When I first saw the Hong Kong Clock in Tiananmen Square in 1994, or Xianggang zhong as people call it in Beijing, it displayed a bright digital number of 1055—the days remaining until the resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong on 1 July 1997. When I returned to the Clock in 1996, the number had changed to 298, then 297, 296... (fig. 1). And my response to it had also changed from ridicule to a tightening sense of expectation: the Clock—in fact a giant timer—seemed to tick louder and louder.

Another difference in 1996 was more “clock-watchers,” mostly in small groups and all Chinese. Judging from clothing and dialect, some of them probably came from Hong Kong or Macao; others were mainlanders traveling to the capital from the provinces. Many visitors posed in front of the Clock to have their pictures taken (fig. 2), some grim-faced, others laughing and joking. A young man said to his female companion in a heavy Shandong accent: “Yinian hou zanmen yeneng qu Xianggang warwar le (A year from now we can also go to Hong Kong to have fun).” I looked around and wondered what brought other people here: they seemed to have little in common in terms of origin, culture, profession, or even citizenship. But at that moment they had all linked themselves to a single measure of (political) time and space, since all of them had come to Tiananmen Square to see the Clock, and the Clock would show the same number in every snapshot taken that day.
Fig. 1. The Hong Kong Clock in Tiananmen Square, 1996.

Fig. 2. Visitors to the Clock having their pictures taken, 1996.
The Hong Kong Clock and Post-1989 Tiananmen Square

In a sense, what these visitors encountered was not only the Clock, but also a renewed Tiananmen Square, whose symbolic structure and political significance has inevitably been modified by the Clock's installation. The same phenomenon can be observed from an alternative angle: the Clock resulted from the continuing transformation of the Square, a process which has speeded up since 1989, the year of the prodemocratic demonstrations of Beijing students and the government's crackdown on the movement.¹

A visitor to the Square in 1996 would see the same “hardware” as in 1989 or 1977: mammoth concrete buildings enclose the Square making it the most sacred and untouchable place in the People’s Republic of China (fig. 3). People are familiar with the individual roles and symbolism of these buildings. Less familiar is that their spatial structure defines a system of political time—a temporal order based on political concepts and serving political agendas. The four monuments surrounding the Square form two symmetrical pairs, each juxtaposing the present with the past in a symbolic historiography (fig. 4). Tiananmen, the grandstand of the living Chinese leaders in state ceremonies, opposes Mao’s tomb; the National Museum of History faces the Great Hall of the People.²

It is also in the Square that history as a systematic account of events in a temporal order achieves its most authoritative narrative form. Through the inscriptions and relief carvings on the monuments and through the permanent exhibitions in the Museum of History, the static juxtaposition of the past and the present is transformed into a logical process linking the past to the present. The concept of political time is historicized and particularized. Selected dates punctuate the 4,000-year-long Chinese history in stages; but the periodization is retrospective, with the self-confessed purpose to prove the inevitability and legitimacy of Communist rule. The most important date in this history is 1840, the beginning of the Opium War, which ended with the 1842 Nanjing Treaty and the ceding of Hong Kong to Britain.³ According to Maoist historiography, this

2. The Monument of the People’s Heroes, another important structure in the Square, changed its meaning in 1976. Mao’s Mausoleum constructed that year took over this monument’s original role to represent the country’s revolutionary past. The Monument then became superfluous in the official symbolic structure and was increasingly associated with a growing dissident public. See ibid., p. 106.
3. More precisely, Hong Kong became a British colony through the Sino-Anglo treaties of 1842, 1860, and 1898. The first two treaties ceded in perpetuity the island of Hong Kong and Kowloon respectively, and the third leased the “New Territories” up to the Shenzhen River and associated islands
date also marks the beginning of the “democratic revolution” against imperialism and colonialism, thereby dividing Chinese history into two parts, ancient and modern (fig. 5). It is based on this theory that Mao Zedong dedicated the Monument of the People’s Heroes at the center of the Square to those “who from 1840 laid down their lives in the many struggles against internal and external enemies for national independence.” It is also based on this theory that the enormous National Museum of History to the east of the Square is actually comprised of two independent institutions: The Museum of (Traditional) History and The Museum of Revolutionary (i.e., Modern) History.

Sustained by the Square and its monuments, in 1996 this official historiography still seemed steadfast and all-powerful. On the other hand, almost half-a-century has passed since Mao wrote his inscription, and the exhibition in the Museum of Revolutionary History is close to forty years old. Upon reflection, we realize that no permanent monument has been added to the Square since 1977, after the establishment of Mao’s mausoleum as the final closure of the Cultural Revolution. That the Square has actually stopped growing over the past twenty years is itself a significant phenomenon. Indeed, for a person like me who grew up in Beijing and witnessed the transformation of the Square from a walled tunnel to “the largest square in the world,” it would have been hard to believe that it would one day cease to expand. This is not to say, of course, that the government has paid less attention to the Square. In fact, the Square has become such a sensitive political spot since the 1989 student movement that the government has spent more money each year to guard it, renovate its monuments, and keep it a sparkling showpiece.

