

Beyond nationhood: Border and coming of age in Hong Kong cinema

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Abstract

The 1950s of Hong Kong manifests the initiation of a communal imagination oscillating in between the sovereignty of a British colony and the reality of a Chinese territory. The influx of immigrants from the north and, as a result, the establishment of a border during the 1950s not only restructured the demographic composition of the city but also brought along new momentum for mass cultural productions. Along the contestations and reconciliations between different ethnicities, languages, and identities, Hong Kong cultural configuration has since then embarked on a trajectory of its own, including the conceptualizations of childhood, border, and national ambiguity. Whether this piece of land was once desecrated by colonialism or this reclaimed territory is now alienated by renationalization, the formation of childhood serves as a critical lens to examine the meaning of border and nation from the colonial to the postcolonial eras of Hong Kong. Capitalizing on two titles produced in the early 1950s and in the late 1990s of Hong Kong cinema, namely, Fung Fung's *The Kid* (1950) and Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung* (1999), this article aims to explore the correlation between border, community, and nationality through the life adventures of the child protagonists, whose transitions and explorations are entangled with a political and territorial border that polarizes our sinophonic imagination in the ongoing present of China–Hong Kong division. In this context, the cultural configuration of Bildungsroman, apart from manifesting Franco Moretti's "the symbolic form of modernity" or Marc Redfield's "acculturation of the self," should embody the struggles with an obscure nationality, as here exemplified from the footprints of childhood tiptoeing on and off the borders of Hong Kong.

Keywords

Border, coloniality and postcoloniality, coming of age, Hong Kong cinema, nationhood

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Introduction

The correlation between childhood and nationhood pinpoints a vast array of cross-disciplinary inquiries that center on the political, social, and cultural intersections between self-identification and nationality. Imaginaries about childhood, though often characterized by purity or innocence that set them apart from adulthood, have in recent decades been questioned and confronted in many disciplinary crossings in a global context.¹ In brief, the formation of childhood, even though its ideological immunity is foregrounded in parentings, upbringings, and education in general, is in fact deeply enmeshed in cultural and identity politics. Coupling childhood and nationhood offers a perspective not only to illustrate the power struggle of border and nationalization but also to interrogate the basic groundings of national belonging.

So how does the notion of childhood explicate the complication of nationality? How do the experiences of child protagonists in the cinema manifest the characteristics of a community? The adventures of children do tell us the story of a community, and, correspondingly, the silhouettes of a community may also be the boundaries to spatialize or dramatize the upbringing of its young citizens. In the case of Hong Kong, the idea of a nation remains ambiguous from the colonial to the postcolonial eras. The nation-state is ostensibly a unique and ubiquitous framework sustaining and demarcating the imagination of a community; any inquiries beyond this may seem futile and unnecessary. After World War II, many colonies strived for independence from colonialism; in South and South East Asia, nationalization became an antidote to colonial contamination. Nationalization, then, has become a synonym for decolonization. But in the case of Hong Kong, national ambiguity has steered this city onto a journey different from its Asian counterparts, as from the colonial to the postcolonial days, the grounding of a nation has remained foreign and obscure in the community. If it is the nation-state that has the unique strength to consolidate a community, Hong Kong has to look elsewhere for this particular mediation. It is in this specific context of national ambiguity, the cultural constructions of childhoods in Hong Kong bring to light the struggles of this community with the idea of a nation.

Along different ideas and theories about the nation, it is obvious that uniformity, as articulated in the imagination of common ancestry, ethnic orientation, territorial boundary, and language, is the ultimate goal of all respective political maneuverings targeted for nationalization. To consolidate is also to immerse a group of people into the same collection of symbolic resources. The nation, as argued by Bhabha (1994), should normally be a political and cultural platform to reconcile differences and attain coherence:

The scarps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of a nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*. (pp. 145–146)

Elimination of differences is crucial in the production process, as it chisels the boundary and cultivates the content of a nation. The search for commonality is the prerequisite long before other cultural productions like history or memory come into shape. Unlike other Asian countries where the story of decolonization is identical to a grand narration of nationalization, cultural productions in Hong Kong have to explore an alternative path to recapture the tensions and transitions along the absence and presence of a nation.

It is for the same reason that this article will focus on Fung Fung's *The Kid* (1950) and Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung* (1999) to explore how childhoods in the cinema of Hong Kong highlight its entanglements with national ambiguity and, at some points, imaginary alternatives for the community. Although separated by almost half a century in their periods of production, these two titles do share the same strategy in thematizing Hong Kong childhoods to capture the meaning of transitions in the community. It is true that the term "transition" was once synonymous specifically with the 1997 handover and the transfer of sovereignty from the British to the Chinese authorities, but with a closer look into the chronology of Hong Kong, this city is indeed filled with stories of change and transformation from the colonial to the postcolonial eras. What one calls transition in Hong Kong should always be in plural form, especially those discovered by our child protagonists in the cinema.

