CHINAMADE BRIEF

Infrastructural Power, Hong Kong, and Global China

Darren Byler, October 2020

Figure 1. West Kowloon China Railways High-speed Rail Station on October 1, 2018 (Image credit: Wikicommons)

On September 23, 2018 the Guangzhou–Shenzhen–Hong Kong Express Rail Link officially opened—linking Mainland China to downtown Hong Kong by high-speed rail. This $11 billion project, built over nearly 9 years, did more than facilitate travel. It also brought Chinese territorial sovereignty right into Kowloon. Now, there is a new Chinese border inside the wave-like steel folds of the gleaming station, where travelers are subject to Chinese laws.

As the sociologist Ching Kwan Lee argued in a September 2020 China Made lecture titled "Hong Kong: Global China's Restive Frontier," the past decade of Chinese infrastructure projects, such as the high speed rail station, are part of the colonial project to remake Hong Kong in China's image. [1] "They wanted

[1] *Note: The impetus for this essay was a recent China Made lecture by the sociologist Ching Kwan Lee, the ideas expressed, however, are those of the author.*

direct access to downtown Hong Kong." Lee noted, "As soon as you enter the custom areas inside train station you are under Chinese law. It was the extraterritoriality of the project that caused popular outrage and protests." Both sides of this project—Hong Kong protestors and Chinese authorities—understood something about the way power was carried by the built environment.

Listening to Lee's discussion of the imposition of new infrastructure systems brought to mind conceptualizations of infrastructural power: the way the dispositions of built systems can enhance a state's influence over a society (Mann 1984; Easterling 2016). By building itself into the lives of citizens and introducing a new regime of costs and benefits through this imposition, an infrastructural state begins to shape the right to the city, the right to transport, the right to work and so on. Infrastructure power—a materialist reframing of what Foucault might refer to as biopower (Foucault 2007)—announces the priorities of a state: who and what is authorized to move and act, whose lives and what materials are valued. Paying attention to infrastructural power adds another dimension to recent discussions of Hong Kong which focus on human rights, legal reform, democracy and protest (Davis 2020; Wasserstrom 2020). It opens up a materialist analytic of China's colonial territorialization of Hong Kong.

The highspeed rail line that announced China's intention to transform Hong Kong was also at the center of Hong Kong's decolonial movement. Back in 2009, when the new express rail-line was proposed, thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators took to the streets. It was clear to them that the project was producing redundant railway capacity, and dumping extra infrastructure from Mainland companies into Hong Kong at the expense of Hong Kong taxpayers. The protestors used many of the tactics typical of democratic protest—petitions, marches, hunger-strikes, rallies—but they also began to innovate.

Over several weekends in January 2010, they adapted a Tibetan votive practice, prostrating every 26 steps to protest each kilometer of the proposed rail line. Their protests began to mirror the built environment in other ways too. Using social media they organized a coordinated blockade of the Hong Kong Legislative Council Building trapping pro-Beijing lawmakers inside for over a day. They drew and published online maps of the locations of police and protesters. They carried plastic wrap to cover their faces against pepper spray. They chanted "shame" when the police escorted the lawmakers out and began beating protestors.

This protest, over ten years ago, inspired Joshua Wong and many other high school students 2 years later to protest the introduction of propaganda materials into Hong Kong high-school text books. This in turn inspired the 2014 Umbrella Movement which in turn inspired the Anti-Extradition protests of 2019. Each successive protest has grown in scale and become more sophisticated in its tactics. It has produced a generation of young Hong Kongers who have come of age in the midst of radical political action. Protest is now mainstream in Hong Kong—though now dangerous due to a 2020 National Security Law.

Lee argues that this history is important not only because it shows us how social movements take form, but also because it speaks to the role of infrastructural power in activating decolonial politics. It also demonstrate the limits and strategies of global China.

Global China

As Lee (2017a) has shown in a recent monograph, global China should not be thought of primarily as a geographic or regional phenomenon but as a field of power. The forms of investment and governance strategies deployed within the magnetic pull of the sphere of influence outside of China are very closely connected to systems inside China. This is not to say that Chinese state and corporate actors are attempting to replicate the systems they use in China in non-Chinese places exactly, but rather domestic strategies inform and shape Chinese power strategies in other places (Oakes 2019).