But all such attention—protection and renovation—has helped transform the Square from the “bright symbol of New China” to a collection of well-maintained relics from a bygone era. This transformation means that the whole symbolic system of the Square has now been reframed in a larger historical narrative: although

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4. From the inscription on the Monument, which Mao wrote on September 30, 1949. See Wu Hung, “Tiananmen Square,” p. 98.
5. It is significant to note that although the exhibition of traditional Chinese History has been revised after the Cultural Revolution, the exhibition of “revolutionary history” after 1840 has remained basically unchanged.
6. Two large architectural projects in the Square during this period aimed at renovating and reinforcing the structure of the Great Hall of the People and the National Museum of History, and took several years to accomplish.
Fig. 3. Tiananmen Square (viewed from south) in 1994.

Fig. 4. Symbolic structure of Tiananmen Square since 1977.
the Square still retains its intrinsic political symbolism and historical evolution-
ism, this system itself has become a creation of the past and is contrasted with
a fast-changing present. The pre-1977 monuments in the Square are “living sym-
bols” of the People’s Republic only to the extent that they embody, as asserted
repeatedly in official propaganda, “the fundamental ideology of the Communist
Party,” which must be maintained, even though China has become quite a differ-
ent country in recent years.

It would be wrong, however, to separate the Square from this changing China.
As an art historian who is interested in visual display, I see a new form of sym-
bolic presentation which, though unstable, has routinely appeared in the Square
over the past two decades to supply the place with a sense of contemporaneity.
These are short-term official installations which last only for several days to a
few weeks. Although often designed as statues of monumental dimensions, they
are never intended to be permanent fixtures of the Square. Their larger than life
images and their fragile materials produce a visual irony or puzzle: a work of
this kind is at once a twenty-foot-high statue and a mere assortment of colorful
cloth, paper, plants, and flowers (fig. 6).

I have tried to reconstruct the history of this official art and have found an un-
expected origin: it seems to have first appeared in the Square as a forced response
to the increasing challenge to the place’s official roles and symbolism. Two mass
demonstrations in 1976 and 1989 both began from taking over an official mon-
ument in the Square and turning it into an “un-official” or even “anti-official”
one. It is difficult to forget the image of the Square during these movements: it
was covered by an ocean of white wreathes that the demonstrators dedicated to
their deceased heroes, whose portraits were attached to the Monument of the
People’s Heroes to cancel the “heroes’” anonymity. None of these flower wreathes
or portraits were supposed to be permanent; I have proposed that even the God-
dess of Democracy established during the 1989 movement was “a monument that
was intended to be destroyed, because its monumentality would derive from such
self-sacrifice.”

Ironically, after crushing the statue, the government’s “replace-
ment” of the Goddess only reconfirmed her previous existence. This new work
counterpointed the Goddess in almost all aspects and therefore followed her logic.
Also a temporary statue of figurative images, it celebrated the government’s crack-
down on the “counter-revolutionary riot” by occupying the very spot where the
Goddess once stood.

8. Ibid., p. 113.
If this official statue was still attached to a serious historical event, what followed were more like stage scenes for grandiose farces. The 1991 Pan-Asian Games in Beijing gave the regime the first chance since 1989 to show the world the mandate and benevolence of its rule. The Square was again transformed, but this time by the government: tons of multicolored flowers brightened its concrete surface and softened the harsh contours of its monuments. Giant smiling pandas, the “auspicious symbol” of the Games, stood on turntables, and were unexpectedly accompanied by enormous phoenixes drawn from Chinese mythology (fig. 6). The effect was both comical and surreal. I doubt that any historian would attach much importance to these images, but they did introduce a new mode of the monumental for the 1990s. I call these and similar official installations “soft monuments,” which, though occupying strategic spaces and serving important occasions, have little substance in either a physical or ideological sense. Unlike a “hard monument” from the previous era which commemorates history and demands faith, a “soft monument” of the 1990s is deliberately short-sighted and goal-specific, prepared only for a particular, current event. Its temporary but extravagant existence reflects a more practical and fluid sense of time.

Paul Virilio’s formulation of two types of monumentality helps explain the differences between the “hard” and “soft” monuments in Tiananmen Square: “The first is primarily material, constructed of physical elements, walls, thresholds and levels, all precisely located. The other is immaterial, and hence its representa-

9. In fact, these official installations, which often take the shape of auspicious animals or historical monuments, recall the temporary displays made for birthday celebrations of emperors or empresses during the Qing dynasty.

Fig. 5. “Burning Opium,” relief carving on the Monument of People’s Heroes symbolizing the beginning of the Chinese “Democratic Revolution,” 1958.
tions, images and messages afford neither locale nor stability, since they are the vectors of a momentary, instantaneous expression, with all the manipulated meanings and misinformation that presupposes.

His evidence for the second kind consists mainly of the disembodied electric signals which dissolve solid volume into "instruments of measure." We can easily relate this sense of monumentality to the digital display of days and seconds on the Hong Kong Clock. On the other hand, the Clock still assumes a larger than life appearance and is still attached to the symbolic space of Tiananmen Square. Although its main purpose is to frame an individual event, the Clock also tries to insert this "micro narrative" into the grand narrative of revolutionary history. We may thus question the absolute opposition established by Virilio between a classical architectonic monument and the obscure luminescence of an electric signboard, or between a "grand narrative of theoretical causality" and a "petty narrative of practical opportunity." The Hong Kong Clock is neither a hard nor a soft monument but a hybrid which combines these two kinds of symbolic presentation and their diverse concepts of time.