Establishing border, initiating transitions

If the 1997 handover of Hong Kong should have restricted the meaning of transition only to the transfer of sovereignty from one nation to another, here we should liberate its denotation with a broader perspective, especially through the establishment of border in the 1950s. In the post-war period, the influx of immigrants and refugees from the Mainland not only brought the population up to an unprecedented level, but also, most importantly, fostered the idea and implementation of a border in between this crown colony and its motherland. The insertion of a border does imply a new transition in the colonial governance of Hong Kong, as such division is arguably alien to the objective of maintaining the city as a commercial entrepot ever since its colonial inception (Luk, 2005, p. 75). From the perspective of the colonial administration, border control is conceived to be a policy to cope with demographic expansion and its repercussion on the limited resources of Hong Kong, and in particular, housing (Endacott, 1964, p. 310). The border system was meant to be a protective measure in the 1950s for the congested space of the city. With a similar implementation from the newly established Communist China, the closing of the border sparked waves of illegal immigration until the termination of touch base policy in the 1980s. The end of free population flow indirectly demarcates a territory that is now cut off by legal and political means, and the ambivalence in between geographical proximity and political governance—part of China yet ruled by a different nation—is therefore diluted with the new establishment of a border. Different from the concept of concession in the tumultuous 19th century like Shanghai or Qingdao, which was politically demarcated and situated within the same national territory, the border of Hong Kong in 1950s, as walled up mutually by the British colonists and the Chinese communists, instills a sense of national ambiguity in the community. Originally a Chinese territory under British rule, now it became a true colony as the ambiguity of governance of an open-ended border was terminated; this is also the reason for a Hong Kong historian to deplore that "the border between Hong Kong and China had eventually become a reality after the signing of Nanjing Treaty a century ago" (香港和中國之間的邊界，在<<南京條約>>簽署後一百年，終於成為事實。) (Sinn, 1997, p. 196). If the urge for communal imagination is often governed by its distinction instead of identification with other territories, the realization of a border should be considered a crucial component in heightening a sense of transition and, at the same time, valorizing the need of an alternative imagination for Hong Kong.

Unlike the 1997 transition with strong emphasis on the handover of sovereignty and renationalization, the 1950 transition situates Hong Kong as a colony within a new and well-defined border. The new border embarks Hong Kong on a new excursion in cultural configuration that has shaped the city into what it is today. It is also certain that the border clears out the imaginative ambivalence

that has long haunted this familiar yet estranged territory: although governed under a colonist power, Hong Kong is culturally remote from the metropole; though geographically adjoining and culturally affiliated, the city is fully aware that along the border, there is another form of ethnic Chineseness awaiting further exploration and perhaps, reconciliation. In other words, the border urges Hong Kong to face its own self and to stop just being a colony of the British or a stolen territory from the Chinese. There are indeed many other components in catalyzing this transition in Hong Kong 1950s, but then what makes border control stand out is that it requires the city to reconfigure its presence beyond the narrative clenches of colonialism or nationalization, and this also contextualizes childhood as a significant option in the mass culture of Hong Kong in readjusting its correlation between colony and nationality.

Initially implemented in 1951, the border between Hong Kong and China has been transformed and multiplied throughout the ages. As recent examples, the Guangzhou–Shenzhen–Hong Kong Express Rail Link (XRL) and The Hong Kong–Zhuhai–Macau Bridge (HZMB) are mega infrastructural thrusts in bundling Hong Kong with other major southern Chinese cities for the initiation of the Greater Bay Area, with which the purpose, according to Mu (2019), is to develop

a vibrant world-class city cluster, a globally influential international innovation and technology hub, an important support pillar for the Belt and Road Initiative, a showcase for in-depth cooperation between the mainland, Hong Kong and Macao, and a quality living circle for living, working and traveling.

Together with Hong Kong, Macau, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan, Zhongshan, Dongguan, Huizhou, Jiangmen, and Zhaoqing, the integration of these southern Chinese cities, while complementing each other with their own comparative strengths, roles, and identities, requires respective lifting and reduction of their border controls. Except for Hong Kong and Macau, with their roles as special administrative regions sanctioned under “One Country, Two Systems,” the remaining cities may have their traits and characteristics having invented, imagined, and annotated under a single national framework. For Hong Kong, the infrastructural implementation of the High Speed Rail has sparked rounds of disputes in the community, and among them, border control and checkpoints deployment between Hong Kong and China—widely known as Co-location Arrangement—stood out as a heated legal and administrative controversy among many other issues in Hong Kong administrative autonomy (Cheung, 2017).

