

Counting Down on the Train to 2046 in West Kowloon: A Deep Map of Hong Kong's Spectral Temporalities

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Abstract

This paper maps the spectral temporalities of Hong Kong in the wakes of the official opening of the high-speed rail link in West Kowloon. Probing the spectral figurations of time in the city through Jacques Derrida's spectrality discourse, the paper connects spectrality with the method of "deep mapping" as proposed by Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks in *Theatre/Archaeology* (2005). This method aligns the poetic with the discursive, the fictional and the historical in order to set up an alternative archive of a locale with narratives that traverse and overlay the past, the present, and the future. I consider the notion of time through the act of "counting down" to 1997 and to 2047, and center this deep map on the site of West Kowloon. The reflection is placed in the context of the high-speed rail link, Wong Kar-wai's train to 2046, a censored, or "disappeared" artwork originally presented on the International Commerce Centre (ICC) by Sampson Wong Yu-hin and Jason Lam Chi-fai "Our 60-Second Friendship Begins Now / Countdown Machine" (2016), and the West Kowloon Cultural District.

The place is West Kowloon, a stretch of reclaimed land overlooking the Victoria Harbor. Built on the site is Hong Kong's usual mix of residential buildings, a fancy mall, hotels, metro stations and a dizzying network of footbridges, roads, and bus stations. This particular area is also home to the International Commerce Centre (ICC), Hong Kong's tallest commercial building; West Kowloon Cultural District, a cultural hub aspiring to put Hong Kong on the global map of contemporary arts; and the Express Rail Link West Kowloon Terminus, a massive infrastructural railroad project.

This cross-border express rail project linking Hong Kong straight to Beijing has been nothing short of scandalous with controversy after controversy—strikes and performative protests against the eviction of an old village (S. K. L. Chan, "Prostrating Walk"), continuous construction delays (A. Lee and Ng, "Hong Kong to Guangzhou"; Tsang, "Delays, Costs and Rows"), contentious bills in the Legislative Council to cover ever-escalating budgets (Siu and Leung, "Hong Kong Taxpayers"; Cheng, "Cost Overruns"), an immigration checkpoint in the heart of Hong Kong bringing Chinese law inside the territory (Cheng, "Explainer"; Tong, "Appalled"), and not to mention, a total of 30,400

square meters of “hidden” spaces in the rail terminus previously unannounced but revealed less than a month before its official opening (Su, “Four More ‘Hidden’ Spaces”; Cheng, “Back of House Areas”).

The month is September 2018. This rail network boasting a narrative of speed and progress begins to shuttle passengers between West Kowloon and West Beijing. Traversing 2,230 kilometers, the network brings Hong Kong closer to its motherland and the capital of Beijing. It also creates a palpable connection between the planned Palace Museum¹ in the West Kowloon Cultural District and the actual Imperial Palace Museum next to Tiananmen Square. The high-speed railway is a ride towards future-oriented development, and with the Palace Museum next to it, also acts as a link to past glory and to the heart of Chinese political power. Past, present, and future collide in the spaces of West Kowloon.

The month is February 2019. The High Court has ruled that having a checkpoint where Chinese law is enforced on Hong Kong soil is legal and constitutional. Legal scholar Johannes Chan Man-mun expects the case to ultimately reach the Court of Final Appeal, and suggests that the judges’ decisions would be instrumental in determining the future of the Basic Law, Hong Kong’s constitutional arrangement with China and the sustainability of One Country, Two Systems (Lum 2018).²

In this article, I attempt an excavation of the contemporary layers of time in Hong Kong, through the lens of the locale of West Kowloon, vis-à-vis the discourse of spectrality (Derrida, *Specters*). Rather than only casting Hong Kong in the light of postcoloniality, spectrality offers the possibility of thinking beyond the chronology of the “after” and the “post-.” The tale of Hong Kong’s postcolonial progress and development is not to be recapitulated here through a chronological timeline, but to be (re-)visited from affective layerings, both in time and in space. Such an approach gives the possibility of “palimpsestic thinking” (Blanco and Peeren 32), for instance, in reference to the ritualistic nature of local commemorations and protests. New meaning gets attached to the dates of July 1 (establishment day of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region since 1997), and June 4 (day of the bloody crackdown in Tiananmen Square in 1989), as large-scale public events take place and

¹ The Hong Kong version of the Palace Museum will host prized relics from its Beijing counterpart, Imperial Palace Museum. See J. Lam “Protesters” over the Museum’s controversiality, and the discussion below for further details.

