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One Country, Two Systems

Faith S. Pang

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BFA Thesis
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Abstract

As Hong Kong approaches 2047—the year that China will formally commandeer the government—fear looms over our city. Since 2014—the emergence of the Umbrella Revolution—thousands of protests occur every year, as citizens continue to fight against the policy changes that China has imposed upon the city. Our freedom and our future hangs in a delicate balance; no one know what China will do next as the Communist government is too unpredictable. I left Hong Kong eight years ago but since these riots began, I have felt an urgency to understand the exact nature of Hong Kong’s identity, to tell our story before China potentially changes my city permanently. Fueled by these doubts about the future of the city, my thesis investigates this question of Hong Kong’s identity through personal stories, historical narratives and current issues. These categories manifest themselves into poetic objects that each tell a small nugget of the story—a beautiful yet haunting sculpture, a fabric lantern that denotes my experiences in school, a book and a rug that represents a gesture of forgiveness, a desk and a map that reimagines a colonial classroom experience and an umbrella, that symbolizes hope for change.
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I. The Beginning

“By extension, [it] reflects China’s own future. Will Beijing permit the rest of China to become more open, a reflection of the Hong Kong experiment? Or will Hong Kong be forced to converge with an unyielding China as we approach 2047, the year when the fifty-year guarantee of Hong Kong’s rights and freedom expires?”

- Anthony Dapiran, City of Protest: A Recent History of Dissent in Hong Kong

When I first arrived in America, people used to ask me about growing up in Hong Kong. I could only come up shallow and interminable explanations that left both my listener bored and me with an escalating frustration. It seemed an inconceivable task to answer the question, ‘what is Hong Kong?’ in one eloquent sentence. I realised that even I didn’t have an answer. My generation\(^1\) grew up with the lingering remnants of our colonial past and the constant looming fear that our parents warned us about, that the Communist government would change our home forever in 2047.\(^2\) Yet this is a history we have never experienced ourselves, and a future that we know nothing about.

Growing up in post-colonial Hong Kong, I had accepted my generation’s lack of an explicit identity and our indifference towards it. Hong Kong is the hybrid child of the British Empire and Communist China. Since its release from British rule in 1997, Beijing promised independence to Hong Kong’s government for 50 years. We lived under the informal recognition of One Country, Two Systems since then, but the Umbrella Revolution\(^3\) revealed that the potential erosion of this concept was not a distant threat anymore, but rather, was happening right in front of us.

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\(^1\) I was born in 1996, a year before Hong Kong’s return to China.
\(^2\) In 1997, as part of the conditions of return, China promised the Great Britain, in good faith, that the city would remain unchanged for 50 years before it was fully integrated back into the motherland. The date July 1, 2047 is a prominent date in Hong Kong.
\(^3\) The Umbrella Revolution occurred in 2014. Thousands of students and young adults occupied Central District, peacefully protesting that Hong Kong residents have a fair election. Most of Hong Kong’s government is Pro-Beijing and candidates are pre-approved.
Fueled by this uncertainty and my frustration to tell this story in words, my art practice focused on exploring one quintessential question:

What does it mean to be from Hong Kong?

And I found that there was never just one answer.

One Country, Two Systems is as much a discussion of the past, present and future identities of Hong Kong, as it is a memoir for myself. It is a place for complete honesty, for questions, feelings and answers that have been buried for far too long. In this thesis, I move from the most personal responses to this central question, to the most universal answers that all of Hong Kong can understand. While each section corresponds to stages in my life, the timeline is not linear—it is circuitous. I begin with age 12, discussing the toxicity of the elite society that informed my childhood. I proceed to move back in time to primary school, unpacking the meaning of propriety and the politics of the local school system through the school uniform. Still, I move further back in time, discussing British colonialism and how it’s affected modern day. I consider the Sino-Japanese conflict and how the scars of the war have become infused with the larger umbrella of Chinese identity. While examining the past, I continually reference contemporary times until I arrive at present day, with the discussion of the Umbrella Revolution. The essay finally culminates to a point of asking another question: What will Hong Kong’s identity mean to me?
II. Behind the Golden Doors

“I like a lady to be exclusive; I’m dying to be exclusive myself.”

