Convergence Vs Homogeneity: Exploring Hong Kong's Identity in Transition

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Abstract: This article explores the multiple drivers behind Hong Kong's identity transition through the lens of the disappearing neon signs. Its cultural and political significances are analyzed through the theoretical frameworks of identity politics, decolonization, and nationalism. The simultaneous forces of decolonization and mainlandization largely accounts for the intricate politicalization of many issues in Hong Kong, including its iconic neon signs, whose connotations has gone through several transitions: from being historical (Western influence), to economic (as a prosperous entrepot and shopping paradise), cultural (unique hybrid of glocalization), technological (becoming outdated in energy efficiency) and even political (fading away after the strengthened regulation in 2010), especially when its early development was a result of bottom-up participation at a grassroots level, while their removal came from a top-down approach through government regulations. The study design incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods by combining survey results with interviews and policy paper analysis to explore the multiple drivers and the perceived effects on Hong Kong's identity. This then informs discussions of how to maintain Hong Kong's position as a space for convergence while developing some new features of in-betweenness.

Keywords: Identity, transition, decolonization, nationalism, in-betweenness, neon signs.

Hong Kong has long been a place of convergence of peoples, cultures and ideas, produced by its unique and long history in trade, cosmopolitanism and colonialism. Streetscapes brimming with advertising signboards and neon lights in various languages and colours from different businesses have been its iconic images, constantly appearing in posters, postcards, tourism promotions and films. In combining tradition, creativity, practicality and craftsmanship, they also represent Hong Kong's prosperous economy and diversified culture. While becoming synonymous with Hong Kong in the 20th century, signifying "progress and the energy of a city, representing modernity" (Ribbat, 2013), neon signs have now become victims of post-modernization: they are slowly fading away in Hong Kong.

Since 2001, the Hong Kong government has ordered the gradual removal of signboards that are "potentially hazardous, neglected, abandoned or unauthorized" (Kwok, 2020) under the "Minor Works Control System" regulations by the Buildings Department, which oversees building codes and safety. According to "Statistics of the Building Department's Enforcement Actions Against Unauthorized Building Works from 2001 to 2010", a total of 23,716 signboards on external walls have been removed, with a peak number of 6,470 and 3,371 removed in 2009 and 2010 respectively as a result of a special 12-month action from 2009-2010 (Legislative Council of HKSAR, 2011). Following the completion of this ten-year enforcement program in March 2011, the number of removal orders for overhanging signboards has picked up speed again in recent years, from "4,154 demolished between 2014 and March 2020" (Kwok, 2021), to "1,119 orders in 2022" as per a *Guardian* report published in April 2023 (Leung, 2023). However, it is important to emphasize that these numbers include neon signs, but *also include* other overhanging signboards, even LED ones, as it falls under the "Measures to Enhance Building Safety in Hong Kong", thus *ALL* potentially hazardous signs are targeted and there is no authoritative figure of how many neon signboards have been taken down so far. It is true that some of the removed neon signs have been replaced by safer and more energy-efficient LED screens, which are 10% cheaper and use five to ten times less power. Therefore, the disappearing neon signs is often understood as partly due to environmental and safety concerns, and partly due to technological advances.

However, most of the media headlines affixed on "neon signs" in its reporting, such as in the same month of April 2023, we can read "Fading glory: the fight to save Hong Kong's beloved neon signs" by *Guardian*; "Hot Topics: What is the future of Hong Kong's neon signs? Government rules, safety concerns causing them to fade" by *South China Morning Post*; and "It is disappearing very fast: Hong Kong's fading neon heritage shines a spotlight on the craft" by *HK Free Press*. The same focus on neon has continued as reported by NBC in May 2024: "The lights are going out for Hong Kong's iconic neon signs" (Jett, Zulfaqar & Kong, 2024). Meanwhile, the subheadings of these

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headlines almost always mention “government”, such as “the city’s neon-drenched streets, which inspired filmmakers and artists, are changing due to tightening government regulations” in the *Guardian* article; and media analysis by NBC even associated it with the crackdown on dissent after months of anti-government unrest in 2019: “Though underway for decades, critics say the disappearance of the signs has contributed to the erosion of the Chinese territory’s unique identity amid a crackdown on dissent”. When decreasing neon signs was accompanied by an increasing number of immigrants from mainland China, contrasted with the recent exodus of expatriates and Hong Kong residents - around 140,000 people have left Hong Kong from 2020 to 2022 (Yu, 2024), these combined factors are intertwined to push a redrawing of the city’s identity, which in some critics’ eyes is shifting away from a magnetic convergence of global kaleidoscope to a place of homogeneity like other cities in mainland China (The Economist, 2024).

This article explores the multiple drivers behind Hong Kong’s identity transition through the lens of the slowly disappearing neon signs. Its cultural and political significances are analysed in the theoretical frameworks of identity politics, decolonization, and nationalism. The simultaneous forces of decolonization and mainlandization largely accounts for the intricate politicalization of many issues in Hong Kong. Its neon glow is no exception to be tinted with political overtones, especially when its early development was a result of participation at a grassroots level in a laissez-faire style, which created a “forest of signs with full individuality, no blank space, no order in terms of size, balance and harmony”, while their removal came from a top-down approach through government regulations (Yamaguchi, 1989). Therefore, it may be seen as a reduction in civic culture and erosion of its bottom-up autonomy, which is part of the embedded Hong Kong identity, under the control of the central government that places more emphasis on top-down order, stability and even standardization of aesthetics.