² As of February 2019, cases have already been reported of jurisdictional issues regarding incidents happening inside the Chinese port area of the station, and a Hong Kong citizen was arrested by Chinese police in the zone. See Chinese coverage in *HKOI*’s “Arrest of Hongkonger.” For a detailed background discussion of Hong Kong’s constitutional status and the history of One Country, Two Systems, see the introductions to Chu’s *Lost in Transition* and *Found in Transition*, where he details the history of the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law and its aftermath in the post-Handover era, or Yash Ghai’s *Hong Kong’s New Constitutional Order*.

bring new dimensions to the memorialization each year.³ As such, a spectral reading of these dates compels a “politics of memory, of inheritance, of generations” (Derrida xviii; original emphasis), inviting critical reflection on these moments by coming to terms simultaneously with the past, the present, and the future.

Already in 1997, Ackbar Abbas writes that “colonialism will not merely be Hong Kong’s chronic condition, it will be accompanied by displaced chronologies or achronicities” (6). This statement opens itself up to a spectral discussion—colonialism is a chronic spectral condition that will continue to haunt Hong Kong long after its official return to its motherland. There is no real “post-” here, but a lingering effect of felt presence despite the absence of colonial rule, befitting the notion of a specter as a “paradoxical invisible visibility” (Blanco and Peeren 33). Chu encapsulates this paradoxical feeling in his monograph *Lost in Transition* by titling his introduction “After the End” (1). In the sequel, *Found in Transition*, he titles his introduction “Are We Dead Yet?...” (1), a question that once again engages the question of how Hong Kong is reconfigured in the years after the Handover. Situating Hong Kong in the “end times” (Chu, *Found* 18), he references Slavoj Žižek’s suggestion of “thinking backwards” in order to construct imaginaries and “radical alternatives” (*ibid.*) for Hong Kong’s story. This orientation Chu that takes on suggests the centrality of temporality in approaching the study of Hong Kong. Indeed, what kinds of displaced, achronic narratives could be built from this “post-colony” with an expiration date? I take up this question by creating what I call a “deep map of spectral temporalities”, modeled after Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks’ methodology in *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001). The deep map, they explain,

attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history, and everything you might ever want to say about a place. (64–65)

Places, according to Pearson and Shanks, are marked through layers of palimpsest, memories preserved over generations, and could include an intermix of genres of history, folklore, natural history, and hearsay as

³ The essay will refrain from a rehashing of Hong Kong history which can be found in many accounts discussing Hong Kong culture and politics in and out of the academic discourse. For a concise overview, see Carroll, *A Concise History*. Note that the translation of work into Chinese resulted in a controversy, where direct critique towards the Chinese government was allegedly removed by the Chunghwa Publishers (“Chunghwa”). The author thanks Lillian Liu for bringing this to my attention.

legitimate “records” in an alternative archives of places. To acquire a sense of a location, they ask “What is this place? What happened here? Who lived here?” (158). Staying attentive to the multi-layered temporalities of narratives shuttling between past and present as well as to the multiplicity of voices in articulating memories of the self and of the collective, the authors propose a deep mapping method that enfold the autobiographical with the discursive, the factual and the fictional. This creates a heterotopic⁴ archive that is constantly changing over time. Committed to continuous (re-)inscriptions, appearances, and disappearances, the deep map of a location could take and incorporate various forms—a performance, a piece of art, a film, a memoir, found objects, newspapers, or in this case, an essay. Pearson and Shanks’ orientation speaks to spectrality through their commitment to temporal multiplicities, and the openness to include things such as stories, memories, and speculations, which may be invisible to the “official” or dominant narrative of a locale. Through the act of deep mapping, the scholarly investigation “becomes part of an integrated, social and political practice active in the creation of personal, communal, local and national identities, a practice unafraid to be sensual, interpretive, romantic” (162).

Following Pearson and Shanks, I construct a deep map of Hong Kong, shuttling between the autobiographical and the artistic, the speculative and the factual. I also center it on the site of West Kowloon, in the context of the high-speed rail link, Wong Kar-wai’s train to 2046, and a censored, or “disappeared” artwork originally presented on the ICC by Sampson Wong Yu-hin and Jason Lam Chi-fai “Our 60-Second Friendship Begins Now / Countdown Machine” (2016)⁵ (“Countdown Machine” hereafter). The high-speed rail terminating in West Kowloon is, perhaps, our train to 2046, like the one in auteur Wong Kar-wai’s *2046* (2004). In Wong’s science fiction tale, 2046 is the promised land where no change would happen, a clear reference to the city’s constitutional status and Beijing’s promise to keep Hong Kong “unchanged” for 50 years from 1997–2047. Characters are keen therefore to travel to 2046 on the utopic train to sustain their nostalgic attachments to the past. The artwork, *Countdown Machine*, deals with 2047 from another angle. Originally commissioned as part of the fifth “Large-Scale Public Media Art Exhibition: Human Vibrations” in 2016, the work was pulled days after its premiere, when the artists explained that the large-scale counter display on the harbor front in fact counted

⁴ Foucault’s work on heterotopia is relevant here, in particular in his discussion of how several spaces could be juxtaposed within a single real space despite apparent incompatibility. From a temporal perspective, heterotopic spaces also incorporate multiple senses of time. See further Foucault “Heterotopia.”

