

梁秉鈞：記憶的城市·虛構的城市
Cities of Memory · Cities of Fabrication: excerpts
By P.K. LEUNG
Translated by Richard SHEUNG

Translator's Introduction

Leung Ping Kwan (1948-), who writes poetry under the pen-name Ye Si 也斯, has been a prolific poet, essayist and novelist as well as translator of avant-garde Western literature since the 1960s. The following excerpts are taken from the concluding chapter in his recent novel *Cities of Memory · Cities of Fabrication* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993). The autobiographical novel recounts the author's impressions of various Western and Chinese cities which he has visited, of the friends he met up with there, and his eventual return to Hong Kong.

The time frame of *Cities* coincides with a period of intense economic, social and political change in Hong Kong prior to and following the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the political future of the territory. The novel *per se* may be seen as an account of the author's personal experiences and portraits of his friends and acquaintances caught in the midst of all these changes. Instead of following chronological order, Leung's narrative, at once earnest and satirical, shifts between past and present in a way which undermines the actuality of the here and now.

The concluding chapter begins with the narrator's doomed attempt to make a photographic record of Food Street, where he lives, before its ominous facelift. He

is so busy getting on with the serious business of life, like finding a new job, etc, that in the end he has no energy left for his increasingly irrelevant artistic project. It would seem that art as a career has become increasingly difficult for his artist friends and acquaintances in materialistic, fast-paced Hong Kong. Of course, some 'artists', like the kitschy columnist Mr Wong, have adapted rather better than others. Some have become disillusioned and emigrated, like the avant-garde artist W, who rents his apartment to the narrator.

There are presumably many more artistic types who are leading a marginal existence, like the self-styled 'committed' artist O and, to a lesser extent, the would-be feminist X, the research student Y, and the dedicated cultural worker L whose stories are told in the excerpts. O's case is particularly interesting. He is by profession a photographer of struggling movie starlets seeking publicity, but he is nonetheless quite serious about making a photographic record of, and unwittingly perpetuating the myth of, the Kowloon Walled City. He regards it as the last remaining site of pre-colonial, and therefore primeval, Hong Kong. His ultimate humiliation is Mr Wong's exploitation of the mythical value of his 'disappearance' and his labelling him as "a sentimental character" *par excellence*, "the sort of guy who loves to sing 'Aulde Lang Syne'".

Cities has a 'postmodern' theme which distinguishes it from most of the other literary works published locally in Chinese.¹ The postmodern goes beyond the experimentation with styles; it marks the dissolution of the dividing line between the real and the mythical, the serious and the trivial, etc. in the cultural space of high capitalism where signifiers are emptied of their content and subject to all kinds of appropriation. It would seem that the postmodern, far from being just a passing fad of metropolitan Hong Kong, effectively provides the setting in which the city is racing against time to shed its colonial past. There is a surfeit of information, there is so much activity and politics demanding everyone's attention and participation. There is precious little time left for reflection, and in the narrator's case, for unpacking the cardboard cartons he has brought back from the faraway cities, and appreciating or otherwise organizing some of those books, mementos, memories and fabrications, years after his return.

¹A collection of Leung's poems on apocalyptic images of Hong Kong is available in English translation under the title *City at the End of Time*; Cultural Studies Series No. 3, Hong Kong: Department of Comparative Literature, University of Hong Kong, 1992.

5. Cities of Memory

I am sitting in a room in W's old apartment looking at the night view through the window. I rented his apartment after he eventually emigrated. It is thanks to his help that I have been able to solve the problem of finding a place to live. I look out the window and see the light on the pointed tower. I recall W's favourite joke about it being Hong Kong's answer to the Empire State Building. I wonder how he is doing.

I look at the cardboard cartons lined up in rows by the wall. Each carton is like a city, waiting to be opened.

I see one with the label 'San Francisco'.

I see one with the label 'Washington'.

I see one with the label 'Berlin'.

I see one with the label 'Taipei'.

I see one with the label 'Shanghai'.

I open a carton and take out the large book lying on top. Its title reads, *Paul Eluard and His Painter Friends*. I turn to a page featuring a portrait of Eluard by his friend Andre Breton with a heavily annotated horoscope.