The Clock establishes its relationship with revolutionary historiography through its location and design. In terms of location, the Clock, attached to the facade of the Museum of History, reinforces the Square's importance but interrupts its normal workings. While bringing curious onlookers to the Museum, the Clock also blocks its central entrance, at least visually. A three-point explanation for this location can be deduced from Maoist historiography. First, this location corresponds to the division between the museum's two wings, the south wing dedicated to traditional history and the north wing to modern history; the Clock thus implies the year 1840, which separates these two phases and buildings. Second, in this location the Clock confirms the concept of "democratic revolution," defined by Mao as the Chinese people's struggle for the country's independence beginning in 1840. It also predicts the victory of this struggle: the return of Hong Kong, the first Chinese city ceded to a foreign country by the first unequal treaty, will symbolically conclude this revolution.

Third, that the Clock blocks the museum's entrance symbolizes the incompleteness of this historical process. It is expected that the museum will regain its normal appearance—and Chinese history resume its continuity—only after the Clock reaches zero on July 1, 1997 and is removed.

11. I say "symbolically" because Macao will remain under Portuguese administration after 1997.
Fig. 6. Giant statue of a panda installed in the Tiananmen Square during the 1991 Pan-Asian Games. Tiananmen Gate is visible in the background.
To create this historical enclosure from 1840 to 1997 is also the purpose of the written passage on the Clock's thirty-foot-high face:

The Chinese Government
Resumes Exercise of Sovereignty over Hong Kong
Clock Counting Backward
to July 1 1997
X X X Days
X X X X X X X Seconds

This passage, on the other hand, is deliberately unreadable because it changes every second. What the Clock registers, therefore, is the present, but a fleeting present which is meaningful only because it is unstable. The Clock provides the days and seconds left before July 1, 1997; we wonder why hours and minutes are not given. The answer must be that the rapidly running numbers of seconds, though of little use for time-telling, most acutely (and dramatically) convey the impression of the quickly disappearing present, and hence the quick approach of an anticipated future.

Public Time-Telling and Political Space

Judith Zeitlin, who went to see the Clock with me in 1996, remarked that it looked nothing like a clock; it resembled a giant document. This seems exactly the intention of the Clock's design, since its features, including the rectangular shape, the thin, flat surface, the five-star heading, and the “black-characters-on-white-paper” (baizhi heizi) style of the written message, all imitate an official document, or more precisely, an official certificate. On the other hand, this document is not yet finalized. It is still in the making and its function as a certificate is only implied, not consolidated. To realize this function it must gain the stable form necessary for a document, which can be achieved only when the Clock's changing number stops at zero. The Clock would then freeze and its message, “The Chinese Government Resumes Exercise of Sovereignty over Hong Kong,” would become eternal. The identity of the Clock as a timepiece would then cease; instead it would certify the identity of a space. This also means, however, that while the Clock is still ticking at this moment, the concepts of political time and political space are still being negotiated. The Clock, though created to ensure the result of this negotiation, also highlights the Utopian nature of its goal, because political time and political space must always be interdependent; the notion of a “timeless” space turns politics into religion.
This observation leads me to reflect upon the changing relationship between political time and political space in Chinese history. Since this topic is too large for this essay, my interest can be focused on a single question: In what way(s) has public time-telling served to regulate a specific political definition of space? Although this is still an enormous question, examples can be selected to illuminate some basic modes pertaining to distinct historical periods and political systems.

For three thousand years in premodern China, political theory held that harmony between time and space was the foundation of rulership and a unified country. This idea was first established in the Book of Documents, one of the Confucian Classics written during the second and first millennia B.C. The book begins with the “Canon of Yao” (“Yao dian”), which records that Yao, a legendary emperor in the time of Great Harmony, sent four chief ministers/astronomers to each of the four directions “to compute and delineate the sun, moon and stars, and the celestial markers, and so to deliver respectfully the seasons to be observed by people.”

Time was thus conceived from and framed within the “four ends” of the world, and the mythological emperor could thereby define his position at the center of this temporal/spatial structure known as China.

The triangular relationship between time, space, and political authority gained a more complex and dynamic form around the third century B.C. The new pattern, called “monthly observances” (yueling), was translated into the architecture of Bright Hall.

12. For an English translation of this text with the original Chinese text, see James Legge, The Chinese Classics, vol. 3, “The Shoo King” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), pp. 15–27. The passage cited here is translated by Joseph Needham, Science and Civilization in China, vol. 3 (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 188. Although traditional Confucians attributed this text to Yao himself, modern scholars believe that it was probably written around the 5th or 6th centuries B.C.
Hall (Mingtang), perhaps the most ambitious ritual building ever attempted in ancient China. On the hall's main floor, twelve chambers along the four sides corresponded to the twelve months, surrounding the central chamber that stood for the middle of a year. It was the emperor who linked these static spaces into a temporal/spatial continuum: he would begin his year from the first room at the northeast corner (where the yang ether rose) and would move clockwise through the hall. Each month he would dwell in the proper room, dress in the proper color, eat the proper food, listen to the proper music, sacrifice to the proper deities, and attend to the proper affairs of state. The emperor would thus literally become a moving hand on a big clock. It was understood that only his synchronous movement with Heaven and Earth would secure harmony between his rule and the universe. This function of Bright Hall as a "ritual clock" seems to be confirmed by the discovery of an early example of this architectural type constructed by Wang Mang shortly after the common era (fig. 7). Located south of the capital city Chang'an, it was moderate in size and could not possibly have been used as an actual palace. More likely, the emperor traveled to the hall at designated moments to hold monthly and seasonal ceremonies. Bright Hall thus helped construct two kinds of temporal systems: on one hand, it registered time by mimicking the movement of the universe in a closed ritual space; on the other, it was a focus of intense public interest and belonged to a larger social space. The colorful rituals and the parade of the royal entourage must have signaled the regular interval of time and constituted a calendar for life in the capital city.

