DEVOURING TRADITION, PERFORMING THE FUTURE: 
ON THEATRE AND HOPE IN HONGKONG

Rozanna Lucy Lilley

Except where cited, this thesis is my original research.
She walked along the seashore, with the hope of being able to measure the whole territory of the island by foot. In this way she could identify herself, achieve self-confidence and obtain the right of autonomy.

The Decameron 88, Programme Notes.
## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements  i  
List of Illustrations  ii  
Abstract  iii  

1. Introduction: Playing the Moment  
   The Conditional Present  1  
   Shedding Tears  4  
   Teeth and Lips  10  
   Aims and Orientation  22  
   Preview  27  
   From the Heart  29  

2. Perplexities of Displacement: Film and Television in Hongkong  
   Claiming Identity  32  
   The Indigenisation of Television  34  
   Hongkong Cinema  41  
   Dystopian Horizons  52  

3. The Double Bind: Performing Arts in Hongkong  
   Hegemonic Parameters  55  
   Interest in Mainland Arts  59  
   Of Deserts and Forests  65  
   Strewing Flowers on Beautiful Silk  70  
   Performing Arts Companies  76  
   Loosening the Bindings  86  

4. Treading the Margins: Zuni Icosahedron  
   We Have No Story  89  
   Colour/Structure  92  
   Zuni Style  95  
   The Zoo of Fantastic Sounds and Gestures  100  
   International Connections  104  
   Mobilising the Media  109  
   Engaging the Audience  112  
   Challenging the Establishment  119  
   Preparing the New  123  

Bibliography  127
5. Zuni People: An Intimate Hierarchy

Something Intimate
It's A Very Zuni Place
Old and New
Everybody Has An Artist In Their Heart
Dialectics and Discipline
Such A Boring Question
Paternal Intimacy
Divide and Confess
Apology

6. Chronicle of Women: A Hongkong Story

Foreplay
Doing It
Fatal Attraction?

7. Conclusion: Well Water, River Water (A Wet Dream)

The Absolute Stage
Reflections

Bibliography
Devouring Tradition, Performing the Future began to germinate in 1989, and since that time many people and institutions have contributed enormously.

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List of Illustrations

Figures 1 & 2  
Scenes From A Man’s Changing Room (between pages 2 & 3)

Figures 3 & 4  
Demonstrators advocating political reform in mainland China (between pages 7 & 8)

Figures 5 & 6  
Rehearsals for The Square (between pages 30 & 31)

Figure 7  
Publicity photograph for Her Fatal Ways II (between pages 46 & 47)

Figure 8  
Programme cover for Fantasy of Ancient China (between pages 79 & 80)

Figure 9  
Publicity material for The Legend of the Helicopter People (between pages 83 & 84)

Figures 10 & 11  
One Hundred Years of Solitude - From A Past Event To A Prophecy and The Last Stage (between pages 102 & 103)

Figure 12  
Zuni people (between pages 135 & 136)

Figure 13  
Edward Lam rehearses cast members (between pages 155 & 156)

Graphics 1-4  
Chronicle of Women (between pages 158 & 159)

Figure 14  
Chronicle of Women (between pages 166 & 167)

Figures 15 & 16  
The Revolutionary Opera (between pages 187 & 188)

Diagrams 1 & 2  
Deep Structure of Chinese (Hongkong) Culture (between pages 192 & 193)
This thesis examines contemporary cultural production in Hongkong and its links to representations of ‘Hongkong identity’. Throughout I argue that issues of local identity are wrapped up in a politics of culture whose result is to strengthen indigenist ideologies. These indigenist ideologies are viewed as part of an agonising process undertaken by local people to renegotiate ‘Chineseness’ in the light of the Mainland’s resumption of sovereignty over the territory in 1997. I thus focus on the political forces shaping discourses about identity in Hongkong and the ways in which identity is constituted within representation as part of an ongoing effort to dramatise an increasingly uncertain present.

Local cultural products demonstrate the radical possibilities for the construction of novel identities by means of a hybridizing tendency which critically, and often ironically, appropriates elements from dominant cultures. This hybridizing tendency is investigated in film and the performing arts, with a particular stress on the performance work of Zuni Icosahedron.

This group has been singled out both for the ways in which they resist the stranglehold exerted by hegemonic versions of ‘Chinese’ and ‘Western’ tradition in Hongkong and for their refusals of essentialization as they play upon the fundamental instability of being, or becoming, Hongkongese. The importance of these refusals is traced to the near presence of a Communist orthodoxy which forces representation into a standardised mode in the name of Revolution and the continuing influence of a British administration whose dominant cultural norms are anxiously monolithic.

In undertaking this project I have highlighted the historically specific social practices through which notions of gender are produced, circulated, accepted and contested. The markedly masculinised, hierarchical structures of Hongkong’s television industry and of Zuni Icosahedron are related to the coexistence of indigenous structures of patriarchy and established structures of patriarchal capitalism in the territory. These structures are, to some extent, challenged by representational critiques of patriarchy but tendencies towards allegorical readings which reactively summon up the quest for local identity in terms of nationalism and ethnicity work against this process.

Overall, I insist that the concepts of ‘Chinese identity’ and ‘Hongkong identity’ are not given, accomplished facts that cultural products then represent but artifacts whose forms, meanings and effects contextually shift during processes of political articulation and negotiation across a range of sites. The efforts of some Hongkong people to perform various identities both within and against the weight of cultural traditions that place them in positions of marginality lends to a questioning of the utility of totalizations such as ‘Hongkong identity’ in favour of a more radical critical space opened up by ambiguity, juxtaposition, irony and a specific refusal to predetermine the new.
INTRODUCTION: PLAYING THE MOMENT

The Conditional Present

Tourist shops in Hong Kong are currently selling t-shirts which feature a Chinese ‘cooler’ on a ladder, paintbrush in hand, industriously erasing the Union Jack and replacing it with the gold stars of the People’s Republic of China. The reference here is to the planned peaceful retrocession of Hong Kong to China in 1997. I regret now that I didn’t buy one of these garments, considering them tediously kitsch. In retrospect, the precarious perching of that gentleman might have been a handy way of reminding myself of the marketability of sovereignty transferral which rests, in turn, on the uniqueness of the territory in the history of Western imperialism. Valedictory testaments to a lost era of Empire, nostalgia, outrage at the ways in which local people have been denied any voice in relation to their own political fate, tenacious ethnic ties to China, confusion and excitement all coalesce around this particular moment in future time.

Perhaps, in the midst of all this, 1997 is getting somewhat overdone. Clubs in trendy Lan Kwai Fong all seem to have names now like ‘1996’ or ‘1998’. Businesses are taking out full page advertisements in newspapers. We’re here to stay; Hong Kong is our past and will be our future; respond positively to the winds of change. The exhortations to optimism continue. There is a kind of designer packaging to the whole affair that is, well, banal.

This thesis is partially about that banality, about the politics of recognition and the political necessity of constantly referring everything forwards to that moment of changeover. But it is also about painful balancing acts, the pressure of being squeezed between West and East, peoples’ deeply felt relationship to China and their fear of, as one retired schoolteacher put it to me, ‘that bunch of bastards’ in Beijing. My title makes use of a Cantonese expression, *hek yan ge laigau* or ‘the customs and traditions that devour people’. I first heard this

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1. Though it should be noted that Macau, currently a Portuguese colony, will also be returned to China. The uniqueness of this positioning lies in the transfer of these territories from one colonial power to another. Obviously, this does not tally with the Mainland’s representation of sovereignty transferral which is described as an act of ‘reunification’, a return to the rightful embrace of the Mother country. Plenty of indigenous commentary in Hong Kong, however, sees this not as a long-awaited pleasure but as a transfer from one benevolently authoritarian institution to another brutally authoritarian one.
expression during a performance of *Scenes From A Man’s Changing Room* which was put on by local theatre group Zuni Icosahedron in August 1991 at City Hall. This group formed the focus of my research.

*Scenes From A Man’s Changing Room* was a very personal exploration from director Edward Lam, a homoerotic piece staged just after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the territory. The timing of the piece and the efforts to scandalously flout convention were self-consciously conceived. In an interview in *Sing Pao Daily* (1/8/1991), Lam stated:

> I feel I am a marginal man. I find that I do not identify with men under the traditional standard. Those type of men represent ignorance and power worship. However, I can feel the feeling of safety when I am with them. I feel confused. I intend to express my understanding of my sexuality from the perspective of being contradictory in my feeling and thinking.

This attempt to remake, replay, cultural narratives by constructing a form of coherence founded on contradiction is typical of the work of this performance company. Lam’s ‘choreographic theatre’, as he likes to call it, proceeded through a number of discrete narrative vignettes to probe the issues of suppressed sexuality, sadism and hostility, rivalry, voyeurism, exhibitionism and death. During rehearsals male performers were told to look like Audrey Hepburn, to recall *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, to be more like a James Bond girl. They sat around talking about what sections of the newspaper they masturbated on. I wondered whether I was really in Hongkong. During the show, a man sat in a barbers chair making small talk about the latest fashions in haircuts and suits whilst being fellated; a male couple simulated intercourse for ten minutes, exhausting themselves to the strains of Mozart’s *Clarinet Concerto*. Of course, it wasn’t all so deliberately provocative. Much of the action turned on pastiches of movies, jokes about Hitchcock in overdone spy sequences, the use of Cantonese cinema cliches - ‘Please marry me’, ‘Even now you don’t believe I really love you’, ‘You are jealous of me’ - in seductively camp scenes.

For his part, Lam constantly stressed how unChinese he is. He contrasted his own desire to ‘spill his guts’ and his belief that ‘democracy’ comes from knowledge of the self with the value he asserts that Chinese people place on reticence, secrecy and self-delusion. In the *TV & Entertainment Times* (12-18/8/1991: 16) he commented: ‘Why am I interested in physicality? Because many Chinese don’t give a damn or just don’t pay any attention to other men’s bodies. To mention bodies is always taboo’.

And taboos are there, for Zuni Icosahedron, to be challenged. Certainly, part of my attraction to this group hinged on the ways in which they ‘devour’ traditions, negating what they perceive to be canonically Chinese in their search for innovation and novelty, ripping apart the tissues of remembrance as they purposefully turn themselves towards the future. This is, in many ways, a classic revolutionary tactic - constructing a view of a static, ossified society, ascribing it to the previous and current regimes, and committing oneself to changing it
Puritanical morality, Mao Zedong's rule, Qing society, the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping's leadership, the constraints of party historiography and British colonialists all become fodder for critique in their theatrical practice as they attempt to search out the boundaries of a radical beginning.

Yet the notion of 'devouring tradition' should also be understood in another way. Memory as well as forgetting is implicated in this project. Zuni members also feed off their relations with China and Britain, deriving sustenance from the recognition that they are irrevocably the product of interlocking histories and cultures, drawing nourishment from the effort to explicate this complicated cross-over. There is no illusion of a return to the past, just a clear sense that searching for a beginning is unthinkable without the efforts of recollection. Images of 'Chineseness' are not simply rejected but also conveyed and sustained in performance.

Zuni Icosahedron are not alone in this quest. There is, in Hongkong, a common feeling of cultural crisis resulting from historical change. Responses to this sense of crisis appear in many different guises and doubtless other areas of research would also have highlighted the ways in which the conditional present is opening up a field of possible 'becoming', a becoming which strives to forge an enunciatory space for Hongkong people which is not confined to the teleological visions of either their Maoist-Marxist or colonial masters. Particularly in much contemporary cultural production, Hongkong citizens are busily defying the gravity of their situation, wresting from the edges of the future a line of possible flight. This thesis attempts to trace some of those paths of flight, searching for what is emergent in current representational practices in the territory with a stress on the performances of Zuni Icosahedron.

This could be phrased in many other ways, and it is certainly not a new problematic. Rey Chow (1993: 25), I think, comes closest to the spirit of my enterprise when she states:

... it is the tactics of dealing with and dealing in dominant cultures that are so characteristic of living in Hongkong. These are the tactics of those who do not have claims to territorial propriety or cultural centrality. Perhaps more than anyone else, those who live in Hongkong realise the opportunistic role they need to play in order, not to 'preserve', but to negotiate their 'cultural identity'.

Part of what this negotiation of cultural identity in contemporary Hongkong involves is a contest among various social groupings for the right to define the territory both internally and abroad. These definitions are unstable and contingent, constructed on ever shifting ground and structured by larger systems of signification, such as international capitalism, Chinese communism, patriarchy and racism. They are inevitably moulded by these constraints but manage to assert the capability of local peoples to speak themselves rather than to simply be spoken about. Zuni Icosahedron, the theatre group whom I have chosen to speak about, are involved in precisely this project. What I find of most
Shedding Tears

All beginnings contain an element of recollection. My own is no exception. I first became interested in Hongkong during the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. At that time I was studying Mandarin at the Australian National University and planning to do fieldwork in China's Yunnan Province. My own office within Anthropology was across the corridor from a visiting scholar normally resident in Yunnan. The sense of deep shock and bereavement which engulfed the Chinese intellectual community in Canberra was profoundly affecting. The gentleman across the corridor replaced, within a few days, his own public tears with public denials that anything of much significance had occurred. He took the Chinese government line. At the time I found this volte face enormously disturbing. In hindsight my perturbation seems rather naive but, at that moment, my own research plans on ethnicity seemed hopelessly irrelevant to the main plot. It was in this state of agitation that I attended a seminar about responses in Hongkong to the events in China and learned of the dramatic reactions in the territory to this tragedy.

Protests and rallies shook Hongkong during the spring of 1989. Declaring their sympathies with the student-initiated protest movement in Beijing, Hongkong residents took part in rallies unprecedented in size and duration. On May 17, 6000 people gathered in Victoria Park and a hunger strike by seventeen Hongkong students entered its third day (South China Morning Post (SCMP) 18/5/1989: 1). These ‘patriotic protests’ continued on May 20 as 50,000 people, undaunted by Typhoon Brenda, thronged through the streets of Wanchai demanding the resignation of Chinese Premier, Li Peng (South China Sunday Morning Post (SCSMP) 21/5/1989: 1). Support was also expressed in other ways. Hongkong news reports were sent to China via telex and facsimile, posted daily in Tiananmen Square and ardently read by Beijing citizens. Even before the military crackdown, Communist Party hardliners were branding Hongkong as an anti-revolutionary base (Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER) 29/6/1989: 32). Later, Hongkong people were publicly accused of taking part in illegal activities aimed at subverting the Chinese government (Hongkong Standard (HKS) 14/6/1989: 1).

An outpouring of emotion followed in the wake of the declaration of martial law in the Mainland (Rafferty 1989: 7). One million people marched through the heart of the territory; in other words, one out of every sixth person...
was moved to express their disquiet (Buruma 1990:45).\(^2\) For most, it was their first attendance at a political rally. Builders climbed down from their scaffolding to join the march which wound snake-like from Chater Gardens to the Happy Valley Racecourse, clerks left their offices, shoppers exited department stores to swell the numbers (HKS 22/5/1989: 1).

The army massacre of unarmed civilian demonstrators in Beijing at the beginning of June and the subsequent arrests of student leaders and others across China was watched with horror on Hongkong television screens (Rafferty 1989: 7). Rioting broke out in the territory, with police teargassing crowds; people wept in the streets; the whole colony went into mourning. A general strike was called on June 7. Share prices went into free fall (SCMP 20/5/1989: 1). The staff at China’s representative office in the territory, the New China News Agency (NCNA), hung a banner outside their windows stating: ‘Resolutely support the patriotic democratic movement of Beijing students’ (SCMP 19/5/1989: 1). Even pro-Communist newspapers denounced China’s action. People demanded the right of abode in Britain and guarantees of human rights. And as the colony was swathed in black, the coffers of the Bank of China sunk steadily lower while customers withdrew their savings in protest (FEER 15/6/1989: 13 & 22/6/1989: 14).

These events have been widely interpreted within a Durkheimian framework, stressing the integrative force of the protests. The mountains of wreaths and banners, the lamentations and the grief are perceived as a concrete demonstration of the links which bind the inhabitants of the territory into a ‘united, unified Hongkong’ (Rafferty 1989: 7). We are told that this ‘astonishing outburst of old-fashioned patriotism’ (Wang 1989: 2) established the conditions for affiliation, loyalty, identity. Commentators agree that ‘It was in many ways Hong Kong’s finest hour’ (Buruma 1990:45).

The conditions that have enabled such a transformation are reputed to be grounded in the presence of a new generation born and bred in Hongkong who, unlike their refugee parents, have a sense of belonging. The 1981 census established, for the first time, that more than half the inhabitants of the territory had been born there, and many of these are identified as belonging to a well-educated middle class (FEER 5/1/1984: 29 & 25/7/1985: 36; Morris 1988: 295). The twist in the tale was that as Hongkong people’s sense of disaffection with the Chinese Communist Party intensified, this disaffection became the catalyst for the vivification of their participation in a Chinese identity which simultaneously stressed love of country and hatred of the Beijing government (Kim & Dittmer 1993: 274; White & Cheng 1993: 190).

Obviously this invocation of unanimity and shared, corporate experiences glosses over divisions and contradictions amongst Hongkongese. Affiliations to place and province, loyalties to language and ethnic identities vary enormously. Many came from China’s Guangdong Province, bound together by a common

\(^2\) The 1991 Population Census returned a total figure of 5,674,114 (Ng 1992: 213).
usage of Cantonese but divided by the circumstances compelling them to leave, by their aspirations and by more local networks of association. Regional prejudices amongst Chinese run deep. In the area where I was living, Discovery Bay on Lantau Island, arguments in the local Park 'n Shop supermarket would frequently reduce to the hurling of the Cantonese derogatory epithet 'you Mainlander!' at some dissatisfied customer. Hokkien speakers and Hakkas, Tankas and Vietnamese, Filipina amahs, American businessmen and other gwailos (foreigners, literally 'ghost people') further fragment the community. These categories are crosscut by others - socioeconomic situations, lifestyle variations and so on. Yet I think we have to take seriously the fact that these demonstrations keep being referred to subsequently as a kind of marker, a before and after Event, if we are to remain sensitive to the whole question of identity and to the cultural construction of such perceptions as moments within a specific historical imaginary.

Returning briefly to Tiananmen Square, it is evident that a complex series of potent meanings were mobilised in the demonstrations of June. Indeed, students and others exploited such occasions with liturgical sophistication and zeal and a conscious manipulation of symbols. As Calhoun (1989: 55) convincingly argues, the protest movement 'wove symbols from a common international culture together with its own specifically Chinese concerns and conscience'.

On the one hand, a subversion of Chinese communist culture is noted by Barme (FEER 22/6/1989: 37,38) in the reinterpretation of martyrdom to serve a cause defying party orthodoxy. Thus, when Wu'er Kaixi, the infamous 'pyjama boy' who berated Chinese Premier Li Peng in a televised meeting at the height of the Beijing spring demonstrations, spoke later that year in Australia he played upon an image of the blood of the students congealing all Chinese together, thereby recalling republican revolutionary Sun Yat-sen's celebrated remark that the Chinese people were like a 'plate of loose sand'.3 Banners announcing a determination to die for the cause, hunger strikers, the formation of suicide squads, and, in a scene that has passed into romantic iconography, a lone student playing matador to a line of tanks (Rafferty 1989: 14), all attest to the centrality of martyrdom. The seizing of Tiananmen Square, a space rich with historical allusion that spoke at once of the Party, which used it to display its authority, and of the people who gathered there to acclaim leaders (Calhoun 1989: 57), was itself an act of semiotic guerrilla warfare. And how else could we interpret the appropriation of the Party's own hymn, The Internationale, by protesters (Rafferty 1989: 2)?

On the other hand, protesters also adopted symbols directed at a Western audience. From the erection of the enormous styrofoam and papier mache Goddess of Democracy, modelled on the Statue of Liberty, which outfaced the portrait of Chairman Mao across the Avenue of Eternal Peace (Jose 1989: 296),

3 He was speaking at a public lecture at The Australian National University (20/12/1989) to promote the cause of the Paris-based Federation for a Democratic China.
to proclamations of ‘Vive la liberte’ and the two-fingered ‘V’ for victory held aloft by marchers playing on nostalgia for Churchill’s triumphant World War II gesture and the 1960s (Calhoun 1989: 55,58), the volatile and multivocal character of these enactments of dissent clearly emerges.

At one level, this multivocality simply indicates how internationalised models for dissent have become and how astute students were at directing their pleas to an international audience in a situation where, for a number of weeks, they were dominating world news (Wasserstrom 1992: 245). But more than cynical calculation was at stake here. If we take the example of the Goddess of Liberty, the highly self-reflexive character of these protest actions becomes evident. While her creators began with a notion of copying the Statue of Liberty, they decided to adapt it to their own situation. A preexisting figure of a male Chinese peasant grasping a wooden pole was feminised in a style consciously imitating the work of Russian revolutionary realist sculptor Vera Mukhina (Lee,F. 1992: 172,173). The result was a pastiche, part-ironic, part-serious, that reminded people of the giant white statues of Mao that were carried through Tiananmen Square during National Day parades in the 1960s (Esherick and Wasserstrom 1992: 34). The mutual implication of the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ was literally on display.

This mutual implication was also characteristic of Hongkong protests. Not all activities can be elided into binary categorisations, but it remains the case that interpretations have focused on a British/Chinese dichotomy manifest in forms of political resistance. Usually the notion of British identity is notably ill-defined, while the practices symbolising it are virtually a compulsory cliche. This is well illustrated by the text of a full-page newspaper advertisement, pressing for the right of abode in England, replete with a photo of a Chinese boy in a British school uniform:

The coins in his pocket bear the impression of the Queen. On Saturdays he plays football. His school flies the British flag. He doesn’t think about freedom because he takes it for granted (cited in Buruma 1990: 45).

Emotionally charged signs of ‘Britishness’, such as protesters making speeches in English or broadcasting a cassette of Vera Lynn triumphantly carolling ‘Land of Hope and Glory’, were the crucial elements of such pleas.

More commonly, however, appeals have been cast in terms of adherence to an equally stereotypical Greater Chinese ideal. Even the most virulent of critics, Martin Lee Chu-ming, suggests that the Mainland should act as: ‘a considerate and loving parent ... For we are all proud to be Chinese, and we fully support the return of sovereignty...’ (Drafting of the Basic Law for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (DBLHKSAR) 1989: 66). As protesters marched ten abreast they repeatedly sang the patriotic song *Heirs of the Dragon*. Fund raising activities were conducted under the slogan ‘Blood is thicker than water’ (Chow 1993: 24). During the May 21st rally film director John Shum, speaking
on behalf of ‘showbusiness personalities’, stated: ‘We might not be well versed in politics but the blood flowing inside our bodies is the blood of Chinese’ (SCMP 22/5/1989: 1). Cheng Kai-nam, leader of the Federation of Education Workers, joined the patriotic chorus: ‘The Government crackdown has not only irritated the people but the heavens. While our brothers and sisters are shedding their blood in Beijing, we are shedding our tears’ (SCMP 21/5/1989: 1).

In fact, one of the striking features of the Beijing spring movement was the active role played by an international audience of overseas Chinese mobilized by media coverage of the events (Calhoun 1989: 59). World-wide protests were held in response to the call for support from Mainland students. In Macau, which reverts to Chinese sovereignty in 1999, thousands marched; in Washington, New York, Vancouver, Toronto and Sydney large demonstrations were held (HKS 29/5/1989: 1); in Taiwan one million students formed a four hundred kilometre human chain, referred to as ‘Hand in hand, heart to heart’, symbolising a great wall of the flesh and blood of Chinese youth (HKS 1/6/1989: 1). And amongst these communities, Hongkong was undoubtedly the most significant actor. The euphoric support, the millions of dollars raised, the massive demonstrations and activists’ participation in the underground railway, ‘Operation Yellowbird’, that, with the assistance of triads, spirited dissidents away from the Mainland are all concrete evidence of this (FEER 1/2/1990: 29).

For most, the Han Chinese ‘country’ rather than the People’s Republic of China state/nation had clearly become the primary locus of loyalty (Kim & Dittmer 1993: 263,278).

As part of her desire to forge a ‘diasporic consciousness’ which rejects this focus of loyalty, Rey Chow (1993: 24) has negatively described these heartfelt claims to ethnic oneness as ‘illusory’ and ‘manipulative’. Further, she suggests that the social differences separating Hongkong and China are being bypassed through submission to a ‘myth of consanguinity’ that is ‘empty’. Here, it is necessary to make a number of comments. Firstly, Chow relies on a somewhat canned vision of what Hongkong actually ‘is’ that sits uncomfortably closely to Cold War rhetoric. For her, Hongkong is a civil society marked out by its fair legal system, freedom of speech and emerging direct elections. The odd qualifier doesn’t detract from the contrast. Of course, this is one view of society which Mainland activists were pursuing in 1989. In this sense, ‘difference’ in no way detracts from consanguinity because Hongkong is a model of what China might become. More disturbingly, Chow’s negative comments betray an idealist positing of an ‘outside’ to the systems which structure subjectivity and an unwillingness to sanction the tremendously strong political strategy that calls to ‘blood’ entail.

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4 Donations, remittances and investments from Overseas Chinese account for a considerable percentage of China’s foreign currency. Conservative estimates suggest that investments, for example, currently stand at about US$1 billion. These figures include funds coming from Chinese in Hongkong and Macau, who are referred to in the Mainland as ‘compatriots’ (FEER 22/11/1984: 47,50).
Nowadays, Tiananmen Square has been resurfaced, the Chinese propaganda machine has transformed the protesting ‘martyrs’ of 1989 into ‘thugs’ and ‘gangsters’ and ‘bourgeois elements’ participating in the so-called peaceful evolution (heping yanbian) strategy of the capitalist West, the foreign media’s attention has been diverted by radical changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and international realpolitik and business interests have prevailed over concerns for human rights violations as the terror of arrests, executions and purges continues (Jaivin 1989: 22; Jose 1989: 297; Kim & Dittmer 1993: 258; Rafferty 1989: 5). Politics in Hongkong remains volatile. Premier Li Peng accused locals of stirring up ‘rain and wind’ by chanting ‘down with China’s Ceaucescus’ at a New Year’s day march in support of the Romanian revolution (FEER 25/1/1990: 17); in April, 1990 thousands of demonstrators alluded to Tiananmen and to the inefficacy of officially mandated amnesia when they observed the annual Qing Ming festival to honour dead ancestors (Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) 7/4/1990); in July of that year China’s National People’s Congress adopted the Basic Law, the mini-constitution for Hongkong after 1997, in the face of forceful objections that it undercuts guarantees about the protection of civil and political rights (SMH 7/4/1990: 30).5 New political groups are also proliferating, including the United Democrats of Hong Kong, the core members of which are drawn from the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of the Patriotic Democratic Movement in China(FEER 23/8/1990:22). In response to these activities, repressive measures are also becoming more commonplace. For instance, in 1990 a Hongkong magistrate invoked powers that have lain dormant for seventeen years to convict five pro-democracy activists of using loudhailers at a public gathering and collecting public donations without official approval (FEER 9/8/1990: 11).

This increasing resort to extra-institutional modes of demand making, including dramatic actions such as the public burning of the Chinese constitution, has irreversibly altered the political landscape of Hongkong. During the year of my fieldwork in the territory, marches and hunger strikes were frequent occurrences. In fact, hunger strikers positioned on mats outside the Star Ferry entrance were on almost permanent display during 1991 and were obviously a focus of romantic idealisation. Young women would remove their shoes before approaching these debonair young men who were propped in front of guitars and lavish bouquets of flowers as nearby video players constantly replayed footage of the Tiananmen Square massacre to passers by. I think it is important to state here that my sympathies were entirely with these young people and that I, too, marched a number of times to the New China News Agency, pushing against police cordons.

I have included this material on the protests in Tiananmen and subsequent

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5 Objections centre on Beijing’s power to declare a state of emergency in Hongkong in times of war or internal turmoil and on the limited role given to Hongkong courts to interpret the Basic Law. Insufficient reform of the legislature is also at issue. The Basic Law provides for the qualified democratic election of 20 of the 60 members of Legco by 1997, with the possibility of half the seats being directly elected by 2003 (SMH 7/4/1990: 30).
reactions to these in Hongkong partly because it provides a vivid example of the use of social categories in context-dependent ways but mainly because my whole approach to studying Zuni Icosahedron was, and is, predicated on these events and the sense they conveyed that the present is a time of disjuncture, a time when, to borrow one of the earliest slogans of Tiananmen demonstrators, 'we are writing history'. This ethnography is a part of that history, constantly doing battle between a desire for concrete political action and the often seemingly ethereal demands of 'my people', the members of Zuni Icosahedron. The end result of this battle to comprehend the aims of Zuni Icosahedron and the views of its members in a manner that I can reconcile with my own political convictions has been a tone of, for want of a better phrase, romantic irony.

From the start I took my lead from Calhoun's (1989: 67) point that the monological and authoritative rhetoric of the Beijing spring movement should not divert our attention from 'the sense of cultural crisis which went along with it'. The pursuit of civil liberties and calls for the government to listen to the demands of the people were part of a history of trying to find a national identity which can serve effectively in current times. Chinese publications of the 1980s were full of discussions about a specifically modern 'identity crisis' (rentong weiji) and debates about the appropriate foundations for modernisation reform which went under the rubric of 'culture fever' (wenhua re). This concern, I suggest, is also at the heart of cultural production in Hongkong where the whole question of whether there is one China to which all Chinese belong takes on particular urgency in view of 1997. The productions of Zuni Icosahedron are part of this protracted and agonizing process being undertaken by Chinese intellectuals to renegotiate 'Chineseness' as they search for a viable position in the world.

Teeth and Lips

As Hongkong prepares to shed its colonial status with sovereignty to be transferred in 1997 not to the local people but to Beijing, this question of

6 This sense of cultural crisis is beautifully captured by Nicolas Jose's 1989 novel The Avenue of Eternal Peace. He writes:

On Saturday afternoons throughout the city, salons for democracy were held. Items on the agenda included: modern management techniques; cybernetics and systems theory; artistic individualism; an independent press; the separation of Party and government. People talked their heads off... argued against Marx and for Nietzsche, asserting the power of individual will to recast the world (Jose 1989: 271).

7 This extraordinary situation of sovereignty transferral stems from the Chinese denial that the British have any right to be in Hongkong. They have maintained, at least since the fall of the Manchu dynasty, that the question of both the
identity takes on greater salience. Given current circumstances, it is hardly surprising that this question should emerge urgently and irrevocably in the throes of political alteration. There are, however, other factors at work. In particular, the shift from a refugee to an indigenous society has been posited as a crucial fracturing. The Chinese civil war and Communist Revolution of 1949 led to a mass influx of refugees from the Mainland, providing Hongkong with cheap labour (Morris 1988: 28; Reference Services 1987:6). The population increased from an estimated 1,600,000 at the end of 1946 to approximately 2,360,000 by the spring of 1950 (Scott 1989: 67). Unlike previous seasonal migrants drawn largely from the rural peasantry, the majority were stable resident workers who came from urban areas. Most hailed from Guangdong but they included a significant group of ‘northerners’, especially industrialists and technicians from Shanghai (Donnithorne 1979: 619; Wong 1986: 320). When population movement between Hongkong and the Mainland was stopped around 1952 they effectively became exiles (Wong 1988: 37). It is the children of these people, locally born and educated, who are said to feel like Hongkongese first, and Chinese second; to have developed a sense of attachment and belonging. The relative affluence of the city since the 1970s is also cited as a relevant factor in the development of an indigenous cultural identity. As Wang Gungwu, chairperson of the Council for the Performing Arts, put it to me: ‘There is more money, leisure time and people ... they want more. They need the circuses now that they’ve got their bread’.

Indeed, in the writing of some authors, pre-1970s Hongkong is mobilised as the paradigm of the traditionless, the land of the material not the cultural. Thus Hutcheon (1989: 7) remarks:

If Hong Kong looks back on a long history of cultural neglect, that is because the administrators of the Qing dynasty saw no use for the arts; its small trade and sea-oriented population were people of simple tastes, with a little piracy thrown in to provide the spice of life. Looking back through the historical record, we see there was little to distinguish our early inhabitants from other coastal dwellers of southern China. The archaeological artifacts that survive from these earliest years show the barest concession to artistic design - functional pots and bowls, unglazed and with incised simple geometric patterns, simple tools ...

Of course, this kind of intellectual swoon before the very notion of a leavening of cultivation suggests that there are, on the one hand, heavily circumscribed menial cultures, carried as a foil to the grandeur of the West and, on the other, that there is Culture, marked out in the terrain of pan-European arts, as the unitary, identity-producing machinery of civilization which forms a final stage in
the narrative of Hongkong's progress (see Cubitt 1989: 2,3).

This position obviously elides the past and any consideration of self-awareness precipitated by the colonial encounter. Since the early 1950s, Hongkong has become a politically detached metropolis, immersed in modernisation and cosmopolitanism, with a distinct urban identity which has rendered it quite different from the 'embedded' cities across the border (Lau & Kuan 1988: 33,189; Wong 1988: 323). It remains the case, however, that social and political changes in the 1970s ushered in a process of introversion, which has been intensified by the 1997 issue (Kuan & Lau 1988: 12). The Tiananmen Square massacre has had an essential role to play in galvanising both this sense of separateness and relatedness but well before the carnage in Beijing, a cautionary literature on Hongkong's future, asserting that legal measures would prove entirely inadequate to preserve a liberal administration, had flourished (White & Cheng 1993: 184).

In one sense we can say that this introversion and consequent assertion of Hongkong identity is a counterhegemonic discourse that pits itself against both British and Mainland Chinese refusals of local specificity. On closer inspection, though, one begins to feel uncomfortable with the extent to which this discourse of identity derives from and reproduces colonial structures of thought. Indeed one of the strongest and least noticed English influences on Hongkong claims to a unique identity is exactly this type of cultural nationalism in which the inner essence of a people is discovered in a selective version of local cultural production (see Williams 1989: 67,68). Of course, China is also nationalist in orientation and a great deal of debate centres on searching out the roots of this orientation. Watson (1992: 71), for example, argues that the idea of a unified culture predated, and made possible, the invention of a modern Chinese state following the collapse of the imperial order in 1911. Scalapino (1993: 217) places much emphasis on the role of the 'traditional' belief that China is destined by virtue of its superior culture to tutor others in forging modern nationalism. Fitzgerald (1991), by way of contrast, opines that Sun Yatsen's concept of *min zu* (translating the Western terms 'race' and 'nation'), popularised during the 1920s and 1930s, can itself be traced back to essentialist, racist European writings about 'Johnny Chinaman'. Leys (1988: 65,66), too, documents the use by local intellectuals of Reverend Arthur Smith's notoriously unflattering nineteenth century book *Chinese Characteristics*. This catalogue of collective vices neatly shored up the indigenous presentation of a barbaric traditional society desperately in need of transformation. Whatever the case, the thin line which separates an indigenous Hongkong counterhegemonic discourse about 'local identity' and hegemonic British and Chinese nationalist discourses remains intact.

One of the difficulties in writing about Hongkong is that, in any case, 'nationalism' is not a particularly useful word insofar as some notion of patriotic loyalty to either the Chinese or the British state is not at issue and even movements for political autonomy are severely curtailed. However, this is
complicated by the Mainland use of the term ‘minority nationalities’ to refer to ethnic groups encompassed within the Chinese state. There is sometimes a quite conscious comparison between minority aspirations of self determination and regional autonomy within China (see Hsieh 1986) and the future status of Hongkong. Of course, most of the population of Hongkong are Han Chinese and so the logic of the argument is more metaphoric than exact. This does not detract, however, from the strategic uses of a local political discourse which manipulates international concern over Tibet to draw sombre parallels with projected suppression in post-1997 Hongkong.

Alternatively, some writers opt for ‘localism’; others, arguing for a broader ‘southern Chinese’ orientation, prefer ‘provincialism’. This latter term receives impetus from the increasing dovetailing of the economies of Guangdong and Hongkong. Hongkong’s involvement with manufacturing industries in the Shenzhen economic zone is a good illustration of what is sometimes referred to as the ‘vanishing border’ (Donnithorne 1979: 621). In fact, local legislator Martin Lee speculated that Hongkong and areas of south China could ally against the north after 1997: ‘We speak the same dialect ... It’s the sort of thing that can happen because Hongkong’s prosperity has rubbed off on Guangdong and Shenzhen’ (White & Cheng 1993: 183). The issue of language is not incidental here; Cantonese separatism is an integral component of the centrifugal tendencies of south China which analysts within the People’s Republic describe as a ‘Pearl River culture area’. The question of this potential merging takes on greater salience with recent accounts of the continued devolution of economic and political power to local authorities in China, with wealthy Guangdong being cited as the most prominent example of this regionalism. In addition to being granted three special economic zones, Guangdong also boasts the privilege of dealing directly with foreign concerns in economic matters (SCSMP 3/11/1991: 13). Some commentators refer to Guangzhou as having an ‘alloy culture’ (hejin wenhua) mixing East and West, or a ‘window culture’ (chuangkou wenhua) of cosmopolitan trading connections. Further, a convergence between the roles of Hongkong and Guangzhou in serving the Chinese state as places for dealing relatively safely with international interfaces is posited (White & Cheng 1993: 163,164,167,173,182).

In the midst of these mercurial discursive categories, that shuttle back and forth between north and south, coast and inland and Han and minority, most writers opt for the much vaguer term ‘identity’. This neatly bypasses most of the problems even if it does little to clarify the situation. As White and Cheng (1993: 156) put it, ‘the notion of identity has been put to so many social purposes, it seems to be a word in search of a definition’. The Chinese equivalent rentong did not even come into usage until the 1980s and is confined largely to technical/academic discourse (Kim & Dittmer 1993: 246). I think that

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8 It should be noted here that there is no straightforward dichotomy between Han and non-Han, although it is often presented as such. Over centuries, whole populations have made the transformation from non-Han to Han (Watson 1993: 86).
the best we can do is to recognise that whether we use one label or another we are dealing with the same 'epistemology of entivity' (see Foster 1991: 253) involving an awareness of difference, the attribution of that difference to 'culture', and the objectification and substantivization of culture as a unitary essence (see Jolly 1992: 54). This observation in no way implies that such strategies are politically impotent.

The politics of recognition demands that the fate of groups, however they may be defined, is bound up with the words that designate them, the capacity to mobilise around a name (Bourdieu 1984: 481) - 'Hongkongese', 'Chinese', 'feminist', 'proletariat', 'gay' or whatever. So, even if we are not sure about what 'identity' is we can, at least, say that it acts as an essential and essentially contested concept. The term may be intellectually messy but it has the advantage of reminding us of the positional and conjunctural character (their formation in and for specific times and places) of these designations, opening up identification as a form of political action rather than as an inheritance. Certainly the major protagonists of this thesis have no access to anything as stable and fixed as a monolithic, singular 'Hongkong identity' as a position that they can unproblematically occupy. Instead, they speak and perform various identities both within and against the weight of cultural traditions that place them in positions of marginality (Hall 1992: 309; Robinson 1991: 135).

This marginality is acknowledged as a type of 'distinctiveness'. In fact, the main purpose of both the Sino-British Joint Declaration, signed in 1984, and the Basic Law, promulgated by the National People's Congress in 1990, is to design the necessary measures so that the distinctiveness of Hongkong can be maintained (Lau & Kuan 1988: xi). This distinctiveness is, however, conceived in largely economic terms. Hongkong is permitted to retain, for fifty years following the transition of sovereignty, its 'capitalist system and lifestyle' (DAFHK 1984: 30). This is based on the concept of 'one country, two systems' in which Hongkong will become a Special Administrative Region with a high degree of autonomy (FEER 21/3/1985: 100). This bare formulation has its advocates in the territory. Prominent publisher Louis Cha, enthusing in *The Peoples Daily*, claimed that the concept was so farsighted that it should be extended to solve global problems: that is, 'one world, two systems' (FEER 25/10/1984: 56).

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9 The 1982 Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) stipulates in Article 31 that: 'The state may establish Special Administrative Regions where necessary'. These regions are part of a policy of opening coastal and riparian cities, particularly former treaty ports, to trade and investment cooperation with foreign firms (DAFHK 1984: 14; FEER 21/3/1985: 29).

10 While there has been much criticism of the relationship between the notion of 'one country, two systems' and China's four cardinal principles (adherence to the socialist road, to the democratic dictatorship of the people, to the leadership of the party, and to Marxism-Leninism and Mao's thought), Communist party propaganda presents this situation as a concrete manifestation of building socialism with Chinese characteristics (FEER 5/12/1985: 14). What emerges is a very flexible concept of socialism, largely uncoupled from any specific doctrines or texts, which allows China to argue that there will be no repetition in Hongkong of the outflow of capital and entrepreneurs which occurred in post-'liberation' Shanghai (Scott 1989: 69), and to benefit from Hongkong's experience as an international trading centre as an extension of a pattern of irregular state centralisation (FEER 1/8/1985: 29; White & Cheng 1993: 169).
However, a large proportion of Hongkong people do not share Cha’s optimism; such guarantees, have done little to allay local apprehensions. Distrustful of a system where the state assumes so much responsibility for supervising not only economic affairs, but also social reproduction and the surveillance of day to day existence (Dittmer & Kim 1993: 25; Yang 1988: 408,418), Hongkongese have already voted with their feet to escape the Mainland only to find themselves forcibly returned to its administrative gaze. The territory’s political discourse is now choked with abstractions, from Communism and instability, to stability, freedom and democracy, all of them as unclear as they are potent in their appeal (see Said 1983: 136). For many, the future constitutes a massive dystopian horizon; sovereignty transferral is a fact so brutal, solid and encompassing that it stifles. The terror of this near future is, of course, deeply rooted in class comfort and privilege; for some the fear is that of proletarianization, of slipping down the ladder, of the promises of the modern slackening and unravelling. Others are concerned with increasing poverty, with the blocking of fantasized mobility, with the curtailment of liberties.

This fear is exacerbated as emigration becomes increasingly difficult, except for the very rich or the very professional (FEER 13/9/1984: 29). Successive parliamentary acts in London have ensured that few Hongkongese are qualified to possess full British passports, or have the right to settle in Britain (FEER 19/12/1985: 25; Morris 1988: 213). Nor did the 1989 ‘nationality package’, under which fifty thousand ‘key’ Hongkong people and their families would be granted full British citizenship, do much to allay the anxieties of the 3.25 million locals who are British nationals by virtue of having been born in the colony (FEER 15/6/1989: 13). For those who can afford it, the most popular ‘insurance policy’ takes the form of an exodus - a mid-1989 poll found that 12 per cent of the population had residency rights overseas with more planning to emigrate (White & Cheng 1993: 187).

A proclivity to be demoralized by the logic of circumstances, to feel ground down by the present and its agonizing choices is manifest in the muting of both anti-colonial and anti-Mainland discourse. Self-determination is simply not an issue. In some ways this is surprising. The history of subordination is, in its most general outlines, clear. Hongkong has remained what it was at its inception - an archaic colony presided over by a Governor, subject only to the decisions of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in London (Morris 1988: 30,202), supported by an enormous civil service controlled by expatriates, many of whom maintain the attitudes of district officers believing they have brought civilization to a native people and forged the economic success story that is

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11 Prior to the 1966-7 riots the top levels of the civil service were almost exclusively dominated by British expatriates. Steps were taken to amend this situation and the service is now 98 per cent Chinese. In particular, the recent appointment of the territory’s first local Chief Secretary, Anson Chan Fang On-sang, is viewed as a major blow to expatriate domination (South China Morning Post International Weekly (SCMPW) 25-26/9/1993: 1). However, a large number of expatriates still hold high positions (Scott 1989: 12) and are tenaciously trying to hold onto their jobs, even threatening to sue the administration, despite an agreed policy of localisation.
contemporary Hongkong (FEER 15/11/1984: 50, 21/3/1985: 53, 25/7/1985: 34). An Executive Council (Exco), appointed by the Governor, advises on policy matters and a Legislative Council (Legco), often accused of rubber-stamp approvals, enacts legislation subject to the approval of the Governor (Reference Services 1987: 7). The courts of Hongkong follow the procedure of the English courts, rely heavily on English case law and are presided over mainly by expatriate judges (Chan 1992: 15; Lau & Kuan 1988: 119). Cantonese has been made the object of systematic discrimination. Succeeding phases of the local elite have been successfully co-opted and Anglicised (see Davies 1977). Anglicising institutions, from schools to universities, were implanted. All these processes are rightly seen as forms of political and cultural repression.

Britain’s recent token shuffles towards electoral reforms have not done much to alleviate the situation. In 1991 the first direct elections of 18 people to a 60 member Legco took place, with the elected membership rising to 20 in 1995 (FEER 23/8/1990: 22). Amidst government publicity over the historical importance of the territory’s maiden direct election and the much touted slogan: ‘Vote. It’s power in your hands’, it remained clear that Hongkong’s political structures and institutions would not be changed in any fundamental way by this exercise (SCMP 14/9/1991: Review 12). In the first place, only 750,467 of 1,916,925 registered electors cast their ballots. As about half of those eligible for voting actually registered, the people who turned up at the polling booths represented less than one fifth of the electorate (SCSMP 16/9/1991) Secondly, functional representatives, derived from ‘the economic and professional sectors’, outnumbered direct representatives in the most recent elections and will continue to do so in 1995 (SCMP 7/6/1991: 19). In analytical terms, this gradual enlargement of the franchise treads carefully down the path of evolutionary democracy. The Hongkong present is equated with the British past but the territory has only a few years grace to complete its journey. Most importantly, although the Hongkong government can no longer count on the smooth passage of all legislative programmes and requests for appropriations (Cheng 1992: xxxi), the present administration still enjoys a built-in majority. Essentially, the status quo remains unaltered - executive power will remain with a bureaucracy which owes its allegiance and legitimacy to the British (Lau 1990: 193).

Interestingly, though, those who did vote showed a clear preference for The United Democrats of Hong Kong (UDHK), led by Martin Lee who, along with his colleague, Szeto Wah, gained popularity for leading the organisation that

12 Among the nine judges on the Court of Appeal, only the Chief Justice is local. In the High Court six out of twenty three judges are local (Chan 1992: 23).

13 For example, if we look at the area of law we find that until 1989 all legislation was drafted in English only. Court proceedings in the District and Supreme Courts are conducted in English (Chan 1992: 26). The whole issue of English versus Chinese language schooling is currently hotly contested.

14 This is not to deny that Anglicising has been, in a number of respects, a choice of some Hongkong people. Local complicity in this process only serves to underline the operative political constraints of a social formation which has accorded greater benefits to those who enthusiastically participate in the institutions of British colonialism.
offered material support to the students involved in the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. Since their involvement with the Hongkong Alliance in Support of the Patriotic Democratic Movement in China (HKASPDMC), both have been branded as ‘counter-revolutionaries’ by Beijing, were removed from the Basic Law Drafting Committee and have been shunned by Mainland officials (SCMP 7/7/1991: 10). Despite, or perhaps because of, Chinese pressure urging electors not to cast their ballots for the UDHK (SCMP 7/9/1991: Review 6), this party and its allies won 17 of the 18 seats on a platform of introducing greater democratisation and curtailing China’s power of scrutiny over local affairs during the transition period (Lee, M. 1992).

The current political feud over Governor Chris Patten’s proposals to increase the pace of democratisation in the territory by lowering the voting age to 18 from 21 and broadening the voting base of the functional constituencies would still leave Hongkong, post-1997, with an unrepresentative government with an executive chain of command that runs directly from Beijing down through the territory’s chief executive and her or his top officials to the 190,000 strong civil service. Interviewed for the Far Eastern Economic Review (1/4/1993: 12), Patten described his proposals thus:

I freely confess that my proposals are not a great step forward towards democracy for Hongkong. They aren’t even a small step ... What they are is an attempt to secure a legislative council which is broadly based, which is credible ... I hope that in a rather wider context they will reckon that I helped close the last chapter in Britain’s colonial history honourably.

His conservatism parades as radical reflection against China’s reactions to these plans. Premier Li Peng accused Britain of trying to ‘create disorder and impede the smooth transfer of power’. This mild outburst later gave way to personal insults - Patten became known as a thoroughly dishonourable ‘prostitute’, ‘serpent’ and ‘tango dancer’.

Even so, the New China News Agency statement issued during the 1991 election period - ‘Not only are Hongkong and the Mainland geographically inseparable, they undoubtedly have a relationship as close as teeth and lips’ (SCMP 1/9/1991: 1) - remains applicable. The UDHK, described by Martin Lee as ‘more conservative than John Major’, continues to support China’s resumption of sovereignty over the territory and, in those areas where it is concerned to ‘kick that supine habit of kowtowing to Beijing’ (Lee, M. 1992), has a strictly delimited ability to press for changes. Indeed, it is China, with newfound powers obtained through the airport memorandum of understanding (1991), which now has a legal framework to exert increasing pressure on every

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15 According to the Basic Law, in the first years of the Special Administrative Region, the proportion of directly elected seats on the legislature will remain small. Provisions exist for 20 directly elected seats during 1997-1999, increasing to 24 by 1999 and reaching thirty to fifty per cent of legislature seats by 2003. Any departure from this model is seen by China as a betrayal of the ‘through train’ concept by which legislators elected in 1995 would stay on after sovereignty transferral in the interests of ensuring political stability (Lo 1992: 12).
sector of society (SCSMP 18/8/1991: 13). Economic confrontation is becoming commonplace - China has refused to give its approval for tenders and contracts awarded by the Hongkong government for large scale engineering projects as a form of leverage against Patten's proposals (FEER 1/4/1993: 10) and the rapidly growing presence of mainland Chinese companies in the territory adds to this influence. In fact, China is threatening to set up an alternative shadow government or 'second stove' if Legco approves the package (FEER 18/2/1993: 16).

Yet this belonging to China and to Hongkong, this consubstantiality, partial identification, participation in something that surpasses the theorist on every side, remains infinitely obvious and infinitely obscure. The difficulty of decoupling nationalism and communism, the socialist regime and China certainly provides one clue to the muting of strident Chinese nationalism in Hongkong (Kuan & Lau 1988: 29). On the other hand, the immunization of the colonial government from independence movements has been attributed to a variety of factors: a perception that the British administration in Hongkong has been benign; vested interests in a continued colonial presence; social mobility and a generally high standard of living; the lack of viable political alternatives (Lau & Kuan 1988: 19,28,40,82). At many levels, within these complex and disabling circumstances, Hongkong people have resisted their treatment as passive pawns. This is clearly manifest in a number of controversies - grassroots opposition to Beijing's decision to build a nuclear power plant in nearby Shenzhen; the furore ignited in 1987 by the Public Order (Amendment) Bill which was construed as an attempt to curb freedom of speech; the massive demonstrations in response to the Tiananmen Square massacre. But, given the complexity of the process as a whole, it remains unlikely that these struggles will be unified. It is hardly surprising in these circumstances that 'Hongkong identity' is seen as being primarily cultural - in cinema, music, television, comics, the performing arts - rather than explicitly political.

That the question of 'Hongkong identity' is a political question is evident in the uses to which the term has been put. Not only is it used by locals to assert distinctiveness in a variety of situations, it is also played upon by both the Chinese and the British governments in their scramble for the legitimations of public opinion. For the first time, the general public is being constantly encouraged to fill out surveys, to provide statistical data, to express their wishes about their fate amidst disingenuous promises of 'Hongkong people ruling Hongkong' (Kuan & Lau 1988: 8). If we bear in mind that 'to totalize' does not just mean to unify, but to unify with an eye to power and control (Jameson 1991: 332), then it becomes obvious that totalizations like 'Hongkong people' or 'Hongkong identity' are ambiguous in that they carry the possibility of simultaneous inscriptions into hegemonic and oppositional political praxis.

Commentators on local culture are not the only ones to have engaged in totalizations about the Hongkong Chinese. Indeed, it is verging on the fashionable to hazard such descriptions. In a particularly influential study, based
on surveys, Lau and Kuan (1988) have argued that ‘utilitarian familism’ and ‘egotistic individualism’, form the core values of the ‘ethos’ of Hongkongese. This description emphasises a kind of emptily pragmatic ideology of capitalist performativity. Thus we are told that ‘Hongkong Chinese were found to regard their society instrumentally as a place to make a living or prosper’ (Lau and Kuan 1988: 179).

These academic accounts simply participate in a far more general process of negative stereotyping engaged in by both Western and indigenous pundits. These range from the relatively ludicrous -

Why do Chinese people behave so badly ... People spit, litter, queue-jump and push, smoke in non-smoking areas, shout instead of talk, eat with their mouths full; the list is long and disgraceful. Hongkong must be the worst disciplined society in Asia ... No one can accuse me of being racist as I am genuinely 100 per cent Chinese and I am ashamed of it (H. Leung, Letters to the Editor, SCMP 10/1/1991: 18) - to the rather more benign ‘Hong Kong is above all a practical place. It gets on with the job and lets theory look after itself’ (Sung n.d.: 112). Such examples could be multiplied ad nauseum, but the larger point is that Hongkong is popularly perceived as having a civic culture which emphasises social mobility and consumption and which deemphasises political participation. The language that shapes and lends legitimacy to this view is the discourse of commerce and commodification, of utility and disutility, of self-interestedness and instrumental rationality.

This convenient characterisation should have lost its credibility as locals queued to snap up more than three million copies of the Sino-British Joint Declaration published in 1984 (FEER 25/10/1984: 19). Despite being informed that ‘the agreement must be taken as a whole ... The alternative to acceptance of the present agreement is to have no agreement’ (DAFHK 1984: 9), thousands of submissions on the declaration were received by an assessment office established to gauge public opinion (FEER 13/12/1984: 26). What emerged was a picture of helplessness rather than apathy. Witness the following statement:

For the purpose of your statistics you can classify me as one of those who would accept the draft agreement but I hope you will also take into account that I only accept it with much reluctance and with many reservations ... My heart is not truly at ease and I have no full confidence in the future (FEER 13/12/1984: 27).

The invitation issued by Her Majesty’s Government to comment on the overall acceptability of the draft agreement (DAFHK 1984: 10) was, in any case, disingenuous. As no suggestions for amendments to the text would be entertained, the exercise formed part of a pattern where political deals are formulated over the heads of Hongkong residents (Morris 1988: 288). Throughout the confidential Sino-British talks on the territory’s future, at Beijing’s insistence there had been no direct Hongkong representation as an
independent party at the negotiating table (FEER 8/3/1984: 26). Indeed, Hongkong representatives have been dismissed and insulted in both London and Beijing (Buruma 1990: 44). In view of the limited channels for formal participation in the political system, the active discouragement of political activity and Britain's reluctance to institute genuine democratic reforms, it is hardly surprising that many are cynical about the possibility of exercising effective political influence (Lee 1988: 13).

This enforced impotence was neatly summarised by Conservative member, Lord Derwent, in a House of Commons debate on Hongkong held in July of 1988. He stated:

> From the beginning of Hongkong as a colony until today its people have in fact enjoyed no political rights which theoretically at least could not have been changed by the intervention of the Westminster Parliament - over 10,000 miles away and populated by non-Chinese. Whatever the safeguards and whatever the legal pieties, this is the truth. What is happening is that after 1997, for Westminster we must read Beijing ... Hongkong therefore will be exchanging total dependence on a colonial power for dependence on ... China (DBLHKSAR 1989: 92).

A transfer of power from one authoritarian government to another is also clearly signalled by the 'convergence' doctrine, under which Britain has agreed to provide a continuity of constitutional development between pre- and post-1997 administrations (FEER 18/1/1990: 11).

The extent to which the notion of 'apathy' is a gross generalisation is made manifestly clear by a quick glance at the history of political disturbances in Hongkong. Here we find references to armed resistance against British acquisition of the New Territories in the nineteenth century; food price riots in 1919; a seamen's strike in 1922 and a General Strike in 1925 and 1926 where demands centred on an eight hour day, the prohibition of child labour, the suppression of police brutality, labour representation in the Executive Council, a twenty five per cent reduction in rents and an end to segregation on the Peak. Anti-British sentiment also surfaced in 1967 when thousands massed outside Government House, red flags held high, ostentatiously displaying the Thoughts of Chairman Mao (Morris 1988: 196-198,210-212,274). 1971 was marked by the activities of the Tiaoyutai nationalist movement, protesting Japanese 'aggression' against the Senkaku Islands (FEER 17/7/1971: 8]. More recently, in

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16 China has repeatedly rejected the so-called 'three-legged stool' concept in which Hongkong would be a third party to any agreement.

17 Here I am following Scott’s (1989: 181) description of the Hongkong government as an ‘authoritarian bureaucracy’. Scott’s major argument hinges on the extent to which the Sino-British negotiations and subsequent debates have had a substantial impact on the political culture of Hongkong. Given that he spends much of his book analysing political action prior to 1982, it is disappointingly curious that he, too, accepts the pejorative label ‘apathetic’ to describe the territory's inhabitants before the negotiations. When Scott (1989: 324) states that 'the bureaucracy interpreted the consensus for a politically apathetic population and that the people acquiesced in this state of affairs because they were culturally attuned to the avoidance of authority ... ', he fails to distinguish between legitimating ideology and fact or between normative orientations and practice or between those who are cynical and those who are apolitical. Overall, in the literature on Hongkong there is a disturbing tendency to deny agency to political actors.
1984 the city was shaken by a major riot in Kowloon\(^{18}\) (\textit{FEER} 26/1/1984: 17,18 & 16/2/1984: 11) and in 1986 grassroots opposition to Beijing's decision to build a nuclear power plant in nearby Shenzhen culminated in the presentation of a petition signed by more than one million Hongkong residents (\textit{FEER} 24/7/1986: 44 & 4/9/1986: 16).

In the midst of these activities, the present administration's fear of adversarial politics is translated as a desire to preserve consensus and stability. In turn, this is related to an alleged Chinese 'world view' that embraces a Confucian stress on stable, orderly social relations (e.g. \textit{FEER} 16/2/1984: 12). For example, a green paper on introducing representative government, tabled in Legco in 1984, argued that 'direct elections would run the risk of a swift introduction of adversarial politics, and would introduce an element of instability at a crucial time' (\textit{FEER} 26/7/1984: 13); officials from Xinhua (NCNA), China's \textit{de facto} embassy in the territory, privately say that they do not think Hongkong's socio-economic structure could support the pressures of party politics (\textit{FEER} 26/12/1985: 15) while Lady Lydia Dunn\(^{19}\), prominent businesswoman and government adviser, echoed these sentiments when she proclaimed: 'The constant search for a widely acceptable consensus between different interests has been the key to stability in Hongkong' (DBLHKSAR 1989: 43).