⁵ Footage of the piece (prior to its “disappearance”) can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/167615623>.

down the seconds until June 30, 2047, the expiration date of the Basic Law (Chow, "Global Arts Hub").

By zooming in on West Kowloon through these works, I map Hong Kong's spectral temporalities and reflect on larger questions such as: how are the city and its inhabitants collectively synchronized to specific dates which are of meaning to Hongkongers? What are the affects surrounding a collective remembrance and memorialization of time, like the anxieties and fears that come with counting down towards 2047? As Esther Cheung points out, the trope of the spectral provokes "questions about presence/absence, visibility/invisibility, and appearance/reality" (83) in the spaces of the city. To refer to the spectral as "hauntings" is not merely to wax poetic, but to attend to the affective texture of remembrances, and of felt absences. I consider the discursive meanings of numbers, actual clocks, the act of counting down, as well as various spectral figures that show the palimpsestic nature of history and memory in Hong Kong's time and space.

1, 2

To introduce Hong Kong today to those foreign to its history often involves two numbers. One, and two. One Country, Two Systems.

One Country, Two Systems is intrinsically linked to time. The Basic Law safeguards the continuation of legal and financial systems under the principle of One Country, Two Systems, but is only valid for 50 years, and will run out exactly in 2047. Through the system, Hong Kong is promised to be unchanged for 50 years after the Handover.

The controversy of the high-speed rail link project lies precisely in its challenge to the integrity of One Country, Two Systems. In 2009, activists and politicians attempted to block the construction of the rail link, citing, amongst other concerns, the arrangement of immigration checkpoints. Should a checkpoint be placed in West Kowloon station, Chinese officials would be carrying out their duties on Hong Kong soil. Should a checkpoint be created in Shenzhen where the border between Hong Kong and China actually is, passengers would have to disembark there, effectively nullifying the benefit of creating a high-speed rail service in the first place. This issue was debated over several years in the Legislative Council (LegCo). Despite strong opposition from the pro-democratic camp, the government opted for creating the joint checkpoint in Hong Kong. This proposal gained a majority support vote in the LegCo in 2017, and subsequently, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China released a declaration stating that this arrangement was consistent with the Basic Law and the Constitution of the People's Republic of China.⁶

⁶ Then-secretary for Justice Rimsky Yuen explained in detail the legality of the arrangement in a speech at a press conference on December 27, 2017. See

In the current West Kowloon Terminus, parts of the train station are regarded as mainland Chinese territory. Chinese officials are in charge of immigration checks at a joint checkpoint in the heart of Hong Kong, and enforce mainland Chinese law (including criminal law) inside designated zones of the station and on trains. This area takes up three levels including areas in the arrival and departure halls as well as station platforms, making up a quarter of the terminus.⁷ One critic has described the high-speed train as a “Trojan horse” (Lian, “Trojan Train”) created to introduce a quasi-Chinese border zone and undermine the integrity of One Country, Two Systems, paving the way to the disappearance of Two Systems, and the end of the Basic Law.

The shrinkage of the distance between Hong Kong and China here is both perceptually and literally experienced, through the reduction of travel time and in the actual co-location of the Chinese border zone. Railroads themselves erase the feeling of distance by linking two locations on a map in a shorter period of time. German theorist Wolfgang Schivelbusch, writes in *The Railway Journey*, that railways create the “annihilation of space by time” (xiv). For 19th century travelers in France, the reduction of time to travel from one place to another by train is experienced as a reduction of space, and has an overall effect of creating a “a new, reduced geography” (35). Similarly Pheng Cheah argues, with reference to the rail tracks and telegraph cables built by colonial powers in Indonesia and in the Indies, that technological progress produces “at the level of subjective consciousness the shrinking of the world” (271). Technology is a specter that represents “a historically new type of effectivity or productive force that is more powerful in its capacity to transform physical reality than merely physical force” (*ibid.*).

One, two. This time not of One Country, Two Systems, but one train station, two jurisdictions. Repetition, with a significant difference. The shiny new station is already haunted, by whisperings of conspiratorial tales. The specter invokes a sense of paranoia: am I seeing something that is not there? The new quasi-border zone is an apparition, a layering on top of the physical space of the city, a blurring of boundaries that used to separate Hong Kong from China. (Which “dissidents” will be “disappeared” across the new border zone in the future?) The new quasi-border zone is an apparition, with ghost spaces appearing in an after-hours press release put out stealthily.⁸ Interlayers of the terminus

transcript here:

http://www.news.gov.hk/en/record/html/2017/12/20171227_191454.shtml

⁷ Such an arrangement sparked concern in the context of high-profile cases of “disappearance,” such as Lee Bo, the Causeway Bay Books manager, who was allegedly kidnapped from Hong Kong by mainland agents to China. See C. L. Lim 552–53.

