Cosmopolitan Hybridity, Cultural Memory and Curation in Hong Kong Poetry

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ABSTRACT
This article builds on previous research on the engagement of British-based Hong Kong Anglophone poets with the visual arts. It attempts to outline an object-based curatorial poetics observed in Hong Kong Anglophone poetry. Understanding curation as a mode of writing, we argue that Hong Kong poets writing in English employ a curatorial poetics, making a poem out of a collection of images without detailed descriptions of them, as in ekphrasis. Objects with an Asian/Chinese/Hong Kong connection are presented as a collective, inviting the reader to associate with and reflect upon a pluralistic understanding of Hong Kong’s history based on an intermingling of personal and collective memory. We trace the development of this poetics and identify its beginnings in the works of Chinese-language Hong Kong writers. Then, we examine how a range of poets, both locally and internationally based, utilize the curatorial form to demonstrate the cosmopolitan hybridity that characterizes the city and contribute to an increasingly pluralistic discourse on Hong Kong’s identity. The poems employing this form of poetics act as museums of cultural memory, recording the hybridity of Hong Kong and subverting homogenous, totalizing attempts to define the city.

KEYWORDS: cosmopolitan hybridity, cultural memory, curation, Hong Kong poetry

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
1. Introduction

1.1 Cosmopolitan hybridity of Hong Kong

Poets consistently portray Hong Kong in terms of everyday objects. Leung Ping-Kwan’s *City at the End of Time: Poems by Leung Ping-Kwan* [形象香港：梁秉鈞詩選], an anthology of Gordon T. Osing’s and Leung’s own translations of his works up to 1992 and published in the same year, is made of four sections, and one of them is titled ‘Things 物詠’, following the tradition of dedicating sequences of poems to objects, as in Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914) and Francis Ponge’s *Le Parti Pris Des Choses* (1942). The poems from the section act as odes ['詠'] to everyday objects, which range from pears and bitter melons to bronze statues and ‘the warrior gods pasted on the front door’ ['神荼和鬱壘守着大門']. These objects individually and altogether suggest local knowledge of Asian, Chinese, or Hong Kong culture. As Leung puts it in the poem ‘Images of Hong Kong 形象香港’, a poetic collage of ‘strictly visual matters’ ['視覺的問題'], history is ‘a montage of images, | of paper, collectibles, plastic, fibres, | laser discs, buttons’ ['一連串形象 | 塑造的材料可以是紙箔、塑膠、纖維 | 鏡射影碟的按鈕......’]. From Leung’s ‘strictly visual’ perspective, the history of Hong Kong is traced through juxtaposing ‘images’ of objects and looking at them together. The poem dated 1990 has anticipated the similar practice of an expanding group of English-language poets who, like Leung, were born in Hong

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2 Leung, ‘Images of Hong Kong 形象香港’, *City at the End of Time*, pp. 88-89.
3 Ibid.
Kong but with varying degrees of connection to it. For example, there have been poems dedicated to jewellery, especially Chinese jade, from Louise Ho’s ‘Soliloquy of a White Jade Brooch’ (from *Local Habitation*, 1994; collected in *Incense Tree*, 2009) to Sarah Howe’s ‘Mother’s Jewellery Box’, which opens her debut collection *Loop of Jade* (2015), and the titular poem, where the image of a jade pendant connects a classical Chinese legend with the speaker’s recollection of her mother’s and her own childhood memories. In today’s Hong Kong poetry, defined here as poetry with thematic connections to Hong Kong and written by a poet with connections with the city, we have observed a growing tradition, traceable to Leung’s poetry, of representing Hong Kong as ‘a montage of images’. In the following, we will focus on the English-language poems, given the recent trend of poets with Hong Kong heritage gaining critical recognition in ‘the transatlantic or even international poetry scene’, termed the ‘Hong Kong moment’. We argue that many of these poets not only dedicate poems to individual objects but turn a poem into a kind of curatorial space where everyday objects, often characteristically Asian, Chinese, or Hong Kong, are juxtaposed together within an interlinked framework of personal memory and cultural history.

Leung’s ‘montage’ of ‘Images of Hong Kong’ paved the way for comparable montages in today’s Hong Kong Anglophone poetry. In *Where Else: An International Hong Kong Poetry Anthology* (2023), the latest testament to the global scale of the ‘Hong Kong moment’, montages of images of Hong Kong are seen in the contributions from both emerging and established poets. Born and raised in Hong Kong, Silvia Tse is a co-founder of the online community KongPoWriMo (Hong Kong Poetry Writing Month) and in her poem ‘After-School Snack’, Hong Kong is seen as a world of street food: ‘neon yarn balls / dyed in ten curry sauces and one big pot / rolling with spiced tongues’—also a world frowned upon by

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the speaker’s mother, a ‘cordon bleu chef’. In Paola Caronni’s contribution to Where Else, Hong Kong ‘felt familiar’ for different things, including ‘the irritating rattling of MTR trains’ and the ‘trolleys with cardboard boxes pushed by old ladies’, which ‘everyone wrote about in their Hong Kong poems’. Caronni, born in Italy and having lived and published her first poetry collection Unchartered Waters (2021) in Hong Kong, expresses familiarity with both Hong Kong and its poetry as a montage of varied everyday images. These poetic montages from Where Else, one of the most ambitious anthologies of Hong Kong poetry written in English, represent Hong Kong in terms of its hybridity, showing a range of images rather than a uniform image of the city and self-reflexiveness about the way of seeing Hong Kong in terms of the everyday.