Objections to this position are frequently couched in terms of an advocacy of 'democracy' (\textit{malinjiyu}). This has proved to be both a slippery and a contagious category. Indeed, starkly contrasting views of what Hongkong society is and ought to be have involved many different and incommensurable understandings of this central term. The demands made for democracy and self-government in the territory do not come from a single, united movement but from a broad and heterogeneous group of activists (Lee 1988: 30). It appears that it is precisely the elasticity of 'democracy' that has lent it such subversive potency and widespread currency amongst these groups.

It is, however, possible to detect some dominant threads amongst this tangle. One tactic has been to link \textit{laissez-faire} and free enterprise with democracy, creating a potent fusion of economic ideology with civic pride.\(^{20}\) Thus, Martin Lee casts his pleas for universal adult suffrage in Hongkong as a defence of 'our much treasured free and open market economy' (DBLHKSAR 1989: 65).\(^{21}\) Particularly following the Tiananmen Square massacre Hongkong

\(^{18}\) This riot had no specific political agenda but was widely interpreted as a reflection of mounting discontent among youths regarding the uncertainty of the territory's future.

\(^{19}\) Dunn is one of a number of women actively involved in Hongkong's political life. The whole question of the interrelations between gender and political involvement in the territory deserves close attention.

\(^{20}\) The Hongkong government's past and present institutional links to industry have, in fact, always been much closer than advocates of \textit{laissez-faire} might wish to acknowledge (see Scott 1989: chapter 6).

\(^{21}\) See Nathan (1985) for an extended analysis of the connections between Chinese conceptions of democracy and the pursuit of national wealth and power. While some similarities can be detected between notions of democracy in the Mainland and in Hongkong, the stress on collectivism, centralism and interventionism evident in Deng Xiaoping's idea of a 'socialist mode of democracy' (see He 1990) is, by and large, rejected in the territory.
literals could cogently argue that greater democratic participation would increase the autonomy of the eventual Special Administrative Region (White & Cheng 1993: 186). The keywords and phrases that signify the things that really matter - democracy, identity, Hongkong people - are not fixed in static dictionary definitions but constantly subject to contestation as different subjects seek to hegemonize discourses which support their vision of the future (see Mercer 1992: 426).

Those who seek to politicize society in ways that are not constrained by the channels of bureaucratic-representative political institutions, make their calls for 'democracy' and 'identity' outside conventional Hongkong definitions of legitimate political aspirations and goals. For the first time in the territory's history, mass campaigns and protests on stage or street or square have become a regular feature of the contemporary theatre of power. Previously excluded groups assert the right, through demonstration, dialogue and performance, to be taken seriously as participants in decisionmaking processes and in the work of constructing community. Zuni Icosahedron are such a group.

Aims and Orientation

Much current writing on Hongkong requires confrontational enemies, holy wars between two evil empires, one run by greedy old men, the other by besuited imperialists, with Hongkongese depicted as the powerless victims of both. Zuni Icosahedron remind us that '... between a relationship of power and a strategy of struggle there is a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal' (Foucault 1982: 226). Their performances and social practices point away from any notion of blanket totalitarian control towards a more dense sense of the endless reciprocal relations between global and micro-contexts, between states and subjects. By studying Zuni, I am trying to establish a problematic that, without being shy of the colonial context, opens perspectives on to issues beyond the purview of any political morality tale.

This is a project of ethnography whose broadest ambition is to underline an appreciation of the agency (rather than choice) of people who, at best, have been perceived as victims of oppression and, at worst, as apathetic. In undertaking this project I have privileged cultural production and its links to representations of 'Hongkong identity'. I do this not to exclude the importance of other political struggles occurring in the territory, but as a heuristic device with which to open up a space for considering the effects of such identifications as relations that empower or disempower people as agents of change. The thesis is shaped by a range of imperatives that bear crucially on the questions of identification and representation in contemporary cultures. I am concerned both with the imaginative possibilities of various representations and with the
limited sphere of effectivity of cultural production and the practices informing it. Here, I take it for granted that every representation is also a production, a form of social action, rather than a re-presentation of an already constituted and closed reality (Robinson 1991: 190). Thus, while I hope that I have retained a sense of the oppressiveness of power as it is imbricated in institutionally controlled knowledges, I have also wanted to highlight the relevance of alternative perspectives, multiple discursive sites, struggles over representation and conflicts between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic definitions of social situations (Fraser 1990: 92). Within these wider concerns, an interest in the historically specific social practices through which notions of gender are produced, circulated, accepted and contested looms large. Finally, and in an irredeemably idealistic way, I believe that presenting Hongkong people as active participants in their own historical struggle can shed some light on the prospects for emancipatory social change and political practice in the territory.

With the idea in mind that any identity 'is constructed by multiple agents in varying contexts, or places, and that ethnography must be strategically conceived to represent this sort of multiplicity' (Marcus 1989: 25), the present study encompasses capital-C 'Culture', the production of works of special aesthetic and intellectual interest for fairly narrow audiences, as well as what is blithely termed 'popular culture' or 'mass culture'. In other words, I embrace an interest in the performing arts, film and television and in the processes of manoeuvering that go on internally within these fields and between these fields and the political sphere 'proper', dominated by the British administration and by the Chinese Communist Party as they have attempted to manage cultural production in their own interests.

From a theoretical angle, Verdery (1991: 303) has argued that to see culture as practice removes the need to distinguish between 'high' culture and 'popular' culture; that both are dynamic processes of production whose meanings continually interact with the ongoing practice of social life. I would substantially agree but point out that there are other ways of dealing with the linkage. Firstly, a whole series of productions now cross these antiquated dividing lines. Various cultural programmes on television and radio - performing arts documentaries, film reviews and so on - have resulted in genres that mediate between 'high' and 'low' culture. The example I gave earlier in this chapter of the use of pastiches of film in the theatre provides another instance of this crossover. Secondly, in a relatively small place like Hongkong, many individuals trained in one area also undertake work in another. Zuni Icosahedron was packed with people who had received training in the film industry or as journalists and who now devote themselves to 'avant-garde' theatrical work. For many, this is not an 'either/or' situation - they contribute to a range of media including radio, television, film, dance, video and performance art.

Yet we should not be seduced by these instances into thinking that the division is a complete nonsense. The very same people that work across a range
of media are also frequently the people who strongly believe that film and television are facile, even vulgar, pastimes while speaking enthusiastically about the stimulating and educational virtues of their own theatrical practice. So, even as we recognise that divisions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture must be treated with caution we also need to bear in mind that this distinction substantially informs cultural production in Hongkong.

Many, though not all, members of Zuni Icosahedron are persons we might loosely call ‘intellectuals’. Here I follow Hannerz’s distinction between ‘intellectuals’ and ‘intelligentsia’ wherein both terms refer to people who are preoccupied with ideas but the latter tend to be more bound by paradigms and institutional constraints. Indeed, Hannerz’s (1992: 139) description of intellectuals is a very apt account of the type of theatrical work that Zuni are engaged in:

It is the business of intellectuals to carry on traffic between different levels and fields of meaning within a culture, to translate between abstract and concrete, to make the implicit explicit and the certain questionable, to move ideas between levels of consciousness, to connect ideas which superficially have little in common, to juxtapose ideas which usually thrive on separateness, to seize on inconsistency, and to establish channels between different modes of giving meanings external shape...

In Hongkong, this intellectual stance is generated from a strong sense of ‘in-betweenness’, of being interstitially placed between China and Britain, and is partially a response to state and quasi-state cultural apparati through which both of these powers propagate Oriental and Occidental cultural forms. It is also driven by cosmopolitanism, by the double vision and aesthetic stance of openness to divergent cultural perspectives which this ‘in-betweenness’ fosters. This cosmopolitanism is not fortuitous. Hongkong owes its existence to its positioning at an economic and political crossroad and, nowadays, is an important channel between centres and peripheries within wider international and regional systems (see Hannerz 1992: 201). It is, quite literally, Hongkong’s business to be open. Furthermore, thousands of Hongkong’s families have strong links abroad, not only with mainland China but with diaspora China, made up of about thirty six million people scattered throughout the world (Kim & Dittmer 1993: 277). The heightened awareness of cosmopolitanism within Zuni Icosahedron, and the metacultural position that this encourages, is derived from the above factors and from the internationalisation of art and culture generally. It is also intensified by the biographical histories of many senior members as people who have, at times, sojourned in various parts of diasporic China and returned home to find that the easy sense of the taken-for-grantedness of one’s own milieu is no longer available to them, that encounters with contrasting perspectives have rendered them permanently sceptical.

Most of the writings available to us to help map the passage between cosmopolitanism and cultural production are relatively unconcerned with gender. This thesis aims to partially redress that balance. This is not just
because I am repeating the insistent emphasis of feminist criticism that gender must be accounted for (de Lauretis 1987: 48) - although, I am certainly doing that - but because the questions of identity and identification as 'Hongkong people' are enmeshed with a more general concern with the very possibility of envisaging oneself as a subject that lies at the heart of feminist analysis. Feminist writings have been central to critiques of representation and to the reinterpretation of cultural images and I have found such writings, particularly the work of Teresa de Lauretis and Rey Chow, indispensable to my own understandings of cultural production in Hongkong and to the ways in which the politics of gender are brought into high relief through the performances and internal workings of Zuni Icosahedron.

When I began writing this thesis, I spent a lot of time worrying about whether the performances of Zuni Icosahedron should be classified as 'modern' or 'postmodern'. It strikes me now that this was largely wasted effort. Yet because some of my preoccupations may appear to be connected to this issue and because some academics accuse me of being postmodernist, I will gesture in the direction of these concepts even as I later largely leave them behind. As de Lauretis (1987: 72) has pointed out, postmodernism as a term is currently so frequently made use of in so many different ways that it is nearly empty of reference and thus, itself, postmodern. In conservative anthropological circles, postmodernism is a kind of summarising insult which refers to fears that the traditional fieldwork basis of the discipline and its sense of discrete, bounded cultures is being eroded by monstrous jargon and ephemeral juxtapositions that are, somehow, inherently apolitical. I will state at the outset that this thesis is written from a position that is basically sympathetic to the claim that modern identities are being dislocated, fragmented and decentred. I will also quite clearly state that in Hongkong this is a profoundly political process.

If we look at the performances of Zuni Icosahedron, it would be simple to describe them as postmodern. The omnipresence of pastiche in which the past becomes a vast collection of images open to the play of random allusion; the transgression of boundaries between what is inside and what is outside of a cultural ‘text’, between high culture and popular culture, between reality and representation; the denial of the possibility of master narratives; the presence of hyper-reflexivity and artifice; the production of irony and scepticism are all present. On the other hand, one could equally label their work modernist. The quintessentially modernist figure of the isolated, estranged individual framed against the anonymous crowd looms large in Zuni productions. More convincingly, the whole notion of art as a separate oppositional sphere within society which informed the modernist movement in so far as it marked a crisis of nineteenth century bourgeois culture, is upheld by members of Zuni Icosahedron and by the larger performing arts scene in Hongkong. The idea that there is a split between an artistic establishment which relies on traditional forms and an experimental, subversive avant-garde, with Zuni in the latter camp, permeates the discourse of members and the media’s appreciation of the
company. Heterogeneity, deconstruction and difference have made absolutely no impact on this enduring framework.

My own view is that the polarised thinking encouraged by a modernism-postmodernism problematic is not particularly helpful in understanding cultural production in contemporary Hongkong. The preconditions for the uses of theatrical imagery and techniques which could be attributed to either ‘moment’ are quite different from those in the late capitalist West. There is certainly a lack of faith in the metanarratives of historical materialism or British liberalism but this is felt as a painful not a playful reality. In a place where there is no ‘post’ to colonialism, the past is not raided for commoditizable nostalgias so much as ransacked for possible meanings and future directions. The past may be criticised but it is largely respected. Bearing this in mind, I have, nevertheless, found Frederic Jameson’s writings on postmodernism enlightening for some aspects of my analysis and, to place him with a rather odd bedfellow, have also found Giddens’ work on modernity as a highly reflexive form of life similarly helpful.

Finally, a comment on the methods I employ. Although this thesis focuses on an analysis of texts and performances, it does so through an anthropological method that supplements reading and watching with fieldwork. This fieldwork, which took place between December 1990 and December 1991, places these texts and performances in the context of sets of social relations. On this view, to thus investigate the context of cultural production in Hongkong is not just to study additional information about it but to give ourselves a greater understanding of the meanings being invoked and the stakes of this mobilisation than would be available to someone who ‘read’ these as self-contained items. Instead of setting up a relation of ‘text/performance: reader/analyst’, I hope to have provided some insight into a whole nexus of relations among cultural producers and the institutions that frame their actions.

Perhaps the most salutary lesson of my fieldwork, though it was not unexpected, is the degree to which I have had to face up to the changing conditions of anthropology in which subjects are far more militantly self-conscious and critical of the ethnographer. Zuni Icosahedron graciously allowed me to spend a year with them. During this time, I watched videos of their previous productions, ransacked their filing cabinets for any pertinent information, observed numerous rehearsals, conducted formal interviews, enjoyed informal conversations and attended their performances as an audience member. I also attended numerous other shows and conducted library research in Hongkong to try to get a ‘feel’ for the broader performing arts scene. While I was busy researching the experimental fringe, my husband Michael Hyde, who works as a stage technician in Australia, was finding employment with various ‘establishment’ companies such as the Hongkong Ballet. Between us, we tried to cover the field.

Once home, I began sending drafts of all my chapters to Zuni Icosahedron. They have not been uncritical. Obviously living it is different to writing about it
and not all of my assessments have been complimentary. Some company members have particularly seen my accounts of factionalism within the group and of gender bias as grossly inflated. However, they have not convinced me that my ideas are in any way substantially misplaced. Mostly, I think their concerns relate to a distaste for washing one’s dirty linen in public and a suspicion that there is little point to doing the laundry. I have persisted because I do not think it is enough to champion their subversive work. I take it seriously by taking both their achievements and the limited effect of their actions and representations into account. In other words I have sought to recognise both the extraordinary creativity of their work, the ways in which it troubles complacency, and to resist the cant with which they can be described as permanently transgressive irrespective of content or their own theatrical practice.

While Hongkong is the focus of my research, the material here is, I believe, relevant to other areas and disciplines where similar kinds of issues about representation, identity, cosmopolitanism and gender exist. My point of departure is a durable tradition of social anthropology concerned with theorising the relationship between central and marginal social formations and with illuminating the nexus between politics and culture. But in considering these issues I have also found it beneficial to draw from a wide variety of work across a range of disciplinary boundaries. Cultural materialism, especially the writings of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, feminist theory, film theory, poststructuralism and Bourdieu’s problematisation of artistic ‘distinction’ have all informed my own discussions. These remarks should not be understood as a precaution but as a positive valuation of a range of research orientations, in and out of anthropology.

Preview

The organisation of this thesis involves a progressive narrowing of focus. In Chapter Two I am concerned with television and film in Hongkong; in Chapter Three I give a broad outline of performing arts in the territory; Chapter Four is a general consideration of Zuni Icosahedron; Chapter Five examines the relations between Zuni members and the internal structure of the group and Chapter Six is a detailed analysis of one of this company’s productions. Although I don’t want to give a detailed preview of all of my concerns, I think some foreshadowing of the material may be helpful in orienting a reader.

In the following chapter I am interested in examining the political effects of contemporary currents in television and film. This examination proceeds partly through a consideration of interpellation, Althusser’s term to describe the process whereby an individual internalises representations so that they become constitutive of her or his own identity, and of the critical responses encouraged
by inter-cultural imaging and genre mixing. Throughout, I argue that representations cannot be directly linked with other social structures but that the question of the relationship of film and television to those structures cannot be erased either. Part of my agenda here is also to combat a view, commonly expressed in Hongkong, that ‘mass culture’ necessarily leads to political impotence and narcissistic insensitivity (e.g. Sze 1992: 460,461), to allow a positive assessment of popular culture.

The broad outline of performing arts in Hongkong, found in Chapter Three, is largely designed to clarify the general shape of the field of cultural production in which Zuni Icosahedron are situated. This is a situation in which new locally oriented performing arts are pitting themselves in conspicuous opposition to more traditional productions that celebrate Chinese and Western traditions, often in the form of idealised visions purveyed by a kind of elite nostalgia. I describe these more traditionalist orientations as hegemonic to express the advantaged positions of dominant social groups with respect to representation. This allows us to recast the issues of social identity as promulgated in the performing arts in the light of societal inequality and touches on a number of the more heated issues in the political economy of contemporary complex cultures including government support for the arts and the sponsorship of cultural production. While my use of hegemony stresses the intersection of power, inequality and representation, I have sought to avoid monolithic views which suggest that dominant groups exercise absolute control over meanings by stressing the negotiations and contestations involved in the search for cultural authority.

My fourth chapter conceives of the work of Zuni Icosahedron as occurring in the margins of these hegemonic constructs. From a consideration of the history of this company and the stylistic attributes of their work, I move on to give attention to the ways in which they have secured for themselves an adversarial aura, partially through mobilising the press, and the diverse reactions of critics and audiences to their productions. Finally, in this section I have tried to guide the reader from the more overt content of the performances to the space implied yet unarticulated by them.

Chapter Five outlines relations among Zuni members in terms of both ‘intimacy’ and ‘hierarchy’. It is concerned with how positions of authority are forged and maintained within the company and with the pervasive axes of inequality which structure this group. Although I point to the valorization of critique, questioning and self-reflexivity in their practices, I am also at pains to highlight the fact that these intellectuals are, often contrary to their own perception, rooted in particular locations in the social structure and that, despite all their talk of obdurate refusal of dominant Chinese social relations, they practice a kind of paradoxical conservatism which they interpret as much needed nurturance. The intent here is not to cast a corrosive light on the backstage recesses of their activities but to take their own aims seriously by neither denying their ideals nor forgetting the costs of their implementation.
Chronicle of Women, my sixth chapter, uses an analysis of a lighthearted Zuni Icosahedron production to explore the serious issue of establishing a strategic form of local identification which takes gender into account without lapsing into an essentialising rhetoric of 'Hongkong identity'. The resilience of this production's critical pleasures allow me to consider the ways in which performers and audiences identities as female subjects are consolidated and, conversely, dispersed through representation. Predictably a critique of patriarchy was hijacked by concern for other types of cultural oppression, particularly the overwhelming concern with sovereignty transition. Yet the prospects for mobilising counterhegemonic interpretations not crushed under the weight of 1997 remains.

I conclude via a detour to another production, Revolutionary Opera. This production returns us to the start of our journey, to the attempts to forge a novel aesthetic mode which speaks politically to the present in the midst of the stranglehold exerted by canonical versions of the performing arts in Hongkong. The way back is signposted with the violence and terror which underly efforts to achieve ideological homogenisation in the Mainland, with active remembering and fear of the future, with obdurate refusals of essentialisation. The question which informs these travels is: What impact will Hongkong have on China post-1997? The dream that it will be a fertile wellspring of salvation and the nightmare of impotence jostle for our attention. Sleepwalking, we find that the cultural pilgrimages of Zuni Icosahedron demand we straddle both visions.

From the Heart

I hope I have said enough in these introductory remarks to indicate that currently in Hongkong there is disorientation and a feeling of vulnerability in relation to impending sovereignty transferral and that this uncertain fragility was magnified by the Tiananmen Square massacre. Zuni Icosahedron members are not immune to these feelings. Speaking to me in the Wanchai office of the company about the immediate responses in the territory to the 1989 protests on the Mainland, Danny Yung, artistic director of Zuni Icosahedron, described the enormous sense of shock and the desire to positively respond which these events generated:

There was a lot of creative energy and the reason why it was creative is because it came from the heart. When it's out there it's out there and you can just sense it and people will do it spontaneously with no contriving. Because I remember when we were laying out the bedsheets over here and we just found whatever paint we could, we found whatever sticks or bamboo poles we could to hold those sheets up and we made do with everything because we all just wanted to participate in the demonstration and there's a lot of creative energy in it and it's there - you can sense it. Not only here but
I remember this one big character we did which was rather interesting and also kind of sad because it was in '89 in May. At one point the news we heard was that the government finally decided to have a dialogue with the students. So the whole demonstration we had organised almost became a celebration and then on the 24th everything suddenly turned around. We were writing, we were trying to pick out words that could reflect how we felt. So I remember I put down one character which meant 'mourning'. It was one character and the reason I chose one character is, as I kept saying: ‘Hey, let's do one bedsheets and the most visible way, the most powerful way is to do only one character on one bedsheets and the bedsheets looks like a mourning screen at a Chinese funeral’. And then somebody else suggested we should say that this is mourning for the death of democracy. And the person who we dedicated this to was Li Peng. So it became an ironic thing.

I remember we did that and it was captured by all the television crews, that particular character, and then during the next three days I saw on the news that Shenzhen was doing the same thing. It was very visible. That's why the television picked it up and from then on everybody else. You know how TV can spread the news.

I include this lengthy quotation because it underlines that palpable shock and rage, the dynamic of hope abridged which Hongkong citizens registered in that year. I also include it because it illustrates the sense of stillness which Zuni Icosahedron tried to recover in the midst of all that loud, noisy history. Later, Danny Yung attempted to restore that still rage, to remind people of the necessity for keeping an engaged distance, in a production titled The Square: Deep Structure of Chinese (Hongkong) Culture; a production that was as much stern unappeased vigil as it was performance.

Initially, Yung was reluctant to undertake a performance on this subject: ‘I felt it didn’t make sense to do anything on stage because the entire street was like a stage at that time, with demonstrations of one and a half million people in Hongkong; the scale seemed completely wrong; the creative energy was out there’ (The Independent 17/5/1990). But driven by the knowledge that ‘1997 is something that’s definitely on people’s mind, dealing with the Chinese government is definitely on people’s mind and if they have to deal with the government they have to deal with June 4; it’s in their mind and it’s part of their culture - there’s no way to take that away’, Yung persisted. He arrived at an austere piece which paradoxically embodied, in carefully inscribed images of chaos and disarray, the tyranny of Hongkong’s political positioning, a tyranny less than subtly alluded to in the choice of two songs which were repeatedly broadcast through the theatre: the ironic contrast between Land of Hope and Glory and kindergarten children singing ‘China is a big garden, the warm sun shines brightly, everybody is happy and gay’ was not lost on anybody.

Yet it wasn’t all so obvious. Indeed, the bracketing of ‘Hongkong’ in the title of the piece clearly indicated the exploration of the proximity between mainland Chinese and their Hongkong compatriots and the cultural distance separating them. The performance began with four figures wearing the uniforms
of the People’s Liberation Army guarding the stage, their backs to the audience. Pacing figures crossed and recrossed the floor, scrims delineated several increasingly opaque playing spaces, the simple steps of the Maoist ‘loyalty dance’ and the ‘peasants’ dance’ repeatedly reminded the audience of bodily propaganda.22

A black curtain finally lifts to reveal the horizon, a huge blank back wall, the wings, the stage machinery. The revelation of artificiality was carefully positioned between a kind of austere optimism and the desolation of exposure. The centre of energy remained the spaces between. For me, this stark image of what is behind and between is a necessary complement to the more widely publicised images of demonstrating masses. It restored a sense of what is possible and a sense of the crushing weight of current historical circumstances and left me wondering whether the politicizing of art is the specular image of the aestheticizing of politics. The emptiness Yung opened up was the abyss where our identities and images run the risk of being engulfed. Walking a tightrope, he wondered whether he should allow himself to be walled in or make a play out of it.

In his Programme Notes to this performance, Yung (1991: a) was at pains to disconcert the audience by insisting that in The Square there is no conclusion, that Zuni Icosahedron are continuously searching, trying to say something that they can’t even understand. He went on to comment:

... deep inside the stage there’s a wall. And my heart sinks again. The stage is sort of like a book. You flip through page after page and there are a lot of high points - the pleasure of reading. And when you finish reading a book, when you flip the last page, all this pleasure is hanging up there. Maybe it’s not important. Maybe the important thing is what’s between one book and reading another book, between one performance and another performance and between one piece of work and between another piece of work.

This thesis too is about what is at stake between: between performances, between performers, between China and Britain, between conjuring with the false unity of ‘Hongkong identity’ and imaginatively mapping out the unknown. If you hold in your mind that image of the long, receding distance to the back wall and the vast see-through wings, this need to play the moment, to make a scene, will guide you through the following pages.

22 Yang ko communist drama was derived from this peasants’ dance originating in Shensi Province. Its easy steps and clear dramatisation were considered ideal vehicles for Maoist propaganda (Hsu 1985: 14.15).
Chapter Two

PERPLEXITIES OF DISPLACEMENT: FILM AND TELEVISION IN HONGKONG

Claiming Identity

Recently, a number of indigenous commentators have suggested that, even in the absence of any supportive or protectionist policies, a separate ‘Hongkong identity’ has been articulated through various cultural products (e.g., Choi 1990: 537,538). These products are taken as the ‘figures’ that render society visible to itself, the representations which give tangibility and figuration to the motive energies of a time of transformation. For some, this transformation is inextricably linked to a political project. Chan Kai-cheung (1991: 454,455), for example, argues that a form of ‘cultural decolonization’ took place in Hongkong during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The following chapter is an attempt both to flesh out and to critique these suggestions, with a particular concern to hazard an assessment of the political effects of contemporary cultural currents in television and film. Underlying this is a larger question: What is there about the notion of ‘Hongkong identity’ that makes it so apt a junction for culture and politics in the present moment?

This chapter does not attempt an all-embracing unravelling of this conjuncture in the sense that my focus is on local critical discourses about television and film rather than on textual or ethnographic analysis of programming and content, though I do touch on these latter concerns. Obviously, writing about culture does not prescribe people’s cultural practices (Ang 1985: 115). However, the complex issue of audience responses to these cultural products is largely beyond my scope here.

My analysis presupposes that both cultural production and the intellectual activities of cultural critics are situated. Neither emanates from some neutral aesthetic field but are, rather, one of several instruments for realising social conflicts and interests. Contemporary discourse about ‘Hongkong identity’ and contesting images of Hongkong ‘selves’ can be partially seen as expressing the dilemmas of people interstitially placed between dominating powers – China and Britain. I also attempt to show how various critics have taken advantage of these crosscurrents to subsume varying representations under questions of local
identity and political placement as part of a bid to construct themselves as Hongkong's acknowledged cultural spokesmen in the struggle over how to represent Hongkong and its values, both internally and abroad. Issues of local identity are wrapped up in a politics of culture, whose result is to strengthen indigenist ideologies. In writing of ideologies that are indigenist, I refer to discursive statements in which the concept of 'Hongkong people' or 'Hongkong identity' has formed a central preoccupation (see Verdery 1991: 3-5, 9, 171).

In assessing this question of Hongkong identity in relation to cultural production I am not interested in positivistic taxonomic juxtapositions in the manner of 'this is Hongkongese', 'this is mainland Chinese', 'this is overseas Chinese', 'this is British, American or Japanese' but rather in bracketing even as I repeat the terms. The task facing us is to articulate the specific ways in which Hongkong ethnicity, as the site both of possible formations of collective identities-in-resistance and of cultural predicament, functions (see Chow 1991a: xi, 3).

Part of the difficulty in addressing this issue of who is 'seeing' whom and how has been a tendency within literature on Hongkong to treat cultural products as direct reflections of social conditions, as transparent documents which provide a mirror to society. The notion that the 'spirit' or 'identity' of a people is quintessentially encapsulated in cultural production obviously tallies with some real situations, but in its ordinary form it speaks to too many. That kind of history and that kind of interpretation of its relation to social change, although unavoidable and replete with evidence, belittles it (Williams 1989: 67, 157). Of course, the theoretical problem is not confined to Hongkong. Many older discussions of this issue have opted for the 'semitonomy' of cultural production: its presence above the practical world, whose mirror image it throws back in forms which vary from legitimation to contestatory indictment (Jameson 1991: 48).

So, while I would not reject the supposition that there can be a homology, or formal correspondence, between certain kinds of cultural production and the social relations within which they are shaped (Williams 1989: 224, I think we might be on more productive terrain if we consider Frederic Jameson's appropriation of the Althusserian (and Lacanian) redefinition of ideology as 'the representation of the subject's Imaginary relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence' (cited in Jameson 1991: 51). Using this definition as a springboard, Jameson (1991: 51, 52, 415, 416) suggests that cultural production enables a situational representation, a map, of individual relationships to local, national and international structures and processes. In this sense, there remains a gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends individual experience but which ideology attempts to span by means of representations. This kind of approach allows us to think of cultural production in Hongkong not simply as a reflection of social conditions but as expressions that bear the marks of contradictory historical relationships; of Hongkong
culture emerging in a space opened up by current political predicaments rather than as directly expressing those predicaments.

Let me make myself quite clear here. My argument is not that representations are unrelated to social conditions but that, particularly in film, we are dealing with genres whose theatricality (if I may use that term) denies closure, whose fragmentary juxtapositions disallow simplistic notions that cultural products offer slices of unmediated reality.

The Indigenisation of Television

Television in Hongkong, as in many other industrialised countries, is the most popular of all media (Chan 1990: 507). Television was introduced through a cable system in 1957 but at that stage it remained an elite medium with a rental fee of $55 per month. In 1967 broadcast television was introduced and viewership widened enormously (Lee 1991: 79). According to a recent Broadcasting Authority survey, almost every household in the territory owns a television and more than twenty per cent possess two sets. Average viewing time is 4.2 hours per day (SCMP 27/7/1991: 3).

There are currently two commercial television licensees in Hongkong, Asia Television (ATV) and Television Broadcasts (TVB). Each licensee operates two channels and, by law, one of these must broadcast in English, the mother tongue of less than one per cent of the population. This colonial structure dates back to the 1960s, when licensing conditions stipulated a minimum requirement for British but none for any other type of programming (Chan 1991: 454).

Television in Hongkong is unique because of the domination of the market by TVB Jade, the Cantonese channel which has monopolized viewership since the 1970s (Chan 1990: 509). While during the 1960s Cantonese programming meant little more than imported shows dubbed into the local dialect, during the 1970s TVB Jade established its hegemony by pioneering the production of in-house Cantonese programmes, often related to local ‘lifestyle’. Since this time, TVB Jade has consistently won over at least eighty per cent of prime time viewers. Indeed, at its lowest ebb in 1988 ATV Gold (now ATV Home), the other Cantonese channel, frequently recorded zero viewership in many time slots (Chan 1991: 454).

In accounting for the way in which TVB programmes, of uneven quality produced on low budgets, almost effortlessly drove out of the market more expensive and professionally produced imported programmes, all commentators appeal to a preference for local products which satisfy the need for a Hongkong identity. Television, in this sense, is credited with enormous cohesive power. For

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1 All figures quoted are in Hongkong dollars. Approximately AUSS1 is equivalent to HK$6.
example, Johannes Chan (1988: 225) argues that television 'dictates the culture and mood of Hongkong' while Chan Kai-cheung (1990: 510) rather more forcefully states: 'The virtual monopoly of Chinese television by TVB Jade did serve a vital historical role in the birth and consolidation of Hongkong's indigenous culture. The shared experience among virtually the entire population enjoying the same television programmes every night (and regurgitating the same talking points the day after) contributed a great deal to the creation of a homogeneous cultural identity for the populace ... ' The effort within much of this explication is to find ways of crediting mass media with subversive or progressive potential. Far from seeing television as a deadening antagonist, this argument both suggest that it has encyclopaedic powers of incorporation and that, in the context of colonialism, this promotes a form of resistance (see Connor 1989: 167).

Today, however, television is losing its immense popularity. This decline began in the early 1980s and since then TVB Jade has lost nearly thirty per cent of its prime time viewership. This is attributed to changes in social structure: economic affluence and greater education have produced a middle-class audience tired of television's regurgitation of basically the same story-lines in countless drama serials. As the lyrics to 'Queen's Road East', a Cantonese hit song written by a former ATV creative director, put it: 'Television spewing out anachronisms every night ... Comrades, lets stir up something new!' (Chan 1990: 511,513; Chan 1991: 456,457,463).

Some of the ratings recently lost by TVB Jade have gone to its competitor ATV Home. However, despite expensive programming strategies based on reproducing the established model of drama serials and glamorous spectaculars and enticing some top names over from TVB, ATV has failed to attain any distinctive positioning. This station now occasionally manages to take up just thirty per cent of the audience (Chan 1990: 513,514; Chan 1991: 457-459; SCMP 9/3/1991: 15; SCMP 10/3/1991: Spectrum 1).

The idea that television in Hongkong creates a community that shares an imaginary totality, that viewing offers a point of entry into a collective experience for the individual, needs, I think, to be taken seriously. Anderson (1986), for instance, has highlighted the importance of the newspaper as a mechanism for providing links between the members of a national community. A stronger case, given the simultaneity of broadcasts, can be made in relation to the ways in which watching television might anchor the imagined community in daily practice. Indeed, there is now a substantial body of literature suggesting that television constitutes a significant cultural resource with many people depending on it both for information and for entertainment (Morley & Robins 1989: 32). But can this, or any other media, be seen as so unproblematically capturing the hearts and minds of their audiences? In other words, even within the terms of the 1997 debate, can television really be such an omnipotent integrator?
In the first place, this argument functions within an utterly uninterrogated model of what cultural identities are. It fails to problematize, but rather takes for granted, the existence of the social bond thereby foreclosing questions about the construction of identity (see Fraser 1989: 85). More specifically, it involves a passive perception of audience reception whereas what we are dealing with are divisions and diversities of interpretation. As studies of popular culture repeatedly show, ethnicities, gender, age, classes, all provide quite distinctive anchorage points; the viewer is elusive, always divided between conventional and non-conventional ‘readings’, between self-recognition and self-estrangement (Chow 1991a: 20,21; Elsaesser 1984: 69).

It is worth underlining here the role of the British administration, and the terms of its interventions in the industry, in determining the limits and the possibilities of local television. Aside from Radio Television Hong Kong which produces but does not broadcast programs, all media institutions in Hong Kong are privately owned. Thus the government does not have any direct say over the appointment of media personnel or financing. However, by means of registration, franchise conditions, regulations which exclude any material which is likely ‘to discredit or bring into disrespect the law or social institutions’ and emergency powers, the government does enjoy ultimate restrictive control (Chan 1988: 224; Kuan & Lau 1988: 2). Bearing this in mind, the area which requires examination is the content or subject matter of television programmes, the dominant narrative discourses and the ways in which they draw on existing cultural histories and practices, reformulating them to build up their own generic conventions (see Higson 1989: 43).

A key process in play in contemporary Hong Kong television is one in which a romantically sanitised version of Chinese history is being busily re-created either through the showing of old costume films (see Jarvie 1977: 104,105) or through the serialisation of Chinese novels (such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*) and stories. Through such narratives, usually set in some indefinable nostalgic past, a particular sense of Chinese national identity is produced. Nostalgia, though, is perhaps an unsatisfactory word for such fascination. What is partially involved here is a defense of ‘Chinese culture’, an idealist preoccupation with authentic origins, stereotypes which endow present reality with, to borrow a phrase from Jameson (1991: 21), ‘the spell and distance of a glossy mirage’. This concentration on China as ‘tradition’ is understandable (see Chow 1991a: 28). Representations of a past before Communism collapse the problem of national identification and objections to the present regime. It is an aesthetic mode which mesmerizes with the comfort of continuity, which demands little engagement with the dilemmas of current experience.

Alongside this fascination with lavish images of a generalized Chinese past, the viewer can find numerous soap operas, comedy shows and programmes with titles like *City Life* which generate ambivalence, and often rejections, of notions about Chinese tradition. Many dramas feature secular story lines: fortuitous happenings, struggles between police and criminals, sudden reversals of fortune
in the rags-to-riches vein, mixed-up parentage in a chaotic postwar milieu (Chan 1991: 455). What these programmes share is a celebration of individualism and wealth, of Hongkong as a city, of the city as privileged scenario of the modern experience. Asserting the intrinsic worth of local sociality, these negations of tradition (see Thomas 1992) are perhaps more crucial than its commemorations in the construction of a distinctive local identity.

Television in Hongkong is also increasingly absorbed by what Umberto Eco has termed ‘neo-TV’, that is, television which takes itself and its participants as its own subject matter, as in game shows, chat shows and award ceremonies (Connor 1989: 168). Every day on TVB Jade one can watch the entertainment-news oriented *Hot Gossip*. To familiarise viewers with the station's favoured actors and presenters there is a daily segment titled *Talent Mini-Programme*. On Monday’s ATV offers *Infotainment*. The very popular Lydia Shum hosts the fast-paced *Money Crazy Game*, which goes out on weekdays on Home. On Thursdays TVB screens *To Be On Top*, offering funny schemes on how to get rich (*SCMP* 29/9/1991: *The Guide* 2). And so it goes on. Images and styles no longer function as the promotional accessories to products, they are the products themselves (Connor 1989: 46). This can properly be seen as part of a global process, the tendency towards autoreferentiality in all modern culture, its designation of its own cultural production as its content (Jameson 1991: 42). But this view of television as a world of simulations detached from reference to the real, purportedly the postmodern cultural condition, does not help us understand the particular valences such programming takes on in Hongkong.

Shows are replete with very late capitalist images of prosperity: the manic compulsion to consume, economics as a game of chance, floating visual pleasures and impossible dreams of stardom (Mort 1989: 162). In Hongkong ideologies of affluence, of glamour and 'style', have had very real effects on much of the population. Consuming is consistently represented as a source of power and pleasure. Unlike traditional and Socialist China, where politics, to a large extent, determines elite status, in Hongkong it is usually wealth which results in forms of political recognition, such as government appointments to advisory bodies and councils (Lau & Kuan 1988: 36; Wong 1986: 322,323). The wealthy are, by and large, admired and staggering income inequalities tolerated. With no possibility of independence, the inability to convert wealth into genuine political power, sustains an emphasis on consumption (Lau & Kuan 1988: 37,38,63,64), on the hyper-eroticisation of a visit to the shops. Television can thus be viewed, in Althusserian terms, as a ‘civil’ apparatus, reproducing the conditions of capitalist production by ‘interpellating’ individuals into the existing system (see Chow 1991a: 21).

The extent to which television is dedicated to emulations of Hongkong yuppies, those mythical heroes and heroines of the financial market, clutching their mobile phones, with a lifestyle ruthlessly dedicated to consuming (see Mort 1989: 160), can, however, be exaggerated. Television is not entirely devoid of satirical interventions. Witness, for instance, ATV Home’s *Fun-Making Agency,*
which makes leading members of the Chinese Communist Party the subjects of ironic humour (SCSMP 6/10/1991: Spectrum 5). But, taken as a whole, it remains the case that television pivots around glamour and commercialism; the screen is a glossy skin, an exhilarating illusion (see Jameson 1991: 34).

In fact, the structure of the industry, which recruits actresses through beauty pageants, feeds this stress. Over five hundred female contract artists work at the two television stations, and many are former contestants. Around 5,000 women each year apply for ATV’s Miss Asia Pageant and TVB’s Miss Hong Kong pageant. The monetary rewards for winning either are there: a car, a flat for a year, clothes and free holidays. The real attraction, though, is that success in a pageant guarantees a contract in television, with the possibility of a career in film. As one ATV spokesman explained: ‘We will audition girls after the pageant for jobs at the station. These include roles in dramatic programmes, compères and singers’. For those who are employed, salaries are pitifully low. Most earn around $6000 to $7000 per month with $300 awarded for each acting appearance (SCSMP 27/10/1991: Spectrum 3). Television is a major industry within patriarchal capitalism, with the same structure as other capitalist industries; actresses work in an occupation that is controlled by men (see Pateman 1988: 197).

As it is impossible to maintain the necessary glamorous image on this salary, quite a number supplement their income through various sexual arrangements. Bao Hei, where a rich man enters a woman in a pageant and pays all her expenses is reputed to be currently fashionable. A 1991 court hearing (dubbed the ‘Miss ABC’ case) which held Hongkong enthralled, revealed an active trade between pimps pressuring hopeful starlets and wealthy customers. Money is either paid into the woman’s bank account, or she is given an account at a shop or a credit card (SCMP 14/8/1991: 3). Participation in these arrangements enables women to earn more than they can by working in most other jobs open to them.

Here I refer to Salaff’s (1981, 1990) studies of the ways in which Hongkong capitalism draws on the labour of young, single women in its drive to supply export-led manufacturing with cheap, skilled labour. In this low-wage economy characterised by the complete absence of basic social insurance provisions the pooling of the wages of family members is an essential strategy of survival; daughters’ wages are an increasingly crucial part of this income. Social class determines the use of such wages but Salaff estimates that three-quarters of working women’s incomes go to their natal families before marriage, and thereafter to their husbands’ families. These families place great emphasis on ancestral traditions and patriliny; sons are the main recipients of all benefits, including education (see Moore 1988: 109-114).

The saturation coverage newspapers gave to this trial, emphasising the graphic nature of the evidence as five models, actresses and pageant contestants

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2 Oriental Sunday, for example, deployed a team of about twenty reporters and photographers to cover the case. At one point more than 100,000 copies of this newspaper were bought in less than five hours (SCSMP 11/8/1991: 4).
testified against businessman Chin Chi-ming who blackmailed them for sex, revealed a staunchly voyeuristic underbelly to interest in television viewing which is underplayed in the literal content of broadcasts. It also demonstrated the interlinkages between media, the ways in which images are extremely rapidly recycled to cash in on current interests. Thus, during the trial an Infoline service was quickly established providing daily telephone accounts of court proceedings (SCMP 14/8/1991: 1) and, a few weeks following the trial, a film satirising pornographic movies, complete with a director named Fok King-yiu, which mimicked the events was released (SCSMP 8/9/1991: The Guide 11).

Television can thus be seen as one of a series of institutions and discourses which reproduce the logic of consumer capitalism. This is bound up with broader political developments pivoting around interpretations of democracy that slide between ‘consultation’ and ‘individual initiative’, succinctly summarised in the sloganising of Hongkong private enterprise (see Pateman 1988: 9). Emancipatory narratives are circumscribed; freedom is largely defined as the freedom to consume. As Salaff (1990: 131) puts it: ‘They feel the surge of ‘freedom’ in terms of consumer goods and a widening sphere of choice ...’

The story of the ‘Miss ABC’ case is quintessentially a story of the ‘sexual contract’ as described by Pateman (1988) and, in this sense, it is a political problem not a matter of morality. Much more is at stake than ‘double standards’. Capitalism and patriarchy are not separate issues but wedded dimensions of power in the complex structure of domination evident in contemporary Hongkong. On one level this story is about the male demand that women’s bodies are for sale as commodities in the capitalist market. Predictably, women are deemed culpable for this situation. Well-known politician and former ATV chief executive Selina Chow commented: ‘In the entertainment business you have girls who want to get somewhere and inevitably their vanity and ambition does some harm and brings disrepute to the industry’ (SCSMP 27/10/1991: Spectrum 3). The character of men’s participation in these activities and their demand for such services is treated as unproblematic.

On another level, it tells of the creation of a fraternity – ‘Chin himself always wore a devil-may-care grin to match his loud suits. He liked to welcome every spectator personally and stood around outside court each morning with a benevolent smile which he flashed on each new arrival like a host’ (SCMP 26/10/1991: Review 5). Indeed, the popularity of the trial, the fascination for the sexually graphic evidence, the demand that women yield themselves by describing intimate details of positions and circumstances, the desire to reveal their hidden identities can only be explained as a banquet during the course of which Hongkong men and women were forcibly reminded that males have right of access to women’s bodies.

This voyeurism is not confined to court trials associated with television; a desire for the lurid manifests itself across a range of media. In 1984, for instance, a new magazine was launched, Dragon, Tiger, Leopard. Under the rubric of enhancing ‘medical knowledge’ this publication included photographs
from medical text books which gave detailed depictions of childbirth, breast and vaginal operations and so on. Within a few months circulation had increased six-fold and at one stage the magazine was selling over 700,000 copies in a three-issue month (Blowers 1990: 181). Hongkong, despite its reputation for prudishness, is now part of a burgeoning international sex industry that includes the mass-marketing of pornographic magazines, videos and films, the widespread supply of strip-clubs and topless bars and the ready availability of prostitutes. The sexual display of women, either in representation or as live bodies, reinforces the gender stereotypes on which the logic of consumer capitalism is founded.

My more general point in this section is simply that any notion of television forming a site of cultural decolonization relies on the idea that Hongkong people representing Hongkong culture is a sufficient articulation of difference to constitute a political challenge. The whole question of precisely what is represented, the ability of these representations to further concrete social struggles or the deeper ideological models on which these representations are based, is lost in this assumption. In this sense I would argue that simply ‘to speak’ is not sufficient; viewers are not being offered a single neutral subject-position of ‘the Hongkong person’ but a series of subject-positions which are already the interpellated roles of this particular social formation. However, in the current political climate totalizations about ‘Hongkong identity’, and consequent assertions of social solidarity, hold much potency. It is interesting to note here that this potency is recognized by commercial interests, which precisely reproduce this form of theorising about the ability of television viewing to foster social bonds. Thus the general manager of the hugely successful video rental company KPS explains: ‘The video boom will continue to flourish as more and more people appreciate the return of family unity and the strengthening of filial ties through home entertainment ...’. In a week when the ten top rentals included the violent Robocop 2, the homophobic Panty Hose Heroes, and local films The Killer and Triad Story (SCMP 6/3/1991: 4), one could be forgiven for suggesting that such statements are cynical exploitation.

The suggestion that television articulates an indigenous subject-position in opposition to a colonial milieu is further complicated by the fact that TVB is the largest Chinese television programme producer in the world. Currently TVB produces 5,000 hours a year of original local programming (SCMP 9/8/1991: Letters to the Editor) and every half hour of this is watched by twenty million people in Asia (SCSMP 18/8/1991: 13). Not only are shows obviously being produced with a wider Chinese diaspora in mind but any dichotomous

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3 See Lull (1991) for an account of how television’s stress on consumerism has a completely different effect in China, fuelling discontent for a socialist system in which the material fantasies preferred by Hongkong advertising underline the massive difference in living standards between the territory and the Mainland. More generally his argument is that, despite the Communist Party’s attempts to use television as a vehicle for unifying propaganda, it frequently presents a challenge to official discourses due to viewer scepticism and consequent constructions of alternative readings and also due to the production of two domestic drama series (New Star and River Elegy) that stimulated subversive political critique.
colonial/anti-colonial framework for interpretation is undercut by the extent to which Hongkong television might be seen to be colonising Chinese others. Of course, this can be phrased more positively. Television programmes are simultaneously products of cultural striving and means of politics, elements of a relation to the peoples both within and beyond Hongkong’s borders; television has a central role in defining Hongkong to itself and to the world. This is so because representations are vehicles for the formation of consciousness and subjectivity. For these purposes it is not just any ideology that serves, but a definition of identity that is indigenist. The content of such definitions can remain vague. Critics may focus on local production of programmes and their popularity in terms of local appropriation to achieve the desired effect (see Verdery 1991: 21,90,127).

To view this construction of ‘Hongkong identity’ as simply manipulative impoverishes a far more urgent project – to constitute an imagined wholeness, premised on internal uniformity, for a fragmented reality and, by extension, an imagined sovereignty for vassalage. In this sense, one can admire the genuine efforts of commentators and producers to develop a positive local identity opposed to Western and mainland Chinese deprecations of subaltern cultures (see Verdery 1991: 131,312).

**Hongkong Cinema**

*An Brief History*

Aside from Bombay, Hongkong boasts the most prolific film industry in the world. In the past decade over 2,200 films were made and, since Asia Studio’s *Stealing A Roast Duck* (1909) over 7,000 films have been produced (Li 1985: 9). Hongkong is also said to have the highest rate of cinema attendance per head of population in Asia; in 1990 sixty million seats were sold (Jarvie 1977: 56; SCMP 25/4/1991: 21). Amongst these cinema goers local gang-chaan (Hongkong-produced) films clearly dominate the market (Choi 1990: 550). Like television, this popular medium has been the subject of sociological analysis invoking homogeneity. Sek Kei (1991: 52), the territory’s foremost film critic who writes for the *Ming Pao Daily*, states: ‘The sense of crisis ... has forced Hongkong people to examine their identity in the ’80s more than at any other period. At the same time, it has fostered a sense of common purpose – that people in the same boat must help each other – and that a common medium is needed to give vent to collective feelings. This common medium is the cinema’.
Although after 1949 Hongkong was the major source of Chinese films, the local industry did not register internationally until late 1972 when Europe and America began to import martial arts movies, synonymous to foreigners with kung-fu and Bruce Lee, for their action houses and drive-in market (Jarvie 1977: 35,51; Stanbrook 1991: 45). After this fad was rapidly satiated, films produced in the territory again made some international impact in 1979 under the rubric of the ‘Hongkong New Wave’. The industry was soon eclipsed, however, by ‘New Wave’ movements in China and Taiwan (Kei 1991: 58). Most recently, it is again enjoying a resurgence, reaching beyond local and Southeast Asian markets to America, Australia and Europe. Indeed, American critics now compete to claim credit for ‘discovering’ Hongkong cinema; movies once confined to backstreet Chinatown have been promoted to trendy art cinemas (SCMP 28/9/1991: Review 9); the New York Times gushed, in relation to a film directed by John Woo, ‘Balletic splatter and camp sentiment have rarely if ever been stretched to the extremes found in The Killer’ (SCMP 27/4/1991: Review 7).

The outbreak of war with the Japanese dispersed the Chinese film industry from Shanghai to Chungking and Hongkong. When the Kuomintang government decreed, in 1937, that films should only be made in Mandarin, Hongkong became the established centre for Cantonese film production, catering both to locals and to the desire on the part of dispersed overseas Chinese to maintain contact with their southern homeland. As the People’s Republic continued this discriminatory policy towards dialect movies, the territory still maintains its leading position in this regard. Many of these early movies were filmed versions of Cantonese stage opera, completed within the space of a few days (Jarvie 1977: 3,9,10,14,20,53,88). From the 1950s until the decline of the Cantonese cinema in the 1960s, films largely catered to a working class audience, stressing slapstick comedy and vernacular dialogue (Cheng 1985: 41; Li 1985: 9).

During this period, though, Cantonese films were not the only ones under production. Mandarin cinema, divided between the ‘left wing’ studios (like the Great Wall and Fenghuang) and ‘right wing’ companies (such as MP&GI and Shaw Brothers) was also flourishing. The latter actively fostered a studio/star system and lavish big budget productions, a combination which eventually contributed to the demise of its Mandarin and Cantonese competitors (Li 1985: 9; Law 1985: 16). This was a period in which cultural producers vied with one another for important political terrain. The production of films was shot through with ideological debate; movements and manifestoes, attacks on ‘dictatorial’ management and feudalism, efforts to establish collectives, and calls for ‘democracy’ abounded (Rayns 1990: 56).

The ascendance of the studio-shot fantasies churned out by right-wing Mandarin companies is not solely attributable to audience popularity. The Hongkong government and the United States actively intervened here. In 1952 the British administration deported over twenty filmmakers thought to be ‘left-wingers’ following a workers strike in Yonghua studio (Jarvie 1977: 31; Law
1990: 16,17). In fact, the degree to which the Hongkong government was attentive to the political uses of cinema is evident in their own use of the medium, prior to the introduction of television, for public messages and education. Propagandising took such forms as the free screenings for children of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 (Ho 1983: 140). The United States government, for its part, and in parallel with its policy in Taiwan, gave financial grants to support artists and cultural workers who would oppose Communism and propagate American culture and ‘freedom’ in the interests of extending their influence in South East Asia. In both Hongkong and Taiwan the often used term ‘Free movie industry’ was a euphemism for anti-communist organisations. From 1953 until 1958 America funded the Asia Film Company through the ‘Free Asia Association’. Although the themes of the nine movies produced by this company are not clearly ‘right’, their films did stress nationalism and the reaffirmation of traditional Chinese ethics (Law 1990: 17,18,20).

Against this background, the political positions adopted by various cinemas began to polarise. In 1960, four Hongkong theatres were boycotted by the United States under the American ‘Foreign Properties Control Act’. Some left-wing filmmakers contributed to the rioting of 1967, using cinemas as ‘political study centres’ (Ho 1983: 140,141) when the Cultural Revolution embraced the territory. However, as Taiwan was being stabilised under the American defence umbrella and Hongkong increasingly presented itself as an outpost of the ‘Free World’, cultural workers on the left were isolated. The comedies, musicals and romances of anti-Communist companies like Cathay and Shaws were box office successes but the greatest popularity was reserved for Hollywood movies (Jarvie 1977: 33,35). During screenings, audiences were also encouraged to commit themselves to foreign mass consumerism: gifts such as makeup or soft drink were often included in the price of a ticket; ‘smartly-dressed girls would stroll down the aisles selling popcorn, chewing gum and cigarettes, all from abroad’ (Ho 1983: 139). In Hongkong, no Chinese films outgrossed the top Hollywood offerings until 1968/1969 (Jarvie 1977: 43).

The film market continued to be dominated by Hollywood until the 1970s when local products achieved preeminence. Television had an important effect here, as many Cantonese movies were imitations of successful serial dramas.4 In the 1980s, the Mandarin cinema ceased to operate and a combination of Cantonese and local slang became the contemporary lingua franca of Hongkong cinema (Law 1991: 70; Lee 1991: 79; Teo 1990: 92).

Throughout this chequered history, Hongkong movies have been censored, usually on political grounds. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the British administration kept overt Communist propaganda off screens (Rayns 1990: 56). Nowadays, the Film Censorship Bill, which went into effect in 1988 and gave a legal basis to previous practice, is used to mollify mainland China. This

4 Television also stimulated the local record industry as the recording of theme songs from successful series promoted a passion for Cantonese pop songs (Lee 1991:80).
legislation allows the excision of any footage which could ‘seriously damage the good relations with other territories’ (Fonoroff 1991: 68; Stanbrook 1991: 49). In fact, the scope for manipulating this legislation is ominous. The Film Censorship Authority is obliged to follow the executive direction of the Governor and films must be resubmitted for approval every five years (Chan 1988: 217,220).

From 1974 to 1986, 21 films were banned on the grounds that they damaged good relations with other territories. These films were made in Taiwan and Hongkong and all explored unfavourable aspects of the People’s Republic (Chan 1988: 214). In 1970, Hongkong director Loong Kong’s film *The Plague*, which alluded to the riots of 1967, had offending footage removed. Chinese director Tong Shu-shuen’s film *China Behind*, about Mainland university students fleeing to the territory during the Cultural Revolution, was made in 1974 but only approved for public viewing in 1988 (Cheng 1990: 99).

Commentaries made by overseas news agencies highly critical of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 never received a showing in Hongkong (Litton 1990: 185) and, in the same year, sixteen minutes of interviews with dissidents was forcibly edited from *Mainland China*, Chang Chao-tang’s documentary on the Beijing spring protests (Fonoroff 1991: 68). Indeed, sensitivity about these matters is intense. In 1990 the Film Censorship Authority prohibited the screening of a Canadian film about a Chinese emperor who persecuted intellectuals (*FEER* 1/8/1985: 31 & 12/7/1990: 16).

More insidiously, this government censorship on behalf of China has created a climate which allows the Mainland to directly intimidate producers. Thus two scenes were cut from local director Ann Hui’s film *My American Grandson* by its Taiwanese producer when it premiered at the Hongkong International Film Festival in 1991. He stated that he was ‘coerced’ by officials from the Beijing film bureau to remove these scenes which were described as portraying the dark side of China within an overall plot line examining cultural and generation gaps between an American-Chinese teenager and his Shanghainese grandfather (*SCMP* 16/5/1991: 19). Furthermore, organisations often engage in forms of self-censorship to avoid trouble with authorities. Shuk Kei’s documentary *Sunless Days*, dealing with the repercussions of the June 4 Tiananmen Square massacre on people’s attitudes to sovereignty transferral in Hongkong, was refused a screening at all venues apart from the Arts Centre. This same Centre later cancelled its own June 4 film retrospective on the basis of an ‘internal decision’ (*SCMP* 3/5/1991: 21). All of these examples suggest that attentiveness to film and the political field in which it operates is a major component of the current colonial situation.

Reterritorialising Subjectivity

It is commonplace nowadays to argue that cultural identity must be defined not only by its positive content but also by its differentiation from, and relation to,
other cultural identities. Within this framework, the major question to be posed
is who the significant Others are against whom, or in relation to whom, a given
group is defined (e.g. Morley & Robins 1989: 10). In terms of contemporary
Hongkong cinema Chinese, and to a lesser extent Taiwanese, are the usual
identity protagonists. Expatriates are noticeable for their absence, although this
has not always been the case. In Cantonese comedies of the 1950s ‘Westernized’
characters who indulged in chic amusements like teddy boy dances were the
subjects of ridicule and mockery. The suggestion that participation in these
practices involves impropriety and licentiousness certainly indicates a level of
criticism against the intrusion of Western culture (Cheng 1985: 43; Law 1985:
14). If we take a broader view, we can see how Westernization, which is usually
not present in a visible, thematic form, nonetheless haunts contemporary
Hongkong cinema. The identification with Hongkong or national Chinese
history, these terms being far from exclusive, cannot be seen simply as nostalgia
or sentimentalism. These subjective processes are partly a response to the
solicitous calls, dispersed internationally, to such an identity and are thus part of
a trajectory of cross-cultural interpellation that runs through modern history, a
history that is indissolubly linked to imperialism and Westernization (see Chow
1991a: 25,121).

Critiques of Hongkong films tend to fall roughly into three camps. The first
of these is reflectionist; that is, films document the histories of accommodation
and confrontation between immigrants and local residents. Secondly, some
commentators view films as a kind of anxiety management operation while,
thirdly, others attempt to apply a feminist orientation to their interpretations.
Actually, these are not discrete positions or unified discursive fields – any
analyst is likely to engage with all of these loosely coexisting, overlapping
strands of interpretation.

Those who follow the first impulse are interested in the representation of
Hongkong/mainland China relations in cinema. Thus, Sek Kei (1985: 32,34,35)
suggests that the successful ‘Broker La’ comedy series of the 1950s delineates a
breach between conservative rural-based moral values and capitalistic city-based
values. This ‘bouncing back and forth’ or ambivalence is then negatively
attributed to ‘blank spaces in the city’s culture’. While I have trouble envisaging
exactly what a blank cultural space might be, the more general point is that
cinema is being mobilised as an alibi in the task of criticising Hongkong from an
indigenous perspective.