- Daisy Miller, *Daisy Miller* (James, Part 1)

I grew up in a society where the faint smell of jasmine wafted through the very air we walked in and around the spaces familiar to us, where we could hear the heels of brown patent leather shoes clicking on the white marble tiles of our homes, where Tuesday high tea afterschool was compulsory, along with cotillion classes at the Four Seasons. My childhood was shaped by the forged perfection of this lifestyle. But when I left Hong Kong—a place that I once equated with a sense of comfort—my home was reduced to a foreign world tucked behind golden doors, as I began to deeply doubt its authenticity and humanity. And behind those doors, cold to the touch, lived all the quiet words spoken while the loud thoughts slowly permeated the space from a dark corner—the air was thick and dripping with judgment.

*From a 12 Year Old’s Perspective* (fig. 1) addresses the subconscious beginning of mistrust in the home and the issue of housing defining class in Hong Kong. This work was incited by a personal narrative—*The Promises of Entering Society*—that I wrote a year after I left my home; the paper drew a metaphor between a boarding school reception and Henry

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4 I left Hong Kong in 2011 and went to boarding school in New England.
5 Because of the limited land, typically, 80% of an average household’s income goes into housing.

“They always say that there’s a special promise when a girl enters society: the lavishly adorned parties, soft silk dresses and sparkling bubbly champagne are all part of it. But what should have been the introduction to my new life, freedom from rules, became my own prison. For all I found behind those golden doors were the quiet, potent words, dripping with judgment that trapped me... The boarding school community in Hong Kong consists of a select group of families’ wealthy enough to send their children to the nonpareil schools in the Western Hemisphere. My actions of attending Milton, however, have already fulfilled part of the compartmentalized mold that they had prescribed to me. In this world, women required the garish name brands plastered on their bodies and diamonds glittering in every light...”
James’ novella, *Daisy Miller.* I also reminisce about a childhood memory when I heard the painful groans of a 60 to 70-year-old cleaning lady, as I sat, separated from her in my toilet stall at the St. Regis. It was an appropriate metaphor—we lived above on our mountaintops acknowledging, but oblivious and indifferent to who or what was physically below us.\(^8\)

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

*fig. 1 Faith Pang, From a 12 Year Old’s Perspective (2018)*

The sculpture’s materials allude to the foundation or the building of a home: chicken wire, pink insulation, light, papier-mâché, which alludes to wallpaper, and reflective surfaces. As the chicken wire is bent, twisted and cut, and used as a frame for the overall structure, the insulation is wrapped around it as a sort of protection that lines the sharp edges. The papier-mâché is the shredded ghost prints of a previous project inspired by a poem about my grandfather.\(^9\) I use this motif of the echoes of my family as a wallpaper to

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\(^7\) In Henry James’ novel, *Daisy Miller* becomes ill and dies, presumably from the weather in Switzerland, but the reader can’t help but wonder if she died from the toxic society around her.

\(^8\) The wealthy in Hong Kong live on Victoria’s Peak or in an area called the Mid-Levels, which is half way up the hill. The average Hong Kong resident lives scattered in the territories below the mountains.

\(^9\) The poems were written by poets, after the Cultural Revolution in China, as a way to say thank you to my grandfather for saving their artistic work.
further highlight skepticism of the metaphorical foundation of home: my family and what part we play in the society that raised me. I use sickly sweet colours, to represent the consumerist culture of my childhood, a nod to the aunties in my world who perpetuated the stereotype that pinks and purples were feminine and to be feminine was to be proper. I used iridescent colours, reflective surfaces to allude to mirrors, as I reflect upon this excessive vanity, the spoiled thing that turned my concept of home inside out. All this, however, is left unfinished as the viewer confronts the ragged and violent nature of the sculpture (fig. 2). The outer shell, breaks open, giving way to an improbable architectural circulation, while the shadows, propelled by the eerie lights within the structure, seem to explode on the wall, creating a sort of beautiful monster.

fig. 2 Faith Pang, From a 12 Year Old’s Perspective (2018)
III. Politics of the School Uniform

The concept of a school uniform is “an early introduction to the disciplined world of work.” (Wordie) It is meant to unite identity. It is “a social leveller in the classroom, playground and on the street; outwardly, at least, everyone is the same.” (Wordie) When applied to the context of colonialism, however, the school uniform further plays the role of reforming education into a strict Western standard.

