

Self-fashioned Identities: Art Deco Architecture in 1930s Hong Kong as Resistance and Empowerment

Leung-kwok Prudence Lau
The Education University of Hong Kong

At the turn of the twentieth century, new waves of modern architectural movements swept over the Eastern hemisphere, particularly in entities dominated by Western powers. As a British colony since 1842, architectural development in Hong Kong was stimulated at its earliest moments by Western forces (Zhu 9). During the economic crisis and civil war in China in 1927, masses of international architects and firms left mainland Chinese cities and moved from north to south, i.e. from Shanghai and Tianjin, to Hong Kong. Particularly during the Sino-Japan hostilities of the 1930s, prolonged social and political conditions in the mainland had resulted in Hong Kong becoming a haven for conducting trade and business. During these decades, the influx of professionals in the construction industry from northern to southern China had moreover propelled the modern architectural development of Hong Kong.

Initially, in the early twentieth century, only a small number of around 33 architects registered with the colonial Hong Kong government in 1903. By 1941, the number of such 'Authorized Architects' in Hong Kong had increased to 74, of which 24 were Chinese (Lam 46). This was mostly due to the return of Chinese architects, some trained abroad in the classic Beaux-Arts schools in the United States (Cody, Steinhardt and Atkin), and the rise of local architectural practices in Hong Kong and China during the 1920s and 1930s. Previous research mainly focuses on architects on the mainland and delineates their earliest activities in China, with some linking their works with prevailing international currents of the time, including Art Nouveau and Art Deco movements (as seen in studies by Xu Subin and Lai Delin).

The lavish ornamentation of the Art Deco style, when translated into the Western urban context of Shanghai in the 1930s, is observed by Lee Ou-fan as "a new mediation between the neoclassicism of British imperial power ... and the ebullient new spirit of American capitalism" (11). Others moreover argue that the strong decorative heritage in Chinese culture allowed Art Deco to be readily incorporated into modern times, or essentially, modern applications to Chinese architecture (Minick and Jiao 38). These studies provoke further critical insights into the architecture of colonial Hong Kong, particularly during the period when Chinese architects returning from their studies overseas began to establish their own architectural practices. Up until now, there has been only one publication in 2007 on

early modern Hong Kong architecture, focusing on around ten ‘first-generation’ architects. This publication, written in Chinese and with the English title *The Story of First Generation Chinese Architects in Hong Kong* (Ng and Chu), is a seminal piece of work that paints a picture of the modern urban architectural milieu, but is however only a collection of works of the individual architects, and does not critique why and how they confront or mediate respective social or cultural contexts and architectural styles.

Moreover, there is no previous study of the architecture of Hong Kong in light of postcolonial discourse. There are, however, studies in Hong Kong art, cinema, and literature that utilize postcolonial theory, such as research on Hong Kong literature (Hooper), movies (Wong), and the well-known but often criticized publication by Ackbar Abbas critiquing the city’s “disappearance” of identity. Therefore, existing scholarship on Hong Kong architecture, including those mentioned above and more to be addressed in the next section of this paper, does not offer a critical understanding of modern architecture in Hong Kong: scholars do not question the underlying premises of the methods in analysing architectural style nor allow the architecture to be placed in interaction with broader issues including socio-cultural contexts.

This study utilizes postcolonial theory as the basis for the analysis of early modern architecture in Hong Kong in the decades around the two world wars. As a British colony for over 150 years, Hong Kong is currently still coming to terms in many respects with its ‘new’ political domination by China since 1997. This paper argues that certain architectural projects in Hong Kong in the early twentieth century, as Bill Ashcroft stated in his *Postcolonial Transformation*, are not passive subjects that are unable to escape the pressure of imperial ideology. Instead, these buildings, or “subjects” in Ashcroft’s terminology, “consume the dominant culture in a strategy of self-fashioning and self-representation” (40).

My research relies on archival sources and documentation as the primary methodology, including site visits and the analysis of documents, photographs, newspaper articles and reports. Secondary sources include government reports from the colonial administration of the time. The main research question revolves around how certain Chinese architects, in negotiating between the patron and the audiences of the architecture, ‘self-fashioned’ or, in essence, constructed realities in the form of aesthetic modes of resistance and empowerment while problematizing the architectural style in colonial Hong Kong. This research therefore anticipates expanding the knowledge base of postcolonial theory as it can be used and applied in the field of architecture in Hong Kong, and also contributing to the growing intellectual discourse in architectural history in greater China and Asia by presenting alternative theoretical frameworks.

The dialectical relationship between coloniser and colonised will be reappraised in my study, and I anticipate that researchers and students of British colonialism will be able to utilize this study as a means of understanding the issues and politics from the perspective of the colonised. In addition to representing often unheard discussions of

the impacts of British imperialism, this essay also establishes a provisional socio-cultural history for early twentieth-century Hong Kong, supported by previously neglected or undiscovered materials. I will explore the idea and expression of modern architecture in the interwar years and present a clearer narrative of this era via an account of indigenous Hong Kong architectural practices. This research contributes not only to the architectural history of Hong Kong but also to the history of modern architecture in China, and could serve as a basis for future studies and research, particularly when questions of the interaction of colonial discourse with the built environment comes into play.

