main Occupy focus became Admiralty. Admiralty is at once the site of key government offices—the spanking newly Chief Executive's building and Legislative Chambers—plus other venues for solemn occasions. These sites include: the Convention and Exhibition Centre, site of the transfer of sovereignty in 1997; police headquarters; the old City Hall; and, just a stone's throw away, Tamar, the People's Liberation Army headquarters in Hong Kong. Admiralty is, indeed, a place of concentrated power and symbolism.

Admiralty is also a crossroads, a transportation choke point. It sits in the middle of Gloucester Road, the main east-west highway running along Hong Kong's northern coast.

On the weekend of September 27-29 in 2014 protesters focused on gaining entry to the courtyard at the Legislative Council Complex, as well as the space in front of HSBC headquarters. On Sunday the 29th the police used tear gas to drive back from both locations. After months of build-up, the media was standing by, and broadcast these events widely. The crowds, augmented by new supporters upset at the police, then flooded onto the highway outside the government offices, the non-space of transit.

The occupying crowds created a village, filled with movement and buzz. And this new village in turn created ripples of quiet disruption around Admiralty and the other zones. The days dragged on. The mountain-like bank buildings cast their long shadows over unused tram tracks. People walked in all directions, ignoring street signs. For the blur and whiz of cars and buses was gone. You felt an absence, as if a wall had been torn down.

Events & Antecedents

Occupy Central had antecedents, most importantly Hong Kong's 2011-2012 version of Occupy Wall Street. That Occupy Hong Kong lasted longer than any of the other Occupy location in the world. It was if not a model then at least an *inspiration* for Occupy Central in 2014. Yet there were other direct causes, in particular Hong Kong's political deadlock. For ever since the handover in 1997, Hong Kong has had a leadership vacuum at the top.

Occupy Central of 2014 began with a January 16, 2013 article by Benny Tai Yiu-ting, a professor at the University of Hong Kong.[2] He proposed an act of civil disobedience, a sitting occupation of Central, if universal suffrage was not passed. On March 27 he

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[2]"公民抗命的最大殺傷力武器" [the greatest mortal weapon of the peoples' struggle]. *Hong Kong Economic Journal*. Retrieved 27 March 2013.

and two others, Chu Yiu-ming and Chan Kin-man, issued a manifesto and established an organization, Occupy Central with Love and Peace.[3] In June of 2014 Occupy Central commissioned a poll in which participants were asked to choose the best plan to elect the Chief Executive. Some 800,000 people took part and voiced their support for a method that would allow the public, political parties, and the existing nominating committee to put forward candidates for public election.

Such polls had no effect on the Hong Kong or Beijing governments. In August 31 the NPCSC (National People's Consultative Standing Committee) announced that from 2017 Hong Kong people would be allowed to elect their own leader, but the candidates would all be screened and approved by Beijing in advance. The Hong Kong pro-democracy camp felt betrayed.

Following this announcement, the Occupy Central organizers made plans to begin civil disobedience on October 1. However student organizations had already started their own class boycotts. These boycotts led to demonstrations in front of the key government buildings in Admiralty. Occupy began on September 27 as a result of these non-coordinated demonstrations. Thus while the *idea* of Occupy Central was promoted by Benny Tai, et al, and the concept was certainly in the air, the actual events appear to have been spontaneous and largely student-led.

The 2014 Occupy movement lasted seventy-nine days. Here are the highlights:

July 15	Hong Kong Chief Executive C.Y. Leung submits a report on public consultation to the National People's Consultative Standing Committee confirming "mainstream opinion" that the Chief Executives must love China and love Hong Kong, and that nomination power should be held by a committee.[4] This statement foreshadows the upcoming white NPCSC paper.
August 31	The NPCSC announces that all Hong Kong will be able to vote for their Chief Executive, but the candidates will be strictly screened and approved by the Central government.
Sept. 26	Students protest outside Admiralty
Sept. 28	Tear gas is used on crowds outside Admiralty; the Umbrella Movement is born.
Sept. 29-Oct. 6	Crowds occupy Admiralty, Tsimshatsui (briefly), Mongkok, and Causeway Bay, disrupting traffic in all locations.
Oct. 3	Scuffles break out between protesters and anti-Occupy protesters
Oct. 9	The Government calls off scheduled talks with student representatives.
Oct. 21	Talks are held with Chief Secretary Carrie Lam; no result.
Nov. 18	Admiralty is partially cleared to allow access to one building.
Nov. 26	Mongkok is cleared.
Nov. 30-Dec. 1	An attempted blockade of government offices is fended off with water cannon.

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[3] "Manifesto," on Occupy Central with Love and Peace website, http://oclp.hk/index.php?route=occupy/book_detail&book_id=11, accessed May 23, 2015.

