

*The Translocalism of
Hong Kong Popular Culture:
An Analysis of a Critical Internet Meme
Co-created Across Hong Kong and China*

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze and demonstrate the translocalism of Hong Kong popular culture through uncovering the sociopolitically alternative characteristics of an Internet meme that traveled across Hong Kong and China. In the theoretical sections, I explain how the culture-based concept of “translocalism” differs from the geography-based concept of “translocality,” review current studies that discuss the translocal characteristics of Hong Kong popular culture, introduce relevant international studies of Internet memes, critique current studies of Hong Kong memes, and provide an overview to the context of translocal meme-making across Hong Kong and China. In my empirical analysis, I examine a very popular Internet meme named “sorry, being wealthy really lets one get away with anything,” originally invented by Hong Kong netizens in 2014 and widely used and popularized in China in 2017 and 2018. Since 2018, Hong Kong netizens accepted the Chinese enhancement and used it broadly in Hong Kong’s social media. This meme illustrates how an originally Hong Kong-based cultural item successfully traveled across borders without the help of established institutions or groups, how Chinese co-creators contributed to enriching its usage and meaning significantly, and how the meme’s critical social value was enhanced with translocal co-creation. This study’s data were primarily collected from online sources and secondarily from informal interviews with meme-users. I traced numerous instances of the use of this meme to find out how netizens used and developed it between 2014 and 2019.

Introduction

This study examines the “translocalism” of Hong Kong popular culture by analyzing the translocal and critical characteristics of an Internet meme that traveled across Hong Kong and China. The meme was first created in Hong Kong in spoken Cantonese, “sorry, *jaucin zanhai daaisaa*” (sorry [sic in English], being wealthy really puts you on the top; sorry, 有錢真係大晒) based on a local TV drama, and subsequently gained huge popularity in mainland China under its Mandarin title, “*duibuqi, youqian zhende keyi weisuoyüwei*” (sorry, being wealthy really lets one get away with anything; 对不起, 有钱真的可以为所欲为). For consistency, in the rest of this article I will call the meme “sorry, being wealthy really lets one get away with anything” (hereafter “being wealthy”), a rough English translation by myself.¹

In this article, I understand the concept of “translocalism” by demarcating it from the much more often used term of “translocality.” Translocality as a geography-based term refers to transborder geographic networks or transborder migrant mobility, whereas translocalism refers to sociopolitically alternative transborder cultural fields, networks, and interactions. A key aim of this article is to show that translocalism is a neglected yet robust part of Hong Kong popular culture.

This study begins with a theoretical review that comes in four parts. The first briefly explains the theoretical differences between “translocalism” and “translocality,” followed by a review of current studies that discuss the translocal characteristics of Hong Kong popular culture. The third briefly introduces relevant international studies of Internet memes and critiques current studies of Hong Kong memes, and finally, the fourth part provides an

1. Although the meme expresses a common idea, the Cantonese morpheme *‘daisaa’* carries a haughty and assertive tone that makes it distinctive and recognizable. When Hong Kong netizens use the meme online, they often contain this morpheme, which makes the reference obvious.

overview of the context of translocal meme-making across Hong Kong and China. The theoretical section will be followed by empirical analysis that focuses on an Internet meme that vividly illustrates Hong Kong popular culture's translocalism.

Theoretical Differences Between “Translocalism” and “Translocality”

Empirical and theoretical research on the “translocal” took off since the early 2010s, with hundreds of studies including the terms “translocal” or “translocality” in their titles by the late 2010s. Most of these studies investigate the translocal characteristics of migrants or the geographic translocality of economic networks such as supply chains (Hoerder; Porst and Sakdapolrak). These two branches of research mainly conceptualize the translocal in terms of geographic “place” and “mobility” (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 373), giving the term “translocality” a strong spatial connotation.

“Translocalism” is a much less used term, and has an ideational connotation. There is a small branch of research that conceptualizes the translocal in terms of the translocalism of global cultural dynamics (Kraidy & Murphy), but the majority of these failed to attract subsequent scholarly attention and empirical analyses. These studies began to theorize translocalism in the late 2000s, and focus on the cultural aspect of the translocal rather than geographic space or migrant mobility.