Figure 2. The Hong Kong section of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge under construction in 2015 off the coast of Lantau Island. (Image Credit: Wikicommons)

It is important to understand that Chinese domestic development over the past three decades has been fueled by an anarchic system of local competition. Provincial, city and prefectural governments have competed with each other to lead in economic growth and for central state investment in infrastructural development. As Lee demonstrated in her 2007 monograph on labor struggle and the rebirth of Chinese capitalism following the decline of state socialism, the cutthroat competition between localities has led to many redundancies, or forms of overaccumulation, in a wide variety of sectors (see also Lee 2017b). When the domestic market for real estate, energy, and other products is saturated and profit rates are falling, provincial authorities, ministries, state owned enterprises and private companies all have an interest in lobbying the central government to promote outbound investment around the globe. Since cadre promotion in local divisions of the Communist Party are now always tied to growth, the outward propulsion of Chinese state and private capital has built in momentum.

As Lee noted in her talk, reiterating some of the conceptual analytic of her 2018 book, around 2008 as a recession took hold of North America and Western Europe, central leaders in China began to realize that they needed to build technological capacity in order to reposition themselves in the value chain of global capitalism. This meant that they needed to begin to position themselves to set global standards; and they saw that they had a key strategic advantage in infrastructure development—something that they had been developing throughout China over the past decade. The force of global China then is driven by a top-down need for economic growth, and an implicit drive to legitimate the Chinese political system, but it is also driven by locally positioned private and state owned companies who lobby for this outward expansion.

Hong Kong, Lee argues, has become a key site in this field of capital-driven political power. As in many locations where the global China field of power is being deployed—from Southeast Asia to Africa, a pattern of a loose set of practices is beginning to emerge. This tool box or playbook is comprised of three primary domains: economic investment, patron-clientelism, and institution building.

First Chinese state capital is invested in infrastructure projects ranging from roads and dams to "safe city" surveillance systems and internet access. This form of economic state-craft and multinational corporate development both releases an overaccumulation of capital from the sending location in China and builds a material basis from which additional relations of power or influence are solidified and, potentially, can be institutionalized.

The second aspect of the toolbox is the development of interpersonal relationships with key leaders in positions of power in the receiving locality; or in some cases with diaspora Chinese who are positioned at the grassroots of society. These relationships are cultivated in a variety of ways, but financial incentives in the form of gifts, lucrative jobs and personal investments appear to dominate this aspect of global China expansion. The third aspect is deployed largely through discourse and institutions that disseminate that discourse. Through newspapers and television, social media and films, changes to text books, and reshaping of official discourse, Chinese authorities attempt to unify thought in a way that further cements power relations.

In Hong Kong these practices can be seen more clearly than in other locations, because the Chinese state has ultimate sovereignty over the territory. As Lee noted in her talk, "exporting overcapacity to Hong Kong is much easier than to other states where they have to deal with another sovereign political system."

The world's longest bridge, which connects a key Hong Kong transportation infrastructure—the Hong Kong airport—to the Mainland via Macao, is another example of the way infrastructural power is used to assert symbolic material dominance into Hong Kong. The 55 kilometer bridge was built by a consortium led by the China Highway Planning and Design Institute at a cost of nearly $18 billion to Hong Kong taxpayers. As Lee noted the bridge does multiple types of global China work: first, at the level of formal politics, it symbolizes the integration of Hong Kong and Macao with the Chinese city of Zhuhai. But it also builds capacity for further development. Even before the bridge was completed the state-owned enterprises which were given contracts to build it had turned their production lines to the construction of similar bridges in Norway and elsewhere. "Now this new generation of bridges will be built to Chinese standards," Lee said, "This is the key."

When Does Global China Become Colonial?

On July 1, 2020 a barge appeared in Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor. On the sides of shipping containers stacked four high, government officials draped red banners with the giant yellow characters "Celebrate the National Security Law" (贺国安立法). Overnight, on the twenty-third anniversary of the British handover of Hong Kong to China, unharmonious political views and symbols became illegal, including support for Hong Kong, Taiwan, Uyghur and Tibetan autonomy. The announcement, projected though infrastructural power at the scale of the population, instantiated the reorientation of Hong Kong institutions and authorities away from democratic values and toward global China.