Among the poetic montages in Hong Kong poetry, Jennifer Wong’s ‘Mountain City’ from Letters Home (2020) is one of the most extensive English-language examples. The unnamed city in Wong’s epic poem, which is strongly evocative of Hong Kong’s cityscape and everyday life, is first ‘painted in red’, portrayed in terms of images of traditional Chinese marriage. It is suggested that the speaker was raised in Hong Kong, remembering ‘how it used to be’, where ‘a muttering game | of mahjong’ could be heard from next door, with a hawker shouting on the street ‘tamagotchi ten dollar ten dollar’, and addressing the poem to an overseas, English-speaking traveller, probably with limited knowledge of Cantonese (‘You yau hak, Mr Tourist, | Tsingtao beer and Lonely Planet | in your hands’).

8 The Tamagotchi, a portable Japanese digital pet simulation game, gained worldwide popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s.
10 The phrase ‘yau hak’ is the transliteration of the Chinese term 游客, meaning ‘tourist’.
11 Wong, “Mountain City”, Letters Home, p. 43.
portrayal of her birth city is ‘marked by cosmopolitanism’ and thus a ‘complex sense of belonging’, to quote her understanding of Hong Kong’s English-speaking poetry as a whole.\textsuperscript{12} Wong’s ‘Mountain City’ is also a perfect example of what Koon-Chung Chan [陳冠中] understands as the uniqueness of Hong Kong: hybridity ['混雜'], rather than originality ['原創'].\textsuperscript{13} Building on Chan’s idea, Yiu-Wai Chu asserts that Hong Kong’s ‘distinctive kind of hybrid cosmopolitanism’ has been ‘disappearing’ since the handover of the city to the PRC government in 1997; and the development of ‘Hong Kong Studies’ is needed to chart the progress of ‘the hybridizations of Hong Kong cultures’.\textsuperscript{14} Chu’s idea of the disappearance of Hong Kong’s hybridity is informed by Ackbar Abbas’s notion of ‘a culture of disappearance’ in Hong Kong, where the disappearance is ‘more a question of misrecognition, of recognizing a thing as something else’.\textsuperscript{15} As a study of Hong Kong poetry, especially the English-language examples, this article aims to investigate how poets have contributed to the discourse on Hong Kong’s cosmopolitan hybridity, adapting Chu’s terminology to highlight hybridity as the driving force behind the city and recognize that it is marked by a cosmopolitan mentality. How do poets represent Hong Kong’s hybridity in terms of remembered images of objects and simultaneously create a new wave of opposition against any ongoing attempts to represent Hong Kong as ‘something else’?

1.2 Cultural memory and critical autoethnography


\textsuperscript{13} Chan Koon-Chung 陳冠中, Wo zheyidai Xianggangren 我這一代香港人 [My Generation of Hongkongers] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 47.


\textsuperscript{15} Abbas, Ackbar, Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 7.
In general, we find the term ‘personal cultural memory’ the most useful to understand the object-oriented memory in Hong Kong poetry. Van Dijck coined the term to explore how personal ‘collections of mediated contents’ can be read as ‘cultural acts and products of remembering, in which individuals engage to make sense of their lives in relation to the lives of others and to their cultural context, situating themselves in time and place’.  

16 Van Dijck argues that such intertwined memory not only ‘overlaps with autobiographical memory’ but places ‘memory at the intersection of individual and culture’.  

17 It is exactly this ‘intersection’ which marks many Hong Kong poems for their engagements with individual or multiple objects to negotiate cultural history through personal memory, blurring the boundary between history and memory, individual and collective, and private and public. In Where Else, Silvia Tse’s ‘After-School Snack’ represents the tension between the daughter’s and her mother’s world views. In contrast, May Huang’s ‘Sestina for Hong Kong’, the poem with which Where Else opens, is marked by the tension between Hong Kong as remembered and the city in its current form. In the poem, Huang, from Hong Kong and Taiwan and now based in Berkeley, anticipates her ‘return to the disappearing city’, saying that she can ‘stop by the cha chaan ting for a plate of memory: | Char siu rice, two eggs, and milk tea on the house’.  

18 In the poem, framed as a sestina ‘for Hong Kong’, the Proustian moment of remembering and identifying home in terms of food represents an interlinkage of local food culture and Huang’s memory of Hong Kong, as well as the poet’s understanding of the former as an essential part of Hong Kong culture. The sestina-form dramatizes the speaker’s connection of the individual (‘house’) with the collective (‘city’). The poem actually begins by saying, ‘Before I return to the disappearing city | For weeks I have the same dream | Of a maze built on reclaimed land, an old

17 Ibid.  
The image of ‘the disappearing city’ recalls Abbas’ understanding of Hong Kong’s culture of disappearance. Huang’s poem places vivid memories of Hong Kong against a recurring ‘dream’ of the hyper-urbanization of Hong Kong and Huang’s childhood home, which sooner or later will be sold (‘Mother says selling the house won’t take long’). The images of the unconscious are later revealed to be far from personal: ‘Landmarks vanish from our collective memory’. Notably, Huang expresses concern about the literal disappearance of Hong Kong as she knew it as a child, and Abbas’ sense of ‘reverse hallucination’, where local or colonial architecture, for instance, is not seen as Hong Kong culture as such. Huang’s poem epitomizes the varied tensions in the personal cultural memory embodied by Hong Kong poetry.

