

Yiu-Wai Chu

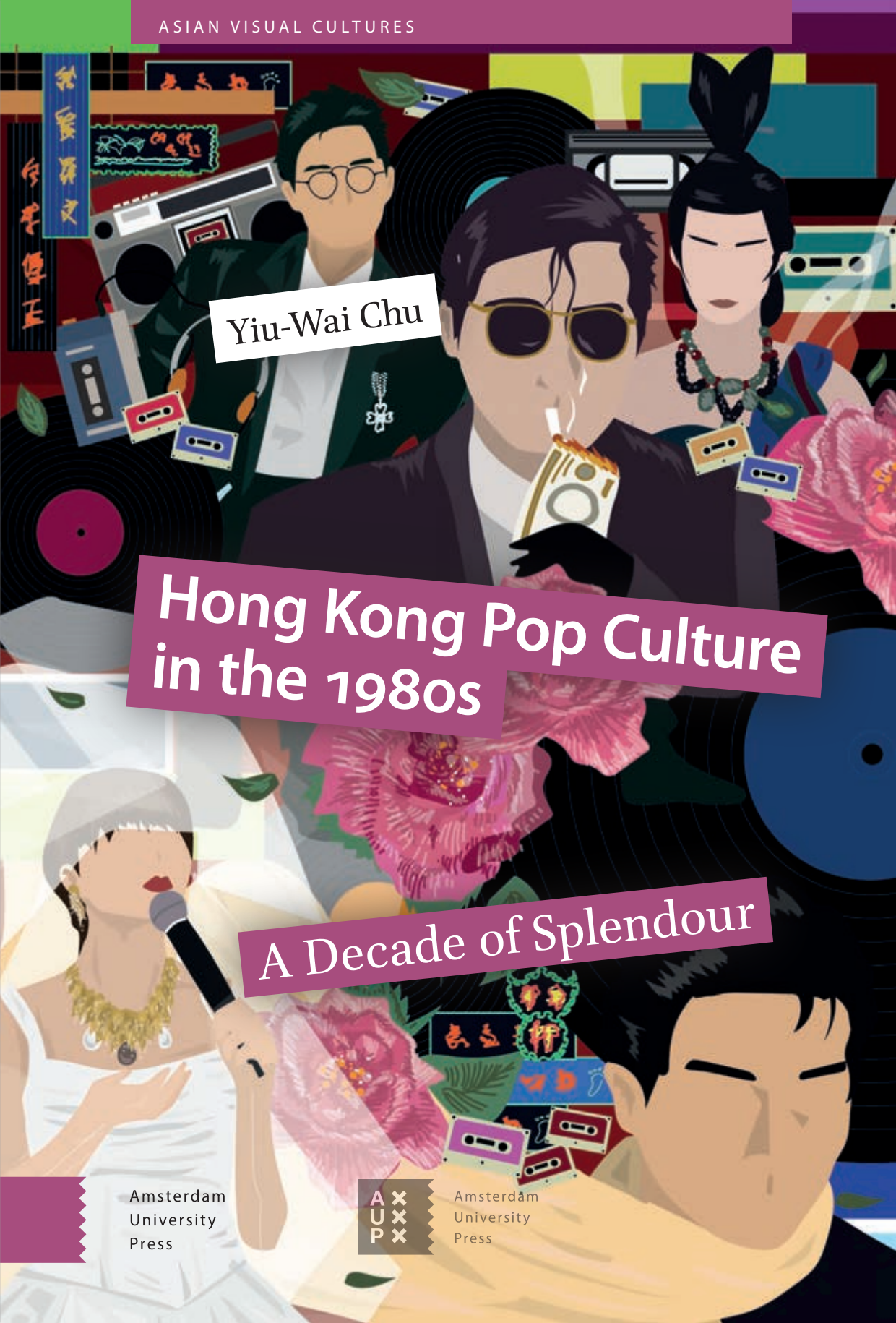
# Hong Kong Pop Culture in the 1980s

## A Decade of Splendour

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# Hong Kong Pop Culture in the 1980s

# Asian Visual Cultures

This series focuses on visual cultures that are produced, distributed and consumed in Asia and by Asian communities worldwide. Visual cultures have been implicated in creative policies of the state and in global cultural networks (such as the art world, film festivals and the Internet), particularly since the emergence of digital technologies. Asia is home to some of the major film, television and video industries in the world, while Asian contemporary artists are selling their works for record prices at the international art markets. Visual communication and innovation is also thriving in transnational networks and communities at the grass-roots level. This series seeks to explore how the texts and contexts of Asian visual cultures shape, express and negotiate new forms of creativity, subjectivity and cultural politics. It specifically aims to probe into the political, commercial and digital contexts in which visual cultures emerge and circulate, and to trace the potential of these cultures for political or social critique.

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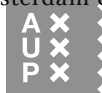
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# Hong Kong Pop Culture in the 1980s

*A Decade of Splendour*

*Yiu-Wai Chu*

Amsterdam University Press



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# A Note on Romanization and Translation

Chinese names are generally romanized according to the style commonly used in Hong Kong, with English first names followed by Chinese surname (such as Leslie Cheung). For the sake of consistency, those without English first names are also romanized in the same way (such as Yun-Fat Chow), except those internationally known by other formats (such as Tsui Hark) or more commonly known by pinyin (such as Lin Xi). Names of Mainland Chinese generally follow standard pinyin (such as Zhang Yimou) unless they have English first names (such as Jet Li). I have adopted the way other Chinese names have been transliterated by convention in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Mainland.

All translations from Chinese materials are mine except otherwise stated.



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To Nancy, Sebastian, Nathaniel and our beloved family members



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# Prologue

## Horse Racing and Dancing as Usual

### Abstract

Deng Xiaoping, the chief engineer of the unprecedented “one country, two systems” framework, famously promised Hong Kong people horse racing and dancing would remain unchanged after Hong Kong’s reversion to Mainland China in 1997. This chapter discusses how horse racing and dancing were used to symbolize Hong Kong’s lifestyle and the smooth transfer of sovereignty. Throughout the 1980s, the upward mobility and vigorous development of Hong Kong pop culture enabled a distinctive cosmopolitan lifestyle between the East and the West to grow and mature, and Hong Kong people came to take pride in their cultural identities.

