No silver here: An analysis of the changes in the urban fabric of Hong Kong after the Be Water Revolution

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Abstract

This thesis follows the claim of the right to the city exercised by HongKongers through their intervention in the urban fabric during the protest movement of 2019, named "Be Water Revolution", which concluded unsuccessfully. The paper follows the metaphor of "urban scars" to talk about changes in the urban fabric, and temporally separates them into three different types: "wounds" – meaning the damages caused to the urban fabric during the protest movement, "plasters" – meaning the rapid governmental intervention of installing temporary measures of repair, and "scars" – meaning the permanent, reworked form these repairs have taken. The research utilizes various ethnographic methods including participant observation, interviews, informal conversations and walking ethnography. The findings attest to an adoption of a revengeful "aesthetics of defeat", with governmental intervention weaponizing the element of disappearance found within Hong Kong culture, turning it into censorship and an imposition of painful memories. The paper concludes that the tactics implemented to oppress the right to the city surpass disappearance and aim at eradication.

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Introduction

In February 2018, Chan Tong-kai, a man born in Hong Kong murdered his girlfriend Amber Poon Hiu-wing in Taipei, Taiwan. After hiding her body he flew back to Hong Kong, where he confessed to the authorities; however since the crime was committed in Taiwan, the Hong Kong authorities had no right to prosecute him, and with no extradition treaty in place they found themselves paralyzed. Chan's case was quoted by the Hong Kong government as the reason for the proposal of an amendment-bill regarding extradition in 2019, which would work on a case to case basis and would be operated by the Chief Executive (Legislative Council of Hong Kong 2019). Since Taiwan was considered by China as a territory that belongs to them, the proposed extradition treaty would allow suspected criminals to be extradited to China and be judged under Chinese law, which is remarkably harsher than Hong Kong law, especially in matters of national security.

The proposal occurred in an already charged political climate in Hong Kong, as the *Umbrella Movement*[1], a city-wide protest movement which had taken place in 2014, was still fresh in people's memories. The case of Chan and the proposed extradition bill was enough to spark another, larger uprising. It started with a few sparse protests in February 2019, but as promised by the "we will be back" sign hung above the cleared site of the *Umbrella Movement* occupation, the people were quickly back on the street en masse. The most populous march recorded declared nearly 2 million participants, in a city of 7 million people (SCMP Reporters 2019).

[1]Taking its name from the use of umbrellas as shields against teargas and pepper spray, in an act of non-violent resistance, the *Umbrella Movement* was Hong Kong's most recent (2014) large scale protest movement until then, which sought out to establish universal suffrage, a right which had supposedly been secured by the British during the territory's handover to China, and which ended in disappointment after a 79-day occupation of the main arteries of the city.

While the proposed bill was the reason that sparked the uprising, the protesters rapidly started citing fears of a forced assimilation into China before the supposed date of complete reunification of 2047. A number of other cases which pointed to Hong Kong's loss of autonomy[2] were also brought up during this time, which led to an even greater gathering of people. The sparse protests had quickly become a large scale pro-democracy, anti-China uprising. The first significant incident took place on June 12th, when protesters surrounded and entered the Legislative council building, briefly occupying it and spraying Hong Kong's red emblem, hanging above the main room, in black paint. They were quickly dispersed with the use of teargas, pepper spray and violence by the police. This led to the development of what became the movement's five core demands (**五大訴求**), which were the following:

1. Full withdrawal of the proposed extradition bill
2. An independent commission of inquiry into police brutality
3. The retraction of the classification of protesters as "rioters"[3]
4. Amnesty for arrested protesters
5. Dual universal suffrage, for both the Legislative council and the Chief executive[4]

Two additional major incidents took place during the summer of 2019. First, on the 21st of July the police were called to defend protesters who were being attacked by Triad[5] members in the

[2]An example is the abduction of five stuff members of a bookstore in Causeway Bay in 2015, who were involved in smuggling scheme of contraband books into China (Palmer 2018).

[3]Demands 2 and 3 were directly related to the incidents of June 12th, which was the first protest to be characterized as a "riot". It is important to note here that people being arrested with the charge of "rioting" are liable to a much harsher punishment than of that for "unlawful protest", meaning a protest that did not obtain a Letter of No Objection by the police.

[4]Hong Kong's election system by that point worked as such that the people were only able to vote for 50% of their legislators, 5% was decided by district councilors, and the remaining 45% was decided by Functional Constituencies, which are groups that represent specific societal sectors, for example business, trade, farming etc. Historically these groups are known to be pro-China (Hong Kong Government 2016). This system was supposed to be replaced by Universal suffrage in 2017, 20 years after the territory's handover from Britain to China. This had been agreed on during the signing of the Sino-British declaration. However, it was never realized.

Yuen Long MTR[6] station. They responded to the call after 39 minutes and did not even attempt to identify the perpetrators[7]. Secondly, on the 31st of August the police chased protesters into the Prince Edward MTR station, entered the trains, used pepper spray on people, and hit them with batons[8]. Due to an alleged miscount on the part of the police about the number of injured protesters trapped in the station after it was cleared out (initially 10, then later 7), rumors started circulating about killings performed that day in the station. This evolved into rumors about people being killed in police custody at large. The aid the MTR lent to the police on that day, and on multiple occasions afterward, led many people to distrust the transportation service and refuse to tap their personalized Octopus cards[9] to enter the trains, often jumping the gates entirely. These two incidents became part of a slogan about the corruption of the Hong Kong police force, and entered what later became an intricate culture of commemoration, where people would gather to protest in Yuen Long every 21st of the month and lay flowers at the Prince Edward MTR exits every 31st. Since Prince Edward and the wider area of Nathan road in the Kowloon peninsula has multiple small alleys that are perfect for road blocks, the entire area became a hot spot for protests.

Despite all this, the Hong Kong government continued refusing to completely withdraw the extradition bill, with a temporary suspension being the only outcome of the movement[10]. The rest

[5] Triads are gangs from China known to be ruling over the territories of Hong Kong closer to the border with China.
[6] Hong Kong's metro system
[7] this begun a trend of events of police misconduct being incorporated into the creation of the slogan **7**21唔見人 #831打死人 #101 槍殺人: meaning July 21st, they didn't show up, August 31st beating people to death, October 1st, shooting people.
[8] An important element to add is the fact that this movement was incredibly well documented, with professional videos of all the aforementioned incidents becoming widely available immediately.
[9] Similar to London's Oyster cards, they constitute the main tool people utilised when taking the MTR. For students these are personalised. Additionally, these are widely used within the city for general payments, much more than regular credit or debit cards.
[10] A suspension means that the bill would be put on hold once again, to be implemented at a later time, while a withdrawal entails its complete dismissal, not to be brought up again.

of the demands were completely ignored. This kept the movement escalating, with increased police brutality and the people's desperate attempts to catch the attention of Western political powers, especially Britain, to take accountability about Hong Kong's continuous decrease of autonomy. This phenomenon became evident to anyone that happened to pass by a demonstration, where the protesters could be seen holding American, EU, UK and often British colonial flags. Other than condemning the violence displayed by the Hong Kong police force, Western powers originally did nothing (Goldberg 2021, BBC News 2019, Reuters 2019). In an attempt to become visible to the rest of the world, during the summer of 2019 the protesters poured into the international airport, disrupting its normal function.