In a broad sense, these two aspects of Bright Hall pertain to time-keeping and time-telling, two main functions of a traditional Chinese government in controlling time. Readers who are thinking about Big Ben on London's Parliament building will have trouble distinguishing time-telling from time-keeping, because in that case a single clock, which sounds automatically, performs both roles. But in the Chinese system, two sets of equipment were employed for these two purposes.

Time-keeping relied on horology, which allowed the government to regulate seasons, months, days, and hours. Extremely advanced hydraulic clocks were invented in the course of Chinese history; but as scholars have pointed out, these devices, often amazingly complex, were created not as functional clocks but as

14. For the discovery and reconstruction of this building, see Wu Hung, Monumentality, pp. 177–78.
cosmological models, with the fundamental goal of securing the harmony be-
tween Heaven and Man.\textsuperscript{15}

Time-telling, on the other hand, conveyed a standard official time to a large population. The principal instrument for this purpose was a drum tower (sometimes coupled with a bell tower). A drum-tower was not a “clock” because it did not compute time and did not record the passage of time. It came alive only at designated moments. At these moments, it amplified signals from an official clock and transmitted these signals to the public. What the public was told, therefore, was not a continuous, even and unidirectional movement of time, but an official\textit{ timetable}.

Su\'\j alum\' an\' al-Tajir, an Arab traveler of the mid-ninth century, reported that a Tang city had ten drums over city gates which officials beat at regular hours, “the better to show publicly their loyalty to the emperor, as well as to give knowledge of the hours of the day and the night.”\textsuperscript{16} He was probably mistaken in suggesting that the drums were struck \textit{both day and night}. A record from the \textit{New History of Tang Dynasty} clarifies this confusion: “At sunset, the [public] drums were beaten eight hundred times and the gates were closed . . . . At the fifth watch [at dawn], the drums within the Palace were beaten, and then the drums in all the streets were beaten so as to let the noise be heard everywhere; then all the gates of the wards and markets were opened.”\textsuperscript{17} This and other texts further tell us that the drums were silent during the day, but at night they were struck every two hours to mark the five watches from sunset to dawn. These records allow

\textsuperscript{15} The most ingenious example of such a cosmological clock, completed by Su Song in 1094, has been carefully studied by Joseph Needham and his collaborators in \textit{Heavenly Clockwork: The Great Astronomical Clocks of Medieval China,} 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). The basic feature of this clock is summarized by David S. Landes: “It was designed to reproduce the movements of the ‘three luminaries’—sun, moon, and (selected) stars—which were crucial to Chinese calendrical calculation and astrological divination. It did this by means of an observation alarmillary sphere—that is, an assemblage of rings representing the paths of these bodies as they presented themselves to an observer on Earth—and a demonstrational celestial globe, each rotating on a polar axis and appropriately inclined to the horizon. These in turn were driven off a pair of vertical transmission shafts, one of which also bore a series of superimposed wheels six to eight feet in diameter. These wheels carried jacks, little manikins that revolved with wheel and shaft in measured pace and showed the hours, the ‘quarters’ (k’o, each of which equaled fourteen minutes twenty-four seconds of our time), and the night watches by means of placards. The whole mechanism, which must have weighed tons and occupied a tower about forty feet high, was powered by a water wheel designed to turn intermittently at a stable rate.” \textit{Revolution in Time} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 17–18. Landes has also noted the function of such hydraulic clocks as cosmological models. Ibid., p. 29.

\textsuperscript{16} Joseph Needham et al., \textit{Heavenly Clockwork}, p. 93, n. 1.

us to recognize three main features of a public drum tower in a traditional Chinese
city: its main function to announce the beginning and end of day and night; its
secondary function to signal the nightly watches; and its response to the imperial
drums (and ultimately to an official clock) inside the Palace. A drum tower thus
delivered a particular kind of punctuality determined by the government for a
specific purpose. Unlike public bells in medieval Europe, which were “drivers
of actions” and “goads to effective, productive labor,” the sound from a Chinese
drum tower ensured peace through the long night.

First constructed in 1272, the Drum Tower in Beijing (fig. 8) continued these
practices throughout the later part of the imperial period. Although a water clock
was now installed in the building, the connection between the tower and the
Palace persisted and was manifested in their spatial relationship. As shown in
fig. 9, the Drum Tower (together with the Bell Tower behind it) terminates
Beijing’s central axis, which runs through the Throne Hall in the Forbidden City.
The Drum Tower was therefore a far-reaching projection of imperial power into
the public domain. The building has a monumental appearance. (In fact, with
the respective heights of 46.7 and 47.9 meters, the Drum Tower and the Bell
Tower are the tallest buildings standing on the axis.) But they commemorated
nothing except for a seemingly timeless repetition of rhythmic sound. Everyday
at the *wu* hour, about 7 P.M., its twenty-four drums (each with a leather-covered
head 1.5 meters in diameter), together with the 5.5 meter-high bronze bell in the
Bell Tower, were struck twice, totaling 108 beats. The thundering sound
reached every corner of the city. The same performance was repeated at the *yin*
hour, about 5 A.M., the next morning. In between, however, the bell kept silent
and only the drums announced the nightly watches.