[4] "Eight Questions about "Occupy Hong Kong" October 16, 2014, Human Rights Watch website, http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/16/eight-questions-about-occupy-hong-kong, accessed April 25, 2015.

Dec. 11   Admiralty is fully cleared.

The Mainstream Position: Let's be realistic

An ocean of discourse, both pro and con Occupy, filled the newspapers and airwaves leading up to the actual Occupy action. The whole territory seemed to be obsessed with the *possibility* of mass occupation of Hong Kong's financial center. From September 27 it became reality. While multiple positions rose to the surface, they ultimately fall into two groups: the mainstream ideology of pragmatic self-interest, and the ideology of self-determination and identity. These discourses around Occupy Central reflect the tacit ideological assumptions fuelling thought in today's Hong Kong. In this section I will spell out those assumptions and positions that feel so natural to those who hold them.

Much mainstream opinion revolves around the need to "be realistic." Jeffrey Lam, a legislative councilor, expressed this well when he called for consensus among all the arguing factions. In an open letter in October he warned that should society "spend endless time in arguing the nomination procedures outside the purview of the Basic Law," there will be no consensus and hence no hope of achieving universal suffrage in any form in 2017. He called for "rational and sensible dialogue to narrow differences," and not taking to unlawful occupation which would paralyze Central.[5]

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[5] "Letter to Hong Kong" by Legislative Councilor Jeffrey Lam, Oct. 8, 2014, http://programme.rthk.org.hk/channel/radio/programme.php?name=radio3/lettertohongkong&d=2014-08-10&p=535&e=273196&m=episode.

The historian Leo F. Goodstadt, in his study on Hong Kong governance, summarizes the attitude held by political leaders calling for pragmatism since the 1997 handover. Ever conscious of political risk, the political elite has consistently felt that the highest priority should be placed on "the efficiency of the system." Economic and financial management should be privileged over any other issues such as the alleviation of housing, poverty, or income distribution.[6] According to Goodstadt this attitude of "not rocking the boat"—not asserting the existence of the differences implied by and allowed under the "one country, two systems" rubric—has been generally accepted by most Hong Kong society. This acceptance is reflected in a general sense of economic satisfaction with the economic structure of Hong Kong. As late as 2010 a Hong Kong Transition Project survey showed little distrust or resentment of the extremely wealthy.[7] Although 59% felt the government privileged the interests of the rich, less than 50% felt the current distribution of wealth was actually harmful to society.

This general acceptance of the economic situation is remarkable. For Hong Kong was certainly affected by the Global Recession of 2008-9.[8] If the economy has not been a focus of discontent, what has? The key issue, unspoken but widely felt, was trust in governance. Goodstadt emphasizes the charged relationship between the general population, the governed, and the government in post-1997 Hong Kong. Power is concentrated in the Chief Executive, with the Legislative Council having little real influence, and the people having little direct influence over either. Once a leader lost credibility with the public at large he found himself nearly unable to govern. This was most clearly the case with Tong Chee Hwa (Chief Executive 1997-2005), who was forced to resign after having sprung too many reform measures without any public consultation. But the same can be said of his successors, Tsang Yam-kuen (2005-2012) and C.Y. Leung. All lost public trust. With the current administration of C.Y. Leunga new variable has come to the fore: Beijing's role. Beijing is taking a stronger hand in Hong Kong issues, in particular the issue of the selection of future Chief Executives. Beijing's hardline position has been reflected in warnings from Standing Committee officials that opposition was equal to an attempt to gain independence.[9]

As Goodstadt concludes, the Hong Kong post-1997 public preferred "polite and tolerant" politics, yet when the public's patience was tested it could turn on its leaders. Thus Hong Kong people are not overly concerned with welfare or the income gap, however real it is. Let me emphasize this point: it is a mistake to assume that wealth gap (the Gini coefficient) is a political problem in Hong Kong to the same degree it is in other countries. It is therefore puzzling that all three of Hong Kong's post-1997 chief executives have consistently voiced populist themes. These themes include reducing

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[6] Leo F. Goodstadt, (2013).*Poverty in the Midst of Affluence: How Hong Kong Mismanaged Its Prosperity.* Revised Edition. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press.
[7] Ibid., 78.
[8] Using the IMF definition of a decline in world GDP, the Great Recession began in 2009 on a world scale. See "World Economic Outlook - April 2009: Crisis and Recovery" (PDF). *Box 1.1 (page 11-14)*. IMF. 24 April 2009. Retrieved September 26, 2015. Hong Kong's economy contracted sharply in late 2008 and early 2009, then rebounded. See Janet Yellen, "Hong Kong and China and the Global Recession," FRBSF Economic Letter, February 8, 2010, http://www.frbsf.org/economic-research/publications/economic-letter/2010/february/hong-kong-china-global-recession/, retrieved September 26, 2015.
[9] Li Fei, National People's Congress Standing Committee Deputy Secretary-General, NCNA, 22 August 2014.

