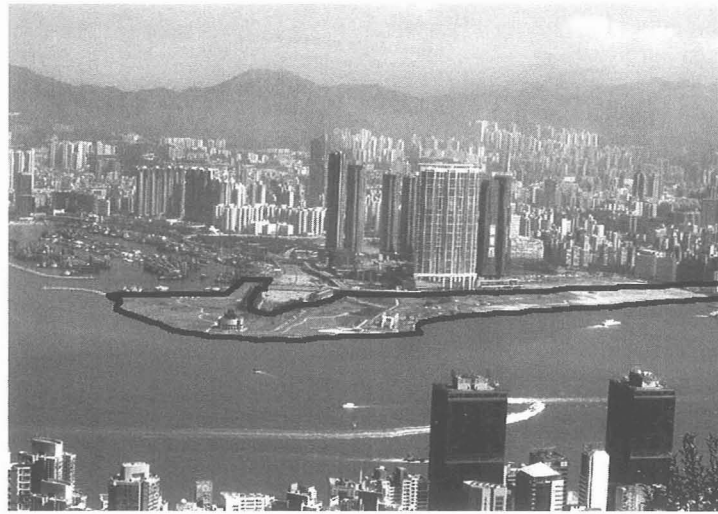# The Dual Spectacle of the West Kowloon Cultural District: De-centreing Public Culture in Hong Kong, 2001–2005

by Fan Yang

The WKCD Spectacle

On a typical cloudy day in late February, 2005, I was on my way to a popular dim sum restaurant on the third floor of the City Hall in Hong Kong Island's Central District. Lines had long been formed in front of the restaurant entrance, which is not unusual for a Sunday morning dim sum crowd. But to my surprise, the second-floor Exhibition Hall was no less populated. The crowd was attracted by a public consultation session of the future West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD), currently under planning by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government. The project had been on the news for quite some time; my Hong Kong friends in the United States spoke of it often. Once built, they told me, it was to become the largest performing and visual arts complex in Hong Kong, if not in Southeast Asia.

The three exhibitors were convincingly professional in appearance, a telling sign of the developers' financial prowess. The three competitors, Dynamic Star, Henderson, and Sunny, were either real estate mega-giants themselves or newly formed joint ventures between relatively smaller developers. High-spirited sales staff stood in front of flashy LCD screens, urging visitors to fill out opinion forms. "The views collected in this consultation exercise will be made public," promised the News Bureau-issued promotion materials.[1] Judging by the size of the crowd and the level of enthusiasm with which the patrons attempted to communicate with the exhibitors, "the public" was indeed participating in a political process that was to determine the use of one of the last waterfronts that remained unoccupied in the city.

Yet equally intriguing was the degree to which each proposed master plan resembled one another. All of them featured a canopy-based design that loudly proclaimed to be the future landmark of Hong Kong. It turned out that the canopy was chosen by "an international jury as the winner of an international concept plan competition," and was hence "adopted as the basis for inviting proposals from the market."[2] In addition, the developmental plan had to include numerous theatre venues and dining facilities, plus a waterfront promenade and "an automated people mover" within the district.[3]

Without doubt, the WKCD spectacle was ostensibly staged by the "post-colonial" city-state to construct a hyper-visible physical space for public recognition. However, as I continue to probe the governmental rhetoric and mediated narratives of the WKCD, I am convinced that the WKCD more importantly represented the Hong Kong public's desire for a more inclusive public sphere, a decentred space that allows wider political participation. Emerging from the WKCD discourse and counter-discourse is a shifting understanding of cultural identity that has arguably become more diffused and open-ended, but is perhaps equally if not more powerful in effecting political change.