Yvonne Osei’s recent solo exhibition *Who Discovers the Discoverers? (fig 3)* is a series of photographs that investigates “residual implications of colonialism... and Western education in post-colonial Ghana.” (Bruno David) She photographs herself wearing Ghana’s public school uniform in confrontational and expressive poses in front of various doors in European capitals such as Lisbon, Paris and Madrid to spark a conversation, not only about the Ghana’s history but the impact of colonialism worldwide.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Though they appear as photographs, these images are extensions/stills of a performance at the location.
Similar to Osei’s series, my work *From Convent Days to Freedom. or what seems like freedom* (fig 4) addresses how Hong Kong’s British colonial past is conflated with the modern Chinese identity through the reimagining of my old school uniform. While boys’ uniforms purposely imitate British grammar school styles—complete with a tie, a pressed and ironed dress shirt, a dark coloured blazer and a school badge, the “girls’ uniforms—particularly for those schools controlled by Christian denominations—are often a modified three-quarter length...*cheongsam*, with a mandarin collar and short side slits.” (Wordie) And as Hong Kong approaches the erosion of one country, two systems in 2047, the Beijing government continually tries to drive education reform by promoting four key ideals: “perseverance, respect for others, responsibility, national identity and commitment.” (Curriculum Development Council), which was officially shelved in October, 2012, was only one of the many efforts to influence Hong Kong to become more pro-Communist.

*fig. 4 Faith Pang, From Convent Days to Freedom. or what I thought was freedom. (2018)*

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11 The British grammar school was the highest rank of state-funded secondary schools in the UK.
12 National Identity refers to the Chinese identity as China and Hong Kong have been considered one nation since 1997.
Though the *cheongsam* was a statement of liberating women’s fashion in the 1920s, the change of this body-hugging dress, that celebrated the female, into a compulsory uniform that assumed a false sense of propriety, altered the way many women, myself included, saw the dress. Echoing the past and present school reform, I reconstructed my *cheongsam* school uniform, from my Catholic school days, into 6 individual panels that formed a lantern, which alludes to the comfort and joy of traditional Chinese festivals—a feeling that could never be associated with school. I used hyacinth, the colour of my former school uniform, to give the restrictive school system a physical, rigid and uncomfortable form; to remind myself of the corner which I stood while stinging blows were brought to my 6-year-old palms. The outside is plain, highlighting the simplicity and elegance of the uniform should look like, complete with white Chinese buttons and trimmings (*fig. 4*). However, as the viewer crouches and emerges into the space (*fig. 5*)—simulating my experiences of getting dressed and, in effect, looking into my mind—the interior reveals doodle-like imagery that challenges the idea of propriety (*fig. 6*). Each panel uses symbols and words to reveal my experiences in school. The panels are loosely attached, suggesting the ill-fitting and uncomfortable qualities of the cheongsam for a growing child. Thus, the project interrogates the strict nature of Western colonial education and the concept of what it means to be a modern Chinese woman.
fig. 5 Faith Pang, *From Convent Days to Freedom. or what I thought was freedom.* (2018)

fig. 6 Faith Pang, *From Convent Days to Freedom. or what I thought was freedom.* (2018)
IV. Shibori, Reconciling the War

The horrors of World War II has plagued the Chinese identity for generations. And sometimes I forget that being from Hong Kong means that we bear the Chinese identity. As 2047 approaches, and we finally embody the meaning of a Chinese, I wonder if the events of the war are truly so inherent that they remain part of the Chinese identity forever. Growing up in Asia, my grandparents told me their own stories of the unspeakable acts committed by Japanese soldiers during the war. As children, we were taught to demonise the Japanese—my parents constantly warned me of the supposed morals that they believed Japanese people lacked; my peers made sure that they never participated in close personal relationships with Japanese teens. With every generation, the true accounts that our grandparents narrated, turn into a diluted, generalised version of themselves, until the first version is lost and all that’s left is a deeply rooted prejudice. On the other hand, the Japanese are known to have rewritten their history textbooks that mitigate Japanese violence during the war—both countries neglected the truth.