Being poets ourselves, we have likewise published poems where personal memory of Hong Kong is juxtaposed with cultural history of the city. ‘So MK’ by the second author is titled after a ‘catch-all tag’ for Hong Kong’s emo poseurs’ and made of vivid images of these ‘poseurs’ and the streets they frequent: ‘Bright-haired street signs all bedecked | with Off-White Thrasher hoodies | pairs of Yeezys’.

The first author’s ‘Remembering Hong Kong as 39 Everyday Objects’, to which we will return in section 4.2, preceded Jennifer Wong’s ‘Mountain City’ with its similar reliance on an array of images of everyday objects. As poets and researchers with interests in Hong Kong poetry, we have found it productive to present this article as not only a critical study of Hong Kong poetry but also a work of autoethnography, defined by Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner in 2000 as writing and research that

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., p. 25.
22 Abbas, p. 6.
connects the ‘personal’ to the ‘cultural’ and often blurs the ‘distinctions’ between them,\textsuperscript{24} and in particular, a work of critical autoethnography, which ‘distinguishes itself by the critical scholarship (research) that informs it’ and ‘critiques and challenges cultural and hegemonic standards’\textsuperscript{25}. This article, informed by the first author’s criticism on Hong Kong poetry, which has focused on its diasporic tendencies and close connections with the visual arts,\textsuperscript{26} is hoped to cast light on the emergence and characteristics of Hong Kong Anglophone poetry, its connections with its Sinophone counterpart, and the collective memory of Hong Kong people. This article, a combination of literary criticism with critical autoethnography, is expected to have methodological implications for future research in contemporary poetry and Hong Kong studies.

2. From description to curation

Reading the ongoing ‘Hong Kong moment’ in British poetry, which reached ‘a new peak’ when Eric Yip became the youngest winner in the history of the UK’s National Poetry Competition,\textsuperscript{27} the first author of this article once used the term ‘Hong Kong School’ of poets to describe this expanding group as comparable to the New York School of poets for their similar ties to the visual arts.\textsuperscript{28} Their engagements with works of visual arts were considered as ‘Hong Kong ekphrasis’ and ‘Chinese ekphrasis’, which offer ‘a temporally and spatially distanced perspective of the city’ with the uses of ‘familial objects and cultural artifacts from modern Hong Kong’, and delve into ‘traditional Chinese

\textsuperscript{26} See Huen’s “The Hong Kong Moment” and “The ‘Old Hong Kong’”.
\textsuperscript{27} Huen, “The Hong Kong Moment”, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{28} Huen, “The ‘Old Hong Kong’”, p. 20.
aesthetics’ and explore politically charged moments in China’s history through drawing inspiration
from ‘ancient Chinese arts and political news images’. However, apart from **ekphrasis**, where poets
describe a work of visual art in detail, we have observed in today’s Hong Kong poetry poetic
equivalents of exhibition curations, demonstrating another distinctive way of engaging with art. In
Jennifer Wong’s ‘Mountain City’, the poems from *Where Else*, and the two examples of our poems,
there may not be detailed descriptions of a single object, but ideas about Hong Kong are generated
from the grouping, sequencing, and association of disparate objects. These are often everyday objects
being briefly described and may be seen as incongruous or disconnected by readers unfamiliar with
them. Although similar in mechanism to catalogue verse or so-called list poetry, with its history
traceable to the lists of heroes in ancient Greek epic poems and the biblical verses from the Book of
Proverbs, this way of writing is read here as curatorial to highlight the creativity and the cultural
implications involved. It can also be argued that a poetry volume by Leung Ping-Kwan and Jennifer
Wong, or even the *Where Else* anthology, is a form of curation by weaving together different poems,
each an artefact of personal cultural memory. By focusing on individual poems by different writers, this
article, however, demonstrates the ways Hong Kong poetry at large function as a curatorial project,
where many poems are curations of everyday images as remembered, contributing to a meta-curation
of Hong Kong images and their associated memories.