Cheng Yu (1985: 43; 1990: 98-101), on the other hand, details the transition
from what is known as the ‘North South powwow’ cinematic genre to the
pejorative stereotyping of Mainlanders evident in the ‘A Can syndrome’. The
most famous film in the ‘North South powwow’ category is Wang Tianlin’s The
Greatest Civil War on Earth (1961). This film, which stimulated a spate of
imitations, enjoyed tremendous box office success. The story traced a belligerent
conflict between Cantonese and Shanghainese tailors in Hongkong which, after
a famous sequence in which they compete by singing their regional operas, is
transformed into a harmonious resolution of differences with both locals and outsiders united in the realization that they are all Chinese. By way of contrast, the 'A Can' stereotype was first deployed in a television drama serial in 1979. He is the canonical awkward country hick from the Mainland who flounders ridiculously in the big city in numerous Hongkong films. The transition between these genres is then assimilated by Cheng Yu as a historical movement between genuine attempts to accommodate political refugees from China following 1949 and later resentment of economic migrants from the Mainland who became objects of mirth. The latter attitude is then related to the rise of a local consciousness in the 1980s: ‘A Can was a negative example. It allowed Hongkong people to assert their own identity and be satisfied’.

This process of negative stereotyping intensified with Johnny Mak’s Long Arm of the Law Series (1984/1987/1989), in which mainland Chinese are psychopathic criminals creating a claustrophobically violent Hongkong, to be exploited as a wellspring of material riches and bodily pleasures (Cheng 1990: 101). Leung Noong-kong (1990: 75) attributes this fear of the Other to a ‘Post-97 Consciousness Stage’ in the interior life of Hongkong citizens.

More recently, Her Fatal Ways I and II and His Fatal Ways manage to combine political satire, rehashes of the A Can stereotype and appeals for harmonious resolution reminiscent of the North South powwow genre. Mainland Public Security Officers are the central figures around which these tendencies coalesce; gentle fun is made of both Communists and Kuomintang – a couple woo while washing dishes, affecting Cultural Revolution poses as they stand against a backdrop painting of the rising sun; Mainland police mistakenly sing to a non-musical video in a karaoke lounge, hurl beeping pagers out of windows convinced they are bombs and wear clearly visible red singlets underneath their formal suits (SCSMP 9/6/1991: The Guide: 11; SCSMP 22/9/1991: The Guide: 10). China is represented as a place of renunciation and simplification, of the quashing of urban difference, of sexual repression. Yet this view of the Mainland as a place from which everything exciting about Hongkong (and about ‘Western civilization’) has been amputated is undercut by anticipatory, utopian appeals to Chinese nationalism and reunification. What is required is a double reading whereby we can recognise that the interrogation of China/Hongkong relations is conducted over a series of filmic signifiers onto which are displaced fears of a return to rural idiocy and aspirations for a genuinely harmonious collectivity of the future (see Rosen 1984: 33 & Jameson 1991: 335).

This interrogation of identity is also seen as a major theme in local ‘arthouse movies’ directed by the ‘New Wave’ since the time of subdued optimism leading to the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. An oft-quoted example is Yim Ho’s Homecoming (1984) which charts the journey of a businesswoman back to her native village in Guangdong and her realisations of the material and spiritual shortcomings of both the Mainland and Hongkong (Stanbrook 1991: 46). Other representative works activate nostalgic
Figure 7: This photograph appeared in the *South China Morning Post* on June 13, 1991. It was captioned: 'PLA soldiers invaded Nathan Road yesterday to spread a little propaganda for *Her Fatal Ways II* (Courtesy South China Morning Post Ltd).
reminiscence of pre-war Hongkong – *Hongkong 1941* (1984), *Welcome* (1985), *Painted Faces* (1988) and *Rouge* (1988). This last film, directed by Stanley Kwan, with its interlocked stories of a tragic love affair from the 1930s and a more placid one from the present, pivots around questions about the intensity and durability of emotional commitments (Rayns 1991: 66; Kei 1991: 53). One hardly need labour the point to suggest that it is a metaphor for the relationship between China (old Hongkong) and Hongkong (the contemporary city); that the present is a moment in which Hongkong’s self-image is that of a community returning to itself along a trajectory of cyclical time (see Guha 1985: 107) and that this return involves displacement and loss and a reconstructive process of belonging. Sam Ho (1991: 126) thus describes *Rouge* as ‘an allegorical tale that eloquently articulates the colony’s love/hate relationship with its Chinese past’. Ng Ho (1990: 41), another film critic, attests once again to this splitting of the self between polarized feelings of longing and repudiation, between love and hate:

> I do not know how to sum up. The Chinese nation is too complex. One can both love and hate China, Taiwan and Hongkong all together. After the June 4 incident in Peking, intellectuals have searched into themselves and do not know whether to be happy or sad. The Chinese race is a giant whose spirit is split down the middle. For thousands of years it has struggled between totalitarianism and democracy. As a Chinese intellectual, I am similarly split down the middle. China, I love you and I hate you!

Appropriating Rey Chow’s (1991) Freudian inspired theory of modern Chinese subjectivity as a process of loss, substitution and identification, described by the term ‘fetishism’, we can similarly argue that contemporary Hongkong films structure imaginings that involve the mutual play between an emotion and a sight-in-recollection; that Hongkong identity is the process of belated consciousness achieved via representation. Hongkong identity, in these terms, can be described as being constituted largely through a sense of loss – the loss of an attributed ancient Chinese history with which people identify but to which they can never return, ‘a fetishizing imagining of a ‘China’ that never is, ... the last residue of a protest against that inevitable "dismemberment" brought about by the imperialistic violence of Westernization’ (Chow 1991a: 27). Such arguments reveal the extent to which identificatory acts are complex and cannot be contained by constraining notions of representations of subjectivity as direct reflections of social conditions.

A reflectionist view is also marshalled in the analysis of Hongkong ghost/horror films, reading the resurgence of this popular genre as a kind of anxiety-management operation. In contrast to the anti-superstition, didactic formulas of the ghost movies of Cantonese cinema in the 1950s and 1960s (Cheng 1989: 20), contemporary ghost films are explained as troubled anticipations of sovereignty transferral. Witness the following: ‘[Hongkong] people have suddenly realised that a spectre is haunting their city – the spectre
of 1997 ... The result is a general sense of bewilderment and unease, intangible but undeniably real ... In an ambiguous manner, the horror films of the Hongkong cinema actually reflect the Hongkong people’s quest for identity’ (Kei 1989: 13) or ‘In the light of the question of 1997, and the feeling of widespread insecurity, fatalism and superstition it has spawned, one could say that such movies have also reflected on the Hongkong person’s perceptions that heavy-handed authoritarianism and irrational forces of terror may descend upon the territory at any moment’ (Cheng 1989: 23). With one utilitarian stroke the whole genre is domesticated as a useful outlet for mounting fears.

The final critical strand I will deal with here, before I move on in a more detailed way to my own reading, is the one that sees itself as underpinned by a feminist viewpoint. These critiques centre around ‘hero’ movies, a trend which began in 1986 with *A Better Tomorrow* directed by John Woo, as reactionary renewals of macho sensibilities. These screen heroes belong to characters in violent action thrillers, such as *The Killer*, who are modern versions of swordfighting knight errants. Actor Jackie Chan, Asia’s most successful cinema star, is considered the most representative personification of this type (Kei 1991: 59-61). An extraordinary stuntman, Chan has remoulded the kung fu film to create a genre of his own called kung fu comedy: ‘Where Bruce Lee kicked high, I kick low. Where he punched, I make a funny face. I try to make every move like a dance – nothing else is like a Jackie Chan movie, nobody else can do it’ (SCMP 2/3/1991: Review 9).

Male subjectivity is foremost in much Hongkong cinema. Male bonding and the homoerotic aspects of violence are real audience pullers. Yet this far from describes the totality of Hongkong films. Ann Hui, probably the most influential director in the 1980s, has given a new prominence to female subjectivity and, more broadly, to the extent to which Chinese identity hinges on patriarchal exploitation (see *Song of the Exile*, 1990). Ghost movies too can be seen, at least partly, as forming a site in which women are given a voice to articulate oppressions. Exploited females who have suicided, often because they cannot consummate a mortal passion, are the mainstay of this genre; such characters both terrify and inspire admiration (Cheng 1989: 22). The previously mentioned *Rouge* is such a story – in the arduous course of female melancholy charted here, the male is eventually rendered a stage prop, a pathetic extra in a film studio while the ghost of his former lover only gains in substance and beauty. Of course, this is part of a popular Chinese literary/cinematic genre in which the courageous deeds of women, especially those who suicide, are glorified. Often the dangers of female ghosts are really the dangers of a female sexuality that departs from convention. Ambiguities surrounding the issue of female sexuality and fears of women’s frightening sexual proficiency are also evident here (see Chow 1991a: 57-61).

These contestatory images of women and men also need to be considered within changing cinematic depictions of Hongkong families, although a direct link is rarely made by local critics. On the one hand are the ‘city yuppie movies’
produced since 1988 (Heart to Hearts, The Yuppie Fantasia, Heart into Hearts etc.), which have proved successful with the middle classes. These feature young couples living by themselves, motivated by money and packaged with all the necessary possessions. Armed with their electronic diaries and designer fashion wardrobes, their social universe is entirely populated by similar couples (Ho 1991: 128; Law 1991: 72). Other films are more overtly critical of extended families; frequently they are represented as oppressive institutions in which parents attempt to stifle their children with their reactionary commitment to obsolete Chinese values. Some critics see this as part of the transition to an 'abstract, atomized' social formation in which ideologies of individualism carry great weight (Jarvie 1977: 115). Some suggest that cinematic critiques of the family are part of an attitude of increasing scepticism towards Chinese values in the light of 1997 (Ho 1991: 126).

All of these efforts to see Hongkong films as basically transparent documents of sociological knowledge, while not without merit, suffer from an inability to deal with the constructedness or opacity of cinema. These entrenched habits of naturalistic interpretation make it impossible for film to be considered beyond a reflectionist function. Such limitations are partially understandable in terms of the search for 'good copy' – 1997 certainly sells and this constant assimilation of issues in terms of concern for the future is in some ways simply a gauging of the consumer market, both locally and internationally. Most of the viewpoints I have been considering derive from Hong Kong International Film Festival catalogues. Articles appear in Chinese and in English translation, attempting to interest both indigenous and overseas audiences. Because of this, critics are constructing themselves as socially responsible spokesmen for local people. Naturalistic interpretations are part of an attempted project of politicisation.

There is, however, more to it than that. The whole complex of issues that congeal around 'Hongkong identity', 1997 and sovereignty transferral now operate as a kind of master symbol with structuring properties: discourses concerning these questions have the capacity to interrupt other discourses/representations and redefine them. Film critics are the occupants of a privileged site for the formation and transmission of this indigenist discourse, constituting thereby one of the means through which society is 'thought' and I suggest that they quite consciously work to create what Verdery (1991: 18) terms 'cognizant publics' who recognise and support the values being defended. In this situation, culture and intellectual activity about culture are inherently political (see Verdery 1991: 12,17,19,122). This constant pressing of meanings and symbols in the direction of local identity and its relation with imagined future political horizons is more than intellectuals' quest for power and influence. To make a successful claim to status as a bearer of cultural authority requires that many different themes and concerns are enclosed within framing utterances about local identity, that intentions are recast to suit the expression of intensely...
held indigenist values. The realisation of professional hopes, the articulation of a distinctively Hongkong position, and the presence of a Western audience eager to find evidence of ‘dissidence’ directed at the Chinese regime within Hongkong cultural politics are inseparable (see Verdery 1991: 12,17,169,202,207).

In order to regard Hongkong cinema as proffering more than mechanical reproductions of the real, we need to shift our focus to considerations of form. And, while recognising the extraordinary multiplicity of local films and the consequent inadvisability of constructing my own totalizations to typify these very diverse representations, I want to suggest that the notion of an aesthetics of excess might be fruitful here. In other words, I am not entirely persuaded that poststructuralist suspicions of ‘totality’ tell against attempts to devise generalizations about historically specific social formations and cultural productions (see Fraser 1989: 13).

Hongkong movies are often criticised by Western arbiters of taste because they are said to be too frenetic (Stanbrook 1991: 48). Clinging unabashedly to the search for ‘entertainment’ and box-office success, most popular films are structured by an emphasis on elaborate action stunts, fast editing and a heterodoxy of genre combinations to achieve a hyperactive sense of incessant action (Law 1991: 76; Li 1989: 9; Teo 1989: 44,45). In an overwhelmingly commercial environment, which sometimes sees films being speeded up to facilitate extra showings (SCMP 25/4/1991: 21), the sheer vigour and frequent gore of Hongkong cinema launches a ‘committed assault on timid notions of "good taste"’ (Rayns 1991: 64). Teo (1989: 41) puts it like this: ‘The Kung Fu Horror movies communicate a feeling of exuberance; many sensations carved up and put in chambers marked "bounce", "energy", "shock", "laughter", "thrills", and so forth. All these are components in the packaging of Hongkong movies’.

In a cannibalisation of all the cinematic styles of the past, a density of allusion and humour is achieved (Jarvie 1977: 100). Comedies, for example, frequently borrow gags and technical skills from Chaplin’s work (Cheng 1985: 45). Hitchcock, too, is a frequent reference point. The horror/ghost/vampire stories of Hongkong cinema utilise Chinese sources, such as literary texts from the Qing Dynasty, local legends, the Japanese vampire fad which saw the profusion of vampire discos, vampire fashion, vampire fast food and so forth, and the narrative devices of Western films, particularly Roman Polanski’s The Fearless Vampire Killers (Cheng 1989: 20; Ho 1989: 31,34). This play of stylistic allusion, these references to Hollywood, China, Japan and elsewhere is a constitutive structural element; ‘intertextuality’ is a deliberate feature of the aesthetic effect (see Jameson 1991: 20).

We could interpret this in numerous ways. Is it evidence of an ‘incorporative attitude’? Majorie Topley, for instance, writing in 1966, suggested that Hongkongese ‘follow some Western practices because they find them effective in some circumstances and some Chinese practices for similar reasons. People may move in and out of ... traditions’ (cited in Wong 1986: 309). More
negatively, explanations of this cinematic structure could support the often felt though rarely stated view that Chinese from the Mainland are more ‘authentic’ than those who live in ‘Westernized’ Hongkong (Chow 1991a: 28,29), that the city is too much of a cultural bastard and a colonial remnant to be taken seriously (Wong 1986: 324). Teo (1989: 45) essentially sides with this kind of pejorative designation when he ‘reads’ local cinema as reflecting ‘the loneliness and emptiness of a people – a city – in perpetual motion’. Or perhaps we could invoke a harmonic East/West combination (see Kei 1991: 52)?

What I want to suggest, borrowing from Pick (1989: 56), is that these unstable signifiers of inter-cultural imaging are a space in which the uprooted subject can belong. In this sense, we can describe Hongkong Chinese as exiles; people whose cultural territory is made up of intersecting figures, whose representational world is constituted through a layering process or, more precisely, through the very instability upon which the dialectic between ‘Chinese’ and ‘Western’ is played (see Chow 1991a: xi). In Love Unto Waste (1985, directed by Stanley Kwan) a police officer is asked: ‘Why do you wear sunglasses?’. He replies: ‘Because Premier Zhao and Michael Jackson like to’. The main female character moves to an apartment overlooking Kai Tak Airport because she loves to see planes taking off. Friends discuss the relative merits of saying ‘I love you’ in English, Cantonese or Mandarin.

In Hongkong cinema we often find a collage of narratives that are split between sensationalism and sentimentality, a cheerful inmixing of sugary emotion and brutality. Instead of trying to integrate into a meaningful whole the images and mannerisms which are so strikingly juxtaposed I want to focus on the fragmentary qualities of local films, a fragmentation that frequently evokes confrontation and a critical response on the part of viewers (see Chow 1991a: 65). This response is usually articulated via humour. Note Jarvie’s (1977: 95,96) description: ‘When Hongkong movies get gritty they get gross ... the overheated atmosphere that pervades the film, an atmosphere so thick the audience started to mock it. By the end they were cheering’. At a screening I saw of Operation Condor in 1991 the audience screamed with laughter, banging their fists on their legs, as Jackie Chan yelled out ‘superman’ while a wind tunnel buffeted him ridiculously about. Marginality and parody are the critical elements here. Carnivalesque smudgings of the borders between Chinese and Western identity allow a subversive reterritorialisation of Hongkong subjectivities that refuses containment. The attempts by both Western and indigenous commentators to rigidly compartmentalize Hongkong identity, to treat ethnicity as a discrete and finite entity, are undercut by mirthful ambiguities.
Dystopian Horizons

The desire of critics to see films as reflections of social history and social structure means that they have to smooth disjunctions over, level off intensities and thereby put aside the forces of excess and parody which make Hongkong cinema different (see Elsaesser 1984: 61, 62). The questions about 'Hongkong identity' here, and in other literature, are smothered as soon as they emerge; hollowed out from within, identity takes on the illusory self-evidence of a given. If these disruptive cultural productions tend to shy away from the overtly political, it is partly because British censorship and mainland Chinese surveillance effect an excision of direct political comment (Stanbrook 1991: 49). But these combined practices cannot mute the filmic reterritorialisation of an Hongkong imaginary that actively engages the perplexities of displacement (see Pick 1989: 64).

In terms of the future, the Hongkong Special Administrative Region is guaranteed the power to decide any cultural policy on its own. This is enshrined in the Basic Law (Final Report of the Subgroup on Education System and Cultural Policy 1987). However, only very broad principles have been laid down and these are obviously open to manipulation. Many local film workers are currently moving overseas, particularly to Canada, both to evade triads who are disrupting shooting schedules by demanding protection money (SCMP 30/9/1991: 22) and to avoid what they anticipate will be a high level of mainland Chinese control over cultural production in the territory. Certainly the failure of the recently enacted Bill of Rights to include cultural rights (SCMP 12/9/1991) has strengthened such misgivings. As director John Woo put it:

In 1997 I definitely will leave Hongkong. I have to try to keep on doing my business and making movies. That is my life. But I am sure the freedom will be limited and they (China) will put more pressure on the artist, so many rules, so many politics. I hate it and I hate to be controlled (SCMP 18/3/1991: 22).^5

Since the period of deMaoization following the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), there has been some liberalisation of the Chinese Communist Party's policies on the use of cultural products as political propaganda. But the limits are never clear. Shifts in party policy succeed each other so fast, and Mao Zedong's 1942 Yenan Talks on literature and art are so frequently invested with novel significations, that cultural workers are terrified of being trapped in these undulations (Fokkema 1986: 160,162; Goldman 1967: 165). Particularly since the Tiananmen massacre and the crackdown on 'bourgeois liberalisation', the bulk of positions in the culture and propaganda arena have been occupied by conservative ideologues (SCMP 5/3/1991: 10). Companies have been ordered

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^5 Ironically, Woo's directorial Hollywood debut *Hard Target* incurred the wrath of United States censors who objected to the general level of violence in the film (SCMP/W 24-25/7/1993: 5).
to produce karaoke videos with more ideologically sound messages (SCMP 14/5/1991: 6); movie studios have been encouraged to produce revolutionary epics and uplifting stories of daily life (SCMP 14/3/1991: 12); model operas such as *The White-haired Lady* have been revived (SCMP 16/3/1991: 8). The Mainland government is tightening its scrutiny over writers and artists, the ‘tongue and throat’ of the Communist party (SCSMP 17/11/1991: 9).

Compared to traditional and contemporary China, where control over cultural production is considered by many to be a legitimate function of governance (Lau & Kuan 1988: 33), Hongkong prides itself as a haven of ‘free speech’. A local joke sums up this positioning: A Hongkong politician goes fishing with the Singapore dictator. Lee catches no fish while the man from Hongkong reels in a good catch. ‘Why are there no fish for me?’, asks Lee. ‘Because on your side of the boat the fish won’t open their mouths’, comes the reply (SCMP 5/4/1991). While I think I have said enough about censorship in the territory to indicate that suppressive controls over cultural production are a significant feature of the British administration, people tend to view this as comparatively benign in relation to Mainland practices. And, while it remains true that Confucianism as a monitoring social system retains some sway over Hongkong Chinese, that notions of individual freedom as a form of resistance against systematized ideology do not hold the same currency as in the West (see Chow 1991a: 61), it seems a little high-minded to evaporate the legitimacy of rather shopsoiled ideals of freedom of speech on the grounds that they are ‘unChinese’.

Today, the typical article on television or film tends to swerve between two extremes. On the one hand, it refers to the ideologically pernicious, interpelling effects of cultural production, and, on the other, it argues that meaning is unstable (Naremore 1990: 14). In a sense, this is precisely the route that I have followed. But it is also a false opposition. This question of transgression versus incorporation will continue to recur with violent persistence precisely because these products have a real history, with consequently variable relations between representations and responses (see Williams 1989: 217). The argument simply cannot be conducted around an oppositional logic which does not allow for the simultaneity of hegemonic and anti-hegemonic effects. This is further complicated by the fact that we are dealing with populist discourses; academics and critics may write about ‘Hongkong identity’ and I may object on the grounds of monolithic closure but for producers the idea of ‘good entertainment’ and the multiplication of difference in the interests of maintaining profit override such concerns (Connor 1989: 189; Higson 1989: 45). Under these circumstances, the most we can say is that ethnic visibility and audibility necessarily function in ways that affirm cultural identity and yield it up to appropriation for non-emancipatory projects (Connor 1989: 195).

In both television and film much more is going on than representations and constructions in which Hongkong identity and its definitions are implicated. However, placing the matter of identity at the centre, seeking to understand the
ways in which it is not a given object but a continuously problematic process, allows an especially strategic vantage point for understanding the relation of culture to politics in contemporary Hongkong. The attempt by different critics and commentators to capture and subdue diverse meanings to their own indigenous readings will sound familiar to many. Indeed, these processes characterise numerous political groups and movements: a sense of the importance that cultural production might play in the transformation of social orders is common to many emancipatory struggles (Verdery 1991: 178). In the particular case of Hongkong impending sovereignty transferral continually presses cultural commentary towards the political under the umbrella of 'identity'. These debates perpetuate indigenist ideologies – at the expense of Maoist-Marxism or 'the unfettered market' – as a potent force in local discourses.

It is scarcely novel to set about such a critique of 'identity', yet such critiques are conspicuous by their absence in the literature on Hongkong. So my general argument that there is no fixed 'Hongkong identity', no given object but a continuously problematic process is, in this context, crucial. It need hardly be said that the preceding discussion of television and film is illustrative rather than exhaustive. My primary focus is on a particular theatre group in Hongkong, Zuni Icosahedron. However, it is impossible to assess their work without referring to the wider field of cultural production in which the political question of 'identity' is thrown into play. In order to assist this contextualisation I will now consider some of these issues in Hongkong performing arts.
Chapter Three

THE DOUBLE BIND: PERFORMING ARTS IN HONGKONG

Hegemonic Parameters

Popular Western representations frequently depict Hongkong as a hectic transit lounge where the pilgrims of tax free shopping come and go, their luggage groaning under the weight of videos, lap-tops, Gucci handbags and ginseng, bound for other destinations – London, China, Taipei, Sydney or Tokyo. In a recent tome, Rafferty (1989: 29) describes how the city ‘has changed and grown from a small, cosy British colonial outpost to a frenetic, throbbing modern metropolis’; the Guardian Weekly (6/5/1990: 20) informs its readers that the ‘tiny colony ... mirrored a great, rollicking casino’; Morris (1988: 17,48), in one of many travelogues, rather more elegantly refers to the place as ‘a futuristic metropolis’ with a ‘palpable aura of money’; the New York Review of Books (12/4/1990: 46) stamps it as a city of ‘nouveau riche flashiness’, possessing neither past nor future, ‘only a frenzied present’. A presentation preview for the next Pan-Asia Travel Association conference is entitled ‘Hongkong Supercity’. We are in the realm of the upbeat, the hi-tech, the fashion conscious {SCMP 15/4/1991: 21). Or are we? The flip side to this trend-setting blitz is the calm waters of tradition and custom, preserved intact against an encroaching mainland Chinese border, unsullied by Communist attacks. Fung shui and dragon dances, hungry ghosts, Confucian-Taoist-Buddhist temples and shrines are the icons deployed here. And I am reminded, as I read that New Yorkers were treated for the first time to ‘the colourful sight and sounds of a fleet of dragon boats racing up the Hudson River beneath the austere gaze of the Statue of Liberty’ (SCMP 22/4/1991: 3), of the dogged persistence of ‘tradition’ and ‘contemporaneity’ as narrations within a cultural polemic that refuses us solid terms like ‘decolonisation’, that offers up only chimerical slippages between ancient China and a slick metatopical space of global financing.

Labouring to escape this double bind, a phrase which appropriately, in this context, also conjures images of the oppressive winding of linen around feet,¹ individuals involved in local performing arts suggest that they are self-

¹ Barme and Jaivin (1992: 119) report that Tianjin writer Feng Jicai employs the bound foot as the ultimate symbol of subservience in traditional Chinese culture. Elaborating on this, they use the ‘three-inch golden lotus’ as a metaphor for the Chinese ‘bound self’.
consciously trying to create a Hongkong identity. The parallels with film and television, discussed in my previous chapter, are obvious. This chapter addresses from another angle many of the questions raised in the preceding section. Thus, while many would suggest some stark division between 'popular culture' and 'high culture' in the territory, persons differently situated within both communities are involved in the same project: competing to claim that their version of Hongkong identity is the most representative of the values on which local cultural life should be based (see Verdery 1991: 22). So, in a graduation day speech made in June 1989, Dr John Hosier, director of the Hong Kong Academy for the Performing Arts (the major tertiary institution setting professional standards and opening careers in this field) leaves his audience with the following thoughts:

... behind the uncertainty that is being felt today ... a real concern about the future, there is something positive and affirmative taking shape. I have certainly been conscious of it here in the Academy — of a new awareness of the community, a new concern not just about the future but about the past, about tradition, about politics, about our place in the world ... We are not here just to perpetuate museum pieces from alien cultures. We are here to produce skilled performers and technical artists, schooled in the traditions of East and West who can put their technique and artistry to the service of Hong Kong. And the best service to Hong Kong is the discovery and consolidation of its cultural identity. The culture of a nation or a community is what gives it its individuality, its trade mark, its inner life; and the performing artist, writer, and arts technician are the means by which a culture is made manifest, brought into a tangible form so that we can see it, read it and hear it (Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts (HKAPA) 1989: 76).

A range of views are pitted against this optimism. Some attest to confusion. According to Tweedy (1991:34), the author of a local government report on business sponsorship of the arts, 'the image of Hongkong as a money-making community with wall-to-wall shopping malls' is of concern to businesspeople who are valiantly striving 'to identify what is meant by 'Hong Kong' in the broadest cultural sense'. Brinson (1990:29), author of another government report on dance in the arts, describes this rather more delicately as an 'imbalance between Hong Kong's material and non-material culture'. Others are more vitriolic:

Hongkong savours its self-image as the extreme site of capitalism. Politics, economics and communications tightly circumscribe the lives of artists. There are high rents ... very limited government support and no critical culture to support art. The art sections of many newspapers tend to be amateurish press releases or off-the-cuff impressions. The trouble with Hong Kong is an awareness that it is a 'no place' where everything is up for grabs ... And you can forget the notion of a happy marriage of 'East Meets

2 The Academy was established in 1984 and provides for vocational training, education and research in the performing and related technical arts. There are four schools of dance, drama, music and technical arts under an overall director (HKAPA 1989: 89).
In a society where a reviewer feels free to make the following comment about a dance performance given at the Fringe Club – ‘To add insult to injury, the performers were given to sudden spurts of Cantonese dialogue, leaving the majority of an already bemused audience totally lost’ (SCMP 14/7/1991: Marla Bishop, The Guide 3) – such vituperation is understandable.

A negated self? Perhaps. Or is it simply silenced? In 1991 Hongkong’s 150th anniversary passed without any official celebrations. Director of Information Services, Irene Yau, explained: ‘We discussed the matter and really, we just thought ‘so what?’ 150 years is not that big a thing’ (SCMP 21/1/1991: 1). The fear of offending China by underscoring colonialism, the fear of reminding people who have been refused full British passports of their part in British empire building can only be muffling. There are so many restraints on what can and cannot be said, what can and cannot be represented, so many reasons to bury history.

Yet remembrance does occur. If you go to the newly opened China Club on the thirteenth floor of the old Bank of China Building on Queen’s Road, and are privileged enough to gain admittance, you will be seduced by the dignified ambience: slowly revolving fans on high ceilings, the coolness of blackwood and rosewood furniture, Chinese works of art on the walls and, in a final gesture of encyclopaedic ambition, 7,000 books on China stocking a top-floor library. Some of the territory’s most powerful tycoons have signed up. About seventy five per cent of members are Chinese. Imperialism doesn’t only appeal to expatriates, as owner/entrepreneur David Tang is no doubt aware. Indeed, in this private club, designed as a celebration of Shanghai in the 1930s and Hongkong in the 1950s only ‘traditional homely Chinese food’ is served by mature waiters and waitresses, a tactic aimed at making members recall the comforts of the ministrations of their childhood amahs (SCMP 8/9/1991: 3). Treaty ports and colonies merge in this valedictory testament to the pleasures of British imperialism and the profits to be gained from nostalgia.3

If this seems like a digression, I can phrase this question of remembrance and erasure more theoretically. Here, I find Chakrabarty’s (1992: 1,2) comments on the subalternity of Indian history in relation to European history useful. But in Hongkong the point has to be extended – the muting of local identity is not only achieved by the suffocating closures of a master narrative called ‘the history

3 Rosaldo (1989: 68-87) uses the term ‘imperialist nostalgia’ to refer to people’s mourning for the passing of what they themselves have destroyed. By contrast, I am using these two words to refer to an elegiac mode of perception held by both foreign and local elites in Hongkong to mourn the passing of a colonial history from which they have accrued great benefits. In this schema, destruction is attributed to the government of mainland China. The benefits of British colonialism are not lost on Mainland commentators either. In Hongkong writer Jimmy Ngai’s account of the events just prior to the 1984 massacre in Beijing, Tiananmen Days, he records the following comment from a Shanghai activist: ‘A friend of mine has been to Hong Kong. He drove on those fabulous highways. When he came back he said to me, you know, in a way I’m now rather grateful for the Opium Wars’ (Barmé & Jaivin 1992: 91).
of Europe' (or, if you like, 'British history' or 'Western history') but also by 'Chinese history' or 'Chinese civilisation'. This is what I mean by 'the double bind'. It remains a structure of domination and subordination, but we are dealing with three terms rather than two. And, as Chakrabarty so lucidly points out, although any notion of a homogeneous, uncontested 'Europe' (or 'China') necessarily unravels under analysis, the reification and domination of these terms does not diminish because some of us have a critical awareness of the process.

In this chapter I see my primary task as inquiring into a field in which these different terms both conflict and assist each other. My emphasis is on the institutional processes, particularly funding, in which and through which the performing arts are produced and on the representations proffered by these productions. How is Hongkong identity represented?; what images are proposed and fought over?; from what social space are these representations generated? In this sense, I am largely concerned with analysing elite practices. Unfortunately, the vital issue of audience reception of these works is largely beyond my range here.4 Therefore I proceed to investigate elite activities, seeing there a process of ideological construction whose consequences for audiences should be studied in their own right (see Verdery 1991: 6,8).

However, from casual observations at shows, I think I am on safe ground stating that most performing arts in Hongkong has a well-established, steady but relatively small middle class audience. Indeed, I do not think it would be far-fetched to argue that attendance at performing arts is a fundamental class marker, the index of cultural capital that Bourdieu (1984) has labelled social 'distinction'. But if we want to move from the familiar sociological territory of the reproduction of elite groups, we would do well to bear in mind Scott's (1989) notion that the rise of a new middle class which has been excluded from formal political processes explains the growth of political consciousness in Hongkong. According to him, the conditions that have encouraged a transformation from a politically quiescent to a more vocal community are grounded in the presence of these younger educated Chinese who constitute the backbone of various pressure groups and, I might add, of the theatre-going public. This is one of many reasons why we should not make too facile an equation between middle class involvement and any particular 'bourgeois' character of the performing arts (see Wolff 1982: 71).

The difficulty here is that, as Scott (1989: 273) points out, the term 'middle class' is a poorly defined and fluid categorisation. Previous studies have demonstrated that, by and large, Hongkong people do not employ sharply delineated constructs of social class. In fact the whole question of whether there are subjectively perceived classes in the territory remains controversial. I do not

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4 Information on this subject is scarce. The Hong Kong Arts Resource and Information Centre have recently conducted a survey on audiences but I have not been able to gain access to it. Whether this is due to prevailing bureaucratic secrecy in Hongkong or because of my affiliations with Zuni Icosahedron, who are viewed as 'troublemakers' by many in arts administration, I cannot tell.
intend to contribute to this debate but simply note that while it does not negate observations about the primarily middle class nature of audiences of the performing arts it should serve as a caution against slotting people into descriptive categories which then become the terminal point of enquiry.

Interest in Mainland Arts

Hongkong is currently experiencing a dramatic growth of interest in Chinese performing arts. According to the Financial Times (23/6/1988) roughly seventy five per cent of performances in major venues are Cantonese and audiences for these shows outnumber those for 'Western arts' by four to one in the central areas, and by as much as six to one in the territory as a whole. Using data provided by Hongkong United Arts Entertainment Company, Asiaweek (24/8/1984: 56) reported in 1984 that in the preceding six years about eighty traditional stage shows from mainland China were presented in Hongkong and, to give some idea of the scale of this phenomenon, that the most popular visiting Cantonese opera troupe sold 66,000 tickets over 42 performances. This intensification of interest in 'traditional entertainment' was summed up by Benny Chia, director of the Fringe Club – concerts of Chinese music which used to be 'box office poison' are now 'in vogue'. Explanations for this vary. While all invoke 1997 as a relevant factor, some suggest that China increasingly provides a 'frame of reference', noting a simultaneous rise of interest in learning Mandarin. Others describe the present as a time of 'cultural schizophrenia' between an assertion of Hongkong Cantonese identity and a growing awareness of arts from other parts of the Mainland.

Of course, much of this interest has been quite consciously stimulated by various organisations, some engaged in blatant propagandising on behalf of Mainland authorities. For example, in August 1990 the Hongkong Culture and Art Foundation was established. The honorary chairman is chief of the NCNA, the Mainland's de facto embassy in Hongkong, Zhou Nan and the vice chief executive, Tian Dan, is deputy division chief of the NCNA's Cultural and Sports Department. Groups and individuals in the territory receive financial support from the foundation which has also paid for the tour of a Chinese ballet troupe to the territory and organised a Chinese opera festival (SCSMP 11/8/1991: The Guide 3). Such efforts are part of a concerted united-front campaign to influence Hongkong's cultural life, with Mainland officials befriending influential personalities among literary, artistic and media circles (FEER 1/8/1985: 30). Funding and manipulative conviviality are crucial strategies.

Many of these institutional efforts, however, are far from sinister. The desire to incorporate Chinese performing arts within a colonial culture that previously placed value only on Western arts anticipates reunification. Thus the
annual Schools Dance Festival, inaugurated in 1964, added Chinese dance to their competition in 1982. By 1988, 185 teams were participating in this section (Brinson 1990: 107,108). The Hong Kong Dance Federation, founded in 1978, has been working with the Recreation and Sports Division of the British administration since 1982 to promote performances and choreography in Chinese dance. More recently Chinese dance examinations have been offered – Beijing provides instructors and advice on standards and content while the local Federation provides administration (Brinson 1990: 119,120). In 1991 the Urban Council presented the Chinese Theatrical Arts Festival, featuring companies from China, Hongkong and Taiwan presenting Beijing opera, Cantonese opera and contemporary theatre works. The School of Drama of the Academy of Performing Arts has engaged in visits and exchanges with the Beijing People's Art Theatre, the Chinese Youth Art Theatre, the Central Academy of Drama and the Shanghai Theatre Company (Chung 1991: 8). And the list goes on.

Not all of these promotions are successful. For instance, the Chinese Opera Festival, staged five times since 1986 and aimed at cultivating interest in regional operas aside from Cantonese opera, ceased operating in 1991 due to commercial unviability. The sixty per cent attendance rate required to break even was never achieved (SCSMP 25/8/1991: The Guide 2). The first Chinese Ethnic Arts Festival (1991), organised by the Regional Council to coincide with the Mid-Autumn Festival, proved more popular. This featured an exhibition, gracing the Sha Tin Town Hall stage, of folk costumes and dancers entitled 'Roseate Hues Across the Eastern Sky'. Advertisements boasted of 400 diverse pieces of clothing and more than 1,000 accessories collected from fifty five minority groups in China displayed by the Chinese Ethnic Minorities Costumes Parade Ensemble (SCSMP 6/10/1991). At the risk of stating the obvious, this iconography of 'weak cultural pluralism' presented a generally uninflected history of assimilation, disregarding the complexities of ethnic oppression in the Mainland. Ethnic difference is understood as the right to preserve colourful shreds of 'tradition' within bounds that promote conceptions of a larger Chinese national unity (see Hegeman 1991: 75,76). This is in accord with Mainland government policy that 'all performing arts work must aim to promote unity among the nationalities, including that among Han and minority workers' (Huang 1982, cited in Mackerras 1984: 191).

Such displays involve a sentimental search for authenticity. The Regional Services Department's chief manager of Cultural Services, Agnes Tang, stated that in choosing acts for the festival the greatest challenge was to differentiate between authentic and modernised. Reflecting on how unfortunate it is that some ethnic performing groups incorporated novel Western elements, she made Council policy on the matter quite clear: 'We don't want to include groups

5 There are more than three hundred types of regional opera in the Mainland. Beijing opera is actually one of the most recent, conventionally being dated from 1790 (Kraus 1989: 17).
lacking in authentic identities’ (SCSMP 8/9/1991: The Guide 2). Westernisation and consumerism are posited as the enemies of authentic cultural experience; ethnic objects must be tokens from unchanging cultures, souvenirs from a common Chinese past. At times, this concern with authenticity reaches the point of ‘reconstructive neurosis’ (Eco 1986: 13). How else can we interpret the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra playing replicas of antique instruments displayed in Beijing at an event appropriately named ‘The Essence of Chinese Percussion Music’ (SCSMP 3/11/1991: The Guide 2)?

Evangelical aspirations ‘to spread knowledge and appreciation of Chinese culture and art’ (SCMP 21/1/1991: 3), as businessman T. T. Tsui put it at the opening of his private Hongkong museum (said to house the world’s finest collection of Chinese ceramics), are also held by wealthy individuals. Two anonymous philanthropists donated collections of Chinese painting, calligraphy and sculpture worth nearly $500 million to a newly opened public art museum (SCMP 15/6/1991: 3). Nor is this proselytising confined to the territory. The recently completed T. T. Tsui Gallery at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum, made possible after a gift of $15.9 million, attests to this. Mr Tsui, now chairman of Citybus, China Paint, Rediffusion and other Hongkong companies, is serious about spreading the glories of Chinese civilization more equitably amongst overseas Chinese. At his suggestion all labels and signs in the gallery are in Chinese and English and special ‘family days’ have been planned on Sundays so that those working in Chinese restaurants and take-aways have an opportunity to make the pilgrimage (SCMP 8/6/1991: Review 9; SCMP 14/6/1991: 1).

Critique and Cantonese Opera

Of all the Chinese performing arts currently available to audiences in Hongkong, Cantonese opera is the most popular. Despite common perceptions that Cantonese opera is declining in popularity and is watched only by the old, the very poor and people in New Territories villages who have no other forms of entertainment (Ward 1985: 181), Ward (1985: 162) has suggested that the number of festival performances is actually increasing. She partially attributes this to the fact that British administrators did not interfere with local religious practices and performance of these operas is an integral component of large-scale religious festivals (Ward 1985: 161,162). According to Wong (1991:45), from the turn of the century until the 1950s, Cantonese opera in Hongkong enjoyed ‘immense popularity’. Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s, Hongkong,

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6 The question of ethnicity and inauthenticity in China is not recent. Kraus (1989: 155) provides an illustration of this in his account of the performances of the Hainan Autonomous Prefecture’s Cultural Work Team in the late 1960s. This team employed one hundred former Red Guards from Guangzhou who dressed in Miao costumes and presented Sinicized and Westernized versions of Miao songs and dances to a Miao audience. Mackerras (1984: 188,215) argues that Chinese Communist Party-induced professionalisation of minority troupes has led to an absorption of traditional elements within a Han-dominated aesthetic framework that ensures the ideological suitability of anything that appears on stage.
Guangzhou and Macau competed as the centres for these performances (Yim 1989). At one point, Hongkong had over ten established opera troupes, performing at festivals and year round at the Lee and Astor Theatres. Then it went into decline. In the 1960s the Sin Fung Ming Cantonese Opera troupe was founded in an effort to repopularise the genre. At an academic discussion of the matter in 1968, one speaker estimated that there were 3,000 Cantonese opera professionals in Hongkong playing to an audience of about 500,000 (Tsim 1968: 21). Today, the number of professional troupes is rising. The Chor Fung Ming, established in 1973, is the best known and there are shack performances throughout the territory daily (Wong 1991: 48). In fact, there is now an explicit concern to 'preserve Cantonese opera heritage'.

Influenced by reforms in China in the early twentieth century, Cantonese operas have radically changed. Instead of a brief outline, scripts now contain detailed descriptions and instructions. Improvisation has largely given way to a concern with professionalisation (Yim 1989), particularly in the self-consciously prestigious operas performed at formal theatre venues. Wong (1991: 45) gives an interesting description of this:

We didn't even have the time to read our scripts. So every evening, each of us found a corner in the backstage and tried to memorize the libretti. And then we sang, and after that it's gone. We were fortunate to have old stagers with us. They saw us grimacing on stage and came to rescue. They've all seen those 'daybreak opera' days: you don't get any lyrics; if it's a garden scene, you go out and do a garden scene, or if it's a study scene, you do a study scene. You have to make up the words as you go along, and they have to make sense. This is great training for 'impromptus'. But now we have supertitles during the performances, and the audience would rather you follow the script closely. This is also what we want nowadays: sufficient rehearsals, act according to the script, and try to do away with 'impromptus'.

The popularity that Cantonese opera currently commands is well illustrated by responses to the death in 1991 of Tang Bik-wan, a star who rose to fame in the early 1930s and appeared in over one hundred operas, films and television dramas in a career spanning fifty years. Interestingly, many of these stars remain well-known and gain new fans via film adaptations of Cantonese opera made in the 1950s and 1960s which are now broadcast frequently on television after midnight (SCMP 30/3/1991: Review 9). When news of the death of Ms Tang broke, hundreds of fans flocked to Queen Mary Hospital (SCMP 26/3/1991: 5). At her funeral service, mourners included tycoons Stanley Ho and Cheng Yu-tung and Legislative Councillor Lau Wong-fat. Funeral committee members included National People’s Congress delegate and singer-actress Lisa Wang Ming-chuen and Legislative Councillor and former ATV director Selina Chow. Movie superstars Jackie Chan and Chow Yun-fatt, together with ten others, escorted the coffin to Cape Collinson Crematorium (SCMP 1/4/1991: 2). The cover of every magazine in every newsstand in the city lamented this loss.

How are we to understand this popularity? Many commentators have suggested that Cantonese opera is a major vehicle for the inculcation of values.
But, as Ward (1985: 186) has pointed out these ‘values’ are ambiguous, being neither orthodox or politically innocuous. Some of Tang Pik-wan’s best works, for instance, saw her playing delinquent daughters-in-law or dominant wives. In Strange Encounters for Strange People, made in the early 1960s, her husband had to kneel before her every day, fan her, pour her tea and tolerate another admirer courting her (SCMP 30/3/1991: Review 9).

What is interesting to note is that Cantonese opera has, in recent times, gained respectability and official support. Previously it was regarded by many of Hongkong’s elite, who believed Beijing opera to be the only style worth discussing, as vulgar, noisy, dirty and inauthentic (Ward 1985: 164,178), though there was a certain misplaced faith that it served a useful function ‘in educating the common folks to the ideas of love for one’s country and filial piety’ (Tsim 1968: 25). In the previously mentioned symposium held in 1968, appropriately titled ‘The Causes of Present Degeneration of Cantonese Opera’ (Tsim 1968: 15), one speaker complained that the plays composed ‘are either vulgar in content or irrelevant to historical facts’ (Tsim 1968: 17). Echoing this concern, Kwan Tak-hing decried the ignorance which resulted in the flouting of traditional codes of honour, such as a man keeping his distance when conversing with a lady, during stage action (Tsim 1968: 25). Others criticised the atmosphere inside the performance space or mat-shed, describing it as ‘disgusting – noisy, chaotic, with waste paper and orange peels everywhere’ (Tsim 1968: 18). Helpful suggestions for improvement included composing plays in a serious manner and carefully presenting historical facts (Tsim 1968: 19).

Indeed, this symposium may well have taken its title from Bowers (1956: 308-312) survey of Asian dance and drama, in which he argues that Cantonese opera in Hongkong ‘is a clear illustration of the degeneration Chinese opera undergoes when it is so far removed from its home and apex of perfection’. He pins his objections on a number of aspects: the use of microphones and music which is often ‘even danceable in a Westernized ballroom way’; the use of scenery, literal stage properties and extravagant costumes which contribute to ‘the blinding meretriciousness of ... setting’. In this discourse, not only is Cantonese opera vulgar in its inauthenticity, it is also vulgar in its display of sexuality. In contrast to Beijing opera, women portray women on stage, chorus girls ‘drip with diamond-like headbands’, and the most popular opera star, Fong Yim Fun, is compared to a strip tease artist. In fact, even the audience are unable to behave properly: they chew gum instead of cracking pumpkin seeds. For Bowers Cantonese opera is irredeemable, a specific sign of a more general prostitution to the West, with an audience composed of Guangdong refugees with the jaded tastes of people forever tainted by modernisation.

Perhaps the continuing popularity of Cantonese opera is a symbolic gesture of ethnic solidarity and assertion, of shared Guangdong origins. This notion gains credence from the presence of numerous regional operas in Hongkong which appeal to particular ethnic groups. However, even here the situation is far from clear. The large Hakka-speaking population of Hongkong is not served by
any distinct troupe; Hakka speakers generally support Cantonese opera but those originating from Hokkien dialect areas frequently attend performances given by the Waichow troupes (Ward 1985: 178).

Certainly, the charms of Beijing opera, which is often designated as China's national theatre (see Perng 1989),7 have been largely resisted by Hongkong audiences. We are dealing with a clear preference, once again, for Cantonese products and, by implication, clear support for a 'southern' performing arts tradition in opposition to a 'northern' one. What has come under less consideration is the extent to which the performance of Cantonese opera and attendance at these events is so popular precisely because it constitutes a festive critique of 'high' culture. I am not suggesting that theorists should argue over whether Cantonese opera is intrinsically radical or conservative, for to do so would automatically involve a false essentializing of the genre. What I am suggesting is that, given the ranking of operatic genres in a hierarchy analogous to social classes (as evidenced by Bowers and participants in the 1968 symposium), Cantonese opera is a site of symbolic struggle.

Although it is not my intention to enter into the considerable debate over the interrelationship between popular culture and class conflict, an anecdote may help to indicate the ways in which this is an ongoing process. While I was attending a performance of Cantonese opera at the Hongkong Cultural Centre in 1991, I witnessed a small but telling dispute over audience behaviour. The venue had attracted quite a number of expatriates, like myself, taking a benign interest in 'local culture'. Wealthy Chinese were also present in large numbers. Less usual in these antiseptic confines, was the presence of older, poorer Chinese who came with their binoculars and food to munch on which crackled loudly in plastic bags. I was not in a position to tell whether it was gum or pumpkin seeds.

During the performance, these people began to eat and animatedly discuss the action on stage, or anything else of interest. Elite Chinese attempted to silence them by the sheer force of their head turning and stares. This proved ineffective. Finally, the situation became too much for an American couple in front of me who resorted to giving a whispered lecture on the importance of respecting the performers and repeated incantations of 'shh'! None of this had any effect. It became increasingly clear that different conventions of behaviour were in place, that these aesthetic polarities carried a political charge and that this antagonism was turning into a moment of noisy resistance at the moment of intervention by the elite, even when no overt oppositional element had been present before (see Stallybrass & White 1986: 16).

7 The political nature of this issue is clearer in Taiwan where Beijing opera has enjoyed great official institutional support, for troupe expenses, training and promotion, at the expense of regional performing arts. Perng (1989: 139) characterises this as 'the tyrannical yoke of a privileged theatre'.
Of Deserts and Forests

In a Marxist analysis of the Hongkong government's role in regulating leisure activities, To (1984) argues that two factors have led to bureaucratic intervention in this arena. The growing affluence of Hongkong society and the political unrest evidenced in the 1967 riots are posited as the crucial elements in a policy change which recognised ‘the demand for leisure’. Recreation and the performing arts are seen as a unit of collective consumption crucial to the reproduction of labour power, essential in shifting workers’ attention from alienation to the prospect of more pleasant pastimes. This view is replicated in less strident form by other analysts. Hutcheon (1989: 13) envisions a population demonstrating increasing ‘self-consciousness and maturity’ following the bank runs of 1965, the Star Ferry riots of 1966 and the 1967 Cultural Revolution extension in the territory. According to this model, the initiatives of MacLehose’s governorship – housing schemes, some social welfare measures and spending on the arts – were designed to ‘build a sense of belonging’. The construction of new town halls in Tsuen Wan, Sha Tin and Tuen Mun and the building of multi-purpose facilities such as the Queen Elizabeth Stadium in Wan Chai, the Hung Hom Coliseum and the Ko Shan Theatre in Kowloon are the bricks and mortar of community sentiment.

And indeed such a view seems essentially correct. But these theorists agree on more than this point. To and Hutcheon are both engaged in a ‘civilizational discourse’, they are on a mission to improve their inner ‘primitives’ (see Kapur 1990: 117; Verdery 1991: 144). Thus To (1984: C-12) berates Hongkong people for playing mahjong or video games, betting or watching television as such activities are neither creative nor meaningfully fulfilling. Hutcheon (1989: 12) joins in, warning that we must bear in mind ‘the difference between what enlightens and what merely entertains ... man – and woman – cannot live on jam alone; the bread and butter of art is equally impressive’.

One begins to sense a chorus. T. H. Tse of Kowloon writes lovingly of the City Hall complex: ‘I considered it a member of the family, patiently teaching me by showing and explaining its treasures in its museum, allowing me to read the books in its library and, while growing up, providing unforgettable evenings in its auditorium, in all, a precious education to which I owe the basis that makes me a civilised person’ (SCMP 28/4/1991: Letters to the Editor 12). Vice-chairman of the Hongkong Arts Festival contributes: ‘Until the early 1970s, culture here was pretty thin. Then Hongkong itself began to explode, to make money, to become a sophisticated, international commercial centre, and people wanted a more civilized community (San Fransisco Chronicle {SFC) 3/1/1990). Tweedy (1991: 73) comments: ‘Business in Hongkong can hardly be expected to sponsor the arts if the general community and the educational system do not rate the arts as a key requirement of a civilised society’. Brinson (1990: 54) concludes the cacophony by arguing that the territory needs classical ballet because it is a ‘possession [emphasis added] of most mature industrial societies'.
Factions unite to confer on Art the powers of enlightenment and cultural salvation. Justification for arts funding and for middle class and elite appropriation of cultural goods is derived from a representation of Hongkong society as only 'semi-civilized', defined primarily in terms of its economic prosperity, versus its potential for genuine civilization, known through the aesthetic education imparted by the performing arts.

However, in case the reader has gained the impression that government is injecting massive funds into arts spending as part of a civilizing mission, I should make it clear that their contribution is, in fact, rather limited and that both the formulation and implementation of arts policies are complex and frequently contradictory. Faced with lengthening bills for the Port and Airport Development Scheme and with inflation running at over ten per cent, arts funding is not high on the list of the administration's priorities. Most performing arts groups have not recently been awarded increases (Brinson 1990: 32; SCSMP 30/12/1990; Reynolds 1990: 8) and cutbacks in the Recreation and Culture Branch's budget are expected by all.

Responsibility for arts funding in Hongkong is divided between a number of different organisations. The Culture Division of the Recreation and Culture Branch is responsible for the formulation and coordination of government policies on the performing arts. With the assistance of an advisory body, the Council for the Performing Arts (CFPA), it administers the disbursement of subsidies to groups (Roberts 1990: 316). Aside from this, the Urban Council and, since 1986, the Regional Council have statutory authority to establish and maintain performance venues and to fund or promote performances. Both councils have full autonomy in determining their policy and action in this field (Report of the Director of Audit (RDA) Oct.1989: 19) and both are largely appointed bodies with strong business interests. A large number of donations, ostensibly outside this government framework, have also been made by the Jockey Club.8

Many performing groups in Hongkong are totally reliant on government funding. Amateur as well as professional groups fall into this category, especially since the absence of unionisation in the arts community makes distinctions of amateur versus professional centre on issues of pay-for-work as opposed to union certification. Examples include those organisations founded and/or run by the Urban Council. A smaller number of groups remain officially independent of government while receiving some funding both from the administration and from individual or corporate donors. Examples include the

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8 An indication of the influence of the Jockey Club is found in the old cliche that power in Hongkong resides in the Jockey Club, Jardine and Matheson, the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank and the Governor in that order (Scott 1989:65).
A large number of the performing arts donations made by the Jockey Club are for the construction of venues. In 1978, this club donated $4 million for building the Hongkong Arts Centre and a further $4 million for refurbishment in 1988. Between 1982-1984, the building costs for the Academy of Performing Arts was $30,860,000 and this was paid for by the Jockey Club. In 1988 the Fringe Club received $185,000 to renovate its office space. In 1991 the Jockey Club gave the Hongkong Arts Centre's Festival 2000 $1 million (Zabihi 1991: 25).
Hongkong Ballet and the Chung Ying Theatre Company (Jeffri 1989: 5,6). Others receive no funding.

In terms of public money spent on the performing arts, out of a total of $520 million used in the financial year 1990-1991, the Urban Council contributed around $300 million. The Regional Council came next with $106.5 million while the APA, directly funded by the Recreation and Culture Branch, was forecasted to spend about $75 million. The government also provides approximately $35 million through the CFPA. But these figures are deceptive because much of the money is used to maintain and run venues. For instance, less than twenty per cent of the Regional Council’s arts budget is spent on cultural programmes and presentations (Canberra Times (CT) 8/4/1992: 28; Reynolds 1990: 8,9).

According to official government views, leisure makes life ‘richer and more enjoyable’ (Roberts 1990: 295). The administration’s role is to provide the people of Hongkong with a wider choice of activities. This view is contested by some performing arts practitioners. Perhaps the most strident critique comes from Danny Yung, artistic director of Zuni Icosahedron. And I think it is worth citing him at length because a conflict emerges over who has the authority to define cultural work, those who do it or those who, in Yung’s vocabulary, ‘govern’ it:

Under the pretext of looking after the interests of the taxpayer, ‘serving’ the arts circle turns into ‘governing’ the arts circle, and the original sense of inferiority turning into a sense of superiority can easily be traced in this ‘governor’ mentality. From the definitive sense of paternalism to a sense of charitable patron, from a blind fear of artists to a casual discrimination against artists, these are but common phenomena…” (Yung 1991: 31).

The administrative system that Yung excoriates is one that only partially funds his performing arts group, leaving its continued operation continually precarious. Between the lines, his attack is also aimed at those whose representations to bureaucrats for funding have been more successful – those with better personal connections, those who are more established, those who wield greater influence in the institutions through which the production of performing arts is regulated.

Thus while Yung strives to impress the bureaucracy with the necessity for receiving greater outlays he must challenge the existing hierarchy. And he uses several strategies. Firstly, he attacks arts administrators, describing them as generalists who lack expertise and are therefore more open to manipulation by a conservative government – ‘... a slaughter house manager one day being shuffled to become a theatre manager the following day is common local practice’ (Yung 1991b: 30). As we shall see later, this is a particularly sensitive charge considering current government stress on the necessity for greater professionalisation in the performing arts. Secondly, he invokes the importance of constructing local identity, arguing that without a definition of ‘Hongkong culture’ such administrators will continue to lack vision (Yung 1991b: 31).
Thirdly, he complains of an absence of ‘transparency’, mobilising democratic discourse to rail against the secrecy of cultural organisations, their resistance to public monitoring (Yung 1991b: 32,33). Throughout he takes a stand on the critical importance of an autonomous aesthetic divorced from concerns of marketability.

In Hongkong there is a persistent opposition between cultural workers who feel themselves excluded from ‘the establishment’ and those larger companies and organisations they perceive as blocking their path. This opposition is a contest for larger allocations of money and cultural power. The division is not simply between ‘the government’ and ‘cultural dissidents’ although superficially it appears to be. The arguments are also between sections of a cultural elite, differentially empowered by a system which requires and supports the performing arts while allowing influence to only some of its practitioners (see Verdery 1991: 92).

How did this system develop? As numerous commentators have pointed out, there has been an extensive range of arts development within the last three decades, but particularly during the 1980s. Generally, the construction of the Urban Council’s City Hall in 1962 is posited as the beginning of the territory’s cultural life (e.g. Jeffri 1989:18). Prior to this, we are told, ‘the occasional dragon or lion dance’ or performance of Cantonese opera took place but these activities are excluded from any cultural history proper. More than this, they are in fact indicative of an ‘artistically sterile [emphasis added], soul-less and mercenary city’ (Hutcheon 1989: 7).

From 1972, the launch of the International Arts Festival was followed by the Festival of Asian Arts. In the next decade the Hongkong Chinese Orchestra, the Philharmonic Orchestra and Chung Ying Theatre Company were established. The Arts Centre opened in 1976, the City Contemporary Dance Company was founded in 1979 and in 1981 the CFPA was established and the Hong Kong Dance Company launched. In 1983 the Hong Kong Ballet was formally constituted and in 1986 the APA was opened. The expansion of cultural activities into the New Territories occurred with the building of the Tsuen Wan, Sha Tin and Tuen Mun Town Halls over this period. And, in this official litany of progress, the completion of the Cultural Centre in 1989 marks the end of this enlightening journey (Brinson 1990:27).