This is when I landed in Hong Kong for an exchange year, and found myself immediately plunged in the middle of demonstrations. Originally it was difficult to make sense of the happenings, as the primary language of communication was Chinese, which I could not read. However, universities quickly took centre stage. Fortunately for me, The University of Hong Kong (HKU) is English speaking and, as one of the main goals of the protesters was the spread of information to the West, posters and leaflets quickly started being translated to English. In the meantime I found media sources that operated partly or exclusively in English, and eventually met Chris , a law student in HKU, who was the first person to speak to me extensively about the happenings, and who is the primary informant of this research. Our friend group grew from there, and we started attending protests together. Observing my friends helped me further understand the social context.

The impact this movement had on society seemed to be immense. Families were torn apart due to conflicting opinions, and a great number of young people were arrested and sentenced to multiple years in prison (Lee 2023). An important development was the solidification of the

"HongKonger" identity (香港人), which split from "HongKongese" or "Chinese citizen of Hong Kong" (Chan 2016). It developed as a result of the convergence of localism and pro-democracy sentiments, mainly during the *Umbrella Movement* (Kaeding 2017). "HongKonger" is a term that pro-China or pro-establishment individuals stirred away from, and protesters strongly embraced (Dapiran 2020). A meta-analysis of 33 public opinion surveys, most notably those of HKU (Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute 2021), and CUHK (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey 2014), shows that it is also closely linked with pro-independence ideals (especially among young people) and Chan (2016) claims it to be tied with "radicalness". Therefore, it is not an ethnic identity, but an identity closely linked with pro-democracy movements. The supporters of the protests strongly identified with the term and as such, I will be using it to describe them in this thesis, as I believe it to be the most appropriate term. To speak of the general population I will be using "inhabitants of Hong Kong".

Besides the traditional "political" dimensions, the movement had profound effects on consumer and pop culture. Not only was the MTR hit by protesters refusing to pay for tickets, but businesses were also either supported or boycotted based on their political affiliation. During the *Umbrella Movement*, protesters would hand out yellow ribbon bracelets to passersby to show support for their cause. This led to people who were pro-democracy being labeled as "yellow", and those who were pro-police being labeled as "blue". Those who were explicitly pro-China would be labeled as "red". This color coding system continued during the protests in 2019. Businesses[11]would be labeled as either "yellow" or "blue", and would be logged onto a Google Maps extension which protesters consulted when choosing where to spend their money. "Yellow" businesses would be those who helped protesters hide from the police during protests,

[11] This was mainly applied, but not limited to, restaurants, cafes, and other places of food and drink consumption.

and would display marks of support on their walls. “Blue” and “red” businesses were the ones whose owners had openly supported the police or had expressed pro-China views. This economic factor became a central part of the movement, which remained in place long after everything else had died down.

Another important element of the movement was the development of its own pop culture, which was primarily based on symbols found on the internet. For example, Pepe the frog became a significant symbol, and protesters would obtain dolls of Pepe and dress him up in protest gear. Dolls of Winnie the Pooh, who the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi Jinping is said to resemble, could be found on the street bearing clear signs of maltreatment. The pixilated pig icon of LIHKG, an online platform which spread information about the protests was also used as an icon and was often found on sticker designs. Other pop culture elements were borrowed from films such as *TheHunger Games*, *V for Vendetta*, and *Les Misérables.* Quotes from the films were used in graffiti, and many protesters adopted Telegram[12] nicknames based on them. My friend Mockingjay, another key informant for this research, is an example. Les Misérables gained particular traction as protest songs such as “do you hear the people sing” were often used during demonstrations. Multiple bands also released songs with clear protest affiliations[13], and eventually Hong Kong developed its own “national anthem”, titled *Glory to Hong Kong*[14]. This song became incredibly popular and was often played on speakers and sung during demonstrations, and was immediately followed by the most popular chants.

[12]Telegram was the main communication platform, its end-to-end encryption appealing for security purposes
[13]*LMF* and *My little Airport* are some of the examples.
[14] In May 2024 the song was banned globally from streaming platforms, following a two year ban specifically in all Chinese territory (including Hong Kong).

The chants belong to a wider culture of slogan creation, often taking the form a four word answer and four word reply (in Cantonese). Examples of those include:

光復香港，時代革命: Liberate Hong Kong, the revolution of our times

五大訴求，缺一不可: Five demands, not one less.

沒有暴徒，只有暴政: There are no rioters, only tyranny.

香港獨立，唯一出路: Hong Kong independence, the only way out.

Importantly, since the stakes were very high for those arrested, this movement naturally became leaderless; therefore no one was leading the chants. The development of short, concise slogans became key and their chanting took the form of one person shouting the question unprompted and people around them shouting the response.

Generally, it seemed that for those supporting the protests these elements had been incorporated into almost every aspect of life. This became a mechanism for people to be constantly reminded of their cause, even at times in which they were not taking to the streets.

By the end of September 2019, one could cut the tension with a knife, and the streets of Hong Kong were increasingly bearing the marks of protest. Continuing on from the *Umbrella Movement*, the practice of Lennon walls spread throughout the city. The original Lennon wall is found in Prague. An otherwise regular wall, during the 1960s it was first decorated with an image of John Lennon and soon after, people started using it to post material condemning the communist regime of the time (Un 2019). The practice was adopted in Hong Kong, and quickly developed its own distinct aesthetics of post-it note motivational messages. During 2019, graffiti

and Lennon walls were visible on almost all potential surfaces of the city. Protests were becoming increasingly frequent, with special attention paid to days of significance. For example, on October 1st, the Republic of China's official national day, a large demonstration took place, during which the police fired a live round directly at a protester for the first time; a 17-year-old boy was shot in the chest. The boy survived, but the sheer act of the police firing lethal bullets enraged the protesters, and marches were held every day for the rest of the week.

On November 4th 2019, a young protester, Chow Tsz-lok (or Alex Chow) fell from a parking lot in the Tseung Kwan O district during a demonstration[15]. The police were accused of intentionally delaying first aid responders in reaching Chow, which ultimately led to his death a few days later in the hospital. This was the first official death in relation to the movement, escalating things. By that point the dismay of the protesters had already been growing, with countless arrests, increasing police brutality and the use of rubber bullets and live rounds injuring multiple people[16].

Complete chaos ensued. First, students gathered at university campuses, occupying them, creating vigils for Alex Chow and holding commemoration ceremonies. The next step came when they decided to bring the city to a standstill. Calling for a general strike on the 11th of November, they begun using materials found on the street to create large roadblocks and disrupt movement in the city's main arteries. Notably, the structure of Hong Kong, its narrow streets and multiple small alleys became ideal for the setting up of roadblocks and evading the police. The most significant artery blockage was that of the cross-harbor tunnel, by the students of the

[15] No CCTV footage was ever released, but it is suspected that Chow was trying to evade the police in the midst of teargas smoke, which is why he did not notice the edge of the structure and fell from the third to the second storey of the building.

[16] Soon after the beginning of the more intense protests first aid responders as well as civilian participants started losing their eyes due to rubber bullets being shot directly at them. Similarly, there were multiple injuries resulting from direct impact with tear-gas canisters.