Architectural Styles as Sites of Contestation

Architectural historian and postcolonial critic Sibel Bozdoğan, known for her award-winning 2001 book on the importation of modern architecture by Turkish political and intellectual elites, as both a visible symbol and instrument of their modernizing agenda in 1930s Ankara, Turkey, offers an analysis that is useful for my research. She argues that modernization in non-Western countries often lies in the hands of the colonial government or local elites, who implement a top-down program on architectural or urban development as a form of “visible politics” (*Modernism and Nation Building* 9). I would argue otherwise. In the case of Hong Kong, there were forms of ‘invisible’ politics in the architectural milieu of the early twentieth century, in the form of dynamics between architects, the patrons, and the local community. Architects, particularly several Chinese individuals, were in fact driven by various agendas while consciously or unconsciously contesting colonial architectural styles.

Architecture in colonial contexts is therefore not simply a question of form but is a process relating to wider societal issues between the patron, architect, audience and local political forces. Bozdoğan’s use of postcolonial theory in theorising architectural historiography demonstrates an awareness of the inherent politics within architecture, as one may also discern in her 1999 article “Reflections on Postcolonial Challenges to the Modern Survey” (207), where she makes an early scholarly attempt to make architectural history less Eurocentric and more cross-cultural. Lawrence Vale’s classic text *Architecture, Power and National Identity* in 1992 also shows that buildings are the product of a balance of power between political and cultural forces, focusing on national government institutions in capital cities including Washington D.C., Ankara, Canberra, and the post-World War II capitals of Chandigarh and Brasilia, etc. He highlights postcolonial struggles in the 1970s and 1980s to build the symbols and institutions of democratic government during periods of political and economic change and the issue of national identity-building in these situations.

Taking insight from Bozdoğan and Vale’s works and reflecting upon the colonial context of Hong Kong, however, I note that British

influence upon architectural development is often only addressed in passing; for instance, it has been characterized as Gothic architectural styles and classical revival architectural forms in previous literature (Morris 25). Nonetheless, the above literature situates the architecture in the wider contexts of identity and power, and how the buildings are manipulated or exercised by respective stakeholders. In his classic study of power, Michel Foucault demonstrates that the exercise of power is not simply the control of one entity over another, but rather stems from the relationship between individuals or groups. Operations of power are rooted in the idea of a “subject,” of which Foucault offers two possible meanings: “subject to someone else by control and dependence” and “tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (331). The first meaning implies that power becomes part of the everyday life of a person as they are continually made aware of their own identity, or manipulated to accept a form of identity. Foucault argues for the second meaning, that power is essentially linked with the production of knowledge. Architecture as a system of producing knowledge can therefore be recognized as a participant in power dynamics (Cabalfin 175).

The power dynamics between architects, the patrons, and the local community in Hong Kong is therefore the main focus of this paper. My previous research on colonial Bombay (now Mumbai) in the interwar years, centering the narrative on certain Indian-born, Western-educated architects, argues that the city experienced similar power dynamics that resulted in modern architecture contesting imperial architectural styles and the rise of Art Deco buildings (Lau). Now, what exactly was Art Deco? This 1920s-30s ‘modern’ style, as coined and explained by art historian Bevis Hillier in the 1960s, drew inspiration from a variety of sources and can be defined as:

a classical style in that, like neo-classicism, but unlike Rococo or Art Nouveau, it ran to symmetry rather than asymmetry, and to rectilinear rather than the curvilinear ... and its ultimate aim was to end the old conflict between art and industry ... by adapting design to the requirements of mass-production. (Hillier 16)

Bombay, initially proclaimed “India’s first city” by Governor H.B.E. Frere (1815-1884) in the early days of British conquest, saw most public commissions designed in the Gothic Revival style. Such advocacy of imperial architectural styles was challenged in the form of modernist architecture by English architect Claude Batley (1879-1956) during his visiting professorship between 1914-1934 at the Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School of Art (established in 1857), the oldest art institution in Bombay and an architectural school that was modeled on the academic Ecole des Beaux-Arts curriculum. This contestation of style in turn yielded an “Art Deco modernism” (Iyer 21), propagated by one of Batley’s students and the protégé G. B. Mhatre (1902-1973), a local Indian architect who later became an avid protagonist of designing in the Art Deco style. At the time, indigenous architectural styles were regarded as inferior when compared to imperial styles, whilst later on certain modernist styles, such as the International Style, were criticised

to counteract the Indian propensity for surface ornament. My 2011 paper further argues that Art Deco, as an architectural style that references modernity while incorporating decorative expressions of the locality, is not only a product of modern industry and mass production, but in certain contexts (including British colonial India and Hong Kong) can act as a decisive reaction against imperialism and also a negotiation between tradition and modernity in architecture.

By identifying the above facets that Art Deco could be fashioned or constructed through, the style therefore cannot simply be understood as an innocent or passive development of architecture, but must instead be seen as one that takes part in a complex modernist project to contest and mediate colonial policies and exchanges between different agents and structures. This paper takes a deeper look at this process, but first I will begin by looking at the socio-historical context within which the production of Art Deco occurred in Hong Kong in the 1930s.