As Peter Choi, an Urban Council official put it: ‘If we were once a cultural desert, today we are a green, green forest’ (SFC 3/1/1990). Colonial gendered tropes are rendered visible – thanks to the fecundating penetration of British administration the culturally sterile land is made abundant (see Shohat 1991: 54,55).

For the first time, local performing artists and audiences are officially faced with a surplus of venues. Many of these initiatives, especially the construction of arts centres and town halls with performing spaces, are organised around a notion of physical accessibility. Culture is being taken to the people. Yet, if we take the case of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, the grandiose solemnity of the
decor, the imposing windowless edifice, the security guards posted with monotonous regularity throughout the building, the very sparseness of a floorspace unlittered with lounges or chairs, seems to suggest otherwise. People do congregate there but largely outside the building – children play on the steps, couples pose for wedding photographs poised between the harbour and this monument to cultural excellence, as evening falls teenagers fondle in the partially concealed space of the buttresses flanking the sides of the Centre.

Certainly people are offered the pure possibility of taking advantage of these cultural amenities but few have the real possibility of doing so. A parting gift of the colonial government, the Cultural Centre frequently functions as a cultural palace to house overseas artists. Big names like Isaac Stern or Dame Joan Sutherland command, as is everywhere the case, ticket prices beyond the reach of most locals. While people may aspire to this type of cultural practice it is simply beyond their economic reach. In 1991 Placido Domingo gave just one concert at the twelve thousand seat Hongkong Coliseum. While the cheaper seats sold out in hours, the best ones priced at $1200 remained empty. A similar story applies to the Bolshoi tour of 1990. Although there was a waiting list for the $150 seats, the most expensive were selling for $1600. None of their six performances were full (CT 8/4/1991: 28).

Critics of government arts initiatives point to the lack of any overarching policy (Brinson 1990: 49; Jeffri 1989: 5; Tweedy 1991: 54), to 'piece-meal, short-sighted, passive funding' (Cheung 1990: 24). There is a great deal of fragmentation and of competition which frequently leaves little public trace – deals and compromises, quests for patronage, gossip and innuendo (see Verderay 1991: 137; Yung 1991b: 33). In the midst of this the Urban Council maintains a position of dominance, not only in its virtual monopoly of venues (most of which it manages) but also by virtue of its sponsorship and creation of many performing groups. This council finances and administers the Philharmonic, the Chinese Orchestra, the Hong Kong Dance Company and the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre. Its major presentations include the Festival of Asian Arts and the International Film Festival (Roberts 1990: 299). The Urban Council's monopoly of venues is resented by those who cannot get bookings or access for rehearsals (Hutcheon 1989: 19). The Urban and Regional Councils fail to agree on the sharing of cultural programmes and neither welcome the government direction that the CFPA was meant to provide as part of its mandate to ensure some cooperation so that performing arts resources would be 'optimized' (RDA 1989: 22, 23).

Tourists and locals alike are frequently told that Hongkong's 'cultural life' is a unique blend of the traditions of East and West. But the repeated incantation

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9 This also seems to be the case in mainland China. In 1986 Pavarotti filled the ten thousand seats of the Great Hall of the People eight times. He is said to be the most popular foreign singer ever in China (Kraus 1989: 208).

10 The Regional Council insists on absolute discretion in determining ticket prices in its New Territories venues while the Urban Council usually demands a common ticket pricing structure throughout the territory to avoid undercutting and loss of audiences from their own venues (RDA 1989: 21).
of these cliched orientalist categories does little to mask the cleavages wrought by dissension over funding and resources within the performing arts. In the next section I will consider these issues further by concentrating on the work of the CFPA and on the administration's attempts to encourage business sponsorship of performing arts.

Strewing Flowers on Beautiful Silk

_The Council for Performing Arts_

The CFPA was established by the Hongkong government in 1982 to advise on the development of the performing arts in Hongkong and on the disbursement of funds to art groups (CFPA Pamphlet 1991).\(^\text{11}\) While the greatest percentage of funding has been allocated to traditional ‘high arts’, particularly opera and ballet, over the last few years there have been increasing efforts to include experimentation and ‘avant-garde’ work within certain funding categories. The Grant Application Scheme, which allows for direct financial support of performing groups and individual projects, is the most visible area of Council responsibility. There are three grant types – General Support Grants, Project Grants and Seeding Grants (Cheung 1990: 13).\(^\text{12}\)

Under the terms of the General Support Grant, government funding is allocated to local full-time professional performing arts organisations for part of their annual operating costs. Applications from amateur groups which operate on a district level are not given priority (Cheung 1990: 14,15). Thus in the 1991-92 financial year the Council contributed $35.14 million to the performing arts. The major grants were $11 million to the Hong Kong Ballet; $6 million to the Chung Ying Theatre Company; $5.3 million to the City Contemporary Dance Company; $5.3 million to the Hong Kong Arts Festival Society and $367,000 to the Hong Kong Festival Fringe. The remainder, a little over $7 million, is distributed among numerous smaller groups (SCMP 26/3/1991: 3). The first four of these organisations have been recipients since the Scheme began in 1985. Hong Kong Philharmonic was also subvented since that time but is now subsidised by the Urban Council (Cheung 1990: 13). For the financial year 1992-

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\(^\text{11}\) Members of the Council are appointed by the Governor on a biennial basis. Representatives from the Urban and Regional Councils and from the APA are also appointed ex-officio members (CFPA Pamphlet 1991).

\(^\text{12}\) The first Seeding Grant was awarded in 1989/90 to Exploration Theatre. The objective of the grant is to assist local performing arts organisations to attain professional status (Cheung 1990: 17). In 1991 Hong Kong Sinfonietta also received a Seeding Grant (CFPA Press Release 29/10/1991). In 1992 the CFPA approved two Seeding Grants of $3 million and $1 million to these respective companies (CFPA Press Release 24/6/1992).
General Support Grants were again awarded to the Hong Kong Ballet ($11.03 million), Chung Ying Theatre Company ($5.4 million), City Contemporary Dance Company ($5.348 million) and to the Hong Kong Arts Festival Society ($5.8 million) (CFPA Press Release 24/6/1992).

The Council's overall policy is to support professionalisation under the rubric of 'the development of artistic excellence' (CFPA Pamphlet 1991). From what is perceived as a chaotic amateur scene, the Council sees its major task as the creation and sustenance of a small core of representative companies which do credit to Hong Kong's international image. Chairperson of the CFPA, Dr Wang Gungwu, explained it to me like this:

... it was created really out of necessity because a lot of people were doing all sorts of things for a long long time and finally people in the government, people outside, realised that all this was all over the place and nobody was sure ... so they created the Council ... Out of all that mess, I guess, the government ... took on a number of big ones to make sure that they survived ... there were several ballet schools, several orchestras, there were several drama groups and so on and some decision had to be made so decisions were made – we shall support group X. The idea being, and the philosophy I think is perfectly correct, that if you just give a little to everybody nobody would become professional ... And having done it, then there's a commitment. Now the Academy came along and of course that makes the government even more determined to support professional groups because where will all these graduates go? ... all these groups were there for a long long time – too many competing, none of them were good enough, so somebody's got to step in. London has six major world class orchestras. Sydney supports several institutions. So the government says 'well, we should have at least one'.

Criticisms of the CFPA frequently target its failure to develop a coherent cultural policy. In a manuscript disseminated by the Arts Policy Study Group (APSG), a cultural pressure group largely staffed by people associated with Zuni Icosahedron, complaints are made that the CFPA 'lacks a clear objective to encourage original work. Its policy is superficial and aimless' (APSG 1990: 9). Comments from others involved in the performing arts tended to centre around accusations of excessive bureaucratism: 'Too much red tape and far too much paper'; 'CFPA is good only at book-keeping'; 'The operation needs to be less like a civil service or accountancy department' (APSG 1990: 12, 43, 45). Charges dispensed with dreamy-eyed idealism such as 'We want just a little money to make our ART dreams come true; we want the public to share the beauty of art; do not let formalities kill IT' (APSG 1990: 45), emanate from those who receive little or no funding. The language of argument is part of a struggle for opportunities within the cultural sphere that proceeds via establishing a dichotomy between bureaucrat philistines, who support only professional, elitist

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13 Dr Wang, a member of the Executive Council, has been the Chairperson of the CFPA since 1989. He is the Vice-Chancellor of Hong Kong University.
organisations, and those with genuine artistic sensibility, ostensibly speaking on behalf of a wider public.14

Criticisms do not, however, emanate only from the ‘have-nots’. Chris Johnson, artistic director of Chung Ying, speaking of the current freeze on government arts funding, says: ‘None of it makes any sense. Why build the Cultural Centre or a training institution like the Academy of Performing Arts unless you believe the arts have real significance?’ (CT 8/4/1992: 28). The significance that the current administration invests in arts is, in fact, twofold. Here I return to my conversation with Wang Gungwu. The ideology of cultural needs that informs state patronage of the performing arts suggests that, on the one hand, with greater affluence ‘the cultural level’ has risen and that government has a responsibility to respond to that, ‘to make sure that the circus works and actually keeps people happy and entertained’. On the other hand, the economic necessity of attracting qualified expatriates to Hongkong is stressed: ‘... as long as the image of Hongkong is that of a cultural desert, that people who come to live here – especially from outside – find nothing to do except go to the movies or walk in the hills or something like that; after a while it constrains people’s ability to live in Hongkong, to actually get settled here’.

These ‘outsiders’, I should point out, tend to be politically conservative white males with managerial careers and dependent wives. Frequently these couples have little desire to engage with local culture and, even when they do, are usually very conscious of being in the territory only for the term of a contract. As Wear (1989: 10) suggests, this has obvious consequences in terms of the importation of performing artists and the administration's desire to support canonical versions of 'high art' such as ballet and the philharmonic.

But there are limitations to this political need for government intervention in funding. This limitation is justified as a promotion of a ‘pure’ cultural authority; the legitimation of cultural products is situated squarely within the community of professionals said to be immune to the manoeuverings of politics under future Communist control (see Verdery 1991: 204,208). In a remarkable inversion of the accusations of bureaucratism levelled by critics of the CFPA, Wang Gungwu argues that piecemeal performing arts funding is actually a form of resistance to the imagined transformation of Hongkong society into an overcentralized tyranny:

The day will never come when everything is paid for by the government. It's impossible and it's not desirable. It's artificial, like the communist states and after a while you control it, it dies. You have no freedom to do what you like. Sooner or later the bureaucrats will say: 'I don't want to pay for that sort of thing. I don't like this. That's pornography or that's revolutionary or that's anti-establishment. We don't like that. We'll pay for you to do this. If you do that we don't pay for it ... ' That's terrible. We

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14 The stakes in this conflict are not only monetary or matters of social recognition. They also involve the possibilities for performing arts practitioners to view their activities as meaningful, through promoting their particular definitions of aesthetic value (see Verdery 1991: 303).
want to avoid that. I would say that’s the last thing we want. So the last thing you want is to get too much government money.

It is easy to interpret performing arts funding as a sociopolitical strategy of containment. All other arts industries operate without direct financial support from the administration. Film makers, visual artists, authors and purveyors of pop music all practice without the benefits of state subsidy. The provision of government funds to performing arts organisations is, in this context, something of an anomaly in need of explanation. And this explanation hovers between ‘assistance’ and ‘interference’.

Certainly, CFPA funds are increasing – in five years they multiplied from $2.2 million to $26.5 million in 1989/90 (Cheung 1990: 18) – as Hongkong moves closer to sovereignty transferral. Surveillance is at issue here. A Report Writing Scheme, begun in 1984, provides the Council with a ‘dossier of information’ about the active performing groups in Hongkong (Cheung 1990: 7). The objectives of this scheme are to provide the Council with up-to-date appraisals, provided by over one hundred assessors, of the standard of performances of local groups and to help the Council judge applications for financial support on this basis (CFPA Press Release 16/3/1991).

But the situation is far from clear. In some ways the Council is diversifying its funding strategies. There is a steady increase in the success rate of Project Grant applications and many marginal groups have benefited from this policy direction (Cheung 1990: 21,22). While the administration is more actively intervening now in arts funding than has been the case in previous years, performing arts organisations are not necessarily subject to control simply because the source of their funding is governmental.

**Business and the Performing Arts**

Business support of the arts in Hongkong is usually divided between philanthropic donations and corporate sponsorship. Philanthropy tends to be the preserve of the very wealthy amongst the Chinese business community while sponsorship is generally undertaken by multinational companies. Amongst the former, there is a widely held view that private wealth may be distributed according to individual wishes but that shareholders money cannot be readily dispensed. Paternalism and the drive to enhance both personal and family reputations play major roles (Tweedy 1991: 32; Doling 1991: 23). The latter exhibit a preference for high profile international arts projects, such as the Philip Morris sponsorship of Pavarotti. Companies such as Cartier and American Express already have a marketing policy which encourages the notion that quality entertainment is available only to the elite – ‘membership has its privileges’ (SCSMP 11/12/1988). Most small and medium-sized companies, essentially all Chinese, have yet to be convinced of either the virtues or profits
of supporting the arts. Their priorities lie with social welfare rather than ‘leisure’ activities (Tweedy 1991: 25,65).

1997 has impacted on business support for the performing arts in a number of ways. Corporate strategic plans in Hongkong are becoming increasingly short-term; a quick return is expected from all promotions. Long-term corporate ‘image building’ has largely fallen by the wayside (Tweedy 1991: 32). Returns for sponsorship have to be specific and measurable. Philanthropic gestures are also constrained by current politics. People are saving their money for emigration (Zabihi 1991: 24).

The performing arts in Hongkong are under increasing pressure to be inserted into a market based on advertising and sponsorship. Government is trying to off load at least some of its arts funding to business. For example, a Matching Grant Scheme was introduced by the CFPA in 1990 as a means of promoting business sponsorship (Report of the CFPA 1989-1991: 18). This was on a dollar for dollar basis. In 1991, the CFPA announced that for every three dollars offered by business, they would provide one dollar. Not only had the ratio altered but, under this new scheme, this money could only be used for the purposes of promotion or putting on extra performances. One member of Zuni Icosahedron described this to me as *jin shang tian hua* or ‘strewing flowers on beautiful silk’. This is opposed to genuine assistance, *xue zheng song tan*, or ‘giving someone coal while it is snowing’.

With this effort to pass some of the responsibility for arts funding to business there is an increasing commodification of the performing arts. Audiences become ‘arts consumers’ (Tweedy 1991: 34); government consultants argue for greater resources to be deployed towards arts in education because it encourages imagination and this ‘creative thinking’ can ‘shorten the innovative cycle, cut seconds from process time in factories, accelerate distribution and consumption’ (Brinson 1990: 40). Aesthetic education and business success are conjoined. And, in a bizarre twist of liberal arguments about the constant diversity required to stimulate the global markets of advanced capitalism (see Connor 1989: 41), local appeal is posited as the decisive factor in commercial success. The value of the Hong Kong Ballet and other performing arts is to project to audiences and potential customers overseas an image of the territory as ‘a civilised, attractive environment’ (Brinson 1990: 59).

Throughout the world cities now compete in terms of ‘liveability’. Remember Wang Gungwu’s comparison of Hongkong with Sydney and London, his assertion of the necessity of having a professional orchestra because these places do. We are dealing with the needs of transnationals to operate in congenial environments which will attract skilled workers (Mulgan 1989: 265,270). Pittsburgh and Glasgow are cited as classic success stories in the

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15 This should not to be confused with the scenario, documented by Fitzgerald (1984), of cultural commercialisation occurring in mainland China. This involves the assumption of responsibility for profits and losses on the part of cultural production units and the transferral of authority over cultural activities from state and collective management to small groups and individuals. Much of this commercialisation is consciously modelled on broader market reforms, particularly the Agricultural Production Responsibility System.
strategy to use arts spending to regenerate industrial cities, to give them an appearance of pleasant prosperity. To achieve this aim, all artistic expression has to be recuperated as local identity or civic pride, with the subtext of this being good economic sense (Turim 1984: 135). Brinson (1990: 40) glibly writes: 'Local becomes global in a world in which Chinese dance, Thai cuisine, French wine or Hong Kong's particular style of choreography, music or blend of East and West in life style draws attention to something special within the global cultural market'. Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Arts centre, Tim Doling (1991: 23), concurs: 'It has been shown conclusively that the key to a stable, dynamic business environment is the nurturing of a healthy and creative arts community. The fact that a city enjoys an enviable cultural reputation and is well-resourced with cultural amenities is invariably an indication of a dynamic, self-confident social order, one that is aware of the cross-cultural influences which are imperative if that city is to remain at the forefront of world progress in every area'.

But this insistence by the British administration that within capitalism business sponsorship, not government 'hand outs', is the appropriate source of funding for performing arts, this promise of the simultaneity of profit and generous public presence, is greeted by many in Hongkong with scepticism. Robert Ng of Sino-Realty Enterprise encapsulated this scepticism, remarking: 'If the arts were fundamental to business they would have made Vienna or Salzburg the economic capital of the world' (Tweedy 1991: 33).

Such arguments inevitably favour the funding of 'high arts', considered suitable for an executive and professional audience (Mulgan 1989: 272). Corporations rarely contribute to the experimental or political sectors of artistic production. The generally conservative aesthetics of corporate decision-makers ensure that companies have their names associated with non-controversial performing arts (Turim 1984: 138). Those groups that fare badly in this amalgam of government and commercial art are then informed that they are excluded by the potent criterions of 'standards', 'professionalisation', 'excellence' (Williams 1989: 104). The result of this is that avant-garde works are not entirely excluded. Rather, there is a hierarchization of performing groups, with the avant-garde positioned on the bottom of the scale.

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16 In Pittsburgh arts spending was part of a broader strategy which resulted in a city which was once perceived to be terminally run-down being voted the most 'liveable' city in the United States. Glasgow, chosen as European City of Culture in 1990, invested 45 million pounds in a year-long arts festival as part of an effort to alter people's associations of the industrial capital with urban violence and decay (Mulgan 1989: 270, 271; Tweedy 1991: 40, 41).

17 There are exceptions to this. Companies such as Northwest Airlines, Philip Morris Asia Inc. and the Shun Hing Group sponsored Festival 2000 in 1991, a month's worth of eclectic productions performed entirely by local groups (SCSMP 23/6/1991: The Guide 3).
Performing Arts Companies

Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra

Hong Kong’s most successful performing company is the Philharmonic Orchestra. Once an amateur group known as the Sino-British Orchestra, this company is now a professional body with ninety four players which annually attracts an audience of over 100,000, and is financially supported, since 1989, by the Urban Council (Hutcheon 1989: 14; Roberts 1990: 303). It is not my intention to analyse the choices of music proffered by the Philharmonic but I think it is worth noting some of the controversies that have dogged this company because they point to some of the less rosy aspects of the territory’s performing arts scene.

During 1991 a growing rift became evident between musicians and management and in particular with David Atherton, the controversial music director. Players dubbed an unexpected spate of firings and demotions the ‘St Valentines Day Massacre’; at least eleven musician’s contracts were not renewed, including principal players. Under the new contracts offered musicians can be instantly dismissed for disloyalty, for speaking to a reporter, for being late six times, for showing insubordination to the music director, for virtually anything that ‘in the opinion of the [Hong Kong Philharmonic] Society, is detrimental to the Society’s interest’ (SCMP 24/2/1991: 11). The Chinese players, who make up roughly half the orchestra, were issued translations of these contracts only two days prior to the signing deadline (SCMP 26/2/1991: 3).

Despite restrictions on speaking to reporters, many players anonymously aired their grievances. Complaints centred around oppressive working conditions and a tyrannical management which allowed them no say in the negotiations of contracts or in artistic matters. Many compared the situation in Hongkong with conditions in ‘the West’: ‘Unlike most countries in the West, there is virtually no protection for players. None of us, principal players included, have any say in artistic decisions or appointments’ (SCMP 14/2/1991: 3); ‘He [Atherton] called one of the players an arsehole twice during rehearsals the other day. There is absolutely no way he would get away with that kind of behaviour in Britain or the States. The orchestra would walk out. Management, the union – they’d have a fit. Believe me, conductors do not behave that way. Except of course in Hongkong’ (SCMP 6/7/1991: Review 1,2).

What is interesting here is that a government directed discourse about Hongkong’s ability to compete with the performing arts attractions of other ‘civilised’ places is being directly undercut by musicians. Instead, they invoke the powerful spectre of mass intimidation, of the dictatorial undercurrents of Hongkong society, its tendencies towards disciplinarianism; in short, its
barbarism. And from here it is only a small step to mobilise the future as a form of critique: ‘It’s like communism: there’s one small group like a central party which dictates everything that happens and the people who do the work have no say in anything’ (SCSMP 10/3/1991: Spectrum 5). Stereotypes of capitalism and civilization, communism and barbarity, are extremely potent rhetorical strategies in the current moment.

Dance

Hongkong is now described as a leading dance centre in Asia with three established professional companies specialising in classical ballet, Chinese dance and modern dance (Brinson 1990: 53).

Hong Kong Ballet

The Hong Kong Ballet was founded in 1979 with a Jockey Club grant of $2 million and a $1 million donation from shipping magnate Sir Pao Yue-kong (SCSMP 23/6/1991: Spectrum 3). The company’s repertoire consists of established classical works such as Swan Lake, Nutcracker and so on. While the media tends to concentrate on the lavish spectacle provided by their forty odd annual performances – ‘The costumes are absolutely gorgeous, elaborate tutus capped with tiaras atop hair swept upwards’ (SCSMP 13/10/1991: The Guide 3) – this company, too, has been experiencing difficulties. Brinson (1990: 31,65,67,69) reports that the attention of management goes more to the bureaucrats from whom they receive allocations than to the dancers. The problems of having an inaccessible management are compounded by a huge gap between salaries for senior administrative staff and the wages of even principal dancers and by a policy of importing expensive star dancers, leaving resident dancers with no real career structure.

In view of the large sums provided by the CFPA to fund the ballet, Brinson (1990: 54) rhetorically asks: ‘Why should a classical ballet company exist in Hong Kong at all?’ Struggling to find a suitable reply, he argues that as Denmark, Norway and even New Zealand possess classical companies, Hong Kong should too. In the face of audience disinterest supply will create demand (Brinson 1990: 59). This emphasis on competition, on keeping up with the Joneses, on display, is appropriate for an art form initially fostered by European monarchs as a show of splendour and an exhibition of wealth and power (Robertson & Hutera 1988: 8,11). Despite the historical associations of

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18 Recently, however, fears have been expressed that the current artistic director, Bruce Steivel, is systematically replacing the existing repertoire with productions of his own work (SCMP 5/9/1992: Review 3).

19 It is not my intention to suggest that ballets necessarily glorify the state. Ballet has had a long and diverse history crowded with moments of satire and political commentary of numerous persuasions (e.g. see Au 1988). This history is
the global dissemination of European ballet with imperialism, the insipid metaphor remains one of rightful access to civilizing practices, of shared participation in an uplifting aesthetic. This proselytizing condescension finds no counterpart. The opacity and unavailability of Chinese performing arts to Western audiences is carefully elided.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Hong Kong Dance Company}

The Hong Kong Dance Company was founded by the Urban Council in 1981 and seeks to promote ‘traditional’ Chinese dance. They perform around ninety times a year attracting an annual attendance of about 20,000 (\textit{SCSMP} 21/4/1991: \textit{The Guide} 3). Approximately sixty per cent of their dancers come from Hong Kong and most of the other personnel, including artistic director, Shu Qiao, were trained in the Mainland. While some of the company’s works, such as \textit{Rouge}, are based on Hongkong, most deal with Mainland themes (Brinson 1990: 76,77; Roberts 1990: 303).

Program titles like \textit{Chinese Historic Myths} or \textit{Chinese Customs and Rituals} are indicative of their promotion of nostalgic symbols of heritage culture. This is in accord with the usual style of the recently fabricated genre described as ‘traditional’ Chinese dance.

From the Song Dynasty onwards China produced virtually no official dance at all, outside of its incorporation into opera performances (Wang 1985: 76-78). According to Van Gulik, footbinding was at least partially responsible for this discontinuation (cited in Daly 1978: 148). In 1942 Communist artists and writers launched the ‘New Yangge Movement’ in Yanaan which advocated borrowing from folk dance to create works such as \textit{Brother and Sister Open Up Wasteland} or \textit{Husband and Wife Learn to Read} (Wang 1985: 100). After Liberation, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s, efforts were made, based on Soviet models, to construct Chinese dance using a mixture of historical records, such as murals, and folk dances (Bowers 1956: 273,274). Dancers visited minority areas to collect local dances and ‘rearranged’ and ‘improved’ them (Wang 1985: 9,30,88). As Wang (1985: 105) puts it: ‘In the mid-fifties, Chinese dancers \textit{created} [my emphasis] a national dance with a distinctive style based on their study of national tradition and the use of foreign dance forms as reference’. This was an integral part of the effort to reorganise China’s artists into propagandists for Marxism, singing and dancing their way to revolution (Kraus 1989: 153; see Mackerras 1984: 194).

\textsuperscript{20} See Kraus (1989) for an account of this empire building in relation to the piano and of the consequently unstable reception accorded to Western music in recent Chinese history. He contends that the spread of Western music, and the disagreements within China over its dissemination there, can only be comprehended by reference to the global expansion of capitalism in the form of imperialism. This issue is further explored in Chapter Seven.
Brinson (1990: 79) excoriates the company for ‘an indeterminate repertory hovering between tradition and an uncertain (or too cautious?) interpretation of ‘modern’. If the company receives its impetus from a frequently extravagant glorification of an imaginary splendid Chinese past, then this remains an ambivalent position in the sense that either ‘tradition’ or ‘contemporaneity’ can notate a variety of purposes in the cultural politics of contemporary Hongkong (see Kapur 1990: 109).

Allow me to elaborate. Perhaps the most prominent instance of the commodification of performing arts in Hongkong involves the marketing of national heritage. Of course, this promotion of the glories of Chinese civilisation is neither confined to Hongkong nor to the performing arts. More overtly commercial interests, too, engage in this form of objectification. This marketing of heritage can be interpreted in a number of ways. We might argue that the Hong Kong Dance Company presents something like what Jameson has described as ‘historicity with a vengeance’ through the gluttonous consumption of the past as so many kinds of fashion (see Hegeman 1991: 91). Eco (1986: 31) refers to something similar when he suggests that ‘the frantic desire for the Almost Real arises only as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories’, it is the ‘offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth’.

Indeed, some of the work of the Dance Company might appear to make this very point. In Dust-Covered Relics, one of four pieces making up Fantasy of Ancient China, a man uncovers an ancient Dunhuang dancer under a yellow cloth. His touch gives life to the once motionless woman and they dance, romantically entangled. The couple are joined by other women, creating a grand ensemble imitating the famous Dunhuang murals in Gansu Province. Then the women depart, leaving him to lament the immobility of his once fluid partner. So, a man reaches out and contacts a feminised Past, temporarily animating it, only to lose it again. This could serve as a very neat example of the levelling of historical periods, of the fetishization of art as a sequence of famous subjects

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21 One only has to look as far as Shenzhen where tourists and locals alike can experience the wonders of a miniaturised mainland China by simply crossing the border for a one day excursion. In this ‘Lilliputian Land’ visitors can experience ‘a vast land of charm and beauty’ featuring ‘impromptu performances of amusing folk songs and folk dances’ and miniatures of well known scenic spots in China all within the confines of a thirty hectare park. The masterpiece of this reconstructive mania is a reproduction of the Great Wall made from six million bricks, laid piece by piece, on a scale of 1:10 (China Travel Service n.d.). The ‘Shenzhou Doggy Park’ in Changping, 64 kilometres north of Beijing, has less artistic or philological pretensions, appealing to a taste for the sumptuous at a lower price (see Eco 1986: 25). The major attraction here is a dog palace complete with a panting emperor who sits atop a central throne draped with a tattered red cloth while a soundtrack booms out: ‘Welcome to my kingdom. I’m here to serve the people’. In the future there are plans to arrange dogs around the emperor in a hierarchy based on their abilities, such as sheep herding, guarding and attack (SCMP 15/6/1991: Re H’ 5). In the midst of this eclectic frenzy one can, perhaps, detect an undertone of scepticism and humour. Need I go further? In Changsha, the provincial capital of Hunan Province, a theme park, modelled on Han Dynasty palaces, is currently being constructed. Visitors will be dressed like an emperor, served imperial cuisine and entertained with imperial music and dance. A memento of the dynastic experience will be provided on videotape. The striking aspect is the craving for opulence. But as Xiao Fu-liang, a senior official in charge of the project, puts it: ‘We are not resurrecting imperial traditions, this is tourism’ (SCMP 21/4/1991: 10). In Hongkong, tourists may visit a Sung Dynasty Village in the New Territories, sauntering between the recreations of a 1,000 year old wineshop or bank. Impresarios stage special performances, including a traditional wedding ceremony and kung-fu demonstrations (Boschman 1988: 164,165).
Figure 8: Programme cover for *Fantasy of Ancient China* presented by the Hong Kong Dance Company in 1991 (Courtesy Urban Council, Hongkong).
(Eco 1986: 42) – one of the other pieces in the programme is *Terra-cotta Warriors*.

Yet the choreographers’ comments might give us cause to pause. Shanghai born Ying Eding modestly states: ‘Since I am neither a historian nor a thinker, it is an unrealistic expectation that something profound would be staged in this programme. It is a presentation no other than using the past to allude to the present ... I intend to convey in this programme my heartfelt remembrance of my motherland ...’ (Hong Kong Dance Co (HKDC) May 1991). In a newspaper interview he went on to refer to his reasons for engaging in this act of remembrance, his need to express the ways in which Chinese are ‘trapped in perplexity as a result of the inconsistencies between our cultural heritage and the advent of modernity’ (SCSMP 12/5/1991: *The Guide* 2). If the Dance Company hovers between tradition and modernity, it appears that there are good reasons for it.

The programme notes by Sun Long-kiu for *Chinese Customs and Rituals* (HKDC July 1991) reinforce this point: ‘In the gap between our traditional culture and our contemporary ethos, we have become homeless wanderers. Is traditional culture our spiritual refuge? I don’t know. But I clearly perceive that when I deliberately reflect on our traditional culture, it evades me ...’

So I return to the question of how to interpret the representation of this gap. And I return to insist that while Eco and Jameson are pertinent, they are not the whole story. Current debates in mainland China indicate the instability of ‘tradition’ as a category, its openness to various uses. The Communist Party’s increasing appropriation of icons such as the Yellow River or the Great Wall, its attempts to shore up its legitimacy via identification with national symbols, is subject to rising criticism. For example, the controversial television miniseries *River Elegy*, watched by over 200 million people, called for an abandonment of traditional Chinese culture in favour of greater contact with the outside world. The series attracted vehement accusations of national nihilism and worship of all things foreign from the Chinese government and the ensuing argument spilled over into Hongkong, Taiwan and overseas Chinese communities (Barme and Jaivin 1992: xx,138,140,141,346). Beijing based Liu Yiran’s 1988 short story, *Rocking Tiananmen*, detailing the restlessness of a professional dancer gives expression to these discontents rather better than I can:

... that dinosaur dance bores me shitless ... Maybe that’s how the Chinese have always squandered their creativity; otherwise we’d surely have worn out that little bit of civilization our ancestors left us by now ... Our teachers have been doing the red ribbon dance all their lives. What have they got to show for it? I’m not saying it’s no good, but we’re living off the past’ (Barme & Jaivin 1992: 13).

In the context of the multifarious struggles that take place in colonial Hongkong, the representation of a fantasized ancestry can be a form of recovery, an overcoming, however fleetingly, of spatial and temporal rupture (see Chakrabarty 1992: 18 & Shohat 1991: 67). In terms of contemporary
Mainland politics it can also be a fairly blatant form of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda.

City Contemporary Dance Company

Founded by Willy Tsao in 1979 City Contemporary Dance Company (CCDC) is Hongkong’s only professional contemporary dance group. While the company's principal source of funding used to be non-governmental – the private resources of the Tsao family – in 1986 it became one of the subvented performing companies of the CFPA and began receiving general support grants. The company has, since 1985, also received sponsorship from Philip Morris. Tsao still contributes twenty per cent of the $11 million annual expenses. This group gives sixty to seventy performances annually and describes itself as having an ‘international outlook’, employing dancers trained in Europe, Southeast Asia, Taiwan, China, the United States and also locally at the HKAPA (Brinson 1990:83; CCDC 1986/1987: 13,14; Chow 1991).

Part of its agenda is to encourage a new generation of local choreographers and to develop modern dance in the Mainland. CCDC regularly tours internationally but places particular emphasis on developing links with China. In 1991 Willy Tsao became artistic director of the Guangdong Experimental Modern Dance Company, the first modern dance group in the Mainland (CCDC 1989/90: 27; Chow 1991). Most importantly, however, the Company advertises its aim of creating a specifically Hong Kong dance culture. Tsao states that the Company has developed ‘a Hong Kong identity’, that ‘CCDC belongs to Hong Kong’, that all its directors are locals and that they all have ‘profound understanding and deep affection for this city’ (CCDC 1986/87: 5). Moreover this affection is seen to be profoundly political – works are perceived to bear ‘witness’ to this ‘transition period’; each dancer is using ‘his/her body to answer the call of time’ (CCDC 1989/90: 6).

Certainly a production like Hell Screen, staged in August 1989 as a response to the Tiananmen Square massacre, bears out this desire to make ‘a strong cultural statement in a time of important political and historical changes’ (CCDC 1986/87: 5). At a poorly attended performance of South Wind I saw in 1991 the audience had a very strong gasping response to a final apocalyptic vision in which dancers appeared in silver spacesuits adorned with bits of Chinese opera costumes and icons of modernity like vacuum cleaner hoses and bits of piping. The whole scene was saturated with flight metaphors: toy aeroplanes and children’s pinwheels were worn as headdresses, red lights flashed along a runway, the booming of an aircraft filled the auditorium. Other

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22 In 1981 CCDC was the first Hongkong dance company to perform in China, giving two performances in Guangzhou. In 1984 and 1987 the company toured to Guangzhou again. In 1987 CCDC participated in the first Shanghai International Arts Festival. In 1988 they performed at the first Guangzhou Dance Festival. In 1991 the company gave four performances in Fuzhou and Xiamen (Chow 1991).
works, such as *Seven Beauties* which parodied old Cantonese films or *Housewife Song* which depicted three women trying to free themselves from the bondage of plastic shopping bags (CCDC 1987/88), are more lighthearted.

**Theatre**

In post-war years commentators remarked on the general lack of interest in playwriting in Hongkong. Arguments on the subject pivoted on whether people in Hongkong were actually interested in drama. But apparently it was the duty of the enlightened to lead society to accept it (Tsim 1968: 7). Others suggested that if perhaps plays were written in Cantonese they might be more popular. However, it was generally agreed that there were ‘limitations’ to the language, it was ‘slovenly’ and an inadequate vehicle for the expression of emotional depths (Tsim 1968: 23).

With hindsight this debate appears extraordinary. Today more new works than translations are performed and the appropriateness of Cantonese is no longer at issue. The current administration supports these developments. The CFPA now gives awards for Outstanding Original Scripts to encourage young local playwrights (Lam 1991: 12). When translations are performed they are frequently given a local setting and theatre producers and the media alike commonly argue that the choice of production is a form of political commentary, a signalling device about the future. This is obviously the case with, for example, Chung Ying Theatre Company’s decision to stage Vaclav Havel’s *The Memorandum*. Hong Kong Repertory Theatre’s choice of Gogol’s *The Government Inspector* may be more oblique but the *South China Sunday Morning Post* has no difficulties allegorising this Russian comedy. ‘Satire Open To Modern Interpretation’ announces the heading in the entertainment section of the newspaper (*SCMP* 1/9/1991: *The Guide* 1). The relentless impulse to frame everything in terms of 1997 and the issue of sovereignty transferral begins to pull the past and the present toward its own advancing.

It is impossible to generalise adequately about the nature of original Hongkong plays. They are simply too diverse. However many do deal, in one form or another, with questions of local identity. Take, for instance, *American House*, written by Anthony Chan and produced by Sha Tin Theatre Company in March 1991. This play centres on nine Chinese students sharing a house in Denver. The student from Taiwan is criticised for his lack of Cantonese. He, in turn, criticises the others for their ‘tragic’ inability to speak putonghua. When a fleeing Mainland dissident arrives, he is rejected by the others on the grounds of cultural gap. Their American landlord finally ejects them moaning ‘Why can’t you be like the Japanese?’ In the place of any solutions to the dilemmas of what it means to be ‘Chinese’, everyone agrees on a final group photograph (*SCMP* 4/4/1991:21).
What can safely be generalised is the increasing professionalisation of Hongkong theatre. Six years ago the scene was largely amateur. With the training provided by the Drama School of the APA this has radically altered (Chung 1991: 9). Two of the most established local theatre groups are the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, formed in 1977 by the Urban Council and the Chung Ying Theatre Company, formed in 1979 under the auspices of the British Council. Chung Ying is now independent of this body, receiving funding from government and business sponsorship. Both companies stage works in translation and original works by local playwrights. Both attempt solid productions with some ‘social commentary’ but are criticised for being ‘predictable’ (e.g. Findlay 1985).

The predictability of much of Hongkong’s theatre scene is partially the result of long standing censorship. Colonial officials have been empowered since 1888 in respect of Chinese theatrical performances and since 1930 in respect of other public entertainments to issue permits without which the presentation of stage plays is illegal. An editorial in the Hong Kong Law Journal (PWS 1984: 1,2) argues that this circumscribes local cultural life because it enforces the presentation of largely apolitical work.

Currently the Places of Public Entertainment Ordinance prohibits the presentation of any stage performance without a permit granted by the Commissioner for Television and Entertainment Licensing (TELA). In 1983 the Commissioner demanded that all scripts be sent to him prior to the granting of a permit. He could then censor any part of them. After strong public opposition, using the rhetoric of ‘artistic freedom’ which is seen to mark an important difference between the Mainland and the territory, this script-vetting system was discontinued in 1984 (Chan 1988: 208,209; TV & Entertainment Times (TV&ET) June 20-26 1984).

However, TELA still holds sway over performance rights - the Commissioner retains the right to impose any condition in the permit. Beyond this, mainland Chinese representatives in Hongkong have made it clear, in an erratic but effective fashion, that certain work offends them. The cumulative effect of this combination of official and veiled censorship is increasing self-censorship. More neutral, predictable productions are the end result (see Wear 1989: 12).

Challenging theatre does exist in Hongkong but it is marginalised, suffering from dire lack of funds and occasional problems of interference from sponsors (Findlay 1985). One of the most interesting new performing groups in this respect are Sand & Bricks and I would like to give some examples of three of their 1991 productions. Legend of the Helicopter People was performed in May at the Fringe Club and derived from an idea by a member of the company, Kwong Wai-lap. While in England watching television coverage of Vietnamese boat-people arriving in Hongkong, he was struck by an image of the whole of Victoria Harbour darkened by shadow as thousands of helicopters, carrying Hongkong refugees, fled the territory leaving a desolate space below. The biblical
Figure 9: Publicity material for *The Legend of the Helicopter People* presented by Sand & Bricks in 1991 (Courtesy Sand & Bricks).
associations embodied in this despair are evident (SCMP 13/5/1991: 16). To suggest that Hongkong Chinese will be dealt the same fate as Vietnamese refugees is to critique current local discrimination against the latter, to remind people of their own parents' histories of exit from the Mainland and to proffer a bleak vision of the future: a nightmare summation of the undercurrents of fear which attach themselves to the prospect of a return to Chinese sovereignty.

In September the company premiered Whose Body Is It Anyway?, focussing, in their own words, on 'urban schizophrenia' (ArtsLink 8 1991), at the Sheung Wan Civic Centre. At the beginning of the play five modules were arranged in a row across the stage. A huge eye looked down on them. Because the unidirectionality of visibility denied the occupants knowledge of whether they were being watched, this Panopticon-like image presaged an internalisation of surveillance, the loss of interiority and intimacy. At another point an outwardly docile woman aggressively stamped on her family’s washing in a tub. Another, chameleon like, answered to any name (SCMP 16/9/1991: 24). Anxiety, resentment and confusion coalesce.

You Are Here was presented in November 1991 at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre Studio Theatre. Structured around childhood games, improvised playthings and the boredom and camaraderie of kids in a dense urban setting, the production contrasted these images with slides — formal family portraits, boys in People's Liberation Army uniforms, black and white snaps of children at housing estates, the glowing colours of paper lanterns at the Mid-Autumn festival. Pregnant men and women with maps and question marks printed on their white tracksuits traversed the set, weaving their way amongst ladders, platforms, balloons and an enormous bronze head atop a plinth, crusting with age.

The programme notes read as follows:

I tremble in front of nihility. The transmission from space to time has drawn me into a burrow. Sometimes I long to climb out from the burrow, even to climb higher, to the top tower where I could disdain all living creatures. But even if this could be achieved, I still cannot escape from the feeling of being at a loss and personal weakness. The cold rationalist, no matter how hard he has tried to lash against this world, still cannot dispel the feeling of oppression accumulated by time (i.e. history, the past, memories and the pale future). However, You Are Here is not an elegy in a burrow. One and a half hours ago, I was trembling in front of nihility. One and a half hours later, after stepping out from this cold-looking theatre, I expect the performers, the participants and the audience can, together with me, in the floating light, think, clear-headed, about the mood of ones' own life. As far as I believe, the feeling of being at a loss and personal weakness originated from mankind's silent tolerance towards the alienation between themselves and the community, between human beings and their self-growing-up, and between human beings and human beings (Chen 1991).

This is, of course, an expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie and social fragmentation (Jameson 1991: 11). But it also involves an

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23 All translations of original Chinese textual material in this thesis were undertaken by Jiang Ren.
aesthetic of mapping, a cartographic impulse which presents Hongkong as an alienated city in which people are unable to cognitively map either their own subject-positions or the urban totality of which they are a part. You Are Here hopes to present the audience with techniques for disalienation, ways to go about the practical reconquest of a sense of place and person (posited as inseparable) and the construction of an individual/community past which can be retained in memory, resilient to current cleavages.

Even though there is some attempt to speak on behalf of ‘Hongkong people’ this is not a call for some homogeneous ethnic identity or more transparent national space. It is, rather, an attempt to grasp people’s positioning as individual and collective subjects, to represent a temporality which splits these colonial subjects over and over again (‘history, the past, memories and the pale future’), in order that they may gain a lucidity presently neutralised by social confusion (see Chakrabarty 1992: 13; Jameson 1991: 51,54).

By far the most glamorously self-promoting vision of oppositional avant-garde theatre practice in Hongkong is provided by Zuni Icosahedron. Since their formation in 1982, they have managed to become the territory’s most controversial performing group, due to a combination of the minimalist, highly symbolic form their productions take, their coolly ironic self-awareness and their unconventional forays into social issues, especially figurative reactions to local and Mainland political events. As the following chapters address this group I will not deal further with them here except to point out that while local media devote a lot of attention to Zuni and other performing arts groups deemed to provide political/critical productions, they all suffer from the weight of an ideology of ‘the modern’ which imposes a Eurocentric set of cultural criteria on Hongkong.

A unitary logic of advancement is applied so that Hongkong performing arts are always seen to be out of step. More progressive critics phrase this in terms of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ but the metropolitan concentration of culture in ‘the West’ remains unquestioned and the linear model of crude progressivism remains intact (see Kapur 1990: 113). Allow me to quote from Wear (1989: 12):

More challenging is the work of younger artists who have returned to Hongkong after completing postgraduate degrees in England or the United States. Their training offers deconstructive strategies to make sense of their experiences here, but paradoxically they are working within a frame of Western art assumptions and history. Frequently their work merely follows lines of formal experiment learned abroad, with little relation to Hongkong. This puts them in the position of being peripheral players in a game centred on Europe and America.

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24 I should perhaps add that theatrical experimentation also takes place in mainland China, though not to the same extent. Citing the parodic play Pan Jinlian, Tang (1991: 99) reports that, despite unrelenting censorship, attempts are made in contemporary drama to pose questions of reality and representation. In Taiwan the best known experimental theatre group is Performance Workshop. Productions like A Post-martial Law Couple (1988), The Island and the Other Shore (1989) and Look Who’s Cross-talking Tonight (1989) frequently employ satire and surrealism to highlight the fragmentations of Chinese identity (Performance Workshop 1991).
The tendency to interpret the arts in Hongkong in terms of a lack that translates into inadequacy is evident and, although the language is different, Wear's argument is remarkably similar to Hosier's more blatant statement: 'Hongkong has missed out on whole periods of evolution in the arts: even the periods of the twentieth century, like the 50's and 60's; and so the CFPA is understanding when arts groups go through these periods of being 'old fashioned' in order to catch up' (APSG 1990).

For further examples of the ways in which narratives of modernity repeatedly single out 'the West' as the primary habitus of the modern (Chakrabarty 1992: 21) we can look to Brinson's (1990: 84) comments on CCDC – 'Choreography often is interesting because of the ideas it communicates, although the modern style is somewhat behind styles to be seen in Europe and the United States' – or theatre critic Michael Waugh’s complaint about Sand & Bricks – ‘The company's claim to have an ‘innovative approach to theatre’ does not stand up against the fact that shows like this have been part of the theatre scene in Europe and the United States for over thirty years' (SCMP 16/9/1991: 24). Performing groups are left only with the option of reproducing an already known artistic history with a necessarily inadequate touch of local content.

Loosening the Bindings

I am trying to illustrate two points in this chapter. Firstly, I hope to have established that there is a ‘double bind’, a phrase I have borrowed from Chakrabarty (1992), through which Hongkong performing arts are articulated. The strips that make up this binding are the ‘West’ (Europe/America) and ‘China’, both constructed entities being treated as possessing established performing traditions which are part of ‘civilised’ society. Government funding is predicated on supplying the imputed need for this ‘civilisation’ and cultural policy has, to a certain extent, attempted to create this demand and enforce these reference points. Examples here would include the funding of the Hong Kong Ballet or Urban Council’s creation of the Hong Kong Dance Company. The gravity of Western and Chinese performing arts are being continually mobilised and these extremities frame all further elaborations. Although China’s and the West’s perception of their own great traditions are subject to continual renovation and internal questioning, as different works are raised to ‘classic’ status or once-favoured works are abandoned, the point remains. What is being invoked is a common history and destiny grounded in the assumption of the aesthetic superiority of both of these cultural traditions.

These civilising practices are mainly designed to meet the requirements of expatriates and local elite. Of course, the nexus between ‘high art’ and capitalism has been argued elsewhere but what is surprising about Hongkong is
the sheer blatancy of the connection in public discourse. The major example provided has been Brinson’s (1990) government report *Dance and the Arts in Hong Kong*.

But even a casual glance through the social columns of any newspaper will confirm that attendance at performing arts is seen as demonstrating an affiliation to the cultivated world. Describing the audience at an elaborate production of *Aida*, Monica Gwee writes that Hongkong’s glitterati cloistered at the front while corporate heads and celebrities entertained in $30,000 boxes amidst the din of champagne corks popping. She goes on:

> But the fashion show was the main attraction. Ms Flora Cheong-Leen appeared in the VIP section, beau in hand and flashing a tiny skirt and hot pink tights. She was surrounded by a sea of Chanel bags, displayed prominently like lap dogs. A fur coat was draped over the back of a plastic chair. A party of Chinese in their box, dressed casually in Issey Miyake and track suits, clashed fashion-wise with a gweilo box in dinner jackets and sequins. Women in full-length beaded gowns sulked in their plastic seats (SCSMP 10/11/1991: 2).

Expatriates and local elite may demonstrate different tastes in fashion but are united in the consensus that attendance at such events is a vital marker of ‘distinction’.

My second point has been that although these metanarratives of China and the West are binding, there is a very self-conscious attempt on the part of some local intelligentsia to create a specifically Hong Kong tradition in the performing arts, to insert a third term into this constricting structure. Examples would include City Contemporary Dance Company, Zuni Icosahedron and Sand & Bricks. While these organisations receive some government support, and some receive more than others, all are pilloried for being ‘mimetic’.

My criticism here is not conducted in the spirit of ‘Wow! Look! These people have their own performing arts which are also splendid’. Rather, that homages to the West and China, lined up against one another as self-sufficient grand traditions, result in the complexities of these other efforts being bypassed because they are outside these hegemonic parameters and therefore treated as though they simply fail to meet prescribed standards.

The model I am proposing here is of course extremely schematic. But if I am going to undertake to bring the complexity and variability of differential practices in the performing arts into some kind of recognisable order, then one way of proceeding is to recognise the importance of those who ask: What is at stake in being Hongkongese? And though this question is in danger of becoming purely rhetorical, one part of the burden of it rests on performing artists. A subsidiary point I have been making here is also that part of their burden lies in the ways in which value is attached in Hongkong to the consumption of performing arts but not to the practitioners, that hierarchical divisions between management and artists are particularly entrenched. The Hong Kong Philharmonic and Hong Kong Ballet were used as illustrations here.
More broadly I want to argue that the insertion of this third term in the performing arts is part of a more general cultural reconfiguration which strives to meet the demands of a society now perennially caught in political instability and social reorganisation as it constantly engages the fear of the future. We need to highlight the political importance of these moves on the part of Hongkong cultural workers to retrieve a subject position for themselves from which to address the British and the Chinese.

This is a process of contention rather than an achieved condition and, within this contention, the politics are more complicated than some simple manipulation of cultural production by the British administration and/or increasingly influential spokespeople for the Mainland, than some obvious disabling of alternative cultural foci. I have also indicated some of the cleavages amongst performing arts practitioners and the discursive strategies they employ in the pursuit of bureaucratic allocations or interventions. The question of who best represents Hongkong’s cultural interests is a field of contention open to numerous uses by government, business, elites and dissidents alike. What we witness in these interrogations is an elaboration of hierarchies in which ‘Hongkong identity’ is an important, though by no means the only, mode of organisation.

I have chosen to concentrate on Zuni Icosahedron in the following chapters because their work provides us with a way of interpreting contemporary Hongkong cultural production other than as a kind of ‘bastardized appendix’ or ‘mediocre apprentice’ (Chow 1991a: 33) to Chinese and Western traditions. The issues raised are neither esoteric nor abstract: it is a matter of the relative power of different groups to define their own identities and of the ability to mobilise these definitions through cultural institutions. It is also a matter of exploring the borderlines, the limits of cultural production where some of the most intense questionings and flagrant assertions about the present and the future of Hongkong take place.

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25 My sympathies in this respect lie with Scott’s (1989) examination of Hongkong history in terms of a number of ‘legitimacy crises’ puncturing a fragile capitalist state.
Chapter Four

TREADING THE MARGINS: ZUNI ICOSAHEDRON

We Have No Story

Revolutions Opera is in rehearsal. Beyond the doors, in the labyrinthine corridors of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, a documentary film crew anxiously await an interview. Finally they are allowed to enter the studio, hauling their cameras and microphones through a maze of black clad performers. Mathias Woo, a young director with Zuni Icosahedron, has been chosen to speak with them. The interviewer, an eager young British woman, explains that they have come from a few days filming in Taiwan and are now putting together a segment on the territory. The series is a spin off from the Rough Guides, popular backpacker manuals which cover a range of travel destinations. This particular programme will cover Macau as well. She would like Mathias to say something about the Zuni production currently being worked on but, most importantly, she needs him to comment on 1997, to refer to the fear of intense censorship directed at the performing arts once Chinese sovereignty becomes fact.

Mathias nods a great deal during these preparatory instructions. He says nothing. Once the cameras begin rolling he talks a little about the themes motivating Revolutionary Opera. Then he is silent. The interviewer, flustered, tries to cue him again. This time she speaks a little slower and louder, as though his English needed some prompting. Mathias nods and then proceeds to say the same thing. Worried that she will not get the footage she requires, the interviewer instructs the cameras to roll again and this time asks: ‘Do you fear the imposition of tight censorship after 1997?’ There is no reply. She continues: ‘I know a lot of people in the performing arts in Hongkong are concerned about this. Do you think the Chinese government will censor Zuni’s productions after 1997 or that your company will even be able to continue to exist?’ ‘You had better ask them’, comes the droll response. The interview is over.

This incident takes us, by way of a seemingly minor route, to the heart of some questions concerning Zuni Icosahedron - their frequent refusal of explicit political statements combined with the local and overseas media’s determination to make them spokespeople for anticipated fears and current oppressions. This chapter attempts to answer some of those questions using a variety of source materials with a particular emphasis on the commentaries
provided by theatre/dance critics and on oral and textual statements made by Zuni members in the effort to both publicise and explain their activities to a wider audience. These commentaries and statements are not simply about social processes, but are materials which in some part constitute them (see Giddens 1991: 2).

The previous vignette could indicate a number of things. Perhaps we are dealing with an inscrutable Oriental. Or, to parody the opinions of psychologists, I might refer to the infamous Chinese indifference to strangers, the indirect verbal style, the avoidance of confrontational, argumentative talk (Bond 1991: 36,52,54). Another tack would lead us in the direction of Mathias’ inexperience with the press, the manner in which Zuni is grooming this final year architecture student to perform on such occasions and his nervousness about that performance.

More productively, though, I would like to consider it as an example of the conflicts arising between the production of symbolic representations, their evaluation and their appropriation by the media. This process makes it frequently impossible to pursue discussions about the performing arts without referring to 1997, whether or not this vocabulary accurately captures the concerns of Zuni. Conversations are consistently diverted into previously established channels, turning statements about the possibilities of initiating alternative forms of representation into arguments about sovereignty transferral, Chinese nationalism, totalitarianism and British betrayal (see Verdery 1991: 109,170). My observations here about constraints on the form of discourse repeat the proposition made in Chapter Two that the whole complex of issues that congeal around ‘Hongkong identity’, 1997 and sovereignty transferral now operate as a kind of master symbol with structuring properties. Thus this process is not confined to cinema but operates with equal force in the realm of performing arts.

The incident described above is not an isolated one. In 1990 the British television show Orientations (Program 7: Part 1) featured what they described as ‘internationally acclaimed Zuni theatre’. From the outset, the producers made it clear that the story assessed ‘the future of Hongkong’s avant-garde theatre ... as 1997 draws near’. The manner of assessment consisted of background footage of the company in rehearsal and performance interspersed with one or two line comments made by those involved with Zuni. A few of these comments summarised the stylistic attributes of Zuni but the editors mainly chose statements which would be perceived as more directly ‘political’. Statements pivoted around three issues: Chinese democracy, critiques of British rule and emigration from Hongkong.

Thus one performer says: ‘We Chinese are suffering as a race because democracy still eludes us’. Another contributes: ‘The biggest problem with China is not the octogenarians at the top, but the fact that the majority of people don’t know what democracy is’. Someone else comments: ‘Under British rule, Hongkong can never have a democracy; we want democracy and freedom
of speech’. The point is amplified by a further statement: ‘The legislative body of Hongkong is at present chosen only by people from a certain social strata. There should be direct elections in future’. On a more personal note, Wong Wyman, well-known disc jockey and Zuni member, laments: ‘I’ve considered emigrating because I have no faith in the government that takes over in 1997. However, this is my birth place. Perhaps I should stay on and see what’s going to happen and what I can do’. Finally Danny Yung, artistic director of the company, brings this rather forced wedging of political and theatrical themes in the documentary together with the kind of succinct synthesizing statement which makes him a favourite with the press: ‘I think we at Zuni try to reflect the attitudes of the younger generation in the 1990s ... We try to do on stage what we can also do off stage. We don’t need the big stage, there are other smaller one’s around’.

Stirring stuff. In such presentations Zuni consistently appears as almost an underground movement with a kind of enchanted closeness to the pulse of everyday political life and aspirations in the territory. Of course, this ‘politics’ in theatre is of a type Westerners can applaud. Dreams of freedom and democracy, the desire for pluralism, have powerful connotations in an international arena still reeling from the Tiananmen Square massacre. Zuni members are heroes and heroines continuing a rebellion against paternalistic colonialism and a repressive totalitarian China in their theatrical practice. But the precise link between the stage and politics is assumed rather than explained.

My own romantic predilections initially attracted me towards Zuni. If I was looking for ‘resistance’, then everything I read about this theatre group, their attempts to track the processes of displacement and realignment at work in contemporary Hongkong, their construction of something different and unique out of that encounter with British and Chinese traditions, confirmed that I was in its charmed presence. Critics told me that Zuni are ‘Hongkong’s only truly avant-garde theatre’ (Winterton, SCSMP 7/1/1990), that ‘politics and Zuni are irrevocably linked in the public’s eye’ (Lai, HKS 31/8/1989), that ‘Zuni and Danny both command attention as path-blazers of creative theatre in Hongkong, a litmus test as to whether dissent will have a respected, and respectable, place in our future society’ (Ram, HKS 18/6/1988).

Others, though, have been more measured in their responses. Lin Jing Min, a Taiwanese theatre commentator, remarked: ‘Zuni members are like moderate reformists. They protest with rationalism and in silence, against the society, the culture and even their own future’ (cited in Esquire Hongkong (EHK) July 1990). In my first interview with a company member, Joseph Lau, I referred, rather starry-eyed, to Zuni’s media reputation as political activists. He responded:

Actually I would not say political. I would say open. We open choices for the people as to how they see things, or how they see Zuni. I think how they see Zuni is how they see the world. Because in every play we just present the performer himself or herself or perform what is happening in the present. We have no story. If you say that this is
about emotional problems, okay - it's about emotional problems. If you are politically inclined then you will feel other things.

Mathias Woo was more strident in his denial of a political identity as characterising the company:

It's to do with the definition of politics. Is it the methodology we are using? The way we work? You can't define it as political theatre unless you are promoting the socialist ideal on stage. Zuni wants to generate ideas, discussion, questions, dialogue. In Chinese society people say you are being political when you ask questions ... You should be using a more rationalised procedure to understand the system. It's really straightforward. The system is very bureaucratic. I'm not challenging. I just want to clarify things.

I was beginning to understand that politics was something of a dirty word in Hongkong, used either to dismiss people questioning the administrative machinery of the territory or to summon up images of post-Maoist propaganda. Obviously if I was looking for some coherent platform I was not going to find it. Yet the notion of this interrogative third term (see Bhabha 1992: 57,59) exerted its own fascination. How could a group of people so vague about their aims become so infamous?