It was our last day in Paris. We went to the exhibition with Y. She said she had not read Eluard, so I told her about his poetry. I thought that since she was an admirer of Li Yishan and Li Qingzhao, she would definitely appreciate Eluard. Various modern lyrical poets of the older generation in China, such as Dai Wangshu and Luo Dagang, had translated Eluard. The tender and deeply felt emotions of his poetry seemed never to fail to touch us. I recall he wrote that there was no starting point between us, that we have always loved each other, that because we have always loved each other, we want to set free those who have been living in icy isolation. I thought of what Y had gone through, how she was always looking for love. I thought of how she had met her husband, how they had made their living farming the plot they 'appropriated' on Sunshine Island. And then her husband had gone back and been arrested, never to be heard of again. And then, after much ado, she had come to Paris. Despite the trials and tribulations, despite the sorrows of her emotional life, she still had a passion for classical verse which gave her a direct means of appreciating life. We were touched by her passion.

We said goodbye to Y in the square outside. I knew she would get on with life and study, in her own way. She would fall in love, and experience the same sadness and happiness again and again. Would she become a feminist? Probably not, but she would end up coping better than any one of us. She would continue

to live cheerfully in spite of the hurt; she was quite prepared to take on the new challenges out there in the world. Some street performers had attracted a crowd of spectators on the square. The children were chasing each other, screaming and having fun. The buildings at the back were characteristic of those you would find in the heart of any modern metropolis. Bright, open and exposed, they accommodated the daily bustling city crowds. We said, let's meet in our city someday. Who knows? Maybe things will be better then. Chances are we will have more art museums and exhibition centres collecting and curating works of art, spreading knowledge to a wider public. We were flipping through the books of poetry we had bought, encouraging each other to read.

I look in this enormous white book. I am ashamed to say that it has yellowed somewhat and there are even water stains on its edges. Like me, it has been through some unhappy days. I have read some unfavourable reviews of Eluard, and less and less of his poetry. Perhaps I should re-read Eluard just in order to see him in the present context. As to Y, I met her again in Taiwan last year.

I was in Taiwan for a conference and I gave her a call. She came to see me at the hotel with her painter husband. They took me to Sincere Collection, a well-known bookstore, to see a painting and poetry exhibition entitled 'Poetry and a New Habitat'. Y had not changed a bit. She still could not remember addresses; she still kept asking her way around as she did in Paris. We found a place in downtown Taipei to have a Taiwanese meal and to catch up on each other's lives. She was living happily with her husband, teaching and creating, and still enjoyed talking to friends. Friends are an inspiration to us. I think she is better able than me to take changes in her stride, with no bitterness. She is able to find a city to build a home and create her living space. Before parting, she invited me again to have tea in the teahouse of the National Palace Museum. "I can better appreciate your expansive poetic style now!" she quipped while sipping tea. I replied with a smile, "My poetic style has changed too!" She was teaching literature and writing. The job was perhaps not entirely to her liking, but it at least gave her some chance to do what she liked doing. She was just as keen to find out who had written good pieces and eager to show me a collection of her students' works. She added, "In fact, the new generation of Taiwan poets are experimenting with similar things to you." I was touched that we were able to talk poetry over tea despite the long years of separation. And unnerved, too. I suddenly realized that her enthusiasm was a far cry from my state of mind these last years.

I find a dunce's cap in one of my cartons. I vaguely recall that it was W's

present to me. That was after my trip to New York, after I tried to get him interested in O'Hara.

We were talking about surface and depth, in the vicinity of Confucius Tower. We said there seemed no way we could be totally convinced that there was a deep-structure meaning in everything. But having said that, we were not content with just skimming the surface of Soho-style glamour. We were probably talking about how difficult it was to put up with the exaggerated selflessness of writers like Peasant Woman when I quoted O'Hara as a 'counter-example'. He said in one of his essays something like this: Instead of talking about making sacrifices for mankind, would it not be better to spend two hours drinking coffee or having a meal with

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HO Chak 何澤

Central Series I: Bus Stops Packed on the Truck, 1994.

