

Situating the Northbound Imaginary: Origin Stories from the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone

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The third issue of the Hong Kong Cultural Studies Bulletin traced some of the ways in which referents for the signifiers "China" and "Hong Kong" are fixed in contemporary Hong Kong discourses about itself in relation to its northern other, the People's Republic of China (PRC). The issue offered the term "northbound imaginary" (北進想像) as a gloss for this discourse formation. The northbound imaginary is produced through the cultural contradictions engendered by the territory's political subordination and economic power. Politically, Hong Kong remains a colony of Great Britain and, as of July 1, 1997, becomes an administrative district of the PRC. Neither the British nor the Chinese system recognizes political self-determination as a legitimate form of local government. At the same time, Hong Kong's centrality in the production and management of Asian-based globally-migrating capital gives rise to practices of economic domination whereby Hong Kong based multi-nationals assume hegemonic roles in the PRC. Symptoms of this process include the transfer of dirty industries and labor-intensive manufacturing from Hong Kong to China, as well as the export of Hong Kong produced cultural products to the Mainland. At stake in the discussion about the northern imaginary are the differently unequal subject positions that the contradiction between political subordination and economic power enables.

Hong Ho-fung's (孔誥烽) reading of Leung Fung-ye's (梁鳳儀) novels sketches the contradictions and antagonisms in debates over what it means to be "Chinese." This subject position is characterized

by gestures to a common culture. Tam Man-kei's (譚萬基) discussion of Giordano, on the other hand, makes clear that any referent to Hong Kong Chinese must also account for the global citizenship that is produced through advertizing. These two narratives exemplify one of the contradictions characteristic of the northern imaginary. Gestures to a common culture make the referents of Hong Kong Chinese and Mainland Chinese equivalent, emphasizing shared traditions and heritage.

Advertizing, however, differentiates Hong Kong from the Mainland insofar as Hong Kong is a producer and marketer of mass products. In other words, the subject positions for Hong Kong Chinese and Mainland Chinese are differently unequal and fundamentally unstable, but nevertheless co-constitutive; the articulation of one position necessarily entails an articulation of the other. My response to the articles in the third issue of the Hong Kong Cultural Studies Bulletin situates the northbound imaginary within contemporary Mainland Chinese discourse about the meaning of "Chineseness" with respect to Hong Kong. Mainland narrative emphasizes the extent to which shared Chinese culture legitimates the Chinese state. The slogan "one country, two systems" (一國兩制) explicitly subsumes economic difference to political unity. Indeed, in these narratives, the Hong Kong economic difference predicates further integration and unification of the Chinese state. Specifically, I situate the northbound imaginary within Shenzhen discourse about the origin of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at the Hong Kong-PRC border. My response is based on interviews and materials collected in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone while conducting fieldwork

since September 1995.

The Shenzhen SEZ is one of the defining topological features of the landscape produced by different Hong Kong and Mainland articulations of their respective identities. The SEZ both connects and separates the Chinese mainland from Hong Kong, a buffer zone between socialism and capitalism. An 84.6 km long administrative boundary, commonly called "the second boundary" (二線), separates the SEZ from the rest of China. From inside Shenzhen, the rest of China is referred to as "the interior" (內地), a rhetorical gesture which places the SEZ outside of China but not exactly within the world outside (國外). With Hong Kong, Shenzhen shares a 27.5 km long border which is internationally recognized as the (current) limit of Chinese sovereignty. At the border, Mainland discourses about national sovereignty and shared cultural heritage play out, enabling diverse subject positions. In this paper, I trace how the Hong Kong northbound imaginary intersects with and diverges from Shenzhen origin stories in the production of the subject position of migrant laborer.