income inequality and providing welfare support. "People are angry over the lack of social mobility and affordable housing," said Leung Chun-ying.[10] Taking the bait, most outside commentators also focus on the gap between rich and poor and unaffordable housing as major underlying problems behind political unrest.[11] It is difficult not to conclude that these issues, however worthy on the surface, are smokescreens used to avert attention from the real concerns of Hong Kong people.

In addition to finding the idea of Occupy unrealistic, many establishment figures also insist the entire effort was instigated by outside players. This charge usually meant the involvement of American interests, including the American government. Legislative Councilor Regina Ip, for instance, stated publicly that Legco needs to investigate the extent to which the Occupy movement was funded by U.S. organizations.[12]

Such positions by establishment figures mirror comments from China and China-controlled media in Hong Kong. A People's Daily editorial on October 19, 2014, for instance, stated that the true aim of the Occupy movement was to topple the Hong Kong government and attain independence from China.[13]

To sum up, the "realistic" position is to privilege Hong Kong's economic role, to maintain the status quo, and to avoid discussion of issues of real concern, such as direct election of the Chief Executive.

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[10] Keith Bradsher and Chris Buckley, 'Hong Kong Leader Reaffirms Unbending Stance on elections', *International New York Times,* 20 October 2014.

[11] See, for instance, the Forbes commentator Bee Lin Ang: "Underlying the discontentment is a widening rich-poor gap and unaffordable housing for first-time buyers." In Bee Lin Ang, "Hong Kong Real Estate: Is The Lack Of Land A Myth?," in forbes.com, accessed at http://www.forbes.com/sites/beelinang/2015/04/03/hong-kong-real-estate-is-the-lack-of-land-a-myth/.

[12] "LegCo panel backs Occupy Central probe," online article at rthk.hk. October 10, 2014, http://rthk.hk/rthk/news/englishnews/20141010/news_20141010_56_1044581.htm, accessed April 10, 2015.

[13] Keira Lu Huang, "Occupy Central organisers want independent Hong Kong, People's Daily claims," South China Morning Post online, October 20, 2014, accessed May 21, 2015.

The Occupy Position: We will not be just another Chinese city

"We're telling Beijing this is the start of a movement. We don't want to be just another Chinese city."[14]

This quote by Joseph Cheng, a well-known professor and political commentator, shows that the issues at the heart of Occupy movement were not limited to democracy and universal suffrage. The method of electing the Chief Executive was simply the *proximate* issue that ignited last year's political action. In fact a whole range of issues have been building up, some extending back to the handover in 1997, some left unresolved from the colonial period. These background issues have been widely reported by international media during Occupy in their efforts to unpack Occupy.

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[14] Emily Rauhala, "China rules Out Open Election in Hong Kong, Setting Stage for 'Occupy' Protest," online article at time.com, Aug. 31, 2014, http://time.com/3237227/china-hong-kong-occupy-central-beijing-communist-party/, accessed April 24, 2015.

The fundamental issue, however, is the extent to which Hong Kong people can shape their own future. To quote Leo Goodstadt once again, Hong Kong people treat autonomy and self-rule to be a "core value."[15] This value naturally results in conflict over electoral reforms. The Basic Law, published jointly by Britain and China in 1994, promised a high degree of independence for Hong Kong. It was assumed that the "one country, two systems" framework, plus a common will to resolve any minor issues that surface, would be sufficient to ensure a high degree of autonomy. The factual inability for Hong Kong people to choose their own leader contradicts these assumptions.

People also have strong feelings about post-1997 leadership, as mentioned. Many feel the Hong Kong Government policies simply follow China's instructions and ignore the views of Hong Kong people. Such cynicism is perhaps inevitable when the structure used to choose the leader is a 1,200-person committee hand-picked by Beijing.

If suffrage was the major issue, there were plenty of others. In the economic arena there is a sense that the quality of life has improved little since the handover to China. The median monthly income for the young—men and women between 15 and 24—remained at HK$8,000 between 2001 and 2011, even though prices rose by 12% over the period.[16] To put this in perspective, household income in Hong Kong grew 13 times in the twenty years between 1971 and 1991, a time of rapidly spreading prosperity.[17] In addition, there certainly is rising income inequality. While I have mentioned that this is not the prime motivation for political action, the gap is real. The Gini coefficient went from 0.43 in 1971 to 0.533 in 2006.[18]In general the older generation worked in a period of rapid income growth, while the younger generation is faced with income stagnation. So although the standard of living in Hong Kong remains high overall—few would argue that Hong Kong is not a developed economy—the perception is one of economic stagnation for most people.