Polytechnic University (PolyU). The tunnel is the newest and most efficient way to cross Victoria Harbor from Hong Kong Island to the Kowloon Peninsula, and its blockage meant that professionals were not able to commute to work. The police made multiple attempts to clear the university campuses and open up the roads, using teargas, pepper bullets, physical violence and water cannons which shot blue-tinted water[17], to mark protesters out in their attempts to escape. They responded with bricks and Molotov cocktails. Needless to say, by this point in the movement the protesters had completely given up on cooperating with the authorities or obtaining a Letter of No Objection, the usual process to hold protests in Hong Kong. This deemed all demonstrations illegal, and raised the stakes for those who got arrested.

After clearing the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), the police turned all their attention to the campus of the Polytechnic University. Multiple failed attempts at clearing the site took place, which led them to opt to trap protesters inside instead, arresting everyone that attempted to exit. They were even arresting people claiming to be first aid personnel, and refusing to let journalists enter the campus. There are reports of individuals directly lowering themselves on motorcycles on the highway over bridges, using rope (Chan 2019), and people attempting escapes through the sewage system (BBC, 2019). On the night of the 17th of November the police managed to storm the campus and arrest the remaining protesters. This incident was a massive blow to the movement, with a lot of the frontline participants becoming detained, and even more becoming frightened of the consequences of arrest. While demonstrations kept happening for a few months afterwards, this was the last major event of the uprising. After that, commemorations became the only regular occurrence.

[17] This liquid also contained skin irritants.

Notably, the occupation of university campuses went against the motto of the movement, which urged the protesters to "be water", meaning to be fluid; to not attempt to hold ground, as the *Umbrella Movement* had proven that strategy to be ineffective and dangerous. This effectively meant that protesters were urged to disperse if a roadblock seemed difficult to defend, and to regroup further away. After the clearing of the PolyU occupation the need to "be water" became even more apparent, which led to the naming of the movement the "*Be Water Revolution"*.

Shortly before the arrival of the holiday season, Hong Kong held district council elections[18], where the yellow parties won in a landslide. It seemed to me that HongKongers had been holding their breaths for these elections, and this small validation of their desires seemed to calm things down. During the holidays the protests slowed down significantly. Soon after, the emergence of Covid-19 caused universities to suspend in-person classes, in February 2020. While some protests were still organized during Covid-19[19], the nail that shut the coffin was the annexing of a National Security Law (NSL), which made "any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets" (Basic Law-Chapter II, 2020, Article 23), illegal. Few protests were held after that, with *Be Water* essentially drying out completely by the middle of the summer. The movement left behind a deeply divided society, and its immediate aftermath was the fleeing of a disproportionate amount of young people to other countries, mostly the UK and Canada, which offer easy paths to citizenship. This, along with Donald Trump's "Hong Kong Act"[20] were the only reactions western powers had, despite HongKongers' continuous pleas for help (Tsang 2021).

[18] The lowest tier of the system of governance.
[19] Hong Kong did not originally implement any strict quarantine measures.
[20] The Act was a supposed retaliation against the Chinese Communist party, which ended Hong Kong preferential trade status.

I left Hong Kong in August 2020, when essentially all protest activity had ceased, and a swift process of urban repair had begun. I returned in April 2024 with the intention of documenting the traces, or "scars" still visible on the streets, and the general changes in the physicality of Hong Kong, which betray its political trajectory since 2019. This thesis therefore is an attempt to document the progression of censorship and the removal of agency from the hands of Hongkongers through an analysis of how these processes adopted the urban fabric of the city as a territory of struggle and an object of control.

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This research maintains a sharp focus on Hong Kong for a variety of reasons, originally inspired by Simin Fadaee's (2017) call for accumulation of knowledge on non-European, non-North American social movements, toward the development of a "global" social movement theory. She uses the term "Global South" to refer to these places, listing four characteristics which place them into this category[21]. I believe that the choice of term is unfortunate as, "Global South" glazes over the intricacies of societies that may not fit neatly, or be intuitively associated with this category, but which fit the four characteristics perfectly. Besides, I believe that the case of Hong Kong is of particular importance exactly because of its inability to neatly fit into this dichotomy of the Global North/South, and as such constitutes a prime example of the type of society Fadaee was interested in. Furthermore, Hong Kong's ability to break the dichotomy of

[21] Those characteristics are:
1) Emerging in a colonial or post-colonial societies, and being defined by that context.
2) Existing in a variety of semi- or non-democratic contexts, which do not take "human rights" for granted.
3) Taking place in societies where the influence of the state into civil society fluctuates.
4) Being explicitly or implicitly tied with processes of democratisation.

the Global North/South has a unique dimension which illuminates the need for different theorizations when speaking of the "post-colonial condition". This is due to the fact that, as I will argue, Hong Kong should be regarded as a neo-colonialized space, existing in the semi-periphery of both British and Chinese empires. Third, while Chris Chan (2018) has studied the use of space during the *Umbrella Movement*, a spatial approach to the analysis of *Be Water* has been missing, as far as I'm aware. This thesis therefore aims to contribute to literature on the dialectic relationship of social movements and (urban) space, following the "spatial turn", specifically focusing on its temporal dimension (Hamzehkolaee et. al. 2023; Halvorsen 2017; Viana 2015; Nichols et. al. 2013).

Generally, literature on the city seems to heavily focus on its –previously– booming financial sector and growing wealth inequality (Pak and Liu 1998; Wong, Wan and Law 2009; Lai, Yu and Woo 2020; Piketty and Li 2020) and constant housing crisis (Wong 2017; Lee 2019). Great attention has also been paid to the "Hong Kong identity" (Mathews 2007; 2020; Clark 2001; Nagy 2015) which will partly interest me in this thesis. Finally, while an interest in Hong Kong peaked in the time of its handover from Britain to China and then again during the 2014 *Umbrella Movement* (Chan 2016; Kaeding 2017; Kit 2015; Nkok 2014), I have yet to see the same reaction to the most recent protest movement, which has been the largest in its history (Dapiran, 2020).

A central part of my thesis will be the "disappearance" embedded in Hong Kong culture, as first articulated by Ackbar Abbas (1997). I will be utilizing this concept in my analysis of the urban fabric and its appropriation through protest tactics. To further my analysis of urban space, I will be utilizing the approach of Eyal Weizman, to explore the urban landscape of Hong Kong and tell the story of disappearance. The weaponization of memory as is linked to disappearance and

urban space will also be examined, mainly using the work of Thongchai Winichakul (2020). I have chosen to bring *Be Water* in the epicentre of this thesis as I believe the most recent additions to the palimpsest of the urban fabric of Hong Kong illuminate its political trajectory. To do this, I will be following the claim of the right to the city (Lefebvre 1968), as presented in the case of Hong Kong during *Be Water,* its violent suppression and the aftermath, seen through the changes in the urban fabric which I will be calling "scars".

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This thesis will unfold in three chapters, following the metaphor of "urban scars", separated into "wounds", "plasters" and "scars". Each chapter starts from the campus of HKU and extends to the wider city. The first chapter constitutes a retelling of the creation of urban wounds in the city in 2019, especially looking at the moment when the phenomenon proliferated rapidly, during the university occupations in November 2019. I argue that the use of material taken from the streets of Hong Kong constitutes an expression of the right to the city, which has been denied to them throughout British-colonial and current neo-colonial rule.

