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**Spectacular Pasts:
Visualising History through
Material Representations in Hong Kong**

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ABSTRACT

Since being placed under the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, Hong Kong has developed a strong interest in remembering its past. But how Hong Kong history is to be articulated and represented in the contemporary city is a subject of contestation between the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government and local grassroots actors. Whilst the government promotes a Chinese history positioning the city as a part of the Chinese nation, grassroots actors celebrate 'local' history derived primarily its colonial experience to situate the city as apart from the PRC. The paper suggests that material representations of the past influences how the city's history is experienced and 'consumed' by Hong Kong society. It examines and compares the government-run Hong Kong Heritage Museum with the grassroots-managed Hong Kong House of Stories, outlining how disparate narratives of the past are presented to the Hong Kong public through material (and therefore visual) means. Of interest are the infrastructural forms these respective sites assume, and the way physical artefacts are displayed within these spaces. The differing levels of affective attachments exhibited by Hong Kong people towards the histories being promoted at both sites will also be reviewed.

INTRODUCTION

Soon after Hong Kong ceased to be a British colony and was placed under the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, the institutional and vernacular domains have displayed a growing interest towards remembering the history of the city. This interest is documented by the increasing number of scholarly work on the development of the Hong Kong heritage scene. However, most of this literature focusses on reviewing how heritage is approached and managed from a top-down approach in the city, such as by articulating how the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government's heritage policies have been formed in relation to global heritage ideologies and practices (Barber, 2014; Chan and Lee, 2017), assessing if government preservation efforts were driven by market concerns (Yung, Lai, and Yu, 2017), and in articulating how certain government conservation projects have been problematized and criticised by civil society (Ku, 2010). But what this body of literature has yet to address are the heritage initiatives launched by the grassroots, and the presence of different histories at play on the Hong Kong landscape. One question that has emerged in the contemporary city is: what is to be, and should be, remembered? The act of remembering must be preceded by the discovery and articulation of a past to be remembered, which is currently a point of contestation between the HKSAR government and grassroots actors, who each advocate their own interpretation of Hong Kong's past according to their respective political interests. Thus 'remembrance' in the contemporary city must be problematized; as this paper shows, remembrance does not manifest homogenously throughout society, whereby every individual remember the same histories in the same manner; nor is it an act that occurs evenly within society, since some histories are deemed by various individuals and groups as being more appealing and relatable than others.

This paper is interested in exploring the relationship between representations of history, focussing on the disparate images of the past generated by the material manifestations of the HKSAR government's and grassroots actors' respective framings of Hong Kong history on the urban landscape, with the processes of remembrance in Hong Kong. Whilst acknowledging that acts of remembrance are shaped by identitarian debates, I suggest the way in which the city's past is being presented and 'packaged' for Hong Kong society is also influential in determining which historical narratives the population prefers to visually 'consume'. Whilst there has been a plethora of literature examining how the past is being represented in other Asian locales (see Schlehe et al., 2010), less attention has been paid towards how these representations have been actually received and experienced by those who are exposed to them. This paper hopes to rectify this knowledge gap. The discussion begins by reviewing the relationship between the concepts of visibility and remembrance, and then outlines the current tensions that exist within the heritage landscape of Hong Kong. Based on fieldwork conducted in 2010 until 2012 and in 2017,¹ I examine the material dimensions of the government-run Hong Kong Heritage Museum and the Hong Kong House of Stories (HKHoS) managed by grassroots actors, showing how the divergent historical narratives being advocated by the HKSAR officials and the grassroots have been rendered in the physical space of the city. In looking at such 'material dimensions' of the past, this paper assumes a broad perspective that encompasses the exteriorities (the physical form) and interiorities (the contents within and the way they are displayed) of such representations; it is by taking both aspects into account that this paper can examine not only the appearance of these representations that show society *what the*

¹ Data collection took place from December 2010 until July 2012, and from June until August 2017. Participant-observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews were used. Interviews were conducted with museum employees, individuals who served on heritage consultative panels for the government, grassroots actors involved in heritage issues, and members of the Hong Kong public with an interest in history and remembrance. Although informants spanned across the demographic spectrum, the majority (especially grassroots actors and members of the public) were youths in their twenties and thirties. Informants are represented with pseudonyms.

past looks like, but the stories these representations convey at the conceptual level that show society *how the past is to be seen and experienced*. This paper begins by looking at the production and presence of historical images evoked through spatial-material means, whereas the second half focusses on how they have been received at the vernacular level, reviewing which of these sites the everyday citizenry is more attached to, and why this is the case.

‘SEEING’ HISTORY: VISUALITY AND REMEMBERING

A vital component in acts of remembrance is the visibility of history.² This emphasis on making history legible through material means is found across the world, as reflected in the construction of monuments and in the preservation of heritage sites in the US (Young, 1994) and Scotland (Rowlands, 1996), and the display of antiquated artefacts within museums in China (Denton, 2014) and Cambodia (Hughes, 2006). Visualisations of the past are essential in influencing how societies remember, and more importantly, in dictating what should be remembered (Herwitz, 2012). The ramifications of ‘seeing’ history has been examined within political frameworks examining the promotion of nation-building discourses by states (Ivy, 1995; Pan, 2013), and has also been analysed within economic frameworks looking at the spectacularisation of certain sites by both grassroots actors and municipal governments as a means of attracting tourists and capital (Sand, 2013).