For hundreds of years the sound of the drums and bells dictated to Beijing’s
residents when to work, to rest, to open the city gates, to retreat into individual
courtyard compounds: this was the schedule of a community in a tightly walled
city. This way of telling and knowing time was finally challenged by European
“self-ringing clocks,” which arrived through two different channels: foreign trib-
ute and invasion. The challenge imposed on the Chinese system of public time-
telling thus also meant a challenge from a different kind of political space. As
tribute, a European mechanical clock satisfied the recipient’s desire by offering

19. For the relationship between this system and the security of a city, see Balazs, *Chinese
Civilization and Bureaucracy*, pp. 68–70.
20. A popular saying in Beijing described three kinds of beats: “Eighteen fast beats, eighteen
slow beats, and yet another eighteen beats which are neither fast nor slow.” This sequence is repeated
once more to make a total of 108 beats.
Fig. 8. The Drum Tower in Beijing, first constructed in 1272.

Fig. 9. A 19th century Chinese map of Beijing, showing the locations of (1) the Forbidden City, (2) the Throne Hall, and (3) the Drum Tower and the Bell Tower.
not only a private timepiece but also a fancy visual presentation and an array of entertaining accessory functions: sounding bells, playing melodies, singing birds, parading little automated figures. They were adored by the Chinese emperor and the nobility. “The Imperial Palace,” wrote a certain Father Valentin Chalier from Beijing in the 1730s, “is stuffed with clocks . . . watches, carillons, repeaters, organs, spheres, and astronomical clocks of all kinds and descriptions—there are more than four thousand pieces from the best masters of Paris and London, very many of which I have had through my hands for repairs or cleaning.”

It is doubtful whether these clocks had any significant impact on China’s modernization. Most of them were playthings; a few large ones were paired with traditional astronomical water clocks in the Palace to symbolize the emperor’s continuing mandate in a “modern” world. It is true that a western-style clock was once installed onto a traditional Chinese building (fig. 11). With some disappointment, however, I have traced this hybrid “clock tower” not to a public space, but to the emperor’s private garden Yuanming Yuan and further to a nunnery inside the garden.

Ironically, these fancy European clocks, often designed to suit “Chinese taste,” became a distinct target when foreign troops looted the great palaces in Beijing in 1860 and again in 1900. The destruction of some large clocks (including the one on the Yuanming Yuan tower) and the return of some portable ones to Euro-

22. For example, in one of the major imperial halls in the Forbidden City called Jiaotai Dian, the emperor’s throne is flanked by two enormous clocks. The one to the left is a traditional hydraulic clock and the one to the right is a western-style “self-ringing clock.”
23. A witness of the 1860 looting reported: “A large majority of them [i.e., soldiers in the invasion army] were ‘grown children’ who were ‘mainly tempted in the midst of all this unbelievable accumulation of wealth’ by the extraordinary variety and number of mechanical toys and clocks, so that the whole area was ‘one continuous symphony’ with monkeys beating cymbals, rabbits rolling drums, birds singing, toy soldiers playing cornets and bagpipes, clocks chiming, and some four thousand musical boxes simultaneously tinkling their several tunes, and every now and then all this noise was ‘drowned out by the easily amused soldiers roaring with laughter.’” Cited in Landes, *Revolution in Time*, p. 43.
pean markets did not much influence Chinese society. Around the same time, however, two real changes in public time-telling were brought about by foreign military and economic invasions, and profoundly altered the definition of political space. First, the old Drum Tower was silenced. During the 1900 invasion to suppress the Boxer Rebellion, soldiers of the Eight-Power Allied Forces (sent by Britain, France, the United States, Japan, Germany, Italy, Austria and Russia) occupied the Tower and slashed the leather drumheads with bayonets (fig. 10).24 Second, time was now told to the public by “self-ringing clocks” installed on tall foreign banks, which stood next to Tiananmen Square at the heart of the capital (fig. 12). Themselves intruders in an old Chinese city, these western-looking clocks were tangible references to an alien system of time and space. They transcended Beijing’s traditional boundaries and connected this place to a huge colonial network marked by a chain of western “self-ringing clocks” in London, Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong (fig. 13). This social network realized the Enlightenment design of a universal scheme of time and space. Indeed, if in 1600 the Chinese saw the first self-ringing clock and world map as western curiosities, in 1900 they found themselves governed by such clocks and maps, which had reassigned their country—the Central Kingdom—to quite a different place in a global time-space legitimated by science. In David Harvey’s words, in this process China and similar countries “were deterritorialized, stripped of their preceding significations, and then reterritorialized according to the convenience of colonial and imperial administration.”25

A western-style clock on a foreign bank in Beijing, therefore, indicated the dominance of a new technology which, according to Robert M. Adams, should always be thought of as a social-technical system: “What underlies and sustains technological systems is partly institutional and partly technical, partly rooted in material capabilities and possibilities and partly in human associations, values, and goals.”26 As mentioned earlier, the traditional Chinese government exercised its control over time through two separate systems of time-keeping and time-telling; the former was conducted inside the palace and the latter was carried out by the Drum Tower outside the palace. This whole institution became obsolete when time was told by a clock which seemed to move and strike by itself (and

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24. For this reason, the building was renamed “Realizing Humiliation Tower” (Mingchi Lou) during the Republican Period. It seems that only from this time did the tower become a historical monument commemorating a particular event.


