Mundi: articulating a post-Umbrella common(s)

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ABSTRACT This paper shares the experiences of an emergent collective of young intellectuals in Hong Kong and its recent project, *Mundi*, which consists of publication, activist research and communal transmission of knowledge. The project negotiates the notion and practice of "common" at the limit, from within the historical experience of Hong Kong, between academia and public intellectuals, global universalism and local particularism, and colonial knowledge and everyday urban practice. Affected by an intense desire to analyse and theorise the reality of Hong Kong, *Mundi* engages in a long process of decolonising knowledge production. The paper also explores how *Mundi* responds to the demand of the present post-Umbrella Hong Kong situation by problematising and re-articulating the common.

KEYWORDS: *Mundi*, decolonising knowledge, common, post-Umbrella Hong Kong

At the limit

In Part One, Scene 3 of Goethe's *Faust*, the titular doctor struggles to translate the *Gospel According to John* from first century Koine Greek to German. "In the beginning was 'Logos,'" begins the verse; yet what exactly is "Logos"? Is it language and word ("Wort")? Sense and meaning ("Sinn")? Or power ("Kraft")? In a sudden fit of inspiration, Faust writes, "Im Anfang war die Tat" ("in the beginning was the act"), which summons the demon Mephistopheles, desecrating what should have been a holy moment. "Tat," the accursed word, unlocks an unexpected world in which an otherworldly future is mortgaged to the worldly present.

"Tat" is an act and a practice, and this bridges the sacred and profane and is simultaneously the genesis and limit of the world. Thus, "Tat" constitutes a diagonal, still underdrawn, across a teetering duality between the already ruinous world and another emergent world. It is in this Faustian spirit of "Tat" that the intellectual project *Mundi* (of which the author of this essay is a member) endeavors to position, de-frame and re-frame itself.

Production of *Mundi*

Mundi is an emergent intellectual project in Hong Kong that assumes a form in between periodic journals and intellectual bookazine. This publication involves an open collective that consists of scholars, researchers, writers and artists from the academia and local intellectual communities. "Mundi," in Latin, is "worlds": world in its full multiplicity. Every world must be commonly shared (otherwise, it is not a world anymore); however, it is possible to share the world in infinite ways, styles, manners and logics. *Mundi* is in the midst of multiple bodies, multiple relations and affections, and multiple thoughts on "worlding": how common world(s) can be exposed as such.

The first issue, themed as "Limit," contains eight 10,000-word articles and interviews and addresses some controversies and debates related to the present situations of Hong Kong (Figure 1). These topics include the rise of nativism and right-wing discourses, the refugee question, the parasitic relation between law and violence, the interference of the "China factor" and patriotism, re-conception of "debt" as a prevailing commodity-form under the US-led financial capitalism, and the current socio-economic and socio-ideological conditions of urban politics. The present issue remains underdeveloped in terms of perspectives, topic range and theoretical maturity. However, the issue expresses the intense desire to think at the "limit" by appropriating and experimenting with all possible concepts and analytical tools at hand.
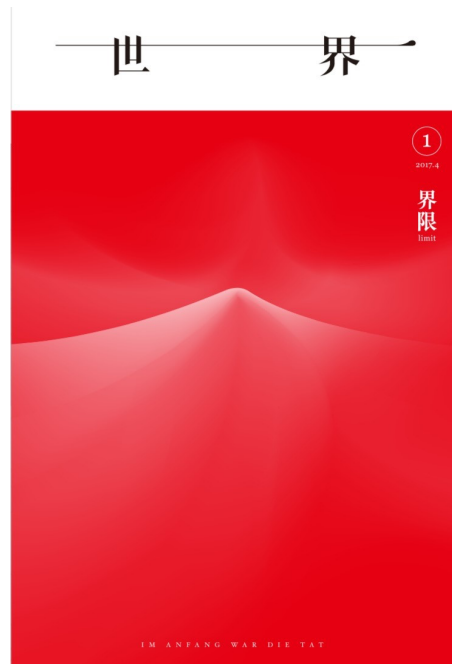
Figure 1 Cover of *Mundi*, No.1 "Limit," with Goethe's words "Im Anfang war die Tat" printed at the bottom.