The geographic and cultural conceptions of the translocal differ in an important theoretical aspect: the tension between two interpretative emphases of the translocal, namely, sociopolitically alternative relations and relations between multiple places. (I use the term ‘alternative’ to describe non-mainstream, subaltern, or counter-hegemonic relations. Whether a given relation should be regarded as alternative may involve contested evaluations.) For example, commercial supply chains set up across national borders or wealthy migrant

businesspersons who travel around a region are translocal in the latter interpretation (i.e. between multiple places) but not necessarily so in the former one (i.e. socio-politically alternative). The geographic conception of the translocal prioritizes the latter interpretation, although they also claim to have covered the former interpretation. In contrast, studies of the cultural aspect of the translocal tend to prioritize the former interpretation (Kraidy & Murphy).

I argue that the conceptualization of the translocal as geographical translocality is not comprehensive enough for the analysis of translocal cultures, and that the prioritization of the interpretation of the translocal as sociopolitically alternative relations is crucial for understanding translocal cultural phenomena. In the context of contemporary information and communications technology, most forms of non-material culture become hyper-globalized. In other words, cultural products and items easily travel across multiple places, and it is not necessary to define all such cultural diffusion as translocal. Under these circumstances, whether a cultural item is sociopolitically alternative should become an important criterion for defining it as translocal. This study therefore defines translocalism as sociopolitically alternative relations between multiple places, and emphasizes that sociopolitically *non*-alternative relations between multiple places should instead be seen as transnational, global, or international. The exact definition of “sociopolitically alternative” is, for sure, difficult and contested, and future theoretical studies of the translocal will need to problematize and address this issue.

Current Studies of Translocal Characteristics of Hong Kong Popular Culture

There are existing studies that borrow from the translocal framework to analyze Hong Kong popular culture, some explicitly and others without adopting the specific term

“translocal.” This section explicates why these studies are inadequate for comprehending the translocalism of Hong Kong popular culture. A theoretically sophisticated and highly cited study on translocal culture in Hong Kong is Eric Ma’s article, “Translocal Spatiality,” but two of its intellectual preferences undermine its utility for clarifying Hong Kong culture’s translocalism: First, as its title demonstrates, the article adopts a geographic (“spatial”) conception of the translocal instead of a cultural one. Second, it investigates the translocalism of hip-hop, a culture that originated in the US and Europe, rather than from Hong Kong or based on distinctive Hong Kong popular culture (Ma, “Translocal Spatiality”).

Another example includes Zhang Yingjin’s *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* and a related article (Zhang, *Cinema*; Zhang, “Transnationalism”). They adopt the geographic conception of the translocal and do not discuss the sociopolitically alternative relations of Hong Kong films. Chow Yiu Fai’s “Hong Kong Creative Workers in Mainland China: The Aspirational, the Precarious, and the Ethical” again adopts a migration-based geographic conception of the translocal, focusing on Hong Kong migrants’ experiences instead of Hong Kong culture. Several studies on Hong Kong’s popular cultural products slightly emphasize their social alternative meanings (Choi and Fore; Ling; Xu). But they do not associate these sociopolitically alternative meanings with the concept of the translocal. Namely, they investigate Hong Kong popular cultural products’ sociopolitically alternative meanings but not their sociopolitically alternative relations.

Miranda Szeto and Chen Yun-chung’s article “Mainlandization or Sinophone Translocality” adopts a cultural conception of the translocal and also emphasizes sociopolitically alternative relations (Szeto and Chen). While I agree with its analysis of the plot of *La Comédie Humaine* 人間喜劇 (2010), it nonetheless has the culturalist problem of taking the translocal relations

(between Hong Kong and China) in a film's plot as actually existing translocal relations. Although the plot indeed artfully features the translocal relations between the two main characters, the film has been neither well-received nor commercially successful outside Hong Kong, and discounts its persuasiveness as good evidence for the translocalism of Hong Kong popular culture.