Throughout her scholarship Lee has been careful to differentiate between the Chinese model of development characterized by global China and colonial or imperial projects. Since colonial systems imply a process of occupation, dispossession and domination, many global China projects do not rise to the level of colonization. Instead, Chinese infrastructure projects may begin to build forms of economic influence, and may bring groups of Chinese citizens to build and maintain them, but the forms of power

they exert in the local politics and institutions of other nations are often limited. As Ivan Franceschini (2020) has shown in a recent case study of construction workers in Cambodia, both Chinese and Cambodian workers employed by Chinese companies are exploited by their employers, though Cambodian workers are paid far less than their Chinese counterparts. Yet while Chinese media, financing and corporations have begun to shape Cambodian society, they have yet to produce a feeling of

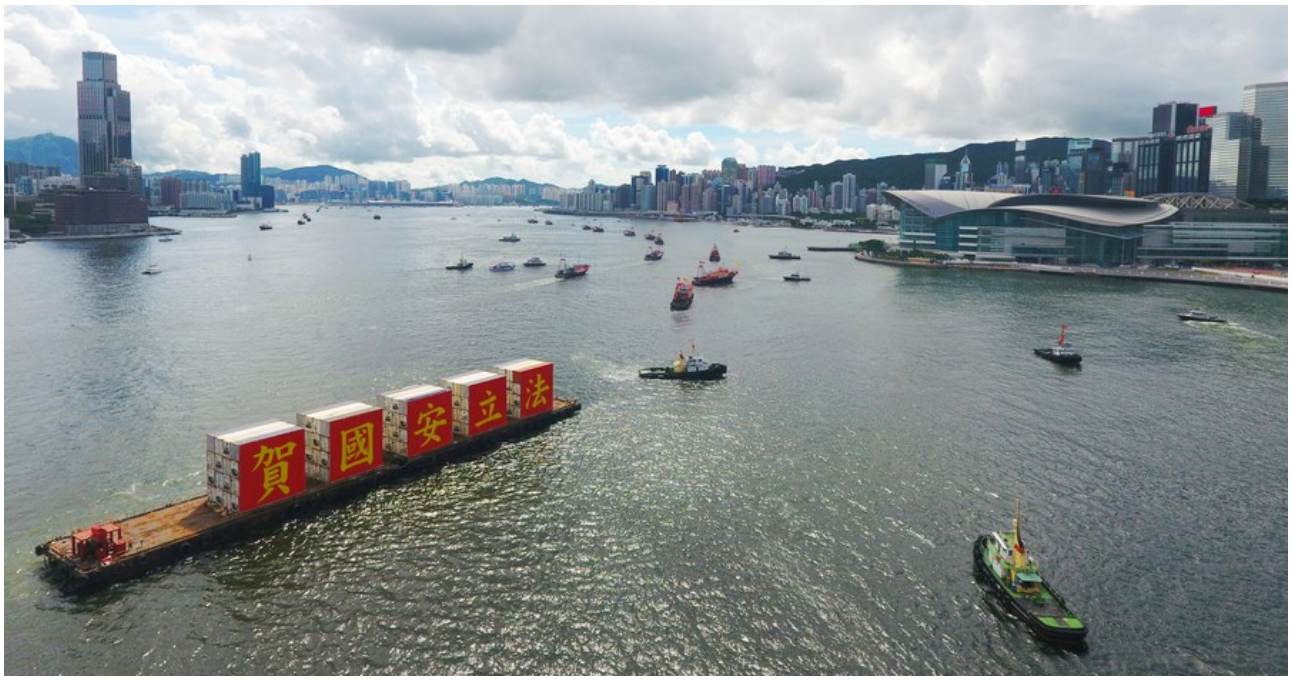

Figure 3. A barge and shipping containers support the banners "Celebrate the National Security Law" in Victoria Harbor on July 1, 2020. (Image Credit: Chinese Embassy of Canada)

occupation, domination, or even widespread dispossession. Most Cambodian social institutions—language, education, religion, police, civil service—remain intact though underfunded and often failing. Furthermore, as Miriam Driessen (2019) has shown, in still other cases, in places like Ethiopia, local workers can use local legal systems to protect themselves from Chinese labor regimes.

The case of Hong Kong is different. Here global China takes on the shape of an internal colonial project. This, Lee argues, is shown through institutional transplant and capture. This process of norms and personnel replacement is a key element of colonization by a sovereign power. Because Chinese authorities are ultimately accountable to no countervailing power, they have found ways to capture key institutions such as the police, the media, the education system, civil service sector, and election systems. "Looking at institutional transplant and capture is the key to diagnosing a colonial project," Lee remarked.