A ready example is the “Beijing Municipal Regulations on the Management of Public Signs” released on 27 November, 2017. According to *China Daily*, this regulation serves the purpose of “creating an urban skyline that is visually clear and bright” by limiting the number and placement of signs on buildings (China Daily, 2017). It standardized the position of the sign on the building, the size of the sign, the use of external light sources, as well as the text written on it. Uniformity is the key, so all signs not conforming to the new regulations were removed – a total of 27,000 signs were marked to be removed in one month’s time by the end of 2017 (Hou, 2017). Implementation of this regulation has led to streetscapes of homogeneous shopfronts of identical designs and colours. After receiving some strong negative public reactions and even criticisms on *People’s Daily* (He, 2017), calling it a practice of formalities that killed the city’s creativity, a new regulation was passed in May 2021, which called for highlighting local features and avoiding “homogeneity of design, colour and font”(Xinhua News, author’s translation, 2021). However, this regulation, although initiated much later than Hong Kong’s local policy, has prompted some speculations of Beijing government’s influence as another contributing factor to the fading of neon signs, especially when this came at two decades after Hong Kong’s handover to Beijing. Since the transition of Hong Kong’s identity took a political turn after 1997, which is inextricable from the historical layer of its identity, it reminded us that these layers always meld together into a seamless whole, rendering any separation of these layers analytically flawed.

HOW NEON LIGHT BECAME A SYMBOL OF HONG KONG’S COMPLEX IDENTITY

Neon gas was discovered in 1898 by English scientists but was popularized by French entrepreneur George Claude as a medium for commercial advertising (Crowe, 1991), with the first neon sign in China erected in 1926 by Canadian bookseller Edward Evans & Sons on Nanjing Road in Shanghai to promote typewriters. The first bilingual neon sign was locally made by a firm called Far East Neon (遠東年紅) in Shanghai in 1927, hence “*nianhong*” (年紅) became the original Chinese word for neon, which could also mean “annual bonus”. Later the new term “*nihong*” (霓虹) gains currency (Lo, 2019; CityUHK, 2023). It is unclear when the first neon sign appeared in Hong Kong, but the government began to recognize it as a form of advertisement in the 1920s. Based on an article, the neon light technology reached Hong Kong that year as a modern “art of illumination” (Hong Kong Telegraph, 1929). Many of the early neon signs in Hong Kong were supplied by Claude Neon Lights Fed’s affiliate in Shanghai, which announced plans to build a plant in Hong Kong in 1932, incorporating Western technology with local craft. Neon signs flourished in the latter half of the 20th century, especially in the 1960s and 70s when the city entered a phase of rapid economic development, illuminating the streets of the so-called “Pearl of the Orient” as symbols of fashion

and prosperity, creating another reputation of its being the "neon city". Its representation in Hong Kong films further contributed to its symbolic image, so much so that the Hong Kong Tourist Association often featured neon signs as promotional visuals.

From the British colonial rule in 1842 to the mid-twentieth century, Hong Kong slowly developed into an economic entrepot between China and Western countries and a cultural melting pot. Neon lights became an epitome of this convergence as it combined "Western styles and Chinese traditions, new technologies and handmade solutions, and global branding and local solutions" (Kwok, 2021). As described by Lee, Hong Kong is a "city between worlds" (Lee, 2010), perched on the fault line between China and the West, characterized by its four features of density, centrality, hybridity and verticality. These qualities had led to a unique feature of Hong Kong's signscape: "its order amongst apparent chaos, which has entirely resulted from bottom-up participation" through spatial battles at grassroots level, "in which each sign was designed to stand out from the rest in order to be the centre of attention" (Kwok, 2021, p. 363). This distinguished Hong Kong from other cities that also have a lot of neon signs, and explained why neon lights formed the defining image of Hong Kong. As Kwok explained, people construct places "through our everyday participation, in which meaning is accumulated, constructed, and assigned to a place, the place in turn is able to convey for us a sense of proprietorship" (Kwok, 2020, p.538). It is widely acknowledged that long-term residents of a particular place tend to feel a sense of affection and belonging towards said place (Proshansky, 1983; Hay, 1998; Morgan, 2010), which shapes people's lives, cultures, identities and histories, giving the place "human emotional values" (Tuan, 1977). The representation of neon light itself has gone through some transitions: from being historical (Western influence), to economic (as a prosperous entrepot and shopping paradise), cultural (unique hybrid of glocalization), technological (becoming outdated in energy efficiency) and even political (fading away after the tightened government regulation in 2010), making it an epitome of Hong Kong's identity in transition that is marked by complexity. It was made an art in extinction by technology development of LED lighting, which was already developed in the 1960s, but commercial applications only took off at the turn of the millennia. Since the late 2000s, LED signs have appeared in the streets of Hong Kong, slowly replacing neon signs due to some obvious advantages including lower cost (both for installation, energy use and maintenance), bigger size (that can cover the whole building facades) and more versatility with dynamic effects. However, they tend to be homogeneous in terms of designs and colours while each neon sign was individually made rather than mass produced. And paradoxically, their relatively low cost and higher brightness ended or up worsening the so-called light pollution rather than alleviating it (Kyba *et al*, 2017), as light pollution is caused by both "the use of inefficient lighting installations and long operating hours" as per the definition of the Hong Kong Environment Bureau (Environment Bureau of HKSAR Government, 2012). According to Pun and So's study, Tsim Sha Tsui is the brightest one among the 18 locations in Hong Kong, which is said to be 510 times brighter than that background, while even though Sai Kung East Country Park is the darkest, it averages 15.4 times the standard (Pun & So, 2012). Hong Kong's own environmental charity, Friends of the Earth (FoE HK), runs anti-light-pollution campaigns named "Dim It" since 2008. However, even the Environment Bureau (2015: 19) itself has endorsed the need to "maintain Hong Kong's famous night scene", fearing that dimming them would drive the already deteriorating business environment further downhill and result in Hong Kong losing its metropolitan luster (Environment Bureau of HKSAR Government, 2015).

