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The Ghostly Presence of the Hong Kong Subject in Rey Chow's Postcolonial Critique

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I. Introduction

Hong Kong, categorized as belonging to the geographical realm of East Asia, has been a focal point of the area studies subfield of "modernization studies" in the United States. However, postcolonial theories hardly account for Hong Kong's cultural identity and the problems of (neo)colonialism; modernization discourse has already produced a dominant understanding of this region almost in the exclusive terms of capitalist economic rationalization —Hong Kong has been called 'Little Dragon,' 'Asian Tiger,' and an 'East Asian economic miracle' at various points. Apparently, all the sociopolitical energies of the anti-colonial liberation struggles in this city were co-opted into producing irrefutability East Asian 'Confucian' capitalization, whose so-called cultural dimension is entirely bound by and reduced to serve economic purposes. Although modernization theory, which could be understood as a legitimization of colonial rule, might have been overly applied to Hong Kong, there is real doubt as to whether the region will ever be 'postcolonial.' The obvious absence of postcolonial studies in this city can be readily explained by the fact that, in the prevailing view, Hong Kong's continued colonial status is by the consent of China, Great Britain (or the West), and Hong Kong's own citizens (Miners, 1998). However, has the consent of the governed, to either British colonialism before the handover or a Chinese authoritarian regime after 1997, ever been sought?

The opening of the Cold War in Asia created a strategic, unchanging colonial position for Hong Kong. The United States, and its allies attempted to maintain the hegemony and legitimacy of postwar order in Asia by containing various communist movements supported by China and attempting to save the postcolonial region from communist influences. However,

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it is no secret that China reaped considerable economic benefits from colonial Hong Kong, which had been Beijing's chief source of exchange earnings. In order to avoid overdependence on the Soviet Union, China needed to establish trade with the West via Hong Kong. Living in the long shadow of the Cold War, Hong Kong's colonized people felt insecure about their long-term future and lived with a great deal of anxiety, although China exhibited restraint and collaboration with the British colonial government—even during major conflicts with the West, such as the Vietnam War. As a result of this—as well as of the demands and pressures of national security—in the field of area studies, academic interest in Hong Kong primarily stressed the city's economic growth and rarely challenged its colonial enterprise. Even if the colonial project was doubted, it could hardly be debated publicly. Scholars in communist China generally dismissed Hong Kong as a corrupt colony, and promulgated no further emancipation-revolution rhetoric after the failed leftist riots of 1967. The overriding discourse of the United States, Britain, and mainland China deprive the city of the agency to make its voice heard on the international stage, although the city's prosperous popular media (including film, television, radio, and pop music) since the 1960s has been persistently engendering a fragmented, inconsistent, anachronistic and phantasmal subject through the sights and sounds that can sometimes successfully travel across the globe. Yet the colonial history of Hong Kong is buried in and assimilated by Cold War narratives; and its political presence is reduced to an object to serve the strategic and economic interests of the West as well as China.

II. A Hong Kong Subject that Fails to Appear

The well-known feminist, cultural critic, film scholar, and thinker, Rey Chow, who grew up and was educated in this former British colony, has made a major contribution to the deliberation of a Hong Kong subjectivity and—in the field of postcolonial studies—to contemporary critical thinking mediated by this region. Although only a handful of essays among her numerous works deal overtly with Hong Kong—and its colonial history and related politics—Chow skillfully disseminates, filters, and deciphers things related to her birthplace as a 'place' in her other theoretical writings. It is not uncommon for a thinker to have a primary framework within which she moves continuously and consistently, even if her books address different kinds and aspects

of problems. By identifying herself with Hong Kong, Chow has made very critical and provocative statements about Chinese nationalism that could easily lead to misunderstandings; for example, she has been quoted as saying she does not want "to be a 'fulltime' Chinese" (Yuen 25-30). On another occasion, Chow admitted that she has been "criticized for not being sympathetic with the democracy fighters in China." However, her position is also criticized in Hong Kong; she has been "attacked for hating Hong Kong people, or siding with the white Canadian."[1] Her articulation of Hong Kong is a mode of interrogation that does not lend itself to a fixed position. Conjuring up 'Hong Kong,' but not necessarily in any empirical sense, Chow acts like a shaman who calls upon the spirit not only in order to tackle certain recurring issues that interest her, but also to use it to haunt and unsettle the Western epistemological system that inspires its invocation.

In her analysis of the crisis in the humanities that has become widespread in Western institutions since the late twentieth century, Hong Kong serves as a kind of spectral comparison that 'disturbs' the humanities disciplines in the West as well as their confidence in their Eurocentric values and leads them to question their entrenched beliefs. Instrumentalization and commodification of knowledge, and the relativization of traditional humanistic values, are not necessarily as disastrous and threatening as Western academia generally assume if, Chow suggests, one looks at certain colonial situations. Hong Kong under British rule was "in the forefront of what has since become a first-world experience" ("An Addiction" 51), albeit in a veiled and displaced way. Learning from her experiences of Hong Kong's colonial past, when traditional Chinese humanistic values were marginalized by a hierarchical system of cultural and linguistic differentiation, Chow argues that the potential demise of humanistic values can motivate scholars to historicize and rethink the time-honored premises of their disciplines, rather than remain "complacent with the conclusions that have been reached" (Ibid. 53). The colonial condition of Hong Kong, generally considered to be a subordinate and subjugated one, can be used to measure and scrutinize problems in the Western humanities.