Fig. 11. A clock tower in the Yuanming Yuan Garden. Photo taken by Felix Beato just before the building was destroyed in 1860. Reproduced from *Imperial China: Photographs 1850–1912*. (n.p.: Pennwick Publishing Inc., 1978).

Fig. 12. A foreign bank (now the Bank of Ching) with its western-style clock near Tiananmen Square.
Fig. 13. The clock tower on Queen’s Road in Hong Kong, photo taken by M. Miller in the 1860s. Reproduced from *Imperial China: Photographs 1850–1912*. (n.p.: Pennwick Publishing Inc., 1978).
so was called a "self-ringing clock" by the Chinese). This fascinating, automatic
timepiece changed the nature of public time-telling completely: unlike a tradi-
tional Drum Tower which imposed an imperially decreed timetable on a walled
community, it presented an "objective" time which was believed to be homoge-
neous and universal. The smooth and ceaseless movement of its hands further
offered a powerful cue for reorganizing human thoughts and actions sequentially.
If the punctuality of the Drum Tower was linked to traditional history constructed
as a succession of dynasties and reigns, the mechanical clock helped the Chinese
reconceptualize history as a teleological evolution.

This concept of totalizing and self-expanding time was adapted by Chinese
communist historiography and entered the common-sense of Chinese urban cul-
ture (through the popular availability of personal watches and clocks). But it is
now challenged by the Hong Kong Clock. It is most important to realize that the
Clock not only purports to mark the end of China's colonial history; its horology
and ideology indicate a new technological system, which implicitly challenges
the Enlightenment design of universal time and space. This challenge should not
simply be understood in terms of the general modernist or postmodernist break-
down of Enlightenment order. Rather, the Clock fuses both precolonial and
postcolonial techniques of time-telling into an anti-colonial discourse to serve a
nationalist polity. On the one hand, the Clock rejects the concept of universal
time by resuming the logic of an imperial Drum Tower: it again presents an
official schedule to an internal audience (i.e., to the people of Hong Kong as sub-
jects of the People's Republic of China). On the other hand, the Clock negates
the notion of linear and continuous time by abolishing the movement of a mechan-
cical clock. Its liquid crystal display of days and seconds are strictly momentary
and self-sustaining. These flashing numbers dissociate the Clock from a durable
mechanical or architectonic construction, but link it to a large family of computer
screens, terminals, consoles, and other electronic signboards, which many the-
orists have related to the intensifying fragmentation and compression of time and
space in the postmodern era.

Whereas an earlier western-style mechanical clock united time-keeping and
time-telling, the Hong Kong Clock reintroduces tension between the two. The
Clock's political content—the "timetable" it delivers—is determined by Beijing,
but its digital technology is conventionally associated with Hong Kong. Indeed,
when the first generation of commercial quartz watches were offered by Japanese

27. For the changes in space and time conceptions in modern and postmodern era, see Harvey,
The Condition of Postmodernity, pp. 201–326.
firms in the 1970s and early 1980s, many of them were actually manufactured in Hong Kong, where labor was cheap and exchange rates were favorable. By 1990, this small island exported 590 million such watches each year to every corner of the world. Nowadays people consider a basic Hong Kong quartz watch little more than a piece of junk, but I still remember the sensation it created in Beijing around the end of the Cultural Revolution: though pitifully dim and unstable, the hour and minute shown numerically in a small rectangular window offered the most convincing proof of Hong Kong's advanced technology. (In a broader sense, this “window” allowed the Mainland public to have its first glimpse of Hong Kong's “modernity” after so many years of prohibition.)

Twenty years later, a Hong Kong quartz watch can hardly generate any excitement even in the Chinese provinces, but Hong Kong's technological superiority remains incontestable and continues to stimulate the fantasies of Mainlanders. The Hong Kong Clock in Tiananmen Square, which employs a digital display reminiscent of the “window” on a Hong Kong quartz watch, thus does more than count down Hong Kong's remaining days as a British colony: what is being calculated are also the days before China annexes Hong Kong's technology as its own property. Ackbar Abbas tells me he finds this “a situation unprecedented in the history of colonialism: The colonized state is in a more advanced [technological] position than the colonizing state.” This interpretation, which casts China's regaining Hong Kong as a colonizing process within a nationalist framework, leads me in the final section of this essay to investigate the circumstances of the Clock's invention to uncover its implicit colonialist agenda and intention.

"Counting Down" as Political Expression and Metaphor

One thing is clear: although the Clock's legal foundation was the 1984 Joint Declaration, it was only established ten years later in 1994. Its delayed appearance means that the Clock, rather than an instantaneous celebration and confirmation of the treaty, responded to political changes during the decade after 1984 and, more urgently, to the political situation of 1993–94. Michael Yahuda has reviewed the diverse problems involved in the “Hong Kong issue” during these ten years.