A history that can be visualised is able to have its existence acknowledged and recognised, which is essential in our processes of world-making and knowledge production. For example, in *Colonising Egypt*, Timothy Mitchell observes how European colonists spectacularised the cultures of their Other, using the resultant imageries of the ‘backward Other’ to reinforce the teleological evolutionary framework justifying colonialism, and to portray Britain’s dominance in the world order as an unquestionable “objective truth” (1988: 7). Within urban studies, Kevin Lynch (1960) argues how the imageability of the city, derived from distinctive spatial elements such as landmarks and pathways, plays a central role in how people construct a mental map of their worlds. Similarly, examining the power urban plans and maps have on individual perceptions of the world, Christine Boyer further argues that such representations limit our abilities to envision an alternative city because they espouse a totalising “pictorialisation of space and time” that “forbids us to envision a social order that we can reform” (1994: 3). Echoing these observations, Sharon Zukin notes how collective memories in cities are shaped by what is rendered visible or invisible on the landscape (1996: 44). What this means is that images are not consumed and internalised by the viewer in a passive manner, but exerts a transformative effect whether this be by mediating social relations (Debord, 1967 [1994]) or by enabling those in power to assert a sense of legitimacy in their control over others (Kal, 2011). Images also shape our subjectivities by influencing our conceptualisations of the Self and the Other (Edwards, 1990; Gerrard and Farrugia, 2015) along with our feelings, values, and desires (Sennett, 1990: 101).

In contrast, histories without visual markers are susceptible to amnesia and nostalgia. The eradication of certain architecture enables the omission of unimportant or unwanted histories (Bevan, 2016; Connerton, 2009). Asides from being forgotten, Nadia Seremetakis (1994) observes that the physical disappearance, and thus visual absence, of historical artefacts from our contemporary environments leads to the evocation of nostalgic sentiments. Nostalgia, defined as

² Although scholars acknowledge the role of other senses in facilitating remembrance (see Edwards, Gosden, and Philips, 2006; Low, 2010), we continue to predominantly rely on vision to conceptualise our past and present worlds (see Banks and Ruby, 2011; Simmel, 1921). Seeing is increasingly important since our everyday lives and spaces are becoming spectacularised and aestheticised through the current neoliberal order (King, 1995: 3). It is for this reason that this paper focusses specifically on *visual* representations of the past.

the longing for a romanticised past “that no longer exists or has never existed” (Boym, 2001: xiii), is characterised by conflicting sentiments, such as pleasure that the seemingly unproblematic past is believed to have once brought, accompanied by pain and melancholy from being removed from this past. This affective dimension is important in shaping our attitudes towards remembrance. Histories that are deemed as nostalgic are perceived as being desirable, something we yearn to consume (Dames, 2010; Davis, 1979), because it is by returning to this idealised time that we can potentially regain the delight that we believe the past once brought, and also ameliorate the negative sensations caused by separation from this past. Given the reality that time travels in one direction and a past that has vanished is irrevocably gone, an actual ‘return’ to the moments conceived within the nostalgic imagination is impossible.

However, the *experience* of ‘return’ can be simulated through exposure to (re)created images that serve as signifiers of this lost past (see Holtroff, 2010; Urry, 2002). In other words, whilst we can’t actually travel back in time to regain what was lost, we can temporarily feel as though we can by using and relying on visual representations depicting the past.³ In Hong Kong, the bulk of scholarly work on “the imagistic quality of nostalgia” that emerged after 1997 revolves around discursive representations found within locally-produced movies (Lee, 2009: 10; Robinson, 2006). In these films, nostalgic images are generated through depicting fin-de-siècle buildings and neighbourhoods from ‘舊香港’ (‘old Hong Kong’), the colonial period that spans from the mid-twentieth century up to the departure of the British. In turn, there is little work considering how these nostalgic aesthetic ideals are being enacted spatially (Chu, 2015; Hawkins and Straughan, 2015), an oversight that needs to be addressed because as noted by Anthony King, historical knowledge and “representations do not exist in limbo...people think of their world through their environment. The practices involved in the production of meaning are linked inextricably to the realm of ideas and discourses, but also to the realm of the material, physical and spatial world itself” (1996: 16). The images generated by the materiality of space serve as communicative vehicles for memories. But what also needs to be accounted for in the case of contemporary Hong Kong is the multiplicity of nostalgic imaginings, of the different meanings and different interpretations of these meanings, being circulated through the city space.

HERITAGE LANDSCAPE OF HONG KONG: BETWEEN NATIONAL AND LOCAL IDENTITY

As noted in the introduction, divergent historical narratives have emerged in Hong Kong since the Handover. These different interpretations of the past have been represented through material means within the urban environment, and reflect the respective political ideologies of the HKSAR government and grassroots actors in regards to how the city is to be positioned in relation to the Chinese nation. On the one hand, to portray Hong Kong as a ‘Chinese city’ of the PRC (Poon, 2008), the government promotes the image of an encompassing Chinese history shared between the city and the nation through “sinicising” the city (Lu, 2009: 265; Ng, 2009: 46). Such efforts include the installation of sculptural pieces featuring ‘Chinese’ iconography to emphasise the city’s Chinese heritage. In 1997, the government placed a five-tonne *ding* (a Chinese vessel dating back to the Neolithic era) in Victoria Park.⁴ In 1999, the Reunification Monument built to resemble a *huabiao* (a Chinese ceremonial column that supposedly dates back to 2300 BC or 2200 BC) was unveiled by the authorities in Wan Chai (Clarke, 2001: 144-145 and 153). The *ding* and the *huabiao* are objects

³ In Asia, this is seen from the growing demand for historicised theme parks and retail centres (Hochbruck and Schlehe, 2010), and from an emergent interest amongst the younger generations in visiting and appreciating the aesthetics of old neighbourhoods (Visser, 2010).