The second chapter focuses on the intermediate period, or what I call the stage of "plastering". Abbas' disappearance comes into play here, when the immediate governmental intervention starts happening during the time of Covid-19 restrictions. This chapter looks at the culture of disappearance embedded in this peculiar period that exists between two discrete stages - "wounds" and "scars". In this period of commemoration and nostalgia for the present, disappearance is weaponized by both the protesters and the authorities. I argue that this

existential moment parallels that of 1984-1997, when Hong Kong's handover to China was decided but not implemented yet. The main aim of this chapter is to argue against a mere "spatial fix" (Harvey 2012) and the exposure of "hegemonic redevelopment" (Tang 2017), which aims to strip claims of the right to the city.

The third chapter unfolds after my return to Hong Kong in 2024, documenting the changes in the urban fabric and is primarily concerned with their aesthetics. It begins with an overview of the remaining disobedience tactics and their connection to memory, and moves on to discuss the effect of the altered urban scars. It continues to examine their dual effect; to conceal the recent happenings for uninformed viewers, and highlight them for those who witnessed the happenings. This phenomenon, along with the development of "architecture hostile to protests" as Chris put it, creates an "aesthetics of defeat" which reveals revanchist tendencies. This analysis is achieved through Weizman's (2017) "investigative aesthetics". The thesis concludes with some hopeful developments, and suggestions for further research.

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I deliberated on the term I would use to describe this urban phenomenon. I first encountered the term "urban scar" in a paper on the damages to the urban fabric of Madrid, after its bombings between 1936 and 1936 (De Sobrón, Luis, and Enrique Bordes 2020). The research took a very similar form to the way I approached the scars of Hong Kong, utilizing walking ethnography and a type of urban forensics to unravel the consequences of war on the image of a city. The initial connection however did not come to me naturally, and the idea for the term "scar" came from

Chris. Observing the alterations of the urban infrastructure after each protest, Chris suggested we document the "scarring" of the city. He was very eager to walk around the city with me during the immobilizing times of Covid-19 quarantine. We meticulously filmed and took pictures of these changes in the fabric of the city, being fearful of their prompt disappearance. I enquired about his use of that term recently, asking whether he thought it the most appropriate word to use.

"Yes, it's "傷痕", it means scars in a literal sense but also metaphorically or spiritually. It's not a difficult word, you can use it in oral Chinese [...] it's the most appropriate word to use for it"

Ben, another interlocutor who seemed disenchanted with reality after the protests, spoke of HongKongers as "scarred" after the happenings. Upon being asked if there will be any more protests in Hong Kong, his swift response was:

"No! Absolutely not! I don't want to think about what happened. I feel guilty that my friends are in prison and I'm not […] Why would we try again? I don't want anybody else to get hurt. I don't want to remember […] I have scars, and Hong Kong has scars, it has changed and it cannot be changed back. I would leave if I could, but my Hong Kong degree won't allow me to work many places…"

Based on the outlook people had toward their situation I settled on the term "scar", a word which seems to indicate a matter that has been put to rest, an attempt to recuperate, and focus ones energy elsewhere, to only be reminded of the facts by the visual cues of these urban changes. Virtually all of my informants viewed the battle as being over, and seemed eager to forget what had happened, tending to their own scars, and the scars of Hong Kong.

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The participants for my research, who were former protesters, were contacted through snowball sampling, beginning with the HongKongers I met in 2019. This resulted in my informants mostly being young adults who were students during 2019/2020, and who have now entered the job market. This was a conscious choice of a target group that was the most active during the movement. They resided in multiple different locations in Hong Kong, some living in the centre of the city and some commuting from areas further out in the New Territories, which offered a variety of different perspectives when it came to memories of protest.

A limitation of this study is the fact that I am not fluent in Cantonese, and therefore the interviews were conducted in English, with the facilitation of a friend who was willing to translate when needed. I would however like to point out that since English is still one of the two official languages in Hong Kong, and all levels of education use it as the primary language of teaching, it hardly posed an issue, especially considering that my sample consisted mostly of young people, who tended to be fluent in English.

The different nature of politics in Hong Kong during the three separate stages of research structured my methodology. The information collected in 2019 (Chapter One) took the form of participant observation and in-depth conversations on the matter at hand. The ease with which information was collected back then is a reflection of the eagerness of HongKongers to share information in 2019 with "westerners", in an attempt to seek help from foreign forces. As such, they seemed to have infinite energy to explain the situation to me in detail.

The later parts utilise a slightly different approach. Ethnography for the second chapter took place in 2020, right as the protest movement was slowing down, Covid-19 was spreading and the NSL was introduced. This led to infrequent interaction with participants, and the spread of insecurity about going on record. My research then shifted to information collected during my own observations of the city, and the changes in the urban fabric as it was getting temporarily repaired or "plastered over".

The third chapter, dealing with 2024 was the trickiest to navigate. In the time of my absence, I kept up with friends, asking about recent developments, enquiring about the state of the scars. It often happened that, knowing of my interest in the subject, and due to their own surprise at some of the absurd developments, they initiated conversations on the matter, frequently sending me articles from the increasingly sparse uncensored media sources. Upon my return in 2024, the fear and self-censorship that had spread was evident, as even my closest friends were afraid to be recorded speaking about their views.

This silence around the matter resulted in Hong Kong becoming an actant in this last part, a storyteller equally as viable as my participants. I found that the walls and pavements of the city would reveal the story in such a concise manner that a central part of my project naturally became their mere documentation and analysis. This method is derived from Eyal Weizman's *Investigative Aesthetics* (2021).

The reluctance go on record shaped my methodology. It seemed inappropriate to engage people in dedicated interviews as they appeared uncomfortable when confronted with my questions directly. Curiously however, many seemed comfortable joking sarcastically about it unprompted during excursions in the city, and pointing out elements that might be of interest to me, which in

retrospect reminds me of the strategy of deciphering the unsayable that is hidden in humor practiced by Achille Mbembe's in *On the Postcolony*. It seems that as a coping mechanism and a way of concealment employed by people living under authoritarian rule, humour is an incredible source of information. Therefore, the majority of the findings were collected and reconstructed through a combination of fragments of conversations during excursions in the city, and my own observations only a limited amount of the information presented in chapter three is a result of audio recorded interviews. In a sense, I ended up using a variation of walking ethnography and photographic documentation as suggested by Cheng Yi'En (2014). As such, the analysis will employ the visual aid of photographs I took during these excursions.

Notably, my participants seemed to be equally interested in my perception of the city as much as I was of theirs. Immediately after my return, in April 2024, Chris picked me up from the airport. Knowing I'd come back to study the changes in the city, he was already enquiring about my observations on the bus ride to my accommodation.

"Do you think anything has changed? Do you think there is a difference?"

My sleep deprivation had naturally hindered the formation of any concrete thoughts in the five minutes I had been alone at the airport, so instead of answering, I returned the question.