⁸ The Transport and Housing Bureau issued a press release at 23:24 on September 6, 2018. In this press release, the Bureau admitted to the existence of nine levels

that have not appeared in previous reports submitted to the LegCo came into existence overnight. (Are they indeed only meant for “staff use” with offices, ventilation facilities, refuse collection, control rooms, dining rooms and other amenities... or are they black sites?) The station is haunted by yet another technological specter—the invisible wireless connection. For even Wi-fi policies have become sources of anxiety as Hongkongers are worried that connecting to the free Wi-fi service would mean handing over sensitive personal data to mainland authorities. Comba Telecom, which provides the Wi-fi on site, lists under its terms and conditions that users have to agree to the firm collecting passengers’ names, telephone numbers, email addresses, and information on the websites they visited.

Speculations become stories become urban legends become an indicator of the level of fear towards an unknown future. Whether these theories on the spectral map of the West Kowloon Terminus would ever come true is second to the performative power they have in invoking what is excluded in the official narrative celebrating the railway’s achievement in connecting Hong Kong and China.

7 1, 8 9, 6 4

Hong Kong is haunted by numbers.

In my memory, July begins on a particular note, a mood, a certain malaise. Its first day is imbued with meaning, memory, and action—on July 1, 1997, Hong Kong was handed over from the hands of the colonial British to the hands of the Communist Chinese. It rained that day. With my family, I watched the Handover Ceremony on TV. I was ten at the time; I did not quite understand what changes the Handover really would bring to day-to-day life.

That fateful day marked the entrance of Hong Kong into the “postcolony.” To speak with Achille Mbembe, the time of the postcolony is a time of entanglement, “not a series but an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones” (16; original emphasis).⁹ Hong Kong has had a strange relationship to time with documents of governance that project decades into the future, a recurrent motif of time and expiration. The memorialization of July 1 could be extended further—the New Territories was leased on July 1, 1898, to the British with an expiry date of 99 years, when the British and Chinese governments signed the Second Convention of Beijing. It

in the station, instead of four as initially announced. The late hour of this release was remarked upon in subsequent journalistic reports, for example in Cheng, “Back of House Areas”.

⁹ Mbembe’s work has also been cast in a discourse of spectropolitics. See further Blanco and Peeren 19, 94–95, 131–49.

was then that China was promised the return of parts of Hong Kong in 1997.¹⁰

The palimpsest of time writes over the date of July 1. In 1997, July 1 was a highly-anticipated event—anticipated, with a mix of fear of the unknown and hope for the future, a tinge of nostalgia and an urge to escape. The clock was ticking, and people were counting down the days to the reunification of Hong Kong with China. I remember school friends departing for new lives in Britain and Canada, promising to write letters that never arrived. My parents arranged for a backup plan, and stowed away in the drawer of a dresser were identity cards for Singapore, one with my portrait photo on it.

In the 365 days preceding the Handover, all sorts of commemoration activities began in Hong Kong from those embracing China's power to those wary of the meaning of 1997 for democratization and activism. On July 1, 1996, the *Ta Kung Pao* (大公報) published an eight-page advertising supplement to celebrate the one-year countdown to Hong Kong's return to China. Across Hong Kong were public rallies, marches, performances, temporary stages built in parks, and televised celebrations—how many more days till we reached day zero of the inevitable?

Counting down is a collective exercise in the synchronization to a time—like public clocks erected in squares and on clock towers that offer the possibility to share time. It is the time of a community's life, synchronicity to the temporality of a people, a time that defines an aspect of one's lived experience and perhaps even to cultural identity. In Benedict Anderson's seminal study of *Imagined Communities* (1983), he also makes reference to the "same clocked, calendrical time" (26) that has the potential of bringing together a nation, for subjects to imagine their belonging to the countless others they will never meet but share the same methods of telling time. "Temporal coincidence" (24), in other words, helps construct a sense of identity.

Ren Hai argues that the act of counting down became part of mass culture in China and in Hong Kong through the erection of a large-scale countdown clock in 1994 on Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The clock was seen as a "soft monument" (Ren 53) that commemorates a particular event, by counting down 925 days (or more precisely, the 798798 million seconds) until the Handover. Rather than telling time through a twelve or twenty-four hour cycle as regular clocks do, a countdown clock transforms the counting into the gradual diminishing of a finite sequence of numbers in a teleological manner. The digital countdown clock with its steady reduction of numbers required no

¹⁰ In the negotiations leading to the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, the British government agreed to return not only the New Territories, but also Kowloon and Hong Kong which were previously ceded in perpetuity during the Opium War.

literacy for telling time like that of an analogue clock with several hands. To Ren, the clock, like Schivelbusch's train, embodied "an aesthetic of temporal disappearance, especially of accelerating disappearance as symbolized by digital technology" (*ibid.*), which also signifies progress and a promise of change.