29 Huen, “The ‘Old Hong Kong’”, p. 17.
30 The term ‘ekphrasis’, according to the online *Oxford English Dictionary*, is now commonly understood as ‘a literary device
that entails a detailed description or explanation of a visual artwork’.
3. From exhibition curation to poetic curation

The word ‘curation’ has become ‘a multifaceted term in both academic discourse and everyday life’; and albeit ‘its origin in museums, exhibition making, and the art world, it has expanded to encompass everyday social practices’.\textsuperscript{31} It has been argued that curation as a ‘social practice’ can ‘draw attention to perceived political and social imbalances and to oppose hegemonic narratives’, thereby calling on ‘counter-narratives’.\textsuperscript{32} In particular, we recognize the Eurocentric and colonial origins of curation but simultaneously the potential of curatorial practices to counter colonial narratives. As noted by Arjun Appadurai, known for his anthropological research on globalization, ‘the history of most Western ethnological museums has indisputably come out of prior histories of conquest, commerce, and political exploitation’.\textsuperscript{33} Meanwhile, despite the history of ‘Western ethnological museums’ being sites created by and propagation of colonialism, it is observed that curations of contemporary art can create counter-colonial opportunities. The June 2020 issue of the journal \textit{On Curating}, for instance, focused on the increasing number of biennials, especially in Asia and the Global South, investigating its indebtedness to ‘local, regional, or national specificities’, despite its ‘homogenizing effect of similar exhibition formats and artists/works’.\textsuperscript{34} In the editorial, biennials are said to ‘act as a means of decentralizing the West in the cultural field’ by proposing ‘models of cultural crossovers, the merging of layers of subjectivation and differentiated models of knowledge production’.\textsuperscript{35} Patrick D. Flores, the Artistic Director of the Singapore Biennale of 2019, likewise recognize the potential of a biennale to

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
display the works from ‘Southeast Asia and beyond’ to make right what ‘colonialism and globalization have distorted or denied’.  

Hong Kong, similar to Singapore and many other places in Asia, is characterized by the aftereffects of colonialism and the increasing prevalence of globalization, and it is expected that exhibitions on Hong Kong art and culture can similarly produce counter-hegemonic discourses on the city, correcting what has been ‘distorted or denied’. The same can be said about the curatorial poetics observed in Hong Kong poetry. We have started to read Leung Ping-Kwan’s ‘Images of Hong Kong’ as one of the first representative examples of curation in Hong Kong poetry; and we are informed by Abbas’ observation of a ‘minor mode’ in Leung’s poetry, which is marked by the poet’s ‘fondness for banal and seemingly unpromising subjects’. Abbas regards such banality in Leung’s poetry as ‘an act of de-exoticization’, which goes against the ‘easy assumption of a homogenous social space that would allow a part to represent the whole’. Following this line of thought, we can read Leung’s poem as offering an alternative, pluralistic way of writing Hong Kong. As Leung presents the history of Hong Kong as ‘a montage of images’, the curatorial mode allows him to sublimate banality and plurality. Meanwhile, these images include ‘Repulse Bay Hotel rendezvous produced on cue’ [‘不斷複印的淺水灣酒店’], among other ‘exotic stuff’ [‘異國情調’] ‘for export’ [描绘給遠方的觀眾’], which together recognize the denial of a localized approach to Hong Kong history. In the poem, Leung goes on to say,

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37 Abbas, p. 134.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid, p. 129.

40 Leung, ‘Images of Hong Kong 形象香港’, *City at the End of Time*, pp. 88-89.
'We need a fresh angle, | nothing added, nothing taken away' ['我們在尋找一個不同的國度 | 不增
添也不刪減']. The curatorial poetics in Hong Kong poetry shares the function of many Asian biennales by turning curation against its colonial origins and using it to de-exoticize a former colony and now a global city as well as the objects from it. If Hong Kong poetry is regarded as a museum of the city, local objects are curated to be seen as essential markers of local culture and memory of the city, far from curiosities from a Eurocentric or globalized perspective.

Here it is useful to introduce the theory of Object-Oriented Ontology, commonly abbreviated to OOO and advanced by the American philosopher Graham Harman as early as in *Tool Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002). In a more recent contribution to the theory, *The Democracy of Objects* (2011), Levi R. Bryant describes OOO as ‘an ontology where humans are no longer monarchs of being but are instead among beings, entangled in beings, and implicated in other beings’. Referring to Harman and Bryant, among other theorists, Ian Bogost has put it succinctly in *Alien Phenomenology* (2012) that ‘OOO puts things at the center of being’ and to ‘put things at the center of a new metaphysics requires us to admit that they do not exist just for us’. Via this post-humanist, object-oriented lens, many examples of Hong Kong poetry can be read as presenting human subjects as part of the Hong Kong cityscape, situated among other ‘things’, and portraying both the human beings and the ‘other beings’ as equally important to a local network of relations. In Leung’s ‘Images of Hong Kong’, objects and human beings, both of which can be examples of what we have called cosmopolitan

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43 Bogost, Ian, Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 6.
44 Ibid., p. 9.
hybridity, are similarly introduced in declarative sentences: ‘Here’s an old portrait shot originally in Guangguang Studio in Nathan Road’ ['這幀舊照片，原來是在彌敦道的光光攝影院拍攝的’]; ‘She’d come from unforgettable Shanghai, from glamorous Jaffe Road, with its White Russian coffee shops’ ['她來自上海，忘不了昔日的繁華霞飛路上的白俄咖啡店’]. The same way of putting objects and human characters on equal terms can be seen in ‘Mountain City’ (‘You, you hak, Mr Tourist | Tsingtao beer and Lonely Planet’) and ‘So MK’ (‘Contact-covered eyes’, followed by ‘Bright-haired street signs’), among other English-language examples of Hong Kong poetry. With reference to the object-centred ideas from curatorial and object studies, it can be seen that curation as a method and idea has wide potential and implications and can be productively used to understand the prominence and the cultural and political agency of objects in today’s Hong Kong poetry.