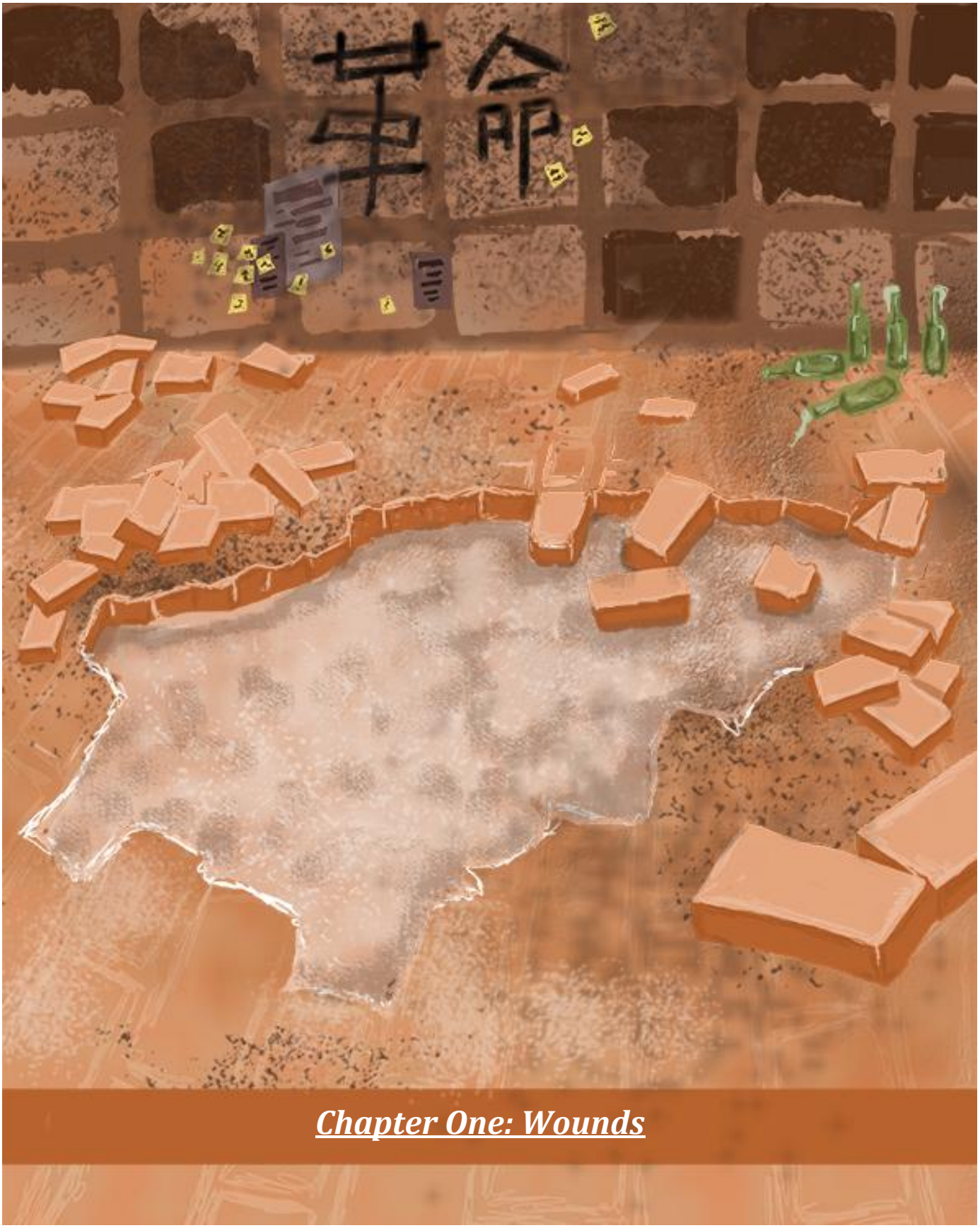
"I think it's all very subtle… The composition of people has changed. Many people have left, and many new have come. You hear a lot more Mandarin being spoken on the street. You'll notice it soon".

It became apparent that I was becoming Chris's anthropological subject as much as he was mine, a fact which had been true since the beginning of our friendship. He was always very interested in what was going on in my head as an outsider observing the movement. And this dual

exchange of information seemed to be the case with most of my participants. The question of what changes I've noticed after my four years of absence came up in every single encounter I had with old friends. It seemed that people were eager to get a glimpse of what the world had come to think of Hong Kong in the post-protest era. I did not have all the answers, but what became clear was the horizontality, and dual interchange of information that this research would foster. Being aware of the potentially problematic nature of anthropological research, especially in a former British colony, I was elated to figure out I could also provide valuable insight for my participants. The deep rooted history of information extracted from indigenous populations has led to a conceptualization of the anthropologist as a "monster" (Burman 2018), and with this in mind I tried to exercise utmost care to be as respectful as possible and not create unequal power dynamics. So, I let my participants take over the focus of my research, and followed the tradition of "reporting back" suggested by Smith (2004), making sure to check with them on the accuracy of my understanding and making sure they were comfortable throughout the process.. This became a playful endeavor, with people being surprised about my reflections. Similar to the relationships developed in Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* (1992), it seemed that my participants were eager to self-reflect based on how I described their stories, and use them as a tool to analyze their own situation in relation to my writing and the literature I utilize. The title, "No silver here, came from a friend's remark after a report of my original findings.

Similarly to how Chris had insisted we document the "scars" in the city during the Covid-19 times of limbo, I let my interlocutors dictate which parts of Hong Kong's trajectory were notable. As a relative outsider to the context of this research, I decided that the best I could do in this situation is to become an information transmitter for the people who chose to stay in Hong

Kong, and who want to speak without endangering themselves under the new status quo. To protect their privacy, all names have been changed.



Chapter One: Wounds

November 14th, 2019.

Campus of HKU

We had each been supplied with a hammer and scattered around. I did not dare use mine, but as soon as I heard the sound of shattering glass I felt adrenaline rushing through my body. I located a dark figure across from me, standing on a bridge next to the A exit of the HKU MTR station. He had just swung his hammer against the glass panel of a sliding door. The door collapsed on the ground, its sound reverberating from the walls around it and spreading to all of Pok Fu Lam district, disturbing the quiet of the early morning. It was quickly followed by a series of loud bangs, as each individual panel lining the bridge acquired a large hole right at its centre. I was standing on the rooftop of exit C1, next to a group of seven others. We had barely had any sleep. The news of the death of Alex Chow had prompted the response of multiple university occupations. There was a silence associated with it. The atmosphere was loaded with rage and hope, and a need for revenge.

A comrade was dangling his feet on the edge of the roof. He seemed exhausted, his body language governed by his desperation. His clothes smelt of sweat and gasoline, the morning air unable to mask the happenings of the previous night. "光復香港!" He shouts in the direction of the person smashing the panels. The response "時代革命!" arrives within seconds. The question and answer slogan of "Liberate Hong Kong" and "The revolution of our times" had become an unquestioned ritual of solidarity, and in this context it was a way of showing approval of the action taking place. The next wave of it came in unison from the rest of the roof dwellers. And the response was received from different locations around the university, from presumably anyone who was already (or still) awake at six in the morning. The sound of the smashing panels

acted as a church bell, and the rest of the protesters got to work. New rounds of posters were getting designed and printed, motivational post-its were getting added to Lennon Walls, glue was being mixed, and people just returning from demonstrations were being hosed down and cleaned from teargas. Someone wrote up a recipe for Molotovs and stuck it on the C1 Bridge, the main vantage point. It developed into an impromptu cocktail-making station, with instructors showing everyone the correct ratios of ingredients. There were still plenty of ready-made concoctions lined up on the wall, but in the light of day they seem dull and deserted. Besides, the need to resupply was more symbolic than material; as oil was being poured into bottles, the vigor to fight emerged anew.