The Metropolis, Visual Research into Contemporary Hong Kong 1990-1996.

your friends, to listen to their problems? Instead of talking about reforming the future of mankind, would it not be better to pay more attention to people you know, to see if they have any needs, if you have anything to say to them? Can it be said that a poem is as much a means of communicating with a friend as it is a means of communicating with a city?

Later, a long time afterwards, W gave me that dunce's cap, saying, perhaps you could put it on while you write.

I take the cap out and dust it.

I look at the Empire State Building through the window. I see the Empire State Building in Hong Kong, I see Confucius Tower in New York. How strange we are. I wonder how everyone is doing.

A case full of 'trouble dolls'. The six of them are either in a standing or sitting posture, but now they all have weathered faces.

A case full of 'trouble dolls'. I had taken them abroad to give to my friends, hoping that they would solve their problems. The friends I met up with after my return all have their troubles too, burdened by work and by life, by the illnesses and deaths of friends and family, by the affection and pain of relationships and by political changes in society. Can the trouble dolls clone themselves so we have three thousand of them to tidy up this mess?

6. Cities of Fabrication

We want to do installation art in tiny Hong Kong Park. We are looking everywhere for suitable locations, trespassing on grounds which are supposed to be off limits. Invariably a caretaker comes out of his room to ask, “What are you people doing here?”

We joke about the great many tabloids, and the occasional bottle of liquor, hidden in their desks. We sneak down the stairs at the rear. We think about how the rear window could be enlarged to double its size, and the notices written in the imperative mood swapped for funny verses. We discover at the back a pavilion for bird watchers. We wonder how the pigeons could be given more spacious homes, how to provide the animals with a place to live and a more hygienic environment, and how to give their offspring a better education.

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YAU Leung 邱良
Central, 1990.

The Metropolis, Visual Research into Contemporary Hong Kong 1990-1996.

We walk on, wondering whether the strange-looking pyramids could be overturned. Could the lawn and fenced-off places be opened up for dramatic performances? Could people move about freely, cross the barriers, stand on soap boxes even, to shout? Could the lofty but useless red brick tower be put into a hat box to avoid further embarrassment? Could the exhaust fumes and the deafening noise be eliminated? Could cockroaches finally be spared the task of enforcing the law?

We steal into the goods lift and go up this grotesque building. Standing in front of the glass curtain wall in the art gallery, you can look out and see other, even more grotesque buildings in the city. They stand out there, each alone and aloof, the only thing common to them being their contest in glitter and shine. We wonder to ourselves whether we could get permission to dismantle the glass and replace it with something more interesting for the exhibition, or to cut the omnipresent stately columns one or two feet shorter so ant hills could be re-sited in the hall.

We have followed the procedures, going through one meeting after another. We were warned by the representative of Big Fortune Real Estate, landlord of Hong Kong Park, that there was no question of making any changes. But after several more months of meetings, they suddenly said they would welcome changes of all kinds. Encouraged by a false sense of euphoria, I dispensed with the robot which I had invented to attend meetings on my behalf and went personally to hear the Gospel. The representative of Ching Wo Real Estate was there too. They said that their trusteeship had ended and the property market held new prospects. But insofar as the artists were concerned, it was back to the earlier position of no change whatsoever. It was their discussion, their meeting: we were not considered to be part of it. I think that it is best that I use the robot as my double next time.

What are your views on the direct elections in 1995?

Which stock do you think is a good investment for the future?

I look at the printout of the new paragraph and say to the woman before me, "I don't want you to repeat what I said, nor do I want to repeat what you said. Can we see if we can work out a way to collaborate on a story which does not merely reflect your view of the truth, or my view of the truth?"

O has really gone missing. He has disappeared into the city of cities. The news of his disappearance has become a frequent topic in Mr Wong's newspaper column. Though he tongue-lashed Mr Wong in the past, now that he is no longer around he has been objectified and distorted into a sentimental character, a big fan of Mr Wong, the sort of guy who loves to sing 'Aulde Lang Syne'. O was set up by Mr Wong and lost his job due to Mr Wong. But there is no escape from Mr Wong, who is everywhere. Mr Wong is a true friend. Mr Wong is the most filial of sons. Mr Wong nurses his ailing wife with love and great tenderness. Mr Wong leaves

no stone unturned in hunting down and routing the thug who dishonoured his mentor. There is no stopping Mr Wong.