Seen in this light, the border between Hong Kong and China does require one to reassess the methods and imaginaries of border implementation. In a wider spectrum of border theory, this particular Hong Kong and China border pinpoints geographical and cultural proximity on the one hand, and ideological and legal disparity on the other. While doing so, the multiplication of border also foregrounds the deep-seated struggles and identification with nationality in Hong Kong community. For it is normally the nation that has the sovereignty to map, define, and administer borders between itself and other nations, and as well as regions, areas, and communities within its own territory, but this process, as delineated by Balibar (2002), can be contradictory and arbitrary by nature:

Here the state, settled on and constituted by its own borders, has, over the course of history, played a fundamentally ambivalent role, for on the one side it conceals—and, up to a point, formally limits—*differentiation*, in order to insist upon the notion of national citizen and, through that notion, a certain primacy of the public authority over social antagonisms. On the other hand, however, the more transnational traffic—whether of people or of capital—intensifies, the more a transnational political-economic space

has formed as a result, . . . tend to operate in the service of an international class differentiation, and, to that end, to use their borders and apparatuses of control as instruments of discrimination and triage. (p. 82)

Here identified by Balibar, *differentiation*, as sanctioned by border implementation and control, is indeed a mechanism of invention and imagination of class distinction on cross-national and territorial bases. Even though border is needed to project as well as to limit difference for the purpose of nationalization and identity distinction, in the case of Hong Kong and China, the border did function initially as a filter to separate dispossessed refugees and upscale immigrants, even though both were eager to leave the Mainland territory in the early 1950s after the establishment of Communist China (Madokoro, 2012). Regardless of their motives and reasons, border crossing was in this context an ideological leap from communism to capitalism, and back then the movement was generally unilateral rather than bilateral, for the influx of Mainland immigrants casted an insurmountable pressure on Hong Kong's social and environmental resources. With the advent of China's Open Door Policy in the 1970s and subsequent market economy reform in the 1980s and 1990s, the unilateral crossing was gradually substituted by bilateral exchanges between the two territories before and after the handover period. As of 2017, there were over 45 million mainland visitors entering Hong Kong (Immigration Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), 2017a), and cross-boundary passenger traffic between Hong Kong and China also reached the figure of over 200 million (Immigration Department, HKSAR, 2017b).

Amid reaching unprecedented level of population flow along Hong Kong and China border, this does not necessarily imply that, after two decades of handover, such mechanism of differentiation will be weakened or ultimately be erased. Although situated under a reunited national boundary, the Hong Kong and China border serves as a good counter-example to the idea of border crossing, as here outlined by Soja (2005):

Borders by definition lead to creating and taking sides, producing and occupying opposing spaces, and to many associated dichotomizations: inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, we/they. But they also simultaneously invite transgression, a movement beyond the defined limits and enclosures of our lives to open new places and spaces, to search for reconciling alternatives, creative syntheses, resolving hybridities. Border crossings defy the limits of inclusion/ exclusion, creating a distinctive space of its own, a borderlands culture that resists enclosure and confinement. (p. 33)

The Hong Kong and China border has long been highly permeable, and with the increasing number of aerial, land, and sea checkpoints for territorial integration, economic cooperation, and infra-structural coordination, the flow of capital, commodity, and population is expected to reach a much higher level in the near future. But the question is, does this particular intensity of border crossing exemplify what Soja identified as a "borderlands culture" that may dissolve all forms of polarity while maintaining distinction on its own? If not, in terms of cultural production and imagination, what hinders Hong Kong and China border crossing, though realized under a single nation, from evolving into another form of borderland culture?

Borders and the geography of consolation: Fung Fung's *The Kid* (1950)

The creative endeavors of Hong Kong 1950s, according to K. C. Wong (1998), have long been interpreted as a specific inauguration of a distinctive subjectivity (p. 93). With the influx of

immigrants during the time, Hong Kong cultural productions were also supplemented with new inspirations and strategies. Endorsed by Leung (2013), the 1950s of Hong Kong should be considered an age of creative multiplicity made possible by the newly arrived immigrants regardless of their backgrounds and ideological orientations:

Around the time of 1949, within a year the population of Hong Kong was brought up by nearly one million with the influx of newcomers from the Mainland. . . Many of them undertook the professions of education, cultural production, publishing and writing, and through which they also diversified cultural developments in the 50s of Hong Kong. (p. 3)