Some articles define the translocal in debatable ways, either misunderstanding translocal cultural flow as contra-flow (Feng), misrecognizing the translocal crossing of borders as a simple and commonplace localization of foreign cultural influences (Wu, "The Translocalized"), or using the concept of the translocal in a theoretically general way to signify cross-national cultural influence (Pang). On the other hand, other studies discuss translocal characteristics of Hong Kong popular culture without adopting the term "translocal," from films (Barker; Chew, "Discovering"), popular music (Chew, "Cultural Localization"), to sports (Lee; Wu, "Sports"), television dramas (Ma, *Desiring*), and popular culture in general (Chu; Wu and Riemenschnitter). They contribute to our understanding of the geographic mobilities of Hong Kong popular culture by uncovering many little-known examples of translocal diffusion, such as how Cantopop electronic dance music facilitated the development of the same genre in China (Chew, "A History"). At the same time, these studies miss the opportunity to clarify the important point that most of these examples also feature sociopolitically alternative translocal relations and therefore qualify as instances of translocalism.

Unsurprisingly, there are many more studies on the transnationalism of Hong Kong popular culture. For example, Hong Kong's martial arts films are widely regarded as Hong Kong's major transnational contribution to global film culture (K. Chan). A similar comment can be made about globally recognized Hong Kong auteurs including Wong Kar Wai and Ann Hui. Here, a contrast between translocal films and transnational ones is informative. The diffusion of Stephen Chow's films outside Hong Kong has been largely translocal rather than

transnational. His films, except for *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), have mainly diffused to Chinese societies, the Chinese diaspora, and Southeast Asia, and have not won critical acclaim except in mainland China (Chew, “Rethinking”). This example of translocal diffusion contrasts the overseas diffusion of Hong Kong martial arts films and the films of Wong Kar Wai and Ann Hui, which have influenced Hollywood productions, won global acclaim, and attracted much international scholarly attention (Teo).

Internet Memes and the Translocalism of Hong Kong’s Internet Memes

Internet memes (hereafter “memes”) emerged in the late 2000s and are now recognized as socially impactful. Systematic research on memes started in the early 2010s and is rapidly expanding, but scholars working on Hong Kong popular culture have yet to catch up with this research trend. As this study will show, memes created in Hong Kong are great examples of the translocalism of Hong Kong popular culture. This section provides background of relevant international studies of memes and reviews current studies on Hong Kong’s translocal memes.

Mememes, like other forms of popular culture, can be socially significant. Due to the emergence of numerous social media-assisted large-scale social movements since 2008 and the key role that social media played in major elections such as the US Presidential election of 2016, scholars now generally recognize the social importance of social media. Memes are a central way through which people communicate after the late 2000s (Milner, *The World*; Shifman, *Memes in Digital*). Social media and memes were popularized a few years later in Hong Kong, China, and Asia than in the West, but their popularity in these societies was firmly established by the mid-2010s.

A large number of memes are “nonsensical memes,” which contain humor and little social meaning, but a significant minority of memes are “political memes,” a

term that meme researchers coin to refer to memes that are made to generate social and/or political impact (Denisova; Huntington). Some memes that are seemingly nonsensical or humorous can become sociopolitically relevant as they develop (Katz and Shifman). The meme investigated in this study, “sorry, being wealthy really lets one get away with anything,” is an example. Most political memes are more serious, usually constructed for a specific political or social issue, and many political memes support liberal or progressive values. But some, such as those created by the American alt-right, support right-wing causes (Lamerichs et al.). Political memes that focus on socioeconomic inequality are quite rare, but the “being wealthy” meme in this study is an example. Another example is the anti-neoliberal meme, “we are the 99%,” popularized by the Occupy Wall Street movement (Milner, “Pop Polyvocality”), but compared to these existing socioeconomic inequality memes, the “being wealthy” meme emphasizes humor and satire more heavily.