4. Curation in Hong Kong poetry

4.1 Quotidian objects in Hong Kong Sinophone poetry

Reading Leung Ping-Kwan's poetry as representing Hong Kong in terms of 'quotidian objects' Winnie Yee argues that many ‘Hong Kong poets share Leung’s preoccupation with everyday life’. In fact, there is a wider tradition of such ‘preoccupation with everyday life’ and ‘quotidian objects’ in Hong Kong literature, as seen in the Chinese-language fiction of Xi Xi [西西] (e.g. 我城 [My City], first published in 1979; the translation My City: A Hong Kong Story, published in 1993) and Dung Kai Cheung

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46 Wong, “Mountain City”, Letters Home, p. 43.
47 Cheng, “Poetry Speaks”.
There are clear parallels or cross-fertilization between Hong Kong poetry and Hong Kong fiction, which deserve an overdue, full investigation, though beyond the scope of our discussion. With our focus on poetry, we build on the common recognition of Leung Ping-Kwan as a central figure in not only Hong Kong poetry but Hong Kong literature, and the critical viewpoint on Leung as a forerunner of a poetics oriented by quotidian objects. Uniquely, we establish his poetry as equally influential to not only more recent Hong Kong Sinophone poetry but the rapidly expanding amount of Hong Kong Anglophone poetry. In doing so, we recognize and demonstrate the commonly overlooked synergy between Hong Kong Sinophone and Anglophone literature, which Leung’s poetry, with the widely circulated translations and co-translations of his poetry, contributes to and in turn, epitomises.

4.2 “Remembering Hong Kong” as quotidian objects: The case of Hong Kong Anglophone poetry

We have already read Jennifer Wong’s ‘Mountain City’ as sharing the cosmopolitan hybridity in Leung’s ‘Images of Hong Kong’. An essential difference between them, however, lies in the fact that Wong’s poem is addressed to a foreign tourist and Leung’s poem speaks of a collective Hong Kong identity. Jeannette Marie Mageo has delineated ‘two genres of cultural memory’: ‘Intergroup memory’ occurs ‘at the boundary between groups’, and often has political implications; ‘Intragroup memory’, in contrast, ‘takes place among group members’, used for finding cultural significance in experiences. If Wong’s poem embodies intergroup memory, representing the tourist as an oddity in the speaker’s

home city (‘you over-tip our cab drivers’), Leung’s poem embodies intragroup memory by putting together images of Hong Kong to record the plurality of Hong Kong culture and question this way of understanding the city. While Leung’s poem begins by declaring that ‘I need a new angle’ [‘我在尋找一個不同的角度’], it ends by saying that ‘each of us finds himself looking around for – what?’ [‘我們抬头，尋找——’]. The collective ‘us’ includes the speaker himself, recognizing Hong Kong as an overwhelming cultural concoction, and ‘our’ sense of the city as resisting homogeneity.

Wong’s ‘Mountain City’, though structurally analogous to Leung’s ‘Images of Hong Kong’, is addressed to someone from outside of a transnational group of people with Hong Kong heritage. In contrast, the poem ‘Fire’ from Wong’s second collection Goldfish, published in 2013 by a local press Chameleon, is thematically closer to Leung’s poem in its mobilization of a culturally Chinese and Hong Kong-specific intragroup memory. The poem is evidence of the legacy of Leung’s ‘object-world’, to quote Winnie L. M. Yee, and perhaps a watershed in the usage of objects in Hong Kong poetry. The following is the poem in full:

*Fire*

by Jennifer Wong

My five elements.

The flowers of hero trees.

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50 Wong, “Mountain City”, *Letters Home*, p. 44.
52 Ibid., pp. 90-91.
53 Yee, p. 155.
The gravity of earth and history.

A red boiled egg on my birthday.

The red bit in my Chunghwa pencil.

The language of protest
runs in my body, flows in my blood.

The explosion of the fire crackers.

I dream the Dream of the Red Chamber.

I drink the red sorghum wine.

Five bright stars shine on the red carpet.

A white bauhinia grows on the same red.

Red is our metaphor. Look at the red baby

You never forget.

The red lanterns sway in the dark.

Even in my sleep, the red blood flows.\textsuperscript{54}

The poem is made of images that evoke the red colour, alluding to fire as one of the five elements in ancient Chinese philosophy. The sense of curation is highlighted by the one-stanza form and the dominant use of end-stopping; and the curated images are personal (e.g. the ‘red boiled egg on my birthday’, the ‘red bit in my Chunghwa pencil’), political (i.e. the lines ‘Five bright stars shine on the red carpet. | A white bauhinia grows on the same red’ allude to the national flag of China and the regional flag of Hong Kong), and cultural (e.g. ‘the Dream of the Red Chamber’ and ‘the red baby | of Zhang