Look, in the north across thousands of kilometers, the white-colored board and red-colored character giant electronic countdown clock, looking down on Tiananmen Square, like a magnificent military gate that has lasted for a thousand years and could not be broken down, even by tens of thousands of soldiers. The neon numbers [are] transforming themselves incessantly, just as mercury falling onto the ground seeks every penetrating opportunity. [The clock's] gaze controls in the distance the progressive steps of Hong Kong history; nobody could possibly escape from it?! (Lee Siu-leung, as quoted in Ren 131)

The counter hit zero on July 1, 1997.

When the countdown reached zero, China took Hong Kong back and the nation began a new temporality. Thus, the meaning of 0 was predetermined and was related both to the end of a present time and to the beginning of a future time. (Ren 51)

From the vantage point of China, the zero point when China welcomes Hong Kong back into her arms is seen as a moment of reconciliation, healing the wounds of national shame and humiliation and defeat since the Qing government ceded Hong Kong in 1842. As Ren writes,

The affective economy of the countdown established an effective politics of cultural disappearance by means of substituting national feelings with a set of new ones. [...] During the countdown, almost all the imagery portraying feelings of humiliation, tragedy, and pain was replaced by spectacles of decolonizing celebrations, festivals, and exhibitions that encoded a new historical experience of revival, success, confidence, and pride. (65)

Counting down represents the stratification of time into measured units and the linearity of its singular trajectory towards the number zero. To Walter Benjamin, the clock stands for "homogenous, empty time" (261) which must be critiqued for its performance of progress, for it suggests a striated and controlled path to the future that cannot be disrupted. It is "a necessary illusion that must be exposed" (B. C. Lim 10). Without a doubt, the figure of July 1 exceeds this linear perspective and the official

narrative of reconciliation and celebration, and may be approached through the palimpsestic thinking of spectrality.

Just as the memory of July 1 as the lease date for New Territories in 1898 has been superimposed by the memory of July 1 in 1997, future years continue to write over older events, effacing and transforming the meanings formerly inscribed. Fast forward to the year 2003, and the meaning of the day would be forever overlaid with the biggest protest march Hong Kong has seen. The fight was against the enactment of anti-sedition public security law, Article 23 of the Basic Law. The dress code was black. Half a million people took to the streets that day. The collective synchronization to July 1 was no longer just about the anniversary of the Handover, but also about the democratic demands of civil society and the grievances against Chinese rule. Every subsequent year on the same day the city sets out to protest. As the years progressed, even the protest narratives fractured. Hongkongers were out for different reasons, advocating causes from gay marriage to social welfare policy, anti-animal cruelty to anti-education reform.

Every year, the protest takes place in sweltering heat. I remember the ickiness of my T-shirt clinging to my body, the voices yelling, the banners and protest props getting ever more creative. I was never sure which group I should donate to, or if I should donate, at all. I remember in particular one year when it started raining really hard halfway and I was drenched, but many of us kept walking even though we had no umbrellas. One year my family started bringing the next generation, and my niece joined in a baby stroller. At points I carried her in my arms and tried to explain what was happening around her; she was too young to comprehend the passionate anger of the students, or why love and peace was highlighted in the midst of years of political strife. That was the July 1 protest in 2014 where a rehearsal for the eventual civil disobedience movement was proposed.

To pass on affective remembrance, over long durations, from one generation to the next.

The spectrality of numbers in the consciousness of Hongkongers does not only include July 1, but also include June 4, that fateful day in 1989 when an undefined number of students and workers were killed by military action, ending the protests for democracy on Tiananmen Square. That June, I was still learning how to walk. But my mother brought me to support rallies in Hong Kong, and carried me in her arms. The memory of this date is passed down through my mother's silences, and her suppressed tears at the recollection of the televised and radio-broadcasted events. Brought up in the era of the 20-year rule where secondary school Chinese history curricula were advised to steer clear of recent historical events, I have only studied officially one page in my textbook out of the hushed archives of June 4. It is between knowing and not knowing the past; images seem to be etched in my mind without full first-hand experience, and sensations and feelings that do

not really belong to me are internalized and strangely familiar. Even though the incident is absent in my conscious memory, its emotive effects are present.

To spectrally (re)appear, through remembrance. If July is marked by the heat of marching in midday, June is imprinted by the warmth of candles and of faces lit up by the sea of candlelight at night. The annual commemoration event in Victoria Park is set up to mourn the deaths and to protest the violence committed which have not been acknowledged by the Communist Party up to this day. We are returned to the scene of Tiananmen Square, where tanks and scenes of bloodshed would be cleansed and replaced by a large-scale countdown clock in a matter of years. From the vantage point of Hong Kong, the public spectacularization of the countdown clock in Beijing only seeks to palimpsestically overwrite the militant and violent history on Tiananmen Square, and the impending rule of a great power that shall not be resisted.