The first issue of *Mundi* was published in April 2017. Since then, book launches and public talks, based on the debates raised in this issue, have been organised in ACO Book (*yigu* (Due to technical problems, we can only include alphabets in the text and notes. So, I took the liberty to move the Asian characters in the text to the "Special terms" section at the end of the article. Please feel free to make corrections wherever you see fit.); a book-café and art-space in Wan Chai), 01 Space (a cultural space owned by the new media group HK01) and HK Reader (*xuyanshushi*; a leftist bookstore in Mongkok). Other connections were also established in Taiwan. The editors of *Mundi* provided talks and seminars in Joie Éternelle (*yonglezuo*; Taipei), The Libratory (*gonggongcesuo*; Taipei), OR Bookstore (*huozhe*; Zhubei) and the Centre for Contemporary China, National Tsing Hua University (Figure 2 and 3).

Figure 2 "The Baton and the Umbrella," a book launch and public talk in the HK Reader in Mongkok, Hong Kong on 5 May 2017.

Figure 3 "Research as Action: Knowledge Production in Hong Kong," a public talk in the OR Bookstore in Zhubei, Hsinchu County, Taiwan on 21 May 2017.

Publication plans for *Mundi* were drawn up in late 2015, with the beginning of 2016 as the original publication date for the first issue. However, publication was delayed by an entire year. Part of the problem was a shortage of funds, which prevented the project from hiring editors and staff (all editors in *Mundi* are voluntary and unpaid) and soliciting more articles for the volume. Unfortunately, this problem will persist in the publication work for the foreseeable future. Considering that the *Mundi* project continuously and consciously operates in a trial-and-error manner and critically confronts theoretical and empirical matters in disparate styles of writing, it rejects immediate ideological and academic identification. Such working style prevents the project from easy and direct recognition by potential funders but also enables itself to re-evaluate and traverse different disciplines, institutional borders and discursive terrains without being bound by unnecessary constraints. The project will require a long time to obtain stable funding, but it can tentatively rely on limited funding from individual donors and operate largely on a self-financed basis.

Financial and other limitations notwithstanding, the project ensued by slightly expanding and diversifying the editorial board and increasing the content of the coming issue to facilitate production and multiply discussion perspectives. The next issue of *Mundi* will appear in early 2018, and the new issue will question how knowledge production in Hong Kong – and in a larger Asian context – can be decolonised.

Decolonising knowledge production in Hong Kong

Contemporary Hong Kong should be understood as a product of colonialism, and this statement stays valid even after the transfer of sovereignty in 1997. "Post-colonialism" in its literal sense does not exist here. Colonialism is not so much an answer as it is a problem that awaits explanation, as Ackbar Abbas repeatedly contends (1997). Rather than leaving behind a historical colonial reality that belongs to the past, Hongkongers must constantly negotiate and struggle with their own deep-rooted coloniality – as if one's self-knowledge, once conditioned by the colonial machinery, would become inevitably split from within. Here, "colonialism" does not merely refer to the politico-economic domination of a place and its people by a foreign power but also to the

discursive apparatus that incorporates and regulates everyday life practices and that constitutes and depends on colonial governmentality. A decolonisation project must involve this discursive and epistemological dimension and intervene in the institutional practice of knowledge production.

Situating itself in such a colonial-epistemological condition, *Mundi* chooses to occupy a singularly interstitial space, a decision described in the prologue of its first issue (Chan 2017, 4):

> *Mundi* occupies the nebulous zone between academia and public intellectual space, as it is not satisfied with existing "commonsensical" discourses circulating in the public, through intellectuals and commoners alike, while striving to do away with the institutions and standards of academia. To our colleagues in the academia, projects like ours have no place in the field, and any attempts to assert otherwise are met with suspicion; from the public's point of view, we are perhaps no different from the aforementioned scholars, armed with highfalutin jargon and ostentatious rhetoric. Additionally, *Mundi* resides in the interstice between "global" and "local" – resisting both the blind openness of global universalism, as well as the exclusive purity of local nativism. We believe that a truly localised knowledge, with all its innovative, critical and clinical power, could only be achieved when the aforementioned approaches – academic, populist, localist and globalist – are thoroughly questioned instead of being taken as given.