It is a world without truth. Mr Wong deplores this sad truth in his column. Real truth. Truth and honesty. True friends. True colours. Truly spicy potato chips. Truly fruity ice. Truth, like gold, will stand the test of fire. Truth, precious as pearls. That's why in my latest book on pearls, I teach you how to differentiate real pearls from fakes. The book contains pictures of pearls from my personal collection. It is very reasonably priced at \$49 and is available at all MTR station convenience stores.

Sometimes I am rather sceptical as to whether Mr Wong is human. He must be a consortium of sorts, a consortium with loads of capital, a manufacturer of robots which infiltrate the morning and evening newspapers, in much the same way as I am a maker of robots which attend meetings as my double. 'Mr Wong' never ceases to manufacture new products. It is always creating new images for itself. It calls itself variously, 'the angry rebel', 'the little guy with a big heart', 'the simple homely type', 'the lonely heart', 'the guy not afraid to speak out', 'the romantic student demonstrator', 'the little general', 'the unassuming and honest person', 'the sentimentalist', 'the guy who loves and hates as he pleases', etc. The images are like umbrellas which one uses and discards.

I went to see my friend L. He had long been confined to bed and was in a coma. He was not able to articulate his feelings in writing or in speech. Not a few of my friends are quietly struggling against enormous forces. Your body tissues are waging a war against you. Your brain starts hearing things. You retire silently to your room. You disappear like a madman behind a wall. My brain is scorched. I am standing by the door. It seems that I can see the dark bottomless pit beyond, and I can hear the murmur of voices too

I begin to learn to use the computer, slowly, clumsily, making all sorts of mistakes.

I type in a sentence, waiting for you to type in another.

I am waiting for you to appear, hoping that we can have a good conversation. But now behind that sentence of mine, I can only see the boundless green screen. No writing is visible.

Does it make sense to go on writing, if it just continues like this?

Where you should have appeared, there is only ongoing silence, an immense expanse of green emptiness. Will you come back to life?

Will you come back to life? I see you lying here, thinner and more austere. You look drained, unable to open your mouth, or raise the glass. We sit quietly through the ceremony. I am asked by your wife to say a few words. Stammering, can I say what I wanted to say? Can I tell the story of your life? As a teenager you contributed to the literary page of the *Catholic Bulletin*. That was the beginning of

your lifelong career as a writer. The priest who knew you as a young man is here to pray for God to forgive your sins. From the religious point of view, the priest must think that you have wasted your life, that you were full of human weaknesses, and that heaven is your only hope of salvation. I am of course in a disadvantaged position. I am still trying to affirm, in our mundane language, your life's accomplishments. Your lyrical poetry has provided solace to many insecure souls; your passionate prose inspires empathy. You pursued your career in literary journalism, news reporting and editing, right to the end of your life. I know of course that like us sitting here today, you spent a great deal of your time attending to tiresome detail, rectifying the sensationalism in the news and the excesses in the advertising. You were forced to make all sorts of compromises in order to make a living, tried your best to create meaning in meaningless work. At different times, you and I sat in bars talking about how to achieve what we set out to do within the constraints. Among the thick foreign-language books we had were biographies of publishers with vision and passion for literature; the way they set new trends inspired and motivated us. Within your constraints, you made some compromises, but there were also times you made a stand, and you managed to establish your own criteria.

You took to drinking more. We all took to drinking more. You hung around in the bar after work, to get a feel for life and love, and to get inebriated. When you were ill, I brought you books, but hardened myself against giving you money to buy liquor. Later, when you were discharged from hospital, you said that you would give up drinking and switch to milk. I thought that you would make a full recovery eventually. I still thought so even when I later heard you were in a coma. People like us who lived through the seventies always seemed to have that romantic optimism. We believed we would see the light at the end of the tunnel. That was until what really happened made us realize that we had to come to terms with reality. Eventually you left us.