The spectral effects and the trauma of June 4 remain in the minds of many.¹¹ María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren discuss how spectrality intersects with experiences of individual and collective trauma, and such hauntings of memories challenge the structure of chronological time (*The Spectralities Reader*). In the process of memorialization, these dates are often reduced to their numerical form—seven one, nine seven, six four, eight nine—a series of codes that is only legible to those who recognize the context. Eight-thirty-one. Nine-twenty-eight. VIIV.¹² How many more numbers can you name?

Dana Luciano has written in the context of 9/11 that the numbers have come to represent an exceptional time that becomes almost a-historical, and “distinguished by its inassimilability into the flow of ordinary time” (262–63). Luciano comments on how the trauma of 9/11 is universalized such that everyone, including non-Americans, is addressed as “co-participant, fellow-sufferer, witness, survivor, mourner” (261–62). In addition, Marc Redfield posits that 9/11 holds the space for rhetorical power because of its “blankness,” that also “unfolds as a performative, an imperial command” that “you shall have no other September 11ths” (59) from this point on. Brian Massumi, in his work on affective politics, referred to 9/11 as “the day the world changed” (vii). As a date, the number stands outside of normal chronological order because it holds extra layers of meaning, and marks defining moments in the public consciousness. The achronic nature of

¹¹ See further F. L. F. Lee and Chan on the impact of June 4 in light of Hong Kong’s protest movements, and Wan, “Absent Memory” using the lens of trauma studies to look at the forced official amnesia and censorship around June 4.

¹² Where were you on June 4, 1989? Were you protesting on July 1 this year, last year, ten years ago? What were you doing when the tear gas canisters started falling on September 28, 2014? In commemoration of 9/11, many accounts begin with the question “Where were you on 9/11?”

such numbers echo with Derrida's reflection on spectral time, and its out-of-placed-ness with chronological time:

A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now," future present). We are questioning in this instant, we are asking ourselves about this instant that is not docile to time, at least to what we call time. (xix)

In the present case, the numbers haunting the consciousness of Hong Kong stand out in their achronic relation to the city's narrative of progression, a series of repetitions disrupting the continuous flow of time. Figurations of specters are to Derrida a hauntology that reshapes history by breaking from the "instituted order of a calendar" (4). I would argue that a spectral take on Hong Kong reveals its own hauntology of dates and numbers, that stems from but at the same time exceeds the order of calendars.

Six-four denotes a moment of mourning, grief, and a culture of digital censorship behind the Great Firewall of China. Seven-one can be a felicitous speech-act celebrating the Handover, but can also be a gesture of resistance and civil disobedience. On different ends of the political spectrum, people are hailed into the memory and memorialization of the events, as dates become numbers that stand outside of the usual chronological order. These numbers generate the multi-layered temporalities of the deep map, and the recurrent nature of dates adds to the "ritualistic" (F. L. F. Lee and Chan 1) dimension of Hong Kong's postcolonial social movements, bringing experiences, memories, inscriptions, erasures, and forgettings into the unstable archive of postcolonial, spectral temporalities.¹³

2047

To be haunted, by the unknown future.

The artwork "Our 60-Second Friendship Begins Now / Countdown Machine" (2016) brings another important number to mind—2047, the year the constitution is set to expire. The work was projected onto the ICC in West Kowloon. In their proposal, the artists cite their reference to Wong Kar-wai's oeuvre, including the 60-second countdown

¹³ Moreover, the numbers of dates also stand alongside numbers remembered by other events of significance. Then Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying was voted into office by 689 votes (Hong Wrong, "689"), and 689 became his unofficial nickname. Also ritualistic in nature, the chanting of six-eight-nine became part of the protest lexicon when he was in office. For a discussion of the then-Chief executive's other nickname Wolf Leung, see Wan, "Lufsig" on the Lufsig protests in 2014.

appearing in *Days of Being Wild* (1990). It was a pick-up line from the male protagonist (Yuddy, played by the late Leslie Cheung) who wanted to get a girl (Su Li-zhen, played by Maggie Cheung) interested in him by asking her to look at his watch for a minute—the original lines read “The one minute before 3 pm on April 16, 1960, you’re together with me. I will remember this minute. You can’t change this fact. Our 60-second friendship begins now.”

But several days after the installation, the artists publicly announced that one of the segments in fact was counting down the seconds to the expiration of Hong Kong’s constitution. Much like the countdown clock in Tiananmen Square, the artists opted to illustrate the process through the unit of the second. The curators and the Arts Development Council made the controversial decision of removing it from view and from the catalogue immediately. As Agnes Tam has previously argued, the stress on the countdown motif in the artwork shows the artists’ intention to “refer to Hong Kong’s imminent ‘death’ in 2047 under the Central Government’s political intervention” (92). In contrast to the large-scale countdown and the official celebratory attitude towards 1997, the very public act of counting down to 2047 via this piece of artwork is discouraged, leaving one to ponder: What does 2047 mean, and how does Hong Kong negotiate this relationship to futurity? What is an expiration date to a city’s constitution, and what will these four numerical characters signify in the city’s future history?