1. Although often misunderstood, Chow insists that "[y]ou have to be able to bear up to the fact that people will say these things about you, in diametrical opposition to what you mean. But I'd rather that, than simply adopting a very safe moral position so that no one can attack you because everything you say is so acceptable." (Discipline and Place Collective 531-32)

However, Chow is not satisfied to stop at using the otherworldly semblance of Hong Kong as a contraposition to reflect upon the interior crisis of Western thought. Her interest in creating a new space for the materialization of a Hong Kong subject is genuine, and her discontent with the closure in existing disciplines (not only area studies but also Sinology)—which limits any possibility of a Hong Kong subjectivity to emerge—is obvious. In an interview conducted a few months before the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, she admitted:

> I was obsessed with trying to work out a kind of space that does not reduce people to [either "desire" in the field of Sinology or "labor" in Area Studies]. Of course there is a self-interest there. I felt, well, what about people like me? What about the fact that, on the one hand, you belong to an ancient kind of ethnicity, four or five thousand years old, on the other hand you live in the modern era and you have been dealing with the West since before you were born? How come there's no space for that kind of subjectivity there? (Discipline and Place Collective 514)

Indeed, she is one of the very first theorists to construct a new conceptual space for postcolonial theories on the subjectivity of Hong Kong, and successfully drew a lot of academic attention at the critical moment when Hong Kong's handover was treated nostalgically by the Western-dominated media as the end of British imperialist rule and the Western loss of full control over a powerful engine of Asian capitalism. However, carving out a new postcolonial space for Hong Kong subjectivity that can accommodate both 'desire' (i.e., unconscious and other psychoanalytical dimensions) and 'labor' (realpolitik, economy, history, and other social and material aspects) is by no means an easy task. Perhaps the most difficult question is whether postcolonial theory can replace area studies or Sinology and do justice to the colonized.

In a pointed essay that examines the historical development of U.S. academic disciplines, H. D. Harootunian argues that postcolonial theory might be "the natural successor of area studies by virtue of both genealogy and geography" (166) because the two disciplines cling to a fixed and unchanging culture and are indifferent to history—although postcoloniality puts more emphasis on hybridity and the primacy of textuality. Postcolonial theory's search for voices excluded by Eurocentric conceptions of knowledge is but a "dead-end pursuit for authenticity" and restores "the Eurocentric claims of the sovereign subject it wishes to eliminate" (Harootunian 169-70). Even

if postcolonial theory manages to avoid cultural essentialism, according to Harootunian, it easily becomes an articulation of an ahistorical indeterminate social system and formulates a subject in "a psychoanalytic framework that itself is culturally specific to the oppressive culture the colonized are supposedly trying to resist and overcome" (Ibid. 172).

The task of constructing a postcolonial Hong Kong subject is daunting in light of the fact that the presumption of postcolonial theory may have fixated the colonized into some ahistorical entity. What should be embraced and excluded from the creation of such subjectivity (such as the nationalist longing for China, nostalgia for British rule, melancholy for the loss of a place that can never be again, self-pity, ethnic pride, anger at colonial racist inequality, anxiety, and fear of an authoritarian motherland), and what criteria should distinguish it from "others" (such as [neo]colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism), are all daunting questions that are not easily answered. Keenly alert to the problems raised by Harootunian and the ideological implications of poststructuralist construction of a Hong Kong subject in postcolonial studies, Chow does not necessarily articulate the city with an eye to producing a sovereign subjectivity within the institutions of power and the established intellectual paradigm.

In "Between Colonizers: Hong Kong's Postcolonial Self-Writing in the 1990s,"[2] one of her first essays to explicitly treat colonialism in Hong Kong, Chow endeavors to use the deconstructive notion of "third space" (158) to designate Hong Kong's in-betweenness and impurity. The essay argues that the city's tactics of playing 'China' against 'Britain,' and of dismantling both nativism and postmodernism, are the very conditions of its everyday life. Chow contends that the so-called postcolonial state of Hong Kong does not necessarily signify the end of colonialism. As the title suggests, Hong Kong's return to China might mark the beginning of a new colonialism. Hong Kong's postcolonial reality is marked by a double impossibility—of submission to Chinese nationalist or nativist repossession at present, and of submission to British colonialism in its past. As her essay neatly delineates, the identity of Hong Kong has long been a complicated issue. In the eyes of foreigners, Hong Kongers are of course Chinese, but seem to be very Westernized compared to Mainland Chinese. Over the last thirty years, Hong Kongers have developed