\textsuperscript{54} Wong, Jennifer, “Fire”, \textit{Goldfish} (Hong Kong: Chameleon Press, 2013), p. 94.
Xiao Gang’). As Mageo puts it, ‘intragroup remembering’ is intertextual in nature, juxtaposing ‘the echoes of collective memories with those of personal memories’. The poem does not resort to *ekphrasis* by describing Zhang’s series of family portraits with a baby or child painted in red. Instead, Zhang’s paintings and even the image of a ‘red boiled egg’, for instance, are expected to be familiar to someone with knowledge of Chinese art and culture. As the speaker insists, ‘Look. Look. | You never forget’. The poem exemplifies Tammy Lai-Ming Ho’s reading of the collection *Goldfish* as a reminder of the universality of referring to ‘certain objects when describing home’, which stems from ‘a desire for assured familiarity and recognition’. In comparison to Wong’s recent poems, ‘Fire’ distinctly relies on a specific pool of Chinese cultural memory, where the flags of China and Hong Kong are seen as sharing ‘the same red’. In the following, we return to the group of poems that were written and/or published in the UK in the last ten years or so. These poems include Wong’s ‘Mountain City’ and May Huang’s ‘Sestina for Hong Kong’, showing the characteristics of what Mageo calls *intergroup memory*. Wong’s ‘Mountain City’ from *Letters Home* ends by urging the addressee to ‘read the unabridged | *Dream of the Red Chamber*’. The image of Cao Xueqin’s novel, often considered to be one of China’s Four Great Classical Novels, is no longer used by Wong to allude to a shared cultural identity, but a marker of Chinese culture for a foreign viewpoint, and indeed, an international readership, with *Letters Home* published in the UK. While ‘Mountain City’ includes the lines ‘let me leave you with the fragments | of a changing city, fill a Tianjin pickle jar | with our memories’, Huang’s ‘Sestina for Hong

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55 Wong, “Fire”, *Goldfish*, p. 94.
56 Mageo, p. 15.
57 Wong, “Fire”, *Goldfish*, p. 94.
59 Wong, “Fire”, *Goldfish*, p. 94.
60 Wong, “Mountain City”, *Letters Home*, p. 47.
61 Ibid.
Kong’ comparably refers to the city as ‘disappearing’, talking of landmarks disappearing from ‘our collective memory’. Both poems express anxiety about the disappearance (in the literal and Abbas’ sense) of a city as the speakers once knew it, and the hope to preserve the memories shared by people with local experiences in the city. Unlike Leung’s or Wong’s earlier works, these recent poems draw on a specific cultural memory to introduce or re-introduce a city to other cultural groups.

Although the speaker of Wong’s ‘Mountain City’ asks a foreigner to keep ‘our memories’, the poem counter-intuitively turns Wong into a custodian of these memories by being filled with bits and pieces from her birth city. ‘A Personal History of Hong Kong as 39 Everyday Objects’ by the first author of this article is a full-fledged example of this sense of ‘keeping safe’ cultural memory:

_A Personal History of Hong Kong as 39 Everyday Objects_

by Antony Huen

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food culture (一)

tea-coloured plastic cup / menu holder with the print of a beer brand / cha chaan teng’s order
pad with a waiter’s scribbles / Vitasoy glass bottle / turtle jelly china bowl / two toothpicks in a
sachet / clay pot for clay-pot rice / bamboo steamer / tea-coloured lazy Susan / U-shaped
barbecue fork

identity (二)

bamboo scaffolding / bamboo birdcage / bamboo broom / blue plastic flip-flops / rolling
suitcase / red-white-blue bag / the pedestrian crossing control box from before 1997 / orange
rubbish bin / blue ribbon / street railing / yellow ribbon / surgical mask

childhood (三)

long wood ruler / chicken feather duster / Chung-hwa pencil / aeroplane chess / mah-jong / day
calendar made of very thin paper

beliefs (五)

Tung-shing / Chinese fortune sticks / joss sticks / maneki-neko / Fai-chun

currency (六)

red envelope / Octopus card / green ten-dollar note / coin with a bauhinia blossom / coin with
the Queen’s head
symbol (七)

Miss Hong Kong’s tiara

The poem, included in an anthology edited by Jennifer Wong, owes its uses of the quotidian to its predecessors. The objects listed are similarly cultural (‘Chung-hwa pencil’, as in Jennifer Wong’s ‘Fire’) and recall Leung’s emphasis on the historical significance of things made of paper and plastic. There are also objects which are subtle nods to the colonial history (‘the pedestrian crossing control box from before 1997’) and the socio-political movements in the last decade (‘blue ribbon / street railing / yellow ribbon’). Framed as a ‘personal history’ but operating as an exhibition guide map, the poem uniquely represents a curation of its own. The poem, recalling Wong’s custodial memory of Hong Kong in ‘Mountain City’, sees the speaker establish himself as a similar custodian of the curated objects, presented as personal and cultural mementoes. Nevertheless, the liminality in ‘personal history’, which blurs the boundary between private and public, allows the unstated personal ‘I’ to reclaim ‘cultural authority and historical agency’ without bearing the burden of a cultural historian. Personal history can be understood as ‘an account of one’s life or segments of one’s life written or told for purposes of understanding oneself in relation to a broader context—familial, institutional, and societal, for instance’, and the first author of this article ironically shies away from offering a direct ‘account’ by drawing on a curatorial model to present his personal history.