The Culture of WKCD: A Dual Spectacle

In 1998, one year after Hong Kong's return to China's sovereignty after 155 years of British colonial rule, the first Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa vowed in his policy address that his administration would turn Hong Kong into "Asia's entertainment and events capital."[4] Enthused by this vision, the Chief Secretary for Administration, Donald Tsang, made a proposal to the Legislative Council to construct a world-class cultural centre.[5] When the design of a giant canopy by the United Kingdom-based firm Foster and Partners won first prize in the concept plan competition, Tsang immediately showed his admiration for the canopy, insisting that this was an image "well-suited" for Hong Kong.[6] In October 2002, without subjecting the twenty-four billion [HK dollar] budget to outside consultation,[7] the steering committee of the WKCD, headed by Tsang himself, "had decided in principle to adopt the Foster scheme" and retained its "distinctive feature" of the canopy.[8]

Tsang's motive, as many speculated, had much to do with his wish to embellish his political career with a visible landmark that he could claim as his key accomplishment. His obsession with the canopy even earned him the mocking title of "the canopy general."[9] The debate over the legitimacy of the canopy quickly became the centrepiece of the WKCD media controversy. Starting June 2003, environmental groups and public policy think tanks set out to oppose the WKCD project, for the chief reason that the government was given too much power in deciding the architectural features to occupy one of the few open waterfronts left in Hong Kong.[10] The local arts community also expressed skepticism of the WKCD proposal.[11] Many believed that the government had retained "the colonial habit of talking behind closed doors to a few chosen interest groups ... to reflect or control community opinion."[12]

The media bombarded the public with mixed viewpoints regarding the project and its key feature, the canopy. The majority of the news coverage from 2003 to 2005 remained focused on the financial arrangement of the project or its relevance to future political campaigns. In November 2004, while the public consultation was in session, Dynamic Star, the sponsor for the Foster plan and perhaps the most determined contender for WKCD, invited reporters from major press agencies to participate in a ten-day museum tour of five countries, where the company's "future cultural partners" could be "consulted upon."[13] The event itself stirred up a round of uproar among media professionals who realized their own "weakness" in reporting "cultural issues," compared to their general savvy in covering business news.[14]

It became clear that the WKCD was a spectacle in a dual sense of the term. Not only was it an imagined space, visualized in delicately arranged architectural models, but it was also staged, a showcase to gather "public opinion." The openness of its political process was supposed to mirror the ultimate accessibility of its cultural offerings. Perhaps it took no less than the Benjaminian "dialectic of seeing" to discover what was hidden behind the visible.[15] The ostensibly staged spectacle worked precisely to conceal the socio-economic exclusiveness of the imagined spectacle. Not only was the seemingly-public voting subject to a pre-selected number of choices, but the kind of "public" cultural vision that it portrayed was nothing but the particular, private interest of the corporate developers in "universal" disguise.

However, before I submit my reading of the WKCD project to a full reincarnation of the Debordian spectacle, I recall the kind of energy that I observed amongst the "spectators" who so earnestly participated in the event that Sunday morning. Later, I also learned that when the consultation ended in June, more than 251,000 residents had come to the viewing, filled out over 33,100 comment cards, and submitted 480 written responses.[16] In October, under the pressure of public criticism, the authorities pledged to revise the invitation for the WKCD bidding, not only agreeing to reconsider the canopy design, but also demanding more financial and managerial responsibility from the developers, which caused all three contenders to withdraw their proposals in mid-February, 2006.[17] Apparently, the "public" was not so easily convinced that their cultural vision should be limited to a single developer's master plan. The publicly staged spectacle seemed to have led to its own demise. Can we go so far as to claim that the twisted fate of the WKCD project has presented us with a case in which competing understandings of "culture," offered by a multitude of public voices, have served to subvert its officially endowed meaning and complicate both its discursive and material possibilities?