⁴ The *ding* was to be a permanent fixture in Victoria Park, but when one of the *ding*’s legs broke, the HKSAR and PRC governments saw this as a bad omen and decided to remove it.

associated with ancient Chinese culture. Their highly-visible presence on the landscape diverts the spectators' attentions towards a shared heritage and cultural identity between the city and the Chinese nation, whilst downplaying the different trajectories of socio-political and economic development experienced by Hong Kong and the PRC throughout the twentieth century.

This process of sinicisation is reinforced within museums, especially those run by the HKSAR government.⁵ Museum exhibits increasingly feature the accomplishments of 'China' (presented as a singular polity, omitting the differences between imperial and contemporary China), and have begun situating Hong Kong within a narrative of an overarching 'Chinese Past', as seen from the Hong Kong Museum of Art's December 1997 exhibit called "National Treasures: Gems of China's Cultural Relics". The exhibit displayed objects excavated from Tibet and Hong Kong, reflecting the contemporary territorial claims of the Chinese Communist government, and conveyed the message that despite colonial rule, Hong Kong has always been a part of the wider Chinese national historical narrative (Clarke, 2001: 133). In 2012, to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the Handover, the Hong Kong Museum of History curated an exhibit titled "The Majesty of all under Heaven: The Eternal Realm of China's First Emperor". The emphasis on Qin Shi Huang, the emperor who consolidated the warring states and unified China, contains a subtext calling for Hong Kong to 'reunite' with the rest of the nation. Other exhibitions highlighted the historical connections between Hong Kong and China, as seen during the 2015 display featuring "The Rise of the Celestial Empire: Consolidation and Cultural Exchange during the Han Dynasty" which framed the Lei Cheng U Han Tomb archaeological site in Hong Kong as a product of the Han empire's artistic and cultural influence.

In contrast to the government's emphasis on a broad Chinese history, grassroots actors (referring to a diverse array of actors including students, activists, NGOs, and community organisations) are fighting to protect idyllic landscapes and historical landmarks representative of a past that is specific to the territorial confines of Hong Kong. These grassroots actors only emerged in the past decade. Throughout the colonial era and even in the immediate years after the Handover, the demolition of historical structures for urban development did not result with public outcry. As Tracey Lu notes, before 1997, the population "had little interest in heritage" because many of them were migrants from China and Southeast Asia, and lacked strong emotional attachment to the city (2009: 259). But social attitudes towards heritage began to change in the mid-2000s, especially amongst the younger generations who were born-and-raised in the city and consider it their 'home'. This was witnessed in 2006 and 2007, when activist-artists staged several protests opposing the demolition of the colonial-era Star Ferry and Queen's Piers (Cartier, 2008; Ku, 2012). In 2009 and 2010, young people mobilised against the HKSAR government's decision to build the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link that would destroy Choi Yuen village, an agricultural settlement established during the mid-twentieth century. Besides from protesting, Hong Kong youths have also initiated an array of community activities to facilitate the preservation of traditional local crafts and small neighbourhood shops.

What is noticeable is that these demotic heritage preservation efforts revolve around landmarks constructed during the colonial era and are considered to be representative of a traditional way of living in the locality. The vernacular domain is not just interested in preserving any historical landscape, but specifically the *Hong Kong historical landscape*. Lu argues that this focus on the local is a response to the sinicisation efforts of the government (2009: 265), where besides from promoting

⁵ Most museums in Hong Kong are managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. There are a small number of 'private' museums run by corporations and NGOS. Education institutions such as the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong also have their own museums, though whether they can be considered 'private' is uncertain, since these institutions funded by the HKSAR government.

an encompassing Chinese history, also involves the removal of colonial structures and neighbourhoods established during colonial times.⁶ The disappearance of material markers indicative of the city's colonial past induced anxiety throughout the population, because as Ackbar Abbas observes, it is precisely the presence of coloniality that "distanced Hong Kong culturally and politically from China" (2003 [1997]: 5). Losing these colonial signifiers led the Hong Kong population to fear that the city's ability to assert their uniqueness within the Chinese nation, and the local Hongkonger (or 'Hongkongese') identity composed of a syncretic mixture of East-West cultural practices that is prevalent amongst current youths, are under threat. In this context, vernacular desires to preserve colonial structures is not only about regaining access to the past, but can also be understood as an act of resistance (Pan, 2013) against the HKSAR government's integrative agenda, and a means to enable the Hong Kong population to continue conceptualising and positioning themselves as being apart from (rather than a part of) the PRC. Coloniality is now entwined with the localism movement (Chiang, 2012; Matsuda, 2016).