The poem can be read in relation to modern poets’ interests in cartography (as in Elizabeth Bishop’s reading of maps in ‘The Map’ and poetic mapping of exotic places in Questions of Travel), or

64 Mageo, p. 21.
psychogeography (as in Leung Ping-Kwan’s and Jennifer Wong’s accounts of a local navigating the Hong Kong cityscape), but it is idiosyncratic for its sheer reliance on the quotidian objects, the brief descriptions of them, and the grouping of the images based on themes such as ‘food culture’ and ‘childhood’ (as opposed to Leung’s resistance of ‘any categorization’). This is not to say ‘A Personal History of Home’ operates a ‘closed system’ to remember Hong Kong; instead, the complexity in the connections between the objects is represented in the graphic that precedes the listing by section, which together reads as an exhibition guide map. Readers are invited to imagine visiting the ‘exhibition’ by beginning with the section on food culture, reminiscent of the significance of food in the representation of Hong Kong in poetry, and then choosing their own ways of navigating such ‘personal history’ in the form of an imaginary exhibition. Mageo has observed a conundrum in intergroup memory: how it is ‘continually defending a group against unacceptable meanings’ and risks ‘narrow[ing] the spectrum of meanings found in recollection, contributing to the decay of meaning systems’. ‘A Personal History of Home’, however, offers an alternative to Mageo’s sense of intergroup memory. Capitalizing on the liminality created by the curatorial form and the personal-history framework, as well as the interplay between word and image, the poem offers a personal and personalized version of history, a self-conscious alternative to any institutionalized discourse on the history of Hong Kong. Without a specific addressee as in Wong’s ‘Mountain City’, ‘A Personal History of Home’ operates on the tension between the personal and collective, and potentially, Mageo’s notions of intragroup and intergroup memory. The poem challenges readers to make sense of the many objects being listed and categorized by drawing on their own memory and cultural knowledge.

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67 Yee, p. 158.
68 The poem in its previous form was published under the title of ‘Remembering Hong Kong as 39 Everyday Objects’ (see the Appendix), where the objects are also thematically grouped, but in unnamed stanzas rather than titled categories.
69 Mageo, p. 20.
The poem can also be read in terms of what Ackbar Abbas observed in the poetry of Leung Ping-Kwan and Louise Ho as ‘a postcolonial sentimentality’, where ‘different historical layers and sensibilities anachronistically jost[e] one another, and not easy to separate’. In ‘A Personal History of Home’, the sense of ‘identity’ (the title of the second section) is constituted by a wide range of objects. Some are universally known cultural symbols, and others are representative of the colonial history or more recent political events. However, there is also particular emphasis on the image of ‘Miss Hong Kong’s tiara’, the only object in the section titled ‘symbol’, and in the map, placed at the centre and linked to almost every other section. Having the object as a focal point of the speaker’s personal history dramatizes the cultural significance of beauty pageants and popular broadcasting and multiplies the dynamics in play by highlighting an increasingly controversial symbol for its associations with body surveillance and materialism. Most strikingly, as the object which follows ‘coin with the Queen’s head’ in the list, the ‘tiara’ is ascribed a political meaning, representing an alternative form of royalty that has perhaps replaced the one brought on by colonialization, a kind of post-colonial parody of the royal tradition and culture. The poem presupposes a culturally hybrid identity and is anchored in a contemporary sentimentality, where objects from different times, of different natures, and of local, Chinese, foreign, and colonial origins are all at the speaker’s disposal for pinning down the history of Hong Kong according to his lived experiences.

‘A Personal History of Hong Kong’ was published in its alternative form back in 2016, followed by poems such as Wong’s ‘Mountain City’ and Laura Jane Lee’s ‘Sweet Like a Bao’, published under her former name, all of which similarly represent a city or cityscape in terms of everyday objects and evoke

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70 Abbas, p. 137.
71 Huen, “A Personal History of Hong Kong as 39 Everyday Objects”, p. 86.
72 The poem in its previous form was published under the title of ‘Remembering Hong Kong as 39 Everyday Objects’ (see the Appendix), where the objects are also thematically grouped, but in unnamed stanzas rather than titled categories.
a sense of Hong Kong.\textsuperscript{73} Lee’s poem is one long stanza that alludes to the hustle and bustle of an unnamed city with its sequence of images of everyday life. It begins by saying, ‘Your voice sounds like the red of a lampshade | at the wet market | like the flopping of fish on the chopping block’.\textsuperscript{74} Similar to ‘A Personal History of Hong Kong’, Lee’s poem is brief in its descriptions of the objects listed, driven by an overflow of the images. It distinctly confuses sight with sound, offering a synaesthetic account that multiplies the hybridity of the city in question. Whether it is the absence of the first-person voice and a speaker-addressee dynamics in ‘A Personal History of Hong Kong’ or the ambiguous subject matter in ‘Sweet Like a Bao’, these poems, with their uses of the curatorial form, can be said to demonstrate a new approach to writing Hong Kong, that is, not only is the city being portrayed in pluralistic terms, but the ways of understanding this portrayal are multiplied.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Towards an encyclopaedia of Hong Kong

We will conclude with Eric Yip’s ‘Encyclopaedia’ to further recognize the novelty in the recent uses of the curatorial mode for personal and cultural remembering in Hong Kong poetry. Yip’s poem proposes four taxonomic groups of pain (or ache), and the following is the second of them:

痛苦 [bitter pain]

1. Your mother’s kidney stones / dead calcium / refusing to dissolve
2. Tarmac torn / to shredded petals / gunfire running / legs rolled / into a carpet of red

\textsuperscript{73} Huen, “The Hong Kong Moment”, p. 61.