I received a telephone call from X at midnight on the day of your funeral. It had been many years since I last saw X. She was much saddened by your death. She could not control her feelings and was even worried about my health. We talked for a long time. We had not talked like that for a great many years. It seemed that we were talking to people less and less. She said that friends left, died or quarrelled with each other. Her days were fully occupied with work and studying criminology; she was still using sleeping pills, but was no longer as romantic as before. Perhaps we all want to change our lifestyle. She said that she was working out to keep fit, swimming and weight-lifting.

Was it you who made us talk again? We had not talked to each other for a long long time. My emotions are so complex that I do not want to remember. I

cannot face my memories. The cartons are covered with dust. They are packed with childish things. They are packed with beautiful things. They are packed with horrible things

But I really want to change the way I live my life. I have to. Like a patient who has been ill for a long time, I am trying to stand on my feet again.

I walk to a corner of the room to open some of the cartons. I take out the disordered papers and re-read those old stories. I have to re-write them in order to start a new life. There is so much I want to say, for example: things which nobody else will mention, your story, his story, her story, my story.

We are still preparing for the installation art exhibition. It is not within our power to plan the whole city; we cannot resist the enormous forces of change. The plainly dressed and slim-built dolls are scattered everywhere. They are doing humble jobs; they are the teachers and designers, drivers and gardeners. They do not have an inflated view of themselves, they have no privileges. They are the ones who are always taken advantage of. Thinking before speaking, speaking in a voice barely audible. They are always reflecting on this and that, always too critical of themselves. Am I doing a good job? What should I do?

There is a real possibility of us giving up our right to speak all too easily, without even making the show of heroism expected of us. Despotism has different faces: the manager in your company, the overbearing financier of a movie project, the literary editor abusing his powers, the irresponsible columnist talking nonsense every day, the undemocratic pseudo-election held for contingency reasons, a woman with the lifelong mission of finding a father with clout It is all ridiculous, trivial and absurd. There is no metaphor of cannon, fire or blood. Slowly, imperceptibly, you find yourself in the midst of this proliferation of sophistic arguments, violent rhetoric, and simplistic thinking attributed to a surfeit of emotions. Words are easily smothered in the web of such discourse. Will you be too overwhelmed to open your mouth? Will you worry about the editorial insertions and deletions destroying a coherent piece?

One day, I received a postcard from X. She had gone away once again. She was worried that I would get bitter and angry. That was a real possibility. I am grateful to my friends for their concern, for it makes us question ourselves. I am thankful to X because underneath her romantic passion she is a kind-hearted and just friend.

We continue with our colouring and the boarding up of the railings in the park. In a corner assigned to me, I set up the computer to continue to edit my novel. I know that my private story will be interrupted by all the talking that will go on around it. My memory will be reformatted. People will sit at my desk and shuffle my manuscript. There will be cross infiltration when private space and public space

intertwine; there is no avoidance of mutual influence. Don't we know how much work we can do on our own? The two developers are bickering over profit but they are both keen that we put on a good show so the Moon Festival celebrations will be a duly extravagant and spectacular affair. The two imposing blocks outside the park look more like twin giants clad in armour. We unfold a map and put colours on it, deconstructing old boundaries and constructing new ones according to our imagination. The space is full of shadows and in a state of flux. We turn the old Chinese architecture upside down and we get lost in the labyrinth we have created. Food Street, which was home to assorted eating and drinking places, has been transformed into a plaza for upmarket boutiques. Statue Square in front of the Hong Kong Bank building, which in the past had been regarded as a place of great solemnity, is now a sitting-out area for Filipino maids on Sundays. Lan Kwai Fong, a frequent haunt of both local and expatriate merry-makers, is now a disaster area under the threat of severe control and regulations.² The Kowloon Walled City has been cleared, its walls demolished by sledgehammers. Friends who grew up there, who were once embarrassed about their origins, have gone on to romanticize the place as a kind of modern myth. But now, in a split second, the walls come down right before our eyes Let us sit down and think: can we not seek our own space in the midst of this endless refraction of images and light?

²Lan Kwai Fong was the scene of a stampede touched off by hordes of revellers on New Year's Eve, 1993. Twenty-one people were crushed to death and many more were injured.