Social-historical Context in the Time of Chau & Lee Architects

A letter dating back to 1951, written by a Belgian architect working in Hong Kong, gives an idea of the architectural milieu of Hong Kong in the early twentieth century and some of the main actors on the local architectural scene. The author of this letter was Gustave Volckaert (1888–1978), chief architect of the *Crédit Foncier d'Extrême-Orient* (CFEO) in Hong Kong in the 1950s.¹ He starts off by introducing two well-known and established British architectural practices of Palmer & Turner (est. 1868) and Leigh & Orange (est. 1874). Immediately following these two practices, Volckaert mentions a third: “Chau & Lee Architects,” and describes this particular Chinese architectural practice as the following: “Established for about twenty years. They are specialised in the construction of cinemas and carry out important works for the University of Hong-Kong and other bodies such as: Y.M.C.A., anti-tuberculosis center [sic] etc.” (Volckaert).

Chau & Lee Architects, an indigenous Hong Kong architectural practice, was founded in 1933 by Chinese engineer Chau Iu Nin (周耀年) (1901–1980) and Eurasian architect Richard Edmund Lee (李禮之) (dates unknown). Chau was educated at St. Stephen's College in Hong Kong, and received his bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering from Hong Kong University in 1920. An associate member of the Institution of Structural Engineers, he was also made Justice of the Peace in 1960. Richard Lee, on the other hand, received his bachelor's degree in architecture in England. Chau Iu Nin's son, Chau Kai Him, merged the firm a decade after his father's death with Ku & Leung architects to form Chau, Ku & Leung Architects & Engineers Limited in 1991, and the group still exists today.

Chau & Lee Architects were active in Hong Kong from the 1930s until the late 1950s. Chau Iu Nin's prominent family connections in Hong Kong also provided him with many public commissions from both the local Chinese and the colonial government. In fact, Chau Iu Nin's brothers, Chau Sik-nin (周錫年) and Chau Tsun-nin (周竣年),

were both elite Chinese individuals in the local community and held important positions within the colonial government. Sir Chau Tsun-nin (1893-1971), the eldest of the three, was initially a lawyer. He was made Justice of the Peace in 1922 and was appointed to the Sanitary Board, a prominent position in service of the colonial government, in 1929. He also served on the board of many important Chinese associations in Hong Kong, including Po Leung Kuk (Society for the Protection of Women and Children) and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, of which the headquarters building that still stands today was designed by his younger brother's firm (Chau & Lee Architects) in 1950. Chau Tsun-nin also served for 30 years as an unofficial member of the Legislative and Executive Councils for the colonial government. Sir Chau Sik-nin (1903-85), the youngest of the three, was originally a renowned doctor in the local Chinese society and therefore highly respected by the Chinese community at the time. He served in the Urban Council (former Sanitary Board) from 1936 to 1941, made Justice of the Peace in 1939, and was also made an unofficial member of the Legislative Council of the Hong Kong government from 1946 to 1959. These prominent family connections with both the colonial administration and the local community therefore explain the numerous public commissions that Chau & Lee received, some of which I shall discuss below, particularly two medical buildings commissioned respectively by the colonial government and the local Chinese community to reveal resistance and empowerment in the architecture.

First, however, a review of colonial measures concerning infant and maternity welfare is necessary. Such services only started in 1932, following pioneering local efforts in the 1920s.² As early as 1903, due to the high mortality rate during maternal labour, the colonial government began to encourage more Chinese women to give birth in government hospitals (Yang 151). However, at the time, locally established infant centres were not immediately warmly received by the local population. In April 1929, an infant centre was established within the Tung Wah Hospital, an institution previously founded in 1870 by local Chinese elites and subsidised by the government "to give accommodation to those Chinese whose fears and prejudices against Western Medicine prevented their applying for relief at the Government Hospitals" (Hong Kong. Medical and Sanitary Department 59). According to this report in 1929, a Western doctor would be posted in the hospital once a week to perform regular body check-ups for infants and demonstrate post-natal care for mothers. However, in the first month it was opened only three in-patients visited the centre, indicating the low level of trust and recognition of such Westernised health services in the local community. In the second month of the centre's operation, the numbers rapidly increased to 83, followed by over a hundred in the month that followed. By the end of the year, a total of 1,704 infants had visited the infant centre at Tung Wah Hospital.

The above numbers indicate the level of trust that the local population were developing towards Western medicine and treatment

for infants, particularly beginning in the 1930s. The locations of these infant centres were also crucial enclaves of the local population. Tung Wah Hospital is an example of an indigenously developed Chinese association of which the key figures are “civic-minded men of achievement respected by their community” and having developed an “informal system of power and influence parallel to the formal system of the British” (Ambrose King 135). The hospital is still located today in the historical Tai Ping Shan district, crowded communities within which the local working-class Chinese initially resided in the early days of the colony. The district was also where the infamous bubonic plague broke out in 1894, and the hospital had acted as a crucial central point of treatment with the appointment of a Chinese trained in Western medicine as the resident doctor (Smith 68). In fact, Kwong Wah Hospital, the Kowloon branch of the Tung Wah Hospital that opened in 1911, is characterised by an overtly Chinese architectural style in the central main hall while the side operating bays are intentionally of a Western classical design (Ho 111). Possibly designed by British architectural firm Palmer & Turner, the hospital building indicates an emphasis on Chinese essence as the ‘core’ yet is accompanied by Westernised hospital wards (Figure 1). One can reflect upon this hospital as an example of early acceptance of Western science, hygiene and methods, as fused with Chinese core beliefs in medical treatment, by the local community.