Memes also have a strong potential to diffuse across geographic and cultural borders (Nissenbaum and Shifman; Shifman and Thelwall). They are based on the Internet and they largely communicate through visuals instead of language. Memes that diffuse across borders may become translocal in the sense of featuring sociopolitically alternative relations, because most memes are user-generated (rather than designed by established institutions) and contain vulgar and lowbrow contents. Additionally, unlike other more popular cultural genres such as film, memes thrive exclusively on social media, relying on non-established types of mediation and gatekeeping. A very good example of a translocal meme that features sociopolitically alternative relations is the “milk tea” meme of the Milk Tea Alliance (Dedman and Lai), co-created through the translocal meme-making efforts of Thai, Hongkongese, mainland Chinese, and Taiwanese netizens (C. Chan). The meme manages to promote popular and translocal solidarity among youths across East and Southeast Asia, and encourages civil resistance against authoritarianism.

There are only a handful of studies of Hong Kong memes that travel across borders (Cheong and Chen; Kang; Sautman and Yan), all dealing with the “locust meme” invented by Hong Kong netizens to denigrate mainland Chinese migrants and tourists in Hong Kong. The meme subsequently traveled from Hong Kong to China. Scholars interpret this meme in very negative ways, mainly as a cultural manifestation of Hongkongers’ discrimination of migrants. They do not find translocalism in the meme and certainly do not think the meme is sociopolitically alternative, an evaluation that I question on the ground that the conflict-oriented interpretation of translocal Chinese meme battles tells only a part of the story (Fang and Repnikova). In fact, Chinese netizens have since then used and developed the locust meme in various ways, including using it to criticize Chinese local governments. Thus, current studies have overlooked the sociopolitically alternative relations involved and the translocal potential that Hong Kong memes offer.

The Context of Transborder Meme-Making Across Hong Kong and China

This section sets the scene for my subsequent analysis on the “being wealthy” meme by providing an overview of the context of translocal meme-making across Hong Kong and China. This overview is especially necessary for readers who are unfamiliar with Hong Kong, China, and the cultural relations between them, and will assess how meaningful it is to understand cultural interflows between Hong Kong and China, and especially that of memes, in terms of translocalism.

Although some would argue that post-Handover Hong Kong culture is being suppressed and mainlandized by China, I argue that Hong Kong and China are still sufficiently distinct in terms of culture to warrant an understanding of cultural interflows between them as translocal. One of the main factors is linguistic. Hong Kong online discourses, often written in local set phrases, neologisms, expletives in colloquial Hong Kong Cantonese

and English–Cantonese pidgin terms, are difficult to decipher for non-Cantonese speakers and mainland Chinese netizens. At the same time, mainland Chinese netizens have also developed locally distinctive online discourses, cultural practices, vocabulary, catchphrases, and memes for two decades.

The Chinese Internet and the Hong Kong Internet are significantly distinct from each other. A commonly used term in scholarship and public discourses, “the Chinese Internet,” reflects the wide recognition that the part of the worldwide web based in mainland China constitutes an entity significantly separate from the rest of the cyberspace. Aside from the powerful push factor of the “Great Firewall,” the pull factor that facilitates its autonomy lies in the fact that the huge domestic and diasporic Chinese-language markets allow the mainland China-based part of the Internet to nurture locally unique information technology, online cultural products, and online practices including Chinese-style meme-making. Few recognize a “Hong Kong Internet.” However, not many Hong Kong netizens spend time on the Chinese Internet, because they tend to favor international social media platforms including Facebook and WhatsApp, as well as Hong Kong-based online forums, news media, and blogosphere. Hong Kong has a local meme field, and a public that is networked through this meme field: local meme-makers have aggregated in the HKGolden Forum since the mid-2000s and the LIHKG Forum since 2016.

The meme field in China and that in Hong Kong are also different from each other. Both are moderately exclusive from the part of the Internet based in the West, but Chinese and Hong Kong netizens have developed their own meme styles. For example, Chinese-style verbal memes, known as “online catchphrases,” have become an influential cultural phenomenon that recurrently generates offline sociopolitical impacts in China (Guo). China’s most popular meme style, the Chinese “custom images” (*biaoqingbao*), is a particularly local invention (De Seta). Netizens in Hong Kong and the West do not create or use Chinese custom images. The Hong Kong

meme field has also created locally distinctive styles such as “subtitle memes.” As I learned from my interviews, Hong Kong netizens know little about memes that are trending in China and seldom use Chinese memes on the whole, and Chinese netizens vice versa. Exceptions certainly exist, and the biggest of them are memes created with scenes from Stephen Chow’s films, created in dozens by Hong Kong netizens in the 2000s. Chinese netizens inherited some Hong Kong-made ones and make hundreds of their own.