The previous night had been exhausting; the constant anticipation and lack of actual fighting perhaps more physically taxing than an altercation would have been. We had been summoned around 11pm, assured that the police would be threatening our occupation. We had quickly split up to gather supplies. The supplies that could be bought started pouring in from the outside: black clothing, gas masks, paint, food and water. The rest had to be collected through the laborious process of extraction: bricks and tiles from the walls and flooring of the university campus. This intervention into the urban fabric for use as materials started creating wounds within the space of the university, generating an aesthetic of reclamation, the agency over the physicality of the university materializing on its walls and floors. Originally, some tactical choices had been made, for the less frequented parts to be utilized first. However, as the days went on, wounds started appearing all around, the holes and debris left behind making it harder to navigate the space. That night most of us had attempted to sleep in the Student Union building. We had been woken up multiple times in the night and told to get in position, and we sleepily but swiftly jumped back into gear and ran to the bridges. No fight was actually had in

HKU, but nobody managed to get any sleep, and in various other locations around Hong Kong demonstrations were raging.

While there is an obvious tactical element to the use of supplies found within the urban fabric, it seemed that there was an unspoken need for a reclamation of the city that went beyond the necessity for materials. The example of the smashing of the panels indicating a uselessness embedded in some of the practices, as glass is not a material that holds any potential during protests.

> "I feel at home here [on campus], more than I feel in my actual home. It's the same like the village[22] during Umbrella Movement, I never felt so rich"

My friend Mockingjay said joyfully, twirling in position with a paintbrush at hand, working on a mural of Lady Liberty[23]a figure borrowed from Delacroix's painting "Liberty leading the people", as well as the statue of liberty in the United States. I smiled and extended the protein bar I just acquired from the supplies pile toward her, before returning to the task of pulling a brick from the ground with Robert, a person who had just approached us about his video project. He ended up becoming one of our closest friends. He pulled out the brick and tossed it to the pile near us, before Harry, the leader of the poster-ing team appeared with a trolley bag to transport them. Despite the exhaustion, there was an element of joyfulness and hope in the air. It seemed like HongKongers were seeing this movement as the epitome of a decade long struggle which finally had a material form.

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[22] "Village" was the nickname of the occupation.

[23]Lady liberty was a significant figure during the protests, with 3D-printed statues of her being transported around Hong Kong to mark spaces of protest.

November 17th, 2019.

Entrance of the Cross Harbour Tunnel, Tsim Sha Tsui.

It was 1am, and the police were attempting a siege of the Polytechnic University. We were gathered around their forces, attempting to distract them from their main target: the university gate. In that moment, the destruction of space escaped the walls of the universities, and in the dark of night, whole pavements disappeared, being stacked into tiny arches to reclaim the streets. The implementation of an aesthetics of resistance aided the momentum of the protests; the wounds in the urban fabric told of the intentions of its residents who, after decades of being ignored, finally had a say about their city. The street was a safe space; if anyone attempted to intervene they became an enemy.

A group of people climbed on a bus stop to inform everyone about the police's whereabouts, bending the poles in the process. Road rails got removed and passed to the front through an elaborate system of hand to hand transport through a supply chain. A group of five near me had been attacking a sign pointing toward the airport for the last ten minutes. My heart was racing, my vision was obstructed by the goggles, but I caught glimpses of their progress every few minutes, the only indication of time passing. The final removal of the sign was greeted with an uproar, as it had taken with it a large amount of cement, its landing making a loud thudding noise, leaving a gouging hole on the side of the street. The sea of protesters opened, as the sign got carried all the way to the front, taking its rightful place in the shielding wall. Similar actions were taking place the whole night around the city. The sight of it the next morning was unrecognizable, with multiple elements missing or having been utilized in unorthodox ways,

aiding the aesthetics of resistance. Graffiti, missing pavements and rubbish bins, bent poles, and rails were among the telltale signs of the happenings.

The next day, in the middle of the street, I approached a young man spraying gasoline onto the Wan Chai MTR exit. A second black clad figure appeared, and with a swift, aggressive movement pushed a rubbish bin on the exit steps, threw newspapers inside and set it on fire. On the way out he placed his hammer in the holes of the metallic shutter, pulling sharply, creating a hole. Aware of the presence of media around, he shouted

> "That's what you deserve, Communist railway, f-ck you" standing next to me, Mockingjay translated the Cantonese.

Older women approached the scene, throwing fake money on the fire, a ritual usually performed for deceased relatives[24].

> "Take the hell money, Carrie Lam" they shouted.

> "We will burn Hong Kong […] if we burn, you burn with us" the young man adds.

My gaze followed him, as he pulled a spray can out of his bag, writing "no one is having kids in this city" in English, on a parental help centre located right next to the MTR exit.

In another instance, I observed a group of five approach a branch of The Bank of China. They damaged the shutter and broke the glass, spray painted "DLLM"[25]and disappeared. This practice

[24] The burning of paper goods is a ritual reserved for funeral ceremonies of loved ones (Anning and Tian 2018). In the scene described above, it is used as a wish for Carrie Lam, the prime minister of Hong Kong at the time, the one who proposed the extradition bill, to die.

[25] An abbreviation of the phrase diu2 lei2 lo4 mo6 屌你老母, literally translating to "f-ck your mother", but commonly used to mean "f-ck you"

was called “renovation”, and was used against any establishment that had affiliation with the mainland, or openly expressed anti-protest views.

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To understand this situation one must look at the broader history of Hong Kong. Previously a fishing village vaguely under the jurisdiction of the Qing Dynasty, Hong Kong Island was ceded to the British after the defeat of the Chinese Emperor in the First Opium War, in 1842. Their repeated defeat in the Second Opium War forced the Emperor to cede the Kowloon Peninsula. As a part of the continued treaty, The New Territories were later leased for 99 years, a timeframe which ended in 1997. These three sections comprise modern-day Hong Kong (Dapiran 2017).

The handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China took place in 1997. The Sino-British declaration ensured that certain democratic rights would be maintained for the next 50 years. The now semi-autonomous Chinese territory was to operate under a “one county, two systems” policy, which allowed Hong Kong judicial and electoral semi-independence, and its own mini constitution. According to Mathews (2007), the handover was hardly celebrated as a moment of decolonisation, as the inhabitants of Hong Kong were never consulted on the issue. Due to the laissez-faire approach the British took with governing, along with the economic prosperity and advancement in infrastructure that ensued, the inhabitants of Hong Kong were relatively satisfied with British rule, which is not to be seen as benevolent. The description of the happenings is only meant to serve as an explanation of the partial affinity some people grew toward colonial powers. In fact, the later colonial years (mid 20th century onwards), are regarded to this day as the

"golden era" of Hong Kong (Bordwell 2000). Cinema, theatre and music production flourished, and were exported to the rest of Asia as well as the West (Mathews 2007, Clark 2001). Under these conditions, a large part of the population began developing their own sense of belonging to a region, which was bound to Hong Kong and did not extend beyond its borders. This new, regional identity became evident in the media of the time (Bordwell 2000), such as films and TV series. This facilitated the development of this identity, which had become incredibly prominent by the late 20th century (Bordwell 2000). Therefore, HongKongers understand it as an identity that they created for themselves, without the intervention of authorities; its grassroot origins aiding a quick internalisation (Hong Kong Public Opinion Programme, 2020).