Media analyses often focus on social issues as factors in discontent. One street-level perception concerns the increasing number of Mainland Chinese present in Hong Kong. 54,000 migrate permanently from China every year.[19] And 47.2 million people from China visit annually (2014), most staying only a few days. This has been welcomed by the businesses that sell merchandise and the landlords who rent to the fashion brands. But the past several years have also seen signs of conflict and outright antagonism to the influx of visitors. Due to price differentials residents on the border regularly cross over from China to buy daily use goods such as cooking oil. This has caused shortages of some commodities in towns near the border with Mainland China. Infant milk powder is a special case—since the melamine scare in China in 2008, mainland parents regularly come to Hong Kong to buy milk powder. The resulting shortages, plus the

[15] Goodstadt, Ibid., 82.
[1616] Maya Wang, "Love China and love Hong Kong": whose mainstream opinion?," online article at open Democracy. August 11, 2014, https://www.opendemocracy.net/maya-wang/"love-china-and-love-hong-kong"-whose-mainstream-opinion, accessed April 23, 2015.
[17] Raymond Cheng, "Knowledge: Knowing the environment—The subconscious propaganda," in commentary.com, accessed at commentary.om/bribe2a.html May 21, 2015.
[18] Chui Lap, Leung Shong Tung, Yip Chun Hin, "Income Inequality in Hong Kong," online report at 2/AwarePDF/s11-12-DP4.pdf, accessed May 21, 2015.
[1919] Maya Wang, "Love China and love Hong Kong": whose mainstream opinion?," 11 August 2014, open Democracy, https://www.opendemocracy.net/maya-wang/"love-china-and-love-hong-kong"-whose-mainstream-opinion, accessed April 23, 2015.

rise of day traders coming only to buy milk powder in bulk, led to the Hong Kong government passing a two-can limit (per day) for travelers going from Hong Kong to China.

More troubling, Hong Kong people have taken to complaining at the manners and habits of mainland travelers. While the particular examples are not relevant here, it is safe to say there is general discomfort at the avalanche of Mandarin-speaking visitors on Hong Kong's streets.

The sheer volume of visitors has changed the face of several urban districts. Landlords have raised rents as fashion brands like Forever 21 and Chanel grab prime locations Established eateries and neighborhood stores have been forced out by high rents as established areas are turned into cookie-cutter high-end shopping districts.

The increased prominence of Mainland Chinese adds to the sense that control is passing out of the hands of Hong Kong people, in every area. This presence of so many Mandarin speakers serves to remind people that representative democracy is not going to happen. At the same time Hong Kong's leaders appear to follow a line of spineless accommodation to China. Vague unease easily coalesces into a sense that Hong Kong is in danger of being swallowed up, by China, of losing its identity. Becoming just another Chinese city means loss of uniqueness, one's sense of place in the world.

And on the street… a new normality

Occupy created real, embodied experiences, ways of living. The new "normality" at the Occupy sites was immediately apparent the moment you arrived. Occupy created a spirit of the street. A carnivalesque atmosphere sprung to life every evening. On some days it felt like the usual Mongkok night market energy had simply overflowed onto Nathan Road. Other nights were filled with tension and arguments, especially in Mongkok. Opposing groups showed up at all the sites, some clearly trying to provoke the demonstrators through taunts and arguments.

What these opposing groups confronted was a miracle of order and organization. For the Occupy demonstrators had organized quickly. Tents, most donated by the public, were lined up into neat rows. Demonstrators established voluntary work schedules for collecting trash and helping with traffic flow. Certain areas were set aside for first-aid, food and supplies, and studying. A mobile university posted lecture schedules. Church services were held on Sundays. Several makeshift altars appeared.

Art and creativity in particular flowered. While most of the drawings reflected Occupy's political agenda, there was a clearly decorative quality as well; the sites became vibrant communities of color. This in turn attracted its share of tourists, especially from China. The Occupy residents soon became aware of the attractiveness of their experiment, and used the fact that they were under constant observation to promote their messages, creating in turn more striking images.

A constant stream of writing and visual media on the Internet paralleled events on the street. There was an avalanche of postings on FaceBook and twitter. (As the movement took root, the Chinese popular WeChat social media service was blocked.)

Eventually, as one week merged into another, people were drawn back to their schoolwork and jobs, and the number of on-site occupy-residents dwindled. A new concern then filled the air: how long will this go on? And what is the point?