2. Reprinted in Chow, *Ethics after Idealism* 149-67. The Chinese translation appears in *Today* 1.28 (1995): 185-206.

a very different lifestyle from that of other Chinese communities. Hence, Chow seeks to create a third space for the Hong Kong cultural identity—a position between Western and Chinese practices, and between the colonizer and the dominant native culture. It is a position of double negativity—neither nationalist Chinese nor globalized Western, neither of root seeking nor postmodern hybrid. This double negativity correlates to the status of specter at a conceptual level. To some extent, Hong Kong's so-called subjectivity is apparent only where there is a certain amount of erasure or crossing out. Its double negativity can only be understood in a context in which Hong Kong and China are parts of a larger world—one in which the Western powers though probably waning in the economic realm still somewhat influence the capitalist modernization process in many non-Western countries.

The hot-button issue of Hong Kong's handover in the 1990s has given rise to competing conceptual claims on the colonial city. Undoubtedly, the dispute over how to theorize Hong Kong subjectivity can be productive in that it may generate more inspiring insights into the city's (post)colonial experiences. The Chinese version of Chow's essay has incited some controversy in Hong Kong intellectual circles as to how postcolonial Hong Kong as a subject can be totalized and historicized. Yet critics of Chow's essay refute the self-pitying image of Hong Kong by focusing on the example of Hong Kong small capitalists who exploited factory workers in the Pearl River Delta of southern China. In this instance of 'northbound colonialism' in Mainland China, Hong Kong is not a victim of colonialism but an agent of it.[3] In the 1990s, when China's economy was not growing as rapidly as it is today, the Hong Kong bourgeoisie tended toward a sense of superiority to the still-backward motherland, and class ideology even became so hegemonic as to be the prevailing Hong Konger mentality, although their pride might be considered a defense mechanism against the colonized people's fear of a threatening China. However, the 'northbound colonialism' argument tends to overgeneralize a few Hong Kong capitalists' China adventures as the city's experience, and fails to investigate how the collaborative compradore role of Hong Kong bourgeoisie and capitalists, who served the British well in colonial days and, when the Western power was moving out, switched their loyalty to China by bringing outside capital, skills and other relevant professional

3. See, for instance, Ip and Hung. The essays in this special issue, in addition to responses and rejoinders by other writers, were anthologized in Stephen Ching-kiu Chan. For a sympathetic summary of these essays, see Law.

experiences to their motherland in a rather similar fashion, is now manipulated by Chinese communist bureaucrats—who learned from the British colonial masters and went so far as to allow these Hong Konger businessmen to exploit the Chinese proletariat. However, who could have envisioned that these arrogant and complacent Hong Kong capitalists might be cast aside by the Chinese state in the twenty-first century—not because of their economic exploitation of the Chinese people, but because their sweatshop operations are too 'archaic' and low-tech, and not as efficient as the Taiwan-owned Foxconn Technology Group's 'high-tech' sweatshop?[4]

The foremost difference between Chow's perception of the Hong Kong subject and that of her critics is that her understanding is not based simply on material wealth, the conventional sense of class difference. On the contrary, it is through the structural relation under the (symbolic and subtle) violence of patriarchy and colonialism that Chow apprehends the colonized subject of Hong Kong. In a series of Hong Kong essays published a few years after "Between Colonizers," Chow engages more politically—condemning the double standard adopted by Britain and the United States when dealing with non-Westerners; discussing the histories of the notorious First Opium War of 1839-42 that led to British colonization and undemocratic rule for most of Hong Kong's 155 years ("King Kong" 93-108); confuting discriminatory judgments that use compensatory logic or salvational motives to understand Hong Kong ("Things, Common/Places" 179-204); recalling her own educational experience in the city in an examination of how Chinese knowledge was "ghettoized" in the delicate process of colonial cultural legitimization ("Postcolonial Difference" 161-69); analyzing the strong racial and political implications of Larry Feign's cartoons, which reveal how Hong Kong itself is thoroughly and irrevocably stereotyped ("Larry Feign" 21-45); and illuminating the social relationships and lived experiences of the underprivileged—through the Chinese writings of two Hong Kong authors, Leung Ping Kwan and John Ma Kwok Ming—that have been generally neglected in favor of politically and economically dominant representations of the city ("Consumption and Eccentric Writing" 45-58).

4. As a major Chinese electronic manufacturer, Foxconn makes products such as computers and cell phones for Hewlett Packard, Apple, Dell, Nintendo, Sony, and Nokia. In 2010, eighteen Foxconn employees attempted suicide in the Shenzhen factory site. The suicides drew media attention and made the company face claims of abusive work practices.