**Keywords:** personal belonging, one country two systems, horse racing, dancing, lifestyle

## What Is Hong Kong?

To answer this question, it is usual to begin by explaining how Hong Kong came into being from a historical point of view. As succinctly noted by John Carroll, while the Chinese Government officially holds that ‘Hong Kong has been part of the territory of China since ancient times,’ until recently, British historians ‘generally dismissed the idea of Hong Kong as having any real history until the British arrived.’<sup>1</sup> It was just a ‘barren island’, or to borrow Richard Hughes’ often-cited term, just a ‘borrowed place living on borrowed time’ – ‘Hong Kong did not exist, so it was necessary to invent it.’<sup>2</sup> Regarding this assessment, Carroll cited the example of James Hayes,

1 John M. Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), p. 9.

2 Richard Hughes, *Borrowed Place – Borrowed Time: Hong Kong and Its Many Faces*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: André Deutsch, 1976), p. 97.

historian and former colonial official, noting that ‘the island was certainly well-established in settler communities long before 1841’.<sup>3</sup> That said, I would rather take up the question from a different perspective, which may seem out of the blue. Refuting Hughes’ concept of ‘borrowed time, borrowed place’, renowned Hong Kong author Kai-cheung Dung has argued that ‘space and time can never be borrowed’: ‘I and many others like me simply don’t accept this description of the place where we live’ because ‘we belong to the space-time that is ours. Nobody lends it to us and we don’t borrow it from anybody.’<sup>4</sup> Two years older than Dung and having grown up in Hong Kong with a similar background, I share his view completely. Hong Kong has been commonly known as a barren rock, a Chinese fishing village, an imperial outpost, a capitalist metropolis, a city between worlds and a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China under the unprecedented ‘one country, two systems’ framework. The brief introduction to Steve Tsang’s *Modern History of Hong Kong* nicely sums up the so-called ‘Hong Kong story’ in the following manner:

From a little-known fishing community at the periphery of China, Hong Kong developed into one of the world’s most spectacular and cosmopolitan metropolises after a century and a half of British imperial rule. This history of Hong Kong – from its occupation by the British in 1841 to its return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 – includes the foundation of modern Hong Kong; its developments as an imperial outpost, its transformation into the ‘pearl’ of the British Empire and of the Orient and the events leading to the end of British rule.<sup>5</sup>

Having experienced most of these stages, I tend to think that, to borrow Dung’s term, it is the ‘personal belonging’ – ‘a near oxymoron, joining the private and the public’ – that matters.<sup>6</sup> When David Der-wei Wang commented on Dung, he made an inspiring point about Hong Kong as a metaphor:

Located as it is at the intersection of many spatial topoi, Hong Kong’s origins are somewhat dubious, and whether or not it disappears is unimportant. It does nothing but extend, in the configuration of power,

3 Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, p. 10; James Hayes, ‘Hong Kong Island before 1841,’ *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24(1984): 128.

4 Kai-cheung Dung, ‘Preface: An Archaeology for the Future,’ in *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. xiii.

5 Steve Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong: 1841–1997* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

6 Dung, ‘Preface,’ p. xiv.



in architectural blueprints, in literature.... Hong Kong had become a metaphor for Dung's imaginary history.<sup>7</sup>

In his award-winning *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, the novelist Dung conceived Hong Kong as 'a work of fiction from its very beginning'.<sup>8</sup> In light of this, I decided to share my 'personal belonging' in this book, telling the story of Hong Kong from my own perspective – as an inveterate fan of Hong Kong pop culture since the 1970s.

My 'personal belonging' is deeply entangled with the Hong Kong cultural identity noted by cultural critics such as Chun-hung Ng and Eric Ma: the people of Hong Kong have accumulated their sense of identity through mass media and the practices of daily life.<sup>9</sup> Pertaining to the distinctive identity of Hong Kong people, Hugh Baker astutely stated in 1982 that 'Hong Kong Man is *sui generis* and the problems of the territory's future are more difficult to resolve because of it.'<sup>10</sup> More than thirty years later, in the midst of the Umbrella Movement, a social movement that strived for 'genuine' universal suffrage (without candidate screening) in Hong Kong in late 2014, Arif Dirlik made a similar remark about this:

The movement may be viewed as the latest chapter in a narrative that goes back to the 1980s, the emergence of a neoliberal global capitalism of which the PRC [People's Republic of China] has been an integral component, and the Tiananmen movement which was one of the earliest expressions of the social and political strains created by shifts in the global economy.<sup>11</sup>

Hong Kong identity has been a highly contested issue both before and after the handover (I will argue below that it may be necessary to speak of it in the plural). Most of the recent social conflicts in Hong Kong, such as the

7 David Der-wei Wang, 'A Hong Kong Miracle of a Different Kind: Dung Kai-cheung's Writing/Action and *Xuexi niandai* (*The Apprenticeship*)', *China Perspective* 1(2011): 81.

8 Dung, 'Preface,' p. xi.

9 Chun-hung Ng 吳俊雄 and Eric Ma 馬傑偉, 'Pop Culture and Identity Formation' 普及文化與身份建構 (in Chinese), in *Hong Kong History, Culture and Society: Volume 1 on Teaching and Learning* 香港歷史、文化與社會(一)教與學篇, eds. Tik-sang Liu et al. 廖迪生等編 (Hong Kong: South China Research Center, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2001), pp. 177–193.