Whilst Abbas and Lu claim that colonial structures enable the city to differentiate itself from other Chinese cities, focussing their arguments on the outward-looking relational aspect of the Hong Kong identity, informants expand on such discourses by emphasising that these structures are vital in enabling the city to look inwards, to define and construct a 'Hong Kong subjectivity'. Informants see heritage protests as a means of resisting the government's nationalistic agenda, but also a means for the vernacular domain to develop a better understanding of themselves as a society. Such sentiments are reflected in the statement of a young artist-activist called Fan, who describes the Piers as having "carried implications as to what 本土價值 [local values] Hong Kong society contains... it allows us to try and flesh out the meanings of identity for ourselves." The interpretation of the Piers as a material resource facilitating articulations of the self is also expressed by Choi, a young man who participated in the 2006 and 2007 Piers protest:

In the past, like in 1966, Queen's Pier is something used by the Hong Kong people to construct a "civil identity", or even a "resistance identity". So if we leave Queen's Pier to be demolished now, then all the things that have contributed to parts of our identity would also be gone. It would be scattered. Even if some of the scholars say that "the piers are of no worth, it is just a bunch of blocks going up and down", their words have no meaning for us [...] because for us, Queen's Pier can help us have awareness about things around us, helping us know about Hong Kong, know about ourselves, know what kind of people we want to be now that the Handover is over (interview, 29 December 2011, Yau Ma Tei).

Chiu is referring to two instances of local identity formation that is mediated through the Piers. He first refers to the Hong Kong 'civic' and 'resistance' identity formed from the 1966 hunger-strike at the Piers to oppose an increase in ferry fares, but later says that the "Queen's pier can help us have awareness about...what kind of people *we want to be now* that the Handover is over" (interview, 9 January 2012, my emphasis, Yau Ma Tei). The Piers protests do not only represent a struggle to preserve their past ('what we were'), but also a struggle to dictate their future ('what we will become'), adhering to Albert Wendt's observation that the 'self' in all societies is defined by "what it remembers; we are what we remember; I am what I remember; the self is a trick of memory" (1987, cited from Friedman, 1992: 854). By physically destroying the Piers, Fan and Chiu believe that the

⁶ Many colonial structures have been repurposed such that their current function bears no resemblance to their original role. For example, a row of tenements along Johnston Road in Wan Chai has been converted into a restaurant known as *The Pawn*. The Former Marine Police Headquarters has been converted in the 1881 Heritage luxury shopping complex. Other colonial-era landscapes are simply removed. Grantham Street, the oldest street market in the city, is now being developed into residential high-rises and commercial buildings.

HKSAR government is erasing the existence of Hong Kong's colonial exposures and also hindering the potential developmental of the Hong Kong identity in the 'postcolonial' era.⁷

Whilst this section described the divergent versions of the past that are currently being circulated in Hong Kong according to nationalistic or localist identitarian interests, what needs to be examined is how exactly such ideologies are being presented to the Hong Kong population. This paper is interested in the role of visuality and materiality in conveying historical narratives to the public domain, and how such representations of the past are subsequently received by the population. These queries will be explored by comparing the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, a government institution, with the HKHoS, a space established by grassroots actors.

Hong Kong Heritage Museum

The Hong Kong Heritage Museum opened in 2000, housed within premises that were purpose-built for the museum. The design of the museum was deliberately "patterned after the traditional *si he yuan* [housing complex based around a central courtyard]" to give visitors the impression of stepping into a landscape of the past (BrandHK, 2017; Discover Hong Kong, 2017). From official descriptions the museum claims to echo traditional Chinese domestic structures in its layout, but in actuality, is constructed at such a grand scale that evokes monumental inclinations paralleling traditional Chinese imperial structures. The Heritage Museum building can accommodate over six thousand people at any given time and is the largest structure in the city, dominating the surrounding landscape, towering over visitors upon their approach to the site. The complex asserts itself as a space of power and authority—especially of historical authority— by its sheer size that overwhelms, overshadows, and dominates the visual field along with the imaginations of the visitor.

The appearance of the museum adopts many characteristics of traditional Chinese architecture, most notably by embracing principles of bilateral symmetry (see Knapp, 2006). The structure also has sloped ceramic roofs, a style dating from the Zhou dynasty (1046 BC-256 BC). The façade of the building is embellished with large columns and circular archways reminiscent of the great halls of the Forbidden City constructed during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The Heritage Museum sign above the entrance is partially depicted in the archaic Small Seal Script from the Qin dynasty (221 BC-206 BC) (Image 1). And though the museum is located in Shatin, a new town development rife with shopping malls and residential highrises, the visual cues alluding to contemporary urbanity are hidden from visitors on museum grounds, thanks to the museum's isolated location next to the Shing Mun river, and thanks to the copse of trees planted around the museum parameter hiding the city from view. The building is constructed using concrete and glass, yet the contemporaneity of these modern materials are concealed; the concrete walls are painted in pale yellow and crimson-brown that suggests woodwork and stonework; glass windows are positioned away from the front of the building and are concealed by the overhanging balcony above the entrance. As a result, the museum simultaneously evokes feelings of a "double displacement: spatial displacement...and "temporal displacement" within the visitor, whereby they are transported from the contemporary Hong Kong landscape that is the product of syncretic influences from its colonial and other global exposures, to a purely 'Chinese' landscape of the past (Peleggi, 2005: 261).

⁷ Applying the term 'postcolonial' to Hong Kong is problematic, since the city did not acquire independence after British colonial rule, and was instead placed under PRC sovereignty. Scholars have instead suggested that the city is undergoing 'neocolonialism' or 'recolonialism' (Ku and Pun, 2006).



Image 1: The Hong Kong Heritage Museum located in Shatin. The building is deliberately built in a ‘Chinese architectural style’. Although the residential highrises are visible in the photo, they are mostly hidden from the museum visitors’ gaze by the trees surrounding the museum grounds.