In writing rebuttals against the self-interested narratives and prejudices imposed on Hong Kong throughout its colonial history, Chow does not intend to imply that the city represented in her discourse is the real, authentic one. The controversy over problematic representations of the (post)colonial place opens her insightful analysis of the referentiality issue. Since referentiality has been desacralized and the conventional sense of presence has been undermined by deconstruction and poststructuralist theory, Chow writes that any attempt at "discovering the specificity of X will lead first to the process of differencing and eventually to the dissipation of X itself as a stable referent. ... [U]ltimately, X as such does not exist. ... [T]he attempt to define X seems doomed to destroy its own object in the process of objectification" ("The Interruption" 59-61). Although Chow's statement is not directly about the city, Hong Kong can easily fit in this category of "X" if it is naïvely objectified as a culturally unique and historically bound local particularity to stand in for its silenced and underrepresented people. Its presence, with the hindsight of poststructuralist theory, can only be bracketed—and sometimes even dismantled—by the categorization of geopolitical determinant or particularism. In a way, 'Hong Kong' may be a sign that constitutes a certain alterity from within the bounds of signification and reference, thus creating room for radical theorization. The ambivalence and indeterminacy of 'Hong Kong' as an "X" to be theorized can be found in some of Chow's writings.

Although the certainty of the particular identity of 'Hong Kong' or any non-Western otherness is sacrificed in the logic of poststructuralist deferment, this act of disavowal may point not only to the subtle form of violence inherent in a system of representation that is historically intertwined with relentless domination and exploitation, but also the lack of (temporal and ontological) self-coincidence in theoretical discourse itself. Then, using postcolonial-cum-poststructuralist theory, how can Chow summon 'Hong Kong' without making it disappear? Must it be a phantom rather than a substantial entity that indicates something beneath or beyond the constituted order of accepted reality? Even if 'Hong Kong' appears on the 'outside,' the compulsive interiorization of Western theory, as Chow tells us, will create an internal rupture or difference and constitute it with a doubly ghostly identity as "signification's spectral other" or the "abject leftovers of a theoretical act of exclusion" (Ibid. 64). This striving to represent an ethnic otherness, in a way, coincides with the structural absence or failure within theory itself. How can Hong Kong be invoked in Chow's theoretical discourse? How would Chow

handle theory that offers sophisticated understanding of the problematic constitution of an ethnic other but simultaneously denies a substantial presence to that subject? The theoretical issue also gives rise to political reflection on how to grasp the presence of Hong Kong in ways beyond the dominant notion of nation-state, which oppresses rather than liberates the emergence of the city's subjectivity.

III. The "Use" of Western Theory

In Chow's first book, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: the Politics of Reading between West and East*,[5] Hong Kong seems to be distinctly marginal. This first magnum opus primarily discusses how modern Chinese literature might still be read under a Western hegemony. Not all texts discussed are directly relevant to Hong Kong, but the most intense debate focuses on the construction of an ethnic subjectivity in the 'always already' Westernized context and the postcolonial encounter between Western theory and Chinese culture. 'Hong Kong' is nowhere to be found in the book, but its traces can be detected in certain of Chow's words. These implicit references may be part of her strategy of using theory to serve her own agenda.

At first glance, Chow's discourse on 'Western theory' sounds provocatively utilitarian and instrumental. It is not infrequent to encounter such words like "function," "tool," and "use" in her language whenever theory is mentioned: "How is [unconscious, an export from Europe] *used*, circulated" (xiii); "it is not whether we 'pay homage' to [Western theory] but how we *do* it that matters" (xv); "The analytical *tools* I *use* becomes the means" (xvi); "The way we *use* 'Western theory' to understand" (xvi); "My *use* of Mulvey's mode of critique. ... The second complication is my *use* of the elements" (18); "*using* the *tools* of Western concepts and theory" (29); "Why *use* Western theory on Chinese literature?" (29); "to *use* a notion proposed by Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty" (30); "Crucially, the *use* of 'woman' needs to become a *tool* of formal analysis" (52); "I want to clarify this particularity in view of the oft-repeated objection that 'Western' psychoanalysis ... is *useful* to an understanding of 'Chinese' literature" (123); and "However, I find her reliance

5. Until otherwise indicated, all following references are to this work. Emphases are mine.

on object-relations psychoanalysis limiting and *un-useful* for my purposes" (190 n26). These words and phrases are found almost throughout the entire book. If understood in the colonial context, Chow's emphasis on 'use' may indicate not only the efficiency-oriented development of Hong Kong's colonial modernity, but also the very self-consciousness of a colonized Hong Kong that always wants to be a goose that lays golden eggs for her masters. Once she is no longer of any use to the colonizers, her future is not difficult to predict. However, such utilitarian use of Western theory outrageously reduces the 'art' of theory to pure skill or techne, implying the colonized's inferior imitation of her master's flair. However, use-oriented mimicry can be a form of subversion or "a playful, self-conscious repetition, made to resemble and conjure the normative image ... yet simultaneously undermining this image from within" ("Sacrifice, Mimesis" 138).

