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BOOK REVIEW

Hong Kong Pop Culture in the 1980s: A Decade of Splendour

Yiu-Wai Chu. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2023. 304 pp. €129.00. ISBN 9789463728669

Anthony Fung

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China
Email: anthonyfung@cuhk.edu.hk

In this academic work, Yiu-Wai Chu situates Hong Kong's popular culture – encompassing television drama, cinema, pop music, fashion, dance and city magazines – within the historical context of the 1980s. This period represents a liminal moment following Deng Xiaoping's assurance of Hong Kong's future encapsulated in the phrase "horseracing and dancing as usual." It is also the era that preceded the economic ascendance of China, during which the mainland's burgeoning market – if not its politics – began to overshadow and absorb Hong Kong's (popular) culture, including its illustrious entertainment industry. Ironically, before China's rise in the 2000s, Hong Kong's entertainment scene was dominant in the Chinese market. Chu's narrative underscores the 1980s as a "golden era" for Hong Kong while refuting Ackbar Abbas's argument regarding the "disappearance" of Hong Kong after 1997 (*Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Hong Kong University Press, 1997). In alignment with Leo Lee's insights in *City Between Worlds* (Belknap Press, 2010), Chu suggests that Hong Kong's fate hinges on the collective awareness and preservation of its cultural values by its people, including himself.

Strictly speaking, this is not a conventional academic book. Chu admits that the examples of popular culture he chose from the 1980s for analysis may not be the most representative, and many facets of this culture remain undiscussed. Instead, these cases are personal choices that resonate with Chu's own "sense of belonging." The book does not aim to present a comprehensive chronological development of Hong Kong's popular culture. Nor does Chu seek to produce a historical checklist of the splendour of 1980s popular culture for contemporary readers to appreciate artists, singers, movie plots, television drama episodes and other influential media of that era. Such detailed documentation has likely been covered extensively in various works on popular music studies by Chu and many of his fellow Hong Kong scholars. By narrating the aspects of popular culture that he remembers and has selected, Chu reconnects the political circumstances and socio-economic changes of Hong Kong with the pop songs, artists and texts that mattered to him from the perspective of a local. Putting aside the empirical objectivity of academic research, Chu's re-imagination of 1980s popular culture and his mapping of it onto memorable historical and political moments in Hong Kong is meaningful to the local audience. As someone who grew up during the same era, I believe that Chu's selection of "samples" is far from random. These choices are deliberate, articulating synchronously with historical moments that provoked emigration, shook the stock market, or restored political confidence. For instance, Ho Yim's *Homecoming* (1984) can be seen as a signal of emigration as an option before China's resumption of Hong Kong's sovereignty, while the fever for the club Disco Disco and the scene it epitomized reassured locals with the promise of Hong Kong's continuity.

To Chu, the popular cultures of the 1980s were not mere short-term fads or incidents that happened inadvertently during a historical bloc. Unlike scholars such as Rey Chow and Shu-mei Shih, who attempt to theorize nostalgia for pre-1997 Hong Kong – a topic Chu discusses in his book

(p. 46) – he treats the 1980s as a significant chapter in Hong Kong's cultural history. This approach illustrates the multiplicity and diversity of Hong Kong culture without attempting to fit it into a theoretical framework of nostalgia.

Chu argues that television stations, Hong Kong cinemas, the Cantopop scene, fashion and everyday life culture collectively created a form of "creative synergies" that shaped popular culture in the 1980s. This eclectic mix of popular culture elements, simultaneously competing and complementing each other, exemplifies the concept of "creative hybridizations" (p. 134). This notion captures the fusion of cultural forms (e.g. music) with local culture, blending Asian and Western influences, national and global trends, and past and present sensibilities. Chu appears to use the vibrant popular culture of 1980s Hong Kong to address a contemporary question: "Is Hong Kong popular culture dead?" He suggests that as long as Hong Kong culture remains open to change – continuing to hybridize or be hybridized as it did in the 1980s – its momentum can be sustained, felt and palpated. Even in the face of the dominant mainland Chinese culture today, Hong Kong culture continues to evolve and produce new expressions. History has shown that Hong Kong possesses a unique experience of cultural hybridization (p. 50), enabling its culture to persist and innovate.

If I were to pinpoint a weakness of Chu's book, it would be that his portrayal of Hong Kong's popular culture in the 1980s seems somewhat restricted. As a matter of fact, the vibrancy of Hong Kong's popular culture during that era extended to non-mainstream and even socially non-acceptable voices or ideologies, including underground bands, porn magazines and cult films, to name a few. People of that time were bolder and more explicit in their daily discourse, humour, social innuendos and political ridicule than Chu interprets and imagines. While it is accurate to attribute the vigour of Hong Kong's popular culture to its quick adaptation and readiness for hybridization, the essence of this culture also includes its high tolerance, inclusivity and openness. These qualities allowed for a diverse and rich cultural landscape that went beyond the mainstream, embracing various forms of expression and dissent that contributed significantly to the cultural landscape of the time.

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