Another example of the inseparability of its multi-layered identity is that while losing its technical edge and functional competitiveness, neon signs have gained a new form of significance as cultural heritage in preserving the city's history. As emblems of Hong Kong's bygone modernity, neon signs have come to represent a testimony to its historical memories, evoking a sense of nostalgia for the disappearing past, and a unique local Hong Kong identity. However, since this modernity was a legacy from Hong Kong's colonial past, it is not something that is encouraged to be fondly remembered by the people in the eyes of Beijing, who views Hong Kong primarily as a lost and regained territory, thus not able to appreciate the emotional attachments felt among the local communities. Actually, the lack of empathy means that nostalgia for the colonial past is often considered traitorous to their Chinese ancestral roots by the mainland. However, in the time between "losing" and "regaining" Hong Kong, lies the different history that produces these different attitudes. If people's 'emotional construction of places' creates "images or impressions about their own cities

through memory and personal interpretation", then such sensual experiences are instrumental to the construction of Hong Kong's identity. Therefore, although the decision was not a political response but a practical one to address other concerns such as safety and environment, if we understand their removal as "the irreversible loss of relevant culture, history, and meaning of place" as well as "individual's senses of identification, security and belonging" as Kwok explained (Kwok, 2020, p. 553), then we can understand the lament among some people that Hong Kong would become just another Chinese city, or a homogeneous space.

THE TRIANGULAR GAME OF HONG KONG'S IDENTITY TRANSITION

As well articulated by Hall (1989), "cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'…… Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power". Jenkins explained identification as a social process, "it is not something that one can *have*, but something that one *does"* (Jenkins, 2014).Therefore, identity is always in transition that defies an anchored analysis. In the case of Hong Kong, as Lo puts it, "the significance of Hong Kong for the West lies in its challenging or subverting of an emerging China and also in its mirroring of a superior Western cultural identity and values" (Lo, 2005). Between "challenging" and "mirroring" is Hong Kong being marginalized and "othered" by both sides, thus caught in a triangular relationship with complex interactions of both inclusion and exclusion at different stages in the co-evolution of decolonization and mainlandization. As the modifier of "emerging" used for China in Lo's statement indicates, the term of mainlandization needs to be understood as an ongoing and interactional process, in the context of the rapidly shifting economic landscape, political matrix and the global flows of capital, during which both mainland and Hong Kong are changing. Without realizing this dynamic nature, we will risk using an outdated map to misguide our search for a reasoned understanding.

To start with, a long historical view is essential for understanding the intricacy of the big triangle of Hong Kong, mainland China, and the West as the colonizer and the colonized. Today's China is entering the second reversal of its relative power status with the West from the first reversal which happened during the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries (Liu, 2022). By externalizing and primitivizing cultural Otherness, China and the West tried to legitimate their own superior self-representation as being "civilized" during these two centuries, which is similar to when Hong Kong claimed a self-representation as being "modern" against the less developed mainland China prior to 1997 (Chow, 1992). Then a reversal of Self/Other relationship is gradually unfolding both between mainland China and the West as well as against Hong Kong. In the late 1970s when opening-up and economic reform was launched in mainland China, modernization was in a large way seen as westernization, and Hong Kong was considered a window through which to see the West. In other words, "Hong Kong establishes itself as the paragon for China's modernization" (Law, 2000, p. 215), and a better China can be built by learning Hong Kong's ways of doing things. This was when the Hong Kong identity hinged on distinguishing itself from the mainland, based on an *Us* vs. *Them* mentality to a certain degree. According to Law (2000), the "chauvinistic sense of pride" of Hong Kong over "a backward China is so widespread as to constitute as much as a class ideology as a popular hegemony" in which China is taken as an essentialized *Other*, and Hong Kong citizens mostly rejected identification as being Chinese but Hong Konger.