In 2004, Wong Kar-wai released *2046*, a film that makes reference to two of his earlier works, *Days of Being Wild* and *In the Mood for Love* (2000). Interlacing Hong Kong in the 1960s and the sci-fi segment imagined by the male lead, the film plays with questions of memory and nostalgia. Wong’s work has long been characterized by his understanding of time in terms of disjunctures, dislocations, and discrepancies (Dissanayake 100). If we read *2046* as a spectral map of Wong’s Hong Kong, it is also one of apparitions, repetitions, appearances, and disappearances, of numbers, dates, and times. *2046* almost has an obsessive relationship with numbers. The lead character lodges in hotel room 2047, and writes a science fiction serialized novel called *2046*. 2046 is an actual place one could travel to where promises are always kept, but no one really knows if it is true because no one has ever come back. In the opening sequence, a voice-over explains:

In the year 2046 every railway network spreads the globe. A mysterious train leaves for 2046 every once in a while. Every passenger who goes to 2046 has the same intention. They want to recapture lost memories because nothing ever changes in 2046.

The train to 2046 is serviced by androids, including CC1966 (a reference to the year of the Cultural Revolution in China) and WJW1967 (the year of the anti-colonial riots in Hong Kong). Wong's obsession with time is also obvious with constant references to the characters' watches, and intertitles appearing throughout the film marking the passage of time like "10 hours later," "100 hours later," or with actual dates. In the hotel, room 2046 needed renovation because a character was stabbed inside, leaving trails of blood and an allegorical warning of bloodshed and violence in Wong Kar-wai's vision of the future. Wong's film trilogy also plays with spectral layering as characters (re)appear and details replicate themselves. Maggie Cheung from the previous two films reappears as an android on the mystery train to the future; Su Li-zhen, sharing the same name as Maggie Cheung's character in *Days of Being Wild*, is now a Chinese Cambodian lady played by Gong Li (C. Lee 136).

For *2046*, Wong's original inspiration was the imagination of how a city would be like if there is no change indeed for 50 years. He maps the political situation onto the love stories in *2046*, inviting the audience to wonder about the characters' inability to move on from old love relationships, and their tendencies to dwell in the past. Will they ever be able to break free of their attachments to history? Will postcolonial Hong Kong ever break free of the nostalgia for the past and the fear of the future?

Countdown Machine makes intertextual reference to the layering of time in Wong Kar-wai's cinematic journeys, bringing into public space these textures of time in Hong Kong. The now-"disappeared" artwork figures as a *revenant* that invokes remembrance of the nostalgic films of Wong Kar-wai, and as an *arrivant* (Derrida 245),¹⁴ a future-oriented anticipation of what will come in the politics of 2047.

Another intertextual reference is of significance here. Author Liu Yichang, whose books were the inspiration for *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*, describes Hong Kong as follows: "It is a tree without roots. [...] Its time is borrowed. [...] It is a dog sleeping on the sailboat deck" (「它是一棵無根的樹。[.....]它的時間是借來的。[.....]它是一隻躺在帆船甲板上的睡狗。」) (54). The city is living on "borrowed time and borrowed place," a term which has been often used to describe the refugee mentality of those escaping to Hong Kong in the wake of the Cultural Revolution or the Vietnam war. Similarly Abbas comments on how Hong Kong is "a temporary stop, no matter how long they stayed" and that it is "not so much a place as a space of transit" (4). Because of

¹⁴ Derrida uses the terms *revenant* and *arrivant* to refer to the dual temporality of spectral figures. The *revenant* repeatedly comes back as a ghost that returns from the past, but in its arrival, it also simultaneously constitutes its own futurity as the *arrivant*, and appears in a manner that cannot be anticipated (Derrida 245).

the nature of Hong Kong as a port city, it becomes a doorway to all the travelling souls who settle here or pass through. *2046* offers a glimpse into the personal memories of Wong's childhood in 1960s Hong Kong,¹⁵ and the notion of borrowed time and place is mapped onto the transient characters he creates in his films.¹⁶ In the countdown to 2047, the borrowed time and place takes a more literal meaning, under the arrangement of a 50-year constitution (now with only 28.5 years left on the clock).

To borrow time from the future, to return to a nostalgic past, these texts bring to the fore a plurality of durations, "discrete temporalities incapable of attaining homogeneity with or full incorporation into a uniform chronological present" (B. C. Lim 13). These multiple characterizations of temporality stand in stark contrast to the unidirectionality of the countdown clock ticking towards 1997 discussed in the previous section, and stand as a critique towards the notion of "homogenous, empty time" (Anderson 26) that could potentially synchronize communities and help construct a unified national identity. If anything, these layers of time speak to the multiplicities of Hong Kong identity formation that is out of sync and out of joint with a singular postcolonial identity or a singular subject of the Chinese state.