Public support for the demonstrators declined. After the first two weeks it had become clear to all Hong Kong residents that epic traffic jams would now be part of daily life. Many people resented this enforced change in their daily patterns. Some felt that the demonstrators had made their point and could now move on, instead of dragging out the drama. Many argued that the effort, however sincere, was nevertheless doomed to fail, since China would never give in on this area of principle.

Making sense of Occupy

Many of the media analyses and nightly updates of Occupy Central were suspiciously facile. Even now, one year on, the events are too recent, the impressions too fresh in our minds, and we are in danger of latching onto any convenient explanations. I want to guard primarily against assuming that this movement is a "version" of the worldwide Occupy Wall Street Movement of 2011. Occupy Central is no version, it is a unique eruption in Hong Kong society. I here suggest an understanding of place to help us go beyond media assumptions about events. I will examine Occupy using four such theory filters: identity, globalization, post-colonialism, and habitat.

1 Hong Kong and the Discourse of Chineseness

Kwai-Cheung Lo, in his study of popular culture in Hong Kong, explores the idea of Hong Kong's uniqueness vis-à-vis China. Lo sees Hong Kong's uniqueness as a prop supporting China's own cultural identity.[20] China policy, now more than ever, promotes the image of a Chinese culture that is enduring and great. This sense of Chineseness stands in opposition to the entrepreneurial, transnational version of Chinese culture that developed in Hong Kong over its long separation from the mainland. For many mainland Chinese, especially government officials, Hong Kong has always embodied a lower form of popular culture.[21] The "dirty freedoms," historically enjoyed in Hong Kong—gambling, dancing, horse racing—went against the existing order in China. Hong Kong represented the field of everyday pleasures, as opposed to the unsullied and sacred treasury that is China's ancient culture. By default Hong Kong is placed in a position of inherent transgression, a position necessary to support the cohesion assumed in the idea of Chineseness itself. In other words, as "the other pole," Hong Kong has always been necessary to maintain Chineseness.

Today Chinese society has itself embraced many of the "dirty" aspects of capitalism, with a vengeance. In no sense are these activities limited to Hong Kong. Yet Hong Kong still performs the role of the exceptional signifier needed to support the discourse of national and ideological unity promoted by Beijing. While no longer exceptional for its gambling or dancing, Hong Kong remains exceptional for its human rights, its rule of law, and its freedom of expression, things still absent in China. In Lo's formulation, "…Hong Kong is structurally necessary to the domain of Chineseness. It is always the singular exception that enables one to formulate the totality as such."[22]

Hong Kong is a signifier in the construction of a pan-national, universal Chineseness. In turn, when Hong Kong's sense of uniqueness is threatened, when it is in danger of becoming "just another Chinese city," the concept of Chineseness itself is, potentially, thrown into doubt. There are, at the symbolic level, seismic tremors.

This process of negotiating Chineseness brings the ideological position underlying the Occupy movement into focus. The occupation of space forced everyone to confront the meaning of their shared identity, their Hongkongness. As Ross Perlin perceptively notes, the Occupy Central protesters, while calling for democracy, were also "… busily crystallizing a distinctive Hong Kong identity—grounded in Cantonese but hybrid in its history and culture, developing now from deeply felt differences with the mainland."[23] Occupy Central was local, with implications for all of China.

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[20] Kwai-Cheung Lo, (2005). *Chinese Face/Off: The Transnational Popular Culture of Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 5-6.
[21] Ibid.,7.
[22] Ibid., 8.
[23] Ross Perlin, "Two Occupys, and the New Global Language of Protest," online article March 30, 2015 at Dissent, accessed http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/occupy-hong-kong-wall-street-new-global-language-of-protest, accessed April 15, 2015.

2 World City: Beyond the Slogan

It's apparent to any visitor: Hong Kong is a world city. It is "Asia's World City," as the government slogan reminds us.[24] In this case, it's true. Hong Kong is hyper-connected, physically by flight and vessel connections, virtually by being a communications hub. It is an acknowledged center of global finance. Manuel Castells labels such places informational cities, "spaces of flows." I will use the broader terms world or global city John Friedmann focuses on global cities as nodal points of the flow of capital, "… a linked set of markets and production units, organized and controlled by transnational capital; world cities," he notes, "are the material manifestation of this control, occurring exclusively in core and semi-peripheral regions where they serve as banking and financial centers, administrative headquarters, centers of ideological control…."[25] Such cities are the charged centers of globalization.