The Debate on Culture: A Counter Discourse

If the mainstream media attention to the image of the canopy revealed more complicity with than opposition to the very government-corporate alliance that produced the canopy spectacle, its general lack of concern for the discussions of culture was decidedly challenged by a variety of alternative voices that worked to complicate the canopy-centred discourse. Renowned cultural critic and

essayist Ying-tai Lung, for instance, raised the following question: "To build up a culture in Hong Kong, is it not necessary to know first just what Hong Kong has, and what its strengths and weaknesses are? ... What is it actually missing: community children libraries ... or modern performance arts centres with chandeliers, red carpets and HKD$10,000-seats?"[18] In critique of what she called the "monopoly of the Central District value," Lung suggested that many people who had been to Hong Kong only paid attention to the breathtaking skyline in Central but failed to see that "1,450,000 of the seven million people in Hong Kong live below the poverty line" and that "Asia's World City ranks number five in the world in terms of economic inequality..."[19] What was needed, Lung proposed, was the mobilization of a wider public participating in the discourse of building a culture for Hong Kong that was not exclusive to the Central District class.[20]

In 2005, a group of concerned Hong Kong individuals, as if acting in response to Lung's call, established a non-profit organization named the People's Panel on West Kowloon. With the aim to bring together voices from the general public and government agencies, the People's Panel organized forums, both online and off, to discuss issues ranging from the WKCD project to Hong Kong's cultural policy in general.[21] The panel's core members consisted of university professors, legislative council members, writers, and artistic directors. Like Lung, they attempted to seize the WKCD spectacle as an opportunity to call upon common Hong Kong residents to participate in shaping the city-state's cultural landscape. Many made their own reflective writings available on the panel's website to contribute to the WKCD debate.

Danny Yung, the creator of a progressive theatre and cultural activist group in Hong Kong, and Ada Wong Ying-kay, an arts administrator, were two of the most vocal panelists. While Yung pointed out that the Foster scheme adopted by Tsang was not a real "master plan" but merely an "architectural design,"[22] Wong launched her attack at the government's "dream for landmark," which attempted to "construct" culture in tourist terms.[23] For Wong, the WKCD betrayed its planners' ignorance of the abundant "non-landmarked" cultural richness in Hong Kong: "Temple Street's vendors and street performances, Tai Hang's hundred-year-old fire dragon custom, the stilt houses in Tai O ... none of which can be covered or replaced by a single canopy."[24] In his call for "a vision for culture and a public sphere," Yung argued, "a city without cultural vision is a city without vision; planning without vision is planning with no culture; a city without a public sphere is a city without civil society."[25]

Yung's and Wong's critique of the "landmark frenzy" is reminiscent of cultural critic Rey Chow's feminist reading of Hong Kong poetry. For Chow, a Hong Kong native who emigrated to the United States, the prevailing criticism of Hong Kong's cultural production has been cast in terms of the colony's "lack" of political power and its purportedly "pathological" materialism; both are signs of a "masculinist discourse" not unlike that of the Freudian feminine sexuality, defined in "lesser" and "inferior" terms.[26] To go beyond the binary opposition between "lack and compensation," Chow chooses to focus on the city's "transporting" role between cultures:[27]

> The founding of Hong Kong as a city converges with an epochal change in the world's value system— from the stability of landed culture to the speeds and currencies of trade. And yet, in the evaluation of culture, we seem to remain as fixated on stability as we are on the centre."[28]

Chow's insight helps bring to the fore the tensions at work in the WKCD debate. The proponents of the canopy, in an effort to "compensate" the "lack of culture" by constructing a visible, physical space for culture, obviously remained trapped in their "inferiority" complex. Relying overtly on the icon of the canopy, whose predominance of visualization and spectacularization only served to conceal its unimaginative repetition of "world-class" models, planners for the WKCD resorted to the same dyad of colonialism and economism, and mistakenly believed that Hong Kong was in need of a visible cultural centre in order to become one itself. Hidden beneath this desire was precisely the assumption that "culture" could only be valorized under the stability and fixity of a "centre"— the same kind of "penis-envy" that Freud's "little girl" had to endure.[29]