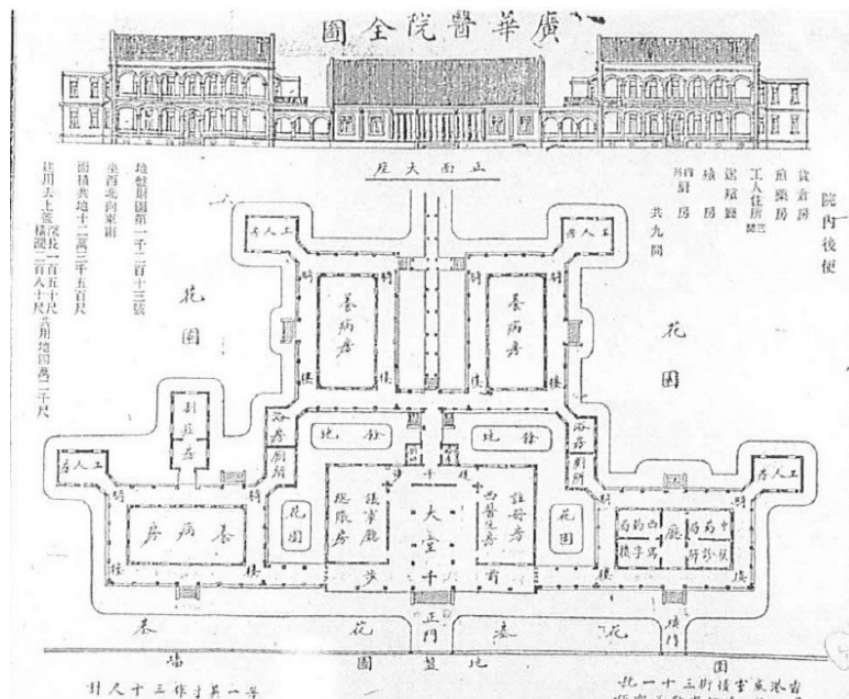


Figure 1: Architectural drawings of Kwong Wah Hospital in 1911, indicating a Chinese hall centred in-between Western architectural hospital bays. (Ho 111)

Having laid out the socio-historical context of the 1930s, let me discuss two medical buildings designed by Chau & Lee Architects. Opened in 1935, the Violet Peel health centre is located in Wanchai, a district in colonial Hong Kong where the majority of inhabitants were

local Chinese. Wan Chai, by the 1860s, had become an increasingly Chinese residential, laboring and shop-keeping community (Smith 109). This building is possibly Chau & Lee's first prominent collaboration with the colonial government. In order to meet the increasing demand for health care from the local community, the project was intended to replace the temporary premises of the Government Child Welfare centre of 1932. Located adjacent to Southorn Playground (named after Sir Wilfrid Thomas Southorn, who was Colonial Secretary in Hong Kong from 1925-36) in Wanchai on Hong Kong island, the new health centre comprised a main building with an annex and a school clinic. Recognition is deserved for the pioneering efforts of renowned Persian-Eurasian businessman, legislator Sir Robert Kotewall (1880-1949), and local Chinese philanthropist Tang Shiu-kin (1901-1986) who enlisted the support and cooperation of notable local Chinese individuals including Sir Shouson Chow (1861-1959) and Chau Tsun-nin (Chau Iu Nin's brother) after the proposal for this building received initial approval from the government. An appeal was then made in the Committees of the Tung Wah Hospital and the Po Leung Kuk during 1933 and 1934 from which a large donation was subscribed and gathered, including from many other members of the local Chinese community (*Hong Kong Daily Press* 7).

In 1936, just a year after the Violet Peel health centre opened to the public, the Chinese public dispensary in Sham Shui Po came into service. Although also a medical building designed by the same architectural firm of Chau & Lee, it carried a very different agenda. The origins of the public dispensaries in Hong Kong can be traced back to 1904, when the "Chinese Hospitals and Chinese Dispensaries" group was established by the local Chinese community, ultimately a result of a movement to manage abandoned dead bodies on the streets. Each dispensary building was managed by a committee of Chinese men, who reported and collaborated with the colonial government. According to the Report of the Secretary for Chinese Affairs for the Year 1934, the history of these institutions is as follows:

The origin of the Chinese Public Dispensaries was a movement started in 1904 by certain leading Chinese citizens, especially Messrs. Fung Wa-chun, Lau Chu-pak and Ho Kom-tong, with the help and encouragement of Mr. A.W. Brewin, then Registrar-General. This movement began in the hope of coping with the scandal of the abandonment of dead bodies in the streets. ... In 1909 the Government gave the movement public support and encouragement and the Committee became the Chinese Public Dispensaries Committee under the Chairmanship of the Registrar-General, now the Secretary for Chinese Affairs. ... Each Dispensary is controlled by a separate Committee of Chinese gentlemen who work in close touch with the Secretary for Chinese Affairs. Responsible to the Committee and in direct charge of the Dispensary is a Chinese Medical Practitioner qualified in Western Medicine (Hong Kong. Secretariat for Chinese affairs C21).