This is also the same context that one should understand the contributions of Fung Fung's *The Kid* to Hong Kong cinema, especially the dimensions interweaving childhood, coloniality and nationality. Being an adaptation of a synonymous comic series authored by Yuan Buyun (袁步雲), this film, having released in May 1950, establishes its fame with the casting of young Bruce Lee as Little Cheung, which also initiated the stardom of this future action movie hero in the history of Hong Kong cinema. What marks the beginning of the film is an intriguing ethical contradiction, as projected in the opening sequence: "The same piece of metal can either be molded for weaponry to destroy the world or be constructed for machinery to benefit mankind" (同是一塊鋼鐵可能造出戰爭的利器毀滅世界, 也可能做出生產的機器造福人群). This has already pinpointed the oscillatory nature in the emplotment of the story, which is further manifested in the transformations of the child protagonist. The role of Little Cheung not only echoes Moretti's (1987) landmark idea of Bildungsroman as "symbolic form of modernity" but also explicates the significance of border in the context of Hong Kong's national ambiguity. To Moretti, the concept of youth gains the valor to become one of the important cultural constructions as it has the "ability to *accentuate* modernity's dynamism and instability" (original italics) (p. 5) that weighs the future to be more important than the past. This particular temporal projection in Bildungsroman fully explains and justifies the linkages between youth, progress, and development in relevant literary and cultural productions. But in the case of *The Kid*, this essence of Bildungsroman may require further reexamination if the idea of the nation and the development of childhood are interpreted along the initiation of a border between Hong Kong and China in the 1950s.

On the surface, this film is perhaps no different from many similar titles preoccupied with the adventures of a child in a complex adult world, and through setbacks, conflicts, tensions, and resolutions, the protagonist will learn and gain new experiences, and eventually become a different and well-developed person. The past, the present, and the future are fully reconciled in his or her excursion. For our Little Cheung of the 1950s, the world of Hong Kong is constituted by distinctive yet overlapping borders of ethics, class, and territory that await his exploration in the story. Cheung's adventure in Hong Kong, as indicated in the ending of the film, is steered toward a clear reconciliation in between a colonial child and his motherland. The ethical border, as highlighted in the beginning of the film, is projected in the incident of a stolen golden necklace. As an orphan, Little Cheung is raised by his widowed Uncle Ho who sustains the livelihood of Cheung and his two children with the humble salary of a school teacher. The rootlessness of an orphan symbolizes the role of an ordinary citizen in the colony, and, to the miserable uncle, receiving formal education is the only way out for the younger generations in the unjust and immoral universe of colonial Hong Kong.

Managing a small roadside comic book stall, Little Cheung gains his experiences mostly through the filthy and busy streets of Hong Kong. It is in the same location that Hung Pak-Ho, a mean and

calculative factory owner in the story, has his pocket picked by Lee and his gang members. Through the heist, they also steal the golden necklace of Hung's daughter, and when the police is alarmed, Little Cheung decides to help Lee the gangster to evade the law and, later on in the story, joins his gang for better livelihood by means of extortion and thievery. As the uncle discovers the necklace and insists on its proper return to the owner, the border of ethics begins to overlap with the border of class.

Upon the return of the necklace in Hung's mansion, the uncle, at the behest of the kind and caring little daughter of Hung, gains a new job opportunity as a secretary and private tutor for the family. But this only exposes Hung's true nature of a manipulating capitalist who demands long working hours and unfair conditions for his employees. At the beginning of the film, Hung presents himself as a philanthropist who cares so much about the education of the poor, yet his benevolence is only used to conceal his true intention to exploit people around him. The new job opportunity of Cheung's uncle also transits the child protagonist to the border of class in colonial Hong Kong. This particular transition is manifested in two incidents in the story: first, Little Cheung's admittance to a new school and second, his new role as an apprentice in Hung's factory. As a beginner in school who is small in size, weak in strength and poor in background, Little Cheung is bullied by other schoolmates on the first school day. While Cheung decides to withdraw, his uncle tactfully initiates another opportunity for Cheung to become a new apprentice in Hung's factory. With several setbacks as an apprentice, including the maltreatment from the factory manager as well as his own witnessing of the prejudices against other factory workers, Little Cheung projects his hope for life and better living standard on Lee—the gangster nicknamed “Flying Dagger Lee” he assists in the beginning of the story. At this point, the adventure of Little Cheung does illustrate an essential dimension of Hong Kong Bildungsroman of the 1950s, as identified by M. S. H. Wong (2009), “Unlike most narratives in the tradition of the Western *Bildungsroman*, the Hong Kong versions normally focus to a much greater degree on the protagonists' social situation” (p. 144). The creative emphasis on the social constraints in the life story of a child not only highlights his role as an immigrant in the city, but, as will be discussed later on, also the main reason for the protagonist to embrace an imaginary nation beyond the border of Hong Kong.