Chow's remarks also serve as a powerful reminder that the centre-periphery model that situates Hong Kong on the margin will not be dismantled if Hong Kong is eager to rush toward the centre to achieve a sense of full self-presence. Wong and other conveners of the People's Panel saw this danger clearly. Instead of falling back to a singular vision of Hong Kong in the rhetoric of the landmark, the People's Panel called for a rethinking of Hong Kong's cultural policy. Their move to dethrone the canopy of its iconic status was one that hinged on the very spatial character of Hong Kong, or, what Ackbar Abbas called "the culture of disappearance."[30]

Abbas bases the concept of "disappearance" primarily on Hong Kong's colonial mentality of seeing "culture" as an import, as "that which came from elsewhere," either from Chinese tradition or from the West.[31] Hong Kong people's fear of losing its "way of life" after the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration (announcing the handover planned for 1997) and the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre in Beijing is a manifestation of a cultural status that is rooted in this inability to see "what is there."[32] However, Abbas's outlook for the creation of a post-colonial Hong Kong subject is by no means pessimistic.[33] As he writes,

> The wiping out of identity may not be an entirely negative thing, *if it can be taken far enough*. Not all identities are worth preserving ... The moment of asignification when models of identity disappear is also the moment when a post-colonial subject is invented ... [This subject] must not be another stable appearance, another stable identity. It must learn how to survive a culture of disappearance by adopting strategies of disappearance as its own, by giving disappearance itself a different inflection.[34]

For Abbas, Hong Kong's "cultural disappearance" ought not be seen as a threat, but instead an opportunity. The sensibility of "lost" in identity is ultimately empowering, if the "lost" is not substituted by another fixity that threatens to assimilate the newborn subject.

In their post-colonial mode of critique, Abbas and Chow both seek to open up a space to rethink a Hong Kong-specific subjectivity. While the Beijing-appointed officials were in favour of a fixated vision of Hong Kong, the People's Panel strove to demonstrate that what the public demanded was not a physical space for a privileged class to accumulate more cultural capital, but rather a more fluid space, that of the public sphere, one that allows more than a singular cultural vision to emerge. If the WKCD was a "representation of space" embedded in a neo-capitalist "spatial practice,"[35] the counter-discourse of WKCD, voiced by urban inhabitants who occupy the "representational spaces," expressed the latter's refusal to accept the top-down imposition of a particular conception of space. Their efforts are largely an act to reinvent a survival space for Hong Kong that is based on what Chow calls "its own libidinal economy," without succumbing to a globalized, capital-friendly sameness.[36] The "public" character of this representational space is thus best seen as an inverted image of the architectural fixture of the WKCD canopy. It is the "disappearance" of a centralized space, the opening up to a discursive field that produces de-centred possibilities of culture that can be expanded "throughout the social realm."[37]

De-centreing WKCD

In February 2005, the People's Panel released a "Re-defining West Kowloon" proposal based on public feedback, which laid out the "cultural vision, urban planning vision, and West Kowloon vision," as well as detailed plans for an "organic, flexible, and liberal" process of civic participation for the project. The document was submitted to the government on June 29, 2005, a day before the end of the public consultation for WKCD.[38] This and other public responses were believed to be instrumental in forcing Donald Tsang to subject the WKCD project to further advisory group reviews. [39] While the discussions of culture, identity, landmark, and space carried on in mainstream as well as alternative mediascapes, the episode that claimed the canopy as its central spectacle has partially come to a closure.