Sham Shui Po, like the districts of Tai Ping Shan and Wan Chai, was and is still a predominantly Chinese enclave. Located in the heart of Kowloon across the harbour from Hong Kong island, the district marked the boundary of "Chinese" Kowloon (north part of Kowloon) prior to 1860, and was an area adjoining British Kowloon (the area

immediately south of the historic Boundary Street in Kowloon peninsula). In 1850, most of Sham Shui Po was still rural farmland, but with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the city of Hong Kong saw an influx of migrants from mainland China. The city's population tripled from 500,000 in 1914 to over 1,500,000 by 1941 (Faure 149). As the north part of Kowloon became more populated, Sham Shui Po Market (now Pei Ho Street Market) opened in 1918, later expanding in 1928. Yee Kuk Street, where Sham Shui Po public dispensary is located, is just two streets behind the Market, and in fact intersects with Boundary Street at another end. Located in an apparent Chinese district, the services this public dispensary provided were, interestingly, fundamentally Western. This was possibly due to the intention of the architects, as I will explain in the next section, which was to cater to expectations from the community for modern health and Western standards in medical buildings.

Self-fashioning Realities and Identities

Several significant differences can be identified by analysing and comparing the two medical buildings designed by Chau & Lee Architects. Despite extensive local Chinese community involvement, the Violet Peel health centre was very much a colonial statement. At the time of arrival in the British Colony of Sir William Peel (1875–1945) and Lady Peel in 1930 (five years before the health centre was established), there was no governmental infant welfare centre. The centre was therefore the first of its kind in the Colony from which medical and health services of a district could be administered. In Kotewall's speech at the opening ceremony of the centre, he moreover reveals that prior to Lady Peel's arrival in Hong Kong child welfare work was rarely known to the public. Apparently, the situation was similar in British Malaya, where her husband was posted and served from 1897-1929 prior to his appointment as governor of Hong Kong in 1930. The experiences of Sir William and Lady Peel in British Malaya and their introduction of child welfare work there reveals that Western standards of medical care and treatment greatly impressed the local people and encouraged them to visit the health centres. I therefore argue that, besides being encouraged by the extensive local Chinese efforts in the realisation of this building, the colonial architectural style that characterises the health centre, as if to showcase Western models for healthcare and medicine, provided incentives and confidence so that the local people would visit. What is noteworthy, moreover, is that even with one-third of the construction cost donated by local elites, including Tang Shiu-kin, on top of donations from many other Chinese people in Hong Kong, a Western architectural style or identity was 'self-fashioned' or constructed for this particular health centre in Hong Kong.

The main building of the Violet Peel health centre comprises two storeys with symmetrical proportions and apparent neoclassical or abstract detailing on all sides of the façades (Figure 2). The overall

subdued decoration and simplified geometric treatment in the façade suggest abstract and somewhat Art Deco overtones. Internally, the health centre is clearly divided into rooms for various functions with large windows for ventilation. Upon entering the building from the main entrance, one is conducted into two large waiting rooms that take up a third of the area on the ground floor. The central plan of the building is divided into three sections, where the general function and consultation rooms are flanked on either side of a central block consisting of a dispensary, a yard, and toilets. Two wide corridors provide fluid circulation from the entry waiting rooms, and extend through the central block to the rear of the building which accommodated the kitchen, store room, and “coolie” or workers’ rooms.

It is evident, therefore, that the architects had in mind concepts of modern hygiene, fluid circulation and ventilation when designing the building. Modernity in design and health thus resonates throughout the building, from the external abstraction of classical architectural form to internal functional needs. Unfortunately, this building was demolished in the late 1980s to make way for the construction of a community complex that redeveloped the entire Southorn Playground site, which still remains today as a public recreational and sports complex.



Figure 2: Violet Peel Health Centre in 1961. Opened in 1935 and designed by Chau & Lee Architects. (Item HKRS365-1-78-4, Public Records Office, Hong Kong)

On the other hand, the new Chinese public dispensary in Sham Shui Po (a district located in the heart of the Kowloon peninsula) responded to the demand by the local community in the 1930s for a new building to replace the original temporary premises. The former temporary structure was originally attached to Tin Hau temple (constructed in 1901), or a temple dedicated to the Goddess of the Sea, along Yee Kuk Street. A point worth noting is the name of this street that takes after the presence of the dispensary, pronounced in Cantonese as 醫局 (*yee-kuk*), literally meaning “medical building” in Chinese. According to a statement of accounts retrieved from the report of the Secretary for Chinese Affairs in 1936, building funds for the new dispensary building came from both the colonial government and local donations. The following report reveals a general comment about the modernity of the building of the time:

The Dispensaries at Shaukiwan, and Wanchai are excellent buildings of their kind, as are those on the Kowloon side at Yaumati [sic], Kowloon City and Shamshuipo. This latter is housed in a new building which was opened on 26th October, 1936. Designed on modern lines it affords ample accommodation for the large clientele which attend daily (Hong Kong. Secretariat for Chinese affairs C23).

