

Hong Kong as a Global Hub and a Liminal Space in the Cold War

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In recent years, based on new insights and newly discovered sources, we have gained a deeper understanding of the far-reaching scope of the Cold War (1946–1991). Rather than simply an ideological and military confrontation between the USA and the USSR, the Western Bloc and Eastern Bloc, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, we now know that the Cold War was complex, multi-faceted, and multi-dimensional. It was a series of attempts to reach a global balance of power, involving multiple players, especially Third World countries (Westad 2005: 1-7). While the Cold War was marked by a constant threat of a nuclear war that could destroy the world in one stroke, we now know that the Cold War developed in fits and starts, mixing moments of danger and tension with moments of hope and creativity (O'Mara 2005: 17-97). More importantly, we have learned that whereas the scope of the Cold War was global, its dynamics and trajectory were conditioned by factors or players rooted in the complicated webs of power-relation in a specific locale. In short, Cold War is best understood as a mixing of global and local plots, and an interplay of global and local interests (Lorenzini 2019: 1-7).

As a British colony sharing borders with Communist China, Cold War Hong Kong was a prime example of the global-local mixing. Being the site where three fast-changing events took place simultaneously – the Cold War rivalry between the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc, the Chinese Civil War between the Communists and the Nationalists, and Great Britain's struggle to manage its imperial decline in the age of decolonisation and national independence – Hong Kong struggled to balance competing claims and opposing views (Mark 2004: 12-39; Roberts 2016). As a free port, Hong Kong had long been a hub in East-West trade before World War II. Due to the Korean War, Hong Kong suffered from United Nations trade embargoes and the United States' stringent export controls. Yet, Hong Kong regained its status as a robust trading hub by expanding its network of aerial transportation and its transshipment services to China (Hon 2025). Hence, Cold War Hong Kong became both a *border battleground* in the global bipolar system and a *liminal space* in negotiating

competing claims driven by local and regional conflicts (Duara 2016: 211-5). On the one hand, its proximity to Communist China exposed it to military attack from without and social unrest from within. On the other hand, its link to regional and global networks of trade and traffic made it "a zone of openness, indeterminacy, and absence of a relatively fixed identity" (ibid.: 211).

From the British perspective, Hong Kong was "a colony too valuable to abandon in peace, and yet too peripheral to be worth committing scarce resources for its survival at war" (Mark 2004: 1). It was militarily indefensible and economically hampered by the embargoes, but it was one of the busiest ports in the world due to the high volumes of transshipment of goods to China (ibid.: 40-82, 130-76). As a result, Hong Kong was always betwixt and between. On the one hand, it was vulnerable and volatile; on the other hand, it was a land full of opportunities and possibilities, allowing those who were creative to flourish. In the 30 years covered in this special feature – beginning with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 and ending with the normalisation of relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and USA in 1979 – Hong Kong continuously faced the perceived threat of Communist China's invasion, the economic pains of United Nations embargoes, and the disruption caused by refugee influx and social instability. Nonetheless, by trial and error, Hong Kong successfully evolved from an entrepot for China trade into a hub of transpacific, trans-Oceania, and East Asia trade. By the early 1970s, Hong Kong was transformed into what David R. Meyer calls "a global network hub" where business and financial elites gathered in one city to make key decisions for the global market (2016: 62).

This special feature aims to highlight the remarkable changes that took place in Cold War Hong Kong. To stress both the vulnerability and the creativity of Cold War Hong Kong, it emphasises two themes: (1) the development of a new web of connection that made Hong Kong a hub in the global system of production, circulation, and consumption; and (2) the cultural production that expressed the characteristics of Hong Kong being a liminal place in the bipolar

world. Consisting of three articles, this special feature explores these two themes through the lens of movement, mobility, and mediation, highlighting the complexity of Hong Kong's role during the Cold War.

Adopting a transdisciplinary approach, this special feature is arranged chronologically. It begins in the 1950s and extends to the 1960s and 1970s. The chronological approach aims to draw attention to the main contours in the development of Cold War Hong Kong. By the late 1970s, Hong Kong was substantially different from what it was after World War II. It became more connected with the Western world and its neighbouring East Asian countries, particularly in trade, tourism, and industrial production. Yet, Hong Kong's new role did not diminish its advantage of being located on the doorstep of Communist China. Over three decades at the height of the Cold War in East Asia, the bulk of Hong Kong's economy was linked to the Pearl River Delta.