The WKCD project is perhaps inherently linked to the "travelling discourse"[40] of the "creative industry," pioneered by the United Kingdom in 1998 as part of a celebratory enthusiasm for entering "the age of the knowledge economy."[41] In this sense, the commodification of Hong Kong's public space embedded in this initiative is no less an attempt to re-colonize Hong Kong under its "post-colonial" state apparatus. Just like the demand for opium trade in the nineteenth century, which resulted in Hong Kong's colonization by Britain, the neo-liberal expectation for global capital flow and commodity exchange is the new force that has encroached upon the city, now with backings of China's post-socialist regime.[42]

While the flamboyant display of the WKCD imaginary might have been effective in alluring public attention to the so-called initiative of creative industrialization, it has failed to satisfy a public that demands more than a space for conspicuous consumption. Emerging spaces like the People's Panel demonstrates the possibility of adopting a cultural strategy of decentreing, which works to deconstruct the narrowly conceived vision to turn Hong Kong into a "fixed" centre of world culture. The demand for a public sphere as articulated in the WKCD counter-discourse reminds us that the expectations for public culture are never reducible to singular forms. Although at the moment their political reach may be limited in scope, the material and discursive spaces that the WKCD spectacle has opened up will continue to constitute a field of contestations in which a plurality of cultural visions and meanings are to be negotiated, challenged, and transformed.

NOTES

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3 Ibid.

4 Chee-hwa Tung, "The 1998 Policy Address," Chief Executive's Policy Address, <*http://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/pa98/english/high.htm*>.

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6 Ibid., 7.

7 West Kowloon Reclamation Concept Plan Competition, Speech by Lord Rothschild, GBE, Chairman of the Jury, 8 Feb. 2002 <*http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=222601*>.

8 Legislative Council Panel on Planning, Lands and Works, "Progress Report on Development of the West Kowloon Cultural District," 4 July 2003 <*www.legco.gov.hk/yr02-03/english/ panels/plw/papers/plw0704cb1-2104-3e.pdf*>, 2.

9 Zhuoru Fang, "Xi Jiu," Fang Zhuoru's Blog, posted 10 Oct. 2005, <*http://fongcheukyu.blogspot.com/2005/10/blog-post_10.html*>. "Canoy general" (tian peng yuan shuan) is the name of a protagonist in the classical Chinese novel *Journey to the West* who was later turned into a pig.

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12 Anonymous, "Empower the People on Land Development," *South China Morning Post*, 29 Oct., 2003, <*http://skyscrapercity.com/archive/index.php/t-222600-p-1.html*>.

13 Ada Wong, "A Ten-day Museum Tour," comment posted on People's Panel on West Kowloon, <*https://www.mindvan.com/cgibin/ourdb/bdetail?session_id=&template=758674850001&key=52&share=contact@ppwk.org&dbname=Document*>.

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15 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

16 "Public consultation on West Kowloon Cultural District concludes," HKSAR Government Information Centre, <*http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200506/30/06300339.htm*>.

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19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 People's Panel on West Kowloon, "Background (in Chinese)," <*https://www.mindvan.com/cgi-bin/ourdb/bdetail?session_id=&share=contact@ppwk.org&dbname=Document&template=758674850001&key=3&caller=https://www.mindvan.com/cgi-bin/ourdb/bdetail&action=Document,758674850001,52&*>.

22 Danny Yung, "I have the following opinions regarding the West Kowloon Cultural District Development Plan," Comment on People's Panel on West Kowloon, <*https://www.mindvan.com/cgi-bin/ourdb/bdetail?session_id=&template=758674850001&key=59&share=contact@ppwk.org&dbname=Document*>. All English translations of the People's Panel's online postings are mine.

23 Ada Wong, "A Dream for Landmark," Comment on People's Panel on West Kowloon, 23 Dec., 2004, <*http://www.ppwk.org/chi/ada_23122004.htm*>.

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25 Danny Yung, "Hong Kong needs Outfits," Comment on People's Panel on West Kowloon, 14 Feb., 2005, <*https://www.mindvan.com/cgibin/ourdb/bdetail?session_id=&template=758674850001&key=63&share=contact@ppwk.org&dbname=Document*>.

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31 Ibid., 4–6.

32 Ibid., 6.

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36 Chow, "Things, common/places, passages of the port city."

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