In contrast, the pan-Chinese identity that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was trying to impose came from the top down. During that time, the Cultural Revolution was taking place in Mao's China, with news of famine and injustice spreading.

"My granddad swam to Hong Kong, to evade the killings in China. He swam to freedom"

Harry later tells me, when I asked him about his own identity as a "HongKonger". Later I found out that the phrase "swam to freedom" was incredibly popular when talking about those times. Additionally, China had already begun implementing an agenda of uniformity, making Mandarin the formal language across the land, deeming other dialects obsolete (Dapiran, 2017). While Hong Kong culture was flourishing under British rule, a growing number of people understood themselves as more western than Chinese. The identity of "HongKonger" has developed henceforth, as a counter-identity, one that has its own unique elements, but which primarily exists as a contradiction to the "Chinese identity", hence its adoption during *Be Water*. In the context of the larger global anti-communist sentiment associated with the fall of the Soviet

Union and the cold war, and China's increasingly bad relations with the United States, people in Hong Kong who were critical of China started panicking about what assimilation would mean for the freedoms they had been enjoying under British rule, and the fact that the handover took place less than a decade after the Tiananmen Square worsened those attitudes (Mathews, 2007). The unique case of Hong Kong majorly benefiting from British rule should not be taken as an example of the empire's benevolent nature, but as a mere explanation of the partial affinity some inhabitants of Hong Kong developed toward colonial powers. Indeed, soon afterward the handover, the CCP began attempts at inserting articles into the constitution of Hong Kong that would make it resemble its own (Dapiran, 2017). Multiple waves of anti-China protests have taken place since, most notably the *Anti-Article23* protests in 2003, and the *Umbrella Movement* in 2014. Both protest movements aimed at pushing back against legislation that would undermine Hong Kong's autonomy. While in 2003 the people were able to push back against the implementation of Article23, the *Umbrella Movement* concluded unsuccessfully (Dapiran, 2017).

This brings us to 2019 and the emergence of the *Be Water Revolution*. After two decades of anti-China protests that saw no significant results, the desperation and momentum had reached a moment of eruption. Throughout the movement, the city became the primary supplier of materials for this purpose. Rails and bricks were removed and used for roadblocks, virtually every passageway and bridge became a vantage point for collisions with the police and an information point, and graffiti and posters covered every potential surface. When walking down the busiest streets of Hong Kong the whole city appeared as a coherent entity, dressed up in protest gear ready to fight.

This holistic, city-wide reclamation became home to *oeuvres* created throughout *Be Water* as well as the *Umbrella Movement*. To use Lefebvre's (1968) concept, the university, street and park occupations became spaces where people exercised their right to the city, even if briefly. They became spaces of hope, where materials collected from the available structures were used freely for what the larger community considered the most important projects. Mockingjay recounts the occupation during the *Umbrella Movement*. Whole schools were created within the precarious walls of the occupation, so that pupils could participate without falling behind. Similarly, in 2019, the universities were transformed into schools of archery, self-defense and combat sports. Other skills were also spread in mutual-aid style, such as how to avoid being followed and how to stay safe online; which apps to use and what code-words were available. Whatever the need of the general community was, it was quickly met with the materials available nearby.

During *Be Water* the right to the city transcended the mere use of space and turned into wounds exactly because of the failure of the *Umbrella Movement,* and the growing of desperation. The destruction of space had practical functions, it served the purpose of collecting supplies, but it also became a material manifestation of the wounds, physical and emotional, sustained by HongKongers. It was a materialization of their rage, against a government that deprived them of the right to choose what happens to their home[26]. These young people existed in a city that afforded them no real right over the land. If they had sustained traumas, so must the city itself. Therefore, the right to the city had to be expressed not through mere use but through destruction, as to be more intensely asserted, as the non-violent techniques implemented until that point seemed to not be working. HongKongers moved from a subversive use of the available space to

[26] This is exemplified by the fact that the voters are only able to vote for 20% of the legislative councillors, while they get no say over

the literal unmaking of the available space (for example the removal of bricks and destruction of shop fronts), as an expression of the right to the city, giving it the aesthetics of resistance.

The concept of the right to the city is incredibly polysemous, and admittedly here I am using a much less radical understanding of it than the one originally proposed by Lefebvre, but as David Harvey argued in *Rebel Cities* (2012), the meaning of the term should be informed by urban struggle as it develops with time. Besides, in addition to Simin Fadaee's call, similar calls to reappropriate the concept of the right to the city in different contexts have been made (Morange 2015). I believe that this debate could be greatly informed by literature on expression of the right to the city in neo- or post- colonial societies. Lopez de souza (2010) speaks of the different forms the right to the city can take, and different struggles which should be included under a reformed understanding of the concept. In the context of Brazil, he indicates an institutionalized version, taking the form of the "statute of the city" which reforms the right to land ownership, affirming a right to the city (at least on paper). Similarly, in South Africa efforts are made by policy makers to officially implement some form of a right to the city (Parnell and Pieterse 2010). Both of these examples describe a reformed version of the right to the city which stems from a reference of its complete lack during colonial rule, and which constitutes a much less radical articulation than Lefebvre's original proposition. I am therefore inclined to call HongKongers' intervention into urban space an exercise of a less radical form of the right to the city, but which in its complex geopolitics, remains substantial. Additionally, in this context I believe that even the economic aspect of the movement, the support of the yellow economy, the boycotting of blue and red shops, and the "renovation" of unwanted establishments is a claim to the right to the city.

It appeared that if China was to get its hands on Hong Kong, it would have to take it from HongKongers' scathed hands, and it would reach them in a state of disassemblage. The gaps and

holes on the pavement, the graffiti and glue-stained walls, the missing signs, and the half-destroyed institutions that were once the pride of "Asia's Global city" would be in shambles. They would also make sure that the image of Hong Kong had been scarred; that it would no longer be perceived as an economic haven in the middle of Asia, but as a space that had entered oppressive rule. The next chapter examines the government's initial reaction to this claim over urban space, and the new protest tactics that emerged as a response.

Chapter Two: Plasters

The siege of the Polytechnic University and the arrest of many of the front-line protesters marked the beginning of the end for the movement. Starting in February 2020, gatherings of more than fifty people were banned due to Covid-19. Later the number was reduced to eight, then four, and eventually two. Despite the fact that no absolute lockdown ever happened, the general population was cautious, possibly due to their recent experience of the first wave of SARS in 2003. This reaction, along with the consequences of the PolyU arrests, emptied the streets of Hong Kong, slowing down the protests considerably. A space had opened up for governmental intervention.