Chow's "use" of Western theory in her book is a way to resist the domination of the historiographically and nationalist-oriented approaches in Chinese studies and to rupture its rigid and exclusively defined boundaries. However, her 'use' of Western theory does not confine itself to a pure strategy against the norm of the field of Chinese literary study. The appropriation of Western theory in Chinese studies, which could probably be also generalized as the application of Western epistemological paradigm to the non-Western world, poses questions about the validity and the so-called universality of Western theory or knowledge itself. While Western theory or knowledge needs a testing ground to verify its universality, its general 'use' or application to diverse referents may create some kind of resistance against its legitimacy and validity. This is to say that 'use' never stops unraveling and toppling at one end without looping back and turning against itself at the other, though resistance may act as a precondition for asserting the cognitive perception of Western theory or knowledge about the world. In short, 'use' is by no means a unidirectional operation, but always suggests a possibility of recoiling and folding back. A reciprocal relationship between theory and the object being scrutinized by that theory is always sought. From the very beginning, Chow states, "We live in an era in which the critique of the West has become not only possible but mandatory. Where does this critique leave those ethnic peoples whose entry into culture is, precisely because of the history of Western imperialism, already 'Westernized'" (*Woman and Chinese Modernity* xi)? It is hard to imagine such a statement can resonate—especially given the recent surge of chauvinistic Chinese nationalism—with Mainland Chinese, whose entry into culture is

not necessarily 'Westernized' and who would not see 'theory' as something strictly belonging to the West. In other words, Chow's 'use' of theory is tightly bound to the colonial Hong Kong ghost.

According to Chow, in this process of 'use,' the subject and the object do not simply engage in a linear causal chain. The subject comprises a dimension by which it represents the object, and in which it also represents and remolds the subject itself. The subject needs the object's response or resistance to define itself and to ascertain its cognitive reach to the phenomenal world. 'Use' is a formation of multiple interactions between the subject and the object. It is a kind of mediation, arbitration, or even a betrayal of both ends.[6] Through these multiple interactions, a confrontation or an intense vibration between them results and may possibly replace the hierarchical relationship. The subject has to risk losing its secure identity in the process of negotiation with its object. 'Use' is beyond the closure of meaning. It is not a simple term for control or mastery; it generates movement, force and disturbance. Only pure movement can resist the total control of teleological meaning.

This rejection of heroic or teleological history is not difficult to identify in Chow, and it is particularly revealing again in the preface to *Woman and Chinese Modernity*: "How then does one begin to speak in a field (of Chinese studies) that is densely populated by practitioners of what Friedrich Nietzsche calls 'monumental' and 'antiquarian' history? The third kind of history that Nietzsche mentions—the critical—is practiced by those who have a special need: 'Only he who is oppressed by a present need, and who wants to throw off his burden at any cost, has need of critical history, that is to say a history that judges and condemns.' This category of the oppressed is where I put myself." (xv) The linkage between Chow's book with Nietzsche's "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" is almost unequivocal. The opening epigraph is a quotation from that early article by Nietzsche: "An excess of history is detrimental to life." However, Nietzsche also points out that the critical species is always unfair to the past and is never innocent of the oppressiveness of the past that it tries so hard to deny:

> It is always a dangerous process, especially so for life itself: and men and ages which serve life by judging and destroying a past are always dangerous and endangered men and ages. For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also outcomes of their aberrations, passions

6. On the identification of cultural mediator with traitor, see Chow, "Translator."

> and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them. (75-76)

Chow is not unaware of the inherent paradox of the rejection of history implicated in the problems of (colonial) modernity. Denied or repressed history will only bounce back as revenant. Knowing the impossibility of escaping history and of radical renewal simply by condemning the past, she appropriates the concept of 'use' in order to tackle this predicament. In a different context, Chow argues that "'use' itself, instead of being the original, inalienable part of labor, is actually the most basic form of alienation, for it is already an exchange for something else—in other words, it is predicated on an other" ("Listening Otherwise" 138). Use, in its most radical sense, is not only an intensity itself—a loosening force without telos—but also a splitting, cutting, and alienating power. It is never merely a unitary being or entity, but a relationship of oneself to the 'other'—even though the other might be a cut-off or carved-out part of oneself. This cut-off other, as a surplus or remainder, always reminds us of the incompleteness of knowledge and acts as a rupture to epistemological closure. It exceeds and escapes what would turn it into a graspable whole. But then how can this cutting force—this alienating power—tackle the predicament of history? It is precisely by means of this strength 'to break up and dissolve a part of the past' that the monumental structure and the totalization of history are continually cut off and disintegrated. As discussed earlier, a cut does not mean a total denial of history because this excised piece is still a 'non-detachable' part—a lump that can hardly be erased. On the contrary, it designates a wound to the presumed whole. We (the subject articulated by Chow) are able to live because of this cut, but at the same time we are condemned to live with the wound. If the Hong Kong subject is destined to be integrated into the historical totality of the Chinese national self, Chow here suggests a possible alternative.

