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A Metropolis in Transition:
The Context of the Search
for a Cultural Identity'

'Hong Kong people rule Hong Kong'2

Hong Kong: The Geographic and Historical Context

This chapter relates the historical development and cultural background of Hong Kong to the search for a cultural identity among the people of Hong Kong. The Chinese yàn (Py: yīn, 隱) and western yèuhung (Py: yáng, 陽) cultures interact to create the unique culture of Hong Kong and the identity of Hong Kong Chinese. This social reality has influenced, and will continue to influence, the nature of transitions in other spheres — political, press media and public opinion, health care, the family and the individual. The evolution of cultural identity of Hong Kong Chinese can also be seen in the changing concepts of mental health and illness, and the healing methods. This will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

Hong Kong is a metropolitan city and one of the world’s economic and financial centres. It is situated at the south-eastern tip of the mainland of China and at the entry of the Pearl River, which flows from the northern highland of Guǎngdōng Province and passes through Guǎngzhōu. From 1842 to July 1997 Hong Kong was a British colony. Its total area is about 1100 square kilometres and includes Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, the New Territories and Islands. In mid-1999, the population stood at 6.72 million and migration, mainly from the mainland, is the major source of population growth (Census and Statistics Department, 2000). Hong Kong’s population is over 95 per cent Chinese, with the rest being ethnic Indians and Pakistanis, and people of European descent.

1. I acknowledge the significant contributions made by Dr Maureen H. Fitzgerald to the content of this chapter. She deserves to be honoured as the co-author.

2. This slogan was first coined by Dèng Xiāoping (邓小平), the late paramount leader of China. Subsequently, it has often been used, prior to and after the transition of sovereignty, to signify the mainland China government’s assurance to the Hong Kong people that they will not interfere with local affairs.
Hong Kong was originally a fishing village. Its cultural, social and political developments were linked with the mainland of China until the first British fleet landed in 1840. At that time there were only a few thousand people scattered around Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula (X.J. Lù, 1995). The demand for more open trading and the sale of opium by the British brought the existing Sino-British conflicts into the open. The First Opium War broke out in 1841 and Imperial China (Qìng Empire) was defeated. In the peace treaty signed in 1842, China had to cede Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon peninsula to the British as one of the settlement terms. Further conflicts and wars broke out because the Qìng Court was too weak to defend itself. In the subsequent 'peace treaties' the rest of Hong Kong, including the outer islands and the New Territories, was leased to the British government for ninety-nine years commencing in 1898. British administrative structures, the judiciary and education systems were gradually put in place to secure control.

The population went through rapid growth, first from refugees arriving from mainland China as wars broke out among the warlords, then due to the Japanese invasion, and later as a result of the civil war between the Communists and the Republican (Kuomintang) armies that lasted till 1949. For a long time Chinese immigrants tended to regard Hong Kong as a transitional place only. They planned to return to the mainland when the situation improved or to continue their journey of migration to other countries. However, for various reasons, they remained and established families or resettled their families from the mainland.

For a long time, the transitional mentality of the Hong Kong Chinese indirectly helped the British to establish mechanisms to legitimise their rule with little resistance (Lau & Kuan, 1991). The measures that were implemented to establish colonial dominance over Hong Kong included the presence of military force, the adoption of Common Laws and elements of independence in the judicial system, the creation of subtle versions of the doctrine of the economic prowess and cultural superiority of white people, and establishing an elitist educational system that favoured the use of English language in schools and work places (Hu, 1998; Lau & Kuan, 1991). In the health care arena, only the practice of western medicine was given official recognition, while the practice of traditional Chinese medicine was neither officially recognised and regulated, nor suppressed. These measures prevailed until 1984 when the Sino-British Joint-Declaration was signed for transferring wùih gwài (Py: húi guī, 回歸, returning, in China's word) the sovereignty of Hong Kong to China on the first of July, 1997.