The exterior of the Heritage Museum evokes an image of ‘Chinese history’ (or rather, an ‘assemblage of Chinese history’, since the building is rendered in a composite of architectural styles from multiple dynasties), an illusion that is maintained inside. Visitors entering the building face an expansive lobby designed to resemble the enclosed courtyards of traditional Chinese houses (Knapp, 2006: 100). Mimicking these enclosed courtyards that have passageways to the sides leading to the different wings of a house, the museum lobby similarly has doorways to the sides leading to its galleries. But much like the museum exterior, besides from assuming features from traditional spaces of Chinese domesticity, the lobby also draws inspiration from spaces of Chinese imperialistic authority. The centre of the lobby is dominated by large palatial pillars and a large staircase (Image 2) resembling the stairs behind the Hall of Preserving Harmony in the Forbidden City, notable for its carved marble slab at the centre of the stairs, with the steps located to the right and left sides. By appropriating physical aspects of the Forbidden City, the Museum is insinuating itself as a space that excises power over visitors.



Image 2: The design of the Heritage Museum lobby draws inspiration from the inner courtyards of traditional Chinese houses, and also from the features found within the Forbidden City (as seen from the grand staircase and large pillars), a space of imperial power.

This assertion of authority pervades within the museum galleries. Museums are regulated, shaped, and controlled by the curators, managers, and owners of these institutions. Deciding what topics to address in an exhibit, and selecting which artefacts are to be displayed, determines what histories are being represented. So whilst the Hong Kong Heritage Museum claims that their exhibitions strive towards “showcasing the diverse treasures of *our* heritage” (Hong Kong Heritage Museum, 2017, my emphasis), it is telling that one of their permanent exhibitions, the T.T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art, focusses on antiquated Chinese artefacts such as funerary sculptures, ceremonial ceramics, jades, and bronzes from the dynastic and Neolithic eras. Other permanent exhibits may feature mid-twentieth century artisans who were based in Hong Kong, such as the journalist and comic artist Louis Cha Leung-yung (also known as Jin Yong) and the painters Chao Shao-an and Yang Shanshen, but emphasise that their works are reflections of long-standing Chinese art forms to reinforce the cultural connections between the city and the nation. The museum thus construes ‘*our* heritage’ not as being derived solely from the Hong Kong locality, but extends to a larger ‘Chinese’ cultural entity extending beyond Hong Kong borders, and is derived from a larger Chinese past extending to prehistory. Artefacts in these galleries are presented by the museum as an authoritative and unproblematic source of historical fact and truth, as seen from a quote by philanthropist and collector T.T. Tsui that is mounted on the wall by the Tsui gallery entrance, saying “Antiques are history, and provide knowledge that cannot be found in most books” (c.f. *The Mirror*, 1995).

What Tsui does not mention is that whilst artefacts are a source of “knowledge”, the type of ‘knowledge’ derived from such objects are contingent on the interpretation and socio-political agendas imposed by exhibit curators. Artefacts can be manipulated to express a specific narrative, based on how they are displayed. In the Hong Kong Heritage Museum galleries, artefacts in display cases are organised in a prescribed order, encouraging visitors to ‘read’ the displays in the way those who established and curated the space intended. For example, the T.T. Tsui Gallery displays are arranged chronologically leading from the Neolithic era to the Qing dynasty, creating the impression that Chinese history progressed in an uninterrupted linear manner, masking the political turmoil and upheavals, along with the shifting territorial boundaries, that punctuated this timeline. Furthermore, the way artefacts are displayed also influences how people remember and how they position themselves in relation to the histories being advocated by the museum space (Edwards, Gosden, and Philips, 2006; Jones, 2009). Artefacts in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum are placed behind glass cases, physically removed from the visitor. Although some displays used multimedia technologies (such as by broadcasting videos or displaying information on television/computer screens, and by projecting images onto the wall), they were few in number, and many were not designed to be interactive with visitors. There are no curators or historians in the galleries to answer questions visitors may have, and visitors have to rely solely on the artefacts and their accompanying information plaques, along with the brochures and audio guides provided by the museum, to learn about the past. Museum tour guides assume the role of educators, teaching visitors about the artefacts, but these sessions resemble lectures and rarely fostered dialogue between the guides and the visitors. Visitors are rendered into the passive spectators of the history being propagated in the Heritage Museum.

Hong Kong House of Stories (HKHoS)

Unlike the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, the HKHoS encourages visitors to actively engage with the historical artefacts being displayed. The HKHoS is an exhibition-educational space within the historical Wan Chai Blue House⁸ (Image 3) managed by St. James’ Settlement (SJS), a non-profit social enterprise that provides rehabilitation and youth services to the Wan Chai community. Sami, an SJS social worker on the HKHoS management team, remembers that SJS became involved with the Blue House in 2006 and 2007 after being approached by Blue House residents who faced eviction because of the HKSAR government’s plans to transform the building into a tea museum (interview, 11 July 2017, Wan Chai). These residents had lived in the building for decades, and hoped that SJS could negotiate with HKSAR officials so that they could stay in their homes. At the time, the emphasis was on securing residency rights for Blue House inhabitants and on preventing the further displacement of the Wan Chai community caused by gentrification (see Lu, 2016), as opposed to preserving the past. But to convince the government to revise their plans for the Blue House, the SJS strategically adopted a heritage discourse.