On the other hand, there are two modes of 'use' derived from Chow's argument. First, use is not exactly labor for any specific purpose. It is not force one can use to fulfill a simple utilitarian aim—although in a colonial context the colonized may have no choice but to work toward the colonizer's mission. However, desiring to emulate her master, the colonized subject is "an indeterminate, internally divided subject, a subject that is not self-identical" ("Sacrifice, Mimesis" 140) because her desire is also complicated by her

'usefulness' to the colonial system. In the end, what she can do is to identify herself with her 'use' (or usefulness). Precisely because of her 'usefulness' to her master, she can transcend the world in which she is subjugated. Thus, "in the long run, all slavish [use(fulness)] realize not the Master's will, but the will—at first unconscious—of the Slave, who—finally—succeeds where the Master—necessarily—fails. Therefore, it is indeed the originally dependent, serving, and slavish Consciousness that in the end realizes and reveals the ideal of autonomous Self-Consciousness and is thus its 'truth'" (Kojève 30). Use, then, is better understood as an intensity, a pure functioning that depends on nothing and is directed by nothing exterior to it. It only works for itself, perpetuates itself, and manifests and stretches its power. No external goal can nail it down or bend it to its service. 'Use' in this sense is comparable to what Nietzsche defines as "life." Life is the will whose essence is being itself. Will is qualified as the power which signifies the real absolute causality that relies on nothing other than itself. The immanence of use is a self-perpetuating force, or a life force that endeavors to detach itself from any assigned goal.

In the case of the 'use' of Western theory, Western theory is never the aim or the end of such use, but rather a medium for the use to traverse, to spread its force, and to reach for a different dimension. However, to say that Western theory is a medium may be misleading because Western theory is neither a sort of real property nor a simple savoir faire. On the contrary, theory is not something solid or well defined. It can be a weapon wielded by Western imperialists to conquer the minds of colonized people or a self-critique of its very exploitative mechanism, and it may be as immeasurable and ungraspable as a multiplicity that never stops changing and multiplying. It provides a horizon or a threshold for the colonized to cross and to form and reform herself, but at the same time, theory also undergoes a process of (re)formation at that crossing. When 'used' to understand the non-West, Chow argues, Western theory is turned against itself "as symptomatic of the mutual implications between modernity and imperialism, between the programmatic acts of fundamentally reconceptualizing the past on the one hand, and those of controlling and subjugating others, on the other" (*Woman and Chinese Modernity* xvi).

This turning against itself is the second mode of 'use.' When 'use' accelerates to the highest speed and reaches its limits, it will bounce back. It stretches to its limits, and then turns back in opposition to itself. In other words, 'use' always negates its own essence and contradicts itself. Nevertheless, if this

turning against itself is inherent in Western theory—implying that the self-critique of oppression and violence is merely part of the Western imperialist legacy—then what is the role left to the colonized subject who makes use of this theory in order to criticize the crimes of the West? Chow, in her other writings, talks about a "melancholy turn" in contemporary theory that increasingly subjects Westernization to critique and makes it possible for the ethnic "to hold onto the notion of a certain original condition (language, literature, culture) while advancing the plaint that this original condition is compromised, injured, incapacitated, interrupted, or stolen—in a word, lost" ("Translator, Traitor" 572). She calls such a rhetorical move an "essentializing-cum-deconstruction" that paradoxically asserts "both the existence of an original and its irrevocable loss, both a lost object and its continued spectral presence, [that] leads to an inexhaustible theoretical productiveness" (Ibid. 572-73). In other words, Chow's strategic use of Western theory can bring about the existence of the Hong Kong subject, although its status is not ontological but spectral.

IV. An Imitation that Pushes the System to Redeem Itself

Called forth via Western theory, this ghostly Hong Kong subject—because of her colonized existence—is already "compromised and demeaned" and reduced to an imitator who "must try her best to become like her master even when knowing full well that her efforts at emulation will be deemed less than satisfactory" ("Sacrifice, Mimesis" 139). As Chow explains,

> [T]he values involved—"superior" and "inferior"—are hierarchically determined and tend to work in one direction only: the "original," so to speak, exists as the authentic standard by which the imitator is judged, but not vice versa. The colonized subject, condemned to a permanent inferiority complex, must nonetheless try, in vain, to become that from which she has been excluded in an *a priori* manner. Try as she may, she will always remain a poor copy; yet even as she continues to be debased, she has no choice but to continue to mimic. (Ibid. 139)

The colonized ethnic's desire to become the white colonizer is overlapped and intertwined with ambivalent wishes and resentments that give rise to a doubled vision of both cultures, or what Benedict Anderson calls, "the

specter of comparisons." If Benedict Anderson's concept of comparison is Eurocentric, the vision offered by Chow in relation to the Hong Kong context may provide a very different point of departure. It is not only the native culture that has been severely scrutinized by the use of Western language and theory, but also the 'superior' value of mainstream Western culture is disturbed and challenged by the marginalized ethnic colonized subject in an inverted form. It may look rather similar to Homi Bhabha's notion of colonial mimicry which is, however, more performative and subversive in its orientation.