**The Political Transition in Hong Kong:**

*One-country-two-systems*

Prior to the transition of sovereignty, the British colonial system, which can be represented by the Yang force, was dominant in Hong Kong. Despite the upheaval
that occurred in mainland China after 1949, the Chinese political system, the Yin force, had little influence on local politics until a decade prior to the changeover. The Chinese political influence found a way to infiltrate into the local scene through the pro-China intellectuals and unionists. However, it had never been able to establish a strong power base under the strict colonial passive process of ‘westernisation’ of the Hong Kong people. Nevertheless, this western dominance was destined to change after 1997 when the pro-China groups gradually regained their influence and political power. Actually, the westerners, who were sceptical of the transition and China’s intentions, were the first group to perceive that things were changing in this direction. Hong Kong journalist, Chris Young cried out his concern under the news headline, ‘In Danger of Losing Our Own Identity’ (South China Morning Post, 3 July, 1999). He concluded that, after reviewing a series of public opinion polls, there were significant changes occurring, that confidence in Hong Kong’s future and in the policy of ‘one-country-two-systems’ had fallen across the board, and that Hong Kong was becoming more like one of the cities in mainland China. In another example, The New York Times on 1 January 1999 stated: ‘After two years, Hong Kong looks more like China’. On the same day, the Los Angeles Times also concluded: ‘Overall, Hong Kong seems to be losing some of its vibrancy, not just in politics but in the economic realm ... For years, Hong Kong was the most dynamic city in Asia. Now, it seems to be slowly drifting into more modes, a subdued future in which it will become merely the most dynamic city in the Cantonese-speaking part of China.’

Although not all the local Hong Kong Chinese share these alarming claims, changes are inevitable as the new and the old political structures interact and negotiate a new balance point. One obvious and amusing change in the local political scene is the position of those people and political groups that had influential power during the colonial time. They often backed the government’s policies on the pace of the development of democracy, particularly in the last decade before the changeover. They have now become abandoned children who no longer hold a significant power base in the new administrative structure. On the opposite side, the pro-China group, which includes a few prominent left-wing unionists and business people and which had been suppressed or ignored by the colonial government, is now an influential group. The new administration depends on this group for support and for balancing the pressure from the democrats.

On one hand, China needs to preserve the economic status and financial structure of Hong Kong to help it to enter the world market. This is one of the reasons it agreed to guarantee in the Sino-British Joint Declaration that the existing economic, judicial and political systems remain unchanged for fifty years, which was supposed to ensure a smooth transition of sovereignty. On the other hand, the ideology and lifestyle differences between the two places do create tensions at times. In particular, the Chinese government guards against the democratic system and ideology infiltrating into the mainland. It keeps a close check on the
development of democracy through the new administration in Hong Kong, as well as deferring the development of a general-elected Legislative Council and restricting its power.

A new political system is gradually emerging as the two systems are evolving and interacting to find an equilibrium point. Certainly the new political system in Hong Kong will not be either China’s system or the previous colonial system, but will be a system with a unique character of its own. This political interplay of two major political forces can be represented well by the Yin and Yang analogy. This is also well demonstrated through the searching for identity among the Hong Kong Chinese. Before we can identify the Hong Kong Chinese, we may question what we mean by the word ‘Chinese’? Does it mean the specific race, the culture or just the people in China? Are there unique characteristics that tie all Chinese together?

**Chinese People and Chinese Culture: Which Chinese Are We Talking About?**

Not only among westerners but also among Chinese, there is often a take-it-for-granted view on the uniqueness of Chinese culture. Both groups tend not to differentiate the cultural differences among Chinese people. Culture is dynamic and ever changing. It is also shaped by political, social and economic changes. It is difficult to define exactly what Chinese culture is without oversimplifying and falling into a narrow-minded and stereotyped definition of Chinese characteristics. Despite this statement, I have to accept that there is a thread, which is made up of cultural abstracts, that link all the Chinese, and gives them a general identity no matter where they live (Tseng, Lin & Yeh, 1995; Yang, 1988). Tajfel, an English social psychologist, suggests that the reason a person chooses to remain in, or identify with, a social group is because the group can offer him/her pride and substance to improve his/her own self-image (Tajfel, 1974).

