
Afterword
“Hong Kong 1997”—
T-Shirt Designs by Zhang Hongtu

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A newspaper photograph shows fireworks lighting up Hong Kong's skyline to usher in the Chinese new year. But this exuberant view only leads the reporter to imagine the future: "In less than five months, at midnight June 30, another fireworks display and more parades will herald the end of Hong Kong's life as a British colony and the resumption of rule from mainland China. A four-day public holiday and much partying are anticipated as Hong Kong's 6.3 million residents bid farewell to Britain and greet their new sovereigns from Beijing."¹ The concreteness of such a prediction reminds me of what Ackbar Abbas's essay earlier called "History with a capital H," meaning a forthcoming event whose media value is self-consciously played up and whose actual happening is expected to take the form of a staged spectacle. Indeed, readers may have found "history" one of the most frequently addressed and contested concepts in this special issue of *Public Culture*. It seems that the hybridity of Hong Kong culture, the ambiguity of its identity, and the uncertainty of its future—the paradox of Hong Kong—must challenge us to rethink how its history is constructed, conceived and represented, and how various constructions, conceptions and representations respond to each other and generate new meaning. In Abbas's mind, while Hong Kong's "public, consensual history" becomes increasingly a grand soap opera prepared for a world audience, another Hong Kong history may be discovered from within—a tacit history shaped by constant but elusive adjustments and self-reinventive

1. Liz Sly, "The Year of the Paradox," *Chicago Tribune*, February 9, 97, Section 1, p. 3.

responses to new and often shocking situations and experiences. His discussion of Hong Kong's urban space does not provide quick formulas, but tries to map the complexities and specificity of the place.

This grassroots history has no place in Chris Patten's historical reflection as recorded and analyzed by Jeremy Tambling. Taking history as a universal and unilinear progression for granted, Patten's thinking is nevertheless distinguished by a dual perspective. More than once he switches his position between two disjointed points, either speaking as part of an ongoing (and vanishing) history of Hong Kong or looking back at Hong Kong in 1996 from a hypothetical future vantage point. He recognizes the "historical nature" of his job as the last Governor of Hong Kong and explains his duty as being to arrange Britain's departure "in as honorable and dignified way as possible." His historical role is thus actually to *end* a history which started in 1842 when Hong Kong became a British colony. He also talks about history after 1997; but here the meaning of "history" changes from actual human events to an abstract entity which, according to him, will "make arguments with itself" to evaluate the whole Hong Kong affair. It is not difficult to see that this dual vision of history belongs to a retreating colonizer. The irony, however, is that Beijing's nationalist historiography also has a bipartite structure, only what is the end for Britain is the beginning for China; so it is logical for Chinese leaders to arrange Hong Kong's future not with Hong Kong but with Hong Kong's other "sovereign country." Running backwards towards point zero, the "Hong Kong Clock" in Tiananmen Square (analyzed in my essay in this issue) frames time before 1 July 1997, as a negative history of Hong Kong. Afterwards, this former foreign colony will be given fifty years to become synchronized with the rest of the country and join a positive, revolutionary historical process.

These different visions and versions of history are tied to different spaces and perspectives. Whereas an intrinsic history of Hong Kong implies interior space and time as well as an internal observer, the world media transforms Hong Kong into news and transmits images and events of the city through virtual space. Britain's and China's visions of Hong Kong are both projected from external locations; their divergent points of view testify to conflicting political agendas but not necessarily to opposing concepts of history. While these are some of the issues that have been discussed by writers in the preceding essays, this "Afterword" hopes to introduce an artist's response to questions posed by the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty this year. Significantly, the title scene of the picture series that Zhang Hongtu has created for the event consciously defines his own position ("Hong Kong 1997"). Depicting the Great Wall *behind* Hong Kong, he



Hong Kong 1997



Good Luck
for the Year
of the Ox



Welcome!

HONG KONG

XIANG GANG

XIANG GANG

HONG KONG

is looking at the city (and China) from across the Pacific Ocean. This vantage point implies an “outsider” who derives his visual vocabulary from the stock images prepared by the world media. On the other hand, this outsider is highly skeptical, if not overtly critical, of any official formulation of Hong Kong’s “public, consensual history.” His works thus reflect a dilemma between *approach* and *language*, a dilemma shared by many people around the world who have no intimate experience with Hong Kong but who try to voice concerns about Hong Kong’s future.

Trained in Beijing’s prestigious Central Academy of Arts and Crafts, Zhang Hongtu moved to America in 1982, and has been consistently using his art to make political comments.² “Material Mao” is a large group of negative images of Mao Zedong that he created between 1991 and 1995. Using various materials ranging from brick, corn, fur and metal, to paper soaked in soy sauce, he made large and small frames to outline Mao’s famous silhouette. Another means he used to “empty” Mao—to remove ideology from an idol—is to satirize and commercialize the great leader simultaneously. The “Mao Dresses” he collaborated with Hong Kong designer Vivienne Tam on are now worn by fashionable Hong Kong females (see fig. 3, p. 317, this issue), partly due to their promotion by some of the most glamorous international super models. His experience as an artist-in-residence at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in 1996 must have further linked him to this island. His newest work, a series of four T-shirt designs, reflects his view of Hong Kong at this critical moment.