Data and Methods

The data in this study came from a larger project of mine on Hong Kong memes that travel across the border to China. In the pilot research phase, I broadly searched for such memes through i) browsing popular websites where memes are used, including *Hupu*, the biggest online forum for sports fans in China, and *NGA* (National Geography of Azeroth), the most authoritative Chinese game forum, and ii) informal interviews with dozens of Chinese netizens. Unsurprisingly, I did not find many: almost all of the 200-plus memes were created with the same source, screenshots and GIFs adopted from various Stephen Chow films. Still, a few popular memes were not made with Chow’s films, and “being wealthy” was one of them.

I collected data on netizens’ use and development of the “being wealthy” meme primarily from online sources and secondarily from informal interviews with meme-users. I used the Google Images search engine to trace numerous instances of the use of this meme. Text-based Google searches were also conducted. (I also paid attention to instances of search results not associated with the meme, but these instances were few.) By scrutinizing these traced instances, I came to understand the various ways the meme has been used and developed. For the “being wealthy” meme, I carried out Google searches and interviews until the data reached saturation, examining 35 instances from Hong Kong online forums, 50 instances from various Chinese platforms, and some anecdotal data

from respondents. I also collected supplementary data from i) news reports, intellectual commentaries, and other non-social media online discourses on the meme and ii) uses of the memes by journalists, bloggers, or other individuals with specialized cultural identities instead of the generic netizen identity.

A problem encountered was that Google searches could not access instances of use on WeChat, the social media tool that almost all Chinese netizens use. My solution was to conduct participant observation with two WeChat groups that I had already joined for several years. The first group was Beijing-based and consisted of college students and freshly graduated young persons; the second was Shanghai-based and included mostly middle-class persons aged between 30 and 55. I conducted informal online interviews with 20 of the meme users in these two groups. I also casually observed a few other WeChat groups.

Analysis of the “Being Wealthy” Meme

My analysis of the “being wealthy” meme centers on two aspects: translocal relations between multiple places and sociopolitically alternative relations. The original version of the “being wealthy” meme is a 16-second short video in GIF (graphics interchange format). It features a conversation among three characters in a Hong Kong television drama, *Every Move You Make* 讀心神探 (2010), two of whom are the main characters of this meme. The first main character, played by Timothy Cheng, is a syndicate boss and a major villain. The second main character, played by Leung Kin-ping, is the legal henchman of the syndicate. The third and relatively insignificant character is a young policeman investigating the syndicate. The conversation goes this way in the short video (translation mine):

Policeman to Cheng: I’ll surely gather enough evidence to put you in jail.

Cheng to Policeman: Well, I'm a very law-abiding citizen. But even if you frame me, I have loads of money to hire lawyers. No way I'm going to jail.

Policeman to Cheng: Being wealthy doesn't mean you can get away [with a crime]!

Cheng to Policeman: Sorry, but being wealthy really lets one get away with anything.

Cheng to Leung: But I don't think he [the policeman] will ever comprehend this.

Leung to Cheng: No, he won't.



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Figure 1. The “being wealthy” meme’s still photograph version and some of its variants. Screenshot by the author.

Relations Between Multiple Places

According to my respondents, this short scene was appealing to meme-makers due to its critical meanings and dramatic performance. Cheng and Leung utilized effusive body language and exaggerated facial expressions to taunt the young policeman. This performance rendered the two main characters repulsive yet comical. Audiences

of the meme are emotionally led to loathe socioeconomic hierarchy and dominant groups who unjustly treated common folks.