At first glance the Sham Shui Po Chinese public dispensary embodies a simplified or stripped classical façade, resembling that of the Violet Peel health centre, comprising two storeys of five bays. A closer inspection reveals that all upper corners of the building are adorned with a stepping-down ziggurat feature, a common decorative feature along rooflines of Art Deco architecture. The main entrance of the dispensary is located in the central bay, marked by a decorative entry portal that is flanked by a flattened pilaster, each adorned with an abstract spiral on top, itself a typical Art Deco feature. Moreover, the window openings of this building are encased with metal window grilles depicting abstract geometric and spiral patterns.

Apart from the Chinese bamboo decorations along the balustrade, the symmetrical layout and well-proportioned features on the main façade of the public dispensary give the building an organised and seemingly Western architectural appearance. However, looking from a side-angle, or by walking through the building, one is confronted by a covered walkway at ground level (Figure 3). This is a typical feature of vernacular Chinese apartment houses, or the Hong Kong shop-house/*tong-lau* (literally meaning “Chinese-house”) structures, where the front of the upper or first storey is supported by columns that form a covered walkway on the ground floor to allow fluidity of circulation and access to shops. On the first storey, the space immediately above the ground-floor walkway is used as a covered verandah space, as reflected in the layout of Chinese tenement houses. The public dispensary at Sham Shui Po therefore exhibits a unique juxtaposition of Eastern and Western elements from the floor plan, layout, use of space to decoration, and is therefore a rare artifact in Hong Kong even today.

With the origins of Chinese public dispensaries in Hong Kong tracing back to efforts from the local Chinese community, and an emphasis that a “Chinese Medical Practitioner qualified in Western Medicine” be placed in charge of each dispensary, it is therefore fitting to hypothesise that the architecture reflected tensions between Western and Chinese medicine by ‘fashioning’ or constructing the building with a Chinese identity fused with Western and improvised Art Deco elements. Other typical Art Deco features are displayed on the façade, including stylised motifs of sunbursts and spirals symmetrically placed on the flat surface of the six pilasters. The railings on the balustrades are green-glazed ceramic shapes of bamboo, a distinctive Chinese element placed beside the Art Deco decorative features in the building. Moreover, window grilles on the two sides of the building display two rows of spirals that are arranged to form symmetrical V-shapes. The side façades also display vertical reliefs or grooves that wrap around the entire first storey and finish with an elegant spiral.



Figure 3: Northwest or side view of the Sham Shui Po Chinese Public Dispensary (Photograph by author)

Architecture as Site of Modernity and Power Relations

Wan Chai, as previously mentioned, is similar to Tai Ping Shan district in that a substantial mass of local Chinese also resided there in the early colonial period. Violet Peel health centre, located in the heart of Wan Chai, therefore conveys a strong colonial message of Western health care and medicine, which is exhibited by its neoclassical appearance with subdued decorations. The presence of the colonial governor as well as large scale reports of the building in local and English newspapers also indicate its level of significance in the

society. However, the building was later demolished, and it is therefore impossible to examine detailed decorative elements or the internal structure. Surviving photographs only indicate certain Art Deco elements consisting of spirals and geometric linear decorations above the main entrance of the building.

One year following the opening of Violet Peel health centre, Chau & Lee Architects designed another medical building for the Chinese community. Similar to the health centre, the public dispensary displays an apparently solemn and Westernised façade, but this time it is juxtaposed with abstract Art Deco and Chinese elements. One should bear in mind that these district-based medical buildings were intended to provide “Western medical advice and treatment,” as stated in the *Hong Kong Medical and Sanitary Report for the Year 1929*:

The Chinese Public Dispensaries ... were established for the purpose of supplying medical advice and treatment on Western lines. Situated in the most thickly populated districts they fulfil a very useful purpose, not only in the matter of treatment but also as foci for the spread of knowledge concerning the cause of disease, the means of spread and the value of Western drugs and methods both in prevention and cure. (61)

So what explains the changes and differences (from a comparatively more Westernised architectural style to one that fuses Western, Chinese and Art Deco elements) in the architecture for both medical buildings? A variety of factors must be considered. The design for the Violet Peel health centre was based on colonial models and agendas resulting in a certain prioritization of Western standards of medicine and science over those of the local Chinese. The Chinese public dispensary in Sham Shui Po may initially seem to elicit an interpretation similar to that of the Violet Peel health centre, which conveyed an ideological expression of Western modernity in terms of medicine and health treatment. Yet the Chinese public dispensary, perhaps being less ‘grand’ or colonial in scale and agenda and therefore allowing greater autonomy for the architects in their design, is heavily infused or ‘self-fashioned’ with Chinese cultural and aesthetic characteristics and identity, and was evidently more playful than the health centre in adopting both Art Deco motifs and Chinese elements. For instance, the decorative system of the ‘band of three’ typical of Art Deco architecture is seen on the balustrades of the first floor, where a zigzag pattern is placed in between two mouldings, and flanked by three glazed bamboo shoots on either side (Figure 4).