30. During the Cultural Revolution, any connection with Hong Kong, regardless of its nature, could cause grave danger to a Mainland resident.
31. Private communication with the author.
in his recent book, *Hong Kong, China's Challenge*. Some of the most important events and processes surface from his narrative and draw our attention. The most important change concerning the Joint Declaration itself is perhaps Hong Kong people's growing suspicion towards it. The initial, if guarded, optimism which greeted the Declaration gradually gave way to an apprehension about how the Beijing government would interpret and apply its terms. The negotiation between China and Britain continued, but was more than often handicapped by profound ideological differences as well as misunderstanding and distrust.

In the midst of such prolonged diplomatic struggle, the 1989 pro-democratic movement occurred in Beijing. Eager to see China moving towards a democratic society, people in Hong Kong gave their spiritual and financial support to the hunger-striking students. But they were soon as disillusioned as they were stunned by the massacre of the pro-democratic students in Tiananmen Square. With horror and disbelief, they saw on live television tanks and soldiers killing hundreds of peaceful demonstrators. Their response was to hold their own demonstration: a million people (which amounted to twenty percent of the total population of Hong Kong) marched through the center of the island in protest. On their mind was not only the tragedy in Beijing but also their own fate after 1997.

Beijing's attitude towards Hong Kong was also changing. The strong support and sympathy that the student movement received from Hong Kong caused the Chinese government to view the territory as a source of subversion and a potential threat to political order in the People's Republic. This conclusion did not surprise the Chinese leaders: for almost ten years they had been watching closely and nervously the transformation of Hong Kong's socio-political system. Since the 1970s, a strong middle class, including a large group of professionals, had emerged and strongly influenced Hong Kong's cultural, economical and political scenes.


33. Sze-yuen Chung, a long-time Hong Kong politician and a member of both Hong Kong's Legislative Council (1965–1978) and Beijing's Preliminary Working Committee (1993–present), also reviewed the most important political events surrounding the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty. "What Has Gone Wrong During the Transition?" in Wang Gungwu and Wong Siu-lun, eds., *Hong Kong's Transition: A Decade After the Deal* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 1–18.

34. This social group is sometimes categorized as the "Hong Kong man": "Quick thinking, flexible, tough for survival, excitement-craving, sophisticated in material tastes, and self-made in a strenuously competitive world. He operated in the context of a most uncertain future, control over which was in the hands of others, and for this as well as for historical reasons lived 'life in the short term.'" Hugh D. R. Baker, "Life in the Cities: The Emergence of Hong Kong Man," *China Quarterly* 95 (December, 1983), 469–79. For a discussion of the main attributes of Hong Kongers in the 1980s, see Lau Siu-kai and Kuan Hsin-chi, *The Ethos of the Hong Kong Chinese* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1988).
The 1984 Sino-Anglo treaty and the 1989 Tiananmen massacre further stimulated this group's self-awareness of its social responsibilities, and on a broader scale, stimulated the people of Hong Kong to pursue their own cultural, social, and political identity. It is commonly held that from the end of the Second World War until the early 1980s, the majority of the Chinese population in Hong Kong showed little interest in participating in political activity or the business of government. This situation changed dramatically after 1984: the majority of Hong Kong people actively participated in meetings, elections, protests, and other public activities. In a poll taken in 1982, more than sixty percent of Hong Kong residents identified themselves as “Chinese”; but in 1988, nearly two thirds of the population professed stronger ties to Hong Kong. As Yahuda has remarked, “The difference between the two polls reflects the concerns after 1984 to demarcate Hong Kong and its way of life from that of the mainland to whose sovereignty it would soon revert.”

New political groups emerged in Hong Kong, and some went on to become political parties. Largely supported by professionals and other members of the middle class, a new generation of politicians tried hard to define a “Hong Kong position” independent from both China and Britain. Their main goal of establishing a workable democracy on the territory before the return to Chinese sovereignty attracted many people in Hong Kong. The strong support of this rising political force was demonstrated in the first direct election to the Legislative Council in 1991. Twelve of the eighteen seats were won by candidates of the United Democrats headed by Martin Lee (whose Democratic Party grew out of the 1989 All Hong Kong Alliance in Support of the Chinese Patriotic Pro-Democracy Movement); another three seats went to independents sympathetic to their point of view; and none of the candidates close to Beijing won a seat.

This election, together with the 1992 “Patten Proposal” (i.e., a plan for democratic reforms on the territory proposed by the newly appointed Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten in 1992), drew angry responses from Beijing. In a series of furious attacks, Chinese newspapers called Patten inter alia a prostitute and snake, and Martin Lee a subverter and foreign spy. Seventeen rounds of negotia-

35. See Yahuda, *Hong Kong: China's Challenge*, pp. 50–51.
tions between China and Britain were held in 1993 but ended in failure. In July, Beijing moved to establish an alternative center of power by appointing a fifty-seven-member Preliminary Working Committee to prepare for the transfer of Hong Kong. In October, an earlier speech of Deng Xiaoping was published, reminding people of the official rationale for the Tiananmen massacre. In it Deng warned: “Don't ever think that everything would be all right if Hong Kong affairs were administrated solely by Hong Kong people while the Central Government had nothing to do with the matter.” He asked: “Isn't it possible that something could happen in the region that might jeopardize the fundamental interests of the country? . . . What if they [pro-democratic Hong Kongers] should turn their [anti-Communist] words into action, trying to convert Hong Kong into a base of opposition to the mainland under the pretext of ‘democracy’?” Under such circumstances, he concluded: “We should have no choice but to intervene.”