I traced the earliest uses of the meme to the year 2014 (Atanggaolushi; Wongbbwong) as a verbal version of the visual meme. It was only moderately popular then and there was little development of the meme for quite some time. Hong Kong netizens used the meme to condemn socioeconomic unfairness and express their powerlessness, such as Atanggaolushi's lament that a non-wealthy guy like him could never meet a girlfriend ("Being Wealthy"). The meme traveled to China in 2015, having been discovered by the Chinese "two-dimensional" (*nijigen* or animation, comics, and game fan) circle and disseminated on Billibili, the major two-dimensional platform in China at the time. The meme successfully popularized in 2017 in China and 2018 in Hong Kong, with netizens observing that it was the most popular meme of 2017 (24189371). Here, I focus on three aspects of this popularization from the perspective of translocal relations between multiple places.

The first aspect concerns translocalism manifested in the use of the same meme by netizens in Hong Kong and China to critique local injustices. Netizens in Hong Kong and China engaged in parallel struggles through making satirical online critiques. Chinese two-dimensional groups constructed a clever and localized application of the meme, which was heavily used by Chinese gamers. The single biggest grievance of Chinese gamers since the late 2000s has been the socioeconomic inequality built into "pay-to-win" games (Chew, "A Critical"). Invented and its success proven in China in 2007, pay-to-win is a business model that encourages gamers to spend much money to buy superior virtual items and time-saving devices. This means that wealthy but unskillful gamers can beat skillful gamers who cannot afford to purchase pay-to-win items. Because the pay-to-win model is exponentially more lucrative than older business models, almost all games in China are pay-to-win. There have been numerous large-scale protests, ranging from violent riots to boycotts, by

gamers against the abusive pay-to-win game design of various games (Chew, “The significance”).

I offer background of the Chinese game business model to clarify why the “being wealthy” meme struck a chord with an enormous number of Chinese gamers. They could use it to vent their dissatisfaction with pay-to-win games (e.g. Huanyingyouxia), to critique a certain game on the market for being a rip-off (e.g. 43168194), or to praise a game for de-emphasizing pay-to-win (e.g. 17788139). Through monitoring these uses in online game forums and conducting participant observation sessions in Chinese game virtual worlds, I observed that the meme’s most frequent uses were to build solidarity between non-wealthy gamers and condemn wealthy ones. A common scenario I observed was the enunciation of this meme by gamers witnessing the unfairly obtained power of a wealthy pay-to-win gamer. A piece of good evidence of Chinese gamers’ use of the meme was a set of game commercials. Thanks to the meme’s popularity, the actors in the meme, Timothy Cheng and Leung Kin-ping, were hired to make several short video commercials for the game publisher XD Network in 2018. The key slogan in these commercials was that XD Network would not let wealthy gamers get away with everything.

The second aspect concerns co-creative meme-making across Hong Kong and China. A conventional way to design image macro memes is to construct an intriguing textual line for the image. When a maker of GIF memes wishes to do the same, she needs a specialized generator to run her tailor-made subtitles at the correct sequence and pace. In February 2018, a GIF meme generator for the “being wealthy” meme was created and freely shared by a Chinese fansubber with the handle “xtyxtyx.” From then on, netizens could effortlessly replace the original dialogue of the meme with their tailored-made variations. This generator further increased the meme’s popularity. Hong Kong’s LIHKG Forum swiftly introduced and shared the Chinese generator in March 2018 (LEVIN, 2018) and it immediately became very popular. For a few months, this and xtyxtyx’s second GIF meme generator were used tens

of thousands of times daily (Youyanwang, 2018). Based on this large-scale usage, Xtyxtyx founded a start-up that specialized in GIF meme generators.

The third aspect concerns Hong Kong netizen's renaming of the meme. In post-1997 Hong Kong, Cantonese television dramas often include Mandarin Chinese subtitles, and the drama from which this meme is derived is no exception. Before the meme's taking off in China, Hong Kong netizens called it by its spoken Cantonese line "sorry, *jaucin zanhai daaisaai*" (sorry, being wealthy really put you on the top). Most mainland Chinese netizens do not understand Cantonese. Therefore, they knew the meme by its Mandarin subtitle: "*dūibuqi, youqian zhende keyi weisuoyüwei*" (sorry, being wealthy really lets one get away with anything). In general, Hong Kong netizens, and especially younger ones in the 2010s, rarely adopt Mandarin phrases to rename something already broadly expressed in Cantonese, perhaps reluctant to do so because of localist cultural and political identities. But the GIF meme generator operated in Mandarin Chinese, and since March 2018, many Hong Kong netizens, such as those on LIHKG, began adopting the Mandarin name of the meme.