10 Hugh Baker, 'Life in the Cities: The Emergence of Hong Kong Man,' *The China Quarterly* 95 (September 1983): 479.

11 Arif Dirlik, 'The Mouse That Roared: The Democratic Movement in Hong Kong,' *Boundary 2* online: <https://www.boundary2.org/2014/10/the-mouse-that-roared-the-democratic-movement-in-hong-kong-2/>; last accessed on 28 October 2022.



governance crisis and the rise of resistance against Mainland Chinese, can be seen as important problems that need to be addressed in relation to the issue of identity. A critical, non-populist, in-depth study of Hong Kong is necessary to critique common misperceptions and misunderstandings of the territory and envision it in the context of China. 'It is not that Hong Kong people are not patriotic. They are very patriotic indeed. But their patriotism is mediated by their Hong Kong identity.'<sup>12</sup> Learning to belong to a nation, according to Gordon Mathews, Eric Ma, and Tai-lok Lui, is a question of considerable significance, not just in but also beyond Hong Kong, because in this SAR, unlike other countries in the world, the notion of national identity 'is indeed often reflected upon in a critical and conscious way'.<sup>13</sup>

Before Hong Kong's reversion to its motherland, the China factor had become an overwhelming influence on life in Hong Kong. It was

the single most dominant force shaping Hong Kong public affairs, government decision making, and policy implementation as well as Hong Kong's external links and global interactions...the accelerator, stimulant, and even midwife to the processes of decolonization, localization, internationalization, and democratization which are still unfolding in the current transition [as well as potentially] a destabilizing force, as it periodically precipitates a crisis of confidence and highlights the imperfect nature of the transition.<sup>14</sup>

I have noted elsewhere that *Fortune* wrote a cover story for its international editions in 1995, which was titled 'The Death of Hong Kong,' claiming that 'the naked truth about Hong Kong's future can be summed up in two words: It's over.'<sup>15</sup> Actually, this 'end' of Hong Kong was not new. 1997 was seen by many Hong Kong people as the 'end' of Hong Kong, as they were sceptical about whether the 'one country, two systems' concept proposed by the late leader Deng Xiaoping could be realized. I have also argued that Hong Kong witnessed a dramatic change in its attitude towards its motherland after 1997. The economic downturn in 1998 shattered Hong Kong's myth of

12 Dirlik, 'The Mouse That Roared.'

13 Gordon Mathews, Eric Ma, and Tai-lok Lui, *Hong Kong, China: Learning to Belong to a Nation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 3.

14 Ming K. Chan and Gerard A. Postiglione, 'Introduction: Hong Kong's Uneasy Passage to Chinese Sovereignty,' in *The Hong Kong Reader: Passage to Chinese Sovereignty*, eds. Ming K. Chan and Gerard A. Postiglione (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 4–5.

15 Yiu-Wai Chu, *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), p. 1; Joe McGowan, 'The Death of Hong Kong,' *Fortune*, 26 June 1995, p. 40.

economic success, putting Hong Kong people in dire straits in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. Many Hong Kong people willingly turned to their motherland, not for the sake of the Hong Kong Government's emphasis on national consciousness, but for the sake of China's surprisingly swift economic growth in the new millennium. When China surpassed Hong Kong in terms of capitalism, Hong Kong culture could no longer retain its special role between China and the world – at that point, China had become the world. 'The media in the early 2000s saw the death of aura twice, firstly through the literal death of stars as an embodiment of Hong Kong identity and secondly through the death of a glorious era of pre-1997 local culture.'<sup>16</sup> Hong Kong's once singular, ambiguous but prolific existence had ceased, and the loss of 'in-between-ness' fuzzed the edges, shifted the foci, and changed the shape of its cultural identity. In short, there were fears that the identity and distinctiveness of Hong Kong culture were 'lost in transition', and that core values such as rule of law were, to borrow Carol Jones' account, 'lost in China'.<sup>17</sup> When Beijing enacted the National Security Law in Hong Kong on 1 July 2020, in the aftermath of the protests against the Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) that began in June 2019, it was once again believed to be 'the end of Hong Kong'. Although Hong Kong has experienced immense impacts in an age commonly believed to be that of a new cold war, it has not died. Despite one end after another, 'What is Hong Kong' – at least in regard to 'personal belonging' – has become a controversial question once again.

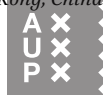
## Beginning of the End: The 1980s

'The end of Hong Kong' was widely discussed before the *Fortune* special issue mentioned above. The 1967 riots were one of the major crises of modern Hong Kong indeed. Regarding Hong Kong cultural identity, however, it is generally agreed among cultural critics that before the late 1960s, there was not a strong sense of local belonging among Hong Kong people, who were dominated by the so-called 'refugee mentality'.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, while many people fled Hong Kong after the 1967 riots, strictly speaking, it was not the end of 'Hong Kong', which was yet to be formed culturally and even

16 Wing-fai Leung, *Multimedia Stardom in Hong Kong: Image, Performance and Identity* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), p.122.

17 Carol Jones, *Lost in China?: Law, Culture and Identity in Post-1997 Hong Kong* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

18 Mathews, Ma, and Lui, *Hong Kong, China*, pp. 27–29.





socially. As rightly noted by David Faure, '[i]f the Hong Kong Chinese up to the 1970s were Chinese sojourners in Hong Kong, the generation of the 1970s [were] Hong Kong people of Chinese descent.'<sup>19</sup> Shortly after the 1970s witnessed the formation and transformation of Hong Kong identity, Hong Kong Governor Murray MacLehose made his landmark visit to Beijing at the end of that decade of changes. In mid-January 1973, Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary Alec Douglas-Home concluded in a memorandum to the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee that, as 'China does not want to take back Hong Kong now' and 'the [Hong Kong] population continue to want us to stay...the material and moral balance of advantage to us is to maintain the status quo.'<sup>20</sup> After Deng Xiaoping returned to office in 1977 and subsequently launched the Open Door Policy, however, things were significantly different. MacLehose's visit marked the dawning of Sino-British negotiations on the future of Hong Kong after 1997, anti-climaxed by Margaret Thatcher's infamous slip on the staircase in front of the People's Hall in Beijing after her meeting with Deng Xiaoping in 1982, which dealt an extremely heavy blow to Hong Kong and its people's confidence towards the future. Subsequently, 'the end of Hong Kong' continued to unsettle Hong Kong people before and after its reversion to China, and 1997 was seen as the end boundary of Hong Kong. Even after Hong Kong's reversion to China, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003, the financial tsunami in 2008, the Umbrella Movement in 2014, the protests against the ELAB in 2019, and the passing of the National Security Law in 2020 have all been seen as marking the end of Hong Kong. In these contexts, Humphrey Bogart's famous words in *Casablanca* – 'We'll always have Paris' – was paraphrased to express the feelings of Hong Kong people: 'We'll always have Hong Kong.'<sup>21</sup> Which Hong Kong is this? As perceptively noted by Tai-lok Lui, the 1970s was a decade of transformation in Hong Kong. His inspiring re-examination of Hong Kong in the 1970s was an effort to look at Hong Kong 'before it was formed.'<sup>22</sup> While Lui wanted to deconstruct the overromanticization of the

19 David Faure, 'Reflections on Being Chinese in Hong Kong,' in *Hong Kong's Transitions, 1842–1997*, eds. Judith M. Brown and Rosemary Foot (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), pp. 103–104.