In Watered down until they were lost. (fig. 7), I tell the true stories from both sides in an attempt to reconnect the cultures, and to give some humanity back to the Japanese. The book contains two stories: one from a sympathetic Japanese man who continually denounced the Imperial Army’s invasion into China and the second, a tragic tale about my grandmother and how her little brother was killed by a Japanese soldier. Together, the stories tell a more nuanced view than what history might suggest. The book is hand-bound, using a stab-binding method; it reads from right to left; it is hand dyed and the words are screen printed. Their pages are not uniform, their edges, raw. For these stories cannot be
found in history books; they are fragmented and collected. The substrates printed on are shibori dyed fabrics, indigo dyed paper and Japanese rice paper, while the front and back covers are wood, reminiscent of the shibori dyeing process I used. The recurring blue and white motif refers to the Japanese man, whose geisha told his story through the shibori fabrics she designed. The words on the pages move with the rhythm of the stories, the format and font dictated by the content.

Similarly, My Favourite Handkerchief (fig. 8) attempts to reconcile this tension by conflating Japanese dyeing techniques with Chinese design. By revealing the underbelly of the rug, I am symbolically exposing the phantom histories that were once hidden because of fear. The centre holds an abstracted version of the Chinese double happiness character while the bats represent luck, forming a ring around the middle. The rug’s design was
inspired by a shibori handkerchief that was given to me by same geisha. Thus, the origin of the design reflects a hopeful, symbiotic nature.

This optimism is reflected in the story of Japanese war orphans. Throughout the early 1930s, Japanese families were incentivized to migrate and settle in Northern China, where the Japanese government had set up a puppet state. But when Japan surrendered, many of the families that had emigrated took their own lives, leaving their children behind as orphans. Over 4000 children were protected, and eventually adopted by local Chinese families that put their immediate hatred aside to raise the orphans as their own. (“Meet the Japanese War Orphan”) Nakajima Yuba, a Japanese war orphan, published a novel in 2015 titled, 何有此生，一个日本遗孤的回忆 (Why is This Life, A Memory of a Japanese Orphan), about his adoptive Chinese parents and how he chose to identify as China as his home. Thus, it is with gestures of forgiveness that this disease of prejudice can be expelled.
V. The Ghost of Colonialism

In the late 18th century, Britain’s fanatic craze for tea had drained the country’s supply of silver, as it was the only form of payment that the Qing Emperor would accept. Due to the exponentially increasing demand for tea, the British began to smuggle opium into the South of China, demanding silver coins in return to fuel their tea addiction. The First Opium War began as a result of the illegal opium, and Hong Kong island officially became a Crown Colony on June 26, 1843, after China’s humiliating defeat. However, despite the fact that Hong Kong was a tax-free port, in the next 12 years, the British would demand renegotiation of the terms, which would lead to the Second Opium War and China’s defeat, again. The British, sensing China’s weakness and concerned that their little port, Hong Kong, might be threatened by the surrounding Chinese dominion, bargained a perpetual lease of Kowloon peninsula in 1860 and a 99-year lease of New Territories, which included over small 200 islands, in 1898. (Welsh, 5)

The initial unjust document was “drafted by London” and written in “haste.” (Welsh, 147) And Hong Kong was “nothing more than an inconsiderable pimple on the great empire’s [China] extremity.” (Welsh, 2). Hong Kong had not even been included in China’s maps until 1760—the map showed only a portion of the island. (Welsh, 13). And Colonel Claude MacDonald15, who had negotiated this 99-year lease, had picked the number because he believed that 99 years “was as good as forever.” (Welsh 210) In my introduction, I wrote about how Hong Kong is the hybrid child of the British and the Chinese. But in

14 The government officials dumped over 1,000 tons of opium into the river which was the excuse the British needed to begin a war, preying on China’s military weakness.
15 Colonel MacDonald once said in a lecture that “the earth is too small...to permit the Chinese keeping China to themselves.”
reality, we are product of British arrogance and Chinese negligence. Our past, however, didn’t stay in the past; Hong Kong is living history, as the residues of British influence are deeply rooted in the very bones of the city.