Colour/Structure

Zuni Icosahedron was founded in March 1982. Since that time, the company has presented over fifty productions and over two hundred performances. Established with the stated aim of pioneering experimental forms of theatre in Hongkong, Zuni have become something of a legendary fringe institution within the territory's performing arts scene but have received their greatest critical accolades performing overseas. The company undertake a variety of activities encompassing workshops touring secondary schools, video art and the running of an arts policy study group which initiates public forums. All of this has been achieved without significant government funding. Financially they rely on support from the Urban Council and from the Council for Performing Arts in the form of small project grants but the prospect of dissolution always looms. Indeed, for members, it forms part of the very horizon of commitment.

During the period of my research with the company in 1991, Zuni operated out of a modest office space in Wanchai.1 Outside, on the nearest corner, homeless men slept on stretcher beds in the street, abutting a 7-Eleven store

1 In 1994 Zuni relocated to Happy Valley.
infamous for its distribution of heroin. Inside, books on Russian avant-garde art, Magritte, Japanese design, feminist film theory and business success manuals jostled for position. Staff numbers fluctuate from three to one, depending on the company’s financial position. Those paid for their work are in administrative positions. Everyone else donates their services, frequently after work or school. In this sense, they are an amateur company.

Following their production of *The Opium War* in 1984, Zuni began independently operating a small theatre in Causeway Bay. From 1985, the group began to stage performances in larger auditoriums. While they were unable to maintain the Causeway Bay premises, Zuni gained greater audience popularity in 1987 with *Romance of the Rock*, a production which drew its title from Cao Xuequin’s classic Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. This new found popularity was prompted by the participation of Tat Ming Pair, a duo of Cantonese ‘pop idols’ (*SCMP The Guide* 17/5/1987). The duo’s appearance in *Romance of the Rock* was a resounding success, with the song of the same name hitting Hongkong’s Top Ten, and performances consistently sold out. During that year over 22,000 people bought tickets to Zuni shows. Since then, audience numbers have fluctuated but, as Danny Yung points out, the company is, at times, more popular than either the Hong Kong Dance Company or City Contemporary Dance Company.

The name ‘Zuni Icosahedron’ tends to provoke dismay and irritation. People are constantly asking me: ‘Why do they call themselves that?’ Indeed, it does seem to point to a certain deliberate inaccessibility although it remains well within an imagistic theatre tradition of inventing elliptical titles to fend off limited categorizing (Davis 1988: 19). Published explanations are of little assistance:

> Zuni stands for a colour in between green and blue. It is also the name of a Mexican clan famous for its handicraft art. Icosahedron is a twenty-sided object as well as the name of a kind of virus. According to Zuni’s interpretation, the combination of the two expresses their aspirations (*Ming Sheng Pao* (MSP) 1984).

Perhaps, at any rate, the name is not so important. It was originally prompted by the need to formally register as a theatre group and organise publicity materials following an invitation to perform in Taiwan at the Asian Arts Festival. Someone at a group meeting wanted to include a colour, someone else had a biology book and, anyway, according to core member David Yeung, ‘we didn’t know the exact meaning’.

However, while the ethnographic ironies may be lost on many, there is a certain appropriateness to forging a comparison between the romantic fascination which the pueblos, prototypically Zuni, exercised on the American public in the nineteenth century (Hinsley 1989: 182) and the kind of idealistic investments commentators, audiences and members of the group make in Zuni Icosahedron. And some of those involved are not so unsophisticated as to
decline playing on this. Steven Hall, a New York performance artist who was invited to collaborate with Zuni in 1991, maintained an ongoing ethnographic discourse about the company which teetered between irony and delusion. A self-described anthropologist, he announced in the Hongkong English-language press that he planned to draw local audiences into 'deep play', that 'Zuni People' were a friendly 'tribe' (TV&ET April 22-28 1991: 15), that his ambition was to become Zuni’s first white member and that it all reminded him of California in the 1960s (HKS 24/4/1991).

But let’s not strain the comparison too much. Obviously Zuni do strike an imaginative balance for some, a foil to the perceived commercialism of Hongkong, in a manner reminiscent of anthropology’s earlier romance with Southwestern pueblo life. However, I have no intention of acting as ‘showman and shaman’ (Hinsley 1989: 188) for Zuni Icosahedron. In fact, Zuni speak for themselves in a language which requires little brokerage on my part. Their own interrogation of the ‘double bind’ outlined in Chapter Three is explicit. In their application for a seeding grant to the CFPA in 1991 (ASG(D) 1991: 1) they wrote:

Performing arts in Hong Kong, until the beginning of the nineties, sadly, can by and large be described as ‘traditional’ - either inheriting directly from Chinese culture or taking its roots in Western civilisation, lacking its own identity.

Zuni Icosahedron, now in its tenth year, has always aimed at bringing to Hong Kong an original force in creativity ... It is with this idea in mind that Zuni performs as a ‘laboratory’ ... ultimately striking a unique language.

This defense of Hongkong’s self-image, in the form of a reaction against cultural domination from the West and China, is combined with an avowed concern to publicise ‘minority interests’ in the territory. Edward Lam put it to me like this:

Due to the existence of Zuni at least more people, especially people in the cultural scene, are more aware of the words ‘alternative’ and ‘minority’ and I think it is Zuni - absolutely, it is Zuni - who bring out these concepts. There is no other company that has been so persistent in promoting an alternative culture, in raising the voice of minorities, in reminding society that minorities should not be neglected. So the performing arts and the publicity and promotions around all these pieces have become a very important tool by which people understand the significance of minority interests in Hongkong. That is a very big step that Zuni has achieved although not much credit has been given to us.

It is with these twin notions in mind – creating a unique local identity and defending minority interests – that Zuni claims to have achieved a ‘revolution’ of Hongkong theatre (ASG(D) 1991: 3). In the following section I will
investigate this rather bold claim through a consideration of some of the stylistic hallmarks of the company.

Zuni Style

Zuni’s work is variously described as ‘minimalist’, ‘structuralist’, ‘postmodern’, ‘surrealist’ and ‘avant-garde’. This range of attributions reveals the diversity of techniques used in different productions and the difficulty of pinpointing their work. In conversation, Yung refuses to associate the company with any particular style but, if pressed, prefers to consider his own pieces as part of a modernist movement. Technically, performances rely on the careful repetition of images, gestures and words to create a metamorphosing network of associations designed to suggest arenas of social knowledge and feeling that are believed to be inarticulate. Yung stresses that he is interested ‘in basics more than particulars ... in form more than contents’, that he wants to explore the ‘impressionistic’ and the ‘emotional’ (Programme Notes Decameron 88). This exploration involves the creation of performance pieces stretched between theatre and dance, between Chinese and Western imagery.

This stretching results in a series of non-narrative pieces, fragments in which everything that happens is not identical but opaquey similar. It is deliberate and fastidious - a painstaking calculation which highlights the visual rather than the verbal. Critics have responded differently to these performances. Reviewing Decameron 88, Andrew Kwong of the Hongkong Standard (22/6/88) writes that the production:

carried all the hallmarks of Zuni: a bare stage, costume in black, white or some other neutral colours, characters aimlessly walking up and down the stage or running perimetrically and diagonally, hysterical cries which are irritating rather than enlightening. In this production the unconventional was crowned with a total absence of the spoken word (apart from some fragments of a live recording of the Legislative Council in session). Movements of the players occurred in a highly aleatory manner, and neither reason nor imagination would provide the key to what was happening on stage.

Others are more neutral in their assessment. China Post (14/3/1982), a Taiwanese newspaper, suggested that ‘Zuni is especially interested in a structural theatre which almost ignores narrative line as it tries to create and fill space and time with multiple focal points of simultaneous interest’. Deborah Singerman from the South China Morning Post (4/9/1983) wrote that: ‘Zuni’s works are abstract dramas. They use minimal dialogue, maximum movement, simple sets and far-reaching symbolism. Players often shuffle as in a slow balletic dream, geometric pattern-play depicting changeable family and
friendship ties’. Bradley Winterton, from the same newspaper (21/9/1988) echoed this view: ‘Zuni’s theatre shows ... are abstract art, or quasi-abstract art. They are stage designs made with people, props, music and light’. Some are more effusive. - ‘brilliantly economical visual poetry’ waxes Chiverton (1990), a radio critic.

Zuni’s desire to create a uniquely Hongkong performance style has led to an excavation of disparate images and sounds deriving from foreign and Chinese sources. This layering effect, an uncovering of colonial history, is bound together by the use of ordinary, everyday movements, gestures and props. Sharon Hom (1990) describes this mundane performativity:

Again and again, the ordinary props of daily existence, chairs, beds, shopping bags, clothing, a kitchen knife, its blade shining in the artificial light, become transformed by repeated use, become infused with an endless stream of possibilities and meaning: extraordinary, dangerous, incredibly particular with life.

But where the blade really cuts is in the analysis of Hongkong’s relationship to Chinese history and tradition. This takes many turns, from a consideration of characteristically Chinese body postures such as squatting, to evocations of the cyclical form of Mainland history or sharp critiques of perceived Chinese traditions such as deference or meekness or female subservience or conformity. As Chiverton (1990) puts it: ‘A Zuni trademark is the constant flow of people across the stage in one direction. Movement against the flow occurs, but only as countermotion. After a while the flow becomes so insistent that it’s like a spatial translation of the arrow of time’. Theatre essays on time and space - essays on history.

A quick glance at a list of Zuni’s stage shows indicates a preoccupation with intertextuality. They repeatedly represent our representations of other eras and localities, creating metaphorical histories that have little to do with linear events. *A Magic Caravan* and *From A Past Event To A Prophecy*, both drawing on Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s contemporary South American fable *One Hundred Years of Solitude; Sunrise (Pre/Post)*, based on the well-known Chinese play of the same name; *Decameron 88*, prompted by Boccaccio’s mediaeval narrative and *Revolutionary Opera*, which takes its title from the model works of the Cultural Revolution, all attest to a cosmopolitan eclecticism whereby warnings about the present and the future are posted by turning to other times and other places.

These productions are so torn from the original texts that we can hardly recognise their presence. Images and narratives are refigured and recontextualised for our allegorical interpretation. ‘My production is an allegorical look at how things are shaping up and I leave the rest to the audience to judge’, Yung commented in relation to *Decameron 88* (HKS 18/6/1988). There is, in no sense, a confrontation between Zuni performances and these canonical texts of the past and present. Rather, the shock effect of
these citations ripped from their original context is derived from the playful allusion to quotational vogues prevalent in self-reflexive aesthetics (Birringer 1991: 57-61) and from Zuni's ability to expropriate the cultural authority accumulated by other authors, claiming them for their own genealogy (see Verdery 1991: 201). This appropriation has plenty of historical antecedents in Chinese aesthetics. As Leys (1988: 33-35) points out, originality is not valued per se; interpretation is stressed over invention; a copy may be superior to its model.2

While some critics deny that Zuni productions have a 'subject', constraining themselves to 'implications' (e.g. Winterton SCMP 21/9/1988), the following examples will give the reader some idea of how the company manages to relate the meaning of diverse texts to the social, political and cultural circumstances of Hongkong. Decameron was said to be about the Black Death and about public fears and expectations in the homestretch to 1997, with voiceovers about ensuring stability and prosperity filling the auditorium and a bed at the side of the stage symbolising Taiwan (CP 23/8/1988: 9; HKS 18/6/1988; SCMP 21/9/1988). Romance of the Rock linked the plight of Black Jade, the neglected granddaughter of the literary saga with the sufferings of Mainland writers and artists during the Cultural Revolution (SCMP 27/2/1987: 20). The political implications of Sunrise became increasingly explicit, with a mixture of oral and written dialogue referring to Legco's controversial Powers and Privileges Bill (1985), the original draft of which gave the legislature the right to deny the public entry to council meetings, prohibited the publication of reports of proceedings held in camera and created a set of defamation offences including 'intentional disrespect' (FEER 27/6/1985: 36). Conjunctions of past and present are thus proclaimed, fictional histories form analogies with contemporary hopes and tribulations and the power of theatrical experience, imagery and mood to construct political consciousness is asserted.

However Zuni productions do not embrace any functional calls for specific political actions. They are intended as a space for questioning, an arena in which people are encouraged to construct their own interpretations from minimal forms. This process is designed to encompass both performers and audiences. Productions are worked on in a putatively 'collective' manner.3 Performers are trained in a progressive course of instruction designed to sensitize the person with the significations of his/her own body and with the meanings they give to their environment. Yung's own attitude to audiences is

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2 Leys (1988: 34) instances the ways in which classical Chinese painting and poetry are based on stereotyped formulas and ready-made images to illustrate his point.

3 This 'collective' workshop procedure is discussed in detail in the following chapter. But the following account from Joseph Lau speaks for itself:

During the first production meeting, the director will reveal all his ideas and concepts about a book. He then collects all our ideas and combines them to see what we want to say. So the director will state: 'In One Hundred Years of Solitude I find the most interesting thing is direction; how we find our direction. Do you think so?' So we say 'yes'.
related to his concept of ‘sincerity’. Convinced that conventional works domineer and bombard, he tries to develop:

a relationship of trust between audience and performers, of faith. You have to believe in whatever you see. Otherwise you would not be sitting there. And you have to believe in what you do. Otherwise you would not be standing there. Anything else is just a superficial interaction or transaction.

As critics never tire of pointing out, many of these characteristics are not new within the context of international performing arts. Zuni’s work could, for instance, be linked to the detachment called for in epic stagecraft, the gestic theatre developed by Brecht in which the audience, instead of identifying with the characters, is educated to be astonished by the representation of conditions (see Benjamin 1968: 150-154) until the familiar becomes strange, until inattention is jolted towards an historicizing of the everyday (Blau 1982: 18). One critic, Michael Waugh (SCMP 23/6/1988) has suggested that the company takes its cues from Russian director Meyerhold.

More frequently, though, Zuni is linked to Western Experimental or Alternative Theatre, Happenings and the whole flurry of radical performance activity during the rebellious 1960s. It was a time when scripts were discarded, when directors replaced playwrights, when actors’ collectives became popular, when the physical relationship between audiences and performers was incorporated into the structure of works, when proscenium arch theatres were eschewed in favour of ‘found’ spaces, when movement and visual imagery usurped the spoken word (Kirby 1984: 111). Some suggest that Zuni’s immediate mentors come from more recent innovators, artists like Robert Wilson from the United States or Germany’s Pina Bausch (SCSMP 7/1/1990). The possibilities of a stylistic connection with Japanese theatre are rarely explored. Remarkably, the correlations with classical Chinese aesthetics are also little mentioned – the presentation of discontinuous images not unlike a Chinese poem, the importance of empty space and silence in bringing a performance to life, and the consequent stress on a minimalism which attributes great weight to the active role of audiences in constructing their own interpretations are all relevant here (Leys 1988: 21,23,36,37).

It is not my intention to enter into this debate about potential origins. What I do want to point to is the way in which such histories are used to suggest that there is something inauthentic about Zuni, something outmoded or plain suspicious. Rosamund Yu, writing for Bazaar (Dec. 1990) put the case rather mildly: ‘It’s food for thought that Lam and Zuni have used seemingly Western forms to question Western colonial hegemony in Hongkong’. Local critic, Winterton, reviewing Sisters of the World United in 1987, was more patronizingly virulent about the matter:
It all seemed very worthy. But repeated stage images of involuntary self-denial, and
symbolic gestures expressing emotional impotence plucked out from any narrative
context, have ceased to be ‘progressive’ decades ago practically everywhere else in the
world ... I have sat in a cellar while the actors shovelled earth on to the skylight in
Poland, been locked into a lift with a ghost in Holland, seen Hamlet done as vaudeville,
Macbeth played by three actors fixed together like Siamese twins, watched horn-players
descend from a cathedral roof in pink overalls, been fed blue cake by a man with a live
rat peeping out from his sleeve ... seen Scott’s expedition to the South Pole done on an
ice-rink and watched fake decapitations. Whether I’ve loved them or loathed them, one
thing is certain – I’ve never forgotten them. I won’t say I can remember nothing of
Zuni’s meanderings on a too-large stage on Wednesday night ... [but] Sisters of the
World United was paler than life (SCSMP 11/10/1987).

A recent essay by Zhang (1992) might help to solidify the company that
cosmopolitan Winterton has here almost evaporated into the realms of
insignificance. Writing about the series of campaigns against Western ‘spiritual
pollution’ and ‘bourgeois liberalization’ that have marked Chinese political
affairs since the end of the Cultural Revolution, Zhang proposes that the
travelling of Western theory to China is part of an active opposition, an act of
antagonism in the face of institutionalised officialdom. Calling on the work of
satirical author Lu Xun, the term ‘grabism’ is deployed to suggest the entirely
different situations and purposes which Western theory speaks to in the
Mainland. According to this analysis, the grabbing of Western theory through
translation is a ‘liberating’ influence in a China mired in ‘a completely
threadbare and ossified theory of class and class struggle that reduces all
literature and criticism to a number of rigid formulas’ (Zhang 1992: 109).

Zhang’s argument can be applied with equal force to Zuni Icosahedron’s
‘grabbing’ of foreign performing arts theory and practice. This application
acquires an oppositional status in the midst of Hongkong’s mainstream
performing arts scene which draws its strengths from the master narratives of
Chinese and European tradition. Put more prosaically, this is an observation
that while art forms may originate in a specific social context, they are not tied
to that context – they make take on different functions in different places and
times (Burger 1984: 69).

During an interview which appeared in AsiaWeek (20/4/1984: 94) Yung
was asked whether he felt that Asian performers are too influenced by the West.
He replied: ‘In a bicultural environment we have a bicultural product – and
there’s nothing wrong with that ... There are many avant-garde creators in New
York who have digested Asian thought and art forms’. Or as Lu Xun pithily put
it, ‘the fact that we eat beef and mutton does not mean that we are turning
ourselves into cows and sheep’ (cited in Zhang 1992: 120).
The Zoo of Fantastic Sounds and Gestures

Over the past decade, six productions forming part of the *One Hundred Years of Solitude* series have provided the baseline for Zuni’s experimentations and given the group’s repertoire a certain coherence. *Magic Caravan, From a Past Event to a Prophecy, The Long March, October, The Last Stage and Days and Nights of Abstinence* were staged between 1982 and 1990 in Hongkong, Taiwan and Japan. The series has been designated the ‘grandmother’ (SCSMP 20/9/1987) of Zuni’s efforts to sidestep narrative in favour of form.

The series has evolved from workshops focussing on ‘direction’ and ‘movement’. In this sense, there is a common thread running through the productions. The nature of Zuni’s work is constantly toward a bottoming out in yet another interpretation and the conviction that there is always something left over results in repeated reworkings. The first production, *Magic Caravan*, retained traces of Marquez’s text with some South American ‘touches’ - girls in wide skirts dancing, peasants harvesting. But as time passed the links were less stated save the title and a preface in programme notes of a letter from Zuni to Marquez which was an adaptation of the first and last lines of the novel. It read:

Many years later, as we faced the firing squad, we were to remember that distant afternoon when my father took me to discover the zoo of fantastic sounds and gestures. At that time our city was a village built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones. The world was so recent that many things lacked names ... Before reaching the final spectacle, however, I already understood that we would never leave that zoo, for it was foreseen that the city of mirages would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when we would finish deciphering the sound and gestures, and that everything signified by them was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth. Viva!!

(Programme Notes *MC* 1982)

Inexplicit perhaps. But the references to being caged and condemned, to time running out, to an innocence expunged from the world’s memory left little doubt that the letter was, in part, intended as an allegorical description of Hongkong’s fate, a reminder of what might happen post-1997 to the shimmering ‘city of mirages’.

Productions played to an even greater extent on ambiguities, resisting decipherment. Audiences became aware of a ceaseless flow of performers across the stage, some moving quickly, some slowly, some pausing and, occasionally, a turning back. Leaders and followers, individuals and groups, were confused in the cacophony of movement. Not everyone was impressed. *Magic Caravan* initiated a controversy about the definition of drama among local theatre circles. According to the outraged, this definitely wasn’t. Others were more bored than shocked. Reviewing *A Long March*, critic John Dent-
Young sarcastically suggested that his article ‘should really be a blank space, so that the reader could read into it whatever he liked’. He went on:

The present work is subtitled *A Long March* and both elements of this title are represented fairly literally on stage. There are no words, only an occasional cough, grunt, laugh or scream, but people travel continually, to music, from stage right to stage left, somewhat like the people of China proving the size of the population and the roundness of the world ... *(SCMP 27/12/1985).*

The first couple of productions dealt with various processions - the stage was continually crossed by wedding parties, mourners, revolutionary lines and religious pilgrimages. *The Long March* was designed to highlight mannerisms within processions, elements like bowing and kowtowing. Later, a concern with the dynamics between groups and individuals emerged. At times, Yung seemed to be expressing something about the corporate, cohesive nature of Hongkong society, the similarity of city movements regulated by patterns of work. His ‘auto-interview’ in the programme for *Days and Nights of Abstinence* began:

As soon as the clock tower struck five, the pavement started to move in one direction, people kept flowing past in front of me - the speed, the frequency, and even the expression - all in one, as if they had just struck a chord. Every face is marked with its own history, you said afterwards. But, at that very moment, on that particular pavement, it all added up as Hongkong’s collective experience.

He then undercuts his previous position and the corporate group is replaced by a fragmented society, divided by differential access to power:

This individual against individual/individual facing group/group to group, may appear to be the chance mixing of time and space, but it can very well be politics.

They’re different powers swaying to and fro, puncturing when they join force.

Now now, men are dead scared to lose their power to ‘puncture’, while artists/minorities/women are not equipped with this ‘puncturing’ power, so sometimes they see a more urgent need to take the initiative *(Programme Notes DNA 1990).*

Sitting in a darkened auditorium, watching a Zuni performance, one is constantly thinking, going back and forth in time and in and out of the stage, trying to deal with the spinoff that these combinatory puzzles provoke. It’s a very cerebral activity. Everything moves by association and elision; particulars are reified to the point of exhaustion. Chiverton (1990) describes this refusal of conceptual relief:

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4 In fact, the thrust of the movement is always from stage left to stage right.
Sometimes following a Zuni production means tracking themes and implications as they condense from a cloud of images. Again, you could imagine a pattern where meanings move outward from a gesture, for example, pointing. Through October actors point forward to indicate a direction, point up to indicate a vote, point at a man to accuse; or they shake the same index finger to reprimand, or just to dance.

What happens on stage couldn't really be described as action. The simplest elements of performance - dark light void pulse motion stillness - depict a power structure. Definitely. But the control and domination is always ambiguous, reversible. Performers move through or occupy this space in an eerie limbo of indeterminacy. And you are never sure whether other audience members are thinking along similar lines. Occasionally images are quite explicit - they leave little room for divergent interpretations. At other times, the company is quite clear about their intentions but some of the audience may remain unenlightened. For example, the continued use of white, grey and black in the One Hundred Years series is intended to convey three positions with Hongkong occupying the grey space between the black and white of China and Britain, a space where, as Joseph Lau described it to me, ‘we have no right to say anything’, where the territory has no entitlement, no access, to a colour of its own. This, in turn, is a reference to the manner in which Hongkong people have never been seriously consulted during the whole sovereignty transferral negotiations.

Even for those who remain in the dark, however, the process remains similar. The space travelled while watching is an interior distance across history through the encircling possibilities of Hongkong identity. Throughout the One Hundred Years series there is a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future in which the lifespan becomes the dominant foreground figure. But this does not suggest any separation of individuals from wider social events. Quite to the contrary, the self establishes a trajectory which only becomes coherent via the reflexive use of the broader social environment. Yet this coherence is also a form of fragmentation because the traditions that provide coherence are experienced as either empty or as utterly overwhelming practices (see Giddens 1991: 75,76,167), a series of endless processions where progress is a conservation, where moving forward is going back.

In the finale of October, when the smoke lifts and silence falls, Pia Ho, a performer representing Jiang Qing, yells: ‘You accuse me of masquerading as a man. I insist I am a man playing a female role. You tried to stop me from climbing the social ladder so I aim to catch the moon’. Chan Man Sheng, a performer in the same production, posed this question during an interview (SCMP 24/8/1987): ‘The production does not reenact any particular historical event. There are only bits, scraps and pieces - monologues, tales and images which await restructuring. Is that what history is like?’

5 Unless otherwise stated, all reported speech within Zuni productions is performed in Cantonese and has been translated into English for this text.
Figure 10: One Hundred Years of Solitude - From A Past Event To A Prophecy. Presented by the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre Research Institute, Taipei National Arts Hall, 1984 (Courtesy Zuni Icosahedron).
Figure 11: *One Hundred Years of Solitude - The Last Stage*. The Japan Performing Arts Centre, Toga International Arts Festival, 1989 (Courtesy Zuni Icosahedron).
Not all Zuni productions, however, involve this textual deconstruction. Quite a number of smaller pieces are site-specific works, conceptual pieces designed to challenge notions of appropriate theatre spaces in the ‘Happenings’ vein. For instance, *A Room With A View*, choreographed by Quentin Wong in 1988, was a dance piece with eight spectators and two performers crowded into Zuni’s tiny video library room (SCMP 5/5/1988). Other performance places have included Chater Road Pedestrian Precinct, Victoria Park and Happy Valley Race Track. Sometimes ‘environmental installations’ are constructed. *Zuni Movement* (1989) was designed by Yung to explore the possibilities of detaching the audience from the stage spectacle. When the audience entered they were given a numbered diagram indicating their seating position within spaces defined by coverings of mosquito nets which partially masked their vision (SCMP 30/5/1989).

*Three Colours*, a dance performance I saw in 1991, took place at the Flora Ho Sports Centre of the University of Hongkong. Seated next to a sign reading ‘No person suffering from any cutaneous or communicable disease shall enter the pool’, I watched as dancers moved silently across the astroturf framed by the blue and white striped awnings or swam weighed down by business suits. Women hanging washing on a nearby rooftop witnessed these sombre laps, bemused.

In fact, Zuni encompasses a variety of performance styles depending on the director involved. Most of the work I have been discussing is attributable to Danny Yung. Yung has the highest profile and is the strongest guiding hand of the company. It is his works that have toured overseas. As freelance writer Jimmy Ngai put it to me, worried that the company will bore their audience with the similarity between productions: ‘Zuni Zuni Zuni which means Danny’. I hope it has become clear by now that Yung’s performance pieces are marked by a contemplative resonance, sometimes labelled sterile formalism by his detractors, a cool yet impassioned visual seduction. The astringent grandeur of these compressions can be contrasted with Edward Lam’s proliferating expansions.

Lam was originally involved with more conventional theatre plays and had a kind of conversion after seeing Yung’s work. He became Yung’s most able protege but gradually went on to develop a very different approach. While there is a concern within the company to preserve the formal appearance of mutual good feelings, the two directors have become increasingly antagonistic. In a thinly veiled reprimand Yung remarked: ‘I said to Edward - learn how to appreciate the still image because still images are much more powerful than moving images with sound or with text. If you can relate to a still image and

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6 Lam first became familiar with Yung’s work in 1980 when he watched parts one and two of *Journey to the East* performed at the Hongkong Arts Centre. Later that year he performed in parts three and four of the same series. A number of other people involved in *Journey* later became instrumental in the formation of Zuni Icosahedron - Pia Ho, who was employed as a junior staff member at Seals Theatre Company, Jim Shum, an experimental film maker and surveyor and Bill Pun, a graduate student of Hong Kong University.
allow people to have the same kind of relationship which you have then the whole expands; there's more possibility.'

For his part, Lam rejects Yung's advice and is rather less measured in his assessment of the differences between the two:

I'm walking a very different road from Danny. His work is very clever, very political. Political in the sense that he knows perfectly well how to achieve the best outcome from limitations. I am doing something totally different. If he understands that he can ask people to walk, then he will just ask them to stand. And he understands that if you ask people to stand for two minutes it doesn't have any impact. So he asks them to stand for half an hour. This kind of thing can either have a big impact or just flop. I'm more in the middle. I employ a lot of techniques, a lot of choreography. I ask performers to exhaust themselves. I am challenging my limitations as well.

Because Danny is very good at minimising, he can get the very best out of very limited resources. But I am elaborating all the time. I want to sort of blow myself up first, blow the whole cast up first, to see how far we can go.

We are not just dealing with differences in style here, with the ways in which Yung's obsessive work solidifies against interpretation while Lam's is more accessible. Both directors embrace forms of emancipatory politics, but Yung's concerns are more to do with the fixities of Chinese tradition, the conditions that enable hierarchical domination and the possibilities of Hongkong identity, of a particular ethnicity, within these constraints. Lam, in his major pieces How To Love A Man Who Doesn't Love Me (1989) and Scenes From A Man's Changing Room (1991), is more overtly interested in sexual politics and gender differentiation, particularly in exploring gay issues in Hongkong. His is a politics of self-identity that has an almost social documentary edge, aimed at constructing a self-defining history against the institutional and cultural stereotypes which afflict homosexual men in Hongkong. These somewhat different approaches currently sit uneasily together within the company's repertoire. More generally, a determination to explore the conditions of perception and reception combined with an interest in more specific critiques are the axes around which Zuni turns, revolutions which are as frequently strained as they are smooth.

International Connections

Zuni Icosahedron has achieved international acclaim and recognition through tours to Taiwan, Japan, Britain, the United States and, most recently, Brussels. The company has received numerous invitations to perform in other countries but has been forced to decline due to lack of funds. Zuni persistently attempt to
use these invitations as a form of leverage in their pursuit of money from the CFPA, harping on the theme that Hongkong 'has been known for its export of various manufacturing products' but not for 'a creativity of its own' (ASG(D) 1991: 5). However, the argument has limited success. The irony here is that, as Yung expresses the matter, 'it is easier to generate dialogue outside Hongkong but our work is concerned with Hongkong' (SCSM 1/7/1990).

Zuni has performed more frequently in Taiwan than in any other overseas destination. In 1982 the company presented Journey to the East, Part 5 and The Dragon Dance under the auspices of the first Asian Drama Festival; in 1984 From a Past Event to a Prophecy and Chronicle of Three Women were staged; in 1988 October and Decameron graced the Taipei National Arts Hall auditorium. According to comments in Taiwanese newspapers Zuni's 1982 appearances, though scantily attended, had a discernible impact on Taiwan's own experimental theatre fringe. In 1984, an element of competition became evident when the Professor of the National Arts Academy in Taiwan applauded and bemoaned the fact that 'the experimental nature of the plays' was 'outstanding' and 'ahead of our own dramas'. He was particularly impressed with the shock value of 'rough lines' issuing from the mouths of female characters. By the end of the review, however, he manages to soothe Taiwanese national pride over the issue of language: 'It is pitiful that the dialogue was in Cantonese, though a few performers spoke a bit of Mandarin with a heavy accent' (MSP 1984). Hongkong performers, no matter how avant-garde, were, it seemed, country cousins after all.

Zuni performers I spoke to largely recalled the questions after shows in Taiwan, the constant desire to know what members thought about 1997. Joseph Lau seemed to have capitulated to the sovereignty transferral straitjacket: 'They saw in all our performances something we wanted to say about '97. Actually all our performances are saying '97'. Indeed, in the context of Taiwan's official aspirations towards reunifying China and their fears of Mainland military action against them, the only message Zuni could possibly deliver is about that fateful point in the territory's future.

But if Zuni were being reprimanded in Taiwan over their use of Cantonese, in Hongkong, when they received the honour of being the only overseas group to be invited to Japan's prestigious Toga Festival during 1989, they were derided for being unrepresentative of local culture, a Westernised anomaly (SCMP 15/7/1989). Pleas for funds from local sources to help tour their production of The Final Stage were met with silence. The CFPA had no cultural exchange policy and the territory's major businesses were not interested. Then company manager Gabriel Yiu remarked: 'Throughout the years the Government has invited many prominent artists to perform in the territory but it is very reluctant to sponsor local groups - especially those not performing

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7 The Toga Festival, established in 1982, was the first international theatre festival in Japan. Founded by Tadashi Suzuki, it is held every summer and has hosted prominent international figures working in experimental areas of performing arts including Meredith Monk and Robert Wilson.
traditional arts - to perform in other countries. The reason is the Government's reluctance to break out of the quaint 'fishing boat' image that has attracted so many tourists over the years' (HKS 21/8/1989).

The notion that Zuni are not sufficiently 'Aberdeenesque' to attract local funding is fairly spurious. For example, in 1990 the Music Office spent $1.7 million to tour the Youth Chinese Orchestra to America, and there is nothing particularly rustic about these young musicians (TV&ET Aug.6-12 1990). However, it is the case that Zuni's representations of the conditions and practices circumscribing contemporary Hongkong Chinese is less than jolly. Eventually funds for the Japanese tour came from three overseas sources: Japan Airlines and Taipei's Performance Workshop8 together covered half of the $100,000 air tickets cost while the Toga Festival covered all accommodation and transport costs within Japan. Zuni was forced to take out a loan to meet remaining expenses.

This became something of an embarrassment to the Hongkong administration after local newspapers reported that The Final Stage had been a success. A heading in the Hongkong Standard (21/8/1989) triumphantly proclaimed 'Local troupe's rain-soaked debut dazzles Japan' and the article went on to boast that the one thousand seat theatre was 'packed to the aisles'. The government was widely criticised in the media for failing to assist Zuni in what was perceived as a great achievement for a local theatre group.9 'Without rice, even a dexterous wife cannot cook a meal' wrote critic Chen Biru (Capital 15/10/1989).

In London, performing Deep Structure of Chinese (Hongkong) Culture at the Bloomsbury Theatre as part of The Turning World Drama Festival in 1990, critical commentary about Zuni heavily stressed their political profile with sympathisers dwelling on the failures of British colonialism and the anxieties associated with 1997, particularly after the Tiananmen Square massacre of the previous year. Of course, there were exceptions. Well-known reviewer from the Financial Times (17/5/1990), Clement Crisp, described the production as a numbing product of the 'Theatre of Tedium' in which 'the oriental mind never seemed more inscrutable'. A subeditor at The Independent (17/5/1990) seemed to have in mind some generic 'Asian' category, calling a lengthy article on the group 'Empire of the censors'.10 However, Jim Hiley, in an article in The Times (15/5/1990) titled 'In the shadow of the future', referred to Zuni as an 'avant-garde, iconoclastic Hongkong theatre company' on a 'collision course with traditional values' expressing 'an unmistakable dissatisfaction with life under British rule'. Rosamund Yu, writing for Bazaar, a South Asian arts magazine published in

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8 See Chapter 3, footnote 24.
9 In 1992 Zuni again toured to Japan with Mirage. This was after I had conducted fieldwork with the company and I have no further information about the tour.
10 This is a pun on the name of the erotic Japanese film 'Empire of the Senses'.
London, suggested that: ‘You would think that now at least - albeit hopelessly late in the day - people might ask Hongkong people, busy on the other side of the world, what they thought of their colonial ties, what they feel [about] impending 1997 and the Tiananmen Square massacre’.

In these sympathetic accounts, it is not so much Zuni’s work that is at issue but their status as spokespeople for the territory. This status as political ambassadors is, to a certain extent, encouraged by Zuni personnel. Edward Lam, in the previously mentioned Times article, argued that group members are part of ‘the first young, energetic, well-informed generation’ to grow up in Hongkong. Zuni directors believe that they speak for this generation.

Following their brief British debut, Zuni Icosahedron went on to perform Deep Structure in New York. This was part of an evening’s commemoration of the victims of the Tiananmen Square massacre held at the Triplex Performing Arts Centre of Manhattan Community College. As it turned out, with the assistance of the United States Embassy in London, their participation in ‘The Memorial Festival’ became one of Zuni’s greatest publicity coups.

Seven of the company’s performers were stranded in Britain when they were denied visas on the grounds that they might not return to the territory after their New York performance (New York Post 29/5/1990: 8; SCMP 29/5/1990). American Senator Edward Kennedy was approached in a bid to force the Embassy to reverse its decision (HKS 31/5/1990). Morrison, a congressman who chaired a powerful immigration committee, wrote to the Secretary of State, James Baker, alleging that it would be ‘deeply disturbing’ if the visa refusal was designed to appease Chinese leaders and if this was part of a wider conciliatory policy towards the Mainland signalled by President Bush’s decision of the previous week to renew China’s Most Favoured Nation Status (SCMP 1/6/1990). The Executive Director of the Asian American Arts Centre concurred that this must, indeed, be the case (SCMP 29/5/1990). The Embassy changed its mind (HKS 1/6/1990).

Back home, even Winterton was impressed, arguing that Zuni had ‘come of age’ with their visits to London and New York (SCMP 23/7/1990). And while Zuni repeatedly denied that the visa refusals amounted to anything more than red tape (e.g. HKS 31/5/1990), they had become, regardless, a cause celebre.

The international connections Zuni has forged by performing overseas, and their consequent claims to greater cultural authority within the territory, have also been consolidated by the company’s policy of bringing visiting artists to the territory to work with them. The professions of these visitors are varied - dramatists, film directors video makers, writers, lighting designers. And although Yung strenuously denies that he is bringing together Chinese artists from all over the globe, with a flippant ‘I don’t think I’m that ethnocentric’, a recent list included fourteen Chinese from the Mainland, Taiwan, America and Britain out of a total of eighteen visitors to Zuni.11 Quite a number of these

11 The names on Zuni’s list are photographer Zhang Zhaotang (Taipei); dramatists Stan Lai (Taipei), Wang Xiaoying and Gao Hsin Jian (Beijing); film directors Chen Kaige (Beijing) and Zhang Yimou (Xian); video artists Hans Zulig.
contacts appear to have been made when Yung lived in America and was involved as an advocate of Asian American rights.

Yung hopes that international support and networking can make an impact on the local scene both in terms of a broadening of what is a fairly staid performing arts scene and in terms of according Zuni greater recognition (and funding) from that field. For example, at an International Conference on Cultural Criticism held in Hongkong during 1992/1993 Yung spoke in a panel on ‘performing arts and cultural identity’ and two Zuni productions, Invisible Cities 2 and Genesis 3, formed part of the general proceedings with post-performance discussion panels of theatre professionals and academics, including Vincent Crapanzano.12 No other performing arts groups from the territory exhibited their work.

Zuni also position themselves as part of an international scene by screening video programmes of the work of dance professionals overseas. For instance, New European Dances - Video Lectures on Sexology and Movement was selected and coordinated by Edward Lam at the Hongkong Arts Centre in 1991. It featured pieces by DV8 Physical Theatre and Anne Teresa De Keermaeker. Indeed, I am constantly aware when writing about Zuni that the history and current practices of the company frequently overlap with performance art and dance experiments worldwide with their emphasis on the physical body and on the breaking up of theatrical illusion (Birringer 1991: 63). While the milieu in which people live remains the source of Zuni’s work, place and local attachment do not form the parameter of experience (see Giddens 1991: 146).

But though Zuni provide an interesting example of the dialectic of local and global, members are committed to various notions of ‘Chineseness’. This invocation of national ideas can be more or less exclusive, more or less categorical and rigid depending on who you are talking to and the context. A number of performers doubted that I could ‘feel’ the productions because ‘they are Chinese’ and thought the task of writing about them for a foreign audience was misguided. David Yeung, who has been with Zuni since its inception, had this to say:

I like performing in Chinese society or in Oriental areas, in Asia more than in Europe. Because what we are doing is actually very Chinese. It is not the form but the contents. The things we want to say are more Chinese. So [I would prefer to perform in] Taiwan or, if possible, China.

I also prefer working with overseas Chinese. When Chinese artists place themselves in Western culture they find a lot of different things. In this way they generate new attitudes towards different cultures, towards Western and Chinese cultures. They have a new perspective. Working with them, I think we can

(Koln), Lin Huai Min (Taipei), Eleanor Yung, Yoshiko Chuma (New York) and Yenlu Wong (Los Angeles); writers Ah Cheng and Zhang Xin Xin (Beijing). I also included overseas visitors who worked with the company while I was there in 1991: writer and composer Liu Sola (London), multimedia artist Ping Chong (USA), composer Qu Xiaosong (USA), performance artist Steven Hall (New York) and lighting designer Tina McHugh (London).

12 Crapanzano is Chair of Comparative Literature and Anthropology at City University of New York.
communicate more on a piece. We are also in a similar situation, seeing different cultures. So they bring with them similar attitudes.

Yung is more hesitant in his responses, more aware of potential accusations of xenophobia. Nevertheless, ultimately, he agrees, arguing that overseas audiences often attend Zuni productions to ‘appreciate the exotic’, that they ‘appreciate’ rather than ‘relate’ to the work. For him, the responses to Zuni in Taiwan are more potent than the responses on other tours because ‘they look at us in Hongkong as an alternative reflection of their own culture - they look at us as part of them’.

Mobilising the Media

Although Zuni could not be accused of staging controversies for the sake of publicity, the company consistently confronts government censors and more conservative elements of Hongkong’s arts establishment. When such confrontations occur, members, especially Yung who is an experienced tactician, certainly know how to use them to their advantage. The ability to mobilise the press is an important element of this. Yung’s attitude is that if a government body can hold a press conference, Zuni can too. And the media listen.

In 1990 Zuni gained increased notoriety through both the United States visa debacle and their inclusion of a male nude scene in *Deep Structure of Chinese (Hongkong) Culture*. The forty five second scene was forcibly withdrawn after the first performance at the Hongkong Cultural Centre, pending legal clarification by the Television and Licensing Authority (TELA). After viewing a video of the show, the TELA panel allowed the scene to be reinstated ‘given the solemn and serious setting of the play’, provided no members of the audience were under eighteen years of age (*SCMP* 13/4/1990: 4). This act of Victorian largesse received front page coverage in a Saturday edition of the *South China Morning Post* (14/4/1990).

Yung employed highly dramatic, emotive language to describe the incident: ‘The pressures exerted on us last weekend to change the show suffocated me. Now I feel we have broken through and established our right to create experimental theatre how and as we feel fit’. Part of Zuni’s agenda is to challenge government restrictions by forcing them into the open. For example, any modifications imposed on performances are always printed in programmes. Yung believes these battles point to Zuni’s relevance, stating:

The efforts to censor us proved that we were not just engaged in self-expression in a vacuum, ‘masturbating in a corner’ as experimental arts are sometimes accused of doing. We were touching on social taboos (*The Independent* 17/5/1990).
This confrontational stance frequently turns antagonism into a media event even when no obviously oppositional strain has been previously active. In 1984 Zuni's production of *The Opium War - Four Letters to Deng Xiaoping* received enormous media coverage and polarised the local performing arts scene. This was partially because the title of the piece was considered sensitive in view of the timing of the show - it was performed during the drafting of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the future of Hongkong. The politicisation of performances via their titles and their timing, the sense in which this lends shows an adversarial aura and provides a dominant meaning which viewers can decode no matter how abstract they find the actions on stage, had, by then, become a Zuni trademark. However, it was the Arts Centre's decision to close the performance down, after Zuni violated fire regulations by inviting members of the audience on to the stage, which provoked the greatest outrage. A spate of press commentaries and letters from the public ensued.

Difficulties began when TELA demanded to scrutinise the *Opium War* script before issuing a permit for the performance. The Licensing Authority naively asked if Zuni had actually written four letters to Deng Xiaoping. 'Not exactly', came the reply. TELA appeared a little mystified that there was no formal script and that the production was aimed, according to Zuni, at exploring social and metaphysical problems around the theme of addressing God, Father, Lover and *The Self* (*HKS* 21/8/1984). But they granted the permit.

Problems then become apparent when the Arts Centre, under new management, withdrew its financial assistance from the production. Zuni members stated they felt 'betrayed' and implied that the Arts Centre had failed to be 'unflinching in its vision' (Letters from Zuni to the Arts Centre 4/6/1984 and 12/6/1984). The press quickly began to give the narrative the form of a heroes' tale of beleaguered intellectuals defending Truth and Art from an assault by the Establishment. The *TV and Entertainment Times* (27/6/1984) claimed that the risk of an encounter with government censors 'appears to have played a part in the withdrawal of support', and went on to argue that:

Zuni and the Arts Centre are growing increasingly incompatible. The theatre group, while wilful and unpredictable, is developing into what the local theatre has needed for a long time - an authentic artistic movement that draws its inspiration not from overseas, but from the social and political conditions in Hongkong. And the Arts Centre ... is gaining a reputation as a camp follower of the Establishment. A parting of the ways ... is perhaps inevitable.

This suggestion provoked outrage from the director of Garrison Players, Harry Garlick, who could not agree that the Arts Centre had failed Zuni:

The Arts Centre has, as a matter of factual record, supported Zuni for a considerable number of shows over several years, often when the box office returns, and hence popular support for their productions, was less than overwhelming ... Furthermore, the Arts Centre is, in part, using funds that are earned from profitable, non-subsidised groups to make possible Zuni shows ... The more that goes to Zuni, the less there must
ill be in the kitty for others ... What is most dangerous ... regarding your argument is the extent to which it may create a climate in which Zuni comes to believe it deserves, and has a right to, public funds ... an occasional taste of the discipline of the market place is no bad thing artistically for any theatre group, however experimental (TV&ET July 1984).

The battle lines were changing. Art versus Power was being transformed into a thinly veiled scramble for arts funding under the rubric of Popular versus Elite. Eventually, though, the former narrative took precedence when the Arts Centre management dropped the fire curtain in after forty members of the audience had taken seats on the stage. The General Manager of the Arts Centre, Nicholas James, accused Zuni of being deliberately provocative. Zuni retorted that he was using the fire regulations as 'an instrument of power' (SCMP 22/8/1984). While Yung declined from going so far as to suggest that the lowering of the fire curtain had been prompted by behind-the-scenes political machinations, he did state that the incident revealed the staff's 'rigidity' and 'lack of regard for experimental theatre' (HKS 21/8/1984).

Great capital was later made out of this line of argument, with Zuni proposing training workshops to create better understanding between Arts Centre staff and performers to help defuse 'authoritarian and patriarchal attitudes' (Letter from Zuni to the Arts Centre 21/8/1984). Things were shifting again; bureaucratic inflexibility was being pitted against creative souls with Zuni benevolently offering to assist in translating between the two camps.

For some members of the audience, the dispute was almost cathartic - 'I didn't know what gave me the courage, but I threw myself under the safety curtain to stop it reaching the ground'. Any accusations of Zuni being self-indulgent were swamped by accusations that the Arts Centre management were 'outraged by their [own] impotence' (SCMP 26/8/1984).

One remarkable feature of this controversy was the degree to which Zuni's self-documentary tendencies gave them greater authority. Armed with a video recording of the events and detailed notes of all meetings and conversations with Arts Centre staff, Zuni consistently maintained the upper hand in the dispute. They were simply better organised. The other remarkable aspect is the way in which something so seemingly minor became so overblown and here the most feasible explanation is 1997. Without the fear that 'one country, two systems' will fail to live up to its promise, without the concerns over curtailment of freedom of speech in the Special Administrative Region, the potential ramifications of every action would not be so seriously taken.

While Zuni gained a great deal of press coverage and elicited fierce audience loyalty as a result of this incident, the Arts Centre terminated their patronage of the company (Letter from Nicholas James to Zuni 22/8/1984). This prompted the establishment of the Causeway Bay premises. David Yeung described the incident as having a consciousness raising effect on members, a final push in the direction of becoming 'an experimental group and not a
conventional group in the Hongkong cultural field', a consolidation of their identity as fighters for freedom.

Engaging the Audience

Zuni's placement of themselves as practicing an autonomous 'high' art in opposition to companies given over to the ideological reproduction of society, their pursuit of originality and denigration of conformism, have resulted in accusations of having an 'insulting disregard for the audience' (SCMP 27/12/1985), of staging a 'confrontation' between performers and spectators (Tsin Pao 28/6/1988). Many company members take the somewhat elitist view that the masses seek distraction whereas true art demands concentration from the viewer. In their 1991 application for a seeding grant Zuni listed as one of its objectives 'serving' the audience in a more positive manner in contrast to merely 'entertaining' the community (ASG(D) 1991: 1).

Zuni members express this viewpoint in a variety of ways. One woman said to me that Hongkong Repertory Company was 'not no good, just traditional'; that 'most of their performances are just the same', 'just to make you laugh.' Mathias Woo articulated the same sentiment in a more formal fashion:

I think most of the audience in Hongkong is very pseudo. They just look at the form. Chinese Opera is more geared towards entertainment. Arts in China tends to be of a decorative nature. It is designed to entertain and please rather than ask questions about society. Artists are either supporting the power structure or working for the rich or just indulging themselves. There is a possibility that art can become a tool to ask questions rather than a decorative thing. Modernisation shouldn't mean standardisation. It should mean everyone can become independent. It's just an idealistic thing but Chinese art can never achieve this. It's so decorative. People try to write one thousand characters on a bean. It's meaningless.

Despite the comic exaggerations, I think it is telling that Woo here aims his critique at Chinese tradition, that he automatically places Zuni's work in an adversarial relationship to arts in the Mainland. Yung is more balanced in his public statements:

There are two kinds of performing arts. One kind belongs to the museum which we can all go to and appreciate. It is like looking at porcelain: a summary of our history, our background. The other kind is actually moving, going on, expanding, relating, developing. I think I am more interested in the second, although I can see that the first is important (Hackett 1990: 33).
If Yung tactfully suggests ossification in Chinese and Western tradition, placing himself as part of a movement towards innovation, Lam, with typical confidence, at one time suggested that the response of audiences was, to a certain extent, irrelevant. In a newspaper interview he had the following statement attributed to him: ‘Unlike other commercial groups which have to pander to the audience’s tastes in order to secure a good box office, we are a sponsored group and therefore we can stage our performances in any way we feel like regardless of whether people understand them or not’ (SCMP 4/9/1986). Yung is less careless in his characterisations but feels vehemently that his company embodies a genuine concern for their public. Speaking to me about a time when he was working with professional performers in Hongkong, he argued that:

most of them just look at it as coming on and doing your song and dance bit and just go home ... And they usually criticise me for not caring about the audience. I think they were totally wrong. These are the people who couldn’t care less about the audience. They are the ones who are cheating the audience all the time. They were selling their trade.

Obviously there is a tension operating here between Zuni’s belief that they are respecting and caring for audiences and the perception of others that this elitism is alienating. Certainly the company has gone to great lengths to try and ‘civilize’ the public into their preferred values and to sustain their attachment to these values (see Verdery 1991: 198). And if members’ statements show a remarkable consistency in this regard, giving their opinions the shape of prefabricated formulae (see Bourdieu 1984: 432,433) it is partially because this attitude attracted them towards Zuni in the first place, and partially because many take their cues from Yung’s opinions. He is both teacher and father figure in their own journeys towards the formulation of an original aesthetic.

Frequently audiences do dislike Zuni productions. Some, though, while not objecting to the ‘prostitution’ of entertainment, find an almost masochistic pleasure in their own bewilderment. Witness these meanderings from Zheng Jingming in the Weekend Herald (3/7/1988):

If you are not perplexed after you watch Zuni’s performance, I would feel worried. The feeling of being perplexed proves that you have tried to, though failed to, find the answer. This is the normal reaction of normal people. That you feel you know the answer could mean that either you are above worldly considerations or you are dreaming during the performance. It is, in fact, a self-persecution to watch Zuni’s performances. You have to enter a state of depression, constantly wrestling with your own thinking, trying to interpret the successive symbols ... Faced by Zuni’s obscure ideas it is natural that we are perplexed, or even angry, feeling that we have bought two difficult hours with our own money.

A few days ago after I finished watching Zuni’s The Decameron, my ears were filled with the audience’s complaints ... Zuni’s performance appeared to bring a nightmare to the audience. Relief came only after the show. What the hell does Zuni’s performance
want to say? There would be no answer if you insisted on asking Zuni ... Therefore quite a number of drama critics are of the opinion that Zuni's attitude has distanced itself from the folk. It is destructive, rather than constructive.

This kind of criticism reflects only the critics mentality. They regard the audience as being three years old. To be honest, those soap-opera-type of dramas can only dull the audience. An approach like 'this story teaches us that ... ' can only raise up a lazy audience.

Though the account is ambivalent, it demonstrates a willingness to accept Zuni's elusive pedagogy, an admiration for the discipline of their abstractions. Ironically, I think that this appreciation of Zuni's instruction is much greater in the Chinese language press because, while the content may be vague, the attitude has affinities with socialist philosophies of art and performance as educational tools. This notion also has some currency in the West but seems to be more readily accepted by Zuni audiences than might be expected elsewhere. The genuineness of people's desire to understand and to be taught is part of an acceptance of a marked pedagogical strain in contemporary Chinese artistic policy. And, in the Chinese language press, the circulation of these ideas, affects reviewers whether they write for Taiwanese, Mainland or independent publications. Ceasing to be a particular theory professed only in mainland China, the value of a distinctly pedagogical artistic practice has so affected language, ideas and reality that it has become a constitutive part of the Hongkong cultural landscape.

However, another critic of the same production, while indicating the same genuine quest for comprehension, believes he fails precisely because the form is too Western, too modern:

This is the second time I have gone to a Zuni performance. The first time I watched October at the Sha Tin Town Hall. After the performance, several ladies asked me about my impressions. I simply said, 'I don't understand'. An old hand of the drama circle said: 'You will understand more if you watch Zuni performances more often'.

Yesterday, I went again to a Zuni performance. Still I failed to understand. Fortunately I met a very famous figure in the field of performing arts. He told me: 'This type of drama has become very popular in the United States. It is the avant-garde type'. I am still very perplexed. Maybe I am too old-fashioned.

I did not want to give up. I must be able to find someone among the audience who could understand. While I was looking around, Mr Xu Guanglin came along with several young men. I dragged him out, asking: 'What does this drama mean? 'Oh, we are just discussing that. Let's have something to drink first', said Mr Xu.

We sat in a restaurant for two hours. We raised many questions. Several times we thought we could not continue the discussion. One young man read through the whole synopsis. He stopped to have some cold lemon juice, then said: 'I am confused more as I read more. ... It is not written for a secular man like me (Zhu Ke The Mirror 1984).
If Zuni aim to imbue an attitude of questioning, in this instance they certainly succeeded. One might note, though, that what is being questioned is the methodology of Zuni rather than current social circumstances in Hongkong. In this sense, the company could be described as creating a disposition towards doubt which partially rests on the instability of attraction/repulsion to critiques addressed to Hongkong Chinese couched in what is perceived to be a Western form.

Of course, critics are a particular case and most tend to admire Zuni, particularly after their overseas touring. Many are in awe. One dance critic I was attending Cantonese language classes with was too terrified to review a Zuni production. The mythos had grown around the company that they were not interpretable, particularly to foreigners. Some react negatively to this ‘off-limits’ quality - the most vicious attacks I have read were published in English language newspapers. I have already given some examples of these vilifications but the following will serve to jolt the reader’s memory - ‘boring, cold, authoritarian ... rich kid’s aloof play’ (Winterton, SCMP 21/9/1988) or, rather more absurdly, ‘Zuni performers were like characters out of Roger Corman’s movie Night of the Living Dead ... Everything was below a threshold of discernible stimuli’ (Borek, HKS 1/5/1991). A number of issues and neuroses are played out in these critical commentaries. If Chinese critics sometimes feel they do not understand Zuni’s productions because they are too Western, Western critics fear they lack understanding because they are too Chinese. There is an element of resentment here, common to many expatriate discourses in Hongkong. But there is also a counter strategy of claiming superior knowledge of ‘avant-garde’ performing arts, of suggesting that Zuni have appropriated something which is not rightfully theirs and which, being Chinese, they do badly anyway.

Critics everywhere have a fundamental role in producing legitimate classifications of artistic value. In Hongkong, however, this role is somewhat attenuated. Critics cannot make or break a show because productions simply do not run for long enough. Even six performances would be a lengthy season. Reviews do not generally appear until a few days after opening night and audiences thus must decide whether to buy a ticket prior to the publication of a review. In the long term, though, critics do form the basis for the recognition of performing groups and for the further accumulation of their cultural authority (see Verdery 1991: 189). The series of properties which critics who dislike Zuni’s work pick out – pretentiousness, tedium, obscurity – reappear in the reviews of those supportive of the company but here the negatives become positives – enlightening, experimental, profound. Each of the critics located at either extreme can essentially recycle what the critics on the other side would say by praising what is stigmatised, or stigmatising what is praised, by their opponents (see Bourdieu 1984: 235,469). Zuni have managed to sidestep this process to some extent through their ‘political’ reputation and their handling of specific controversies. This gives them an advantage over other local performing...
arts companies because they have largely managed to create and control their own media profile based on specific interventions that are deemed newsworthy.

I would now like to consider audience responses to Decameron to give some idea of the reactions of people without a distinct professional interest in Zuni performances. The following comments are culled from forty three assignments written about the show as part of an 'experiencing architecture in the performing arts' project undertaken by Hongkong University students. This group is not typical in some mythical average Mr and Mrs Wong sense. Their interest in the performance is by definition extreme - they have been forced to reflect on and analyze the production as part of their assessment criteria. On the other hand, Zuni audiences are largely young Hongkong Chinese, many of them students. Some older 'intellectuals' or lost tourists attend but there remains a large middle class elite who, despite the publicity, are not even aware of Zuni's existence. The simple act of seeing one of the company's performances has an oppositional element. They are cult knowledge. In this regard, the opinions of these university students are fairly representative of the range of responses experienced by knowing spectators.

Roughly twenty per cent of these responses were negative or critical. A couple of students complained that they could not 'find any message'. One suggested that there was a deliberate attempt to widen the gap between actors and audience and that the director was trying to 'trick' viewers. Another praised Zuni's style but felt that their 'deliberate abstractionism' was 'annoying'. Aside from the issue of abstraction, complaints focussed on obscenity, particularly on performers wearing underwear and on women in the production swearing. This was felt to be 'rude' and 'ugly'.

The vast majority of responses, however, were positive. Those who liked it were very specific about the reason for their approval – heterogeneity and the refusal of precise meaning, the demand for thinking and for questioning, were valued. A few examples will suffice:

Zuni Icosahedron is a fresh thing to me. This is my first contact with their performances. Looking at this kind of performance is not like seeing films in the cinema. Actually, we have to expend great effort in seeing and experiencing what the performance is going to give us ... The performance requires the audience to have a basic knowledge which includes academic knowledge, social awareness and so on. Once you have this basic knowledge, they will bring different aspects of problems to you. You may get an answer or you may get a lot of questions in order to help you think of the problem thoroughly ... the performance continues doing this even after it has finished ... This is a break from tradition and has a really strong impact on the audience.

or

After seeing the play I think it is unnecessary to discuss its content. It would be meaningless to analyse or explain the ideas of the play if we just picked out some sections and tried to understand them ... The main theme of the play is trying to initiate our thinking. Therefore the meaning is different for different people, and much
depends on one's perception and background. The role of the actors is to excite our emotions. The director leaves the argument to you ...

or

Unlike other plays, The Decameron does not aim to tell a story but tries to help or guide you to form your own story. The playwright is providing materials (sound, scene and words), which together with materials already in your mind (experience and imagination), arouse your thinking, remind you of your past or form new experiences in your mind. He acts as a thinking arouser.