20 Cited from Chi-Kwan Mark, 'Crisis or Opportunity? Britain, China, and the Decolonization of Hong Kong in the Long 1970s,' in *China, Hong Kong, and the Long 1970s: Global Perspectives*, eds. Priscilla Roberts and Odd Arne Westad (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 261.

21 Chu, *Lost in Transition*, p. 38; see, for instance, Bono Lee 李照興, *Chic China Chic 潮爆中國* (in Chinese) (Hong Kong: Enrich Publishing, 2008).

22 Tai-lok Lui, *The Story of Hong Kong in the 1970s Retold 那似曾相識的七十年代* (in Chinese) (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Books, 2012); see also Tai-lok Lui, 'The Unfinished Chapter of Hong Kong's Long Political Transition,' *Critique of Anthropology* 40(2) (February 2020): 270–276.

1970s, he also underscored the importance of the 1980s. In the early 1980s, according to Lui, Hong Kong's primary concern was still about maintaining the status quo.<sup>23</sup> In this sense the 1980s was the Hong Kong 'we'll always have', at least to some Hong Kong people.

Bookended by two major incidents, the 1980s will probably enter the annals of Hong Kong history as the decade that defined its future after its reversion to China. Before the end of this decade of significance, the June 4th Incident in 1989 generated a new wave of emigration in Hong Kong, and shortly before its start, MacLehose made his visit to Beijing in March 1979, which 'was hailed at the time as the prelude to extensive Sino-British negotiations on the future of the colony'.<sup>24</sup> To explore China's position on the question of Hong Kong, MacLehose sounded Deng Xiaoping out, suggesting that the land grants in the New Territories be approved for a term beyond 30 June 1997, 'for so long as the Crown administers the territory', but Deng reportedly refused the British request immediately, stating clearly that 'Hong Kong can continue to implement its capitalist system for a rather long period from this century to early next century, while we, the Mainland, practise socialism.'<sup>25</sup> This was followed by rounds of negotiations, which paved the way for Thatcher's meeting with Deng in 1982, but the confidence level waned as Chinese and British leaders responded.<sup>26</sup> The city was deeply troubled by the 1997 issue at that time. The worldwide economic recession triggered by the Federal Reserve's tightening of monetary policy in 1981 to cool inflation and the recession in the United States further aggravated the problem. Hong Kong found itself trapped in the midst of a perfect storm, in which both stock and property prices fell sharply, corrected by 38% and 31%, respectively, from the end of 1981 to the end of 1983. 'The credit squeeze finally came in 1983,' according to Raymond Li, former Executive Director of the Banking Policy Department of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority, as '[p]olitical uncertainties added to the crisis atmosphere, following China's official statement in August 1983 that it would take back Hong Kong on

23 Tai-lok Lui, Stephen W. K. Chiu, and Ray Yep (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Hong Kong* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), brief description.

24 Gary Cheung, 'The Secret Handover,' *South China Morning Post*, 20 November 2006; actually, MacLehose's trip to Beijing kicked off serious diplomatic discussions about Hong Kong's future.

25 For further details of the different rounds and stages of the negotiations, refer to Maria Wai-Chu Tam (ed.), *Drafting and Promulgation of the Basic Law and Hong Kong's Reunification with the Motherland* (Hong Kong: Working Group on Overseas Community of the Basic Law Promotion Steering Committee, 2012), pp. 11–13.

26 For details about the negotiations, refer to Sze Yuen Chung, *Hong Kong's Journey to Reunification: Memoirs of Sze-yuen Chung* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001), Chapter 2.



or before 1 July 1997, regardless of the outcome of its negotiations with the UK.<sup>27</sup> Inflation in Hong Kong increased from 5% in the 1970s to 12.7% by 1983. All of these issues culminated on the infamous ‘Black Saturday’, which, among others, symbolized the confidence crisis in Hong Kong. On 24 September 1983, the Hong Kong dollar collapsed in the midst of the news that Sino–British negotiations had ended in a stalemate, and its exchange rate versus the United States dollar depreciated by some 130/0, falling to an all-time low of HK\$9.6/US\$1. As recollected by Joseph Yam, the first Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority:

With no effective control over either the price or the quantity of the monetary base – there was then no monetary management mechanism to speak of – the currency was heading for a free fall. Queues began to gather in supermarkets and the shelves for rice and toilet paper were quickly emptied. In one or two banks, other kinds of queues were quietly forming, making substantial withdrawals of interbank lines and deposits through the drawing of cheques, and threatening to take cash or cheques in bank branches. The property bubble had already burst, further threatening banking stability, as banks traditionally were highly exposed, directly and indirectly, to the property market and vulnerable to volatility in property prices. We did not then have the 70% guideline for the degree of risk that could be assumed by banks in residential mortgage loans. And so, inevitably, we had one of the worst monetary and banking crisis in Hong Kong.<sup>28</sup>

Although the government launched a linked exchange rate on 17 October 1983, which has been in place since then, the confidence crisis continued to loom over Hong Kong, as evidenced by the taxi strike and the subsequent Mong Kok riot in January 1984, an important year in the history of Hong Kong. The taxi strike, during which angry drivers ‘occupied’ main roads to protest against a proposed steep increase in registration and license fees, triggered a night of rioting on 13 January, the first major riot in Hong Kong since 1967. It was a time of uncertainty for the city and its people, as their future after 1997 was still under negotiation. Although the British Hong Kong Government promised political reform in its Green Paper titled ‘The

27 Raymond Li, ‘Banking Problems: Hong Kong’s Experience in the 1980s,’ *BIS Policy Paper, Bank for International Settlements* (1999): 131.