Without any doubt, white (wo)man's guilt has already substituted the traditional white man's burden today so that the critiques of evils and crimes brought on by the colonization effects, exploitations, and privileges of the West do not come from outside but originate in the self-centered, narcissistic West. So what irritates the non-West is, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, not only that "the West's continuous self-excoriation functions as a desperate attempt to re-assert [its] superiority" but also that "the West supplied the very standards by which it (and its critics) measures its own criminal past" (115). But then, what does it mean for the ethnic colonized subject to imitate this Western self-criticism?

What is at stake in such imitation is to appropriate and rearticulate Western theories the way they should be in the sense that, in reality, their epistemology and scope have always excluded the oppressed, marginalized and colonized ethnic from the notion of "equaliberty"; a term used by Étienne Balibar to denote their inseparability (165). In other words, what the ethnic attempts to 'repeat' is the redemption of a promise, an ideal or a dimension of liberation that is contained but not yet realized in Western theory. Chow would probably call any imitation of the master that renders a temporal noncoincidence and deferment visible a 'creative reinvention,' which is to say, "the very opposite of a purely mechanical and passive forced accommodation" ("Reading Derrida" 222). For Chow, the power of Western theory lies not in a series of abstract, universally applicable features; it has been reinvented and redefined by Chow in such a way that not only the obvious has been modeled and reiterated but also the unsaid and undone are retrieved and 'repeated' in specific contexts.

This reinvention or 'repetition' not only helps the ethnic survive the hierarchical judgments and rigid structures imposed by colonialism, but also shows the dominant system to be spectral rather than fully ontologized, since

the political egalitarian vision and the emancipatory tradition of Western knowledge have never been universally substantialized. In short, "the master himself is never completely master" (Ibid. 223) because he fails to deliver the liberation attempts and intentionally misses chances for realizing universal revolution. Imitation, on the part of the ethnic, is then a retroactive redemption —a leap back to an 'origin' where the real universal emancipatory moment failed or was missed. In other words, the imitation or repetition is actually a retrieval of an act that was repressed, forgotten by, or excluded from the system of knowledge established and maintained by the West.

The strategy Chow employs is not to dismiss or resist Western theory; although she also insists that there should be "a kind of alterity that remains outside the religious, philosophical, literary, and cultural-political trajectories charted by [Western thinkers] in their shared orientations toward Christian benevolence and its secularist avatars" ("I Insist on the Christian Dimension" 245) by upholding or returning to the particularity of an enduring and unchanging native tradition or subject position prior to the arrival of Western imperialism and capitalist modernity. Instead, she chooses to 'imitate'—not necessarily to undermine the origin from within or to exceed its boundaries, but to 'repeat' and redeem its unfulfilled or not-yet-realized part by allowing it retroactively to become what it should have been. It is inadequate, from the beginning, to constitute oneself outside of the dominant Western tradition because any external critique or resistance, no matter how powerful it can be, does not aim at pushing the system to fully realize its sense of universality. Only by means of imitating and repeating the key elements of the 'equaliberty' tradition can the ethnic have access to elaborate, claim, and redefine a tradition that is supposed to be the exclusive right of the Westerner.

In David Mura's short story "Fictive Fragments of a Father and Son," a father of the Nisei generation is scrutinized in a first-person narration by his son. Having been interned during World War II, his father was suddenly convicted and sentenced to prison for a crime he did not know whether he had committed. His father is punished simply because of who he is. As an American-born Japanese, he has no particular tradition, but is like an empty vessel waiting to be filled with American pop culture and Western religion. In order to survive or even succeed in American society, his father attempts to be not merely 100 percent but 200 percent American. He converted to Christianity so as to gain a sense of belonging, and shortened his Japanese name to make it look like an English last name. By the son's account, his father's

American conversion is successful: he reached sixty; became a top executive; and seemingly has no problems with identity, past, or race. The so-called success of the Asian American so-called model minority is itself a story of conforming mimesis that ironically becomes an exemplar for other ethnic minorities. However, this drive to mimic may not sound as passive as it appears at face value. To be 'not 100 percent but 200 percent' Westernized: this thorough conformation to the West and such a complete pursuit of ideals officially espoused might create a harsh demand on the West to realize all its ideological promises, which in turn might really frighten the ideologues. This 'being more Western than the Westerner' not only pushes the system to extremes by exposing its dark underside, but it also generates conflicting senses of loss and the system's spectral presence.