So, what is Chinese? We need to define who the Chinese are. Are we referring to ethnicity, or people who live within a certain geographic boundary, or just a group of people who share a few common cultural values and customary practices? Helen Siu (蕭鳳霞), professor of anthropology at Yale University, states that the identity of Chinese people consists of cultural, geographical, political, historical and national facets (Siu, 1996). She maintains that ‘Chinese’ does not form a set of innate and fixed factors or elements, and the social and political meanings of being a Chinese person developed through continuing negotiations and compromises in different times and contexts (Siu, 1996, p. 18).

Owen (1997) criticises the illusions of unity of the past in Chinese history. He argues that we need to dispel the myth or stereotyping of ‘Chinese culture’ as a unique thing that exists.
Untangling the Threads: Perspectives on Mental Health in Chinese Communities

There never was a single thing called ‘Chinese culture’ in the way we often use the term. There never was a single body of values, beliefs, and practices to be characterised as internally coherent and consistent through time, essentially native, and impervious to outside influence. (p. 10)

Owen believes that the idea of ‘traditional’ Chinese culture was a modern necessity, either to serve as an adversary to be rejected in modernisation, or as a nostalgic utopia forever lost. People believe in its existence as a way of thinking about themselves in comparing current modernity to the past — the ‘pre-modern’ world with some imagined unity of the past, a past that is now over for good (Owen, 1997, p. 11). Nevertheless, despite variations in specific content, a belief in the existence of a unique ‘traditional’ culture is one of the threads that tie all the Chinese together.

Barbara Ward (1985) was one of the earliest anthropologists to make a systematic study of modern Hong Kong. She explained the phenomenon of why Chinese tend to perceive a unity in Chineseness by referring to the conscious model of the social system. The Chinese carry this model in their minds in order to explain, predict, or justify their behaviours as ‘Chinese’. However, people in different locations of China have different ideas about what it means to be ‘Chinese’. There are, therefore, a variety of conscious models, ‘a number of different Chinese ideal patterns varying in time and space with varying historical development and the demands of particular occupations and environments’ (Ward, 1985, p. 42).

The Chinese construct a model of other groups, as distinct from the model of their own way of doing things. Ward calls this their ‘immediate model’. Thus, they carry in their minds an ideal or ideological model of ‘Chinese-ness’, their observer models of other Chinese groups and their immediate model of themselves, which may vary considerably from other groups and from the ideal model. Only outsiders can observe the differences between immediate models; what a Chinese layperson compares is one’s own immediate model of his/her own social arrangements with one’s own ‘observer’s’ model of the other person (Ward, 1985, p. 51). This may explain why Chinese, despite being aware of variations among themselves, still see themselves as a homogenous group sharing a unique culture when compared to those non-Chinese groups, no matter whether they are in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan or overseas.

The Search for Cultural Identity among Hong Kong Chinese

To a great extent Hong Kong is still predominantly a Chinese society, despite its being under British rule for nearly 150 years. Despite the subtle changes that have taken place in the political and social systems during the colonial period, culturally, many traditional values and customs are still preserved. Nevertheless, these
traditional values have been ‘modernised’ and transformed through the cultural interaction of East and West in this city (Jin Yàoji, 金耀基, 1997). Therefore, some of the current values and beliefs held by the Hong Kong Chinese are different from the ‘traditional’ ones. Conversely, in some instances one can say the Hong Kong Chinese are more Chinese than the Chinese in mainland China. This is because over time the communist system and various political and social movements in mainland China have changed many traditional values, as well as social structure and customary practices (Siu, 1996).

Nevertheless, there are opponents to the notion of a Hong Kong culture. Wú (Wú Kāngmín, 1996), a local popular pro-China commentator, denied the existence of Hong Kong culture and claimed that Hong Kong’s uniqueness is only in terms of a lifestyle, which is created by economic success. Others also argue that there is a lack of a ‘unified, coherent cultural foundation’ that allows for the development of a cultural identity of Hong Kong (Chan, 1994, p. 447; 1995; Lű, 1997).