Sociopolitically Alternative Relations

This final section demonstrates the sociopolitically alternative relations associated with the "being wealthy" meme. It finds that the meme is often used to critique socioeconomic inequality and that this critique is co-creatively constructed by netizens in Hong Kong and China, hence fulfilling the defining criterion of translocalism as "sociopolitically alternative relations." The critique of socioeconomic inequality is not simply non-mainstream, but also critical and counter-hegemonic. Rather than facilitating (the orthodox Marxist conception of) class consciousness, I argue that the "being wealthy" meme, like the "we are the 99%" meme, focuses on bringing together a broad-based public to challenge the

neoliberal elite and a mindset of greed that equates financial wealth with unrestricted behavior.

The “being wealthy” meme has become well-known after early 2018 in the context of gamers’ usage and the meme generator mentioned above. My observation of how Hong Kong and Chinese netizens adapted the meme shows that its critical meanings were largely upheld since 2018, with the majority of usage still critical and/or satirical by nature, and that it did not degenerate into a nonsensical meme that only carried humorous meanings. For example, a netizen wrote a comment on the LIHKG that contained this sentence: “[Hong Kong is] a paradise for the wealthy because it is a place where being wealthy really lets you get away with anything [*daisaai*]” (Zhouyoulieguoshen), using a wording that reminds one of the meme. A veteran poster on the “adult subforum” of LIHKG revealed some wealthy men’s practice of drug-raping young women (Tanxiaocaoyuanyang) and denounced such practice with the meme. Many posts discussed how students from wealthy families purchased their master’s degree or first-class honors to beat less privileged students in the job market (Mizhiyangniudiao; Yourenyongwogeming). A Chinese netizen initiated a post to condemn the excesses of certain rich kids vacationing in a glamorous villa (Pengkefunv).

Modest variations were made to the meme to adapt it to critiquing specialized scenarios of socioeconomic inequality. Given the large asset gap between Hong Kong citizens who own properties and those who do not as a result of the city’s exorbitant property prices, a netizen criticized middle-class Hongkongers for their vainglorious thought that “owning a private apartment lets one get away with anything” (Nvjidouxitoueaguaipian). Another netizen adjusted the message of the meme to voice her complaint against young women who showed off their looks and wealth on Instagram: “being wealthy, fit, and pretty lets one get away with anything” (Qianglilidong). Another netizen turned the meme’s critical meanings right-side-up to praise and express respect at an anonymous wealthy and kind person who purchased the

Chinese copyright of a classic Japanese anime series and lets fans watch it for free (ACGer).

Meme variations that fully utilized the meme generator and entirely replaced the subtitles tend to be non-critical, humorous and original, and they often contained narrow personal complaints and/or non-sociopolitical critique. For example, a moderately used variant was designed to criticize the initiator of forum posts who did not include photographs with her textual comments. Most of these variations were meant to be used only once in a specific context, such as for complaining about game balance problems in a given online game. None of these variations were sufficiently widely circulated to yield a successful derivative meme.

The critical value of the meme was not only generated by meme-users' social concerns and expressions. Based on my observation of the discourses surrounding numerous instances of the "being wealthy" meme, I found that the meme was good for triggering vigorous sociopolitical discussions among netizens. While other political memes also inspire sociopolitical discussions, the "being wealthy" meme was particularly provocative as it theatrically displayed inequality through offensive facial expressions and in-your-face taunts. I observed two ways in which netizens were motivated by this meme to engage in debates about socioeconomic inequality.