My series, *Ghosts of Colonialism, (fig. 9)* addresses what remnants of British Colonialism still reside in Hong Kong. Upon first encounter, the installation confronts the viewer with a solitary desk facing a map, resembling the strict environment of an academy. The bench occupies the space in front of the table-top desk—it assumes another unit such as this. One could almost imagine rows and rows of these modules facing a wall that was blank, save for a map.

![Fig. 9 Faith Pang, Ghosts of Colonialism. (2018)](image)

The road map, *Plan of Segregated District 1924 (fig. 10)*, depicts a small, but wealthy region, The Peak District and the Mid Levels District.\(^{16}\) The title suggests the segregation of

\(^{16}\) As the name suggests, The Peak is the highest point of the hill, while the Mid Levels dwell in the bottom half, the foot of the mountain. In Hong Kong, elevation means power.
two groups during the time. From 1904 to 1946, The Peak District Reservation Ordinance prohibited people of Chinese ethnicity to set foot on the taller part of the hill; the border was the Peak Tramway, shown as the black and gold line.\textsuperscript{17} (Peak District) So while the British had their high tea on The Peak with the view of the city, the Chinese had dim sum in the slums. Although this map is from 1924, little has changed today, save for the actual homes or institutions at the time, shown in the key. Thus, both the process of hand beading, embroidery and the material and colour chosen show this pattern: that the model for living luxuriously, that the British began, has remained the same—housing still defines class; we have only transferred the power.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{map.png}
\caption{Plan of Segregated District, 1924. (2018)}
\end{figure}

The desk, \textit{Re-education: Students, Listen Up!} (fig. 11), echo the lines of the map, and is carved with topographical marks all across the wooden material. Two books lay open on

\footnote{17 The British ‘feared’ that the Chinese had contracted the Bubonic Plague and legally decided to separate us from them.}
it, imitating the same sort of lines. *The History of Hong Kong* by Frank Welsh, occupies the highest point, while 我们香港这些年 (Since 1977: Hong Kong Memory) by 徐天成, exists below. The incised paper of the Chinese book was then rolled into little ‘tea-leaf’ like structures. The pages of the English book are formed to create pockets, pockets whose sole purpose is to receive the tea leaves. The remaining tea leaves are scattered on the table and on the Chinese book below—in effect, the act of taking tea leaves that led to Hong Kong becoming a Crown Colony, is recreated.

*fig. 11, Faith Pang, Re-education: Students, Listen Up! (2018)*
VI. Is Hong Kong Dead?

When it’s convenient we are claimed as Chinese, when they can take monetary advantage of us, we are treated as foreigners. Where, then, can we call home? I constantly wonder if I can even call myself a Chinese. Though the Umbrella Revolution\(^\text{18}\) happened in 2014, the protest is still relevant to the concept of the city’s future—it revealed that the potential erosion of one country, two systems wasn’t a distant future anymore, but was already happening. I’ve spent time reflecting on what it means to be from Hong Kong but as we approach July 1\(^\text{15}\), 2047, I can’t help but ask myself if 50 years was indeed an empty promise and if Hong Kong will die that day. Because even if we continue reaping the benefits of democracy, keeping our freedom, we have become a city divided bitterly; there are those of us who have harboured a deep mistrust in our home, in our police, in our government and those who believe that the only way to maintain our political stability and economic health is to align ourselves with China.