As if to respond to Deng’s harsh words, in December, the Legislative Council in Hong Kong voted the final package of the Patten Proposal into law, effective 30 June 1994. This vote was countered by a formal notification from Beijing, which asserted that Hong Kong's Legislative Council would be dismantled after 1 July 1997 and be replaced by a “legal representative institution.” These dates should now be familiar: on 30 June 1994 the Hong Kong Clock was unveiled in the Square and began to count down the days and seconds to 1 July 1997.

Viewed in this context, the Clock is a political statement as well as Beijing's threatening gesture to Hong Kong. Its timely establishment implies the sense of urgency and danger felt by Chinese leaders at that moment. The Clock, in fact, materializes Deng Xiaoping's warning against Hong Kong becoming an anti-Communist base “under the pretext of ‘democracy’.” With its exaggerated size and the appearance of a legal document, the Clock reasserts the schedule for Hong Kong’s return and expresses the determination to realize this goal by any means, including military intervention. The Clock is not just “a public reminder to the people of Hong Kong that they were due to be embraced by the motherland under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party before too long.” It actually transgresses the current China-Hong Kong boundaries and exercises power over the people on the other side of the border. The Clock has such power because of its way of counting and telling time.

In a sense, the Clock continues the tradition of public time-telling in imperial

40. Yahuda, Hong Kong: China’s Challenge, p. 17.
China, which regulated the life of royal subjects by imposing onto them a programmed schedule. But instead of presenting a timetable which is regular and repetitive, the schedule announced by the Clock is designed for a single occasion. More specifically, it measures a particular transitional period and frames this period as a shrinking duration of “negative time” before zero. On the surface, the Clock runs towards zero to indicate that the day of Hong Kong’s return is approaching. On a deeper level, however, it means that the existing Hong Kong as part of the colonial past will reach its end in due course. “Counting down” is thus a powerful symbol of (and an effective means for) termination and revolution: the old Hong Kong will die and a new Hong Kong will be born at point zero. Before that point, Hong Kong belongs to a “counter-history” which must be measured backwards. After that point, Hong Kong will be given a “positive time” synchronized with the rest of the country. Before that point, Hong Kong must rush to complete the “democratic revolution” (accomplished half-a-century ago in Mainland China). After that point, Hong Kong will still have to catch up with the “socialist revolution” of the Mainland in fifty years. “Counting down” thus provides a structure for constructing history.

The Clock is a political timer. As a timer, it dwells on the concept of “end” or “expiration” and generates anxiety. The implied viewers of the Clock must be the people of Hong Kong, because only to them does this concept have concrete meaning. I was struck by the fact that Beijing’s residents seem quite indifferent toward the Clock located right in their neighborhood, but individuals thousands of miles away in Hong Kong seem to hear its ticking even in their dreams. So many articles and speeches nowadays in Hong Kong contain exclamations such as “Time is running out!” or “We don’t have much time left!” People also more frequently and publicly calculate the remaining months and days before 1 July 1997, in so doing they seem to accept the Clock’s logic to see the future as the end.41 This does not mean, however, that “counting down” has the same meaning to those who set up the Clock and to those who watch it. It is no secret that Hong Kong, though guaranteed to enjoy a “high degree of autonomy for fifty years,” will never be the same after June 1997. For one thing, what is being relentlessly counted by the Clock is not only the days remaining before Hong Kong’s return, but also the days remaining for Hong Kong’s Legislative Council, for the representative status of its members, and for the hope that the people of Hong Kong placed in the Council when they voted for it.

41. For example, the Hong Kong art critic Oscar Ho Hing-kay wrote in 1993: “Time is running out: people in Hong Kong need to find their cultural heritage and to reassure their sense of identity, for in four years’ time they might have lost it.” “In Search of an Identity,” Art AsiaPacific 1, 1 (1993): 14.
As an official establishment, the backward counting Clock sharply demarcates Hong Kong’s two alternative identities either as “a foreign colony” or as “an integral part of the socialist motherland,” and denies it a third identity. Hong Kong thus belongs either to the past or to the future. Its present existence is conceived as a continuation of the past, represented by the disappearing days and seconds on the Clock. Thinking within this frame of historical time, it is only natural that Hong Kong’s fate should be decided by its two “sovereign countries”; and this explains why, as many political analysts have pointed out, there has been a “deliberate exclusion of Hong Kong people in the negotiations about their future.” One may well characterize this attitude as a “colonial” one, though it is applied not to an alien subject but to “compatriots” (tongbao) for the sake of a nation state. Here the Clock again provides a powerful metaphor: erasing the present, it juxtaposes Hong Kong’s past and future in a static symmetry and thus suggests a semiotic equivalence between the two. The question remains: Does the Clock anticipate a “postcolonial” time or a “neo-colonial” one?

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42. As David Harvey has pointed out, the reduction of regional identity is implicitly associated with the notion of social progress, which “entails the conquest of space, the tearing down of all spatial barriers, and the ultimate ‘annihilation of space through time.’” The Condition of Postmodernity, p. 205.

43. Yahuda, Hong Kong: China’s Challenge, p. 75. In particular, although Hong Kong’s democrats have been shown to enjoy majority support in every election in the territory, they have largely been rejected by Beijing and been viewed as a political element dangerous to China’s existing system.