\textsuperscript{74} Leung, Rachel K. Y., ”Sweet Like a Bao”, \textit{International Poetry Competition: 2018 Winners and Shortlist} (Oxford Brookes University, 2018)
3. Leaving his room / the lamp overheated / his father tells you / to never touch his son again

4. A rubber bullet / commands itself / with purpose / into a reporter’s right eye

5. Your grandmother arched / over her bed / her husband’s bones / urned in her arms

The above is indicative of the structure that the rest of the poem generally follows, with the five items in the list constituting parts of their own narratives, and each item being centred on an image of physical or psychological pain. These images range from moments of interactions with the mother or grandmother to evocations of the protests in Hong Kong in the last decade. Juxtaposing isolated moments in personal, familial, and political histories, the poem also intermixes intragroup and intergroup memory by speaking to both an Anglophone readership and a bilingual readership, with the Chinese terms translated into English. According to Mageo, a mix of the two memories takes place when neither can gain an upper hand in the process of cultural recollection; and it may be for ‘a forgetting of pathos too great to bear, perhaps better forgotten’. Yip’s poem represents the speaker’s pain-staking attempt to record snippets of memories in contexts immediate or familiar to him. These are fragmentary, dramatized by the slashes used, pointing to a struggle between remembering and forgetting. The poem reveals to be less an ‘encyclopaedia’ than an act of curation, with the groups of pain evoked by the disparate images. Titled ‘Encyclopaedia’ but functioning as a network of groups and sub-groups, the poem suggests that pain cannot be clearly defined, even within an encyclopaedic framework, which can be Anglocentric in its perspective, with the Britannica being the oldest and one of the most widely known encyclopaedia. Yip’s poem offers alternative ways to understand what is

76 Mageo, p. 27.
integral to humanity as well as the recent history of Hong Kong, sharing the counter-hegemonic agenda observed in today’s contemporary art exhibitions.

What Yip’s poem signifies in the trajectory of the curatorial writing in Hong Kong poetry is not only the continuing fascination with the (material) history of Hong Kong as a subject matter, and the consistent intermingling of personal and cultural remembering, but the growing sense of the complexity of Hong Kong as a subject and the difficulty in writing about it. According to Abbas, the act of writing Hong Kong is ‘less concerned with authors and writing or with problems of corpus formation, than with asking how in the process of writing Hong Kong, Hong Kong as cultural space inscribes itself in the text’. In other words, it is concerned with ‘writing that bears the traces of such a cultural space (of disappearance)’. In Hong Kong poetry, we have seen multiple ways of curating these ‘traces’, often through drawing on the discrepancies between the local and foreign perspectives, and the intersection of personal and collective histories. These traces together constitute a collage of Hong Kong, each and altogether representing the hybridity of Hong Kong culture, decolonizing and pluralizing the image of the city in the face of narratives of cultural hegemony. Simultaneously, they point to the impossibility of having the image of Hong Kong, with the insistence on a personalized framework of recollection, and more recently, the act of writing Hong Kong as unstated or part of a wider cultural agenda. The poetic acts of writing Hong Kong have revealed to be more formally and thematically hybrid than ever and writing about Hong Kong, as well as exhibitions and other artistic and cultural projects dedicated to the city, antithetically struggles and thrives on a dilemma: what to remember and what to forget.

77 Abbas, p. 111.
78 Ibid.
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APPENDIX

**Remembering Hong Kong as 39 Everyday Objects**

by Antony Huen

Bing sutt’s pastel-coloured plastic plate/tea-coloured plastic cup

Dai pai dong’s toothpick/menu holder with the print of a beer brand

Cha chaan teng’s order pad with waiters’ scribbles

Vitasoy glass bottle

Turtle jelly china bowl

White paper cup with a maize-field print

Clay pot for clay-pot rice

Dim sum basket
Tea-coloured glass Lazy Susan

Long, hand-held barbecue fork

Bamboo pole for scaffolding

Bamboo bird-cage

Bamboo hat/broom

Lancelets the white plimsolls/blue plastic flip-flops

Suitcase

Red-white-blue bag

Post box/traffic light control box from before 1997

Orange rubbish bin

Blue ribbon

Street railing

Yellow ribbon/umbrella

Surgical mask

Metal folding chair with a circle wood-print seat

Rattan cane

Chung Hwa pencil

Aeroplane chess/Jungle the board game

Mahjong

Day calendar made of very thin paper
Tung shing the Chinese almanac

Kau cim stick

Joss stick

Fortune cat a Japanese talisman

Fai chun a Chinese New Year decoration

Lai see the red envelope with a trademark

Octopus card

Plastic 10-dollar note

Coin with a bauhinia’s blossom

Coin with the Queen’s head

Miss Hong Kong’s tiara