The first article by Yu Chang focuses on the 1950s, when Hong Kong underwent a transition from an entrepot serving the China trade to a regional hub of commerce and transport for the Western Bloc. The realignment was by no means easy because Hong Kong faced tremendous challenges, such as the Korean War that hardened the borders and decimated the economy, and the political campaigns in China that sent huge numbers of refugees into congested Hong Kong. But these crises provided Hong Kong with opportunities for growth and development, including the movie industry. In his article, Yu Chang examines the film character Wong Fei-hung as an icon of modernity. With more than 100 films produced since 1949 on this martial artist icon, Chang argues that the Wong Fei-hung movies represented a form of sophisticated martial arts films based on Cantonese culture. Although the Wong Fei-hung movies were often considered old-fashioned and low-tech when compared to Mandarin movies, Chang sees them as important vehicles for winning hearts and minds during the Cold War. To support his argument, Chang highlights the themes of Confucian morality, social justice, and native-place identity in the Wong Fei-hung movies. Furthermore, based on Miriam Hanson's concept of "vernacular modernism," and supported by ample evidence, Chang shows that the Wong Fei-hung movies provided nuanced interpretations of modernism, and presented a vision of social order that was substantially different from the propagandist narratives of films produced by pro-CCP and KMT studios in Hong Kong.

The following two articles focus on the 1960s and 1970s, when Hong Kong shifted from import-export trade to industrial manufacturing. Industrialisation indeed gave the people of Hong Kong (many of them refugees) a steady job, and thereby a sense of belonging. Despite the 1967 riots, the economy of Hong Kong grew steadily. Widely known as "the Pearl of the Orient," Hong Kong became a gateway to the "Far East" and a Western enclave fronting the "Bamboo Curtain" of Communist China. Upon reaching the mid-1970s, however, Hong Kong faced a new challenge: China rejoining the global community and the global market. Three events epitomised this drastic change: China's entry into the United Nations in 1971, Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972, and the normalisation of US-China relations in 1979. The lives (if not the minds) of people in Hong Kong in the 1970s hinged on this fundamental change in geopolitics.

In his article, Ge Song specifically examines neon signs as symbols

of Hong Kong transforming into a place where different cultural forms and linguistic symbols were freely mixed and creatively combined to create an atmosphere of transcultural and translingual hybridity. For Song, neon signs (which used to be ubiquitous in the entertainment districts) were integral components of the broader networks facilitating Chinese-Western intersections. To support his argument, Song adopts digital ethnography as a method to examine the hybridity and fluidity of neon lights in 1960s and 1970s Hong Kong. Based on photographs, videos, and archival material, he provides a chronological narrative of neon signs, showing how they reflect the uneven terrains of Cold War Hong Kong. By contextualising the neon signs against the unique historical period, he explores the interplay of languages, colours, and designs of neon signs, which vividly reflects the complex sociopolitical realities of Hong Kong as a liminal space in the bipolar system.

In the final article of this special feature, Henry Sze Hang Choi focuses on the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront as a site of negotiation and contestation in 1960s and 1970s Hong Kong. Choi views Tsim Sha Tsui, located at the southern tip of Kowloon Peninsula, as a crucial place projecting an open image of Hong Kong to people around the world. To examine the ways by which Hong Kong served as a meeting point for global travellers, Choi examines two key sites in Tsim Sha Tsui: Ocean Terminal and Star House. The comparison shows that whereas Ocean Terminal was designed to symbolise a "Westerner's stronghold" to serve global travellers, Star House presented differing images of China to lure foreigners and locals. Located next to Ocean Terminal, Star House was geographically within the "Westerner's stronghold," yet its main business was to sell images of Red China and Chinese folk cultural icons and products. More importantly, the owners of shops in Star House consciously practised self-orientalism to satisfy the need of foreign visitors to find an "Orient" as the other.

While cultural production (including the neon signs and the commercial culture) continued to evoke cultural hybridity and global accessibility, the economic structure of Hong Kong (especially its web of transportation) began to shift slowly and quietly toward integrating into the Pearl River Delta. The resumption of through trains from Guangzhou to Hong Kong in 1978, and the opening of the prominent commercial complex China Hong Kong City (with a ferry terminal to Guangdong cities) in 1988, revealed the incipient trend of Hong Kong's reconnection to the Pearl River Delta. Just as the expansion of Kai Tak Airport linked Hong Kong to the Western Bloc (Hon 2025), so too the through train and China Hong Kong City linked Hong Kong to the Pearl River Delta. By 1979, the history of Cold War Hong Kong reached full circle. Hong Kong was connected back to the Pearl River Delta after three decades of looking toward the Western Bloc for business and market share. Vividly elucidated in the three articles of this special feature, this full circle did not mean stagnation or regression. On the contrary, it showed the creativity and vitality of Hong Kong people in responding to the challenges of the Cold War, making full use of the liminality of Hong Kong as a hub of transnational commerce and transcultural mixing. Even though Hong Kong was slowly reoriented back to the Pearl River Delta from the late 1970s onward, it remained betwixt and between, mediating the rules-based market economy of the West and the mixed modes of production in the PRC.

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