It is fortunate that most of these external architectural elements are still intact today on the façade of the now 80-year old building. Currently, the dispensary operates as a methadone clinic which, along with some other dispensaries and clinics in Hong Kong, delivers a city-wide treatment that began in 1972 as a ‘substitution’ therapy for drug dependents. Regarding publicity in the press, there are also distinct observations for both buildings. The opening ceremony of the Sham Shui Po dispensary seemed only to have been reported in local Chinese newspapers, unlike that of the Violet Peel health centre which was reported in almost two full-page spreads in English in the *Hong Kong Daily Press*, as mentioned above. Another newspaper spread on the

Violet Peel health centre, over a year after its opening, shows images of a European nurse weighing a baby with the caption: “Dr. Louise Hunter, the Lady Health Officer at the Violet Peel Health Centre, weighs one of the mites.” Other images in the same spread describe the centre to be “scrupulously clean” and employing “ultra-modern methods” (*The Hongkong Telegraph* 11). Perhaps historical material is missing and the opening of the dispensary might also have been reported more widely or also in English newspapers, but no such material has yet been found.



Figure 4: Stylized sunbursts and zigzag moulding flanked by bamboo-grilles at the balustrade of the Dispensary (Photograph by author)

While the above two medical buildings characterise differentiated levels, or notions, of modernity in the 1930s, modernity in architecture, after all, does not only take the form of a style but is in fact a way of thinking and formulating design intention. Marshall Berman characterises modernity as a historical experience that endlessly seeks to transform the conditions that produce it, and an attitude towards life that is associated with a continuous process of evolution and transformation. In his essay on “Modernity and Nation in the Chinese City,” Joseph Esherick argues that modernity and nationalism are inseparably linked (1). Inherent also to the search for national identity, and perhaps to local or indigenous identity in the case of Hong Kong, is the quest for international recognition or the “aim to be noticed as somebody in the world” (Geertz 258). Under such a premise, the two medical buildings presented in this essay exhibit how ideas of modernity are intertwined with the agenda of the architects, the colonial government, and the local community in Hong Kong. A contradiction can also be identified in contrasting the two buildings, where the architects seek at the same time to be ‘modern’ and to

express international architectural models, while also coming to terms with local or Chinese identity. Therefore, although Art Deco is not a movement insofar as it does not contain consistent ideological programs and manifestoes, it is embedded within the cultural condition of modernity as the pursuit of particular ideological agendas, as exemplified in Hong Kong. This is again reaffirmed by what Bozdoğan observes:

In architecture the appropriation of western modernism as the symbol of anticolonial struggle and national independence—the paradoxical aspiration “to be western in spite of the west”—has been the hallmark of twentieth century nation-building ... Modern architecture as adopted by postcolonial and/or nationalist regimes can be read as the expression of the desire of the other to contrast its otherness and to claim subjectivity in the making of their own history. (213)

Resistance, Empowerment, and Appropriation

My argument is therefore about the ability for certain modern architectural styles, in this case Art Deco in Hong Kong (and also Bombay), to be appropriated and read as a ‘symbol of anticolonial struggle’ or resistance against colonial architecture. However, in present times, it can also be analysed in the context of consumerism or capitalism. William Curtis in his *Modern Architecture Since 1900* regards Art Deco “as the middle-brow bridge between modernism and consumerism” (291). This was also true of a similar architectural style, known as streamlined moderne, which was prevalent in industrial design in the United States in the 1920s and early 1930s. In his analysis of the rise of film and cinema, Fredric Jameson understands Art Deco as a machine aesthetic juxtaposed with capitalism. He views it as a stylistic system that provided a transition between the more aristocratic and elitist period of the 1920s and the more populist and democratic tendencies of the 1930s. Jameson therefore argues:

it is indeed no accident that a certain technology (embodied in the visible machine as it radiates speed and energy through its forms at rest) stands as the common ideological and stylistic denominator of Hollywood and Soviet socialist realism alike, when these are read together as moments of some vaster global art deco transition. (184)

Postcolonial historian Edson Cabalfin, analysing Art Deco in the Philippines under American imperialism, points out that this particular architectural style offers an interesting contrast with modernism, in that “one promotes decoration while the other advocates aesthetic purism” (48). In short, while Art Deco is more commercially driven, modernism is more ideologically motivated. Reflecting on the present architecture of Hong Kong, the situation is still indeed very much commercially driven, and instead of Art Deco being applied to pursue ideological agendas, it may be found instead in postmodern settings for mainly decorative purposes and, to some extent, in the appropriation of consumerism. One striking example is The China Club, opened in 1991 on the upper floors of the old Bank of China building (built in

1950 by British firm Palmer & Turner with the assistance of renowned Hong Kong-born architect Luke Him Sau) in the central business district of Hong Kong. Owned by the famed Hong Kong businessman Sir David Tang (who is, incidentally, the grandson of Tang Shiu-kin, previously mentioned as one of the local philanthropists and forces behind the Violet Peel health centre) of the Shanghai Tang fashion chain. With a strictly members-only policy, the restaurant serves traditional and contemporary haute Chinese cuisine, with an interior decor in the 1930s Shanghai Art Deco style that is merely appropriated in a nostalgic and decorative sense. One could argue that the Art Deco 'nostalgia' when applied to the contemporary context is, in fact, a form of appropriation or display of wealth and consumerism under global capitalism. However, since the postwar years, Hong Kong architectural development seems to have taken over in the form of ubiquitous tower-and-podium blocks, perhaps sharing only one characteristic with the traditional shop-house typology whereby residential accommodation is raised above shops, services and public functions. The current high-rise 'aesthetics of density' and domination of developer-led speculation and capitalism restrict traces of obvious resistance as expressed through architectural style, and therefore result in a limited discussion of contemporary cases in this paper.