In the past decades since its handover in 1997, Hong Kong has gone through a complex relationship with the mainland, showing that identity is nothing but a power game. Initially, as argued by Szeto (2006, p.269), as the exemplary political, economic and cultural modernization, the power relationship between a developed city and undeveloped regions gave Hong Kong a "desire to reverse-colonize China". However, the "Northbound Cultural Imaginary" met head-to-head with "Southbound Cultural Imaginary" from mainland China (Szeto, 2006, p.257): the former describes how Hong Kong imagines China with their implied cosmopolitanism and economic and cultural expansion towards the mainland, while the latter describes China's claim to cultural authenticity and superiority based on Sinocentrism against the once colonized Hong Kong. The authors would describe this as an intertwined "mutual otherness" between Hong Kong and the mainland, not only by both sides but also by both stages of colonial modernity and postmodern decolonization. An example is the coinage of Gang Can/Kong Chian (港燦) from Ah Can/Ah Chian (阿燦)[1]

[1]Hong Kong used to look down upon people in China as country bumpkins and call them Ah Can/Ah Chian, who was a 1980 Hong Kong TV soap opera character as the stereotype of Chinese immigrants to Hong Kong. After 1997, the idiom was turned around to call Hong Kong people in search of work in China as Gang Can/Kong Chian.

to refer to "the Other" being looked down, upon which the self-identity as the superior one is built. Prior to 1997, when Hong Kong people travelled to the mainland, they could confirm their superior identity by their interactions with the *Other*; 25 years after the handover, they could sense the changing identities by interacting with the wealthy visiting mainlanders, giving them mixed sentiments of fear and anxiety with lingering supremacy. May Szeto attributed this mixture to "the southbound national and economic expansion of China", or a "southbound sinocentrist neo-colonialism", and Hong Kong's countering "northbound anti-colonial gesture", resulting in "an exaggerated superiority and an exaggerated inferiority" that Hong Kong's identity rests on, fluctuating between economic boom and gloom (Szeto, 2006, p.270). The mainstream Hong Kong sentiments swung from over-confidence in the 1990s when it represented itself as a cosmopolitan centre to the world and especially to mainland China, to the sense of loss post 1997, when the transnational capital redirected from the more developed Hong Kong to other places in mainland China. Despite this swing, it was stuck in the centre/margin polarity involving Hong Kong, China and the West, and this "in-betweenness" has led to its identity being "doubly victimized" by Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism according to several cultural critics such as Chow (1992) and Law (2009), presenting us with a complex portrait of decolonization.

Chow then described Hong Kong's identity as a "third space" between two colonizers after 1997, with the "motherland" exercising "the same imperialist policies as the former colonizer" (Chow, 1992). China and Britain were depicted as "the two aggressors", one with colonialism, one with authoritarianism (Chow, 1992). This made some people view "the PRC version of decolonization as little more than recolonization" in that the power inequality between Hong Kong citizens and the PRC government is similar to the system that existed under British colonialism (Chow, 1992). In Law's words, "Hong Kong becomes China's indispensable "other" to be recovered as well as to be recolonized", leading toward a "rediscovery of nationalism" (Law, 2009).Therefore, we would argue that Hong Kong's *northbound colonialism* "from economic to political" described by Lee in 1995 and "in terms of economics and popular culture" described by Ip in 1998, is now being largely reversed by mainland's *southbound nationalism*.

Nationalists need mediums, such as the commonality of race, language, history or territory, to create an "imagined political community" in Anderson's terms (Anderson, 2020). In the context of post-1997 China, the rediscovered nationalism is both top-down state-endorsed and bottom-up with features of patriotism among the younger generation of mainlanders. Believing that Chinese nationalism is legitimate over the moral injustice of Western colonialism, both the state and popular nationalism see Hong Kong's decolonization as defined by the territory's transfer to PRC sovereignty, not by local autonomy (Tam, 2024), while "most Hong Kong residents live in the liminal space in between, embracing both the identity of Hong Kong and a continent and contested Chinese identity that rejects those elements of Chinese nationalism that encroaches on their autonomy" (Tam, 2024).This means that Hong Kong's complex postcoloniality cannot be examined in the same lens as other conventional former colonized countries who later claimed independence. Therefore, when mainlandization is interpreted as "communist sinicization" (Law, 2009, p. 202), the analysis of Hong Kong's identity transition is almost inextricable from the fate of being politicalized.

As for the Hong Kong government's stance, compared with their initial caution to not fall into the so-called mainlandization, notable changes took place between the 11th five-year-plan (2006-2010) when Hong Kong was mentioned in the central government's plan for the first time, to the 12th five-year-plan (2011-2015) when a separate chapter was dedicated to outlining strategies to support the development of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). These strategies aimed to enhance Hong Kong's competitive advantages in all spheres of economic activity and help Hong Kong better integrate into the overall development of the country. Although Hong Kong was not included in the central planning, this separate chapter has instead stimulated heated discussions in Hong Kong about how to draw on this window of opportunity to better develop itself and compete with rising mainland cities while maintaining its unique advantages. Then in 2014 and 2021, the Hong Kong SAR government submitted official communications to the Commission on Strategic Development to discuss Hong Kong's action plans for the 13th and 14th Five-Year-Plan respectively, indicating an active move closer to Beijing to gain support from the central government. On the twentieth anniversary of Hong Kong's return to China, the "Framework Agreement on Deepening Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Cooperation in the Development of the Bay Area" was signed in Hong Kong on 1 July 2017

(Xinhua News, 2017). It was later commonly known as the Greater Bay Area (GBA), envisioned by Chinese government planners as an integrated economic area aimed at taking a leading role globally by 2035. Over 25 years after the handover, the power relationship between Beijing and Hong Kong has largely been remapped by their relative positions measured by economic achievements and attraction of the global capital flow.