The emphasis on the strategic position of interstice is within reason. Power consistently functions through separation and integration. In Hong Kong, the knowledge production scene has long been partitioned into global universalism and local particularism on the one hand and professional academicism and intellectual populism on the other. Both divisions have their historical root, significance and contribution. As taught by Foucault long ago, power is not so much to repress knowledge as to produce it. Similarly, colonialism never prohibits us from transmitting and applying knowledge for the "common good." What is truly problematic is the manner in which colonialism

conditions our experiences with and use of all those concepts, theories, models, methods, findings, arguments and argumentations produced institutionally.

The first chasm between globalism and localism highly reflects the imaginary split between the world of neoliberal economy dominated by transnational financial capital (together with its fetishism of western "liberal democracy") and the world of nativism where the notion of "native" is naturalised and unconditionally prioritised, if not equally fetishised. This opposing yet mutually reinforcing pair of worldviews, highly visible on the foreground, stifles our socio-political imagination by making us insensitive to the technology and control of colonial governmentality, which remains largely unseen on the background. This coupling of worldviews neither questions global modernity as a continuation and transmutation of colonialism nor investigates how the "native" was historically invented and constituted by colonial machinery (Mamdani 2012). The second chasm between professional academicism and intellectual populism is related to the division of labour internal to the intellectual field. As Mahmood Mamdani (2016) said of the pan-African colonial situation, university scholars have produced and verified knowledge via professional research, whereas public intellectuals have applied knowledge in accordance with current socio-political demands. Different values are attached to the side of academia (which pursues professional "excellence") and that of the public intellectual (which highlights the social "relevance" of knowledge). A deep mistrust between the two has accompanied the long process of decolonisation. Albeit under different historical conditions (for example, such division of intellectual labour in Africa has been further complicated with racism and nationalism that continuously transform with respect to socio-political changes), a comparable situation is observed in Hong Kong. Knowledge production is conditioned by the competitive game of international journal publications and monopolised, classified and hierarchised by research-oriented universities that seldom confront their colonial character. By contrast, the unreflexive appropriation of academic knowledge by public intellectuals, often in an immediate and ahistorical manner, does not orient to a diagnostic self-knowledge so much as it practically acts out the symptom, i.e., the inability to analyse one's experience and theorise present reality without resorting to the discursive system offered by colonial modernity (Sense unclear, please check again.).

Operating in-between the global and local and the academic and populist, *Mundi* aims to construct and shape an intellectual common(s) that can localise knowledge production without compromising its universal and communal aspirations. To transcend the confines of academicism and intellectual populism, *Mundi* also strives to make visible opposing and contradictory ideas, thoughts and expression styles, thereby exposing them to their own discursive positions and limits.

Intellectual "common(s)" in post-Umbrella Hong Kong

Mundi was published in post-Umbrella Hong Kong, which imposes a problem to us retrospectively. Our understanding of "common" can no longer be the same after such an unprecedented mass occupation of urban space in Hong Kong. Feelings of utopian hope and catastrophic disillusionment fused in the aftermath of the struggle, and such ambivalence led to certain post-traumatic aphasia in public discourses.

We undeniably share some "commonalities" in the Umbrella Movement, and most of them were called "universal values," at least in the context of western political liberalism: democracy, freedom of expression, equality and peace. These commonalities are the most universal political values, wherein the problem lays. These values, being so abstractly universal and ambivalently collaborative with colonial modernity, rarely touch upon the corporeality of urban inhabitants in Hong Kong and the historicity of their urban existence. Perhaps we should learn from Deleuze (1992) here: to realise a universalist project, one must not start with the most universal but the least one, i.e., the common element that is directly agreed upon by one body and certain external bodies in each chance encounter. Real commonality comes from the least universal. Thus, universalisation must involve some irreducibly differential process, which must be patiently engaged, shaped and reshaped by the least universals, i.e., disparate common notions formed locally and historically case by case in urban encounters.