Thus recipients of Zuni performances discover that the manner of appropriating intellectual objectifications that has been formed by the watching of other cultural products – popular or elite – is inappropriate to the present object. This refusal to provide a coherent narrative or a specific meaning is experienced as a shock and, for many, the shock is welcomed. One student went so far as to write: ‘Zuni believes in freedom and democracy, they want to release us from the chains of daily life. Through a stage of no limitation, they opened our minds and woke us from mass hypnosis’.

The difficulty with this shock is that it is so nonspecific. In fact, as Burger (1984: 80) has pointed out in relation to avant-garde practices, this provocation frequently strengthens existing attitudes because it provides them with a blank slate to manifest themselves. Yung has alluded to this problem:

People are always trying to categorise Zuni. People who stand to our right call us left and people who stand to our left call us right. When we use the Taiwanese national anthem in Romance of the Rock, they say we are anti-Taiwan but when we went to perform in Taiwan, they say we were anti-China (SCMP 1/5/1987).

To return to Decameron, the interpretations of most students were prompted by specific contemporary interests. Many viewed it rather broadly as a tale about modernity, alienation and the ‘tragedy’ of city life. One young woman argued that the production represented ‘the unbearable dullness of being’, ‘the broken and shattered images of the modern world’, ‘paradise lost’. Others agreed and found their answers in an advocacy of a moving away from ‘careless and indecent lives’, a rejection of ‘pluralism and atheism’, a reassertion of conservative morality and religion. Some remained emotive, sentimental, without proffering a solution, asking ‘What is Love? Do you understand your mate who sleeps beside you every night? Are you loving a human or a body?’

Those who did not identify the piece as dealing with ‘modernity’ or a broad category of ‘city life’ made connections between the action on stage and contemporary Hongkong. For instance, one student wrote:

Decameron reflected a lot of the actual circumstances of the colony now. The most salient were people taking away their chairs, chaotic sexual relationships and the sense
of unrest. These scenes were probably showing the emigration impact on Hongkong, how Hongkong people view sex and the influence that may be brought by the Communist government.

Another similarly remarked that the production ‘reflects the state of chaos and confusion in Hongkong’, that the drama ‘displays and interprets current issues’ in the territory including the schooling system, emigration, illegal immigration, uncertainty about the future and ‘open sex’. On a more humorous note, a different response compared the ending of Decameron with ‘the 1997 problem’ in that ‘nobody knew whether the play had finished or not and everybody had to make a choice whether to stay’.

The most strident expression of political views was reserved for those students who viewed the performance as an attack on Chinese Communism, finding a consolidation of their own opinions within the stage action. Zuni’s stylistic preference towards performing rather than acting was therefore taken as a representation of ‘uncommunicative, suspicious and equal’ people living ‘under a communist classless society’. A performer holding a portrait of Marx while falling symbolised ‘the degeneration of Marxism’.

A final quotation gives a clear indication of the ways in which audiences generate these applications, finding concrete affirmation of their own viewpoints within a seemingly neutral, or at least labile, stage scene:

The most interesting section was when someone said ‘hello’ for a long time but no one answered, they were just told to keep on waiting. Then the actor asked why the audience was in the dark. This scene had three meanings: 1. Many people question Communism but receive no answer; 2. This represented the low efficiency of the Chinese Communist government; 3. The difficulties in communication between the Hongkong and Chinese governments. Many Hongkong people feel that the Mainland government is very mysterious. Before the end of the performance, there were two boys throwing a ball between them and the rest. The performers took off their clothes except their underwear. This meant that at the end of the colony age of Hongkong, the British government has given up all her responsibility towards us and also that Hongkong people exposed their real faces, leaving Hongkong with all the wealth and knowledge which they obtained here.

For this audience sample Zuni performances are far from being an undifferentiated chaos. There are nodal points, clearer or darker areas, solidifying potential meanings. Some gain a sense of empowerment from the very freedom of interpretation that productions allow, questioning their life praxis. Others latch on to specificities to reinforce previously held opinions and pre-show publicity around Zuni ensures that this buttressing takes the form of critiques of China and/or Britain and/or Hongkong depending on the sympathies of the viewer.

This ability of Zuni productions to mean all things to some people has been noted by academics. Fine Arts lecturer, David Clarke (1990), finds an analogue for the praxis of deconstruction in Zuni’s theatrical praxis. Zuni is undoing the
theatre of representation in the way that deconstruction is the undoing of metaphysical closures. Some commentators are apt to exaggerate Zuni’s effect in an almost apocalyptic manner. Stephen Chan (1990), from the English Department of the Chinese University of Hongkong, breathlessly declaims that Zuni’s success ‘would have to involve the radical reordering not only of the fundamental relationships between culture and politics for a metropolis like Hongkong, but also of the respective fields of action/discourse delimited by the cultural and political practices of the Hongkong people in the face of the difficult times ahead, towards and beyond 1997’. He continues, ‘an aesthetics of difference is being organized here on the alternative stage, which can only be integrally tied to the simultaneous cultivation of a politics of difference at the quotidian level’. Well, come the revolution anything might happen. And, verbiage aside, the whole question of ‘what revolution?’ or ‘whose revolution?’ seems to have got lost in the excitement.

But there is no denying that the impulse to search for a novel utopia is at work in contemporary Hongkong. And, for some, Zuni provides the vague outline for that new territory, a border of possibility. The vagueness is inevitable. Zuni is not in the business of marketing the type of conception of cultural identity which has played such a critical role in many post-colonial struggles. There are few invocations of uniformity, of stability, of continuous frames of reference and meaning. The cultural identity that Zuni promulgate is about ruptures and discontinuities, points of fragmentation, limitations and difference. And this sense of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’ (see Hall 1990: 223,225) is what constitutes their potency and their weakness.

Challenging the Establishment

Zuni’s reputation as a company of uncooperative radicals within Hongkong’s performing arts scene has been achieved in a number of ways. The press that they have received during international tours, the Arts Centre controversy, their use of nudity, the form and the content of their performances have all played a part. Most obviously, their direct attacks on the institution of performing arts, their mockery of ‘the establishment’, has contributed to this notoriety. One of the ways in which classifications of legitimate art are upheld in the territory, and adherence to Chinese and Western traditions rewarded, is through the staging of annual drama and dance competitions presided over by the Urban Council.

In 1985 Zuni entered *Sunrise* in the Urban Council’s Schools and Youth Drama Competition. Dialogue in the production, which centred on an exploration of the uses of arbitrary power, included directly addressed questions to the judges sitting in the theatre. These ranged from the fairly tame ‘Mr Judge, do you have any questions?’ to the more provocative ‘Mr Judge, have you ever
thought of who gave you the power and the privilege to ask questions?' The adjudicating panel was not impressed.

In a 1986 Youth Choreographic Competition held by the Urban Council, Zuni submitted twelve pieces. Two were accepted, in the fields of ballet and Chinese dancing. While the judges were expecting exhibitions of technical virtuosity, Zuni provided them with largely untrained performers who blended everyday movements into the work and lampooned the whole notion of 'dance technique'. Competition personnel and, no doubt, other entrants, suspected they were being humiliated. One of the pieces gained no marks because it was 'not a Chinese dance'. Lam, who choreographed the entries, explained: 'that was precisely what I wanted to question in my work – what is dance? To trained artists, all we did on stage was run out and pose in various balletic positions' (TV&ET 1986). In a later press interview he expanded this point:

Technique isn't worth a penny when it is used as a form of bondage. It can be very chauvinistic, excluding those who do not possess it. Technique can help you be more inspiring but we should be encouraging basic creativity (Lifestyle Aug. 1985: 46).

Zuni's belligerently alternative approach routinely inverts any negative judgements or criticisms and reads them as symptoms of failings in the sensibilities of others. Their avowed concern to democratise dance and theatre baffles and threatens others in the performing arts who dislike this questioning of the value of the skills they have arduously acquired, this undermining of the foundations upon which they have carefully built up their own cultural authority and claims to expertise. The dismissive 'it's not art' is heard as heavy punctuation to the applause of Zuni followers and the qualified approval of critics (see Jowitt 1988: 309).

To some extent, though, the company has now been incorporated by the very establishment they criticise. In 1989, for example, Zuni accepted an invitation from the Urban Council to perform in the Dance Festival of Hongkong. However, funding difficulties continue with the CFPA repeatedly refusing the company's attempts to become professional through their applications for a seeding grant. Small project grants are approved allowing for an appearance of opposition and a neutralisation of critique on the grounds that the administration is confident enough to allow the performance of small-scale provocations.

This incorporation has encouraged a change of direction for Zuni Icosahedron. Rather than placing themselves on the fringe of the performing arts scene and simply rejecting other practitioners within the field, the group has increasingly attempted to work within the boundaries of the current administrative framework and to push the government to expend greater resources on arts. To this end, Zuni now undertakes a lot of research work such as surveying the opinions of Legislative Council candidates concerning cultural policies in Hongkong or organising forums to discuss the role of the Urban
Council and the Regional Council in reference to cultural development in the territory. They have thus set themselves up as independent cultural commentators and reformists. The political thrust of this counter-surveillance is quite clear. Zuni members passionately believe that the focus on imported, highbrow arts encouraged by the colonial government deprives local groups of space and resources and that this stifling is part of a tactic to avoid political sensitivity.

The question of what audiences want is, partially, irrelevant. One member put it to me like this:

The Hongkong government is very political. Hongkong Repertory do productions which the government likes. That is what they call 'culture'. Hongkong people like their productions too but the Hongkong government has the right and the responsibility to develop the arts in Hongkong.

This stance is not perceived by members as arrogance. There is a genuine belief that they are on a mission to encourage social awareness. Official spokespeople for the company are more guarded in their statements but the pedagogical commitment remains intact. Company manager Gabriel Yiu, for instance, was gentler in his reprimand to the administration:

I'm not saying we shouldn't support the Ballet or the Hongkong Philharmonic. But mainstream culture is endlessly repeating the same things over and over — in ten years time it won't have really changed. The only difference in television, for example, is packaging (TV&ET Aug.6-12, 1990)

At times members do engage in direct political action. They collected signatures against the Public Order (Amendment) Bill when it was passed through Legco and openly stated their opposition to the Film Censorship Bill (SCMP 1/5/1987). As part of a campaign to raise funds in support of the patriotic democratic movement in China following the Tiananmen Square massacre, Zuni members sold badges with the inscription 'Counter-Revolutionary Group' emblazoned on them. Even in this case, however, there was a certain cerebral distancing involved. Yung described the badges as being designed to 'trigger heightened sensitivity and provide an intellectual exercise' (SCMP 11/7/1989). The language employed is not that of militant activists but a discourse of reserved intellectuals with a marked therapeutic accent.

Zuni members may share some political sentiments but there is nothing approaching political unity amongst them. Their basis for unity is, in fact, a shared view of the Other in the form of a part exaggerated, part incisive image of more mainstream performing arts groups, funding bodies and popular culture. Lam summarised this form of boundary maintenance by which Zuni Icosahedron sets itself off from those around it, especially other practitioners of elite performing arts:
The majority of Hongkong's Chinese theatre groups persist in merely translating Western classics. Maybe they think they have exposed themselves by playing Ibsen or whatever but I can still sense the feeling — from television, radio, everywhere — there's still not much like this happening. Even the younger generation who consider themselves to be creative, responsive and angry and progressive, don't understand that they are reinforcing traditional values. They think they are unconventional and that is the most frustrating part. In Hongkong you hardly see any ideas on stage (TV&ET Aug.12-18 1991: 17).

In fact, while Zuni members maintain a strict division between 'them' and 'us', representing themselves as stranded purveyors of genuine art in the midst of a hostile scene which can only offer commercialism and repetition, their allies are many. A network of relationships, both personal and professional, link the company with other artists. This became apparent during the 'Save Zuni Campaign', spearheaded by freelance writer Jimmy Ngai, when the company announced in 1990 that after struggling for eight years on irregular project grants they would have to dissolve. A letter distributed to potential supporters asking for funds was highly melodramatic. It read:

Admittedly, dissolution can be a strategy, a declaration, but is nonetheless a footnote to the environment — Zuni being forced to dissolve illustrates the fact that the current local cultural climate is only ready to heed the society's recognised/established bodies but immune against its alienated alternate sapling. The sapling, locally rooted as it is, can well be left untended ... to survive until the soil turns fertile. To survive.

And survive it did, with the assistance of support from celebrities including film directors, lyricists, publishers, promoters and individuals involved with numerous arts organisations such as Commercial Radio, the Hongkong Arts Centre, the Hongkong Arts Festival and the Hongkong Ballet (HKS 13/8/1990). As a result of this pressure, Zuni collected $125,000 from private donations and received a special grant of $129,200 from the Recreation and Culture Branch (HKS 5/12/1990). Although Ngai accused the government of indicating 'a lack of sincerity' in the small size of the grant (SCMP 5/12/1990), the drama was over.

This continuing network of friends and fellow performing arts practitioners is currently demonstrated by the numerous letters of recommendation Zuni submit with their grant applications. These letters come from a variety of sources. The company counts amongst its allies directors, academics, critics and representatives of diverse organisations including the Hongkong Institute for the Promotion of Chinese Culture and the Academy of Performing Arts. Despite the support, Zuni maintains an antagonistic mentality, developed over years of dealing with censorship and funding difficulties, even when it is unwarranted. The form letter Zuni distributed when seeking references for their 1991 grant application began with the somewhat defeatist sentence: 'I may not be a vivid Zuni Icosahedron follower myself ... ' Many respondents simply crossed it out and began again on a more positive note.
Preparing the New

On occasion, Zuni members express a feeling of inadequacy about their own productions, a fear of the social ineffectiveness of their medium. Mathias Woo suggested to me that art as an institution in Hongkong neutralizes the political content of individual works, saying that sometimes he thinks, 'Oh, God. There are so many problems in the world, in Hongkong, should I put in an effort to do a performance?'. Yung has also expressed this uncertainty:

Worrying about the limitation, asking questions, circling around day in day out doesn't help a bit as it's not going to lead us anywhere. And the stage becomes a cage. With only worry and questions (Programme Notes DNA 1990).

In an article on imagistic theatre, Davis (1988: 17,27,30) has argued that all performance art is seriously flawed as a vehicle for a meaningful critique of bourgeois culture; that, at best, what was once subversive is now merely clever and, at worst, opaque and elitist. In this concluding section I would like to contest Davis' view and suggest that while we need to be aware of the limitations of Zuni's disjunctive work, we also need to acknowledge that within the hegemonic parameters in which the company operates they provide audiences with other points from which to start, conjuring hazy outlines for new conceptions of 'Hongkong identity'.

Here it would be possible to argue that Zuni's style is emancipatory in itself, that its nonorganicity permits the breaking up of ideologies. But we do not have to refer only to structural principles and formal characteristics. Content is equally at issue. Zuni frequently use the stage as a source of counter-information about events in the territory, exposing repression and bureaucratic high-handedness.

Most importantly, though, the value of Zuni Icosahedron lies in their advocacy of a perpetual state of questioning within a polity which encourages passivity and paralysis through a combination of conventional Chinese formal constraints on behaviour which endorse the maintenance of social order and British colonial policies which, until recently, have allowed locals little say in the running of their own city. A tendency to accept current circumstances without complaint is now exacerbated by the continual exercise of considerable self-censorship in criticizing China, partly triggered by a fear of punishment and partly by a brand of cynical realism that avoids confrontation in the hope of obtaining future favour (Chan 1987: 21).

Zhang Jinman of Esquire magazine (1985) described the possibilities that Zuni holds for Hongkong:

Faced with the 1997 deadline, Hongkong is facing a crisis of confused conceptions of value. Hongkong people are used to listening, not to thinking. Decomposing reality into
various elements and then reorganising them can be helpful. It may help us to select a way out.

Zuni member David Yeung gave me an insightful description of the company's rupturing practices:

We are not a political group trying to put propaganda on stage but we do have a political consciousness that we try to express in a creative way on stage. We try to introduce an open-minded point of view, both for the audience and for ourselves. Also we try to talk about history, we try to talk about the environment affecting people and that environment can be Hongkong or China. We are not trying to propose propaganda but we are trying to open people's minds so that they can see. We talk about chauvinisms, we talk about the passiveness of people towards the environment, their country, history.

The form is a kind of revolution for Hongkong audiences. It is very important for everyone to see their life, the standard of tradition and the history of Hongkong and China. We are trying to break rules in the theatre and also in normal life, to show that we are not passive. We are trying to do something.

When you look around yourself you find that there are a lot of rules and traditions that bind you to not do this thing or that thing — morally, politically or intellectually. Then you will think more: Why are there so many rules; Are they relevant; Are they reasonable? Most Hongkong people are educated to be very passive because Hongkong is a colony. I cannot say that we represent most of the people but we try to go back to things.

Besides the fact that Hongkong is a colony, Chinese people are educated to be passive and quiet. This is the character of Chinese people — not being wild, not voicing opinions. This is the position that your parents educate you towards for many, many years. For Hongkong as a colony, the British are using different methods for making you passive. Both of these influences combine together to make Hongkong so different. This place is a borrowed place for Hongkong people. They don't know the future. They are just trying to make dreams happen in a very short time, to get fast money. In this environment you have opportunities, you have a good life if you work hard. Then you don't need to think any more about your rights, about why there are so many rules and regulations that govern you.

Yung is more succinct in his discussion of the same issue: 'The local education system forces everything upon you, making you memorize, and lays down a value system for you so that you won't challenge it at all. People say 'I don't understand' as if everything they watch has to be understood' (HKS 31/10/1989).

In the previous chapter I discussed the ways in which cultural producers bargaining for resources from the administration make claims about their own companies 'cultural representativeness'. But the quest for 'Hongkong identity' is not confined to a search for funds. There is a genuine feeling that society can no longer be clarified and guided by traditional schemata, Chinese or Western. This feeling was captured by Gabriel Yiu:
The Government invests heavily in classical or prestigious art forms. No doubt these are valuable, but they don’t belong to our place and time. They cannot form our cultural identity (Young Post 13/8/1990: 6).

Zuni’s remorseless destabilisation of canons is about creating an alternative form of representation, a new place from which to speak. Other performing groups like Sand & Bricks or City Contemporary Dance Company are also engaged in this quest. But it is Zuni’s project of reclaiming, reinflecting and questioning history and tradition for the conditional present that has attracted the greatest publicity and the most polarised responses. Their pillaging of tradition, their parodies and their allegories construct a hybrid Chinese/Western theatre/dance form. Tracing the original sources from which this hybridity emerges is a challenging intellectual exercise. But the essential point to consider is not these originating moments. Rather, we should recall that it is Zuni Icosahedron which has effectively publicised this ‘third term’, this interrogative space which allows other positions to emerge (see Bhabha 1990: 211) and made visible the hegemonic parameters of Chinese and Western tradition.

Although the defining characteristics of Zuni’s work remain difficult to capture, all of their performances are bound together by dramatic analyses of oppression and subjectivity, the intertwining of culture and power at the level of emotion and bodily expression – the loci where forms of domination become entrenched through being interiorized. What I remember most clearly from their shows is the incessant turning things over, knowing there will be no last word or easy solution. Their depictions of unspeakable closures almost return the viewer to silence, but not quite. And here, the sparse use of dialogue is necessary. Confronted by dominant cultures which repress the articulation of a specifically Hongkong experience, their struggle is, as Williams has described the emerging identities of new social groups, ‘at the very edge of semantic availability’ (cited in Rutherford 1990: 22). Thus they opt for the imagistic, recreating everyday movements and gestures occurring in daily practice. They are concerned with what cannot be put into words and this silence is eloquent.

Focussing on the function of silence in modern drama, Kane (1984: 2) has commented on the ways in which many post-World War II plays are distinguished by their ‘shocking retreat from the word’. He attributes the elevated prestige of the unutterable to the ‘personal and global disintegration that typifies our age’ (Kane 1984:180), to the need to express a sense of entrapment. Certainly, with Zuni this abandonment of words bespeaks vulnerability. It is as if, every coordinate buckling around them as 1997 draws closer, living in Hongkong has become a constant navigation over the fault lines of tradition. The body of work which Kane addresses (Beckett, Pinter, Albee) employs silence in a contrapuntal relationship to texts (Kane 1984: 17). Zuni, by way of contrast, employ disjunctive speech in a contrapuntal relationship to silence. The felt experience of Zuni performances depend on this quickening
incertitude of evocative silence in which only a promise of problematization is held out for the audience to grasp. As I have demonstrated earlier, Zuni members take the fact that there is no finished edifice, that what is encouraged is the work of potentially endless reflection, as a sign of their own aesthetic and ethical superiority amongst other local cultural producers.

Performances come and go but the project remains. People are encouraged to enter a state of permanent readiness and this preparation for the future consists of the attempted creation of a disposition towards doubt, an eternal questioning (see Hunter 1992: 354). The Hongkong imaginary which Zuni Icosahedron are constructing is not an image of life in the city. While there is a conscious attempt to find forms of representation which would be responsive to some of the diversity of social identities – women, gay men – active in the contemporary polity, Zuni’s counter-colonisation of the future is essentially undetermined.

It is not just, as Giddens (1991: 213) has recently argued, that emancipatory politics is a movement away from rather than towards and therefore has little flesh. It is a specific refusal to predetermine the new and a concrete belief that their performances will only remain lucid when not tied to an already established position about the roads that might be travelled in times to come. ‘Maybe our aim is to show things we can’t see yet’, confides Danny Yung (Orientations 1990). Zuni’s elucidations may take many abstract turns but they are inseparable from a political project (see Castoriadis 1987: 3,57,87).

This project finds its support in the current crisis of established Hongkong society. In the past, Hongkong served as the primary battleground for propaganda wars between the Mainland and Taiwan. The territory has now entered into a transitional phase which is characterised by redistributions of authority in the direction of a dualistic power structure presided over by Britain and China and by outbursts of social unrest (Chan 1987: 1,12,13). In the wake of these upheavals, many people no longer want to be told what they think.

In all of the above ways Zuni’s aims are exciting and important, indicative of wider changes at work in Hongkong. What they are proposing is a reformation of Hongkong performing arts at every level, aesthetically and politically. But it is also necessary to remain aware of the limits of their achievements.

There is an accent of narcissistic pathos colouring the opinions of Zuni members whereby the stifling boundaries of tradition and the search for identity on the part of a minority of privileged intellectuals is generalized as something that everybody in the territory is concerned about. The dimensions of the problems they are dealing with are enormous. Zuni are attempting to construct a unique Hongkong identity, to come to terms with history, to keep a divided company together, to avoid the use of highly trained professionals, to develop a new audience, to educate the public and to alter the economic structure of performing arts in Hongkong.
The group is too unknown to achieve all this, their performances will never be mana for the masses and they will inevitably fail from overextension. However, while I, as an academic analyst, may suspect that I am treading the slippery terrain of fantasies of radical consciousness, Zuni members and supporters believe that they are treading the margins of the possible and that the whole point of the exercise is the expenditure of effort.

The question here is to what extent a disposition towards doubt, an encouragement of questioning and hence of greater individual autonomy can cancel the effects on people's lives of the oppressive structures of the society in which they live. Yung admits to a cynicism about the political system and a consequent desire to use the freedom of the stage as a kind of last resort. His attitudes about the relationship between the wider polity and his own cultural products are difficult to pinpoint because he wisely refuses to separate the two, relying on the old metaphor of the world as a stage to articulate his position:

What's on stage is just as important as what's off stage. Tiny stages and enormous stages, political stages and historical stages, they're all waiting alike for us to acquaint, to stroll about, and to explore. Waiting for us to participate and experience ... What a stage offers is space — with less function/mission/significance in mind, maybe we'll dig up more unknowns (Programme Notes DNA 1990).

If Yung believes in anything, he believes that Zuni Icosahedron speaks for the future. In conversation once on the Star Ferry, he spoke to me about the unique cultural position of Hongkong, arguing that the impending horizon of 1997 now provides a source of continual ferment in the territory, an experience which is not a revolution but a 'condensed evolution'. He compared Zuni's performances to the types of cultural events that occurred in Russia during the October Revolution and in China just prior to and after 1949. Later he added:

The most valuable thing is not only that you have the drive to express and articulate your experience and to analyse and then edit your ways of presentation but also it is that you can always step out again and this is what makes an artist. Being a bicultural person is really a plus. Because you can switch from one language to another language in order to relate in a new way. Through that whole social process we learn faster, we are more sensitive and have more acute vision.

What is pertinent for anthropologists in the argument that Hongkong people are in a privileged position to examine Chinese and Western culture in a critical way, that the very lack of an established identity is an asset, is the invitation, the demand, to reconceive familiar notions of nationalism and ethnicity. The situation of being between cultures, identities, countries is producing its own mode of expression — unresolved tensions between continuity and disruption, between fragmentation and homogeneity characterize these articulations. These are the fractal patterns which we try to specify through
clumsy theoretical terms like 'syncretism', 'creolization', (see Gilroy 1992: 192) 'hybridity' or, more recently, 'discrepant cosmopolitanisms' (Clifford 1992: 108).

Zuni provide a very concise picture of the acknowledgement of the bindings of Chinese tradition, a recognition of the relevance of their British history and a rejection of nationalism in favour of an unstable and fragile notion of 'Hongkong identity' that has some roots in an ethnic idea, in that it primarily speaks to Hongkong Chinese, but is utterly disassociated from any overt discourse of ethnicity. There is nothing apologetic about this stance and the following comment from Edward Lam may help to capture the sense of freedom, of entrepreneurial adventure, that this process entails:

> We are entitled to borrow so many things from the outside because we don’t have this burden about being Chinese. Whatever we see we can borrow and turn it into something in a very Hongkong style. Like the way they make clam spaghetti (TV&ET Aug.12-18: 17).

In their excavation of disparate source materials, their presentation of bits and pieces of history, scraps of culture, in their silent gestures, Zuni diligently dismantle the authority of the master narratives of Chinese and Western tradition.

It is not my intention to counterpose cultural representation to some notion of 'real politics', though I am aware of the tenacity of the dichotomy. I take it for granted that movements for social change can work with and through cultural products and in relation to the world outside performing arts. The condensations and displacements which Zuni offer their audiences are designed to alter perception. But we obviously cannot predict how and to what extent for whom. Indeed, in the absence of any genuine party politics in Hongkong, in the lack of institutional foci with much independence from Britain or China, no dissenting voices in the territory stand much chance of becoming a chorus (see Verdery 1991: 365).

The aim of this chapter has been to demonstrate that Zuni's style, the media appropriations of their productions and the controversies surrounding them are historical. It is the effective presence of the future in anticipation, the subtext of the ineluctable and uncertain prospect of 1997 which forms the baseline for drawing new maps and Zuni inhabit this borderland culture area populated by Hongkong Chinese unevenly assimilated to dominant nation states (see Clifford 1992: 110), slipping between nation, ethnicity and identity in their repeated efforts to question the politics of tradition, of historical memory, of location, of the new.
Something Intimate

While my previous chapter concentrated on the stylistic attributes of Zuni Icosahedron, their public profile, the present chapter is an attempt to contextualise the company’s performances in terms of a more intimate arena. It is about the relations among those who create performances, the complex field of internal political interactions negotiated by individuals engaged in the task of producing representations of ‘Hongkong identity’. In part, I rely here on gossip, backbiting, innuendo and rumour. Yet the possibilities for such an interrogation were, in my case, constrained. To explain this I need to return to the beginning.

Danny Yung initially accepted my proposal to undertake ‘fieldwork’ with the company. When I arrived in Hongkong, people in the higher echelons of Zuni were aware that they formed the subject of my doctoral dissertation. Some were sympathetic, interested even. All hoped my work would be a potential source of future publicity. Many of those further down the rungs of the Zuni hierarchy treated me like a persistent journalist, with a kind of well-practised serviceable amiability. To all I remained very much a foreigner.

At the risk of degenerating into national stereotypes, I like to think that this had something to do with what Sun (1991:14) has characterised as a Chinese ‘Self that is more private (less exhibitionist) than the Western one’. Zuni members revealed little about themselves and rarely initiated a conversation. Of course, there were a few fondly remembered exceptions but I have no apocryphal tales of enthusiastic informants who ‘explained’ the inner workings of the company to me.

Clear distinctions are made by company members between Zuni and outsiders – there is a desire to keep the uninitiated at arm’s length. The treatment of the latter is dependent upon whether they are perceived as friends and supporters, established acquaintances or peripheral hangers on. Apart from a disinclination to discuss personal matters with anyone outside the company, many Zuni members, like other Hongkong Chinese, resent the privileges

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1 I am using the term ‘hierarchy’ to convey the grading, formal and informal, of this organisation. No implicit Dumontian contrast with the dynamics of individualism and egalitarianism in ‘the West’ is intended (see Appadurai 1992).
accruing to expatriates in the territory and tend to view all foreigners as part of an illegitimate colonial elite. These difficulties were compounded by my own biography as a married woman with a child and a dependent husband researching a performing group composed mainly of single men and women none of whom had children and many of whom were gay. Commonalities were not perceived, by either party, to be a strong point.

Caveats aside, though my chances of penetrating the inner workings of Zuni Icosahedron are nil, I know enough to delineate the general thrust of their internal social relations. Besides, I am being a little dishonest with my disclaimers. Having spent two of my teenage years at a drama school in Australia, much of the workshop/rehearsal process and much of the intense intimacy between members was familiar enough. It is also the basis from which my scepticism springs. If people writing about Zuni and people talking within Zuni kept reiterating that the company was non-hierarchical and collective I began from the premise that this was unlikely to be the case. This failure of belief stemmed not so much from anthropological certitudes as from my own experience of drama training as a painful, elitist and sometimes misogynist affair. The state of permanent self-critique and self-modification encouraged, the process whereby students feel that teachers are ‘breaking them down’ is only negatively remembered by me. What is termed in sociological literature about drama as ‘the disintegrative stages of training’ (Mast 1986: 36), I never reclaimed as personal triumph.

In mentioning this, my aim is not to discourse endlessly on my various self-fabrications or to demonstrate a spirit of Western confession over Chinese reticence, but to try to be clear about where I am writing from and the limits to what I can write. The point is to link the realm of representation with the objectives and activities of those doing the representing, both in relation to myself and Zuni Icosahedron.

It’s A Very Zuni Place

Zuni members view themselves, and tend to be viewed by others, as set apart from the rest of Hongkong society. The qualities which set them apart might be described as a kind of stylistic affinity operating across a range of fields – choice of clothing, music, films and so on. Overall, they maintain a belief that they share an orientation informed by their stress on questioning and

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2 I do not think this is an appropriate forum for entering into a long discussion about this but I might mention the ways in which female acting students are forced into intense competition over parts while males have far greater opportunities to play good roles; the belief that a ‘female destructive force’ motivated the actions of many unpleasant characters in plays and the advice that sexual assault had a positive side because one could draw upon such experiences for convincing ‘emotional memories’. These were some of the guiding notions of the drama school I attended in Sydney but may not all apply to other institutions.
experimentation. Speaking about a restaurant, Mathias Woo commented to Danny Yung:

Pia told me it's a very Zuni place – the whole idea of participation. You know, you have to keep trying, experimenting. The way they operate, it's like a salad bar and then you pick what you want. You need to mix your sauces as well. There are different kinds of sauces. So each time you can have a different taste. Shall we go tomorrow night?

The previous quotation points both to the ways in which the practices of Zuni members are seen as sharing stylistic affinities which makes each practice a potential indicator of a more encompassing orientation and to the ways in which ‘core’ Zuni members are responsible for moulding the tastes and choices of their less experienced counterparts by indicating the principles that should guide their preferences.

There is no deliberate pursuit of coherence here, no charter detailing methods for embracing the audacities of the avant-garde. As Bourdieu (1984: 28,77,172,173) and later Giddens (1991: 82) have argued, the construction and maintenance of lifestyles is influenced by group pressures and the visibility of role models. In identifying what is worthy of being seen or in understanding where it is worth being seen, Zuni members are aided by other Zuni members who constantly guide them and remind them with ‘Are you coming to Yvonne Rainer’s latest film?’ or ‘Have you been to that new dance club?’ An adherence develops to similar sympathies and aversions which, far more than consciously stated opinions, forms the basis for a kind of ramshackle unity amongst members.

Although many members have some form of regular employment outside the company, meeting for rehearsals or workshops only in the evenings or on weekends, most feel that the locus of their ‘real life’ is to be found within Zuni. Committed members may be involved with five or six productions in a year and each production demands a minimum of around seventy hours rehearsal. These are usually spread out over a number of three to five hour sessions per week. New Year gatherings are held, members invite each other out on free nights and come in and out of the company’s Wanchai office during weekdays. People spend an enormous amount of time together.

Such processes help to create shared histories of a kind potentially more tightly bound than those provided by family or associates in the workplace. David Yeung explained:

I would say that when you are sticking together for a very long time, you find that you have the same interests. Sometimes you cannot get close to people outside because you find they are so different – their point of view, their interests, their lifestyle. I don't

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3 Here I am employing Giddens’ (1991: 81) definition of ‘lifestyle’ as ‘a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces ... because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity’.
mean that we should be very introverted but it is a fact that only some people are very energetic to meet friends outside Zuni for these reasons.

Edward Lam confirmed, albeit in a nostalgic mode, this sense of a break with the wider society:

Zuni started off as a very enclosed, very stylized company. In the past people used to say ‘Oh, you can easily recognise who is a Zuni member and who is not’. I think probably it has something to do with the class system of the society. A lot of our members came from the middle class and they had some positions on taste, hobbies, references to everyday activities like cultural activities. So they are quite consistent people. They are very faithful and loyal to certain labels like names of directors and that sort of thing. But in the last decade this has changed quite a lot due to the expansion of the company.

Rehearsal master Wong Yue Wai said to me during *The Square* (1991) that Zuni were ‘very groupy’, adding ‘we would like to use this word’. According to him, many people join the company for a single performance and then leave because they cannot ingratiate themselves sufficiently with established members. With an ambivalent mix of pride and concern he referred to the ways in which those outside the company consider members to be ‘arrogant’, ‘individual’ and ‘elitist’. Yung demonstrated a similar kind of reserved pleasure telling me that there were rumours that all Zuni members were religious maniacs or drug addicts or involved in group sex. I never actually heard these accusations from others involved in Hongkong’s performing arts scene and assume they are kept afloat to galvanise a sense of mystique and unjust persecution that envelops the company.

On closer inspection, however, such assertions of shared origins and consequently of shared values, turns out to be partly illusory. It is, rather, a trope of discussions in which members labour to construct a counter-culture in which they equally participate. This trope fits poorly with another much flaunted publicity line; that Zuni is interesting because performers are drawn from ‘everywhere’.

Statistics may be of some assistance here. In their 1991 application for a seeding grant Zuni Icosahedron provided information on 35 principal members, 24 men and 11 women (ASG(D) 1991: Appendix A). Ages varied from 22 to 48 years of age but were concentrated in the late 20s to early 30s age bracket. Twenty one members had either tertiary qualifications or diplomas from technical institutes and seven of these were women. Thus, not all Zuni members are, in Hongkong terms, well-educated though the majority have received substantial academic training.4

4 In Hongkong, primary level education has been compulsory since 1971. Secondary level education was made compulsory in 1978. After the age of fourteen, when parents begin paying for schooling, where resources are scarce there is a tendency to educate sons in preference to daughters (Pearson 1990: 120,121).
As far as employment is concerned, the vast majority of members detailed were involved in what Bourdieu (1984: 359) has described as new ‘petit bourgeoisie’ occupations involving presentation and representation and the providing of symbolic goods and services. In the daytime established members work as magazine publishers, journalists, television script writers, freelance photographers, disc jockeys, voiceover artists and so on. No less than seven of the thirty five members detailed in the application are employed in design fields (graphic design, fashion design, costume design, interior design). Only six members described their occupations as being outside this area of representation and cultural production – an engineer, a banker, a university student, two teachers and an administrator.

In a survey I conducted during rehearsals for Scenes from a Man’s Changing Room (1991), a rather more detailed picture emerged of members’ backgrounds. Altogether there were twenty seven respondents, eight women and nineteen men, with an age range from 17 to 36 years. Nearly all of these respondents live with their families, usually their parents and siblings, although five men reported living alone or ‘with friends’. To my knowledge, only three members are married, two females and one male. None have children. It is partially this status that allows individuals the time to devote themselves to Zuni. Educational qualifications varied. A slight majority had completed some form of tertiary education (14) and the rest had attended secondary school.

The majority (21) were born in Hongkong, two cited mainland China as their birthplace and one came from Macau. Their parents were largely born in mainland China, although five respondents’ parents were born in the territory. Thus, nearly all members are first or second generation Hongkongese, born and bred in the territory. The 1986 By-census reported that almost sixty per cent of the territory’s population now fall into this category. Generally, these younger generations are believed to have a greater sense of local belonging than their parents and to feel more strongly about the future of Hongkong (Chan 1991: 1).

Employment is varied. But as was the case with the information contained on members in Zuni’s grant application, most commonly people worked in occupations involving presentation and representation – design, advertising and television production. Five described themselves as students. Two attended secondary school and three were pursuing a university degree. Four of those people surveyed were employed in administrative positions with Zuni Icosahedron. A social worker, two real estate agents and an engineer made up the rest of the company.

Members’ parents worked in far more traditional occupations. Fathers were described as businessmen, construction site workers, merchants, lorry drivers and owners of small businesses (a metal factory, a printing company). Some were semi-skilled, some skilled (e.g. barbecue master for roasted pig), others

5 A number of Zuni members react very flippantly to survey situations indicating, once again, a refusal to be classified. Some contemptuously ask if they can ‘make up the answers’; others tease with responses like ‘available’ to the question concerning marital status.
decidedly middle class (e.g. supervisor of cargo services, airport). Mothers were nearly all described as ‘housewives’ or respondents did not bother to answer the question concerning their occupations as they considered they had none. Exceptions were in middle class jobs – property agent, merchant, nurse, businesswoman.

1976 statistics suggested that 43.6 per cent of Hongkong women were active in the labour force. By 1986 the figures had risen to 51.2 per cent. There is some public recognition of these altering circumstances. In fact, shifts in employment patterns and other changes have given rise to a brand of urban humour which concentrates on conflicts between the sexes, known as ‘Big Woman and Small Man’. The chief proponent of this humour, Lawrence Cheng Dan-sui, explained the popularity of his ‘Small Man’ films and books:

Men used to be Mr Big around the house. Even though times have changed, men still hang on to their own self-image and relish comforts in their own kingdom. Now women are earning more money, and becoming more powerful in every sphere. Of course they fight back in the house (SCMP 28/2/1991: 2).

Despite these changes, and the uncertainties which accompany them, the traditional Chinese view that women should be confined to the private domains of family and household remains strong (Pearson 1990: 115, 123).

A number of members were reluctant to discuss their incomes but of 22 respondents to this question, 6 earned less than $5000 per month which is below the average wage. Most were in a more average $5000-$10000 wage bracket which, when pooled with the incomes of other working members of their families, places them firmly amongst the middle class. Only one, vocalist and film actor Anthony Wong, reported earning over $20000 per month.6

The indeterminacy of many members’ jobs, the grey area between being unemployed and being freelance, the elasticity of the technical and social definitions of these positions, means that most core Zuni members are ambiguously located within Hongkong’s class structure and there is a marked heterogeneity to the social trajectories which have brought them there. In part, pursuit of such occupations indicates ‘a refusal to be pinned down in a particular site in social space’ (Bourdieu 1984: 370), a desire to be perceived as operating within a marginal, unclassifiable, creative arena. Instead of an abrupt break between their paid employment and their participation with Zuni, people suggest a positive slippage between the two. Thus Lee Fungying, a frequent performer with Zuni, believes that it is ‘inspiring’ to have different kinds of jobs, that her experience in paid employment can contribute to the betterment of her activities with Zuni Icosahedron.

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6 Hongkong is characterised by gross inequality in income distribution. To keep wages low, the Hongkong government has intervened extensively in the provision of major social services, particularly in the areas of housing, medical services and education (Leung 1990: 71,80).
Partially, such statements are a mode of defence against accusations that members are involved in an insular sphere of intimacy, that their sense of belonging is predicated on a need to set themselves apart from an enveloping outside world. People point to the positive aspects of the amateur status of Zuni, of their familiarity with other social arenas in their daytime occupations, to underscore a view that they are characteristically interpolated within Hongkong society rather than cut off from it. This, combined with their Hongkong origins, gives them the legitimacy to comment on that society (see Giddens 1991: 7,97).

Old and New

Within Zuni Icosahedron, legitimacy is largely determined by the length of an individual’s association with the company. This can be expressed in a variety of ways: founding members as opposed to newcomers, core members versus parvenus, the self assurance of established members contrasted with the anxious hyper-identification of recent recruits. Joseph Lau expressed the privileges accruing to established members in terms of a discourse about ‘technique’ and bodily self-mastery:

Old Zuni members are quite sure of what we are doing. We can jump a few steps. The new Zuni members have to go back, to start at the very beginning. Let's take a performance as an example. How do we walk? How slow are we? How stable? Not everybody can do as they wish. For old Zuni members it’s very easy.

Because length of association is the usual criteria for status, age is one key to access to higher positions. Patronage can, however, short circuit the prolonged requirements for entry into the inner sanctum. Mathias Woo, for example, only joined Zuni in 1989 and is now on the Executive Board. He has a powerful patron in Danny Yung.

This opposition between the senior members and the newcomers is grounded in the history of the company’s formation. Zuni Icosahedron developed largely out of an encounter between a secondary school drama club, presided over by Edward Lam, a group of Hong Kong University students, the most prominent of whom was Bill Pun and Danny Yung. The encounter took place during a 1980 production titled The Road, performed at City Hall, which Yung was instrumental in coordinating. As a result, the school drama club underwent a somewhat drastic renovation and emerged as Zuni Icosahedron with old school friends still constituting the nucleus of the group. (During this formation, the Hong Kong University crowd split and, under the leadership of Pun, formed their own group which was later affiliated with the Hongkong
Figure 12: Zuni people. Danny Yung is positioned top left (Courtesy Zuni Icosahedron).
Fringe. That group phased out several years later after the death of Pun.) Yung also brought in some of his friends and the ways in which individuals were initially recruited into the company through either Lam or Yung creates the basis for sporadic factionalism.7

Joseph Lau described the kind of stylistic break that the Rosary Hill drama club underwent following Lam's initial encounter with Yung:

After that time we started a new direction. Previously we were doing melodramas, just acting the characters from written scripts ... We were very young. At that time we had a lot of emotions but after we met Danny we changed our form. I think we had talked enough.

While founding members pride themselves on the continuity of membership in the company, some are now ambivalent about the demands Zuni makes on their time and their careers. Attempts are being made to open up the recruitment process, with audiences being invited to fill in questionnaires indicating their interest in either technical or performing work with the group. But the usual avenue of participation is still mainly confined to those friends recommended by more established members. Dick Wong, a longstanding performer with Zuni, referred to this dilemma:

Old members have a sort of emotional tension amongst each other. And sometimes we are too close to each other. A lot of people outside the group criticise us for just fencing others out. But I think all of us have to face the ageing problem. When we first started ten years ago we were basically quite young. And we just went and did things – never mind whether it is working or not. But as you get older, especially the core members, we have other things to worry about like careers. It is just natural when you reach a certain age you have got to think about the future. The creative energies are quite different from even five years ago. We used to be more carefree. Even our physiques were better.

David Yeung reiterated these concerns:

This is the problem for our development. Because when you grow up maybe you get another interest. You have to survive, make your own living. That may take up a lot of your energy and time. Actually, I think we should develop some younger members. Or maybe Zuni can develop into a professional group.

I'm actually in a dilemma. This year I have been thinking a lot about my personal position. I cannot do two things at the same time, work in the day and work with Zuni. I'm planning to work in a freelance manner. Or I could choose another way and quit

7 I should point out that Yung was not actually in Hongkong when Zuni was established in 1982. He had gone to San Fransisco to produce the feature film *Dim Sum*. The group hurriedly tried to structure themselves prior to Yung's departure and he continued to give artistic advice from afar until returning to the territory in 1984. However, he was not involved with the day to day running of the company in these years. My point that many members came to Zuni via their connection to Yung remains valid.
While some older members are thus seeking to either professionalise Zuni or to withdraw from it, younger ones still embrace the indeterminate future which the amateur status of the company offers. It is precisely the fusion of dilettantism and dedication, the ability to treat the present as an accidental detour and to demonstrate to oneself and to others that their trajectories are neither planned nor defined, which appeals (see Bourdieu 1984: 141,155). Thus, when I asked Mathias Woo whether he would like to continue directing, he replied: ‘It’s not my lifetime ambition. It’s very spontaneous – if I have the chance I will do it. When you are treating your work as a means of earning a living then a lot of problems come’.

In the midst of these divisions between the easy familiarity and presumed knowledge of foundation members as compared to the perceived inabilities of new recruits, between the desire to professionalise and the desire to remain amateur, Yung attempts to protect the company from fragmenting. He stresses group accomplishments rather than individual contributions; he frequently meets with subordinates, encouraging their plans; he resists the elitism of some of the core members and is highly solicitous towards new arrivals. For most, it is trust in Yung which generates that ‘leap into faith’ which practical engagement with Zuni requires (see Giddens 1991: 3).

Nowadays Zuni members are recruited from a number of sources. Since 1985 questionnaires have been used to gauge audience responses to productions, with discussion groups being organised a few weeks later for those who wish to address issues raised by a performance (HKS 4/11/1988). The company also organises workshops in secondary schools. Sometimes interested parties enter the company through these avenues. However, it was only in 1987, following the success of Romance of the Rock, that audiences had the option of becoming performers on a more regular basis (SCMP 22/9/1987). As one member put it to me, the company’s production of October in that year signalled the beginning of a process whereby people from ‘society’ were allowed into the group. Before that, everyone was a ‘friend’ or a ‘friend of a friend’.

Officially, anyone can become a Zuni member. However, the distinction between core members and newcomers and, within the latter group, between those who successfully embrace the style and the attitudes modelled by their seniors and those who fail to come up to scratch, is such that many voluntarily leave. Tacit requirements are thus the real principles of selection or exclusion. In this way, the company avoids the brutality of discriminatory measures and charms the media with its apparent absence of criteria (see Bourdieu 1984: 102,162), its ‘democratic’ impetus.

People become Zuni members for any of a variety of reasons. Some are looking for friendship. Witness the following letter to the company from a form seven graduate of convent school:
I have been involved in school plays ... I have been actively involved in joint School Functions, the Catholic Society, a hiking group and choirs ... I admire the style of Zuni’s work ... I hope I could be involved in the future, even in a small role.

One suspects that this litany of good citizenry could never have destined her for a larger part.

Some are hoping for fame or, at least, recognition. The lengthy list of those members who are employed in areas of cultural production, presentation and representation suggests that people with ambitions in these areas see Zuni as their chance. With a belief that their talents are insufficiently recognised in the workplace, they attach themselves to Zuni as a different avenue of advancement in the quest for cultural power (see Verdery 1991: 207).

Those who stay all have a genuine interest in and respect for Zuni’s performance ‘philosophy’. Or, to put it another way, people cannot stay unless they publicly manifest this interest and respect. Pia Ho, an established performer and director with Zuni, described her entrance into the company like this:

Actually before I met Danny I didn’t know anything about drama or theatre and I wasn’t interested in it at all. Maybe this was because the Hongkong theatre scene is not interesting at all. And going to the theatre was a boring experience for me. This kind of theatre was different. It was more meaningful for me to be involved.

Ellen Yuen, a performer who only joined the company in 1991, structured her reply about her reasons for becoming involved with the group to emphasise the importance of Zuni’s orientation away from the dogmatic: ‘I’ve seen several performances of Zuni before. I like the way they perform. You can interpret it in your own way; there is space for you to interpret it’. It is these kinds of public statements which earn newcomers credibility with other Zuni members.

For those who remain, Zuni offers the gratifications that acceptance by an elitist group confers – aesthetic snobbery, a belief that one is set apart, a sense of intellectual vanguardism. It also offers a sphere of intimacy. Danny Yung captured these affective ties in a workshop record of 1988:

Getting off the plane from Singapore, I first came to see Dick [Wong], and asked ‘How is everyone?’ Dick said, ‘Vicki quit the job. Everyone is sinking in problems involving love’. So I decided to leave the workshop aside for a while. I have a ‘love letter’ to discuss. We can talk about love or love affairs. Under the topic of The Decameron we can talk about anything that is in our mind or forms the cause of our feelings. Anything like that can be developed into a beginning ... I’ll leave the love letter out of the records. It is something intimate anyway. It is like our theatre.

This search for intimacy could be construed as having a negative valence. As the territory approaches 1997, first and second generation Hongkongese are particularly concerned about their very uncertain, and therefore very risky,
future. An almost apocalyptic mood prevails. Zuni members are a part of those generations most inclined towards a sense of belonging in Hongkong and a sense of disillusionment forced upon them by anticipated loss. The future is not necessarily calamitous but it may be. Joining Zuni is one way of registering this potent basis for emotional disquiet. As one member remarked to me, some people who participate in the company have an idea that they are contributing to something that is ‘anti-society’ but they possess no firmer notions than this vaguely rebellious cast of mind.

It can also be positively construed. Hongkong people are crossing a vexed history back to an unstable myth of China. Caught up in a maelstrom of political events over which they have even no token control, some verge towards a denunciation of the tacit assumptions of the social order. Established Zuni members are quite clear about at least that aspect of their agenda. The affective ties they seek within the company are not a matter of narcissistic self-absorption but a necessary base from which to mount their ostentatiously unconventional challenge to explore what it might mean to be ‘Hongkongese’ or ‘Chinese’ when the anchoring reference points of tradition and place are riddled with the contradictions of current circumstances.

Everybody Has An Artist In Their Heart

One of the conundrums of Zuni Icosahedron is that while being a thoroughly elitist organisation they promote a firmly antielitist ideal, an ideal that Bourdieu (1984: 366), with his tongue characteristically pressing against his cheek, has designated the theme ‘of all heresies ... the ideology of universal creativity’. As previously indicated, Zuni is a company officially open to all comers and that openness requires the articulation of a view which happily embraces the non-skilled, which finds advantages in amateurism. Destabilising the circumscription of culture by defining hierarchies, querying the hegemony of the trained body and lauding collaboration, participation and collectivity are focal points of this flirtation.

Yung has been frequently applauded for his attempts to demythologise the performer. The South China Morning Post (1/5/1987) gleefully reports the following eruption:

‘Auditions?’ asks Danny incredulously. ‘We never have auditions. We don’t believe in them. Anyone can get on stage. You don’t need to be able to jump 15 feet in the air or to have perfect projection’.

Horn (1990) goes so far as to argue that the ‘radicalness’ of Zuni lies in its ‘collective work process’. She goes on to explain that Yung sees ‘formal
auditions as embodying an oppressive and elite setting of standards which fails to recognise the uniqueness and source of lived experience each of us has to draw upon', that 'anyone can act, anyone can perform and the work which is created will emerge out of that collective energy of each particular group of individual gifts, interests, and experiences'. If you are beginning to feel warm inside, so was Zuni. This particular piece has been reprinted numerous times in publicity booklets by the company. Hom had obviously got the right idea.

For Yung the ideology of universal creativity, the valuation of the amateur, has a particular history. I'll let him tell the story.

I was angry in 1981. I got angry once. That was a time pre-Zuni. I was commissioned to do a piece for the Hong Kong Rep and the piece was called *The Road*. It was originally called *Long March* but they forced me to change the name. They commissioned me and another friend of mine, Gus Wong. My original idea was that I would work with the amateur group and he would work with the professional group. The concept was to combine several groups together. And he had some trouble with the professional group. So I decided at the last minute to switch. So I took care of the professional group and he took care of all the amateur groups. And I started to rehearse with the people who were in the professional group.

And boy was I mad. Because they were the ones who made me cross saying that the script is overtly political, that there’s something wrong with it, that it should be reviewed by the political branch. They were the ones who up front were very nice, turn around and stab you in the back. And I got so mad because I always trust everyone. And people who work for me; I think the most important thing is you have to believe in them in order to work together. Because I always think people in arts are nicer people than most people. I mean I’m very naive in that sense. Edward used to say: ‘you are very naive’.

So I finally did several workshops with them. I tell them that I’m going to rewrite the script. And this time the script is going to be rewritten by them. So I ask them why they want to go on stage. What’s the purpose? What do they get from it? Why are they doing it? And what is the process? So it’s a long questionnaire – they have to fill in every single line. And some of them fainted and some of them disappeared.

I thought it was so interesting. But at that time I didn’t know that, wow, you could have that kind of power. Because I never believe in that sort of thing. Because I usually think there’s ... you’re never conscious of what power is all about. Only when you are dealing with people who are so power hungry. Suddenly you realise, wow, I could really make people faint (which is not my intention) but they fainted and they dropped out, they filed sick leave forms because they were afraid to deal with me. And finally I finished the script and they only read their own lines. Even nowadays some of them still remember.

I include this lengthy narrative because it illustrates a number of points relevant to Zuni’s present constitution and to Yung’s own mode of personal leadership. A loathing for conservatism, a demand to ceaselessly examine oneself and to demonstrate loyalty to Yung, an assertion of his own innocence in the midst of a profound ability to harangue people under the guise of granting them greater self-realisation, are all important elements of Yung’s
style. That most of Zuni's performers are young and untrained, with no
investment of experience in an established system, makes them ideal candidates
for Yung's pedagogy.

Here I am not trying to suggest that Yung is some Machiavellian or Maoist
figure constantly demanding self-confessions from his adherents in the interests
of maximising his own control. Workshops are important in Zuni; people do
value the chances they have to participate in productions. Rather, I simply want
to point to the ways in which Yung's frequently elegant rhetoric, such as
'everybody has an artist in their heart', desensitises observers to the methods by
which hierarchies and elites are maintained within Zuni Icosahedron.

While publicity materials and media reports about the company stress a
collective work process, individuals within the group are quite aware that the
dynamics of rehearsals and of the day to day running of Zuni are more complex
than any simple notion of collaboration and cooperation might suggest. Yung, in
fact, is particularly sensitive to internal conflicts among members and to
accusations of manipulation and favouritism. Nevertheless, he maintains his
faith in collective processes as long as he can continue to guide the proceedings.
Convinced of his own centrality and the necessity for paternal intervention, he
mused: 'I also wonder about my own role. It's like I'm always supporting on the
side. If things are lopsided I can really take some action and I know that it will
turn things around and I can get people back on the right track'.

Ideas for productions are drawn from the 'creative crew'; that is, core
members of Zuni. Generally, quite a loose structure is set at the beginning and
performers participate in workshops to explore some of the themes outlined in
the structure. This exploration can take the form of verbal discussion and/or
movement improvisations. Sometimes there is one overall coordinator and a
number of creative crew are responsible for different segments. Sometimes one
director is firmly in charge of the entire proceedings.

Whatever the case, performers know that their role is to realise the ideas, if
you like, the vision, of creative crew. Frequently discussions function as a form
of ritualistic agreement to maintain a positive orientation to the production.
David Yeung described his experience as a performer in the following terms:

The most important thing is not on the stage. It is the process, the rehearsal process,
the communication with the director and the choreographer. What are their ideas?
Why have they put this thing together? That is the most important part of the
performance. Through this pre-performance preparation we can discuss more, we can
understand more why or how the director put this thing together, what he wants to say.

By and large, there is no resentment from performers that they have little input
into the overall concept of a production. However, established members are
quite capable of being sardonic about the extent to which some creative crew,
Yung in particular, sometimes rigidly specify every minute detail of physical
activity in a production. In this situation, they feel that their experience and their talents are being wasted.

The tendency is for directors to be more specific in their instructions to newcomers who are assigned very simple performance tasks, such as walking back and forth, forming crowd scenes and so on. Generally, only established members are trusted with more complex stage actions. Yung's approach to new recruits is that 'whatever they can do can always fit' but he has no intention of sacrificing the highly polished, smooth accent of his work for the corrugations of free for all participation. Mathias Woo bluntly summed up the status distinctions within Zuni between creative personnel and performers - 'The difference for a performer is you just do whatever you are told'.

In fact, many core members of Zuni have either had some professional training or are actively involved in other areas of cultural production. A few examples will suffice. Dick Wong, a core member since 1983, received his training through City Contemporary Dance Company (CCDC). Jessie Pak, a frequent performer with the group, is a professional dancer with the television station TVB and is also a dance instructor with CCDC. Wong Kwansun, who directs productions, began his dance training at CCDC, completed a year at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts and has won a number of awards for his choreography. In the midst of the 'anyone can perform' rhetoric embraced by Zuni, individuals like these generally have to keep a certain amount of technical skill under wraps. Some polish is inevitable but their degree of expertise is not obviously flaunted (see Jowitt 1988: 322).

The expertise of some Zuni members is also related to the close interconnections within Hongkong between various fields of cultural production. Although, at the level of discourse, a strict separation is maintained between the 'entertainment industry' and 'high art' there is actually a good deal of cross-fertilisation between these camps. Performers and directors move between 'alternative' and 'established' theatre, between theatre and television or film or radio work. Joseph Lau provides a good example. With Zuni since the company's inception, he formed The Production Brand Theatre Company in 1986, largely concentrating on a series of pieces loosely based on Bai Hsinyung's novel In the Outside dealing with the gay community in Taipei. He also produces fast paced commercial feature films and is involved in television variety programmes as an image director.

Thus there is a profound tension operating within Zuni Icosahedron between their interest in 'cultural proselytism', that is in widening their performer and audience base through an ideology of universal creativity, and their concern for 'cultural distinction' (see Bourdieu 1984: 229), manifested in the much greater profile accorded to performers and directors with some professional experience. Their concern to 'democratise' culture is therefore both ambivalent and contradictory. Some are no longer even concerned with the appropriate rhetoric. Edward Lam response to a question I asked him about whether he found it frustrating not working with professional dancers was:
I would say Dick is very professional but he is not professional at the same time. Take *Scenes from a Man's Changing Room* for example. Some performers are good performers. Yet, if I can choose, if I can have some more professional people, like more capable persons or more versatile persons, maybe I'll just take them instead of what I had in July and August.