A broader context needing to be taken into account here is the wave of globalization that engulfed the whole world in the 21st century. As Ritzer's book *The McDonalidization of Society* argued, alongside diversity, globalization brings in greater homogeneity (Ritzer, 2021). In a way, like resisting globalization is not an option for small countries to counter the tides of change, not becoming homogenized and mainlandized is proving harder for the post-97 Hong Kong. Meanwhile, it is important to emphasize that the mainland by this time is also having a shifting identity, especially in relation to Hong Kong. Cities in mainland have become a much more capitalized, materialized, and developed, which shows more similarities than differences to Hong Kong compared with 30 years ago. However, the governance model of Beijing and Hong Kong remain representatives of two poles apart: a "Big Government" that seeks to be excessively involved in public policy through extensive bureaucracy and regulations for Beijing vs. a "Small Government" that features laissez-faireism, or hands-off approach with minimal intervention into the lives of the citizenry for Hong Kong. Since the priority for Chinese government has always been maintaining stability, the "Big Government" model serves the purpose well, however, while homogeneity may facilitate order and stability for mainland China, convergence has been the fountainhead for Hong Kong's past glory and will remain so for its future prosperity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This piece of research incorporates quantitative and qualitative methods to gather both broad and deep data. All necessary ethics approvals were sought and obtained from the BAHSS Ethics Committee of the University of Central Lancashire, for two phases of the research, with the approval number of BAHSS2 01170 Phase_1 and BAHSS2 01170 Phase_2 respectively. A data protection check list was submitted along with the survey questionnaire, interview questions, participant information sheet, consent form, and email to contact the potential interviewees, and all the subjects have provided appropriate informed consent. Primary resources consulted include a number of policy documents with their Annex, such as the Ten-Year Unauthorized Building Works (UBW) Removal Program from April 2001 to March 2011 (Legislative Council of HKSAR, 2011), including the "Building Department's Enforcement Policy Against Unauthorized Building Works" published in 2001 (Legislative Council of HKSAR, 2011, Annex A); Hong Kong Legislative Council documents regarding "Measures to Enhance Building Safety in Hong Kong" published in December 2010 (Legislative Council of HKSAR, 2010), and "Control of Unauthorized Building Works under the Building Ordinance (Cap 123)" published in June 2011 (document:CB(1)2487/10-11(01)). Information released on the official website of the Buildings Department (BD) were carefully studied as well, including "Signboard Control System" with detailed specific cases, such as the large scale operations in selected target street sections carried out since 2014 (Buildings Department, the Government of HKSAR, updated: 2025, January 27), and the priority demolition orders regarding "large signboards that are in serious breach of the law and pose high public risk to safeguard public safety". All the cases are presented with contrasting pictures before and after the removal of signboards. Government news releases were also studied, especially the one in March 2010 that gave statistics of the removal program ten years on (HK Government News, 2010).

Then a survey and semi-structured interviews were carried out by focusing on six groups of people: local residents, business owners, policy makers, expatriates, and tourists from the mainland and overseas to explore the perceived effects of disappearing neon signs on Hong Kong's identity. The questionnaires were provided in three different versions in English, full traditional characters and simplified Chinese to reflect the multiple cultural backgrounds of these groups that contribute to Hong Kong's identity. The online survey opened from 8 May to 4 July 2024, and received a total return of 528 responses, of which 489 are valid responses, including 467 completed in Chinese and 22 in English. A necessary note is that a very small number of respondents have chosen the category of identifying themselves as "HK business owners" (0.6%) and "HK government officials" (2.6%), although arguably, these groups can be considered members of "HK local residents" (31.3%) as well. A total of 12 interviews were carried out, with six in English and six in Chinese to balance it out, including three local residents, three expatriates, two overseas tourists, two

mainland tourists, one business owner and one senior politician.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

First of all, the majority (60.1%) of respondents have "noticed that an increasing number of neon-light signboards have been taken down in Hong Kong streets". This shows its wide-reaching impact is far beyond the sign owners themselves. The percentage is the highest (86.3%) among local residents; also above average among expatriates (65%), while the lowest is among overseas tourists (31%). People who lived in Hong Kong for a longer time are more likely to notice the change and have developed stronger emotional attachments to its cultural icons such as the neon lights due to the "human emotional values" discussed earlier. In terms of the rating of the "main reasons for taking down the signboards" where a Likert scale is provided in the survey, "technological advances" received the highest mean number (3.44), followed closely by "environmental concerns" (3.25) and "safety concerns" (3.24), while "influence from central government" was only 2.88. See Table **1** below.

A univariate analysis of variance was then conducted to examine the differences in the opinions, especially regarding the two factors that received the highest and lowest mean numbers, and the results revealed some interesting findings. As we can see from Table **2**, 59.7% (292 out of 489) respondents "agree or strongly agree" that "technological advance" is the main reason, while 20.9% chose "disagree and strongly disagree". Among Hong Kong local residents, a higher percentage of 25.5% chose "disagree and strongly disagree", showing a more reserved and complicated attitude towards "technological advance" as the main reason, in sharp contrast with 5% who "disagree and strongly disagree" and 79% who "agree and strongly agree" in the group of overseas tourists. As one of the local resident interviewees pointed out, there were simply more and more neon signs taken down, not because the technology is out of date, as they were not replaced by LED lights, endorsing the aim of the regulation was to remove "potentially hazardous" signboards. However, since there are fewer and fewer craftsmen in the neon industry, when new business owners establish signs, or have the old ones replaced, they do tend to go for LED ones.