Hong Kong was not always seen to be a major link in global networks. Friedmann's hierarchy of world cities in1986ranked Hong Kong as second-tier, "semi-peripheral and secondary."[26] Yet by other criteria Hong Kong has succeeded in entering the top tier. Peter Taylor's ranking of world city-ness values, published in 2000, places Hong Kong on top, one of the Alpha group (with a score of 10 out of 12) along with London, Paris, New York, Tokyo, Frankfurt, and its main regional competitor, Singapore.[27]

These rankings generally privilege economic factors. And in this sense Hong Kong clearly meets the "global" criteria. In Hong Kong, things function—the vaunted rule of law, social stability, a low crime rate, facilities for trade and travel, all combine to make Hong Kong one of the pillars of global capital. In addition, Hong Kong has an unbeatable geographical advantage: because of its unique location on China's southern edge it effortlessly draws capital and talent targeting China.

There are implications to being a global city. First of all, the people and cultural energy attracted to the global city encourages transnational mixing, hybridity.[28] It is a constantly moving social experiment. But global city governments tend to focus narrowly on economic factor and in particular on one thing, infrastructure and facilities. How, they ask, can we further enhance our competitiveness? The uniform answer is to compete by building new urban landscapes with top-quality facilities. At the same time the residents of global cities increasingly demand more: better government services, deeper cultural offerings, more convenience. These governments end up pushed and pulled in multiple directions, with big business and developers encouraging bridges and high-rises, and a multivalent population wanting freedoms and lifestyles."Going global" today means that cities develop flagship projects at the same time they rush to

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[24] See the Brand Hong Kong site (http://www.brandhk.gov.hk/en/#/en/about/overview.html) for details of this branding program.

[25] Quoted in Tsung-Yi Michelle Huang (2004) *Walking between Slums and Skyscrapers: Illusions of Open Space in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Shanghai.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 5.

[26] Lily Kong, Ching Chia-Ho, Chou Tsu-Lung (2015). *Arts, Culture and the Making of Global Cities: Creating New Urban Landscapes in Asia* (Cheltenham, UK, Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar, 3.

[27] Ibid., 4.

[28] Ibid., 5

invest in cultural capital. Ironically, such investments often ignore indigenous cultural resources.

As Saskia Sassen emphasizes, the process of being a global city also leads inevitably to the creation of a "glamour zone" for what she calls the new elite.[29] The need to develop this veneer of attractiveness in turn compresses any areas left *out* of the glamour zone. Michelle Huang, in her study of open space in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Shanghai, notes how quickly the office buildings, first-class hotels and international airports expand, taking over prime real estate.[30] According to Huang, these trophy projects are built not only by glass and steel, but also by the space taken from other uses in the community. She cites the example of Lan Kwai Fong, a throbbing entertainment district on Hong Kong Island that until the 1990s was a cramped, midlevels residential district. It developed almost overnight into an active center of nightlife. One day the city woke up and found a new carnival-like zone of danger and enticement, located conveniently on the financial district's very doorstep.[31]

The global city thus creates *segregated* space. The presence of a glamour center inevitably creates, often just beyond the horizon, its inverse, the nondescript buildings and crowded alleys housing the workers who service the global elite. The majority of Hong Kong people live in anonymous high-rises. Only half own their own homes.[32] Many residents feel locked out of the information and capital flows animating the glamour zone. These theorists like Huang and Sassen challenge us to create a narrative of the global city as space open to all users.[33]

3 Hong Kong's Postcolonial Modernity

Unlike Tokyo and New York, two other major pillars of global finance, Hong Kong is a postcolonial city. Hong Kong was created from spaces of marginal subsistence on China's periphery—a few fishing villages and sheltered coves quickly grew into a magnificent city that was a British colony for 157 years. From the point of view of economic development this colonial past has not been a problem. In fact it is an asset. As Anthony King notes, colonial cities were the forerunners of the current globalized age.[34] But at the level of self-identity Hong Kong's shift from colony to global city was sudden and severe For many colonial cities, and none more so than Hong Kong, there was what Akbar Abbas calls an "unclean break" between the stages of imperialism and globalization.[35]

[29] Sassen, 1996, 220.

[30] Tsung-Yi Michelle Huang (2004). *Walking between Slums and skyscrapers: Illusions of Open Space in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Shanghai* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 5.

[31] Ibid., 22.

[32] Bee Lin Ang, Hong Kong Real Estate: Is The Lack Of Land A Myth?," in forbes.com, accessed at http://www.forbes.com/sites/beelinang/2015/04/03/hong-kong-real-estate-is-the-lack-of-land-a-myth/.

[33] Ibid., 29.

[34] Ackbar Abbas (1997), *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2.

[35] Ackbar Abbas (1997). *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 3.