The SJS claimed to share the desire as the government towards preserving the Blue House. But whereas HKSAR officials sought to preserve the physical form of the Blue House itself by removing the people living there, the SJS advocated for the preservation of the building’s ‘living memory’ by arguing that the way-of-life observed within the Blue House has remained relatively unchanged over the past decades and so granted insight as to how people in the past once lived, thereby justifying the need for Blue House residents to remain. To the surprise of Sami and other grassroots actors involved with the negotiations, the government conceded to SJS’s demands, saying that “the retention of both the premises and the tenants...will preserve the architecture of early Wan Chai and

⁸ The Blue House is part of the Blue House Cluster which also comprises of the Yellow House and the Orange House. Although categorised as a singular ‘group’ of historical buildings by the HKSAR government, each building has a different historical grade (with the Orange House receiving no grading).

also reflect its original residents' lifestyle and community development" (Development Bureau, 2016: 15).⁹ Not only were Blue House residents allowed to stay, but the SJS was also given permission to set up an educational-exhibition space on the ground floor of the premises to raise public awareness about the socio-cultural practices of Hong Kong's past, leading to the founding of the Wan Chai Livelihood Place in 2007, renamed the HKHoS in 2012. Besides from exhibiting historical items, the HKHoS runs workshops on traditional arts and crafts (Image 4), hosts free movie screenings and music concerts, provides guided walking tours around Wan Chai, and serves as a social locus for Wan Chai residents.

Because the Blue House is located on Stone Nullah Lane, a short distance away from the main public transportation routes, HKHoS visitors will first have to walk past the wet markets and hawker stalls on the streets in the aging district, seeing commonplace scenes of everyday life. Whereas the Heritage Museum is deliberately positioned away from the contemporary city to give visitors the illusion of being transported to an ancient Chinese structure, the HKHoS does not attempt to conceal the fact that they are situated within the thrum of present-day urban activity. Traditional buildings such as the Blue House and the modern landscape are not delineated and separated, but are seen to coexist in the same vicinity, showing how features of the past can be integrated into the present. Despite being dwarfed by the surrounding highrise developments, the Blue House is still the first structure that catches the visitor's gaze thanks to its bright blue exterior, colonial-styled balconies, and its old-fashioned shop signs and wooden doors signifying the historicity of the structure. More importantly, the Blue House captures attention because it is visually arresting; the status of the building as a Grade I historical building is juxtaposed with the presence of everyday clothing and household items left outside of the balconies by residents. It produces a contradictory image of exceptionality and familiar mundanity that is unexpected and fascinating (see Schmid, Sahr, and Urry, 2011).

The HKHoS comprises of a small single room¹⁰ lined with shelves that are filled with artefacts donated by Wan Chai residents, showcasing everyday items from the mid-twentieth century including furniture, teapots, vinyl discs, typewriters, and statues of guardian deities (Image 5). On the walls there is a hand-painted sign explaining the history of the Blue House and the HKHoS, vintage posters, and hand-written 揮春 (Chinese new year greeting banners). At the end of the room is a table with a hot water dispenser and a mismatched set of cups for visitors to use, giving the space a domestic aesthetic. Although the SJS manages the site, its daily operations are delegated to a team of elderly volunteers from the neighbourhood. Visitors are greeted by these volunteers, and would be told that they can freely take photos of any objects and handle them (save for a few fragile items). Objects are not arranged in any chronological order and there are no labels explaining what they are, what purpose they served, or who it once belonged to; visitors are encouraged to approach volunteers to obtain this information, often leading to the exchange of personal stories surrounding the artefact. Benches and wooden chairs are placed around the HKHoS, normally occupied by visitors and by local residents who would frequent the space to converse with volunteers. Depending on who was in the HKHoS at the time, topics of discussion ranged from sharing everyday neighbourhood gossip, telling jokes, answering questions from visitors, to reminiscing of the past.

⁹ Sami believes that the HKSAR government relented to avoid courting more negative publicity after the public furore and protests that erupted in 2007, in response to the demolition of Lee Tung Street in Wan Chai, an area renowned for producing traditional wedding cards and its publishing industry.

¹⁰ The HKHoS is usually located in the Blue House, but was temporarily relocated to the Yellow House during the 2017 fieldwork period due to government-initiated restoration efforts on the Blue House. The HKHoS moved back to the Blue House in August 2017.

Unlike the Heritage Museum that asserts its status as an authoritative source of historical information, HKHoS volunteers make no claims of being experts but insisted that they are just regular people, interacting with visitors in an informal and egalitarian manner. Volunteers and local residents would often share their own memories and experiences of 'old Hong Kong', stories that allow visitors to attach an intimate human narrative to the objects being displayed within the space and to the Blue House itself. Another difference between the Heritage Museum and the HKHoS is that whilst visitors of the former are made to view artefacts from a distance, HKHoS visitors can select which objects they wish to examine. Instead of being passively fed historical information through the Heritage Museum display cases that are arranged to convey a predetermined narrative, visitors of the HKHoS can choose what they wish to learn about, attaining authorship over the historical knowledge they can acquire.