The first pattern involved netizens debating whether a certain phenomenon represented inequality (43168194; Pengkefunv). The second involved conflicts between netizens supporting different "meme stances" (Shifman, "memes in a digital world"). The "being wealthy" meme invites netizens to take different stances. My observation shows that netizens agreed with the main idea of the meme (i.e. being wealthy really lets one get away with anything) as the sad reality, idealistically disagreed with it, or came up with a few other responses. The multiple meanings of different stances facilitate rather than undermine critical conversation. For example, some netizens started a post arguing that being wealthy does not genuinely let one get away with anything (Atanggaolushi;

Qianglilidong). Other netizens in the post disagreed, arguing that the reality is harsh and to think that wealth is not powerful is naïve. Yet some others argued that the present reality is not unchangeable and that one must find ways to change it.

An interesting and independent sub-branch of critical discussion triggered by the meme concerned the meme's two actors, which also reinforces the emotional power and popular appeal of the meme. The discussion centered on the unfair marginalization of talented and industrious common folks by established institutions. The two actors of the meme, Leung Kin-ping and Timothy Cheng, have been skilled actors for years and worked for Hong Kong's oligopolistic television corporation, Television Broadcast Limited (TVB). Cheng is known, and has received acclaim, for his performances as villainous characters. Leung had a very unsuccessful career with few chances of work, and had to rely on part-time (non-acting) jobs to sustain his family. Immediately after he left TVB in 2012, he proved himself by lead-acting the short film *Tricycle Thief* 三輪車俠 (2014), which won Best Short Film at the Toronto International Film Festival 2015. Alongside discussing the meme, Hong Kong netizens often critiqued TVB for marginalizing many talented artists like Leung and Cheng, while Chinese netizens sometimes condemned the contemporary Chinese celebrity system for generating undeserving idols ("Haajatzaam"; Semaoshou). Interestingly, the popularity of the meme in China boosted the two actors' careers, who found job opportunities in films and commercials in China after early 2018. A Chinese media observer notes that "the two represent the first case of meme-based celebrity" (Shenmeguishangnidajitui), an observation supported by my respondents, who told me that whenever she used the "being wealthy" meme, she "enjoyed the emotional satisfaction of helping two marginalized artists fight injustice."

Discussion and Conclusion

The previous analysis illustrates the translocalism of Hong Kong popular culture by establishing that the “being wealthy” meme facilitates “relations between multiple places” as well as “sociopolitically alternative relations.” The translocal characteristics of the meme are cultural instead of spatial or migrant-based as it traveled from Hong Kong to China and then back to Hong Kong. Chinese meme-makers and netizens did not invent the meme, but their contribution was considerable, making the meme a robust case of co-creation between them and the Hong Kong creators of the meme. Like most globally successful memes, this meme diffuses casually through popular practices of common netizens, whose relations were convivial (instead of conflictual) and indirectly mediated by the meme. One does not find any confrontations associated with Chinese ultranationalism or radical Hong Kong localism.

The meme also demonstrates considerable critical social value. To someone unfamiliar with meme use on social media, the “being wealthy” meme could look apolitical and/or nonsensical, since at face value the meme appears to preach that wealth is the most important thing for anyone. But as I have shown, socioeconomic critique has been built into the meme since its creation in 2014. Its critical applications were greatly expanded and skillfully operationalized by Chinese gamers and meme-makers.

Aside from illustrating the translocalism of Hong Kong popular culture, my findings raise a general theoretical issue. The “being wealthy” meme constitutes an empirical anomaly for major frameworks of analyzing Hong Kong culture, such as mainlandization (Szeto and Chen), disappearance (Abbas), and “between colonizers” (R. Chow). As evident in this study, the meme was created in Hong Kong, but promoted and made popular translocally by netizens in China before re-entering Hong Kong. It is therefore not an example of mainlandization, because mainlandization is a process of oppressive

homogenization. The meme also neither represents an imminent disappearance of Hong Kong culture, nor demonstrates the threat of the Chinese colonizer, given the active role Hong Kong plays in creating and re-adopting the meme. On the contrary, it circulates through both spheres and transforms each of them with elements from the other, highlighting that translocalism is a dialogic process through which culture travels, transforms, and enriches multiple societies.²

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² I deal with this theoretical issue at greater length in a separate study (Chew, “Rethinking”).

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