Mundi situates itself historically in post-Umbrella Hong Kong precisely by problematising the notion (and practice) of "common." *Mundi* does not pretend to be an intellectual dream-world that, serving as a universal platform of free expressions, can transcend all institutional disciplines and historical conditions. By contrast, *Mundi*

regards itself not so much as an isolated intellectual undertaking, but endeavours to articulate itself with other intellectual communities to form a complex and composite "body." *Mundi* has already been connected to two independent but mutually affected communal bodies (as other connections are still negotiated). The first issue of *Mundi* was published in the name of Liber Research Community (LRC; *bentuyanjiushe*), which is a pragmatic and activist research network founded in 2009 (Figure 4). LRC has conducted multiple studies on local urban issues and published numerous research papers, some in the form of popular books, which targeted issues such as housing problems, agricultural policies and brownfield development. These cautiously crafted papers do not only constitute an empirically grounded challenge to the government, land developers and privileged "native" groups in rural New Territories; it also experimented with new research methods and techniques (Figure 5).
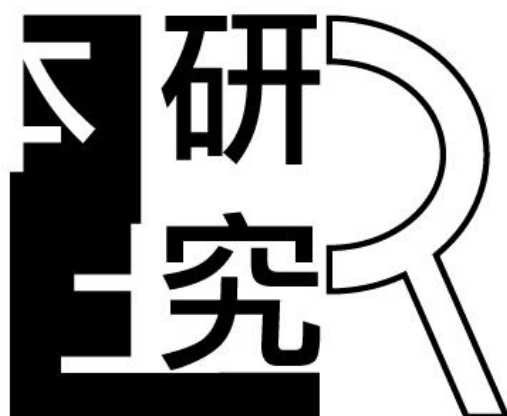

Figure 4   Logo of Liber Research Community (LRC).

Figure 5   A day of collaborative research.

Another intellectual community connected to *Mundi* is the Intercommon Institute (ICI; *xianggang minjian xueyuan*), a co-learning commons founded three years ago (Figure 6). ICI involves intellectuals from the fields of philosophy, mathematics, history, sociology, urban studies, social design and agriculture. ICI advocates and forces the opening of academic knowledge by actively engaging local and marginal communities, re-politicising knowledge and rendering it situational, experimenting with the learning environment (e.g., classes in streets and agricultural fields) and creating new platforms for dialogues among scholars, artists and activists domestically and internationally (Figure 7).

Figure 6   Logo of the Intercommon Institute (ICI).

Figure 7 Seminar organised by ICI.

Publication (*Mundi*), research (LRC) and education (ICI) – at the first sight, the three form a composition that seems to repeat the structure of an institutional university. However, the composite project of *Mundi*–LRC–ICI is not to return to the production and consumption of institutional knowledge. This project simply demonstrates one possible constellation of knowledge production and transmission, localised and exposed here and now.

The post-Umbrella situation demands us to grasp another "common," which should not be simply general or universal. *Mundi* is cautiously designed to not offer any taken-for-granted commonality. The task of *Mundi* is not so much to guarantee a pre-existing common(s) than it is to problematise and re-articulate it. One cannot localise a common unless he or she repeatedly and patiently, as well as continuously and discontinuously, "undergoes" the operations and articulations of such communal body. To preserve the potentiality of this emergent and immature project, we perhaps should not even presuppose a given harmony between *Mundi*, LRC and ICI. Although the three comprise an experimental body, *Mundi* should be differentiated from both the effective empiricism of LRC and the pedagogical community building of ICI. *Mundi* is the gap or cut right between the other two, and it resists the fantasy of total incorporation. The still

uncertain status and value of writings in *Mundi* demonstrate a deliberate imperfection and incompleteness of this experimental body.

Feel, struggle and experiment with each intellectual encounter, as well as stir it up, and keep pace with it, so that the as-yet-unnamed common might be exposed – this process is what we have been thinking and practising in the production of *Mundi*.

Special terms

Yigu　　艺鵠
Xuyanshushi　　序言書室
Yonglezuo　　永楽座
Gonggongcesuo　　公共冊所
Huozhe　　或者
Bentuyanjiushe　　本土研究社
xianggang minjian xueyuan　　香港民間學院

Notes on contributor

(Please help provide a short biographical note of yours [within 100 words] here. Thank you.)

Contact address

(Please provide both email and postal address of yours, and specify if you prefer not to have the postal address printed in the journal.)

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