Along numerous advances and setbacks in his adventure of Hong Kong, Little Cheung is in fact crossing from one border to another—a process that delineates ethical, economic, and social dichotomies in the colony. This particular childhood experience resonates with what Balibar (2002) calls the “polysemic nature of borders”:

Today's borders (though in reality this has long been the case) are, to some extent, designed to perform precisely this task: not merely to give individuals from different social classes different experiences of the law, the civil administration, the police and elementary rights, such as the freedom of circulation and freedom of enterprise, but actively to *differentiate* between individuals in terms of social class (pp. 81–82)

There may be no difference between children and adults as they all fall prey to the constraints of class, but in the film, it is the child protagonist that fully exposes the delineation of borders and the production of differences. In between affluence and destitution, integrity and deceit, legality and injustice, it is in the footsteps of Little Cheung that other adult characters in the story are eventually caught up in a series of contestation. The adventure of the child in Hong Kong here can hardly be crystallized as progress or other achievements deemed proper and essential for personal growth,

but it is also this journey of dead end that motivates Little Cheung and the Ho's family to ultimately cross the territorial border in the end of the film.

The film ends with the reconciliation between Hung and the factory workers and Lee's determination to disband his own group of outlaws. As for the Ho's, their crossing of the territorial border into rural China, or in the uncle's words "returning to the village" (返鄉下), is visualized by a long shot of Uncle Ho, his children and Little Cheung treading along a railroad into a vast and open rural area. Apparently this suggests that heading forward to a more promising future implies a symbolic and physical return—a reversal in the time-telling of modernity, a restoration of origin as well as a departure from the urban to the rural. Despite similarities in language and ethnicity, the "homecoming" or "village returning" of Little Cheung confirms that prior to the actual implementation of border control in 1951, the border had long been invisibly yet solidly built in between the colony and the adjoining nation. This nation, though only impressionistically assembled with vast rural space, scattered village houses and a long, stretched railroad in the end of the film, is charged with the symbolic strength to withdraw from the internal borders of Hong Kong and to erase such overlapping and overwhelming sense of distinctions as experienced by the child protagonist. Withdrawal from colonial Hong Kong entails a valediction to national ambiguity and an erasure of his presence as an immigrant, even though the nation is reclaimed not in the future but in the past of his temporal progression, and the orientation of time in Bildungsroman is here offset by the border crossing journey of Little Cheung. After all, progress does not necessarily be forward looking, and this is a lesson demonstrated by the colonial child, and by reclaiming an imaginary nation through crossing the final border in the film, time has also been reconfigured as a consolation for those who may not be able to join him for a new start in life beyond the territorial border of Hong Kong. Coming of age has always been a temporal experience, and for a little child like Little Cheung, this experience is regulated by the border in between coloniality and nationality.

From Fung Fung's *The Kid*, the child teaches us how to re-imagine a nation at a time when the ambivalence of colonialism would soon come to an end with the establishment of a border between colonial Hong Kong and Communist China. Almost half a century later, another child in Hong Kong cinema, also by the name of Little Cheung, embarks on a different journey to explore the borders of the city of another transitional period. So to speak, this transition of the 1997 handover of sovereignty is anticipated to cleanse the national ambiguity of this former crowd colony through reunion with the motherland. The very first barrier for the coming of age of this newly reclaimed community, once desecrated by colonialism and imperialism, is to learn how to tell and interpret time under the framework of nationalization. The child protagonist in Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung* (1999) fully illustrates how the territorial border is subsequently replaced by a temporal one in his life journey as well as in the early post-handover period of Hong Kong.

Borders and the reconciliation of time: Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung* (1999)

Time has long been a delicate issue for Hong Kong, especially throughout this transitional period of the handover. This is not solely a matter of ownership, as reiterated in Richard Hughes' *Borrowed Space, Borrowed Time* of the 1970s; rather it is a matter of coherence and congruity in the renewal of cultural imagination when Hong Kong becomes part of a nation. Reconfiguring time for Hong Kong was obviously one of the political maneuverings in the early transition

period, as acknowledged in the speech of Jiang Zemin, the former chairperson of PRC, delivered at the Ceremony for Establishment of HKSAR:

Hong Kong's return to the motherland is a shining page in the annals of the Chinese nation. From now on, the Hong Kong compatriots will truly become masters here as a new leaf will be turned in the annals of Hong Kong. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China, 1997)

It was no surprise to see a strong political emphasis on the renewal of time and history for Hong Kong upon the handover. Unprecedented this might have officially presented, yet, as shrewdly identified by Allen Chun (2010), 1997 can also be a year of no significance: "The ritual façade of the handover has marked the fictive significance of 1997, and the fiction of Hong Kong's autonomy in a meaningless ideological framework has reset the clock again on its eventual integration with the mainland" (p. 186). The resetting of temporality was once a common political wish-fulfillment, at least to many it was expected that Hong Kong will have its colonial past cleansed overnight and be reset for a glorious national future. As part of his 1997 trilogy thematizing on the political intricacy of Hong Kong handover, Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung*, together with his *Made in Hong Kong* (1997) and *The Longest Summer* (1998), reassesses the meaning of time and border through the adventure of a local Hong Kong child.