A primary way they have done this is through a combination of first and second aspects of the global China toolbox: economic statecraft and patron-clientelism. The infrastructure of Hong Kong is increasingly oriented toward the Mainland. As Carolyn Cartier (2020) has shown, by building "cultural facilities" that sponsor investment in Hong Kong's West Kowloon Arts District, Chinese state planners are using creative industries as a tool of knowledge production which "produce[s] reality by aestheticizing it." A quintessential example of this, Cartier suggests, is the late-stage inclusion of a branch of the National Palace Museum—placing material culture curated in Beijing on display in Hong Kong as a way of indexing center-periphery power. Similarly, as Lee noted in her talk (see also Toland 2020), an

estimated $63 billion project to create an artificial island for prime real estate in Hong Kong will have the effect not of reducing housing cost pressure, but rather open up new space for Mainland investors to decenter the urban core of Hong Kong.

To summarize, over the past decade major private institutions and development projects throughout the city have been bought by Mainland investors. Furthermore, Hong Kong elites who maintain positions of power have also been bought off by offers too good to refuse. Those that refuse have been pushed to the side. Increasingly, those in command in Hong Kong today—Carrie Lam and her supporters—now mimic the behavior and power relation of those who control them (see Bhabha 1994). Weaponized with the new National Security Law, the state has also begun to limit freedom of expression and assembly. It has also further transformed curriculum in primary and secondary schools.

Social Institutions of Anti-Politics

Yet, at the same time that all of this has been established, paradoxically Hong Kong has become the epicenter of resistance to global China. Because an entire generation of Hong Kongers have come of age in a time of protest over time they have increased their personal political capacity and their demands have been radicalized. "Hong Kong has come into itself," Lee noted. "The idea of an independent Hong Kong has moved from the fringe to the mainstream of people's political imagination, especially among the younger generation."

In addiction the reflexivity that is fostered by these cascading protests leads to a capacity to correct past mistakes. While, following the passage of the 2020 National Security Law the Hong Kong protest has shifted to anti-politics and reducing casualties, under the surface in neighborhoods and behind closed-doors a radical politics is simmering. "Hong Kong is the most restive frontier of global China, because they have built the most capacity to push back," Lee remarked. "This is in part because it is a global city. It is a structural central in global capitalism, so there are many powerful stakeholders."

Hong Kong has information infrastructure at a level that is at the cutting edge of global capacity. As a financial center, the world's wealthiest people, including Chinese billionaires, are forced to care about protest. As a result Hong Kong remains a key site for the way the contradictions of global private capital meet Chinese state capital. These fissures create an opening. For instance they make it difficult for Hong Kongers to be replaced. This is a marked difference from sites of Chinese internal settler colonialism, Tibet and Xinjiang.

The colonization of those locations began too with economic investment in infrastructure. As Emily Yeh (2013) has shown, in Tibet the largely unwanted gift of infrastructure development is what began the process. Similarly, in Xinjiang, the hard infrastructures of roads, rail and pipelines is what first bought settlers from other parts of China into Uyghur majority areas in the 1990s and 2000s (Byler 2018). Yet it was the replacement of indigenous political leaders and educators at the grassroots level with loyal Chinese citizens from elsewhere in China, coupled with the dislocation of hundreds of thousands of native peoples from their families, that has pushed Tibetans and Uyghurs toward forms of what Patrick Wolfe (2006) refers to as social elimination. With new leaders in place at the level of neighborhood watch units or work brigades, a system of human and technical surveillance is able to enact a new regime of truth (Byler 2018).

In Hong Kong however communities at the grassroots level remain intact even as they are targeted through patron to client relations, and those in higher levels of command are often coopted. Drawing on his work in Jakarta the scholar AbdouMaliq Simone (2016) argues that intersubjective relations are what make human communities resilient in midst of dramatic changes in infrastructural power. He found that although changes to urban space and livelihoods can narrow the possibilities for community organizing, "processes of taking care" can still survive through forms of strategic invisibility, or anti-politics as Lee

put it. Such acts can refuse colonial and capitalist frontier making because they operate out of an interpersonal ethnics of care that is at least partially outside of the gaze of the state. The cold logics of infrastructural power—geared toward extraction and efficiency—can be turned against themselves as long as families and communities remain intact.

At its core Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan international city. Transforming it may come only at the cost of destroying this ethos. Even coopted authorities such as Carrie Lam must understand this. In order to understand the future of Hong Kong and the future of global China, it is important to develop careful analytics that see relations of power and strategies of adaptation of resistance. This means thinking deeply about global China, not as a homogenous colonial project but one that deploys particular strategies with uneven results. Moving to the scale of global internationalist movements of solidarity, it also means developing a critical awareness of the strategies of other global states in deploying infrastructural power, replacing institutions, and projecting symbolic dominance onto less powerful states. There is a lesson to be learned about infrastructural power—whether projected by global China or global United States—in the communities of Hong Kong.

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