In the process of imitating or repeating the actions of the master, a (post)colonial lack emerges deep inside the colonized imitator, who cannot help but mourn for the irrevocable loss of her native culture under the reflexivity of a borrowed or even imposed episteme; the melancholy may also haunt the Western master because his equaliberty claim, in light of the dedicated pursuit of his follower, remains unfinished and the tradition established through such a declaration of universal human freedom only designates an inconsistent practice and a failed promise. In other words, a (post)colonial lack is overlapped by a lack inherent in theorization itself, as if a revenant from outside has come inward to disturb Western theory. A double haunting should be recognized here: if the colonized imitator is confronted by the ghosts of her lost origin, over-imitation of the West also becomes a critique of the West itself. Chow's Hong Kong subject comes into existence in the guise of a phantom from another dimension, who disrupts the normal order of Western theory.

In her essay of mourning for her deceased mother, who worked as a radio broadcaster and scriptwriter (and who sometimes made cameo appearances in the films she wrote) in colonial Hong Kong from the early 1950s to the late 1970s, Chow associates her with a mosaic of disembodied voices and transient images: surprisingly, she saw her mother onscreen when she was five or six, but she could not understand why the audience in the movie theatre applauded her mother's appearance ("Playing on the Air" 109). Chow found out her mother was a celebrity only afterward. Although her mother's voice was heard over the radio by millions, the young Chow was not allowed to hear her because "her programs were aired during weeknights when the

menace of another new school day was at hand and when [Chow] had to go to bed without seeing mother come home" (Ibid. 124). The resonance of her mother's voice, in other words, is actually depresencing. Chow knew it was there but she never heard it herself. However, the young Chow saw her mother's image onscreen, yet had no clue why it was there. Her perplexity may resonate with the bafflement of the city's younger generation about Hong Kong's obfuscated history and their ancestors' pasts. The way Chow depicts the memories of her mother is revealing and fascinating.

Her mother's glamorous career in the local Cantonese-language entertainment industry, Chow relates, was emblematic of the ambivalent and transforming narrative modes of mass media from radio to film in the British colony, which (with the support of colonial authorities) paralleled the sociopolitical process of constructing a unique local cultural and linguistic identity through radio, film, and other popular forms for multilingual people from different parts of China. A separatist Hong Kong identity was being constructed to stabilize and serve the interests of colonial governance so as to alienate and alleviate the dominant influences from mainland China. Yet, the irony, as Chow's essay narrates, is that the local subjectivity built by the popular cultural forms could never be turned into a solid substance, and the popular media that coordinated and unified all the differences were losing their materiality and becoming more and more virtual as technology progressed. Although the presence of a radio voice or film image was in permanent flight, the stationary radio and television box sets operated by the London-originated Rediffusion company had also been replaced by portable radios and wireless broadcasting.

The point of origin or the referent of the past has become a ghost. When the daughter attempts a retrospective rapprochement with her mother (Chow confesses, "[as a child] I wanted to *be* her") ("Playing on the Air" 122, emphasis is original), her presence and all the interesting details surrounding her may have become 'the specificity of X,' through which signification may eventually lead to dissipation as a stable referent. The passionate attachment is there but the mother-object is no longer accessible, not fully itself, and is never in its self-presence. Perhaps, even when she was there, as Chow's narrative discloses, her presence was as elusive as the voice on the radio or the onscreen image. The loved but lost mother-object can only be conjured up as a phantom, much like the 'Hong Kong' in Chow's postcolonial discourse. Nonetheless, a de-ontologized phantom is not necessarily one of

lesser power. The last episode Chow mentions in her essay is her mother's shunning of a friend who made a sympathetic film about a Japanese family to commemorate the twenty-eighth anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. As a Chinese who underwent and witnessed the sufferings and traumas of Chinese people during World War II, her mother could not support her friend or promote the film and chose to remain silent. Her silence, Chow seems to tell us, was in marked contrast to the nationalist sentiments loudly proclaimed in today's world politics.

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Abstract

Hong Kong, the ex-British colony where postcolonial critic Rey Chow grew up and was educated, is merely a ghostly presence in her postcolonial critiques though it is always being made reference to. By no means can one say that the port city is relatively absent or it just occupies a minor place in Chow's discursive space. It is only that its presence or referentiality has been bracketed, and sometimes dismantled from the categorization of geopolitical determinant or particularism. In a way, 'Hong Kong' is more a sign that constitutes a certain alterity from within the bounds of subordination, thus creating room for radical theorization. Chow's discourse always attempts to find its own political position in between the appropriation of Western theory and the particularistic assertion of local, history-bound and culturally unique difference which is often understood as a kind of resistance to the former. As a result, the certitude of the particular identity of Hong Kong cannot be easily established. However, a spectral presence is produced and it urges us to reflect upon. The act of disavowing, however, may point to not only the subtle form of violence inherent in a system of representation that is historically intertwined with domination and exploitation, but also the lack of (temporal and ontological) self-coincidence in theoretical discourse itself. This essay examines the ambivalence or indeterminacy of 'Hong Kong' as a thing to be theorized in the postcolonial theory of Chow's writing.

Keywords: postcolonialism, Hong Kong, Rey Chow, specter, subjectivity

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