On the contrary, given the earlier discussion on the concept of culture, one cannot deny that Hong Kong has developed a certain cultural uniqueness through the East encountering the West. Over the years, many cultural conflicts have been resolved by compromise, adaptation and integration to yield a unique culture under the colonial administration. On the one hand, the values of familialism, hard work and a high sense of achievement that have been part of the Chinese culture still prevail in Hong Kong. On the other hand, western concepts of individual rights, social justice, law and citizen’s duties and wellbeing are highly respected and valued by Hèung Góng yành (Py: Xiàng Gǎng rén, 香港人, the people of Hong Kong). Words that are often used to describe the uniqueness of Hong Kong people include opportunistic, easily adaptable, hardworking, entrepreneurial and achievement-oriented. Lau and Kuan (1991) point out that the Chinese society of Hong Kong possesses characteristics that are unique and different from traditional and modern Chinese society. They summarise those unique characteristics as follows:

On the whole, the Chinese society of Hong Kong differs from traditional and modern Chinese society in many essential ways: its high degree of modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation; its dominance by market forces; the erosion of tradition; the adapted changes in the family and other primary and quasi-primary structures; the lack of a moralising elite and the dominance of an economic elite; the fluidity of society and the extent of social mobility; the self-select character of the immigrant-settlers; the high standard of living; the exposure to foreign influence; the rapidity of social change and its political and economic dependence. Its ‘borrowed time, borrowed place’ (Hughes, 1976) character, grossly magnified by the 1997 malaise, can in fact stand alone to differentiate Hong Kong sharply from (mainland) China. The high degree of societal autonomy from the state and the more or less spontaneous development of society are also an experience which modern China has yet to undergo. (Lau & Kuan, 1991, p. 40)
However, not until the past decade has the search for cultural identity been a prominent matter among the people of Hong Kong. Many came as refugees to escape from wars or famine on the mainland and thought that Hong Kong was only a transitional place. They were waiting for the opportunity to move overseas or assumed they would move back when the conditions on the mainland, more specifically their gā hèung (Pý: jiā xiāng, 家鄉, homeland), had improved. This belief was quite commonly held among those Chinese immigrants who came after 1949 (Siu, 1996). Nonetheless, the identity as the people of Hong Kong emerged slowly due to political conditions and campaigns launched by the colonial government to counteract the rising identification with mainland Chinese. This identification was particularly strong among the low-paid factory workers during the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and among the intellectuals since the early 1970s. A few cultural campaigns were launched after the riots of 1967 to reinstate the uniqueness of being Xiānggāng rén; these included the Hong Kong Festivals, the Clean Hong Kong Campaigns, and the ‘Hong Kong is my home’ Campaigns. Despite these lukewarm attempts by the colonial government to have people develop a sense of belonging to Hong Kong, both the British and Chinese governments were apprehensive about acknowledging a distinctive Hong Kong culture. A good example is in the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984. In this agreement there is no such word as ‘people’ of Hong Kong. Indeed, the population is described in neutral term as ‘inhabitants’ or ‘residents,’ while local culture is rendered merely as a ‘lifestyle’ that was guaranteed to be unchanged for fifty years. Nevertheless, the identity of Xiānggāng rén developed vaguely among the local-born Chinese, who tend to see themselves as having unique characteristics that are not found in Chinese elsewhere (Evans & Tam, 1997; Lù, 1995; Lù, 1997; Siu, 1996).

The transition of sovereignty could be accomplished overnight, but the search for identity might be a long road, with many uncertainties for the people in Hong Kong. The signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 in preparation for the transition signified a turning point where Hong Kong people started to ask who they are. To face the changes brought about by the transition of sovereignty, Hong Kong Chinese have had to adjust their identity.