_Umbrella Man_ by Milk (fig. 12) reflects the fighting spirit that I pray we will never forget; for many people, it is reminiscent of _Goddess of Democracy\(^\text{19}\) (fig. 13), a 33-foot sculpture that was assembled around a metal structure with foam and papier-mâché. Like _Umbrella Man’s_ unstable body made of wooden blocks; it reflects the structural instability of our governments. It is the symbol of the Umbrella Revolution, as it refers to moment when protestors pulled out umbrellas to protect themselves from the pepper spray that the Hong Kong police unnecessarily used to disperse the crowds.

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\(^\text{18}\) The Umbrella Revolution or Occupy Central occurred in 2014. During the protest’s duration of 77 days, over 100,000 protestors gathered everyday in Central (the banking district in Hong Kong).

\(^\text{19}\) Goddess of Democracy was created just days before the Tiananmen Square shooting. Students assembled the structure quickly and carted it to the plaza. The sculpture was destroyed by soldiers at the end of the protests on June 4, 1989.
In *Girl with Two Homes* (fig. 14), I am responding to *Umbrella Man* and *Goddess of Democracy* by creating a female silhouette with shadows of the flags. Like the figures above, *Girl with Two Homes* is temporary and, therefore, unstable by nature; it is made of two sided flags. Upon first glance, the viewer will see a sea of red, Hong Kong independent flags. Moving around the work, the viewer then encounters the colonial flag, a flag that perhaps shouldn't be there. During the Umbrella Revolution, many young students waved our colonial flag, to romanticize colonial times or perhaps as a reminder of democracy. Flags represent unity and our dual history expresses dissent.
In Sticky Note Revolution (fig. 15), I reflect directly on the protest. The umbrella is covered with the iconic ‘electric yellow’ colour of the revolution. While the exterior states the question “why are we here?” “我哋點解企出嚟?” a question that the protestors posted on the Lennon Wall (fig. 16), the interior is filled with my answers to this question. The umbrella is transformed from an object to a space; I print in both traditional Chinese and English, and on two different colours of yellow to convey the duality of the city.

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In Hong Kong, traditional Chinese is prefaced over simplified Chinese, which is used by the mainland.

fig. 16, Lennon Wall, Hong Kong (2014)
VII. What Will It Mean to Be From Hong Kong? – A Departure

When I left my home in 2011 to attend boarding school, I was trying to leave behind the society, the beautiful monster, that raised me—the word home no longer felt right, it was empty. But physical distance filled that void and brought me closer to home. Researching and making work about the city allowed me to answer the central question—what does it mean to be from Hong Kong right now? Upon graduation, I will live at home again for the first time in eight years. This is a return and a departure at the same time. As I go back to my city, though I am physically returning, I am leaving behind this practice of observing from far away and participating in the space itself.

In America, my investigations were niche and focused. But I don’t see my work as unique or one of a kind; my explorations of the city will join the Renaissance happening in Hong Kong, an artistic movement incited by the united desire to understand our city before the advent of a seemingly permanent change. What will it mean to be from Hong Kong after 2047? Will Hong Kong’s current identity die? We don’t know what our future holds—China is too unpredictable—but we can speculate through art. Like the work of the Umbrella Revolution, howemoy art is temporary, my musings have an expiration date—our freedom does too. Our future is unfolding as we approach July 1st, 2047; our identity may become permanent and final. Therefore, the colour palette of my practice is an opportunity for me to remember what Hong Kong was.

I used pinks, purples and iridescent colours, to symbolize my materially driven childhood that feigned perfection, the treacly sweet cotton candy colours to remind myself of the air, thick like honey—it’s a trap. I used hyacinth, the colour of my former school uniform, the cheongsam at St. Paul’s School, to call attention to the erroneous assumption of female propriety, and to evoke a memory of my name labelled on a white corner in the
convent of my school, the stinging blows of the metal ruler against my palms, my resignation, my acceptance that this was what school was meant to be. I used scarlet because I felt that colonialism had been embedded into the bones of the city. Scarlet is the colour of Chinese flag; I used this to reclaim the British artifacts and embellish them with the process of haute-couture traditions from old Chinese masters in mind; indigo to try and bring peace to two cultures still at war; and yellow, to remind myself that we were our own heroes.
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