VERNACULAR PREFERENCES IN THE CONSUMPTION OF HERITAGE

In order for material representations of history that has been imprinted onto urban space to exert influence over acts of remembrance, the resultant imagery must first be visually 'consumed' by the public domain. Nadia Seremetakis argues that this process of consumption is only possible through the making of history legible, because it is only through ascribing "literality" to the past that it becomes understandable, and thereby "most digestible and commodifiable" (1994: 10). The relationship between nostalgia, materiality, and consumption has already been explored within discussions on 'souvenirisation' examining the processes surrounding the acquisition of antiques or replica objects acting as proxies of the past (see Boym, 2001: 38; Cross, 2015; Outka, 2008). But these studies focus on documenting existing trends of nostalgic consumption, or on speculating why these trends have emerged from a structural perspective, without registering the meanings people derive from engaging in acts of consumption which would offer insight as to why people do or do not consume certain goods. In understanding the impact images have on remembrance, it is important to reorient academic attentions towards "the consumer's head and not the maker's" (Godlier, 1986: 134). So although the HKSAR government and grassroots actors may impose their respective ideologies about Hong Kong's past onto the city space, we must also pay attention to how the audience of such spectacles interpret such imageries. In this section, I examine how the Hong Kong public¹¹ feel towards the images pertaining to the past generated by the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and the HKHoS, and the reasons for this.

All histories are susceptible to commodification, but not all histories will be consumed to the same extent; some histories are more desired and popular than others (Hidaka, 2017). Despite the Heritage Museum being a product of the HKSAR government, conferring a degree of political authority to the historical narrative espoused by this space, informants do not feel connected to the museum or to the histories featured in their exhibits. For example, Fan has never visited the

¹¹ Due to the limited scope of this paper, the focus here is on how the Hong Kong public responds to the Heritage Museum and to the HKHoS. It may be of interest to note that most visitors to the Heritage Museum were observed to be ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong (discernible from their use of Cantonese) and the PRC (who used Putonghua). Government websites promote the museum as a tourist landmark, and the museum produces bilingual (Chinese and English) brochures and information plaques to cater to an international audience, yet in actuality there were few foreign visitors within its premises. This may be because the museum is difficult to access by public transport. In contrast, despite the dearth of English-language materials provided at the HKHoS, the space still received a steady stream of foreign visitors, due to its location in Wan Chai, already a popular tourist spot. These foreign visitors were often accompanied by their Cantonese-speaking friends (who would act as translators during discussions with volunteers). These observations raise questions regarding whom the Heritage Museum and the HKHoS see as their intended visitors, or consumers, of their histories.

Heritage Museum because he lives and works in another district located far away, and it is time-consuming for him to travel to Shatin. The positioning of the Heritage Museum apart from the rest of the city is therefore a double-edged sword, on the one hand preserving the illusion of the structure's Chinese historicity, but also posing pragmatic difficulties for members of the public trying to access the site. But Fan also wonders if he is simply lacking motivation to visit the museum because he is disinterested in the institution (interview, 2 July 2017, Yau Ma Tei). Fan's statement is elaborated upon by Yun, who talks about the temporal and emotional distance that has led him to feel alienated from the Heritage Museum and other government-run heritage sites celebrating a 'Chinese' past. Yun visited the Heritage Museum several years ago, but rather than identifying with the Chinese architectural style of the museum, he found that the building itself looked "out of place" on the Hong Kong landscape for two reasons; firstly, 'traditional' Chinese structures evoking imperialistic authority have never existed in Hong Kong; and secondly, the building is incongruous from the rest of Shatin, which as aforementioned is a new town development (phone interview, 6 July 2017). The heritage Museum is not a structure that is relatable to the experiences of ordinary citizens such as Yun.

Yun also describes the museum galleries as emphasising the "古時" (ancient past), a time too "distanced from the experiences and memories of the current Hong Kong population", and he was unable to see how these artefacts were related to his own history. He admired the antiquity of the artefacts inside the Heritage Museum, but saw them as objects representative of someone else's past, and not his past. From on-site museum observations, it is questionable whether visitors appreciated the historicity of, or formed an affective connection to, the artefacts on display. Most visitors would walk around the galleries talking with each other, only occasionally looking at the display cases or reading the caption on the accompanying plaque. For example, four male students from a school group were making jokes as they approached a display case containing a ceramic dog from the Han dynasty, with one of them exclaiming "嘩, 隻狗好正喎 [woah, this dog is very nice]!" before quickly departing for the next gallery. By informally referring to the historical artefact as 'this dog' and describing it using the slang phrase '好正', his comment was infused with humour and detracted from the historical gravity of the display. '好正' is also a term used to compliment quotidian items such as food or a television programme, which reveals the value this student attributed to the ceramic dog. Similarly, a girl from the same school commented how an anthropomorphic ceramic sculpture reminded her of the Disney movie 'Beauty and the Beast'. Her use of this popular culture reference was an attempt to help make the artefact, which harkened from a distant past, more relatable to her own experiences. These students were given brochures detailing display case highlights to guide them through the galleries, but there were no guides or curators present to answer inquiries these students may have. There were several instances where students would look at an object and comment "乜野嚟㗎 [what is that?];" but without an individual to explain the historical significance of these objects, the students would receive no answers, and they were observed to quickly lose interest and move onto other displays.