However, this adjustment has proven to be an ambivalent process, a ‘schizophrenic’ one if we use the literal translation of the term — jīng sān fān lih (Pý: jīng shén fèn liè, 精神分裂), or ‘mental disintegration’. Sceptical about the mainland’s political stability and the continuity of the current open economy, many Hong Kong people lost faith that the Chinese government would uphold the agreement to keep Hong Kong the same for fifty years after the transition. They started to migrate to other countries. The huge exodus was especially pronounced after the crackdown on the student movement in the ‘June 4 Massacre or Incident’ in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989.
For those who remain, there is a choice to be made in searching for and re-establishing their own identity; that is, to identify with mainland Chinese or to recognise the uniqueness of Hong Kong people. This dilemma remains unresolved to date. Recent incidents that highlight this struggle have divided local public opinion (Seymour, 1998). The search for Xiānggāng rén’s identity is criticised particularly by pro-China scholars (for example, Wú Kāngmín, 1996) who see this as an anti-unification and unpatriotic act that should be condemned. They believe that the differences and conflicts between Hong Kong and mainland China are mainly due to the long separation of Hong Kong from the motherland and that the uniqueness of Hong Kong is only in terms of lifestyle. The proponents of this argument are more optimistic that, because both places share the same cultural origin, the conflict and cultural mismatch will soon be smoothed out after there are more exchanges and dialogue (Wú Kāngmín, 1996; Zhōu, 1996).

What does the younger generation think regarding the Xiānggāng rén’s identity? A social survey was carried out by the Hong Kong Transitional Studies Group (consisting of faculties from the Hong Kong University and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology) to compare the national identity among the secondary school students in Hong Kong and Guangzhou (N = 9226 and 899, respectively). The survey was reported in Ming Pao Daily News on 16 November, 1998. It was found that students in Guangzhou had a stronger sense of Chinese identity than those young people in Hong Kong. Hong Kong youths (33.9 per cent) had a stronger sense of being Hong Kong rén: 39.9 per cent identified themselves as Xiānggāng rén first, and second as Chinese. Only 15.8 per cent felt they were Chinese first then Xiānggāng rén. Another survey was conducted by the Hong Kong Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) on the knowledge of mainland China and national identity among children and adolescents in Hong Kong (N = 630) (reported in Apple Daily, 1 July, 1999). The results indicated that only 30 per cent of children, and less than 20 per cent of adolescents, identified themselves as Chinese. The rest identified themselves as Xiānggāng rén, Chinese Xiānggāng rén, or Hong Kong Chinese.

3. Examples include the re-interpretation of the Basic Law by the Politburo of the People’s Congress of mainland China to overrule the decision of the Hong Kong’s Court of Final Appeal on granting the right of abode to children born on the mainland by Hong Kong residents. The public was divided in supporting such an action. The supporters saw it as a necessary step to protect the locals from an uncontrollable influx of immigrants from the mainland that may worsen the livelihood and employment situation in Hong Kong. However, the opponents viewed this as a precedent for China’s interference in local affairs. They believed it was part of the basic human right of family reunion. A second example is the pace of development of democracy in Hong Kong, that is, the undecided date for the full, generally elected Legislative Council. The democrats and their supporters want this to take place sooner, while the Pro-China groups want to delay the final date to minimise a possible backlash on the new government and open conflicts with China’s government.
My Interpretation: A ‘Westernised Man’s’ View

As mentioned in Chapter 4, I have adopted Evans and Tam’s (1997) definition of culture to explore the cultural context of Hong Kong. Based on this definition and my personal reflection, I can certainly identify the uniqueness of Hong Kong culture that has been constructed through social argument, dialogue and negotiation among the different social groups in Hong Kong (Evans and Tam, 1997, p. 13). As I have mentioned earlier, in the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 the local culture is rendered merely as a ‘lifestyle’ that is guaranteed to be unchanged for fifty years. However, culture is a dynamic abstraction that is constantly evolving, and no society can remain unchanged for fifty years! Thus, Mathew Turner criticises, in his essay ‘60s/90s — Dissolving the people’, that the agreement between the UK and China on Hong Kong’s future provides a slippery neologism, which may be interpreted to mean almost anything (cited in Evans and Tam, 1997, p. 14).

Evans and Tam (1997) also state that Hong Kong’s unique place within a wider Chinese cultural universe further complicates the ‘cultural/political’ manoeuvres swirling around it. Through films, magazines and Cantonese pop songs, Hong Kong reaches out to the large overseas Chinese population. This is evident in the kinds of media that are printed in Hong Kong and produced by Hong Kong’s artists and that can be found abundantly in the grocery stores, newsagents or record stores in every Chinatown around the world. Lynn Pan (1991) agrees that, as the world capital of overseas Chinese popular culture, Hong Kong is the centre of a whole cultural ambience.