Following the terminology proposed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), this system of double borders locates Shenzhen through the logics of equivalence and difference. Briefly, the logic of equivalence is an articulatory practice whereby various elements (by definition different from one another) of a given discourse formation are combined to (1) create meaningful identities and (2) arrange social relationships. And here, it is important to recall that a social formation does not exist outside of articulatory practices. In other words, both the northbound imaginary and the one country-two system policy do not refer to a social reality which exists outside of these debates. The logic of equivalence producing subject positions in Shenzhen is a logic of reduction which deploys the concepts of citizenship and legal residence in order to fix various subject positions and to define the scope of agency available to occupants of these subject positions. In Shenzhen origin stories identification with state policy manages the differences which reform has introduced. The logic of difference producing subject positions in Shenzhen is a logic of expansion and increasing complexity. The logic of

difference is the recognition that the meaning of any subject position and the scope of agency available to those identified as occupying these positions exceeds a given articulation. These two gestures of political unity and economic difference produce the subject position "migrant laborer".

Origin stories about the Shenzhen SEZ emphasize that there was a time before reform and before Shenzhen made its debut on the business maps of China. At that time, only one border separated China from Hong Kong, the Shenzhen river. Shenzhen was a small border town (邊陲小鎮) occupied by women and children because,「那時，從深圳到香港沒有設防，老百姓挑了擔子就可以過河去了」(中共深圳委宣傳寫作組 1995: 18). In these stories, young, able-bodied men went south into Hong Kong, women, the elderly and children remained behind and lived on subsistence farming. A writer remembers returning to Shenzhen from Guangzhou:

我第二次到舅舅家是1975年冬天。這時，外婆早已去世，舅舅已未老白髮。不知為甚麼，門前那些綠竹又被砍光了，我關心地問了舅舅的生活，舅舅搖着花白的腦袋，嘆氣地說：「這裏和香港一線相隔，本來到處都是錢路的，現在卻只准種幾粒米、種花、種菜去英界賣，也說是為資產階級老爺小姐服務，這樣，兩餐雖可揭得開鍋，但沒個零用錢，連到墟鎮上理個髮，也只靠帶上兩斤米當鈔票」(陳榮光 1993: 383)。

The image of Shenzhen as backward and decrepit with respect to Hong Kong retrospectively grounds narratives about Shenzhen's success by drawing attention to the enormity of the problem facing pre-reform Shenzhen/ China. The solution to this problem is provided by the communist party under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. Under reform, the Central government approved the establishment of special economic zones in Guangdong province, the largest of which was Shenzhen. However, although the central government could give the SEZ's preferential policies, it had no money to support development and so local cadres were forced to look for foreign capital in order to implement national policy. These efforts were mostly directed at Hong Kong:「新界地區的商人，企業家一動，又帶動了香港、九龍更多的商人、企業家；港資一動又帶動了美國、英國、日本等外國資本」(深圳博物館 1995: 36)。Such that Hong Kong provides the possibility

of reform.

This image also highlights the justification for reform and what remains as one of the dominant features of Chinese society: the standard of living disparity between rural and urban populations, a difference which is consistently described as economic (as with Hong Kong) rather than as the result of political practices. In Shenzhen, as in all Chinese locales, residents must register at the local police station in order to live and work legally in the SEZ. Registration is of two types, household registration (戶口) and temporary residence. An individual may have their permanent registration in one place but be legally registered in Shenzhen. Household registration is further divided into the categories of urban and rural, a continuation of the organization of pre-reform Chinese society, where household registration completely blocked mobility between the country and the city, reinforcing the state policies of exploiting agriculture in order to strengthen industry. At the same time, the state employees in urban work-units were integrated into a welfare system, while rural residents did not have access to social security benefits.

The reforms begun in 1979 attempted to redress the stark disparities between rural and urban life. In the country, reforms included a decision to gradually raise the price of grain while simultaneously lowering the price of industrial products for farm use. Moreover, taxes imposed on rural brigades were to be reduced. A second decision was to allow those farmers who had fulfilled their compulsory production quotas to sell legally their surplus produce. In urban areas, reform aimed at enlivening commodity and circulation and resolving unemployment problems. These goals were to be met by expanding enterprise autonomy from the state, stressing the role of market mechanisms, and implementing an employment policy that looked to private businesses and collective enterprises to absorb labor (Shi 1993). What these reforms did not do was alleviating the differences in access to social benefits such as higher education, vocational training, medical care, and modern housing which have remained primarily available to those citizens with urban household registration.