28 Joseph Yam, ‘Lessons from 1983,’ *Insight*, Hong Kong Monetary Authority, 18 September 2003: <https://www.hkma.gov.hk/eng/news-and-media/insight/2003/09/20030918/>; last accessed on 28 October 2022.



Further Development of Representative Government in Hong Kong' and released on 18 July 1984, and its resulting eponymous White Paper released on 21 November 1984 (announcing the introduction of the indirect election of members of the Legislative Council – twelve seats by an Electoral College and twelve seats by functional constituencies), Hong Kong people could not rest assured about the future of Hong Kong.<sup>29</sup> The Sino-British Joint Declaration was formally signed by the People's Republic of China and the United Kingdom on 19 December 1984, and Hong Kong people finally knew the inevitable, that Britain would return Hong Kong to its motherland in 1997. Worse yet, '[t]he economic gloom and the general lack of political confidence persisted, however, and did not bottom out until 1985.'<sup>30</sup> And the rest was history.

## Horse Racing and Dancing as Usual

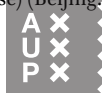
After the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, uncertainty continued to characterize Hong Kong's future as the agreement was believed to raise as many questions as it attempted to resolve. As argued by Peter Wesley-Smith, '[t]here is a difference involving international agreements and one in which China commits herself to an agreement concerning its own territory over which it is sovereign.'<sup>31</sup> To appease the anxiety of Hong Kong people as well as the international community, Deng Xiaoping reiterated his well-known promise to the members of the Hong Kong Basic Law Drafting Committee at their fourth meeting in Beijing on 16 April 1987: '[H]orse-racing and dancing will continue, and capitalist lifestyle will remain unchanged.'<sup>32</sup> As noted above, the *sui generis* identity of Hong Kong people was deeply entwined with their everyday lives and the pop culture they consumed. Hsin-chi Kuan, The Chinese University of Hong Kong professor emeritus and chairman of the Hong Kong Civic Party from its foundation in 2006 until 2011, highlighted in his *Hong Kong after the Basic Law* that the preservation of the socioeconomic status quo, and hence the continuance of the capitalist system and lifestyle,

29 Eva Liu and S. Y. Yue, *Political Development in Hong Kong since the 1980s* (Hong Kong: Research and Library Services Division, Legislative Council Secretariat, 1996), 2.2.

30 Li, 'Banking Problems,' pp. 131–132. 'Between 1983–86, seven local banks got into difficulties. These included the then third largest local bank in Hong Kong, the Overseas Trust Bank.'

31 Cited from Thomas S. Macintyre, 'Impact of the Sino-British Agreement on Hong Kong's Economic Future,' *Journal of Comparative Business and Capital Market Law* 7(1985): 208.

32 People's Daily Overseas Edition 人民日報海外版 (ed.), *Basic Law: A Creative Masterpiece* 基本法: 創造性的傑作 (in Chinese) (Beijing: People's Daily Press, 1991), p. 176.



in Hong Kong was the least contentious issue during the drafting of the Basic Law.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the capitalist system and lifestyle were the status quo that would be preserved in the ‘fifty years unchanged’ framework. That Deng Xiaoping, the engineer of the ‘once country, two systems’ blueprint, put the emphasis on lifestyle and used horse racing and dancing as examples are worth noting indeed. Interestingly, when Xia Baolong, former Director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, explained the National Security Law to the Hong Kong delegates at the National People’s Congress in May 2020, he said that its legislation would guarantee that ‘horses will run even faster, and dancing will be even more spectacular.’<sup>34</sup> More than thirty years later, horse racing and dancing are still used as symbols of Hong Kong’s capitalist lifestyle, although they are not totally absent in the Mainland anymore. While consumerism in Hong Kong has been ‘deeply associated with its international image and self-identity, through which people in Hong Kong define a common historical experience’,<sup>35</sup> horse racing and dancing were so ingrained in Hong Kong culture that they were used to symbolize Hong Kong’s lifestyle and the smooth transfer of sovereignty in 1997. As pointed out by Allen Chun, cosmopolitanism and cultural hybridity were the essence of Hong Kong’s ‘place-based identity’.<sup>36</sup> Horse racing and dancing can be seen as not only symbols of capitalist consumerism but also cosmopolitan hybridity. I will briefly discuss horse racing and dancing and their implications on Hong Kong’s lifestyle, and then move on to the importance of pop culture in the distinctive everyday lives of Hong Kong people.

Horse racing is actually a typical British colonial sport. Introduced by the British shortly after Hong Kong Island was ceded to Britain in 1842, it has a history of over 150 years. According to the Hong Kong Jockey Club, founded in 1884, horse racing began in Happy Valley back in 1846. The Club claims itself to be ‘an integral part of Hong Kong society, contributing to the city’s social and economic progress’ throughout its long history.<sup>37</sup> It successfully enhanced the image of horse racing by highlighting its social responsibility.

33 Hsin-chi Kuan, *Hong Kong after the Basic Law* (Hong Kong: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1990), pp. 3–4.

34 Cited from ‘Hong Kong Will Continue to Prosper with the Country’s Staunch Support’ 國家堅強後盾，港必繁榮穩定 (in Chinese), *Wen Wui Pao*, 29 May 2020.

35 Janet Ng, *Paradigm City: Space, Culture, and Capitalism in Hong Kong* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), p. 89.

36 Allen Chun, *Forget Chineseness: On the Geopolitics of Cultural Identification* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017), p. 106.

37 For further details, refer to ‘Our Milestones,’ Hong Kong Jockey Club: <https://corporate.hkjc.com/corporate/english/history-and-reports/our-milestones.aspx>; last accessed on 28 October 2022.



As early as 1915, the Club made its first public donations, and since then it has provided generous funds for public clinics, parks, and schools. Back in its early days, the colonial sport remained exclusive to the British elites, but thanks to the attractiveness of gambling for many people—both elite and ordinary—as an opportunity to win money, horse racing transcended race and class. After the Hong Kong Jockey Club went from an amateur to a professional organization in 1971, horse racing was even more popular among the local population. ‘Hong Kong’s races are carnival-like in atmosphere, as spectators from all walks of life come together to cheer for their local heroes.’<sup>38</sup> In the end, horse racing became something more than gambling and sport in Hong Kong: it was a culture.