Bigger discrepancy can be observed from Table **3** regarding "influence from the central government". The biggest proportion of both local residents and mainland tourists chose "neutral", with 35.9% for the former and 38.8% for the latter. In terms of disagreement, more local residents chose "strongly disagree and disagree" (41.2%) than mainland tourists (33.5%), while only 6.9% of overseas tourists chose these two options. On the other side of agreement, a whopping 63.8% of them chose "strongly agree and agree", compared with only 22.9% and 27.7% for the local residents and mainland tourists respectively. This pattern may have a correlation with their media use, for example, almost all English-speaking interviewees mentioned "influence

Table 1: The Difference of Main Reasons for Taking Down the Signboards

	Safety concerns	Environmental concerns	Technological advances	Influence from central Government
Mean	3.24	3.25	3.44	2.88
Std. Deviation	1.125	1.143	1.158	1.190

Table 2: The Difference of Attitudes to Technological Advances as the Reason in Groups

		Technological advances					Total
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	
Identity	HK local residents	12	27	20	75	19	153
	HK business owners	1	1	0	1	0	3
	HK government officials	0	0	1	10	2	13
	HK expatriates	1	4	2	12	1	20
	Tourists from mainland	30	23	63	91	35	242
	Tourists from other countries/regions	2	1	9	30	16	58
Total		46	56	95	219	73	489

Table 3: The Difference of Attitudes to Influence from Central Government in Groups

		Influence from central government					Total
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	
Identity	HK local residents	27	36	55	24	11	153
	HK business owners	2	0	0	1	0	3
	HK government officials	7	2	2	2	0	13
	HK expatriates	1	4	7	6	2	20
	Tourists from mainland	49	32	94	55	12	242
	Tourists from other countries/regions	1	3	17	21	16	58
Total		87	77	175	109	41	489

from the Beijing government", while most local residents do not see it as a big factor. As pointed out by one of the interviewees, "Western media's portrayal of HK is often founded on false premises with an ideological spin". One of the expatriates from Britain mentioned in the interview that when he went back to the UK over summer in 2024, he was asked by British friends if HK is a "safe and easy place" to live as the Covid-19 shadow still loomed over the image of China, showing the divergence between a media-shaped perception and reality on the ground. What is also worth noting in media influence is the fact that a total of 307 respondents (62.8%), in disregard of their identity category, use social media "always and very often".

There are a number of valuable additions to the "other" reasons, including "poor economy", "high maintenance cost", "changing aesthetics", and "decolonization". These were not listed in the original questionnaire mainly because "the main reasons for taking down the signboards" refers to the government who made the decisions, however, in terms of implementation, it is the sign owners who have to take them down and the decisions to have replacements or not depend on business and financial considerations. One of the interviewees added the fact that there are not enough people working in the industry now, so even if business owners wanted to replace their neon signs with new ones instead of choosing LED lights, they no longer have as good a supply as before. All the above-mentioned "other" reasons were also backed up by our interview findings, especially the first two as Covid-19 has hit the restaurant, retail and entertainment business the hardest. Besides, as pointed out by one of the local residents interviewed, there has been a recent development of "northbound consumption", especially for residents living in the New Territory of Hong Kong, who choose to spend their money in neighbouring mainland cities such as Shenzhen, where shopping centres and supermarkets are not only larger and cheaper such as Costco, but also offer incredibly cheap shuttle buses for Hong Kong shoppers. This represented a reversal of shopping traffic, and Hong Kong's former reputation as a Shopping Paradise was illuminated in those glamorous neon signs. In this sense, their dimming did reflect a slump in retail businesses. Indeed, on top of the listed concerns, if they no longer make business sense, most people chose "understand and support" (35%) as their attitudes towards this change, followed by "do not care" (21.9%) and "understand but oppose" (21.2%). See Table **4** below.

Then, another univariate analysis of variance was conducted to examine the differences in different people's attitudes, and the results revealed a significant difference. From Table **5** below we can see a completely different picture among "local residents" and "tourists from mainland": the former group shows a very similar percentage of people choosing the first two options: 27.5% "understand and support" and 26.1% "understand but oppose", while the latter group shows a vast difference between 45.9%"understand and support" and 16.9% "understand but oppose". On the other hand, if we look at the two groups that chose "oppose", they added up to a total of 49.7% among local residents. In contrast, only 24.4% chose "oppose" among mainland tourists, not even half of that among the local residents, showing the biggest discrepancy. In endorsing "understand and support", one of the local residents interviewed considered the existence of so many hazardous signboards as a "neglect of duty" of the previous government who failed to set a rigorous standard to supervise installations, thus the current

Table 4: Attitudes towards Neon Lights and Signboard Change

	Number	Percentage
Understand and support	171	35.0%
Understand but oppose	104	21.2%
Do not understand but support	44	9.0%
Do not understand and oppose	63	12.9%
Do not care	107	21.9%

Table 5: Difference of Attitudes to Neon Lights Taken Down among Groups

Attitude to this action							
Identity	Understand and support	Understand but oppose	Do not understand but support	Do not understand and oppose	Do not care	Total	X^2
HK local residents	42	40	6	36	29	153	
HK business owners	0	1	0	1	1	3	
HK government officials	6	1	0	0	6	13	
HK expatriates	3	9	0	4	4	20	
Tourists from mainland	111	41	27	18	45	242	
Tourists from other countries/regions	9	12	11	4	22	58	
Total	171	104	44	63	107	489	82.9**

**p < .01.

policy is nothing but a “needed remedy” when hazards have become a concern that must be addressed.