Chinese historians and scholars appear to have a similar view of the uniqueness of Hong Kong culture but with a different orientation. They see the uniqueness of Hong Kong culture as an inevitable fact of imperialism. Professor Jin Yaoji (金耀基), a well respected social scientist, summarised such a view in an interview with a reporter, saying that the development of Hong Kong culture is a rare one and only one special case within China’s five thousand years of history (Hou Jun (侯軍) 1997). He saw that for centuries Chinese had never prepared to face the ‘invasion’ of western culture through gun and power. Without any choice, Chinese and western cultures met in Hong Kong after the Opium Wars. Throughout the 150 years of colonial rule, there were conflicts, ambiguities and resistance, and, at times, there was mutual compromise between the two cultures (Hou Jun, 1997, p. 29). Thus, at last, both cultures reached, to a certain extent, a balanced point of mutual adjustment and integration. It is one example of a successful dialogue between Chinese culture (Yin) and foreign culture (Yang).

Hong Kong’s culture and social system evolved through navigating among conflicts and ambivalent ideas of social demands as in the analogy of Tao, which is being re-found and followed. Things or behaviours that are acceptable or tolerated in one context, may be rejected or labelled as deviant in another context. Shae Yuchaw (余雋楚) (1997, p. 6) applies a critical hermeneutic method to understand the
local pop-culture. His comment below represents one of the underlying thoughts of this thesis.

Basically, we are living in a world filled with ambiguities and contradictions! Not only are these filled with different conflicts of interest and structural contradictions in our society, even the words or phrases that we depend on to describe our social lives are not all the same. At times they conflict in interpretation.

Navigating among all these ambiguous and conflicting ideas and belief systems, I am going to further illustrate the Yin and Yang analogy by reflecting on the struggle and discovery of my own cultural identity.

Conclusion

Hong Kong has its unique culture, which is often ignored or denied by many people, including both westerners and Chinese. Culture is dynamic and ever changing. It is also shaped by political, social and economic changes. Thus, the take-it-for-granted view on the uniqueness of Chinese culture across all Chinese communities is a fallacy. It is difficult to define exactly what Chinese culture is without oversimplifying and falling into a narrow-minded and stereotyped definition of Chinese characteristics. Nevertheless, there is a common thread that is made up of cultural abstracts that link all the Chinese and gives them a general identity no matter where they live.

I grew up in two different cultural environments. The Chinese value system has been operating in me through learning from my parents and my early education in Hong Kong. Western values, as well as the western medical concepts, were introduced when I studied and worked in Australia. The two value systems somehow contradict each other, like the interaction between Yin and Yang forces, and produce anxiety in me at times. Depending on the situation, I might lean on one system more than the other to justify my decisions or behaviours. I prefer to operate on the system that will help me to deal with a particular situation or solve a particular problem.

On the one hand, working in mental health in Hong Kong and in Australia, I need to depend on the western medical concepts that dominate there to orient and make sense of the clients’ problems, communicate with my colleagues and plan interventions. On the other hand, when I am in the companionship of my ethnic group, or to indicate my identity as a Chinese among my western colleagues and friends, I am inclined to adopt the Chinese value system to communicate and to present and assure myself of my identity.
Juggling between the two systems, just like the Yin and Yang analogy, means that there is an interplay and interaction until a comfortable belief system has emerged and where equilibrium is maintained or nearly maintained. The new belief system is challenged and modified again when a new event occurs or when a previous situation, in which the belief system operated comfortably, no longer exists. A new situation demands a different interpretation. Thus, the juggling cycle resumes until a newer belief system again emerges — a ‘banana-man’ with a new view. With this thought in mind, we shall see how the two medical paradigms, western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine, through the lens of the Yin and Yang concept, have shaped concepts of mental illness, and how they are competing and evolving to find a new equilibrium during transition.

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The Context of the Search for a Cultural Identity