Not unlike other pop culture, horse racing swiftly developed in the 1970s after it turned professional. Horse racing went beyond the racecourse when telephone betting and the first six off-course betting branches were launched in 1974. The Hong Kong Jockey Club soon realized that the Happy Valley racecourse was not big enough to meet increasing demand, and therefore a second racecourse was built in Sha Tin in the New Territories. With a capacity of over 80,000, the Sha Tin Racecourse opened in September 1978, and since then it has become one of the leading racecourses in the world. This paved the way for the swift development of the horse racing industry in the next decade. Not only were all the off-course betting branches fully computerized in 1983, ‘a concerted effort was made to boost the quality of both horses and races’ in the 1980s: ‘That meant that the city’s fixtures were upgraded to Group 1 status, so they could attract international talent and attention.’<sup>39</sup> By the end of the decade, Hong Kong horse racing was effectually internationalized, and the 1st Hong Kong International Cup – which later developed into the Hong Kong International Races comprising four races, with some of the biggest purses in the world – staged in January 1988 was a milestone event.

Given Hong Kong horse racing’s similarity to other popular entertainment industries, it is necessary to have stars to enhance its carnival-like atmosphere. As pointedly noted by Andrew Hawkins in 2014, ‘[w]ith only 24 trainers and a similar number of jockeys, it means the participants are firmly in the spotlight. They are Hong Kong’s Cristiano Ronaldo or Usain Bolt.’<sup>40</sup> Stars were born back in the 1970s. Derek Tai-chi Cheng, who

38 Vincent Cheung, ‘A Brief History of Hong Kong Horse Racing,’ in *Discovery* (the inflight magazine for Cathay Pacific and Cathay Dragon), 30 September 2019.

39 Cheung, ‘A Brief History of Hong Kong Horse Racing.’

40 Andrew Hawkins, ‘Why Horse Racing in Hong Kong Is a Different Beast Entirely,’ *South China Morning Post*, 1 May 2014.



straddled across amateur and professional years, was the first star jockey based on his status as the Hong Kong Champion Jockey from 1967 to 1975. The competition between Cheng and Australian jockey Gary Moore, who later bagged the champion title between 1976 and 1979, was very fierce in the 1970s, before Cheng left racing to become a trainer in 1976. Gary Moore, the son of champion-jockey-turned-trainer George Moore, who also came to Hong Kong in the 1970s, first rode in 1971 and won his first race on New Year's Day in 1972. He formally arrived from Australia and commenced his career in Hong Kong in the 1972–1973 season. The rivalry between Cheng and Moore was simply legendary, seen by local fans as a battle between local/Chinese and foreign jockeys. Local jockey Tony Cruz succeeded Cheng and continued the battle with Gary Moore in the latter half of the 1970s. Among the first batch of apprentice jockeys trained by the Hong Kong Jockey Club who graduated in 1973, Cruz was the most successful home-grown jockey in the history of Hong Kong horse racing. Even with Gary Moore's dominance in the late 1970s, Cruz managed to win the title in 1979–1980, and their contest continued until the mid-1980s, when they were so successful that they shifted their emphases to the international scene. On the subject of horse trainers, Gary Moore's father, George Moore, was the star. Shortly after he arrived in Hong Kong in 1972, he won the champion trainer title a record eleven times between 1973 and 1985. His older son, John Moore, who also moved from Australia and kickstarted his career in Hong Kong as a jockey, may not have been as successful as his younger brother, but he succeeded his father and won the trainer title in 1985–1986, later becoming one of the most acclaimed trainers in Hong Kong in the next three decades. If horse trainers' competition was not as fierce as that of the jockeys in the 1970s and early 1980s, because of the overwhelming George Moore, the competition between Brian Ping-chee Kan and John Moore in the late 1980s was also seen as a battle between local/Chinese and foreign trainers. Arguably the most successful Chinese trainer in the history of Hong Kong horse racing, Kan dominated the scene in the latter half of the 1980s, winning the title four times between 1986 and 1990.

Horse racing would not be possible without horses indeed. Besides star jockeys and trainers, star horses – often hailed as 'King of Horses' in Chinese – also played an indispensable part in the development of horse racing into a culture in Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s. With a record-breaking eighteen total wins, Super Win, trained by George Moore and often ridden by Gary Moore, was undoubtedly the horse of the 1970s, although Money Talks and Fantan were also popular among fans by virtue of their outstanding performances. However, the first official





'King of Horses' was Silver Lining, crowned in 1977–1978, the first of its kind launched by the Association of Hong Kong Racing Journalists and sponsored by Marlboro. Silver Lining was first trained by Chinese champion trainer Chi-Lam Ng (1969–1970 and 1971–1973) and later moved to George Moore's stable, where he partnered with Gary Moore and became one of the most celebrated horses in the history of Hong Kong horse racing. Cruz would not have been as legendary as Gary Moore, even though he won six champion jockey titles, without a 'King of Horses.' Co-tack, trained by local Chinese Tang-Ping Wong, was certainly the most successful horse in Hong Kong in the 1980s. As recollected by Cruz, Co-tack was plainly invincible during his heyday:

He knew how to race – very professional going into the gates. He had exceptional acceleration but would slow right down in the last quarter – I could have trotted him in because no horse in Hong Kong could come anywhere near him; he blew them out.<sup>41</sup>

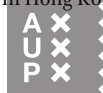
More crucially, Co-tack was named 'King of Horses' twice between 1982 and 1984, a time in which Hong Kong was deeply troubled by the negotiations about its future after 1997. In the midst of unrest and uncertainty, Co-tack gave horse racing fans, and even ordinary Hong Kong people, something to cheer about.