However, in answering “what effects does this have on the image of Hong Kong in your view”, the most chosen answer was “Negative, because it erodes the unique streetscapes of Hong Kong” (240 votes), which is well described by one of the “tourist” interviewees as being “a place with history, not like other cities of newly sprung up skyscrapers that are soulless; it is a place with spectacular mix of old and modern and mix of people from all over the world”. This “mix” is an excellent footnote to what is “organic” divergence used by the same interviewee, who believes that “if the change happens in an organic and natural way, not seems to be forced in an authoritarian manner, then it is fine”. The change is indeed also perceived to have produced some positive effects as what follows in the number of votes, including “saves energy” (179), “removes safety hazards” (170), “makes the cityscape tidier” (158) and “makes Hong Kong looks more modern” (129). This means that the sad loss of uniqueness is compensated by some practical gains in homogeneity. The least chosen answer was “Negative, because people may associate it with the central government’s regulation” (71) before “No particular effect” (28). See Table **6** below.

As discussed earlier, the analysis of Hong Kong’s cultural identity is inextricable from the fate of being politicalized. Almost all interviewees have mentioned the political changes in Hong Kong in answering the questions about their attitudes to the change of the streetscapes; changes in the political landscape as a more profound change were brought up automatically. Meanwhile, while most interviewees across the spectrum see mainlandization as a natural course of Hong Kong’s development that will continue, they do not associate the disappearing of neon signs with the influence from Beijing, instead, the measure was regarded more as a remedy to address the safety and environmental concerns that perhaps *all* governments would resort to. Another strong argument brought by one of the interviewees regarding the worry about increasing migrants from mainland would eventually make Hong Kong more like a mainland city is that “people moved to Hong Kong for the attraction of it as a city with free flow of idea, money and people, something that their hometown does not offer; migrants will not make the new destination more like where they are from, just like the HK immigrants to England will not make England more like HK”. The influx of quality labour force from mainland helps fill the gap left by the so-called exodus of local residents.

Table 6: The Rank of Effects that Respondents Chose on Image of HK

Negative, because it erodes the unique streetscapes of Hong Kong	240
Positive, because it saves energy	179
Positive, because it removes safety hazards	170
Positive, because it makes the cityscape tidier	158
Positive, because it makes Hong Kong looks more modern	129
Negative, because it adversely affects Hong Kong's tourist industry	129
Positive, because it reduces the imprint of Hong Kong's colonial history	118
Negative, because it affects local people's sense of belonging	96
Negative, because it invokes the image of an economic recession	71
Negative, because people may associate it with the central government's regulation	71
No particular effect	28
Other (please specify)	5

As for "the best way to deal with removed neon lights", the most chosen answer in order was "Display them in existing museum as art pieces" (Mean of 3.78), such as the Hong Kong Culture Museum, to encase neon signs as a part of Hong Kong's cultural heritage along with others; "Build a specialized neon museum as a cultural heritage" (3.7), "Sell them as second-hand items or collectables" (3.29), and lastly "Put them in the landfill" (2.22). See Table **7** below. The most interesting findings, both from the survey and interviews, are regarding the "other" ways of dealing with the removed neon lights, including suggestions of "using them to develop a theme park", while more respondents actually preferred keeping them in some designated special reservation areas in an organic way, not like an artificial playground; or develop an area such as Chinatown in Singapore as a tourist attraction. Competent departments can prescribe the criteria for what kind of neon signs can be rated as "cultural heritage" to be maintained and curated carefully. Other suggestions include "recycling/reusing them in an environmentally friendly way", "putting them inside modern shopping arcades", "using them for Hong Kong restaurants in the mainland, as a way to spread Hong Kong cultural icons to the mainland", and "selling them abroad as exotic and quirky decorations, for example, for oriental-style food courts or pubs".

When answering if they "support any of the following measures/efforts to build a new image of Hong Kong", "setting up a neon museum as a project to protect the city's cultural heritage" received the most votes (354), followed by "starting a Hong Kong branded Lumiere Festival as a new tourist attraction" (277). See Table **8** below. While most interviewees endorsed these two ideas, some respondents think this may prove to be difficult to realize due to the coordination of multiple interest groups as Hong Kong is not governed with a top-down approach by the government. One of the local residents interviewed expressed doubts in the practicability of building a specialized neon museum and gave two interesting reasons: "most museums in Hong Kong are government-run and private ones with a niche market are very rare; secondly, from the government perspective, they are more future-oriented than focusing on Hong Kong's past, perhaps because of its colonized history, not something encouraged to look back on". But the paradox is, only when neon signs in the museums represent a way to come to terms with Hong Kong's past, can its identity transition truly face the future.

There are also answers not supporting these measures as they are deemed either "useless", "too late", "produce light pollution", and "a city's culture takes generations to build, constructing a film studio/movieset won't be a solution". There are also people who believe that there is "no need to replicate those light festivals as HK just needs to promote better some of the existing and unique events". Indeed, the multi-media show across the Victoria Harbour started in 2005, "Symphony of Lights" for example, is the world's largest permanent light and sound show according to Guinness World Records, symbolizing the "signature icon for Hong Kong, showcasing the vibrancy and glamorous night vista of the city" (Lam, 2024).