**Dialetics and Discipline**

For those without professional training, Zuni does offer various techniques for carrying out work on the self. At first glance, some of these techniques are not particularly arresting. Diligence and restraint rather than rigour are the defining features. One exercise I recall from rehearsals for *Revolutionary Opera* (1991) involved about fifteen newcomers walking, single-file, around a circular path. Occasionally participants were asked to alter the speed of their paces, moving faster or slower according to the directions of the rehearsal master. They finally came to a stop after about forty five minutes. At other times, newcomers paraded up and down the room while core members commented on their mode of walking, either verbally or physically correcting their posture or gait.

At one level such exercises are commonplace in dramatic training. Physical control and self awareness is being inculcated. At another level, they are part of a process whereby new arrivals learn to defer to the greater knowledge of their seniors and to publicly acknowledge their superiority. This also is commonplace. What is less usual, and more specifically characteristic of Zuni, is the degree to which boredom and the replenishment which hopefully emerges from that state is seen as the necessary beginning. Patience, in this case, is definitely a virtue.

Great attention is paid to minute details. Mathias Woo explained his attitude towards such exercises:

> We find it very interesting when different people just stand there. We look at how they stand. What is their gravity? What are they projecting? What is the shape of their body? Because when you look at the details then you can look at the overall structure and texture. Then you can see the real skeleton of it.

The intensity and minuteness of practical criticism experienced by newcomers testifies to the remorseless character of these performance practices.

This desire to uncover the real self, to render visible the bones beneath the flesh, thus involves a cultivation of bodily consciousness and bodily discipline. Self-control, conscientiousness, order, rigour, care are the bases of the aesthetic disposition preferred by Zuni Icosahedron. As performer Lee Fungying put it: ‘To do well is to concentrate’. The austerity which characterises many of Zuni's
performances is also a part of their rehearsal process. A sense of methodical determination, punctuated by teasings and flirtations between cast members, reigns.

It is not surprising to find such an emphasis on bodily praxis in a company which veers as much towards dance as it does towards theatre. Nor is it surprising considering Zuni's stage investigations of the relations between habitual patterns of body use and social identity, between, for example, being Chinese and kowtowing. There is a profound sense in all of Zuni's repertoire that tradition and memory are passed on in non-textual ways, that circumscriptions are sustained by embodied experience. For people to effectively perform the socially constituted body, they must first become aware of it. The workshop/rehearsal period is designed to make novice performers uneasy with their bodies, to experience them as a source of self-conscious awkwardness in order to force a fissure between the body they think they have and the body which they initially see reflected in the studio mirrors and which again confronts them in the monitoring comments of superior others (see Connerton 1989: 91,102).

This summary image of the self assessing itself in the act of anticipated performance gains greater force with a consideration of the gender parodies and inversions which are a frequent element both of rehearsals and of stage actions. When men are required to imitate women and women are required to masquerade as men, when people primp and preen in the exaggerated manners of magazine covers, it is a cause for hilarity which generates a strong feeling for the unending control that individuals are expected to sustain over their bodies in all contexts of social interaction, of some of the glossy absurdities of the daily staging of gender. This reflexive practice of the self is viewed as an essential starting point from which to mount a critique of the relation of bodily habits to the conventions and traditions which bind Hongkong people and gives rise to feelings of actualisation and mastery for those who have surpassed the awkward stage.

The techne of Zuni's discipline is thus provided by exercises designed to encourage bodily self-consciousness and bodily control. It is also provided by endless forms of self-examination and questioning which promote the company's own notions of dialectical practice. In Asiaweek (20/4/1984) Yung referred to this particular reflexive project of the self: 'Creators of theatre, like any other creative artists, should have foresight, enterprise and experimental spirit, continuously spurring themselves to become independent dialecticians outside the system while simultaneously self-revolutionising'.

With regard to the issue of genealogical appropriation which I addressed in the previous chapter – that is, the ways in which particular literary texts are used by Zuni as starting points for their productions – we saw how novels or plays are made to function as vague allegories for contemporary political and social events in Hongkong. Equally these political and social events can be transformed into occasions for the practice of self-problematization. Lam, for
example, is prone to lecture his performers on the importance of daily ‘democracy’ in their social lives as a way of aggrandising complaints about lack of participation or failures to shoulder individual responsibilities.

In a questionnaire distributed by Mathias Woo to new recruits during the initial discussion phase of *Revolutionary Opera* performers were asked to reply to the following: ‘What are your questions?; Where are your answers?; What are you going to do after you know the answers?; What are your opinions of the questions above?; Where do you wish to go?; What is your plan after you arrive at that place?; What will your reaction be if I ask you to scream right now?; Would you change your opinions of the above questions if I were you?; Please raise five questions concerning the questions in the questionnaire?’.

If we recall Yung’s account of his methods for bringing professionals into line during *The Road*, Woo’s efforts are a close approximation to the tactics of his patron. If people feel that all this is unbearably tendentious they do not say so. The questionnaires are received with a kind of nervous apprehension and dutifully filled out. But as Yung argues, workshops are established for ‘self-consciousness, self-discipline and self-development’. People seemed to be in the mood for intellectual gymnastics and readily identify with such edifying phraseology.

Zuni thus combine propriety with protest in their training activities. In a document which addressed the nature of workshops, Yung wrote: ‘If the workshop is only for entertaining and no development is made through it, it can only be called a gameshop. Rules are necessary ... We don’t need to be afraid of rules’. And the rules are that people learn to adopt a highly self-reflexive attitude through bodily training and through systematically problematising their experience and feelings by publicly revealing their own naivety or unconscious dependence on conventional schemes of thought (see Hunter 1992: 353) with the aim of becoming ‘independent dialecticians’.

**Such A Boring Question**

So far I have demonstrated that length of membership is one of the major criteria around which hierarchical differences are maintained, in the form of a distinction between core members and newcomers, within Zuni Icosahedron. I have also referred to the ways in which some kind of training or experience in a variety of fields of cultural production works to advantage people’s status, despite a very publicly expressed ideology of universal creativity. I now wish to turn to the issue of gender and the ways in which men are decidedly advantaged over women in significantly contributing to this performing group.

Traditionally, the performing arts gives more credit and status to the artistic or ‘creative’ jobs than it does to performers (see Wandor 1986: 28,29). Zuni is
no exception. Men dominate in the authoritative roles of directors, artistic and technical. Women are numerically significant only as performers and, to a lesser extent, as support staff carrying out administrative and secretarial functions. In 1991, Zuni’s executive board, which oversees all major company decisions, was made up of eight members. Only one of these was female – Vicky Leong who, at that time, worked as the administrative director of the company. Of a management staff of seven, two were female – Leong and another woman who has since left. All the ‘creative crew’ were male. It is generally these people who make decisions about new productions and have the greatest command over resources. Even in the area of performers, women were outnumbered; of nineteen major performers listed, twelve were men.

Zuni is somewhat unusual in that, with its minimalist orientations, less attention is paid to technical areas than is usually the case in other performing arts companies. Once again, though, the pattern of male occupation of most positions reasserts itself. Within a design crew of seven, five were men; the four members of the music crew were all men; within a video/visual crew of four, one was a woman; of a technical crew of five, one was a woman. Yung, as artistic director, is at the pinnacle of all these subsidiary groupings and the history of the company is often seen to be to his credit. Combine this with the informal lines of tension which point to Yung and Lam as the focal points around which company members express their allegiances and grievances and a thoroughly androcentric structure emerges.

This is not to say that women are unimportant within the company. Vicki Leong’s position was absolutely essential in dealing both with internal administration and with liaising between Zuni and ‘the outside world’, including funding bodies and the press. Pia Ho, who joined Zuni in the year of its foundation, has participated in nearly all of Zuni’s productions as a performer, creative coordinator or director. She commands a great deal of respect and is often the centre of social gatherings. One can think of other exceptions – Janet Tong, Jessie Dai and Millie Wong spring to mind as performers with high profiles.

Such exceptions, however, do not vitiate the fact that Zuni Icosahedron is a very male dominated organisation. People within the company categorically deny this. When I broached the subject with Danny Yung, he dismissively laughed, saying:

... it is such a boring question. It’s like people will ask how come there are no non-Chinese in the group or how come there are no people taller than six feet. I mean it’s all a portioning or a rationing issue. I really don’t see any difference between Pia and Edward as far as the sharing of resources is concerned or getting support for a project or getting support from me. But I have to be nicer to women.

Yung here uses the somewhat token example of Pia Ho to support the notion of his own distributive fairness and, by extension, the existence of egalitarian
relations throughout the company. The use of tokenism to discount the existence of female subordination in Hongkong is a common tactic. There are many visible female role models in government and industry. Of course, there is a direct correlation between their visibility and their rarity (Pearson 1990: 125).8

Yung also suggests that there is a certain naivety to phrasing any questions about inegalitarian gender relations in terms of statistical presence or absence. It bespeaks a kind of disdained empiricism. In some ways I think he has a valid point. There is something wrong with the simple insistence that Zuni Icosahedron is male dominated because men run it, since that objection depends on a reference to extrarepresentational anatomy (see Gallop 1988: 95). Once we accept the opacity of representation, the ways in which performances are not merely concerned with imaging the real world but with imaginatively exploring it, then the desire to equate all men with patriarchy or all male Zuni members with the perpetuation of female subordination, loses its appealing force. Certainly a strong theme in the company’s productions is a desire to investigate the constraints of bipolar gender differentiation. Indeed, the press has sometimes viewed their work as explicitly feminist. Thus a review in the South China Morning Post (4/9/1983) of One Woman/Two Stories described the production as having ‘a feminist line’, adding: ‘Zuni’s imagery leaves you in no doubt where its sympathy lies. One of the women stands at the back of the stage behind a long red cotton strip which symbolises the noose Chinese women used to hang themselves’. Indeed, the company’s whole articulated project of representing ‘minority’ interests could encapsulate feminist liberatory projects.

And yet I remained suspicious, continuing to bring up the subject in interviews. Women in the company generally skirted the issue but made it plain that they were not going to become ensnared by what they perceived to be a Western feminism that is both arrogant and gauche. Mathias Woo articulated a denial that was the most tortured in its concealments:

You are dividing it in a very physical way, man or woman. But I don’t think at Zuni there exists this kind of value. Most of the people in Zuni have some kind of feminine sensitivity, so I wouldn’t say it’s a male dominated group. You just categorise it in such a simple way – I have a male body. We don’t have that kind of mentality.

What I find fascinating here is the way in which a very established stereotype about the ‘nature’ of artists, which involves a more subterranean reference to the ‘nature’ of male homosexuals, is being used to delegitimise any enquiry into

8 Intense media coverage is devoted to a small group of appointed female politicians, including Senior Executive Councillor, Lady Dunn, and her Executive and Legislative Council colleagues, such as Maria Tam and Selina Chow. Overall, however, few women are involved in formal politics. Even the new political parties, such as the United Democrats, can only boast, at most, a 17.2 per cent female membership. Women are also scarce in the conservative traditional rural political bodies, like the Regional Council and the New Territories District Board (SCMP 18/6/1991: 12). The predictable parading of the few women who occupy prominent positions in the higher echelons of government serves, as Jaschok has argued in a letter to the South China Morning Post (1/4/1991: 10), to effectively flatten ‘the deeply entrenched structural and cultural reifications of sexual inequality so as to render lives of subordination and social positions of weakness a matter of “choice”.'
gender inequalities. I was being directed towards an etherealised plane of being considered far more substantial than the tedious politics of numbers.

This masking of gender inequalities via a tactic of etherealisation is not characteristic of all social groups in the territory. There is an indigenous feminist movement and the work done by numerous local women's groups, such as the Hongkong Council of Women or the Association for the Advancement of Feminism, is frequently pragmatic. Employment conditions for women in the private sector are currently a key area of concern as there are, at present, no laws to protect women from sex discrimination in pay scales, hiring and promotion procedures (*SCMP* 8/3/1991: 3). Overall, however, feminist concerns do not attract a high level of overt support in Hongkong.

Pearson (1990) reports that Hongkong women are systematically discriminated against in terms of a lack of representation in political life, concentration in occupations requiring minimal skills, little legal protection and the frequency with which they shoulder the double burden of work and childcare. I could continue this familiar litany about the ills of patriarchal capitalism. But it is also important to note that women in Hongkong often consider themselves, with some justification, to be better off than women in other parts of Southeast Asia.

The notion that Zuni people cannot be compartmentalized as either male or female because they possess creative attributes which surpass, or render meaningless, such distinctions tends to fall apart both in terms of their necessary participation in a wider patriarchal polity and, more specifically, in other areas of members' discourse. If pressed, a set of stereotypes about 'maleness' and 'femaleness' emerges. Yung offered the following:

Since the conception of Zuni I have found that men, if they belong to the minority set, tend to have more drive. And women sometimes tend to look for support ... And there are men like that and there are women the other way around. I think women have so much more than men. I'm talking in a general sense. Women are so much more sensitive than men. Men are just ambitious, greedy, they just see whatever is in front of them. They never tend to look around or look back.

In this account, men are endowed with the purposive qualities of drive, energy and aggression. Women are graced with the virtue of sensitivity but also perceived as weak (see Bond 1991: 46). Somewhat ironically, the latter qualities are thought to be more artistically productive. Yung went on to say that: 'There is an urgent need for women to deal with role changes and displacements and a dialectic way of looking at her being and I think all of these are the most important ingredients of an artist'.

A shift has occurred here. From an initial denial that men are advantaged over women in the company, Yung has gone on to detail, in a highly stereotypical way, the distinctions between men and women and, from that base, to argue that women make better artists because they experience the
contradictions of present circumstances in a fuller way. The original question is lost in the convolutions of flattery: if women are blessed with greater artistic potential why are so few of them incorporated in the higher status creative areas of Zuni? Part of the answer to this lies in the commonly held view that you have to be very aggressive to get on in the company. Women, by definition, are therefore excluded. The consequence of these stereotypes and of the tendency to etherealise politics by casting aside into the realm of tedious empiricism substantive questions about female participation is to ensure the continuation of a masculinised, hierarchical structure.

And part of the success and invisibility to observers of this masculinised, hierarchical structure is related to the position of gay men within the group. That gay men are believed to combine the conventionally masculine quality of ambition with the conventionally feminine quality of sensitivity leaves them with a persuasive claim on artistic territory. One woman in Zuni put the case to me that ‘most artists that do a good job are gay’. In general, the performing arts has been seen as a legitimate arena in which gay men can succeed and in China acting and male homosexuality have a longstanding association.9

In the midst of the same conversation, another woman laughingly complained, ‘Yes, they are all gays; that’s why I can’t get married’. This jocular interchange left me with a profound sense of the way women within the company can simultaneously feel excluded from areas of male homosexual camaraderie and admiring of friends who, within the wider society, are similarly disadvantaged rather than privileged by the constraints of gender stereotyping. Homosexuality was only decriminalised in Hongkong, amidst great public opposition, in 1991. Prior to this, it was an offence punishable by life imprisonment for consenting male adults in private to have anal intercourse (Law Reform Commission of Hongkong (LRC) 1983: 2). Police in the territory have, until recently, zealously infiltrated and exposed gay circles (Hinsch 1990: 163). Decriminalisation is part of a range of reforms being introduced in the hope of shoring up civil rights before the imposition of Chinese sovereignty.

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9 Precious Mirror of Ranking Flowers (Pin Hua Pao Chien) by Chen Shen is the most famous Chinese novel on this subject. Written in 1849 during the Qing Dynasty, it depicts the relationships between homosexual actors and their friends. The ‘flowers’ of the title are actor-prostitutes. During this time theatres or ‘pear gardens’ were also centres of male prostitution and visiting either a female brothel or a male actor’s house was called ‘holding a tea gathering’ (Hinsch 1990: 154,156). This text was invoked by the Law Reform Commission of Hongkong in its 1982 consideration of altering laws pertaining to homosexuality in the territory (LRC 1983: 16). This invocation assumed an unchanging essence of Chinese homosexuality as if one could readily identify the experience of modern gay sub-cultures with same-sex activity in the Qing Dynasty. Using Kinsey as a springboard, the report also argued a ‘sameness’ to homosexuality across cultures and time. In fact, in the past Chinese terminology did not stress an innate sexual essence, but highlighted ‘actions, tendencies and preferences’. Nowadays, fluid conceptions of sexuality have largely been replaced by the Westernised dichotomy of heterosexual/homosexual (Hinsch 1990: 7,169). For my part, I take it for granted that ‘sexuality’ is an unstable category (see Weeks 1990: 36,37) but want to point to the ways in which people do make conscious connections to the past in the search for legitimating premises by which to ground their current associations between homosexuality and excellence in the performing arts.
The official Chinese line is that homosexuality is a completely Western-introduced form of decadence.\textsuperscript{10} Although there is no law against homosexuality in mainland China, being gay is fraught with difficulties: public opprobrium, problems at work, police harassment and even imprisonment as a liumang or hooligan (Woodman 1989: 9,10). In Hongkong, too, homosexuality is generally highly disapproved although people tend to treat it as very much a private matter which both discourages the sanctions of explicit violence directed towards homosexual men in the form of ‘gay bashings’ and militates against any political agitation around ‘gay rights’.\textsuperscript{11}

**Paternal Intimacy**

Because those who participate in Zuni all agree on the importance of exploring the possibilities of creating a unique representational form loosened from the bindings of Chinese and Western tradition, one may choose to emphasise either the cleavages which separate them, as I have been doing, or the commonalities which unite them. Certainly, for most, a sense of complicity overrides any hostilities. This complicity is partially predicated on mutual participation in a rebellious project. It also has a less public basis.

I have already referred to the ways in which Zuni members hold similar jobs, pursue a specific lifestyle modelled by their seniors and engage in training practices which stress high levels of self-reflexivity expressed through bodily self-discipline and constant questioning. They have other things in common. Throughout discussions with members I was continually struck by the degree to which people separated themselves from their immediate families and, more generally, from more senior generations. Of course, such familial estrangement might seem to be inevitable when people are so wholeheartedly embracing an alternative realm of affective ties governed by Yung’s authority. The paternal intimacy of Zuni undermines familial authority.

This was expressed in a number of major themes that individuals frequently referred to. The first relates to complaints about the lack of familial moral

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\textsuperscript{10} Hinsch (1990) provides the most thorough rebuttal to this nonsense, demonstrating the very lengthy history of homosexual traditions in Chinese social life. He argues that homosexual practices flourished until this century, when such practices fell victim to a growing sexual conservatism aimed at strengthening the Confucian ideal of family and the Westernisation of morality which resulted in widespread intolerance (Hinsch 1990: 4,100,144).

\textsuperscript{11} In 1992, for example, Hongkong's first ‘Gay and Lesbian Pride Week’ was cancelled due to 'lack of interest' in the territory. Spokesperson for the organising committee, Mr Samson Chan Kamwa, speculated that some people were afraid to 'come out' but largely attributed this lack of enthusiasm to a feeling that broadcasting one's sexuality was unnecessary. No doubt, the fact that the Chinese language press gave little coverage to the event contributed to its dissolution (SCMP 22/8/1992: 2).
support for their activities with Zuni. People often stated that their parents did not like them being involved with Zuni but that they could not force them to leave or prohibit them from participating. Many times, this type of statement was followed by a clarification - parents were charged with a failure to understand their children's disinterested propensity to acquire experience and knowledge which is not directly profitable in the marketplace. Lee Fungying sighed:

Most Hongkong people are mostly interested in earning money. They are too practical. After finding out that I was going to perform with Zuni, my parents said: 'Oh, why do you go to do those things? You won't get any money in return'. That kind of thinking, that's their attitude.

Mathias Woo confided:

I have a lot of problems with my parents. They have very traditional thinking. They say: 'You should concentrate on your study; you should marry'. They don't appreciate what I'm doing.

Here, a critique of the family as a source of constraint and difficulty rather than as a source of support is combined with a criticism which posits families as arenas of traditionalism equated with merciless materialism. In this respect, Zuni members often endorse stereotypical accounts of the pragmatic, utilitarian ethos of Hongkong people in order to assert that they are part of a new generation which has more on its mind than money. These distinctions are, however, slippery. Zuni members also frequently use a dichotomous scheme which sharply devalues ‘old Chinese’ modes of behaviour when compared with either ‘modern Chinese’ or ‘Hongkong’ practices.

There is nothing consistent in all this – the construct of a ‘Hongkong person’ is disarmingly fragile. David Yeung demonstrated exactly how hesitant the terrain of reifications about ‘identity’ is:

I think I'm a very Hongkong person. Maybe I feel that Hongkong is my home rather than China. And I'm educated, grown up in Hongkong. I'm influenced by both traditional cultures. I can say I'm Chinese but actually inside it's not a very Chinese person. So I have to say I'm a very Hongkong person ... Maybe I think that I'm a bit of this and a bit of that. Maybe inside I carry most of the Chinese character. I think I'm rather traditional actually because of my family. But because of the influence of Hongkong society you are changing. But I don't really know what a Chinese person is ... attitudes to family, introvert, passive, not questioning, don't like to voice opinions and

12 Of the 27 Zuni members I surveyed, 18 described themselves as residing with their families. For those who specified, nearly all lived with their parents and siblings. Four responses fell outside this pattern — two members lived only with their mother, one with mother and grandparents and one had set up a household with her niece.
It will not have escaped the readers attention that this cliche ridden description of what constitutes a Chinese person is diametrically opposed to the values officially promulgated by Zuni Icosahedron - questioning, voicing opinions, being aggressive, flouting, or at least exposing, rules and conventions. And it is in this context that their techniques for developing self-reflexivity must be placed. While one might seem to be in the realms of any late 1960s or early 1970s account of the idealisms of community based theatre, the whole point about Zuni is that, in their self-conscious attempts to promulgate 'Hongkong identity', they view themselves as being provocatively unChinese or, alternatively, new Chinese. Whether they are contesting the perceived materialism of Hongkong or the perceived constraints of Chinese tradition, the substance of this novel identity remains irretrievably mercurial.

If people criticise the projects of the group, that criticism is instantly turned back on them. Thus if an audience member claims to be mystified they are told that 'there would be a reason for their disappointment that they should search for within themselves' (SCSMP 8/4/1990: 17). Similarly, if a critic objects to a production it is seen as evidence of his or her own problems. And if a group member complains that a workshop exercise is pretentious or unhelpful, they too are directed towards self-examination. This constant psychologising closes off sites of discourse unfavourable to Zuni and means that the internal politics of the group can only revolve around the public articulation of consensus.

This intolerance of criticism and the concomitant pressure for conformity might seem to justify a charge of authoritarianism (see Pye 1985: 50). Indeed, Yung is affectionately nicknamed 'the emperor', and Mathias Woo known as 'the prince', by other Zuni members. When Yung is conducting a rehearsal, he sits atop a table while others gather at his feet. If performers are distractedly shuffling around and become aware that Yung is watching, they quickly stand to attention. The choreography of his authority involves a display of presence at rehearsal, a relationship between the organisation of space and the stratification of social relations (see Connerton 1989: 87). Yung also maintains his dignity by keeping his distance from other Zuni members - he is rarely seen at informal gatherings and rarely participates in group exercises.

Yet, if Yung remains somewhat aloof, he is also consistently affectionate, nurturing and supportive of subordinates. To describe this as a form of 'paternalistic authoritarianism', an amplification of the Confucian model of the father as the ultimate authority in the family (Pye 1985: 185) is, I think, not misplaced.13 In many ways Zuni Icosahedron fits into the numerous accounts of

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13 While Pye has been accused of profound conservatism in his presentations of Chinese communism as an inherently evil force, his explications of the profound effects of long-standing authoritarian and patriarchal traditions on contemporary Chinese social life is, I suggest, highly useful in understanding some of the constraints which influence even the most self-consciously 'radical' projects. However, I would like to leave greater room in my analysis for agency
typical Chinese family businesses (see Bond 1991: 72-78). It is hierarchical and intimate with low levels of formal specialisation but high levels of centralisation.

While members recognise that there are distinctions between each other, most do not feel that these are oppressive. Mathias Woo summed up a more general sentiment that the company is actually less hierarchical than many other Hongkong organisations:

The good thing about Zuni is that when you have problems you can talk about them. Some people have more say, are more influential but we don’t have the same kind of hierarchies as other groups where some people are treated like God. There is a lot of freedom for people inside Zuni — artistically as well as in the way people can just come and go ... Noone is getting paid. Noone is getting any benefit. That’s good. It keeps things relaxed and gives people more space.

But if Woo values the room to manoeuvre provided by the amateur status of the company, and is disinclined to acknowledge cultural representation or ethical snobbery as a benefit, this is partially because Yung is vigilant about checking the elitism of other Zuni members. In the year of my fieldwork Wong Kwansun was choreographing a piece titled Decade of Zuni Classics. He made it clear that he only wanted to involve members who had been with the company for more than six years. Previously, he was responsible for a production called Genesis: Hongkong Version. Yung suggested that he call his new work Genesis: The Old Man’s Version. I doubt the irony was lost.

Divide and Confess

I want to return now to a theme I introduced earlier in the chapter — the muted hostility between Lam and Yung and the sporadic factionalism that this sometimes generates. I should add that this division was probably more acute during the time of my fieldwork than at any other period in the company’s history. Lam had just returned from a one year fellowship as resident programme coordinator at the Place Theatre in London. He had also been absent in 1988 as a recipient of a Goethe Institute Fellowship to visit Pina Bausch’s dance company in Europe. While he had kept in contact with Zuni, his arrival in Hongkong to direct Scenes from a Man’s Changing Room was a return of the prodigal son. During his period overseas, however, his status as an
independent choreographer had increased and his ambitions had begun to outreach the possibilities that Zuni and Hongkong held for him.14

Certainly Lam and Yung have very different working styles and the manifest divisions between them are partially related to performers preferences for rehearsing with one or the other. If Yung is an affectionate father, a sensitive coaxed who usually opts for having a quiet word with his subordinates, Lam approximates a brilliant martinet. He is less easygoing than Yung and more prone to probe into performers personal affairs, to encourage almost encounter group style revelations of the self. Lam described the differences like this:

Danny’s rehearsals have more to do with intellectualisation because they are about very abstract things. It’s like vision; it’s like ‘what’s the meaning of slow?’ My questions are more like: ‘If you had an apple which part would you like to eat first?’ Everybody can relate to it very easily or personally. Our ways of dealing with performers are quite different. I am more conventional but it doesn’t mean I am less caring.

The loyalty performers have to both directors militates against them lining up neatly on either side of this divide. Yet the tensions are obvious. Yung, for example, never attended any of Lam’s rehearsals during 1991 and those involved would whisper about this absence. The major source of difficulty though is that Lam has come to increasingly concentrate on gay issues in his choreographic work and on developing a highly sexualised dance theatre in this vein. Yung remains much less transparent in his concerns and, while his productions are generally seen to concern themselves, at some level, with issues of China/Hongkong relations, the whole notion of pursuing an obviously single issue based politics through theatre is utterly inimical to his philosophy. The public identification of Zuni with Yung, and his overarching control of the company, are also a source of dissension for those more drawn to Lam’s work.

Performers, eager to maintain an appearance of harmony within the group and careful to avoid jeopardising their own careers, will only refer to this in a roundabout fashion. Dick Wong diplomatically phrased the situation:

Zuni is nothing more than a group of people. Zuni is just a name. If this group of people still want to work together, then the group can go on. If not, it’s time to think about whether to scale down the whole thing or whether to stop or whether to change the structure.

In one or two years time I think this situation will intensify. What I’m most concerned with is the capacity of the group. What I mean by capacity is do you want a group that concentrates on one way or do you allow other things — partially style, secondly, the objective. Zuni is important because it helps to balance the whole cultural

14 This is confirmed by Lam’s current status. Since the time of my fieldwork, he has returned to London and is now the recipient of an honorary choreography fellowship. In 1994 he will be producing a new work at the Royal Court Theatre.
scene. It would be a pity if it cannot go on.... It's a dilemma. Danny wants to do a lot of things. Some members don't.

Lam, with more resources at his disposal and a greater sense of security that comes with his overseas work, is less reticent about the divide, quite plainly stating that he would like to set up his own company. In this respect, he acknowledges Yung's formative influence on his own career, describing himself as 'a new branch' and contrasting his own 'emotional', 'desperate' and 'outspoken' character with Yung's 'rational', 'calm' and 'cool' manner. At times he is plainly insulting towards his previous mentor:

Danny's approach is highly intellectual. It has more to do with thinking than doing. I stopped going to his rehearsals because so little happens. Sometimes I am quite bored by very intellectual relationships. I want to see people challenge themselves. I want to see people move. I want them to fly. ... That's why I have problems with his work sometimes. Because people can pretend that they are thinking and actually they are not.

Lam's passion for Yung has partially abated because he now positions himself as part of the European dance scene. Yung and Zuni have become too parochial for what he terms his 'wider and larger' world. He is quite specific about this:

I don't think I have something very particular to offer as a Chinese person at the moment. I'm more Hongkong I think. I'm more, well, I don't want to use the word 'cosmopolitan' but I am more sort of bits of here and there. And I am not ashamed about that. I'm very interested in German culture, French culture, English culture ... I don't know whether Danny has worked with foreign performers before but I have.

What is interesting here is the way in which the notion of Hongkong identity has been divorced from invocations of Chineseness and placed far more squarely within the ambit of European tradition. Lam does not deny an investment in being Hongkongese. Rather, he suggests that Yung is out of touch, too circumscribed by his own 'Chineseness' and thus unable to claim the authority of knowledge of foreign ways or to grasp the unstable conjunction of other places which, for Lam, typifies the territory and forms the grounding which has allowed him entrance to a more global stage.

For most core members, however, commitment to Zuni involves a more specific commitment to Hongkong, to staying in the territory post 1997. Of course, there are variations here. People joke that they will have to leave Hongkong because all their friends have gone overseas. Attendance at a farewell dinner party has become, for many, a weekly ritual. In the midst of these wrenching circumstances, quite a few Zuni members, like other Hongkongese who can afford it, are hedging their bets and applying for foreign
Figure 13: Edward Lam (centre) rehearses cast members for *Scenes From A Man's Changing Room.*
passports. An overall sense, though, remains that Zuni has an obligation to continue performing. This is phrased as a need to 'respond', to 'fight back', 'to send some message' or to 'make things happen'.

The breach between Lam and Yung is indicative of a broader split in the current political strategies adopted by concerned locals. In one definition of emancipatory politics, typified by Lam, the focus for critiques of illegitimate domination centres on a valorisation of differences, of 'minorities'; in this case, sexual difference and the need to overcome discriminatory attitudes towards homosexuals. On the other hand, there is a broader political agenda which seeks to examine the bindings of tradition, of the past, thereby preparing the new or allowing a transformative approach to an as yet undetermined future (see Giddens 1991: 210,211). This is the approach taken by Yung in his stage journeys. This is the China Hongkongese must return to but by another route; the China of politicised memories and desire.

For Yung, minority politics smacks of tokenism. The familiar mantra of women, students, artists, workers, greenies and gays cannot address the big picture. Although he takes an intense interest in elections and lobby groups and encourages, sometimes un成功fully, other Zuni members to do the same, he locates the site for 'real' politics beyond the governmental sphere. While Yung's productions seek to politicise any and all of the actions of the British administration or the Chinese Communist Party, he treats these as symptoms of contradictions located at a deeper level. It is this use of the governmental as a reflexive target of self-problematization (see Hunter 1992: 367) that allows some members a disenchanted withdrawal from practical politics and others a fervent pledge to engage in political activities without any appearance of overt discord.

Apology

Perhaps this contribution is mostly negative, marking out the limits of Zuni Icosahedron and exposing paradoxes and inconsistencies. My argument has been that while Zuni claims to be an ant-elitist collective, it is riven by hierarchical divisions between men and women, between old and new members, between those with formal training and those without, between incompatible political agendas. I have also been concerned to analyse the various tactics, such as the etherealisation of discourse and the recourse to psychologising in the face of criticism, which preserve these hierarchical relations of difference. Overall, I have suggested that the company is held together by the affective ties between people and by Yung's sometimes contested role as paternal guide through this sphere of intimacy. For all the controversy and the experimental work in Zuni's repertoire, the company remains, in many ways, a traditional Chinese
institution. The question of this performing group’s complicity with hierarchical relations and with the legitimating premises of inegalitarian relations is unavoidable, precisely because Zuni’s public performances are precisely concerned with these issues.

In some ways, this seems overly schematic and uninteresting. Indeed, I think it would be a critical mistake to think that this type of analysis exhausts the lived experience, or even the logic, of Zuni. I am writing about people working out their life trajectories within the confines of a particular place and time. Nearly all of them share a heartfelt commitment to their notion of what Hongkong culture should be and many of them will carry that commitment into the new structure of opportunities and oppressions that will come with sovereignty transferral. If we look at the company’s rhetoric of collectivity and anti-elitism, we see a hope for the emergence of autonomy. I suspect that this is what Zuni members would choose to acknowledge.
Chapter Six

CHRONICLE OF WOMEN: A HONGKONG STORY

Foreplay

Let's begin with four images (see Graphics 1-4). These line drawings, executed by Pun Takshu, took up the bulk of the programme material handed out to audiences during Zuni Icosahedron’s production Chronicle of Women: Liu Sola in Concert. Projected on a screen, the graphics also punctuated this performance, presented over three nights at the Studio Theatre, Hongkong Cultural Centre during May of 1991. These images have, in addition, adorned the noticeboard above my desk while I have been writing this thesis and I gain a peculiar sense of satisfaction whenever I glance up at them. Somehow they seem to encapsulate something about Zuni Icosahedron, about Hongkong and about some of the contradictions I feel in my own life but, until I began to write this chapter, I had never given them much conscious thought.

In accounting at a general level for this attraction, I find myself appealing to an oft-cited quotation from Gayatri Spivak: ‘Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘Third World Woman’ caught between tradition and modernization’ (Spivak 1985: 128). Apart from the obviously inappropriate reference to the ‘Third World’ in any consideration of Hongkong women, this statement fits neatly with another from Pia Ho, a Zuni director, writer and performer who was partially responsible for the ideas motivating Chronicle of Women. She stated to me that the graphics were designed to ‘remind the audience of the historical, of tradition and modernity’.

So far so good. But it seems to me that this interpretation is too broad, too non-specific to be helpful in accounting for the particular ways in which these drawings capture attention. Having begun by appealing to one Asian woman in the Western academy, I now turn for help to another with equally unassailable political credentials, Rey Chow. Chow introduces her 1991 book Woman and Chinese Modernity with exactly the same quote from Spivak. However, she goes on to develop the relations between ‘tradition’, ‘modernity’ and ‘woman’ in a way that lends itself more readily to a Hongkong context.
Graphic One: Chronicle of Women.
Graphic Two: Chronicle of Women.
Graphic Three: *Chronicle of Women.*
Graphic Four: Chronicle of Women.
Chow’s polemics are directed against idealist demarcations between ‘East’ and ‘West’ where ‘tradition’ is taken to be the constitutive element of the East and ‘modernity’ to inhere in the West. For Chow, these divisions cannot be sustained precisely because Westernization forms part of the materiality of daily life for modern Asian peoples. She thus does not reject the categories under discussion but argues, instead, that attributions of absolute difference between China and the West cannot be upheld if we are to recognize the emergence of the ‘non-Western, but Westernized, feminist subject’ (Chow 1991a: 95). It is this subject, I suggest, that announces itself so uncompromisingly in Pun Takshu’s drawings. The Chinese women depicted belong, by their dress, to an absolutely other time of classical history and literature. Yet, by virtue of their practices and their surroundings, they are firmly embedded in the present.

To return, for a moment, to Chow’s argument, she proposes that any serious consideration of the materiality of Westernization in Asia involves a breaking down of entrenched notions in Sinology which distinguish between Chinese peoples on the basis of a presumed proximity or distance to a valorized tradition, resulting in a view that those from the Mainland are more authentic than Hongkong people contaminated by exposure to Western ideas and goods (Chow 1991a: 94). While I think that Sinology is too broad a field to absolutely typify in the manner that Chow does (paradoxically considering her dislike of unexamined categories), the general thrust of her argument rings true.

In my own experience of engaging in work on Hongkong, I have encountered exactly these distinctions. My favourite example here were the reasons given to me by a distinguished China expert for not undertaking fieldwork in the territory. His comments ran something like this: ‘It’s very difficult researching in Hongkong; people there read books, in English; they know what you are getting at when you ask them questions; therefore, there is no truth value to their statements; basically, they are as intelligent as you or I’. A sense of the inauthenticity of the modern has also pursued me in seminars about Zuni Icosahedron – someone always doubts that they are ‘really Chinese’ while others desperately labour to assimilate them to various half-baked notions of classical Chinese aesthetics (minimalism, elegance) that they fondly remember from the calligraphy classes of their youth.

I think it is important to note, however, that Sinologists and other Western commentators, are not the only people to engage in such invidious distinctions. Chinese people do it too. Thus Barmé and Jaivin (1992:74) comment on the ways in which Beijing Chinese ‘despise’ Hongkong people whom they consider tainted by the West and ‘somehow not really Chinese’. And it is in the area of this ‘somehow’ that we can situate the graphics for Chronicle of Women. It needs to be said here that to persist in posing questions of gender in terms of an equivalence between, on the one hand, the East and tradition and, on the other, between the West and modernity is to remain bound to an outmoded conceptual opposition that is highly Eurocentric. But part of my point is that these clumsy juxtapositions are also deployed in mainland China and that,
however strongly theorists might object to their innacuracy, these juxtapositions hold force because they are inscribed in dominant cultural discourses and their underlying master narratives (British colonialism, which suggests that it has delivered progress to native peoples, and Chinese notions which dwell on the glories of their past civilisation and the nation’s purported inability to embrace the new). By glaringly juxtaposing that most hegemonic construct, the cultural heritage of ancient China, with various contemporary icons, the drawings displace the entrenched oppositions of East and West, tradition and modernity, thereby suggesting that being Hongkongese is predicated on the fundamental instability of negotiating between these reified terms. The effect is partially derived from the peculiar humour of the juxtaposition.

Yet the exploitation of the tension between East and West, tradition and modernity, local embodiment and global abstraction, forfeits any possibility of singular readings. One could equally, or rather as well, argue that this graphic disjuncture points to the ways in which representations of gender are out of kilter with people’s sense of themselves, that existing gender stereotypes and cultural codings do violence to the sense of identity and subjectivity felt by women whose life experience does not conform with conventional notions of ‘Chineseness’. In case I seem to be writing at an uncomfortable level of abstraction, let me give you a particularly obvious example.

In the same year that *Chronicle of Women* was performed, the Hongkong Association for the Advancement of Feminism held an ‘awards’ night aimed at naming the territory’s most discriminatory advertisement of the year. Bisquit Cognac’s Cantonese television commercial, which pivots around two men discussing changing tastes in cars and alcohol and drawing comparisons with women, ‘won’. An advertisement for butter cookies with a biscuit-munching man visiting a woman who suddenly takes a bath, ran a close second place. Association representative, Ms Lily Lau Leelee, stated that objections centred on the ways in which advertisements reinforce out-dated stereotypes of women in a secondary role to men (*SCMP* 12/3/1991: 16; *SCMP* 14/3/1991: 3).

It would be possible to object that the issue of the sexual objectification of women is hardly confined to Hongkong or China. I would agree but further suggest that the coexistence of indigenous structures of patriarchy and established structures of patriarchal capitalism in the territory are so deeply implicated that to search out one or another could only lead in the direction of another idealist demarcation. My point here is that Hongkong men and women live in a world today where there are too many female breadwinners, too many men staging feminist productions and reading Teresa de Lauretis, in brief, too many transgressions in everyday engagements for them not to feel that many gender narratives are absurdly anachronistic (see Soper 1991: 106), which is not to say that they are without force.

Rather than continue in this very general vein, I would like now to take a closer look at these drawings, modelled on a Ming Dynasty wood carving of ten
women playing musical instruments. In the first of these drawings, five women are positioned in a room in an upper storey of an office building. Three congregate around a computer, two stand in the background. A series of phallic objects traverse the interior: a lollipop leaves a trace of sweet girlish rainbow coloured days, a cigar reminds us of deals completed and comfortable men's clubs, a mobile phone – the almost compulsory accessory of every Hongkong businessperson - completes the series. A briefcase sits atop a high table. Outside, a cityscape reinforces the financial scene. Five women, with coiled hair and long gowns inhabit this canonically masculine space.

In the second drawing, these five women reappear in exactly the same guise and constellation. Well, almost. The spectacles have been removed and replaced by a pair of John Lennon sunglasses. The three phallic objects have become more explicit – an invincible He-man doll, a microphone and, just in case you weren't sure, a dildo. The three women around the table play cards, taking their chances. The briefcase is now a karaoke machine. Beyond the window, the arrows and explosions point to a war game in full swing. Five women, with coiled hair and long gowns, toy with masculine fetishes.

The third graphic was deemed obscene by Hongkong's Urban Council. What, we might ask, provoked them? Was it the corpse that is not really a corpse, the stethoscope and the needle indicating a potential resurrection? Or was it the combination of democracy slogans used in Beijing prior to the Tiananmen Square massacre inscribed on banners past the window frame – 'Serve the people forever', 'Serve the people ceaselessly', 'Permanent sex surface' (come again) – with that male wrist-watch on the flaccid hand of the sheet covered patient which offended? 'Mr Democracy' of the 1919 May Fourth movement was certainly reinvigorated for the 1989 protests. Or was it simply the grids which drew attention to genitals, disrupting the antiseptic, asexual medical surface of the room and exposing it as a potential site of sexualized exchange? Inside the operating theatre, a newspaper merges with the demonstrating crowd beyond, eliding the distance between 'the news' and 'the event'.

In the final drawing we have, once again, repetition and difference. The three women are cutting and pasting a newsheet. Another woman videotapes a woman playing the trumpet. A tapedeck replaces the medical monitor which replaced the karaoke screen which replaced the briefcase. Surrealism seems to have taken over outside. Five women with coiled hair and long gowns have their eyes pasted over, just like the dissidents Western media captured on television screens for a global audience in 1989, exposing them to great danger, until they finally had the decency to cover parts of their faces, rendering them unrecognisable, anonymous.

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1 Danny Yung informed me that this wood carving was reproduced in a book which he purchased fifteen years ago in Beijing. He xeroxed ten copies of the reproduction and began experimenting with the positioning of the female figures and their orientation using transparencies and eliminating components of the picture to reconstruct it. He showed these to Pun Takshu who then reduced the number of figures to five and replaced the classical Chinese musical instruments with various objects. Unfortunately I have, as yet, been unable to discover the artist and title of the original woodcarving.
In this series of four graphics, Pun Takshu frames woman within a constellation of political events, work and sexual practices whose forms alter by the decade, by genres of pleasure (music, fashion, games) and by conventions of collective erotic fantasy and mobilisation. The drawings repeatedly transgress categorical distinctions between sexuality and politics, public and private. What we get are a series of social spaces, places where power and desire are enacted and transferred. The abstract, disembodied networks of textual, electronic, visual and aural communication, official public commentary and unofficial replies all coexist with the manifestly pleasuring embodiment of women, of talented courtesans (see Berlant and Freeman 1992: 150,154). The desire is not to reclaim a lost China of feminine beauty and grace but to deliberately draw from the frontier between the two places (the Mainland, Hongkong) and times (the past, the present). What is at stake here? The performance will force us to come back to these questions.

*Chronicle of Women* is structured around dual protagonists, one male and one female. Anthony Wong, a film actor and experimental pop singer in Hongkong who has something of a cult following, plays the only substantive male role. Liu Sola performs the female part. A graduate of Beijing Central Conservatory of Music, Liu, who now works freelance in London, travelled to the territory specifically to take part in this production. She is a woman of many talents – a pop singer ‘interested in developing Chinese music with Western music’ (*TV&ET* 4-10/3/1991), particularly the blues; a novelist whose work has been frequently translated into English; a composer and lyricist with a chequered political career involving, amongst other events, the banning of one of her cassettes on the Mainland during the ‘anti spiritual pollution campaign’. A tall, gaunt woman with raggedly cropped hair, Liu describes her Chinese audience as ‘mainly university students, educated city dwellers, the readers of my novellas, my friends’ (Liberati 1989: 35). As one of the first Modernist Chinese writers to emerge from China since the 1978 open-door policy with the West (*Sunday Telegraph* 21/5/1989) her presence on stage immediately gave a political edge to the production and underlined that tension between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, which the graphics so patently illustrated, for a curious audience.

My goal here is not to offer a definitive interpretation of the production – given Zuni Icosahedron’s stress on the openness and complexity of meanings this would, in any case, be inappropriate. Rather, my intent is to investigate *Chronicle of Women* closely, from a particular feminist position in order to gauge the political possibilities of a Zuni production. I am not arguing for the representative nature of the performance under consideration. Indeed, the levity of this piece, the ways in which it playfully invokes and resists the lure of monumentality, its quick-paced montage, the counterpoint of image and song contrast markedly with the austere, cerebral, antivoluptuous quality of many

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Zuni works. *Chronicle of Women* has captured my attention because it responds to theoretical issues that currently concern feminist critics and Hongkong people, issues that have emerged in the re-thinking of identity politics (see Robinson 1991: 192).

According to the project description for *Chronicle of Women*, written by Danny Yung, the production was initially conceived as an examination of ‘the identity of woman, woman as mother, wife, lover, whore, working girl and politician’. The description stated that the work would look into the situations and the problems women are facing, ‘both psychological and physical’ and that all of these issues would be examined from the following angles:

- the active as perused by the passive; the mainstream as speculated by the alternative;
- the inside is explored from the outside; human as perceived by women; human as seen by men; the offstage is observed by the onstage; John Major is watched by Margaret Thatcher; the powerless are investigated by the powerful; the crowd is scrutinized by the loner; the revolution is cross-examined by the counter-revolution; the past as studied by the future; all of us as reviewed by ourselves; the beloved as contemplated by love.

While I knew that these outlines were only guidelines for the creative group designing the production and that they were unlikely to be explicit in the finished product, I was looking forward to watching a piece which so evidently broached the question of a gendered colonial subject, that was attempting to show Hongkong women as subject to normative representation as well as subjects of self-representation, that was clearly attempting to wed gender, politics and perception. At the same time, I wondered whether these shored-up pairs were likely to yield a productive account of the limits and possibilities of gender, subjectivity, knowledge and politics or whether it was simply slick. In the event, both my suspicion and my attraction was more than justified.

**Doing It**

At the back of the stage, four solid armchairs face the audience. The chairs are separated by low coffee tables with spittoons underneath. In the foreground are two tables. One, covered with lace, holds brass cymbals, microphones, clapping sticks and scattered makeup. A stool is placed next to it. The other holds a video screen. At the very back, a giant slide screen hangs. The chairs, with lace doilies strategically placed, are unmistakeably of the sort used by Chinese political leaders. The fact that they are empty does not detract from their monumentality, their ability to suggest the lingering presence of great patriarchs. Considering that, in 1990, the National People’s Congress retained an empty chair on stage during the opening ceremony in honour of an absent
Deng Xiaoping (*SCMP* 26/3/1991: 8), it may even add to it. At any rate, the stage is set for *Chronicle of Women*.

My account of the production moves back and forth between a dispersed variety of stage action and images, falsely bringing into narrative logic and collective intentionality a performance that was somewhat deliberately unsystematized. I attempt to broadly retain the chronology of scenes in the production but because the performance is not so much a series of discrete tableaux as a mass of densely connected interactions, some sleight of hand is necessary here. This is partially related to the difficulty of ‘writing’ performance and partially to the need to retain some clarity for the sake of analysis.

The distinguishing marks of Zuni Icosahedron, their ability to include cultural resistance and subcultural consolidation in a bewildering mix of tactics from identity politics and aesthetic theory, governs my inside narrative. While I foreshadow some of my argument, using commentary from Zuni members and audiences, you will have to wait a little for a more sustained analysis. Without being comprehensive, the following is an attempt to anchor your imagination in the events on stage to allow the possibility for some assessment of the productivity of my own ‘reading’ later in the chapter.

Eleven women in light blue cheong sams sit in the front row of the auditorium. They stand, holding hands, yawning and then moaning in a distinctly erotic way. Their sounds become less sensual, more abstract, exploring the possibilities of voice. Chinese characters are projected onto the screen at the back of the stage. The text reads:

*Place: on our mind; Time: several years ago; People: . What is left behind is a piece and pieces of memories. Ten years have passed. Finished. The story has finished. Finished. Finished. Theatre is finished. Our ideal is finished. History is finished.*

The lights brighten. The women move to the centre of the stage and face the audience. Pia Ho steps out from the middle of the group and bows. She is joined by Liu Sola, with long dark tresses falling down her back, and Anthony Wong. Bouquets of orange gladioli and red carnations are presented to these three performers. All clap and exit. The house lights come up.

We hear the sound of performers in the wings, coughing, warming up. The stage is empty and the audience are tittering uncomfortably, unsure of whether they should leave. A man enters with a broom and sweeps the floor. Three other stagehands join him, swapping the tables around. Then company manager, Gabriel Yiu, checks the auditorium seats for any defects. Performers wander onto the stage during this activity. Pia Ho gives directions to a performer named Tanya, instructing her in the art of go-go dancing. Liu Sola enters and sits by the table holding musical instruments. One woman crosses the stage from left to right. Another walks slowly backwards from right to left. Another skips, go-go dances and plays hide-and-seek behind the armchairs. The lights dim.
The audience are relieved that something is now happening and mildly amused at the placement of a conventional ending, with the associated paraphernalia (bowing, clapping, flowers, an elaborate curtsey) of ‘high art’, such as opera or ballet, at the beginning of a show presented by an overtly ‘avant-garde’ company like Zuni. The incorporation of practices usually confined to backstage areas, pre-show checks or rehearsals, and the consequent questioning of the artifice of ‘theatre’ and of daily life, adds to the humour.

A woman with one arm rigidly raised in a salute, schoolbag slung across her shoulder, announces, in Cantonese: ‘This evening we are going to a banquet’. Liu begins to pound her clapping sticks. The same performer reappears, speaking into a mobile phone: ‘This evening I am going to a banquet’. This phrase runs like a linking thread throughout the production. It is spoken time and time again, with slight variations, by different performers: ‘This evening I am going to a banquet; this evening we are going to a banquet; are they going to the banquet tonight?’. Liu strikes her gong once.

Pia Ho explained the significance of the banquet phrase to me:

The banquet is an important occasion, an occasion that people with power won’t invite you to. Actually this was an improvisation which we found during one of our rehearsals. Suddenly one evening when Tanya came to the rehearsal studio she was very dressed up and wore a lot of makeup and we all screamed. And she just burst out: ‘Tonight I am going to a banquet’. So we found out that this location must mean something to a girl or to someone who has rare opportunities to go to such occasions. This is applicable to many things, so we used this very, very simple and understandable phrase.

The exclusion of women and other marginalised groups and the ability of those in power to exclude is thus very self-consciously reiterated throughout the production.

To return to the stage, two women are dancing, their limbs horribly restricted in their cheong sams. Pia Ho, in a purple cheong sam, speaks from one of the armchairs: ‘This evening, they are going to a banquet’. The two dancing women begin doing pelvic thrusts. Ho moves to join them and all three strike seductive poses, mimicking the movements traditionally assigned to women in glossy fashion magazines. All three begin violently scratching themselves, wriggling and squirming, tormented. Liu croons. One woman covers her ears, another her mouth, another her eyes. They continue to take on these deaf, dumb and blind positions, alternating them amongst one another. One woman holds her breasts, another places her hands over her crutch. All three squeeze their own breasts. Ho places her hands over the crutches of the other two. They exit and reenter, clad in hot pink cheong sams. Ho collapses and is taken by them to the armchair she previously occupied. Liu is still singing.

Ho invoked the question of women’s complicity in their own oppression and of the impossibility of simply choosing to step out of ideology when speaking to me later about this scene:
If I explain it in a more emotional or personal way, I find women like to deceive themselves very much. Sometimes they tell themselves not to see or not to care about, not to understand certain types of things ... And in a wider aspect we are also many times blindfolded or deceived by others, especially by those with power or in a dominant position. I think it's the most explicit theme of this piece — female identity and how you deal with your own self; how you face personal, social problems as a female; what is abuse?

Taking our cue from Ho, we can therefore see this scene as resting partially on a strategy of mimicry and female masquerade wherein Woman defines herself and is defined by parts of her body, her genitals and breasts, cut out and displayed like so many close ups in a pornographic photo. Here, though, the focus on gender as performance subverts that objectification, exposing it as an inevitably partial charade, only sustained by desensitising oneself in the practices of everyday life.

Following this sequence, women move slowly across the stage holding large squares of white cloth in their right hands. Liu begins to sing, in Mandarin, repeating ‘during the time of Mao, the people are so happy’ and ‘everything is beautiful in the time of Mao’. Her voice slows down until the words are barely distinguishable and then speeds up like a cassette tape worn out through overuse. The lyrics are derived from The East is Red, the music and dance epic organised in 1964 by Premier Zhou Enlai to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the founding of New China (Wang 1985: 106). This epic, with its brief depictions of symbolically constituted stages in the Chinese revolution — the old disaster-ridden China, the birth of the Chinese Communist Party, the Long March and so on — is a regulative metonym for the identity of the People’s Republic. Liu’s mocking enumeration parodies the formulaic didacticism of this ‘magnificent paean to the Great Leader Chairman Mao’ (Wei 1970: 113) and lends a sense of troubled despair to that identity.

A number of other women enter, also holding white cloths, and cross the stage from right to left and left to right. The video screen shows a Beijing opera singer limply holding a square of white material. Tanya drags Anthony Wong across the stage in various directions, at one point carrying him on her back. She is weight-grounded, strong, lifting, carrying and dragging her partner around the stage floor. Loving and combative, they struggle for equilibrium.

Tanya saw her part in these terms:

The action means I take Anthony's place to have his perspective ... struggling. Sometimes I will be very considerate and sometimes I struggle inside and then I push him away. I don't want him any more. I feel guilty and walk to him again.

At another time, she described her role as ‘a prisoner, a woman, who wants to take a man’s role and tries to look from a man’s view’.
Figure 14: *Chronicle of Women*. Studio Theatre, Hong Kong Cultural Centre. Liu Sola is in the foreground (Courtesy Zuni Icosahedron).
Pia Ho gave a rather different account of this segment, emphasising the ways in which 'China' and 'Chinese tradition' can be a crippling weight for the individual, how it can weigh people down but also provide shape and direction to their movements:

Danny told Tanya that her part is just like that of a person growing up but in the process of the growing she has some burden, like a cultural burden, a historical burden. So carrying Anthony on her back is just like as a Chinese or an individual growing up she has many burdens on her back. And how does she handle her burden? Sometimes you can use your burden as your tool but sometimes you are influenced by the burden, by the history.

Already you will begin to sense the slippages occurring here between explorations and critiques of male-female relations, of gendered subjectivities and investigations of Chinese history and identity in a Hongkong context. But more of that later. The 'play' is waiting.

Eight women form a tightly knit group, holding out their white cloths in a supplicatory gesture. Two women raise their fists in a salute; one holds the cloth high above her head, tautly pulled between her hands. In the centre of the configuration, a woman wipes tears from her eyes with the material while another laughs. Later, Pia Ho repeats the action of pulling the material taut above her head, places it like an execution blindfold over her eyes, then twists it in her hand and raises a clenched fist.

The cloth is a remnant of the Qing Dynasty, a flag, a banner and a proof of virginity. Originally, some words were spoken during this scene: Do I need to prove to you?; Do we need to prove to you?; Do you need to prove to me? It was felt, however, that this would narrow the interpretation too much, that the audience would think only of prescriptions of purity for women in Qing China, of the need to show bloodied sheets to relatives following defloration on the wedding night, that it was too 'linear'. Ambiguity was preferred. Yet the scene does retain an effort to render a presence in the feeling of a gesture, to convey the sense of female subservience to Confucian norms as an experience that is simultaneously subjective and socially coded.

Of course, that experience is still relevant to the present. In Hongkong, virginity still is, to some extent, considered to be a pre-requisite for a bride. In a society which bears the weight of the moral standards of both the Christian and Confucian ethical systems, premarital sex tends to be just that; intercourse with your intended marriage partner (Pearson 1989: 19). And in China, the national airline (CAAC) still manages to announce, with no humorous intention, that it is facing a shortage of stewardesses due to 'a lack of healthy virgins' (SCMP 29/6/1991: 1).

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3 See Edwards (1990) for a brief account of the predominant position of chastity in codes of female virtue during the Qing Dynasty.
Throughout *Chronicle of Women*, childhood games like basketball, skipping, somersaulting or hide-and-seek are interspersed with other actions. These, too, were intended to show the restrictions faced by Chinese women throughout the process of socialisation. Pia Ho described this restrictive upbringing:

> We tried to show some different stages of a girl growing up. And actually in our own experience Chinese girls face quite a lot of regulations and rules and all kinds of limitations. While they are growing up they are not allowed to talk too much or go out too much. Their parents won't take them out to dinner or a banquet. Because you are a girl you have to stay at home and be a good girl.

At regular intervals during the show, slides are projected on the back screen and images play on the video monitor. At the beginning, an aerial view of Hongkong's skyscrapers appears while the audience are entering the theatre. This is followed by a slide of the four armchairs and spittoons set against a red backdrop. Next we have the character for 'woman', strikingly presented in white on black. The armchairs also appear on the video monitor. This image is superseded by an abstract pattern, a close up of the chair fabric. Layers of representation are continually played with. Pun Takshu's graphics, too, are projected on the screen. A drawing is shown which was not part of the series as presented in the programme notes – the same room utterly devoid of people or objects. Slides of Chinese women's faces, glamorous with heavy lipstick, frequently appear. The final video image is of the Chinese flag, its stars fluttering, dissolving over the armchair fabric.

Text is also displayed on the screen. This takes the same script format as the section I previously quoted. For example, 'place: in the theatre; time: later; people: beautiful ladies; problem: how to start a new relationship'. Or 'place: in the theatre; time: passing slowly; people: beautiful performers; problem: very, very, very simple'. This script appears with numerous abstruse variations.

Danny Yung initially decided to incorporate slides into the production because he was concerned that Liu might not be able to 'carry' her ideas. They were designed to give a regular structure to the show and to allow people a break from the dense demands of the stage action. This structure was derived from television – the slides were conceived as equivalent to commercial breaks following each eight minute segment of programming. Thus, in its very inception, the production was structured as a meta-commentary on the pervasive influence of media and the ability of television to formatively influence our capability for concentration and perception.

