CENTRAL POLICY UNIT
THE GOVERNMENT OF THE HONG KONG SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION

THE YOUTH PROBLEM

HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

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Executive Summary

It is commonly accepted that globalization is synonymous with plurality, difference and limitless complexity. It is assumed that the unprecedented mobility of transnational flows (capital, commodities, images, bodies and knowledges) that the free market has facilitated has rendered the tenability of any unified social theory impossible, fracturing global space into a multiplicity of local contexts. Our paper begins on the assertion that such a position is grounded on various unfounded suppositions. In fact, our theoretical wager is that global capital actualizes a process of universalization that dismantles all of the demarcations that divide men and women from one another, making creative cultural and political collaborations between peoples possible. It is this axiom that informs us to formulate several theses on the coordinates that Hong Kong shares with other advanced free market societies.

Now that neo-liberalism is on the verge of purging all traces of the Keynesian welfare state from its system and the state has difficulty in serving as a blockade against the corrosive effects of deregulated finance, it seems to us that the ideological premises of the nation state are more precarious than ever. Indeed, we would go so far as to say that the dramatic turn of Communist China after Deng Xiaoping is exemplary in this regard -- the Party can afford to assume a distance from its populist origins, grounding national solidarity upon the GDP and the profits that derive therefrom, because it is sustained by steady economic growth. It is this growth which offers a promise to the people, offering a utopian vision of abundance to students, small businessmen and workers alike.

Yet what happens when reality lags behind this dream? What happens if growth rates can no longer serve as guarantees for a future that never arrives? It is evident to us that this messianism of the market, which stakes the lives and hopes of millions on a dubious prize, is insupportable without the (illusory) moral foundation that once held civil society together. With the revocation of social welfare, public spending and other forms of statist intervention, state power has become synonymous with the workings of capital itself, consigning the fate of its people to finance. The anxiety that pervades society today originates from the wild waltzes of commerce, as workers and executives alike are drawn into an unending, cruel competition to acquire skills, techniques and contacts in a bid to meet shifting employment criteria as they teeter on the precipice of superfluity, irrelevance and redundancy. This, we feel, lends a new reading to the ‘generation gap’ hypothesis --- the children of today could hardly hope, as their grandfathers did, for lifelong employment in the same firm, replete with insurance and other benefits. From birth, they are compelled to struggle tooth and nail with their peers in an unceasing bid to affirm their employability. It is no surprise to us that this generation --- faced with a world that demands so much of them with scarcely any compensation besides electronic gadgets, shopping malls, nightclubs and standardized apartment spaces --- is losing its faith in the value of work. The state, now that it has co-existed with a world that affords little room for their aspirations, finds itself in a difficult situation before their claims for a new life. It is this antagonism that serves as the subject of our investigations in this paper.

It would therefore be wrong to treat the young of Hong Kong as an isolated aberrancy, a regional anomaly in the fabric of the global market. It would be equally unwise to
presume that their concerns are separable from those of other working citizens in the city. It is for this very reason that they have expressed their solidarity for the villagers of Tsoi Yuen Tsuen and immigrant workers alike. Far from having a ‘youth problem’, Hong Kong faces the splitting of the social into a dichotomous space, between those who persist in affirming the sanctity of the market and those who demand an exit from its dominion.