2019

What time is it? The year is 2019. The time is now, already disappearing into the past, into memory, into lost recollections. Already in 1988, the literary scholar Xi Xi has predicted in "Marvels of a Floating City" that Hong Kong is like a precocious child prodigy whose mother can never understand, and is scared by the agency displayed by the child. And in 1997, Ackbar Abbas speculated that to the Chinese, administering Hong Kong would be like "handling a gadget from the future" (6).

The gadget from the future, or Wong Kar-wai's train, has arrived in the form of the high-speed link rail project. In closing, I connect Wong Kar-wai's train, the disappeared artwork on the ICC, and the Cultural District project by turning once again to the physical space in West Kowloon. The ICC, as the tallest building in the city, signifies the success story of Hong Kong as Asia's world city, with its floors of office space rented by multinational firms and established Chinese corporations, topped with a Ritz-Carlton hotel with the highest rooftop

¹⁵ In his film trilogy, Wong Kar-wai had actors speak in Cantonese, Mandarin, Shanghaiese, and Japanese, and the actors would sometimes be holding conversations with each other in their own tongue. The films also reimagine the flows of people around the South Seas (南洋), and the characters lead diasporic existences in Singapore, Cambodia, and the Philippines, capturing the spirit of Hong Kong in the 50s and 60s.

¹⁶ See also Yue "Migration-as-Transition" on transitory subjects and migration in *2046*.

bar and swimming pool in the world. This tale of globalization and postcolonial success together with the physical height of this building is to be contrasted with the enormous hole in the ground next to it—the underground rail works which connects Hong Kong with the 38,000 km railway network of China. The rail terminus is situated right next to the ICC, both of them hallmarks of futuristic success.

As a physical space, the new station brings another layer of meaning to the West Kowloon development project, part of which comprises the Cultural District under construction. Originally conceived in 1999 as a tactic to rebrand Hong Kong as a global cultural city to counter the pervasive “cultural desert” discourse, the Cultural District is “designed to create spaces for the globally focused cultural industries and to tap into broader flows of people and capital that currently pass Hong Kong by because of its ‘failure’ to provide the ‘right’ type of urban spaces and physical infrastructure” (Raco and Gilliam 1432). This high-speed rail project could be seen as part of the infrastructural attempt to put Hong Kong on the map.

The development of the West Kowloon Cultural District has been heavily debated as local artistic communities hoped for better representation and opportunities to feature local works of art, culture, and literature. Yet in 2016, it was revealed that a Palace Museum hosting relics from Beijing’s imperial archives would instead be built. Speculations are rife for the political agenda behind the project, a decision that was announced without prior public consultations. At the signing ceremony confirming the cooperation, then Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying expressed that it was “the best and greatest gift to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong’s return to the motherland” (Qin, “Planned Hong Kong Museum”). At the groundbreaking ceremony in May 2018, current Chief Executive Carrie Lam called the museum “the jewel on the crown” (C. Lam, “Speech”). Hong Kong becomes the first satellite site outside of the Chinese capital for the display of these treasured artefacts from Beijing’s collections. Supporters suggest that the quality of the exhibits could propel the new museum as a world-class gallery on the global stage.¹⁷ Adding to the futuristic glow of glitzy tall buildings and the technologically-advanced speed rail in West Kowloon is the harking back to imperialist history and the glorification of Chinese cultural artefacts.¹⁸ The future takes us right back on a ride to the past, to times of historical grandeur.

From the physical site of West Kowloon flows the spectral landscape of Hong Kong, inhabited by numbers, stories, memories, conspiracy

¹⁷ See further B. Chan, “No Reason,” and Chugani, “Palace Museum.”

¹⁸ Protestors attempted to a connection between the Palace Museum and the Tiananmen Square crackdown, when a massive wall display of Beijing’s Palace Museum was placed as an advertisement between Central and Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway stations (C. Lam, “Speech”).

theories, memorialized through rituals, protests, films, literature, artworks ... official and unofficial, material and immaterial, present and absent, overlaid in the past, present, and future. From Wong's fictional train to the actual high-speed rail link, from "disappeared" artwork to the nostalgic yearnings of past glory through the Palace Museum, West Kowloon is symptomatic of the interweaving of times as we head towards 2047, towards the end of yet another legal document delineating the contours of the city's fate. The act of deep mapping excavates these spectral layers of time flowing through the city and in the city's consciousness.

One, two, seven, one, six, four, two, zero, four, seven.

The countdown to 2047 has long begun, and the train towards the future is about to depart.

What would Hong Kong's deep map look like when the counter hits zero again?

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