The title scene of the series, called “Hong Kong 1997,” intends to transform visual clichés into irony. Omnipresent in official propaganda and popular culture, the two images in the picture—the familiar silhouette of the Great Wall outside Beijing and the famous skyline of Hong Kong—are symbols and “trademarks” of the two places. When these two images are juxtaposed in a single composition, however, their independent definitions are contested and enhanced by their inter-relationship. Significantly, although even the most insensitive Hong Konger would never forget his powerful neighbor, one rarely *sees* the closeness of China and Hong Kong in such alarming clarity as in this picture. It seems that the Great Wall has suddenly appeared at Hong Kong’s door, casting a giant shadow over the island city. By painting the Wall red the artist defines it as a nationalist monument as well as a communist symbol; he also exaggerates the Wall’s height and

2. For further information about Zhang Hongtu’s work and ideas, see “Zhang Hongtu/Hongtu Zhang: An Interview,” (interviewer: Jonathan Hay), in John Hay, ed., *Boundaries in China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp. 280–98.

volume to allude to China's immensity and prowess. Compared to this great monolith, the intricate glass buildings below it, though startling manifestations of modern technology, only create the impression of a phantom town, fragile and disembodied. The picture disturbs us with a sense of urgency: to place the Great Wall on the Hong Kong border implies dislocation and pressure. It seems that the distance between Beijing (where the Wall is actually located) and Hong Kong has already been drastically reduced; yet the Wall continues to advance and will soon bury the transparent skyscrapers underneath it.

If this first design implies a temporal movement in a spatial juxtaposition, the second design reverses this order by providing "time" with an emblematic image—a frontal ox head (the Chinese symbol for 1997)—which also defines the picture's overall composition (see cover illustration and "Good Luck for the Year of the Ox"). The focus of pictorialization thus shifts from place to time, a new focus highlighted by the picture's title. On the other hand, "The Year of the Ox" depicted here still refers to Hong Kong, a place in the process of changing hands. Painting the national flags of China and Britain side by side over the ox head invokes several readings. The flags indicate the confrontation and negotiation between the two "sovereign states" over Hong Kong, allude to Hong Kong's change of ownership this year, and also suggest the *invisibility* of Hong Kong behind either a colonial mask or a nationalist veil. Although the British flag is shrinking and the Chinese flag is swelling, these are all on the surface, while the ox stares at us behind this surface with an unchanging expression.

An ox head is also in the third design; but this is a different ox, with overtly female features and a self-conscious femininity ("Welcome!"). The animal is harmless and actually *cute*: its horns are short and round; its hair is curly and seem permed; its red muzzle seems to be wearing lipstick; its soft eyes exude tenderness; its expression is half curious and half flirtatious. Although neither a British nor a Chinese flag blurs the image, what this face represents is perhaps one of Hong Kong's own masks. This interpretation is supported by the ox's hybrid body—a female torso in a westernized *qipao* dress. The body movement, hand gesture, and especially the well-tailored dress all identify this torso as belonging to a historical stereotype—a society lady in a pre-revolutionary Chinese metropolis such as Shanghai—whose images filled contemporary advertisements and fashion magazines. The red flag she holds in her hand further points to a historical event and explains the picture's title, "Welcome!": when Communist soldiers entered Shanghai in 1949 after defeating Kuomintang troops, they were greeted by glamorous bourgeois women on the streets.

This picture does not simply link Hong Kong in 1997 and Shanghai in 1949

through some superficial similarities (e.g. both being commercial and western-style cosmopolitan centers). Rather, it evokes a historical experience that those Shanghai ladies would not have known in 1949: regardless of their initial enthusiasm towards the new regime, they would have to spend the next thirty years repenting their bourgeois class background and lifestyle. Of course, time has changed and the flag in Zhang's picture registers 1997; but the woman in the picture is still dressed in blue—the color for Capitalism in each of the four designs to contrast with the Communist red. This contrast is given the most graphic form in the fourth and last design (Transition/Translation), which is also the artist's most direct and poignant comment on Hong Kong's political transition. Here, the word Hong Kong is colored blue while Xiang Gang—the written form for Hong Kong according to China's northern "Standard Pronunciation" (*putonghua*)—is red. Will Hong Kong remain the city's proper name after June 30th? Or will Hong Kong be renamed Xiang Gang like Peking (now Beijing) and Canton (now Guangzhou) were? These questions, implied in the alternative groupings of the two names in Zhang's design, should not be taken or answered literally. Rather, they imply a larger question which lies at the heart of the Hong Kong affair: What is the meaning of this whole business? If "one country, two systems" is Hong Kong's future, will the place undergo a real historical transformation or merely a superficial shift in political affiliation? Are colonialism and nationalism just alternative labels in this case? Can the two names Hong Kong and Xiang Gang coexist inside the People's Republic of China?—Can Hong Kong as a place be separated from Beijing's comprehension of it?

Zhang Hongtu's pictures offer questions, not answers. These questions have been asked numerous times. The repetition has neither brought people closer to a conclusion nor made the questions less serious; what one can do to intensify the questioning is keep people listening. Perhaps this *is* the meaning of Zhang's pictures. Perhaps what he wants is simply to repeat, but to repeat with a difference. After all, these are T-shirt designs intended to be infinitely "repeated" on Hong Kong's streets throughout the Year of the Ox.