Horse racing became part of the Hong Kong lifestyle beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, providing not only a carnival-like atmosphere with crowds and families on race days but also 'thrills and hopes for the people in Hong Kong'.<sup>42</sup> Effective promotion strategies over the years helped horse racing become an extremely successful form of popular entertainment in Hong Kong. It has built up a star system that is not too different from that of the entertainment business. It is cosmopolitan but local at once; its fans straddle across ethnicity, class, and gender; and it is sport, gambling, charity, and, above all, lifestyle. These are plausible reasons why 'the "sport of kings" has lost its crown in most of the world, but there's no doubt it rules supreme in Hong Kong.'<sup>43</sup> Horses did continue to race after the handover. Deng's promise made was a promise kept, except perhaps

41 Heather Adams, 'My Life: Tony Cruz,' *South China Morning Post*, 14 April 2013.

42 Hong Kong Heritage Museum, Hong Kong's Popular Entertainment: [https://www.heritagemuseum.gov.hk/documents/2199315/2199693/Entertainment\\_E.pdf](https://www.heritagemuseum.gov.hk/documents/2199315/2199693/Entertainment_E.pdf); last accessed on 28 October 2022.

43 Hawkins, 'Why Horse Racing in Hong Kong Is a Different Beast Entirely.'





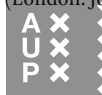
in September 2019, during the height of the protests against the ELAB, when a Happy Valley race was cancelled after an imminent safety threat to racegoers, jockeys, and employees, as well as to the welfare of the racehorses, because a horse owned by a controversial pro-Beijing lawmaker was scheduled to race on that night. It was adventitious, however, as horse racing quickly resumed and continued in Hong Kong even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when normal life was still a distant dream for people around the world.

If horse racing is a gambling sport that turned into a culture in Hong Kong, dancing has become an icon of the nightlife of this city. The big spenders ‘dancing’ in nightclubs in the 1980s were showcasing their city’s success in the capitalist world-economy. Hong Kong’s ‘nightscape’ caught the world’s attention as a result of *The World of Suzie Wong*, the 1960 romantic drama directed by Richard Quine and starring William Holden and Nancy Kwan. In this film, Holden falls in love with the gorgeous ‘bar girl’ Kwan—Suzie Wong—in Wan Chai. Meanwhile, the James Bond author and *The Sunday Times* journalist Ian Fleming, known to be an admirer of Richard Mason’s 1957 eponymous novel on which the film *The World of Suzie Wong* was based, visited Hong Kong in 1959. In order to get a sense of the real setting, Fleming paid a visit to the Luk Kwok Hotel (in Mason’s novel it is called the Nam Kok House of Pleasure), where the novelist had stayed when writing the love story between the painter Robert Lomax and the prostitute Suzie Wong. In his travelogue *Thrilling Cities* – a collection of articles that he wrote for *The Sunday Times* in 1959 and 1960 – published in 1963, Fleming mentioned the Tonnochy Ballroom in Wan Chai when he described Hong Kong’s night life:

The dance-hostesses are on call – which does not mean by telephone, but by personal arrangement – at seventy-six ‘ballrooms’. The prettiest girls and the best bands tend to be in places like the Tonnochy Ballroom and the Golden Phoenix (on the island) and at the Oriental (in Kowloon), where most of the patrons are Chinese and no hard liquor is served, only tea, soft drinks and melon seeds.<sup>44</sup>

An area in Wan Chai later developed into a red-light district filled by regular pubs, girlie bars, and hostess clubs. As perceptively noted by Siu Leung Li in his account of Hong Kong-made musical films, ‘Hong Kong nightclubs and cabaret singers had a long and fascinating history in Hong Kong, especially

44 Ian Fleming, *Thrilling Cities* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963).



between the 1950s and 1970s; the nightclub world in Hong Kong musical films is not at all unfounded in social reality.<sup>45</sup>

Similar to other entertainment businesses, the nightclub scene also expanded quickly in the 1980s, thanks to the opportunities and hence money brought by the opening up of the Mainland market. Club Volvo (later renamed Club Bboss due to a copyright issue), the grandest Japanese-style club that opened its doors to Hong Kong's nightlife in 1984, was seen as a symbol of confidence in the future of the city. In spite of rumours that China was the financial backer of the new hot spot of Hong Kong's nightlife, there was no concrete proof. Beijing did make a public endorsement though. The opening ceremony of Hong Kong's biggest, most luxurious nightclub on 12 December 1984 (just one week before the official signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration) was marked by the presence of Li Chuwen, the deputy director of the Xinhua News Agency (the de facto representative of China in Hong Kong back then), who represented Beijing's commitment to keeping the lifestyle of Hong Kong beyond 1997. Moreover, Huang Guangying, who was believed to be among the first generation of 'red capitalists' in Hong Kong and who funded the Guang Da Group, also conveyed the message that 'horse racing and dancing will continue' – Deng Xiaoping's promise to Hong Kong people – at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Located in Tsim Sha Tsui East, back then a newly developed commercial and tourist area as well as nightspot, Club Volvo had a dancefloor that could cater to 400 in a space of 70,000 square feet. It was so big – the literal translation of the Chinese name is actually big billionaire—that nouveau-riche customers were driven to their glitizily decorated private booths in golf carts kitted out as gold antique Rolls-Royces. Tsim Sha Tsui East was the newest nightspot on the Kowloon side, while the historical nightclubs such as the Tonnochy Club were still operating in Wan Chai on Hong Kong Island. 'The most famous was always Club Volvo. The money spent there had no limit,' according to Neva Shaw, who was running her own late-night bar, The Professional Club, back in the 1980s. 'These girls were like geishas. There was a patron to be found, a lifestyle to be maintained.... I saw one girl take out a wad of bills big enough to choke on, to deposit in the bank.'<sup>46</sup> The business was so successful that there was a plan to turn it into a listed company in the Stock Exchange of Hong Kong, which derailed in the

45 Siu Leung Li, 'Embracing Glocalization and Hong Kong-made Musical Film,' in *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema*, ed. Poshek Fu (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 86.