Perhaps what gives this research significance is the last question about whether people's views have "changed in any way after completing this questionnaire": 53.4% stated that there were "some

Table 7: Statistical Difference among the Best Ways to Deal with Removed Neon Lights

	Put them in the landfill	Display them in existing museum as art pieces	Build a specialized neon museum as a cultural heritage	Sell them as second-hand items or collectables
Mean	2.22	3.78	3.70	3.29
SD	1.064	.970	1.072	1.068

Table 8: The Rank of Respondents Choosing Measures/Efforts to Build a New Image

Measures/efforts to build a new image	Number
Set up a neon museum as a project to protect the city's cultural heritage	354
Start a Hong Kong branded Lumiere Festival (such as in Lyon and London) as a new tourist attraction	277
Phase out neon lights with LED screens	220
Set up autostereoscopic 3D displaying screens in busy downtown areas	219
Others:	12

Table 9: The Change of Respondents after Completing the Survey

	Some positive changes, because I gained more thorough understanding	Some negative changes, because I gained more thorough understanding	No particular changes
Number	261	51	177
Percentage	53.4%	10.4%	36.2%

positive changes, because I gained more thorough understanding" and only 10.4% chose "some negative changes, because I gained more thorough understanding". See Table **9** above.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although neon lights and signboards are just one of the visual features of Hong Kong's unique streetscapes, the examination of Hong Kong's identity in transition through this lens has given us a lot of food for thought. The picture it revealed is obviously different from the negative media portrayal of the perceived effects on Hong Kong's identity when the change is more positively understood, accepted and even supported in situ. Among the top five options chosen in Table **6**, the four most recognized positive effects include "saving energy", "removing safety hazards", "making the cityscape tidier" and more importantly, "making Hong Kong looks more modern". This is telling as saying goodbye to neon signs is perhaps something that Hong Kong people do not wish to do, but they have embraced the change with a forward-looking mentality, and the change does not mean homogeneity will define Hong Kong's future identity, rather, their resilience will.

In the academic discussions so far, "hybridity" and "marginality" seemed to be the most salient defining characteristics of Hong Kong's cultural identity. Indeed, they have received some sharp criticisms from scholars such as Ip who argued against "the banality of characterizing Hong Kong as a place suffering from its marginal status" (Ip, 1998; Law, 2009, p. 205), by challenging both "hybridity" proposed by Lee (1995) and the "victimized in-betweenness" proposed by Chow (1992). He applied Bhabha's theory in stating that "the operation of colonial power is a hybrid cultural production process" (Ip, 1998, p. 46), so the identity of the colonized is hybrid as a pure result from their not accepting the culture of the colonizer in its entirety. True, but hybridity could also be a result of actively blending the best features of the two cultures. The development of neon signs from a Western technology to become an icon of Hong Kong by blending its unique historical, economic, social and cultural elements is such a live example of organic hybridity. Therefore, instead of calling the two defining modifiers "specters" as Ip (1998) did, we would rather describe them as the "two spectacles" used to examine Hong Kong's identity, which may restrict our views to the binary logic, or the centre/margin polarity involving Hong Kong, mainland China and the West. Through this article, the authors suggest taking a third and alternative perspective to examine the more complex and subtle interactions

among the three in the intertwined power dynamics. As well said by Hall, "cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination (that is not what the term means); it is never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture" (Hall, 1989).

If in-betweenness is the *passive* result of being marginalized into a restricted space between the two dominant forces, we think the perception of a "triangular game" sees Hong Kong as a third but important stakeholder, thus indicates some *active* movements between the two sides. But in the logic of a zero-sum game, which means closer to one side harms relationship with the other, the third party often ended up being torn between the two sides albeit with more room to manoeuvre, and it is the tension between the two sides that makes Hong Kong political. For example, Hong Kong is easily victimized by the cross-fire of Sino-British hostilities: whenever there is tension in the bilateral relations, Hong Kong will become the target or flashpoint. The politicalized lens adopted by some Western media to interpret the reduced number of neon signs in Hong Kong as mainlandization is another example. Therefore, a paradigm shift is needed in repositioning Hong Kong as a plus-sum game player, which means closer relationship with one side adds to its weight to the other side in this game, making Hong Kong more attractive and important to both sides at the same time. Hong Kong's role in the GBA could serve as such an example, where its contributions are greatly valued by mainland in developing it into an international first-class bay area; while its involvement in GBA also increases its strategic importance to Western investors who wish to tap into the mainland market through Hong Kong, the most open city in the area with free monetary circulation, known for being the international financial and trade centres, transportation hub, as well as a talent pool of international standard professional services.

Law drew a portrait for Hong Kong's future as "against marginality, down with hybridity, and no more in-between" (Law, 2000). The authors argue that it may be time to open up space for re-thinking "in-betweenness" as a positive vantage position between the East and West. Globalization may blur the economic border between the two, but cultural differences remain, which gives hybridity richness, resilience and diversity. As the Chinese term 中西合璧 indicates, a harmonious combination creates an enriched unison. Therefore, we would like to re-draw a picture of Hong Kong's future identity as "convergence with a new in-betweenness", as "no more" is neither realistic nor desirable when it can be a vantage position. In-betweenness means better understanding of the two sides, thus in a position to make the two sides work together better through the in-between space. This position gives us reasons to remain optimistic for Hong Kong to retain its importance and distinctive features, drawing on its "new in-betweenness" to converge past and future, China and the world.

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