In contrast to the ambiguous degree of attachment museum visitors harboured towards the artefacts and historical narratives on display, HKHoS visitors did not hesitate to identify with the past being presented to them within this space. These visitors, the majority whom were youths, claimed to be interested in the HKHoS because they wished to learn about Hong Kong history, which one woman describes as "our history" to assert a sense of identification and ownership towards the past being represented through the Blue House (interview, 11 July 2017, Wan Chai). Another young woman says that she was interested in the Blue House because she wanted to "see what Hong Kong history is"; for her, the structure is a source of information about Hong Kong's past (interview, 11 July 2017, Wan Chai). I asked Yun why young people have come to see the Blue House as embodying Hong Kong history. He explains that this is because the Blue House has made the decision not to alter or modernise its exterior appearance to emphasise that it is an example of the *tong lau*, a

syncretic architectural form that emerged from the Asian shophouse in combination with the building ordinances imposed by the colonial authorities. *Tong lau* dominated the post-WWII Hong Kong urban landscape because they were seen by the population and the colonial government as an effective means of providing accommodation to a rapidly expanding population (Lee and DiStefano, 2011), and so *tong lau* became a commonplace form of infrastructure that large numbers of people in the city were exposed to. Many from the older generations, such as the parents and grandparents of contemporary youths, once lived in these structures, and despite the number of *tong lau* diminishing due to urban redevelopment projects today, a significant number of people continue to live and work within *tong lau*. Because of this, Yun claims that “*tong lau* are the people’s history, many people from the previous generations can relate to them and will have story with these buildings”. What Yun emphasises is that *tong lau* such as the Blue House represent a past that is not too temporally removed from the experiences of current Hong Kong society; or to rephrase, these buildings possess a sense of temporal closeness with the population. Hong Kong people are affectively attached to these buildings because they are a familiar sight.

This sense of familiarity experienced by visitors is reinforced by the domestic atmosphere conveyed by the interior of the HKHoS that has been arranged to resemble homes from the mid-to-late twentieth century, homes that the contemporary generation of youths would have seen from their own childhoods. There were many instances where HKHoS visitors would look at an artefact on the shelves and exclaim that they have seen something similar in their own homes, or the homes of their relatives, inducing within them a bout of nostalgic remembrance. For example, one young woman excitedly pointed at the wooden stools that had caught her eye because she recalls how her grandmother had a similar item, an item that she explains has since been lost over the years. To find a chair that her grandmother had once possessed being featured within the HKHoS, a space that seeks to educate the public about Hong Kong history, made this young woman feel more connected to, and as being a part of, this past. Unlike the T.T. Tsui Gallery at the Heritage Museum showcasing exceptional items used for ceremonial purposes, the objects on display at HKHoS are familiar and remain relevant to the everyday lives of ordinary Hong Kong people. And unlike the monumentality and grandness of the Heritage Museum building that is designed to visually overwhelm the visitor, the domestic appearance of the HKHoS created a comfortable environment for visitors to ask the elderly volunteers questions about the artefacts on display, and to exchange personal experiences and stories. The use of storytelling by volunteers as a device for sharing personal memories is also important in creating rapport with youth visitors. Informants such as Yun and Fan describe storytelling as a poignant means of disseminating historical knowledge, with Yun claiming that there is an emotional and personal dimension to these stories that makes him feel more attached to these accounts. Fan echoes such statements by saying that these stories help “put a face to the past”, so that regardless of the factual accuracy of these stories, they are still afforded a degree of verity and validation within the popular mindset.

CONCLUSION

Remembrance is a contested domain in post-Handover Hong Kong. There are two historical narratives currently being circulated in the city, with a nationalistic ‘Chinese past’ championed by the HKSAR administration, juxtaposed against a local ‘Hong Kong past’ that is popular amongst the vernacular sphere. Both historical narratives are visually represented through material means on the urban space, as revealed through an examination of the government’s Hong Kong Heritage Museum that was constructed in an antiquated Chinese architectural style, and the grassroots-run HKHoS that is situated within the Blue House, a colonial-era *tong lau*. But just because these histories are made legible on the landscape doesn’t necessarily mean that society will be interested in visually ‘consuming’ these renditions of the past in equal measure. The second half of this paper therefore

explored the varying ways in which the population perceive and receive these different imaginings of the past. From observing the Heritage Museum and HKHoS, it was shown that people felt alienated from the former because the Chinese past was considered too distanced and irrelevant from their experiences, and in contrast, expressed an affinity to the latter because the history being carried by this space was seen as being more relatable to their own lives. These impressions are the result of the method in which history at both sites were visualised and presented to the Hong Kong public, which subsequently shaped how individuals engaged with these histories. Whilst the Heritage Museum asserted themselves as an authoritative source of historical information, with gallery displays making no attempt to connect with visitors and instead positioning them as passive spectators of the past, the HKHoS provided a homely and egalitarian environment encouraging visitors to interact with the elderly volunteers and ask questions about the past, thereby presenting history in a more personable and humanised manner.

This paper reviewed the representation and consumption of the past in Hong Kong in relation to political agendas and identitarian concerns between the HKSAR government and grassroots actors. But the growing role of the commercial sector in propagating, circulating, and reinforcing certain historical narratives in the city should also be mentioned. Youth preference for local history have not gone unnoticed by businesses who strive to capitalise on such trends. Shops such as G.O.D. (Goods of Desire) and rwb330 engage in the 'souvenirisation' of nostalgia mentioned above by marketing products, such as clothing and furniture, harkening to the 'Old Hong Kong' aesthetic. Other corporate ventures have directed their energies towards manufacturing spaces that sell experiences of the past. Since March 2012, Ocean Park, a Hong Kong amusement park, launched the 'Old Hong Kong' attraction where visitors can immerse themselves in the Hong Kong of the 1950s and 1970s, walking along recreations of streets and shops populated by Ocean Park staff dressed in period costumes. Even the transnational coffee chain Starbucks have opened BING SUTT ('ice house') Corner, a café decorated to resemble a Hong Kong diner from the 1970s. What impact these commercial ventures have on shaping the existing fragmentary historical landscape of Hong Kong in the future, and how this influences the affects and meanings the contemporary Hong Kong population derives from the past, remains to be seen.

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