Identifying Hong Kong with this new, nationalist time frame is perhaps no different from perpetuating the status of this community as a territory desecrated and stolen by the British colonists. Rey Chow's (1998) idea of "double impossibility" fully highlights Hong Kong's difficulty in temporalizing: "it will be as impossible to submit to Chinese nationalist/nativist repossession as it has been impossible to submit to British colonialism" (p. 151). In Hong Kong temporality, the only available and imaginable time-telling mechanism is left only with a calendar, as anything beyond it is unimaginable. Unlike national temporality, the calendrical present is well complemented with common myths, histories, memories as well as other cultural supplements, yet in the situation of colonial and postcolonial Hong Kong, the communal imagination is structured merely with the calendrical progression of market temporality—a time frame fraught with the ebb and flow of capitalist exchanges. This situation is fully articulated in the opening scene of *Little Cheung*, as, from the monologue of the child protagonist, what truly unites those existing in the city are their intentions to make money. The people of Hong Kong, including those within and beyond Little Cheung's circle, may only sense solidarity and achieve communal uniformity in myriad formats of money-making ventures. For those willing to cross the border into Hong Kong, such as Cheung's domestic helper Ami and other characters of ethnic minorities, it is for the same reason that they are able to mitigate their homesickness and daily hardships in the city. For the child, this is a unique aspect of Hong Kong that traps him and many others in the ongoing present, until he realizes that the late Hong Kong iconic Cantonese opera singer and actor Sun Ma Sze Tsang (新馬師曾)—a figure that always appears on the family's television screen—is also motivated for money making in his performances and philanthropic missions.

The voice over in the beginning of the film not only highlights money making as a border-crossing motivation but also a means to interweave family, neighborhood, and the entire community.² Apart from the similarity in nicknames, the association between Little Cheung and Sun Ma Sze Tsang (also known as Cheung Gor, an honorific commonly used in Cantonese to show respect and seniority) in the film chisels a new border of temporality in postcolonial Hong Kong. Unlike the other Little Cheung who crossed the territorial border in Hong Kong cinema to seek refuge from an

imaginary nation, this Little Cheung of the late 1990s has to navigate his way in between borders in a congested urban area where national ambiguity and temporality intersect.

In this context, the construction of childhood further exposes and defines borders in the city that have been naturalized in the ongoing present and neutralized by market mentality. Against the backdrop of Hong Kong's cultural reconfiguration and temporal restructuring, the critical dimensions of childhood are attributed from its strength to harmonize and destabilize: "On the one hand, 'childhood' offers a consoling fiction of development and eventual coherence . . . On the other hand, 'childhood' unsettles our sense of self-presence and self-coherence" (Wallace, 1995, p. 294). Simply put, nothing shall be taken for granted from the perspective of a child, and what is in general normal and rational to adults may end up being problematic and nonsensical to a child. The adventure of Little Cheung in the film is domestically bound to the urban labyrinth of Hong Kong, and by following his footsteps, one is able to observe how this child resists the encroachments of singular temporality.

In the film, this process can be perceived via the interrelating contexts of relationships between family members of Little Cheung and his encounters with Fan, the daughter of an illegal immigrant family. If profit making is the only reason that brings people together in Hong Kong, then it is no different in the mingling between children. The first encounter between these two child characters is initiated when Fan looks for a job in a Hong Kong style café owned by Little Cheung's father. Being rejected due to her young age, Little Cheung later on locates her whereabouts from a back alley, where Fan's mother works secretly as a dish washer due to her illegal presence in Hong Kong. The two children establish a business relationship when they begin negotiating the division of the tips gathered from daily errands of food delivery. Bargaining, even though it takes place between children, authenticates the ubiquity of market mentality in Hong Kong. Whether or not this incident can be served as an example to illustrate the elimination of childhood with Hong Kong capitalistic logic remains an issue to be explored; it is however obvious in the film that the family of Little Cheung and other characters in the neighborhood, though interrelated for essentially the same profit-making intention, are in fact divided and estranged from one another in their respective excursions.