46 Cited from 'Hostess Clubs Close in Hong Kong,' *South China Morning Post*, 24 December 2012.

aftermath of the 1987 stock market crash.<sup>47</sup> Former Reuters correspondent Elizabeth Pisani once wrote:

I was covering business at the time, and was curious about the planned stock-market flotation of Club Volvo, the mother of all pickup joints. I've been in a lot of pleasure palaces since then, but none has matched the kitsch of Volvo, a club that makes you feel like you are trapped inside a wedding cake iced in brass, mirrors and cheap satin.<sup>48</sup>

This nicely summed up the lavishly boisterous scene in this heaven of some of the biggest spenders in town. Although Club Volvo was shut down in 2012 owing to the reconfigured nightscape after the rise of China, its glitter and glamour had written a flashy chapter for Hong Kong's nightlife. In *Hong Kong Night Club*, a romantic comedy adventure shot almost entirely in Hong Kong by Japanese director Takayoshi Watanabe, the conflation of Hong Kong and the nightclub 'seems to have made explicit an underlying metaphor running through the made-in-Hong Kong musical; that is, Hong Kong is a nightclub'.<sup>49</sup>

## Lifestyle Unchanged

Horse racing and dancing were just two cases of Hong Kong's lifestyle that Beijing promised to keep unchanged after 1997. The late engineer of the unprecedented 'one country, two systems' framework picked them as examples, possibly because 'according to the moral values of a socialist society, [they] were symbols of decadence of Hong Kong's capitalist lifestyle'.<sup>50</sup> This painted a sharp and clear picture, effectively highlighting the differences between the two systems and the capitalist lifestyle that would remain unchanged. 'Lifestyle' became a widely used term by the late 1970s. In 1981, Michael Sobel made a complaint about its abuse:

Lifestyle is currently one of the abused words of the English language. Social scientists, journalists, and laymen use it to refer to almost anything

47 For further details of the listing plan, refer to Nicholas D. Kristof, 'Hong Kong's Hottest Hot Spot,' *The New York Times*, 11 October 1987.

48 Elizabeth Pisani, *The Wisdom of Whores: Bureaucrats, Brothels and the Business of AIDS* (London: Granta Books, 2008), p. 67.

49 Li, 'Embracing Glocalization and Hong Kong-made Musical Film,' p. 86.

50 Tai-lok Lui, Stephen W. K. Chiu, and Ray Yep, 'Introduction,' in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Hong Kong*, p. 5.



of interest, be it fashion, Zen Buddhism, or French cooking. The more this word is bantered about, the less it seems to mean. If the 1970s are an indication of things to come, the word lifestyle will soon include everything and mean nothing, all at the same time.<sup>51</sup>

Despite this, lifestyle did have significant implications in Hong Kong. First and foremost, it is commonly agreed among Hong Kong critics that a distinctive Hong Kong identity gradually took shape when ‘the local economy achieved independence and the administration assumed effective autonomy’ in the 1960s, and ‘local lifestyles also began to diverge sharply from those of Taiwan or the Communist Mainland.’<sup>52</sup> The 1970s was the decade in which Hong Kong witnessed the formation of a distinct local identity. The ‘refugee mentality’ of Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s was replaced by ‘market mentality’ in the 1970s,<sup>53</sup> and consumption, including cultural consumption, became the dominant mentality of the swiftly developing capitalist city. As ‘a modern social form’, lifestyles have depended upon, among other things, the development of consumer culture.<sup>54</sup> The political turmoil in the 1980s, ironically, created a Hong Kong that some people always wanted to have. Notwithstanding the anxiety about the future throughout the years, Ackbar Abbas’s famous notion about Hong Kong – ‘doom and boom’ (‘the more frustrated or blocked the aspirations to “democracy” are, the more the market blooms’<sup>55</sup>) – was perfectly applicable to the development of Hong Kong’s pop culture in the 1980s. Richard Harris, who pioneered Asian investment management at senior levels for companies such as JP Morgan, Citi, BNY Mellon, and several start-ups, hit the nail right on the head when he explained why the late 1980s was the best time for Hong Kong: ‘The final years of the booming decade represented the height of wealth creation and opportunity, but also a period which was culturally unique.’<sup>56</sup> In other words, Hong Kong’s booming pop culture was one of the important reasons for its overall economic growth in that decade.

51 Michael E. Sobel, *Lifestyle and Social Structure: Concepts, Definitions, Analyses* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), p. 1.

52 Turner, ‘1960s/1990s,’ p. 15.

53 Mathews, Ma, and Lui, *Hong Kong, China*, p. 29. According to the authors, the market mentality ‘came to characterize Hong Kong in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and continuing today.’

54 David Chaney, *Lifestyles* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 14–24.

55 Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), p. 5.

56 Richard Harris, ‘Why Hong Kong Was at Its Best in the Late 1980s,’ *South China Morning Post*, 7 July 2016.



In this context, the rise of local cultural industries such as movies, television, and pop songs had exerted a very profound impact on everyday life. Hong Kong in the 1980s, at least culturally speaking, was the Hong Kong many of its people always wanted to have. Throughout the 1980s, the upward mobility and vigorous development of Hong Kong pop culture enabled a distinctive cosmopolitan lifestyle between the East and the West to grow and mature, and Hong Kong people came to take pride in their cultural identities. 'The increasing prominence and importance of style in pop culture production goes hand in hand with a redefinition of consumption as an aesthetic or artistic exercise,' and as astutely argued by Imre Szeman and Susie O'Brien, the term 'lifestyle' perfectly captured this shift.<sup>57</sup> In his in-depth study on lifestyles, David Chaney cited Michel de Certeau, whose theory has contributed 'a distinctive approach to pop culture that has influenced other studies of lifestyles', and made a point pertinent to our understanding of Hong Kong identity: 'The idea here is that as they move through established spatial and social order, actors are telling stories through their reinforcement and confirmation of local knowledges.'<sup>58</sup> While de Certeau famously stressed the importance of spatial practices, the stories told by the culture of everyday life enunciated a strong sense of belonging among Hong Kong people in the 1980s, when the clouds of the 1997 issue were looming over the future of the city. It is against this backdrop that I would like to 'enunciate' – to borrow de Certeau's term – my 'personal belonging' through Hong Kong pop culture in the 1980s.

57 Imre Szeman and Susie O'Brien, *Popular Culture: A User's Guide* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2009), p. 115.

58 Chaney, *Lifestyles*, p. 74; see also Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 15–42.