Reflecting on Art Deco in imperial Britain, the architectural style is moreover regarded by art historian Alan Powers to be "as far as Modernism went in most provincial parts of the British Isles before 1945" (252). Defining modernism "as the conscious desire to engage through culture with the reality of life following the process of social and economic modernization" (*Modern Britain* 19), he states that it only broke through in Britain during the political upheaval of the early 1930s. Therefore, in Britain as well as in the context of Hong Kong, the ideological and transformative qualities of Art Deco as an architectural style are seen to resonate mainly in the early decades of the twentieth century, and are perhaps not as identifiable or applicable in the contemporary context. However, by opening up possibilities of finding similar cases of 'resistance' or appropriation in today's architecture that are beyond the scope of this paper, one can always bear in mind architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright's comment that "much of the Art Deco movement [could] be seen ... as an effort to synthesize local forms with modern materials and consumer preferences" (38).

This paper ultimately probes into the dynamics and tensions between the coloniser and the colonised, in this case the British colonial government, architects, and the local Chinese community in Hong Kong. The architecture in this research appears merely as a variation on Art Deco to those who may not be sufficiently sensitive to the increasingly complex hybridity of the architecture of the period. In reality, however, Art Deco architecture in cities under British rule, including Bombay and Hong Kong and particularly in the early twentieth century, helps us to understand how local populations enacted strategies of decolonisation through artistically hybrid forms. This essentially follows Ashcroft's encouragement to look into the

“resistance to the narrative of events” for strategies of decolonisation (88). This “narrative of events,” he further explains, is “one which cloaks, with the fiction of empiricism, the teleological and centripetal narrative of empire” (88). Moreover, according to Bhabha, the idea of ‘hybridity’ expresses the interaction of cultures and mutual construction of identities between coloniser and colonised. Reflecting upon the context of 1930s Hong Kong, the coloniser and colonised are in this case respectively the colonial government and the architects, and Art Deco architecture the mediator or hybrid ‘in-between.’

I have argued in this paper that colonial ideologies and local interests impacted the architectural production of Hong Kong in the 1930s, and that the architecture reflects ‘invisible’ forms of resistance and empowerment in appropriating and claiming subjectivity in the making of their own history. In this outlook, whether we speak of British colonial India or Hong Kong, it would often seem that in colonised entities, the response or result is one that is purely of subjugation or oppression. However, as Ashcroft states, the colonial subject is somebody “who consumes the dominant culture in a strategy of self-fashioning and self-representation” (40). He also expresses the urgent “need for a contesting narrative of the reality of colonial experience, of the post-colonial story” (101). By uncovering a different version of the same history, my research suggests that Art Deco in 1930s Hong Kong is not merely a stylistic imitation but rather a subversive re-appropriation of identity.

As much as imperial domination was imposed on Hong Kong, there are, invisible though it may have seemed at the time, a surprising array of forms of resistance to the colonising power. To this day, too little is said about local efforts of contestation, appropriation, or mediation of imperial power by the Hong Kong Chinese, not to mention by local architects. By identifying and analyzing these examples I have sought in this paper to elaborate the process of self-empowerment. The analysis of architectural history and historiography can also become a means of empowerment insofar as it identifies ‘invisible’ or repressed cultural identities and re-inserts them into the historical narrative, in this case the body of architectural work of this period. In re-writing and reconsidering the history of modern Hong Kong architecture, this paper demonstrates some of the negotiations, contestations and power relations that Art Deco architecture attests to in the former British colony.

My research also attempts to present an alternative view of Art Deco architecture as viewed from the ‘other side,’ that is, from the side of the ‘oppressed.’ The capability of the oppressed to appropriate, transform and transcend the elements of colonial power allows us to acknowledge that the colonial subject is never a static object upon which colonial authority could be imposed. Likewise, Hong Kong Art Deco architecture in the 1930s does not simply or passively conform to any imposition or conquest. It is through theorizing a new critical history of architecture and exposing new sites of contestation between the dominant and subjugated that a challenge to canonical Western and imperial historical narratives becomes possible. Art Deco in early

twentieth-century Hong Kong thus invites us to think of architectural representations, as well as other visual forms of representation, as modes of local resistance and empowerment that disclose otherwise hidden and obscured agents of history.

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Notes

1. The Crédit Foncier d'Extrême-Orient (CFEO) was a Belgian-French architectural and land development company active in China's treaty ports, including Tianjin, Hankou and Hong Kong, from 1907-1959. The author's doctoral dissertation analysed the urban developments of this company.

2. Prior to the opening of the infant welfare centre at Tung Wah Hospital in 1929, only Tsan Yuk Maternity Hospital and Alice Memorial Hospital opened infant welfare centres respectively in 1923 and 1928. Tung Wah Hospital was founded by the local Chinese community leaders for the general public, while the latter two hospitals were founded with the help of the London Missionary Society.