It is against this background that Shenzhen

appears different from the interior and Hong Kong is figured as a preferred model of development. Clearly, one of the reasons that Shenzhen is "special" is that the availability of money provides alternative subject positions to those created through household registration. Through reform, most social goods that were previously distributed according to household registration and work-unit status can now be purchased. For these farmers living near cities there are opportunities to participate in the money economy and thereby improve their standard of living. Indeed, these farms often shift from grain production to cash crop production, buying their grain quota on the market (Unger 1994). Much of the youth of these areas immigrate into the open urban areas in search of employment, and through employment, the opportunity to obtain urban household registration.

In Shenzhen origin stories, the success of reform is attributed to the SEZ's proximity to Hong Kong. On the one hand, Hong Kong has provided an alternative model of social organization. On the other, Hong Kong is viewed as the source of the capital that has facilitated the transformation of Shenzhen into a modern city. These origin stories articulate the relationship between Hong Kong and the Mainland in terms of the successful adaptation of the Hong Kong economy to the needs of a socialist state. The expression "store in front, factory in back" (前店後廠) describes the economic process by which Hong Kong and Shenzhen are articulated as co-extensive. This claim is born out in statistics which suggest that the economic north of Hong Kong is not China, but Guangdong province generally and Shenzhen specifically. A 1992 report put 89% of total Hong Kong investment in China in Guangdong with 31% of total Hong Kong investment in China going to Shenzhen (Mackerras 1994). Note the following policy suggestion which makes Shenzhen and Hong Kong co-extensive:「深圳與香港僅一河之隔，這種唇齒相依的特殊地緣關係使兩地銜接具有天然的地理和交通優勢」(陳榮光 1994: 22).

At the same time, these figures and policy call subtend the capitalist base of the Hong Kong northbound imaginary, integrating the expansion of Hong Kong capital into the context of Chinese modernization. As Mobo Gao (1994) documents, most

farmers are not only not able to participate in the money economy but also not able to survive by cultivating the required grain crops. After buying fertilizers and paying taxes, many farmers must go into debt in order to feed themselves because grain remains consistently underpriced. The large number of migrant workers in Shenzhen factories is drawn from this class, many of whom are not legally registered to live and work in the SEZ. In the main, these workers remit up to half of their annual salaries home in order to supplement the family income and pay back the debts incurred by farming. The lack of legal registration in Shenzhen, coupled with rural household registration, produces a particularly vulnerable subject position. On the one hand, occupants of this position have no right to be in Shenzhen and therefore do not have direct access to protection under Chinese labor laws. On the other hand, their rural household registration means that they must continue to produce quota grain no matter where they are living or working. Thus, these workers not only continue to make the Chinese nation-state possible, they also provide the labor that produces Hong Kong capital, these two different and arguably opposed systems of exploitation being united in their bodies.

What is clear from the plot of these origin stories is that Hong Kong is central to local understanding of what China should be and what Shenzhen is. Moreover, in these stories, Shenzhen emerges as a result of cooperation between the Chinese government – at the national level the government provided favorable policies – and foreign investment – the majority of which comes from Hong Kong. In this reading, the Hong Kong imaginary of China as a site for investment and the Mainland imaginary of Hong Kong as a productive part of the Chinese state not only do not contradict each other, they also reinforce one another. The Chinese state continues to need capital to pursue its goals of modernization and Hong Kong capital continues to expand into China. Both of these goals can be pursued with reference to the shared Chineseness. At the same time, however, the money economy of Shenzhen destabilizes subject positions that have been fixed by household registration, making the subject position factory laborer more attractive than that of farm laborer.

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