At the level of identity Hong Kong's colonial legacy is a unique sense of unrootedness. Abbas contends that Hong Kong, so long known as a gateway, a place of transience, occupies a heightened space of *disappearance.* Things in Hong Kong do not last. They are provisional. The physical space is constantly built, rebuilt, and reconfigured. While all cities move in this direction, toward what Rem Koolhaas calls the generic city without memory, basking in the eternal now, in Hong Kong this is taken to the extreme. What counts is the present, the deal, the current transaction. This strong current is in many ways Hong Kong's animating spirit, its *qi:* leave behind your past, wherever you came from and whatever you did, and focus on what you can do *now.*

Another easily seen colonial legacy is the city's hybrid culture. On the surface Hong Kong's culture was always mishmash, with French toast from Britain, bubble tea from Taiwan, hairy crabs from Shanghai, durians from Thailand, and sushi on every corner; always something from somewhere else. Despite such heavy importation Hong Kong as a *region* has all along possessed a strong indigenous culture. Hong Kong forms part of the Pearl River Delta, which in turn is the heart of Lingnan, a south Chinese coastal culture with thousands of years of tradition. But during the colonial period this indigenous tradition faded into transparency. There was a "negative hallucination," a not seeing what was there.[36]

With the rapid pace of decolonization in the 1980s and 1990s, people suddenly reversed the hallucination and began to see indigenous culture. "The imminence of its disappearance…precipitated an intense … interest in Hong Kong culture."[37] What was behind this sudden focus on disappearance and loss? In the buildup to the handover in 1997, it was widely felt that Hong Kong's entire way of life was under threat. People began to focus on disappearing space, to search for what was missing. In the political arena this created fierce battles over the old Star Ferry pier and the project to extend the Central shoreline. Every expression of cultural uniqueness, from movies to colonial architecture to the language of instruction in schools, became precious. A new kind of Hong Kong subjectivity formed, one that went beyond the older comprador mentalities, one that had political, social and affective aspects.[38] There was a desperate attempt to clutch at images of identity.[39]

This nostalgic turn that surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s contrasts and in fact *opposes* the ephemerality found in globalized cities. The global city, as already noted, is transaction-oriented and has a shallow memory. The nostalgic mind longs for an imagined past. All of these currents now vied for prominence in the montage of landscapes that is Hong Kong.

Yet the ethos that dominated Hong Kong was always the economic. Abbas explains this as Hong Kong's late colonial "decadence." By this he means that in Hong Kong's peculiar state of late colonial development its choices were always reduced, limited. There were options, but one can imagine no other alternatives except the one solution

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[36] Ibid., 6.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid, 11.
[39] Ibid., 69.

that permeates the air, the economic.[40] This was Hong Kong's postcolonial situation. The economic ethos, and that alone, is inscribed on all surfaces.[41]

According to Marc Auge's concept of non-spaces, only consumer transactions survive in the realm of non-space. The Occupy protestors in 2014 struggled against this structure of meaning. They rejected the purely transactional, economic conceptualization of space. They chose instead to *make* place, turning non-space into place. Occupy inserted the rhythms of the street for the swoosh of information flowing in and out of the core.

4 Hong Kong's Habitus: Modernity and Milieu

I seem to be caught between two perspectives. The first is world city theory, in which Hong Kong is a node in multiple networks of globalization. The second is postcolonial identity, an area in which Hong Kong people struggle to redefine a sense of place. I suggest that these two theoretical forces come together when we consider milieu, the space of movement in-between.

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[40] Ibid., 135.
[41] Ibid., 90.

Building on Deleuze & Guattari's work in *A Thousand Plateaus,* Leonie Ansems De Vries sees milieu as movement in-between, the play of forces. The milieu includes all spatio-temporal as well as affective relations; that is its *utilitarian* aspect.[42] Milieu also refers to the relational force in-between organisms. This is its *quality of being* aspect. Milieu thus includes quality, powers, events, and affects arising between individuals.

The Occupy protesters were playing with space within milieu. They created islands of signification, a different kind of desirable landscape. These were the Occupy villages in Causeway Bay, Mongkok, and Admiralty, places of street life free from automobiles, places of consensus-seeking and rowdy self-governance. These images of Occupy contrast with the prototypical ordered, capitalist zones of desire found in all cosmopolitan cities. Through spontaneous play and improvisation in the space of milieu the Occupy protesters created a new alternative between the non-spaces of transit and the glamour zones of capital.