The initial business venture of Fan and Little Cheung also fosters the friendship between the two children, and this relationship also tells us something essential about the borders in Hong Kong. If it is only through the border of territory that one can articulate the differences between communities and people, then it is apparent that such territorial border, as crisscrossed earlier by the Little Cheung of the 1950s, is here transformed into an internal border concealed in a back alley of urban Hong Kong. Being part of a nation after the handover does not imply elimination of territorial border, and from the perspectives of the children, such border is here internalized in locality and diversified in quantity. The first among them is delineated in legal terms, and from this context, the borders between self and others and between native and immigrant are manifested in an urban neighborhood. Even though they are only children, in the first half of the film, Little Cheung's father has repeatedly warned his young son against approaching what he calls "children without permit." Amid the political fact that Hong Kong has already become part of a nation, a permit, whether it grants the holder the rights to enter or to abode, suggests that this border is reinforced instead of being eliminated in the national milieu. Despite their similarities in age, language, and ethnicity, Little Cheung and Fan are fully aware of their politically constructed differences. In the end of the film, Little Cheung mistakenly chases after an ambulance instead of the police car where Fan is held custody after being arrested. Although eventually defeated by a political measure of

national ambiguity, through business venture and friendship, the child characters have successfully traversed a border imposed along the transition of a community.

The childhood encounters between Little Cheung and Fan demonstrate Hong Kong's awareness of borders, or to Lo (2015), a form of recognition of its status as an ethnic borderland within the proximity of a nation:

Hong Kong, as an ex colonial space, is historically sensitive to the implications of boundaries and the way in which a nation state relies upon territorial construction of a border to separate "us" from "them" in order to constitute its citizenship as a collective identity. But unlike a modern nation state that divinizes, sacralizes, and hence absolutizes its borders, (colonial) Hong Kong not only deprives border of its designated meaning, but also relativizes its function and detaches it from the idea of sovereignty by making border a midway zone and an object of constant transgression. (p. 72)

Such transgression of borders, as demonstrated in the film, is essential in fulfilling the intentions to maximize gains and profits in the world of adults. For the child protagonist, such transgression is important for experiencing temporality under national ambiguity. As discussed earlier, the historical identity of Hong Kong or its imaginaries of the past are problematic as neither the British nor the Chinese could offer proper temporal identification and continuation. This results in a distinctive and often irreconcilable division between the past and the present in Hong Kong. Materialistic pursuits and capitalist maneuvers in postcolonial Hong Kong may have also subdued the urge for any forms of change or transition in time-telling. Like a clock with hands but no dials, as long as capital accumulation is secured in the transition of sovereignty and sanctioned under "One Country, Two Systems," whether or not there is going to be any changes may seem irrelevant and insignificant, as Chu (2013) explicates:

"One Country, Two Systems" spawned a myth of the status quo both before and after Hong Kong's reversion to China, which has significantly limited its political, social, and cultural imaginaries. . . . It must retain its global capitalistic characteristics in order to safeguard its "autonomy" under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework (making it distinct from other Chinese cities), while, at the same time, it must risk sacrificing its autonomy in the midst of the globalized free market dominated by global capital. (pp. 6–8)

This has also mapped out the border of time in Hong Kong—a border firmly established and closely regulated by the temporality of global capital flow. Being one of the most difficult borders to transgress in Hong Kong, one could see in the film that only through the child protagonist could temporalities be reconciled again for continuity in imaginations.

Little Cheung's father is a character who is obsessed with the ongoing present. This is so not only because of his profit-making inclination but also to keep a portion of family history away from recalling. Heng, the eldest son of the family, is deserted from the family and abandoned by the father for his gangster involvements. Not only does the father forbid the mentioning of his name in the family, he also removes and destroys his pictures in the family albums. Being repeatedly confronted by the grandmother, his wife, and Little Cheung, the father remains steadfast in his filtering of family history. This dichotomy between the past and the present is intercepted by another form of temporality in the film—the moving images and voices of Sun Ma Sze Tsang in the family's television set. His opera performance not only marks the beginning of the film but also invokes the reminiscences of the grandmother as a young performer who had the opportunity to

meet and work with her idol in the past. This icon of Cantonese opera serves as a channel of memory sharing to bring together the old and the young for maintaining the continuity and solidarity of the family. As a symbolic guardian of family history, Little Cheung's grandmother safeguards the order and content of the family album. While the father is busy with cleansing and erasing the memories of his eldest son, the grandmother often tries to perpetuate the memory of him in the family. Apart from the family album, she relies on Little Cheung to mend this particular temporal fracture by reminding him constantly the existence of his elder brother. It is for the same reason that Little Cheung decides to search for his brother from the meandering streets and alleys of Hong Kong, even at the expense of running away from home.

Searching for his brother becomes a quest into the temporal border for Little Cheung. Throughout the process, this child is in fact finding a way to relocate the past from the present or to reconnect the present with the past. The boy and his grandmother constitute a symbolic coordination of time in the film: on one hand, the grandmother preserves and invokes the past for the continuity of the young in the present; on the other hand, to reclaim a future for the family, the young has to unlock a hidden secret from the past. Through his search for the elder brother, Little Cheung not only subverts the authority of the father but also confronts the temporalization of a community. If a nation, a community, or part of a nation as in the situation of Hong Kong, is in Anderson's (1991) words "a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time" (p. 26), then what Little Cheung shows us in the film is that time is heterogeneous in formats and directions.