However, the slides do not constitute, in any simple sense, a break from the demands of the production. Their potential relies heavily on the assumed ability of the audience to actively participate in constructing their own meanings. In this way, they are a space, a time out, for personal reflection. This was well illustrated by the description provided by a fifteen year old schoolgirl who was
motivated to write to Zuni Icosahedron after seeing *Chronicle of Women*. A paragraph from her letter reads:

I came to it alone. I sat in the third row. I did not notice that the people in the first row were performers. When they suddenly stood up, I was surprised or even a bit scared. They made all kinds of sounds: laughing, sighing and weird screaming. They stood up, facing us, while on the screen appeared many characters — 'finished', 'this is finished' and 'that is finished'. After a while a boy came out to clean the floor with a broom. Many other people came to carry things away. I liked it very much. 'Finished', 'finished', and gradually all the written characters were deleted except 'finished'. In my mind I immediately filled in the blanks between the words 'finished' with many personal matters. I know I am a bit silly. Maybe it is because I was just eager to have those unpleasant matters 'finished'.

The attraction here is in the possibility of making up one's own story, in being granted authorship over the narrative, in speaking as a subject of discourse and being listened to (see de Lauretis 1987: 113).

But I am running ahead of myself. The performance is far from finished. We haven't dealt yet with the 'execution scene'. Two women sit squarely in the armchairs — legs wide apart, bolt upright, composed, patriarchal. Two women kneel in front of them and collapse, drained of all movement. Others kneel and collapse, rising again only to fall. A woman points her sword at those in the armchairs, the metallic glint accusing the incumbents. One of the fallen rises and takes her place in an armchair. Another occupies the fourth seat. The first pat(mat)riarch removes her blue cheong sam to reveal a white shift underneath. The second strikes seductive poses and briefly flashes at the audience. The third laughs maniacally. The last go-go dances standing on her armchair. They all urinate in the spittoons.

These provocations invite many interpretations. The scene can be interpreted as referring to any number of historical struggles. As one of the performers put it to me: 'I think most events that happen in China always have executions'. There was a tendency, though, at least on the part of those involved, to view it as primarily referring to the Tiananmen Square massacre. One woman, Ellen Yuen, described her performance in the following terms:

I had some strong feelings while I'm doing some parts, say the execution scene. While I'm doing that I'm thinking: 'How do the students involved in the democratic movement in China feel?; Do they feel the same as me?'. I like to think when I stand up quickly — you can't stop people from getting what they want, the basic aim. And even if you shoot most of them, the people will still ask for it.

The type of idealistic investment demonstrated here is likely to hold sway amongst many audience members. In a city where one million people marched, that is one out of every six people in the colony, to publicly protest the events of June 4, the felt experience of grief and horror remains.
The woman holding the sword has numerous precedents in Chinese fictions about female knights-errant and in Chinese dramas, films and cartoons dealing with female warriors. Many of these have a common source in the ancient ballad *Poem of Mulan*, generally thought to have been written in the fifth or sixth century AD, which describes how a courageous woman dresses as a man to join the army in place of her ailing father. This legend enjoys continued popularity today and is a favourite theme in the Beijing stage repertoire. Without wishing to dwell for too long on the lineage of this figure, it is important to note that the female warrior is considered to have an ambiguous sexual identity instanced in her ability to combine great prowess with tenderness. It is this juxtaposition of masculinity and femininity which provokes fascination (Hung 1989: 164,167,171).

Pia Ho suggested that the very fact of women sitting in the four armchairs represents ‘a kind of challenge’. She clarified her point by adding: ‘You can read it as the minorities challenging those who have power’. Furthermore, those women are ‘playing’ with ‘those formally dominating chairs’ by failing or refusing to adopt the conventions of restrained behaviour which should accompany a position of political prestige. Their movements are deliberate provocations, a breaking of rules.

What she did not mention is the marked association between *femme fatales* and political power in Chinese history and literature, an association replayed in *Chronicle of Women* in the seductive movements and dancing of the women occupying armchairs. Chan (1989: 8) has referred to this as a ‘tradition of termagants’, of wicked ladies including the Empress Wu, the only female sovereign to sit upon the imperial throne who is said to have been so utterly ruthless that she murdered her own infant daughter; the Empress Dowager who presided, *de facto*, over the last years of dynastic rule; and Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao Zedong who came to prominence during the Cultural Revolution and was later charged with the death and unwarranted persecution of thousands. All of these women are represented as lascivious sadists in the melodramas which regularly grace Hongkong television screens (Chan 1989: 50) and their detractors (they have few champions) make quite conscious comparisons between the nature of twentieth century Jiang, the late nineteenth century Dowager and seventh century Wu. If the female performers in this production are seen to be behaving inappropriately in their positions of power, Jiang Qing, for example, is accused of exactly these indiscretions, indiscretions which include privately viewing Greta Garbo movies, sleeping between silk sheets and having an ill-kept secret passion for *Gone With the Wind* (*SCMP* 5/6/1991: 13).

Rather than simply repeating these stereotypes, it seems to me that *Chronicle of Women* deliberately flirts with the figures of Jiang and Wu. The flirtation subverts by denaturalising and defamiliarising these representations. The stripper bumping and go-go dancing and the sultry and seductive movements are a kind of masquerade that serves to disrupt the very representation it so excessively and light-heartedly mimics. In other words, it is
in the very overdetermination of these figures that the ponderous weight of cultural mythologies of gender and race begin to look shabby, to collapse and with them, normative constructions of Chinese/Hongkong womanhood (see Robinson 1991: 24,169,172). In this respect, I share Ho's reading of the scene as ‘a kind of challenge’, though not precisely in the way that she suggested.

A separate ‘translation’ scene occurs within the previously examined ‘execution’ scene. Two women sit behind the armchairs. One reads aloud and the other copies her, scrambling her words unintelligibly. A whirligig of speeches contradict and cancel one another out. At one level this babelic confusion seems to attest to the impossibility of the subject-position ‘Hongkongese’ in that the first woman states, in Cantonese, ‘to be a translator is an injustice; you are saying someone else’s thoughts all day long’. Caught between China and Britain, the possibility of one’s own speech is negated. Simultaneously the scene appears to refer to the contradiction of women in language, as we attempt to speak as subjects of discourses which objectify us through their representations (de Lauretis 1987: 127). Thus, we discover that Hongkong women are doubly erased, buried in silence because of their gender and their ethnicity.

Yet the string of utterances blurted out and then rendered into nonsense cannot, on closer inspection, be taken as an indication of the impossibility of expression.

Don’t force her to play someone else. Let her continue to play herself. It’s not a bad thing to play oneself. I think, maybe, we can let her have more respect for men. I think it doesn’t matter. If a man knows he’s a man then we shouldn’t force him to be a person. I think, maybe, they can seriously consider showing more respect for this place. Tonight I’m going to a banquet. I booked this place.4

And so the phrases continue to tumble out, sliding between references to gender and role playing, translation and banquets, person and place. Rather than an absence, the dissolution of language, we have here a multiplication of words and meanings, a shredding of the possibility of stability and fixity in the face of the massive pressure of words competing for recognition, words that are always misrecognised and misconstrued in the effort to render them meaningful for a different audience.

After the ‘execution’ scene, Liu Sola and Anthony Wong take centre-stage. Liu removes her wig to reveal a shaved head. The couple engage in an amorous duet, at times invoking the strangely dismembered lyrics from The East Is Red, at times relying solely on the passionate melody of their antiphonal singing. Cajoling, soliciting, seducing, Liu climbs, microphone in hand, on to the back of one of the armchairs and wraps her legs around Wong, thighs pressing against his waist. It is a disconcerting dynamic – all tragic emotion after the controlled

4 Thanks to Mei Lee Smith for assistance with this translation from the original Cantonese.
implacable register of Zuni performers. Domination and servitude, exploitation and allure all cavort in this spellbinding song between a man and an androgynous woman. Lilting, muscular, rhythmical, the duet traces the borders of an amorous space of hatred, desire and eroticism.

When the duet has finished, the music continues, drums beating. In this last scene, one performer, Hashima Hamid, dances at the edge of control. With sharp and percussive patterns of torso contraction and release, arms wildly flailing, she continues her dance even when the music has ceased. Pia Ho described this as ‘African dancing’, designed to break the audience’s impression of Hamid’s sexual exploitation in being asked to strike seductive poses earlier in the piece and to allude to the ‘necessity of freeing our emotion’, of being more ‘down-to-earth’. The association between Africans and a sexually vital primitivism is well-established in China and Hongkong, as it is in the West. The transformation of this Cantonese woman into a call for ‘freedom’ and the need for unrestrained expression challenges the dictates of Han and Western mores. When I write this I mean, firstly, that disaffected Hongkongese youth are here using the figure of the African as a counter to established values, as a symbol of defiance and their own alienation from the Chinese mainstream. Secondly, the performance employs the black Other as a reflexive symbol through which Hongkongese can attempt to deal with their own ambiguous racio-cultural status in a Eurocentric world in which Asians occupy a liminal place between civilized whites and barbarous blacks and in a Sinocentric world which privileges Northerners while Southerners and, more particularly, Hongkongese occupy the uncomfortable position of being ‘not quite Chinese’. Hashima Hamid’s dancing is a reminder of the ambiguity of Hongkong’s racial and cultural identity vis-a-vis the Mainland and the West and a rejection of the civility which inheres in both idealised categories. The audience is left with a final image of the possibility of liberation. The entire show has lasted for about seventy minutes.

Fatal Attraction?

There is nothing about Chronicle of Women that allows us to be seduced by the fiction of a well-shaped and unitary statement. As one audience member, a bemused American tourist, put it, announcing loudly as he rose from his seat at

5 During 1988, for instance, riots broke out in various universities on the Mainland when male students attacked African students who were publicly going out with Chinese women. A strong belief that Africans are primitive and over-sexed largely informed the anger directed at African students and the contempt directed at the female students in question (Knox 1989: 15).

6 I am indebted for this interpretation to Russell’s (1992) account of the black Other in contemporary Japanese mass culture.
the end of the performance: ‘That was easily, hands down, the most unusual piece of theatre I’ve seen. I have no idea what that was about’. This bemusement sometimes gave way to anger amongst the predominantly local audience. ‘This absolutely makes no sense’, ‘I cannot understand it at all’, ‘Is it a joke?’ were common audience responses in the foyer afterwards. Part of my agenda here is to demonstrate that the production does make sense if looked at from a feminist position.

My description of the show indicates that a feminist position is, in fact, the vantage point from which those involved in the production largely devised and interpreted the piece. This is also illustrated by Pia Ho’s explanation of the costuming. She elaborated on the choice of cheong sams:

> The cheong sam represents a kind of formalism. When a woman is wearing one she has limitations on her actions. She has to be very elegant and very graceful when she moves around. So, to an extent, it’s a kind of bondage. So we tried to break this limitation by wearing cheong sams on stage but doing things that women wearing cheong sams won’t do, like spreading out our legs wide and moving very vigorously.

This attempt to challenge conventions through mimicry and masquerade, to stress the unstable relationship between ‘tradition’, ‘modernity’ and representations of Chinese women informs the structure of the performance.

Extending this argument, we can say that, once we accept the challenge of the permeability of the piece by approaching it as a speaking out and into contradictions, we can begin to appreciate the ways in which *Chronicle of Women* measures the distance separating contemporary Hongkong woman from her various role models (mythical female warriors, Qing brides with bloodied sheets, matriarchal political leaders, fashion models, go-go dancers) to discover that her identity cannot be totally severed from these women or from the narrative of her girlhood, populated by so many of these ghostly presences. Zuni Icosahedron’s presentation of that identity undergoes an interpretive transformation in the process of performance: no longer the product of constraints, of restrictive cheong sams and never received invitations to banquets, it holds out the promise of a novel identity, a transgressive dancing to a new beat, informed by the weight of Chinese and Western tradition but unmistakeably different (see Bacchilega 1992: 108-110).

This would seem to comply with what Teresa de Lauretis (1987: 2) has termed ‘radical epistemological potential’, conceiving the ‘social subject’ in a new light – a subject constituted in gender though not solely by sexual difference. She envisions a subject formed across languages and cultural representations, a multiple and contradicted subject. Taking this statement literally, we can instance the use of Cantonese, Mandarin and English in the production, the varied images which draw their reference points from Chinese sources (the female warrior) and Western contacts (the go-go dancer), to suggest a fit between de Lauretis’ theorizing and Zuni’s stage practices.
Before you rush to say that what *Chronicle of Women* actually does is to present a series of somewhat hackneyed polarities – the chaste bride, the licentious whore – without attempting to resolve these contradictions, let me quite firmly state that the stakes of this performance are much higher. It does not simply inscribe popular stereotypes but engages contemporary theories of signification (see de Lauretis 1987: 79). And, in case you are wondering why I am using de Lauretis, it is partly because a copy of her book *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984) graced the shelves of Zuni’s bookcase during the time of my fieldwork. And, in case you think that no-one there read it, I can point you in the direction of one of their earlier productions titled *Alice Doesn’t*. I should add here, that I have nothing against the use of foreign critical sources to examine representations in Hongkong. Indeed, I would not invoke de Lauretis if I did not find her work cogent and extremely useful in thinking through the politics of feminist cultural production. The caveat is there for the nervous.

Of course, you might also argue that the formal disruption of narrative, the presentation of a fragmented subject, the refusal of coherence and unity have all been part of a predominantly male avant-garde position for decades. What is it then that is specifically feminist about all of this rather than just generically avant-garde, poststructuralist or anti-humanist? It is because the production begins with the premise of questioning sexual difference, of problematising women’s representability. In this sense, the common interest of the avant-garde and feminism in the politics of images merge (see de Lauretis 1987: 122,123,128). But beyond that, the originality of *Chronicle of Women* stems from its instantiation of heterogeneity in the female social subject, its sense of distance from and proximity to dominant cultural models. Just as the ‘story’ remains fragmented and difficult to follow, differences within and among Hongkong women remain in our memory as its work of representing (see de Lauretis 1987: 139). This fragmentation does not mean, as Pollard (1989: xi) has argued, that ‘present-day Chinese women can freely pick and choose their own cultural models’. The weight of normative constructions remains – wicked empresses, sylph-like beauties, timid, docile creatures bound to Confucian virtues, revolutionary martyrs. But the movement inscribed by Zuni is towards new forms of representation that disrupt those normative constructions through a performative strategy of negotiating between compliance and resistance to hegemonic notions of Woman (see Robinson 1991: 98), that explore the contradictions involved in being a non-Western but Westernized Hongkong Chinese woman.

This is a feminist reading. It is not a label that many Zuni members would be particularly entranced with. Pia Ho, the woman most responsible for the direction of *Chronicle of Women*, certainly does not identify herself as a feminist. I think it is best if she puts her own position:
There are quite a few active feminist people in Hongkong but I think their influence is little and I’m not a feminist. So I don’t want to put too much emphasis on this issue. I don’t want to say anything I’m not too sure of or don’t believe in very much. But I do believe that male and female should be more equal. Actually many things men can do, women can do also. And women have to be more conscious or aware about their own identity or their privilege, their position in the society. I don’t mean they have to fight for anything whether it’s reasonable or not, but I think women should have more awareness of their own selves.

To explain this hesitancy, we need to consider the general lack of support which feminism faces in the territory. Lethbridge (1980: 273, 285) attributes this to the pervasive influence of powerful pressure groups of traditionalists, moralists and rigorists and to the popularity of a ‘social work’ ethic which accepts only a very muted version of feminism, as exemplified by the Hongkong Council of Women, in line with the spirit of benevolence and philanthropy acceptable in traditional Chinese social thought. In other words, what Lethbridge is saying is that feminism has never gained a foothold in Hongkong because the place is so utterly patriarchal.

While I would not altogether discount this point, there is more to Ho’s hesitancy than that. Firstly, we need to take seriously the extent to which people conceive of Western feminism, no matter how benevolent, as yet another form of Eurocentric colonial discourse (see Young 1990: 162). Secondly, while a white cultural feminist, like myself, feels primarily defined and oppressed by gender, many Hongkong women feel that other issues are more pressing. Chow (1991b: 82,83), as part of her analysis of the degendering of responses to the Tiananmen Square massacre, provides a succinct summary of this positioning, of the failure of white feminisms to significantly consider ethnicity:

The anger felt by non-Western women is never simply that they have been left out of bourgeois liberal feminism’s account ‘as women’, but, more importantly, that their experiences as ‘women’ can never be pinned down to the narrowly sexualized aspect of that category, as ‘women’ versus ‘men’ only. What is often assumed to be the central transaction between women and culture – women’s heterosexual relation to men – has little relevance to the China crisis.

In the particular case of Zuni members, a third difficulty comes into play. Their emphasis on fragmentation and on the plurality of subject positions and experiences seriously undermines not only the premises of feminism but of any unitary determinations, including race and ethnicity. In the face of poststructuralist critiques of ‘totalizing narratives’, as initiated by Lyotard (1984), the privileging of heterogeneity, multiplicity, contingency and so on threatens to rob feminism of its force by disallowing any place for the critique of pervasive axes of stratification (Robinson 1991: 4; Soper 1991: 104). Thus, although Ho feels comfortable complying with the current liberal ideology of gender equality, the slightly ‘New Age’ aspect of her comments, her tendency to
continually focus back on self-awareness as a source of transformation, betrays a scepticism about single-issues instilled by the company's insistent emphasis on plural differences and by her own sense that people are more than whatever gender or racial category they slot in to, that people have all kinds of allegiances and aspirations that have little to do with whether they are Chinese or non-Chinese, women or men.

What about audiences? As previously mentioned, some were baffled by the production. In the words of one female student: 'I only get obscure messages from it'. Of eighty responses to questionnaires distributed by Zuni to audience members, only a few referred to gender, even in the most general sense. Thus another female student writes:

At the beginning I could not understand anything. I was entirely lost. I did not force myself to get the meaning. Gradually I could feel something, for example, the characters of women, woman-to-woman relationships, politics etc. The last part, i.e. the story between Anthony Wong and Liu Sola, shocked me. Why do you intend to describe the man-woman relationship as so horrific?

Another obliquely commented: 'Very philosophical and sexual'.

Yet the majority of respondents viewed the performance as being an allegorical account of Hongkong/China relations. As one man put it to me: 'China is fucking Hongkong'. We cannot neatly divide this into a question of female versus male spectatorship. I would estimate that seventy per cent of the audience were women and many of these wrote comments such as: 'It was too explicit; Hongkong was raped; it was disgusting'. The seductiveness of treating Liu Sola as a representation of China and Anthony Wong as straightforwardly representing Hongkong proved overwhelming. Their final duet became, for many, the point of the entire performance.

Later, I asked some of the performers why the question of Hongkong/China relations had, for the audience, largely replaced the question of female identity as initially proposed by the project outline. Lee Fungying replied: 'This is the director, Danny and the concept is from Danny. The thing that Danny most worries about and thinks about is the situation of Hongkong and the relationship of China and Britain'. Obviously, he is not alone.

I have already noted that during the performance there are, at any one time, several competing, even contradictory, meanings that can be discerned rather than some monolithic, all-encompassing statement. What is it that makes people invest in one set of these meanings instead of another or a number? Lee Fungying's answer cites authorial intention. Certainly, in view of Zuni Icosahedron's publicly stated aim of revolutionising Hongkong theatre by developing a specifically Hongkong performing art, and in the light of their media reputation as politically controversial activists, we can partly understand the privilege given to this allegorical reading. The whole question of 1997 and the transfer to Chinese sovereignty is fraught for Hongkong people with so
many questions and emotional ambiguities, that the tendency to see the production as being about ‘China fucking Hongkong’ is almost inevitable.

But what of Danny Yung’s role here? Given the above, are the deliberate politics of including a consideration of the gendered colonial subject simply an appropriative gesture? Does the prior knowledge that Liu Sola will be taken as a metaphor for the Chinese nation neutralise feminist critique? Are the figures of women here recontained, reduced to portraits in a man’s fiction? After all, throughout this century the Chinese women’s movement has been told to wait until later, to hold off while supposedly more important issues are on the agenda (Lee, F. 1992: 168).

I think not. It remains true that considerations of female subjectivity and women’s issues are constantly being elided and foreclosed under ‘bigger’ issues like revolution or economic modernization or sovereignty transferral. But any detailed analysis of Chronicle of Women must recognise that the performance is a consideration and a critique of patriarchy and political hegemony. Rather than resolve the contradictions between these readings, it is necessary to keep them in suspension, to allow them to critically interrupt each other to serve their constituencies (see Spivak 1987: 241). As one audience member said:

The play describes the state of confrontation: people vis-a-vis society, men vis-a-vis women and on-stage vis-a-vis downstage. Can we use one approach to handle everything? The performance represents a different type of aesthetic.

If we map this performance against other contemporary representations, it becomes clear that imaging Hongkong and China as male or female is a frequent strategy. Thus we are dealing with a ‘strategic formation’, a group of texts, discourses and images which acquire referential power (Young 1990: 135). If it seems excessive to grant such a lengthy analysis to Chronicle of Women, other historical trends lead equally and powerfully in that direction. Witness the following quotation, written in 1984, by the late satirist Hah Gong. This piece was published in Emancipation Monthly which numbered its issues backward from 1997 in a countdown:

The Sino-British negotiations have resembled a gang rape of Hongkong by two men, with the victim being denied the right either to scream or to protest ... a few pseudoscholars ... make grandiose statements suggesting that everyone should simply lie back quietly and allow the rapists to get on with it, claiming that any protest would be ‘negative, unconstructive and in no way beneficial’ (translated in Barmé and Jaivin 1992: 430,431).

At a time when Deng Xiaoping is likened, both rhetorically and analytically, to the Empress Dowager Cixi (Young 1992: 23) and Li Peng is portrayed in Beijing

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street performances as a courtesan (Esherick & Wasserstrom 1992: 37), there is no stable relationship between 'woman', 'man' 'Hongkong' and 'China'. Sometimes Hongkong is perceived as a woman. Thus Ellen Yuen, a Zuni performer, made this analogy:

I used to have the feeling that people came here and found that things are unpredictable, that the future wouldn't be good and ran away. It's like taking all of a woman's money ... When a woman is becoming not so attractive due to her ageing, especially rich women, some young man will come and pretend that they love her and at the end of that they take away all she's got and run. I used to think that Hongkong is a woman facing the same situation.

In this account, both British and Chinese who depart the territory are viewed as gigolos, exploiting an easily duped Hongkong. This ties in with other accounts which perceive of the territory as a wellspring of material riches and bodily pleasures, a place where all desires can be satisfied by the whore at the gate of the Mainland.

More often, though, Hongkong is seen as a canonically male space, a place of thrusting buildings, dynamic, progressive, erect while China plays maternal parent to this upstart son. A poem titled *Kowloon-Canton Railway* by Yu Kwang-chung sorrowfully expresses this sentiment:

‘How does it feel to be in Hong Kong?’ you ask.  
Holding your aerogram, I smile sadly.  
Hong Kong beats with a metallic rhythm, my friend,  
Of a thousand steel wheels playing on the steel tracks  
To and from the border, from sunrise to sundown  
Going north, coming south, playing the Border Blues again and again,  
Like an umbilical cord that cannot be severed, nor crushed asunder,  
Reaching to the vast endless Northland,  
The parent body so familiar yet so strange,  
Mother Earth joined yet long disconnected.  
An old cradle rocking far far away ...  

This is not an analogy confined to the realms of 'high' culture. The very popular films *Her Fatal Ways I* and *II*, which I referred to in Chapter Two, relied explicitly for their effect on an examination of the relationship between a shy and awkward female Public Security Officer from the Mainland and a confident male Hongkong policeman as it traced her girlish crush on him, her secret applications of lipstick, the possibility of fruitful cooperation between the couple and the impossibility of consummating the bond between them.

Thus gender is often invoked as a summarising image of the relations between China, Hongkong and Britain but this invocation is fluid, mercurial, moving between incestuous passion, erotic attachment, violation. The instability
of these transfers, of this larger strategic formation, subtends *Chronicle of Women*. As Pia Ho put it:

There were women on stage. These women do not just represent their sex. They are also Hongkong. All of them are Hongkong, all of them are China, all of them are Britain and, moreover, all of them are performers.

This is not a question of somehow reconciling gender and the pursuit of Hongkong identity. On the contrary, it is that imbrication which produces the contradictions which make *Chronicle of Women* such a productive site of cultural criticism. This chapter has attempted to show the (im)possibility of making Hongkong woman the subject of her own story. In the present political context, audience members tend to reactively homogenise women and see the presentation only in the context of nationalism and ethnicity. Yet the very fact of placing the figures of women in a position of negotiating between a discourse of Hongkong identity, which signals affinity and difference, and a discourse of the female gendered subject, which signifies challenge and the critique of forms of patriarchy, reminds us of the need to put the ‘im’ of ‘impossible’ in parentheses (see Spivak 1987: 246) while we attempt to straddle the many-levelled intricacy and openness of the performance.

In this chapter I have tried to read some of the interpretive politics that seemed to produce and was produced by *Chronicle of Women*. My polemic purpose in offering this argument is to caution against simplistic allegorical readings which summon up the quest for local identity in terms of national politics, no matter how strategic such an interpretation may be. My intervention into the production, in the form of a specifically feminist analysis mediated by Gayatri Spivak, Rey Chow and Teresa de Lauretis, is an example of how it is possible to resist that seduction. Mine is a paradoxical gesture as I illegitimately claim the performance to the ‘feminine’ and then seek to illustrate the difficulties of this position.

In some ways this account may appear to sit uneasily with my contention in the previous chapter that Zuni Icosahedron is characterised by a masculinised, hierarchical structure. More seriously, it may be taken as resting on an outdated notion of the autonomy or separateness of representation. Firstly, it needs to be said that the cultural construction of ‘woman’ goes on as busily in the daily practices of company members as it does on stage. These constructions traverse, rather than inhere in, social stratifications, institutions and the occasions of formal representation. Secondly, as I have attempted to demonstrate, it is not that women are not important participants within the theatre company, it is not that they are barred from telling their own stories but that they do so with less access to authority. This paradox of being present and absent at the scene of representation is replayed during the performance in terms of adherence and resistance to normative constructions of Woman. Thus what may seem to be a division between, at its grossest level, life and art or oppression and liberation
is, in fact, the very strength and the source of the productive heterogeneity of *Chronicle*. In this respect, both the performers and the audience are positioned in relation to discourses and representations of gender within their own lives that are analogous with, if not directly mimicked by, the performance. Once we eschew a conventional inside/outside model of politics and accept the imbrication of resistant practices within the forces of domination, we can say that constructions of gender have the capacity to disturb, and rebound upon, other discourses, such as nationalism and ethnicity but that they can also perpetuate the presuppositions and structures of the systems they putatively oppose.

This paradox, this running the risk of contradiction, is one of Zuni Icosahedron's gifts. Their performances will always leave us with an uncertain irony of inaccessibility: Does the performance successfully straddle a consideration of gendered subjectivity and a concern to elucidate that fractured space of love-hate between China and Hongkong? Is an investigation of these contradictions productive, efficacious, or does it simply depend on the usual protections of 'high' artistic expression to purchase the right to scandalize national iconography? It is a condition of Zuni’s continuing potency that these queries remain unanswerable and uncomfortable.
The Absolute Stage

The Revolutionary Opera was the final Zuni Icosahedron production I saw in 1991. Presented as part of the inaugural Chinese Theatrical Arts Festival, this piece was performed for two nights during October in the opulent Grand Theatre of the Hongkong Cultural Centre. To celebrate their first decade of operation, Zuni invited performance/visual artist Ping Chong and composer Qu Xiaosong from New York to participate in their 53rd original production. Originally titled The Legend of the Red Lantern, one of the model operas approved by Jiang Qing during the Cultural Revolution, Zuni was forced to change the name of the show after the Urban Council threatened to withdraw the production from the Festival program because the title constituted a ‘misrepresentation’. The ironic audacity of Danny Yung’s decision to invoke these model operas in the title of his production can only be appreciated if one knows a little about these mind-numbing pieces.

Taking a hint from Mao’s statement that ‘... life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life’ (cited in Ebon 1975: 18), revolutionary operas, otherwise known as model operas or yang ban xi (sample theatre), were a centre-piece of Communist orthodoxy and the efforts to forge cultural production into a standardised mode in the name of the Revolution in China during the 1960s. The notion of model operas relied heavily on the belief that plots and characters should be imitable in politically correct thought and action. This extravagance was to be achieved through the twin methods of ‘revolutionary realism’ and ‘revolutionary romanticism’.

This mobilisation of literature, art and performance was not an appendage to the Cultural Revolution but an absolutely central element of the desire to achieve ideological purity through propagandistic effectiveness. The customary Chinese recognition that culture occupies a central place in socio-political affairs reached new heights. Traditional Beijing operas were banned from 1964, officially leaving the Mainland with only a handful of ‘approved’ works; or, as a
contemporary joke had it, one show per one hundred million people (Mackerras 1993: 4).1

Of course, this creation of proletarian heroes and heroines was not achieved without great struggle - recalcitrant cultural workers continued to resist Jiang Qing’s methods of hoisting ‘the great red banner of Mao Zedong’s thought’ (Ebon 1975: 26) high over the opera stage. However she proved triumphant in largely eliminating this ‘black line’. Cultural institutions became ‘fortresses’ and ‘headquarters’; literary and art criticism became ‘daggers’ and ‘hand grenades’ (Ebon 1975: viii,17). In a 1964 address to the Forum of Theatrical Workers Participating in the Festival of Beijing Opera on Contemporary Themes, Jiang Qing explained her aims:

Theatres are places in which to educate people, but at present the stage is dominated by emperors, princes, generals, ministers, scholars and beauties - by feudal and bourgeois stuff ... We stress operas on revolutionary contemporary themes which reflect real life in the fifteen years since the founding of the Chinese People’s Republic and which create images of contemporary revolutionary heroes on our operatic stage ... An opera must have a clear cut theme with a tightly knit structure and striking characters (Ebon 1975: 2-4).

A commentator in the journal *Chinese Literature* put the matter more succinctly: ‘What to love and what to hate, what to praise and what to oppose, will show in how we make the character look’ (Shu 1970: 122).

Jiang Qing’s own dedication to the project of reorganising China’s artists into propagandists for Maoism is partially attributable to her experiences in cultural work, prior to marrying Mao Zedong in 1939. A minor Shanghai stage- and-screen actress using the name Lan Ping (Blue Apple), Jiang Qing progressed from playing bit parts for left-wing studios to become one of the major players in Chinese politics during the Cultural Revolution. Using her position as a kind of Commissar of Culture to persecute those who had blocked her earlier acting career, she ruthlessly pursued the radicalisation of the theatre until she was later imprisoned as an ‘enemy of the people’. Jiang Qing hanged herself in Beijing on May 14 1991, aged 77, while serving a life sentence. ‘The witch has committed suicide’ pronounced Shanghai’s *Liberation Daily*. (Ebon 1975: xi,xiv; SCMP 2/3/1991: Review 5; SCMP 5/6/1991: 1; SCMP 10/6/1991: 8; SCMP 21/6/1991: 1).

The staging of *Revolutionary Opera* five months after her death was therefore a highly topical reminder of the ways in which the Chinese Communist Party had attempted to secure its hegemony through relentless ideological homogenisation partnered with political terrorisation (Tang 1991: 93). It didn’t take much imagination to see that this might refer to the present

1. There were some other officially approved forms such as works presented by theatrical propaganda troupes, with titles like *Sell More Grain to the State in Preparedness Against War*, carrying on socialist education through the arts (*Chinese Literature* 6, 1970: 132).
and the future as well as the past. Given this, it is little wonder that the Urban Council were nervous.

Obviously the Urban Council were aware that, considering the nature of previous Zuni productions, Yung's proposal to stage a piece called *The Legend of the Red Lantern* was not an expression of a desire to restage the original model opera. In the event, *Revolutionary Opera* was certainly no nostalgic reworking of *Red Lantern*. Set during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945), the original plot revolves around a courageous 'family', biologically unrelated but united by class loyalty. The 'grandmother' and 'father' are interrogated and executed but the 'daughter' finally succeeds in transmitting a secret code to Communist guerrilla fighters. The production was the highlight of the Beijing cultural season in 1968. Sung to piano accompaniment, it was an example of how foreign classical art forms could be used to propagate Chinese patriotism. Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong, Lin Piao and Zhou Enlai all attended the triumphant premiere. Audience members saw fit to give a standing ovation, holding their copies of *Quotations from Chairman Mao* high as they cheered enthusiastically (Ebon 1975: 213,216; Kraus 1989: 144,145).

There was nothing in Yung's production of *Revolutionary Opera* to specifically remind one of all this. Only traces remained - the grating sound of a train whistle, its axles clanking louder and louder as it approached, potentially evoked for the audience the railway siding where the hero, Li Yuhe, worked; a red lantern moving through the engulfing black of the stage inevitably referred to the pasting of red paper over the light to indicate danger to fellow Communist sympathisers throughout the model opera. *The Legend of the Red Lantern* was a provocative starting point for Yung's characteristic reshuffling of fragments of preexistent performing arts, the building blocks of older cultural production, in a new and heightened bricolage of light, colour, movement, gesture and space.

*Revolutionary Opera* featured guest performances by three local artists. Tan Siow Siew, who works in the educational section of the Hongkong Ballet, appeared in the show after expressing a desire to Yung to participate in 'something more experimental'. Hovering on pointe, she continually crossed and recrossed the stage, her sylph-like teetering jarringly combined with stiffly clenched fists raised high. The militancy of this gesture formed a counterpoint to the stereotypical image of the frail romantic female figure which so fixated nineteenth century Western dance.

This image should not, however, be interpreted purely as a reference to grand European cultural traditions. The discarded title of *The Legend of the Red Lantern* makes this impossible. Part of the point, as I see it, of Yung's original choice of this title was that *Red Lantern* provides a very clear example of the highly unstable reception accorded to European culture within China. Jiang Qing's activities in the reform of Beijing opera merged in this particular model opera with her efforts to make symphonic music a second 'stronghold' of the Cultural Revolution. Under Mao's slogan of 'making foreign things serve
China’, the piano was chosen for musical accompaniment of this piece. A violent controversy ensued. While young Red Guards were busily smashing what they regarded as an imperialist instrument and symbol of bourgeois affectation, Qing remained determined to adopt the piano as a favourite musical ‘weapon’. The use of this instrument in *Red Lantern* was boldly announced in publicity materials (Ebon 1975: 214; Kraus 1989: viii,133,140). She also approved the ballets *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White-haired Girl*, again model works. Tan’s incongruous combination of elegant pointe and harsh fists needs to be placed in the context of these earlier plans to appropriate Western cultural forms to further the cause of the Revolution. Her performance simultaneously suggested the hold of canonical versions of Western performing arts in Hongkong and the seemingly contradictory task undertaken in the Mainland of harnessing ‘the foreign tiger’ precisely to fight it.

Augustine Yeung, artistic director of local dance group *The Gay Steppers*, contributed the second guest performance to *Revolutionary Opera*. Casting an enormous shadow on the side walls of the theatre, he intermittently performed sections from the Beijing opera piece ‘The Noble Concubine Getting Drunk’. Amidst a confused cacophony of coughing, hooting, voices and drums, he elegantly presented this tragic vignette of a woman so jealous of her Emperor’s new mistress that she consumes cup after cup of wine. A man playing a woman, Yeung moved with a fluid, feminine grace, seemingly oblivious to the chaotic stage action enveloping him.

Yeung’s decision to incorporate Beijing opera into this production is, in part, a reference to the classical forms of Chinese theatre banned during the Cultural Revolution. In sharp contrast to the propagandistic simplicity demanded by model operas, Beijing opera presents audiences with morally ambiguous characters and situations, with subtle distinctions and, ideally, a contemplative lyricism (Hsu 1985: xi,104,111,141). These references to classical Chinese theatre in *Revolutionary Opera* were further stressed in the stage setting - the use of a small table which conventionally stands for different pieces of furniture or scenery (if an Emperor sits behind it, it is a throne; with a chair at each end and actors walking over it, it becomes a bridge) and the constant dragging of a wide strip of red carpet, a necessary fixture of classical Chinese theatre, across the floor both attested to this (Hsu 1985: 23,27). In contrast to the presentation of grand European cultural traditions found in the figure of the ballet dancer, Yeung’s performance points to the sway of grand Chinese cultural traditions. As Yung (1991c) wrote in his *Programme Notes*: ‘The table on the red carpet in Beijing opera. Forever respectable. Forever stable’.

The third guest performer was Miranda Chin who runs her own successful dance company in the territory. Chin performed a song from *Red Lantern* titled ‘Breaking Your Teeth With Anger’, a song about the anger and hatred that accumulates with constant oppression. Behind a gauze, she took on various revolutionary gestures, pointing dramatically amidst a pile of black clad bodies
lying around her, eerily singing to an invisible upstage audience. Yung gave her
the following directives:

I told her that this particular section is about people watching people watching people.
There are six layers and each layer is participating in observing another layer of
activities. Of course the first layer is the audience. Or maybe who is behind me, big
brother. And then there is the layer of the ballerina who is actually demonstrating
something to the audience, some of the steps, and at the same time she is actually
watching what is going on. And then there are the four women which is the third layer.
And then the fourth layer is the preparation of the opera singing. And the fifth layer is
the people who are all lying, except for one person who is standing among the lying
figures ... And in the sixth layer was Miranda.

It will be apparent from the above quotation that I have not been doing
justice to the complexity of *Revolutionary Opera*, its seemingly endless reflexive
twists into the maze of fine edges dividing surveillance and observation, cultural
creation and the potential tyrannies of cultural production. My account here is
limited to what is necessary to fulfill my own desire to tell a story and to bring
you back to some of the major concerns of this thesis. The structuring figures of
revolutionary opera singer, ballet dancer and Beijing opera performer are
almost sufficient here. But not quite. We need the woman in red to complete
the picture.

When I first questioned Yung about this figure, wearing a long red robe and
elaborate headdress in the style of a Beijing opera Empress, he replied: ‘It’s just
a man playing a woman’s role’. Later he added, ‘You can relate it to Jiang
Qing’. She entered behind a gauze, her back to the audience, barely visible.
Behind her, a red cloth was dragged slowly along. Absolutely still, arms
outstretched, by a trick of lighting she disappeared, swallowed by the stage.
Reappearing she moved across the floor, crablike, percussive. She slowly turned
to the spectators revealing a hollow figure whose featureless entirely black face
merged with the oppressive darkness of the theatre. ‘I just wanted that
particular performer to be faceless and I wanted the face to belong to the stage
and the stage has black curtains - because I think that’s what accumulates in
hundreds and hundreds of years; an artform really belongs to the stage; it does
not belong to the performers’, commented Yung.

Once again we are confronted with the flirtation with Jiang Qing that was
apparent in *Chronicle of Women*. In contrast to the levity of the latter, however,
this dalliance retained a more sombre, nightmarish quality. Further, the
omniscient Empress manipulating behind the scenes does not conclude the
characterisation. She is also Alice in Wonderland, the Queen of Hearts and
Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, her infamous affairs with producers and
dramatists, her ‘liquidation’ of those who crossed her path during her early
career as an actress, transformed in Yung’s (1991c) *Programme Notes* into a
surreal combination of executions and fairytales, of ambitions and revolutionary
ardour, of the desperate desire to achieve fame and the chaos of failure:
In the beginning, she was just any girl in a story book.

(How did a nice girl/place like you/this end up in/with a place/girl like this/you?)

She flips through a fairy-tale MTV. She is slightly dazzled, and a bit lost. She falls into a hole. She goes through a trial.

Though no actress, she is determined to set foot on the stage, to throw herself to an era that is on fire, to become a figure. Any role is better than no role.

Alice in Wonderland. The absolute stage.

The stage. A black hole. A white sky beyond the black hole. Everyone! Step forward. March.

She flips through a fairy-tale MTV. Comes the Yellow Brick Road. Comes the processions of red hot dragons. Drums roll. Heads roll.

She turns, smiles, leaning on her comrades. Have we succeeded? Are we working hard enough? How did we do?

In less than ten years time she withers, just a bit. She comes out from the black hole. Outside it’s a white sky.

There are times for chaos in the white sky.

What about the revolution? What about the comrades?

What about it?

How did a place like this ... end up with a person like you?

In a split second, it is over.

The reader is reminded of the obvious; namely, the underside of cultural production in the People’s Republic of China has been torture and terror, the stage has been a place of bloody revolutions performed for the sake of ‘the masses’. The present, too, is informed by large scale campaigns to mould representations into officially accepted forms. Hongkong may, in the future, be sucked into this black hole. The magic of those stories told in darkened auditoriums is not as innocent as it seems.

If this interpretation seems far fetched, Edward Lam’s review of Revolutionary Opera for Tsin Pao (31/10/1991) corroborates the comparison drawn between the fate of cultural workers and current politics in China:

There were no actors lines. There was only image. The main character which touched the audience was the light. It was dark most of the time during the performance. That reminded me of winter streets in Beijing. Light became a luxury hard to catch. All the people in the play were longing for some light, while they became blind when the light finally appeared. They could see nothing any more as they wanted. Everybody is like
Figures 15 & 16: Revolutionary Opera. Grand Theatre, Hong Kong Cultural Centre (Courtesy Zuni Icosahedron).
that - every one of the performers, the audience and the one billion people of a country.

To say that *Revolutionary Opera* is a self-reflexive performance would be a gross understatement. It is a play about plays whose characters are only actors and audiences. This is a performance about the process of cultural production and we are never allowed to forget that we are, at that very moment, watching it and being watched. It tells of other performances we have seen and other productions Yung has directed. As he put it: ‘It’s very much a piece for the people who are in theatre in Hongkong, people who know about the traditions of Chinese theatre, people who know about Peking opera. It’s so obviously about watching and being watched, the experience of stepping on stage’. This stage is a battlefield; the monumental desolation of darkness only a show away.

Yung’s production drags and jerks exactly at the ‘switch-points’ (Taussig 1992: 47) of cultural production in Hongkong, effectively reaching toward the socio-historical determinants which define the performing arts in the territory and Zuni Icosahedron’s place within that frame. *Revolutionary Opera* (or at least my version of it) returns us neatly to the question of the value placed upon established aesthetic canons in Hongkong and Zuni’s attempts, alongside those of a handful of other groups, to break free from those constraints and establish an aesthetic mode which can address the experience of being a Hongkong Chinese right now. The production moves through a prefabricated cultural landscape of ballet, Beijing opera and model operas to take us back to the issue of the ‘double bind’ (see Chapter Three) through which Hongkong performing arts are articulated. As I have previously stated, the strips that make up this binding are ‘China’ and the ‘West’, both constructed entities being treated as possessing established performance traditions which are a necessary part of ‘civilized’ society. Yung provides his audience with a striking visual presentation of this binding and in doing so creates a montage designed to shock connections into a different patterning (see Taussig 1992: 47), to, in his own words, ‘suddenly jive into a different kind of performing arts’.

According to an optimistic reading *Revolutionary Opera* thus illustrated the notion that cultural production need not be tied to some uplifting drama of revolutionary triumph or some romantic balletic idyll but may be equally inscribed in new types of performance that speak directly to the here and now. Or did it simply suggest that innovation is no longer possible? Here it is instructive to compare a passage by Frederic Jameson (1983: 115) dealing with postmodernism and a passage by Yung (1991c) in his *Programme Notes* for the production. Jameson writes ‘all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum’. Yung provides a remarkable echo:

... Mao Zedong ... feared most the power that art created. He ‘positioned’ art, set up ‘standards’ against artists, framing the ‘main direction’. Come the Cultural Revolution
and Mao went as far as creating a 'model', the absolute standard, and called it 'yangban'.

So another stuffed animal entered the museum collection.

A few months back, The Revolutionary Opera was still The Legend of the Red Lantern. Then Zuni received notice from the Festivals Office, insisting on a change of the title ... or possible cancellation of the performance.

The experience reminded me again of the stuffed animals. And The Legend of the Red Lantern became The Revolutionary Opera.

This would seem to suggest the failure of art, a necessary imprisonment in the past. But Yung is, in fact, more optimistic than Jameson. Yung’s jibes about taxidermy are really an assault on the performing arts bureaucracy in Hongkong and the amalgam of government and commercial art in the territory which ensures that arts funding and policy is primarily designed to meet the requirements of expatriates and local elite. It is precisely at the frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that Revolutionary Opera is staged. This staging is not designed so much to transcend older forms of representation as to expose the systems of power that authorize some forms of cultural production while blocking or prohibiting others. For Yung both the Chinese government and the Hongkong government are implicated in these prohibitions and he has a responsibility to remind the audience of the parallels and of the necessity for future vigilance.

It is relevant to note here that while propaganda on the Mainland usually takes a less rigid form nowadays, the model operas of the Cultural Revolution have not been consigned to the museum. Kraus (1989: 268), for example, reports that Beijing’s Central Ballet Troupe performed The Red Detachment of Women in 1987. In 1993 I attended a performance of excerpts of model operas at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. A Chinese-Australian child sitting behind me remarked, during an aria from Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy, ‘I’m boring’. The 1983 campaign against ‘spiritual pollution’, the attack mounted in 1987 against ‘bourgeois liberalism’ and the more recent efforts to quash critical thought following the Tiananmen Square massacre all demonstrate that propaganda is alive and well on the Mainland. Yung is only too well aware of the fact that, though no direct equation can be made between China in the 1960s and Hongkong in the 1990s, the control exerted by the British administration over financial subsidies to artists can result in the same nauseating dullness that the Chinese Communist Party encourages in the field of cultural production.

2. The performance was provided by the Qiaosheng Peking Opera Company. This group was established in 1990 and its thirty members include professional Beijing and Kunqu Opera performers as well as more recent migrants from Hongkong, Taiwan and the People's Republic.
To many readers, accustomed to the idea that one cannot separate cultural production from the political milieu in which it is produced, Yung's insistence on recognising the political assumptions and forces which govern the performing arts in Hongkong may seem hackneyed. But this type of criticism is remarkably absent in Hongkong. The present administration's representation of the territory as an oasis of 'freedom' neighbouring a place of totalitarian repression has been highly successful. The question for Yung, along with other Chinese intellectuals, is how to encourage a commitment to critical thought. His answer, in Revolutionary Opera, is to bring together Chinese artists from the territory and from overseas to present their own united-front in showing how tenacious the political and aesthetic a prioris are which govern their work and how one might work within these seemingly immutable structures to transform them.

Throughout this thesis I have stressed this transformative potential in various aspects of cultural production taking place in Hongkong. This potential appears in film, wherein an aesthetics of excess creates a space in which the uprooted subject can belong, and in the performance work of Zuni Icosahedron, wherein cerebral distancing and pedagogical commitment inform the pursuit of a minimalist aesthetic. What these forms of cultural production have in common is, firstly, historical context. It is evident that impending sovereignty transferral poses tremendous uncertainties and fears. Even when cultural products are not designed to express these fears, there is a relentless impulse to construe them as being 'about' 1997. That impulse may be frequently misplaced, or just boring, but it does point to the ways in which current representations necessarily emerge within the constraints of this particular time. More specifically, I have argued that the performances of Zuni Icosahedron inscribe a new sense of what it might currently mean to be a Chinese person in Hongkong on the very syntax of theatrical language itself.

Secondly, these cultural products demonstrate the radical possibilities for the construction of novel identities by means of a hybridising tendency which critically, and often ironically, appropriates elements from dominant cultures (China, Britain, America, Japan) to produce a novel mode of expression. This eclecticism is embraced with genuine pleasure. More than a necessity, people gain a sense of what I previously termed 'entrepreneurial adventure' from this journey through a representational world made up of intersecting figures and references that play upon the fundamental instability of being, or becoming, Hongkongese.

It is not my intention to suggest that such fragmentation necessarily results in an effective contemporary cultural politics. In Hongkong the efficacy of this remarkable capacity for ambiguity and juxtaposition stems from the ways in which it refuses essentialization. The importance of this refusal rests, in turn, upon the near presence of Communist orthodoxy which forces representation into a standardized mode in the name of Revolution and the continuing influence of a British administration whose dominant cultural norms are
anxiously monolithic. Forms of cultural production which assert the unfixed and overdetermined nature of identity work against this suppression of diversity.

Reflections

In 1989 the new General Secretary of the Communist Party, Jiang Zemin, warned that Hongkong should not attempt to interfere with China. He stated that: ‘According to the principle of 'one country, two systems', China practices socialism, Hongkong practices capitalism. The well water should not interfere with the river water’ (Cheng 1990: 283). This statement has to be understood in terms of the ways in which socialism profoundly defines itself in terms of its capitalist double. When the People’s Republic looks at its own watery reflection in the glass cladding of the numerous skyscrapers that front Victoria Harbour, it sees in that shimmering expanse an explicit contrast between an ethical socialist state and a morally vacuous city controlled by an immoral market (Anagnost 1992: 190,193). It also sees a promise of things to come.

Chinese authorities have been busy for a couple of decades now trying to ensure that when they embrace that promise in 1997 they do so with a firm grip. Seeking to establish itself as the dominant political force in the territory, the CCP has been very actively building its community network and influence in Hongkong. Some of these activities have been very public, such as the campaign to block the introduction of direct elections to the Legislative Council in 1988 or the appointment of 91 local advisers by the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office and the local branch of Xinhua. Others are less tangible - cocktail parties, receptions, trips to China. Much of the reason for the successful hold of this united-front campaign can be attributed to what Cheng (1990: 288) has aptly termed the ‘unholy alliance’ between Chinese authorities and a conservative business community desperate to maintain the status quo in which they fare so well. ‘Stability’ and ‘prosperity’ are the catch words for this clinch.

The Chinese leadership certainly takes the maintenance of this stability and prosperity seriously. In a situation where China has fallen in status from a model of self-reliant socialist development to that of an underdeveloped and, for many inhabitants, backwards nation, Hongkong represents the possibility of ‘progress’, ‘modernisation’ and foreign exchange. Instead of a backwater colony, Hongkong, as China’s third largest city, is the hope for future success. Jiang’s statement missed the point - the well water has already interfered with the river water. Eighty five per cent of the radios in Guangzhou are tuned to Hongkong stations (White & Cheng 1993: 170); television programmes from the territory are enormously popular throughout the Mainland. The superiority of socialism has become a dubious proposition as viewers and listeners compare their own impoverished situation with that of their comparatively wealthy and unfettered
compatriots in the territory and in overseas Chinese communities. The reflection in the glass has altered. Capitalist Hongkong is no longer a source of reactionary ideas. It is a wellspring of salvation.

The image is undoubtedly distorted. But its flat surface should not detract us from the serious point that Hongkong may have a profound effect upon the Mainland after the Chinese resumption of sovereignty. The weak version of this observation is that the ways in which Hongkong, as an important economic entity, interrelates with China is not entirely up to Beijing (White & Cheng 1993: 190). The stronger notion advanced by theorists is that the border is a 'permeable membrane' through which people and goods and ideas flow. This flow results in a reversal of the centre-periphery relationship so that the periphery (Hongkong) becomes the source of innovation, initiative and wealth (Dittmer & Kim 1993: 23,31). In a situation where, both outside and within China, people's sense of patriotism is increasingly separated from even perfunctory loyalty to the CCP (Chow 1993: 92; Rosen 1989: 201), we can reverse the notion, expressed in Chapter Six, that 'China is fucking Hongkong' and say that 'Hongkong is and will be fucking China'.

Questions about 'Chinese identity' are clearly raised by this scenario. Throughout this thesis I have argued that the concepts of 'Chinese identity' and 'Hongkong identity' are not given, accomplished facts that cultural products then represent but artifacts whose forms, meanings and effects contextually shift as part of a process of political articulation and negotiation across a range of sites. The members of Zuni Icosahedron, along with many other intellectuals, are crucially engaged in this project of dismembering and remembering what it is to be 'Chinese'. While it is not the case that people's identities are constructed once and for all and definitively fixed, it would be equally wrong to see Chinese and/or Hongkong identity as totally malleable. Instead of imagining optional choice, I have tried to focus on the political forces shaping discourses about identity in Hongkong and the ways in which identity is constituted within representation as part of an ongoing effort to dramatise an increasingly uncertain present.

It seems to me that any anthropological reading of this present would, as I have done, reveal the privileged metaphor of '1997' within the radicalisation of the Hongkong imaginary. What is at stake is a process of reification whereby the here and now can be grasped as a kind of thing. Experiences and freedoms are constantly regarded as if they were about to vanish. In this climate, the notion of 'Hongkong identity' is in vogue because it acts as a focus for all the confusions and anxieties that accompany sovereignty transferral. It is also a politically strategic affirmation that strengthens indigenist ideologies by imposing a seeming coherence upon a fragmented populace. To speak of 'Hongkong identity' is an active articulation, a violent gesture, which attempts to compel recognition of the existence of Hongkong people, an existence too often viewed as inert and apathetic by other players on the political scene.
In some respects, the performances of Zuni Icosahedron seem to defy this context of identity politics in that they work to dismantle the idea of the possibility of any singular or definitive identity. Their shows do not give the impression that Hongkong people could simply step outside dominant structures and create some new identity uncontaminated by them. Instead, they resist essentialization knowing that utopian moves will do nothing to unravel the bindings which enforce their marginality. What they seek is a recognition of the constricting power of those bindings and a consideration of the ways in which ‘Hongkong identity’ is not necessarily an emancipatory label. As the diagrams accompanying the Programme Notes for Deep Structure of Chinese (Hongkong) Culture indicate (see Diagrams 1 and 2), the whole issue of identity is fraught with difficulties. Who has the power to speak for Hongkong culture? Who will listen? Is the reification of the present a series of nostalgic snapshots, soon to be consigned to the dusty pages of forgotten photograph albums? Is the current concern with Hongkong identity just another form of cynical commercialism? Such questions are too rarely asked.

The tendency of critics, publicists and audiences to bypass these questions and see Zuni as speaking for and performing Hongkong identity in some straightforward fashion exemplifies in a particularly intense way the tension between disruptive representational strategies and the processes whereby such strategies are absorbed into other projects. Members of Zuni Icosahedron are also implicated in this absorption. Their frequent use of the self-aggrandising rhetoric of transgression, their self-forged status as cultural heroes striking blow after blow at ‘the system’, often blinds members to their own contributions in ensuring the continuation of a markedly masculinised, hierarchical structure within the confines of their own theatre company. In exploring this issue I have tried to take into account Zuni’s differential solicitation of male and female subjects and the tendency of senior members to ignore the conflicting investments of men and women in the discourses and practices of the company. Audiences, too, are bound by their own social positioning. The dominant interpretation of Chronicle of Women as being ‘about’ political relations between Hongkong and China rather than ‘about’ gendered colonial subjects demonstrates this.

Considerations of gender also loomed large in my analysis of Hongkong television as a major industry within patriarchal capitalism. My larger point here was that, in a situation where capitalism thrives on selling people things that will enhance their uniqueness, on differentiation and the seemingly endless production of neoethnicities, it is wrong to assume that the energies invested in representing and constructing ‘Hongkong identity’ are necessarily in a liberalizing direction. In contemporary Hongkong cultural products simultaneously hold out possibilities for the broadening of cultural politics and for its contraction.

Where, then, does this leave us? With an uncertain oscillation between the dangers of essentialization and commodification and the attractions of strategic
I am a child of this colony.
Why is one's own space, one's own community, so difficult to describe?

You don't even have to be here. Just switch on. Same time. Same station. Enjoy the show.

Hong Kong Travelogue
A door, a threshold, a passageway

Confession/Indiscretion
...overlaid with many different, often contradictory elements.

Diagrams 1 & 2: Deep Structure of Chinese (Hongkong) Culture

Just switch on. Same time. Same station. Enjoy the show.

This is a floating city. A door, a threshold, a passageway

This is a make-do modernism

In a city at the end of time there is still time to tell a few stories...

Who speaks for Hong Kong culture? Can we define ourselves only by defining others?
mobilisations of identity? Not exactly. For most of these pages I have been gesturing, I hope, towards something more interesting in the representational work of Zuni Icosahedron. Their productions refuse any illusions that what is said or seen could be a direct mapping of what is. This accords well with my own conviction that cultural products are not mirrors which reflect reality or vehicles for making social structure explicit or ways of resolving fundamental contradictions but forms of representation that bear the marks of contradictory historical relationships and that, on occasion, allow people to ask new questions. What Zuni offer are performances that directly address those contradictions while retaining the feeling of an internal distance, a space of critical silence. This critical space, this movement towards a new position from which Hongkong people may consider their circumstances and find a place from which to speak, exists alongside the heavy cultural baggage which people carry as part of their colonial history as Hongkong Chinese without denying or obliterating it.

We cannot anticipate the outcome of this critical space but we can recognise its capacity to raise corrective doubts and constructive questions, to resituate the debates surrounding ‘Hongkong identity’. In terms of my earlier discussion, it would be easy to misinterpret my comments about the profound effects which Hongkong may have upon mainland China as playing into prevailing discourses about the global collapse of socialism and the necessary triumph of capitalism. This absurdly teleological scenario is not at issue. What productions like *Revolutionary Opera* teach us is a concern about the homogenising tendencies that accompany the blurring of the distinction between civil society and state (both in its capitalist form of rule by a bureaucratic-corporate elite and in its communist form of rule by a centralised state planning apparatus) and a concern with the strategies that might stem those tendencies (see Fraser 1989: 88).

In other words, Zuni Icosahedron are concerned to discredit any rule which forecloses the articulation of difference with an imposed, centralised culture. Any critique of this centralisation, instanced in the figures of the Beijing opera performer, the ballet dancer, the actress in a model opera and Jiang Qing as Empress, also entails a disenchanted with the political systems which fetishise such figures as nationalistic icons supporting different versions of their various grand traditions. Performing within the hegemonic parameters of these grand traditions means negotiating between conceptions of the Chinese past, Hongkong’s prewritten future and their colonial present. As performers manipulated ancestral tablets behind a scrim during *Revolutionary Opera*, throwing huge, looming shadows across the theatre, they invoked the oppressions involved in being Chinese and the impossibility of simply shedding those connections. But in the act of that manipulation they also invoked the possibility of playing with their history, of counter-memory, of the refusal of people who have been systematically debarred and disenfranchised from access to political representation to any longer stand patiently in the wings.


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1 Details of dates and page numbers of magazine and newspaper articles can be found within the text.


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