All this street improvisation played out before a unique backdrop, Hong Kong's iconic skyscrapers. Skyscrapers in general, and nowhere as much as Hong Kong, inscribe one dominant theme: modernity. As the sociologist of modernity Sharon Zukin notes, architecture is subject to the same forces as all objects produced under conditions of modernity. Hong Kong's skyline encapsulates the forces at play in modern capitalism: the standardization, the market differentiation, and the incorporation of older, sentimental forms.[43] Around the core shopping areas we see the familiar process of displacement of local merchants. The international retail brands that encroach onto every street corner all promote uniform standards of look, decor, and dress—think McDonald's. These chains become the new anchors or landmarks in a faux community of transactions. The ubiquitous tea shops (*cha tsan teng*) of the 1950s and 60s disappear and become signposts of nostalgia in a forest of uniformity.

At the macro level, trophy buildings, designed by superstar architects, claw at the sky. In Hong Kong's case these trophies are most prominently the banks—HSBC, Standard Chartered, Bank of China. And every year they are joined by new monuments to excess. Two colossal business towers rising over 100 stories, one in Central and one in Kowloon, now frame the entrance to Hong Kong's harbor. The newest flourishing steel and glass will be the Western Kowloon Culture complex, designed by Norman Foster and Associates. Such monuments to modernity may as well be spaceships from Mars; impressive, even awesome from a distance, they do not fit into any local context, and they fail to evoke a sense of place.

Zukin contends there is a natural tension between the market and an organic sense of place. While these two forces were united in pre-modern societies, they are separated in the modern imagination. Modernist architecture expresses movement, and in particular movement *away* from one place, toward an imagined future. Under modern rules of architectural syntax place as space of meaning is inevitably diminished. We are left with a visual order emphasizing movement, churn. The visual landscape in turn reflects a modernist moral order; as Zukin notes, "building a viable economy requires

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[42] De Vries, Leonie Ansems, "Politics on the line," in Brad Evans and Julian Reid, (Eds.). (2013). *Deleuze & Fascism: Security: War: Aesthetics.* London: Routledge, 126-147),135.
[43] Sharon Zukin (1991). *The Urban Landscape From Detroit to Disney World.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 41.

coherent moral values."[44] The world city, as a node in a multiple global networks, encodes its moral code into its skyline.

The city of Hong Kong is built around the accumulation of capital, its guiding ethos. Every building reflects this preoccupation. Occupy 2014 challenged this dominant moral code, as reflected in transformation of Admiralty, Causeway Bay, Mongkok. The Occupy Movement reconfigured dead space *between* the trophy buildings—the new Legco Building, Admiralty station, the Chief Executive's offices, CITIC Tower. It created a new landscape built around the need for a different morality.

Perhaps morality is too strong a word. Perhaps I search for a more flexible term, such as Pierre Bourdieu's habitus. Bourdieu calls habitus "a system of dispositions, manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking…schemata or perception."[45] Bourdieu places particular emphasis on habitus as improvisation. He draws our attention to its revolutionary potential. In Bourdieu's conception habitus is a stylistic choice. Habitus differs from milieu in being connected to deep psychological attitudes. One cannot, according to Bourdieu, understand revolutions without taking into account this stylistic element. Improvisation contains and unleashes revolutionary potential. The habitus forms through the subversive habits of the revolutionary agent as well as the field confronting the agent.[46] The habitus of Hong Kong is a landscape of perceptions and dispositions, made up of a million threads. Occupy worked to disentangle and reweave some of those threads. This disentangling was not a rational action, the result of a linear strategy. It was an eruption of habitus.

In challenging Hong Kong's trajectory as global city, the entire landscape is brought into contention. This includes that bright future over the horizon—the layer after layer of supra-national institutions, the corporations, brands and images that together make up the liberal dream of a post-1945 world order. Occupy also challenged assumptions about the nature of the modern state, in this case China's: that it is necessarily exclusionary, territorial, uniform and public.[47]

Entering any Occupy site you felt as if the world's axis had suddenly tilted. And it was not just the buzz of excitement—that dissipated soon enough. Rather, it was the calm. At the end of every day a gentle quiet would descend—you heard only murmured conversation, the weight of personal thoughts settling into themselves. These were the shifting rhythms of organic village life. The hyper-modernity symbolized by Admiralty was blocked; the non-places were uncolonized by the excluded.

Perhaps this is the nature of political action in the modern city, the space of flows. Political action in the contemporary context works to block those flows, to create new eddies and entropies. Over its 79 days, Occupy Hong Kong played out in a way inconceivable in any other city. Now it has taken place. And it is no longer inconceivable anymore, anywhere.

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[44] ibid., 254.

[45] Bourdieu, Pierre. "Habitus," in Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby, (*2005). Habitus: a sense of place.* Second edition. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, *27.*

[46] Ibid., 32.

[47]Paul Hirst, "Politics: Territorial or Non-Territorial?", in Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby (*2005). Habitus: a sense of place.* Second edition. Burlington, VT: Ashgate*, , 51-59, 64.*

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