When the father relocates his runaway son from a back alley, he decides to humiliate the boy by forcing him to stand semi-naked in the public right outside his café. The child protagonist is obviously punished for refusing to let bygones be bygones; while he is soaking in tears, Little Cheung begins to recite the same Cantonese opera excerpt sung by Sun Ma Sze Tsang from his home television set. Being resistant against his father who tries to maintain strict and rigid separation of time, here the boy reconciles the past and the present as old memories are here articulated and renewed by the young in the restructuring of a family temporality. After all, Cheung's decision to search for his brother implies a full devotion to mend a temporal fracture in family history and discordance in family ties. Even though it is a punishment from the father, Cheung's performance here acknowledges a multiplicity of time in the family and dissolves a border of temporality along his chanting of Cantonese opera on the street. The older brother is eventually recaptured only as a flash in the film, but with the effort and commitment of Little Cheung, time is no longer empty and homogeneous in the imaginary of a community. Time in Hong Kong has been stagnated through political cravings for status quo in the transition of sovereignty and reintegration with the nation. When temporality is imaginable and calculable only as a singular and totalizing procession, which on the side valorizes progress and development in capitalist terms, then what this child protagonist does is in fact a subversion of temporal homogeneity in Hong Kong:

The homogeneous cross-time of national progress has been shattered by a series of internal borderings that force a rethinking of the capacity of collective historical narratives to fully subsume the less ordered and plural trajectories of singular historical experiences. (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 159)

With the boy's insistence in unfolding, acknowledging, and continuing a suppressed portion of his own family history, Little Cheung also liberates time from the empty and ongoing present of Hong Kong brought along by the political maintenance of status quo. Through his footsteps in the city,

one can clearly sense that temporal alterities do exist even from one of the most ordinary neighborhoods, only they have long been forcefully filtered out for the sake of coherence and governance of postcolonial Hong Kong.

Conclusion

From the children in *The Kid* and *Little Cheung*, we have learned one of the most important lessons about the myriad borders and their overlapping in the colonial and postcolonial city. While many of the adults adhere to the borders in exchange for a sense of security, stability, and solidarity, children do react otherwise in their explorations. Although separated by half a century in Hong Kong cinema, the experiences of the two Little Cheungs do highlight the significance of constant reflection on nation as a concept or as a political reality. Whether the nation is configured as a form of political abstraction in the colonial days or a form of political alienation upon the return of sovereignty, borders are always firmly established and regularly monitored to ensure that governance of Hong Kong is attainable with or without the nation. As mechanisms in the production of differences, every border should have their own logic of unity and uniformity; and every transformation of power may also entail expansion and subtraction of respective borders. Seen in this light, the cinema of Hong Kong hosts imaginaries of national ambiguity and bordering practices through the lenses of childhood.

As for our child protagonists, despite that their itineraries of life are not often plotted politically, their commitments to border crossing may seem subversive and reactionary from a political point of view. Should the Little Cheung of the 1950s know about the story of Fan in the 1990s, he should have felt fortunate in being able to maintain an ambivalence of identity as a Hong Kong immigrant or a native Chinese by simply going on and off the border. From his explorations, every border he crisscrosses in Hong Kong is simply antithetical to his imaginary of a nation, and by retrieving beyond the border, he also erases such ambivalence which was once essential to the colonial governance of Hong Kong. As for the Little Cheung of the late 1990s, with Hong Kong having become part of a nation, this also contradictorily implies that there is no longer a nation for symbolic return. With the physical border being taken over by a legal one in the back alley of urban Hong Kong, territoriality has no more bearings in the sensing of nationality. While the majority is de-temporalized in their daily business errands, the child protagonist has embarked on an excursion to locate and reconnect temporal multiplicities in his family. After all, the pursuit of status quo in Hong Kong and the growth of a child are in no sense compatible, and it is here from the Little Cheung of the 1990s that the temporal stagnation of Hong Kong may find a new way out in its imagination. There are indeed many transitions in the history of Hong Kong, and whether or not they can be transformed into a new momentum in our cultural imaginations depends very much on how we perceive and configure borders. From the border crossings of the two Little Cheungs, we also learn how to bypass barriers of imagination during transitional times of Hong Kong.

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Notes

1. See, for instances, Stephens (1995), Goddard et al. (2005), and Millei and Robert Imre (2016) are landmark collections of interdisciplinary researches on the political and geopolitical configurations of childhood.
2. Cheah (2009, p. 163); see also Gan (2011, p. 113).

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