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March 28th, 2020

Exit C1 of HKU campus

Chris and I ascended the escalators towards the C1 Bridge from Pok Fu Lam road. As we reached the bridge, my surprised remark broke the silence.

"Look they fixed it all!"

"What? Did people need jobs? Why so fast… wow"

"Look over there, look at the panels"

"It's not even the same panels, they're smaller- the originals were smaller. It's so ugly… Our posters are gone"

We walked along the campus street, checking every surface we could remember bearing wounds, most of them had been "plastered" over. Cement was covering holes in the pavement and smudges had taken the place of graffiti. Following the metaphor of wounds and scars, I am employing the terminology of "plastering" here, to speak of an existential moment of in-between-ness, where the wounds were no more, but permanent solutions had not been implemented yet. A plaster is applied over wounds; it offers no medical benefits, simply covering them up.

Later that night I met with Harry outside the dormitories. We were caught in the middle of a rainstorm; I was holding an umbrella over both of us, as he quickly stretched and tore pieces of yellow tape, carefully placing them on the wall where graffiti used to be.

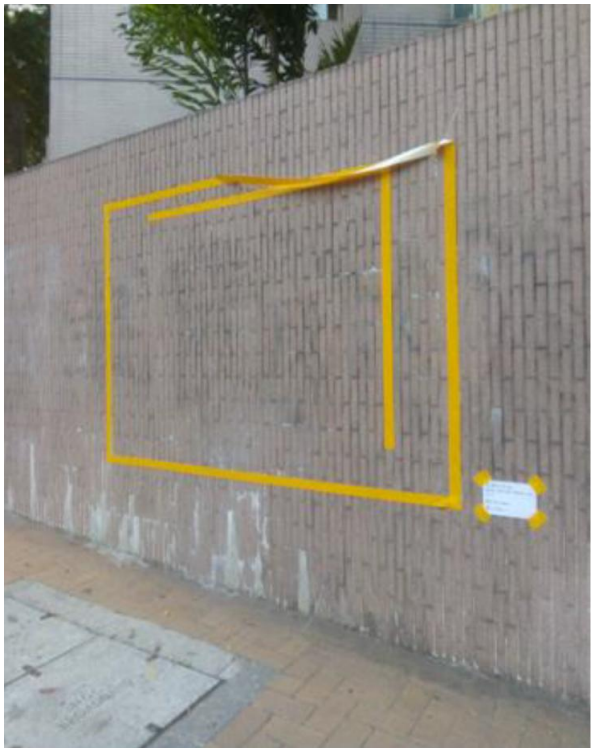
"Do you remember what was here?"

"Was it the first of October?"[27]

"I think so, but I can't remember… I need to ask… I need to ask someone that remembers. Do we have pictures? I will check"

The rain was pouring heavily but this was important, as the actual wounds that betray dissent in the city were being removed, new protest tactics needed to be implemented. Not being able to exercise invasive control over public space, Harry, among others, had turned to a form of commemoration to keep the spirit of the movement alive. As a reaction to governmental intervention, HongKongers adopted a technique of pointing out the-absence-of, a tactic of drawing attention to the disappearance of their efforts. This included the framing of walls and pavements where graffiti, or holes used to be, with yellow tape. An example is shown in the pictures bellow.

[27] Meaning: "was the graffiti about the shooting on October 1st ?"



Therefore, 2020 became a time of commemoration; commemoration of a movement that was –in some dimensions– still going on, a fact which created a lapse in time. I am eager to call this time a liminal moment, existing in the thresholds between two separate stages; wounds and scars. The rapid transitioning between the two stages, which was out of the hands of HongKongers, created the need for memory to be preserved. An explanation of this phenomenon can be provided by the text of Ackbar Abbads (1997), who wrote of the element of "disappearance" embedded in Hong Kong culture in the years prior to the handover.

His main proposition was that Hong Kong existed in a space of disappearance; which is linked to two main factors; first, is Hong Kong's quality as a port city; a city of temporary transience, which is inhabited by refugees, "expats" and travelling diplomats, who disappear as unexpectedly as they arrive. Second, and most importantly, is the territory's character as a city which essentially begun existing with colonization, and which, in its short life has continuously

found itself in a state of transition, whether that is the transition from one foreign power to another, or the change of the essence of colonialism from a tradition of *emporium* to global capital flows, Hong Kong has continuously renegotiated its existence, constantly erasing and remaking the meaning of what Hong Kong *is*. Cartier (2013) described this quality in terms of a "vanishing present" or "fleeting culture". This is equally closely tied with the rapid advancement of technology, which has pushed it in the unprecedented position of a periphery that is more technologically advance than its centre (Abbas 1997). These temporal asynchronicities have placed it in a mode of perpetual disappearance, its cultural expressions permanently threatened by change. Then, in a moment of potential stability around the 1980s, the handover from Britain to China was scheduled, its announcement preceding the event by thirteen years. This created an obscure fold in space and time. Using Walter Benjamin (2003) here, Abbas attributes this to the notion of "anything about which one knows that one soon will not have it around becomes an image" (Abbas 1997, 8). The image here being the way of life in Hong Kong during late colonial years.The eminent change of sovereignty, decided in 1984 to happen in 1997, created this original state of limbo that straddles two separate moments in time, bringing China to Hong Kong while it was not actually there yet. This has been heavily assessed as part of the creation of the Hong Kong identity (Ping and Kwong 2014, Chan 2014, Ngok 2015, Tong 2016). Mathews (2007) speaks of this moment as a time when HongKongers faced a crisis confronted with the idea of "not knowing how to belong to a nation", a fact which he thinks continuous to be true to this day (Mathews 2020)[28]. Frantically searching for what the Hong Kong identity was, as a means to hold on to a sense of self in the changing times, the cultural products of the time heavily incorporated this element of disappearance. I believe that a similar moment in the

[28]I tend to disagree with this rhetoric and find it quite reductive of the actual situation, refusing to believe that what led to *Be Water* was a mere "inability to belong to a nation".

threshold of change was happening during this plastering stage, where HongKongers were becoming aware of the erasure of the aesthetics they created during *Be Water*, through interventions into public space. Not only did this entail an erasure of the right to the city, but the failure of the movement brought China closer. Their response was the creation of a new culture of disappearance, exemplified by the yellow tape framing of what used to be.

A prior expression of the culture of disappearance can be found in David Clark (2001), who spoke of the appropriate use of ephemerality, in site-specific art installations, embedded within visual art during the pre-handover years. These exhibits displayed a nostalgia for the present, which heavily romanticized British rule. The manifestation of disappearance then seemed to have been related to the eminent loss of the unspecified, floating Hong Kong identity. A similar case can be made for the use of public space in cultural displays and setups of visual interventions that were bound to be dismantled during *Be Water*. Following Abbas and Clark, a variety of visual analysis of contemporary (protest) art in Hong Kong has been made (Cheng 2023; Valjakka 2013, 2015). Chris Gaul, a visual artist who documented the smudges left behind by the cleaning of the graffiti in the city centre, writes of them as an exemplification of "the art of resistance and erasure" (2021). The visuals of this project are part of what I can "plastering", which, in his project is analysed through the lens of visual art.While the value of analyzing positive visual representations of disappearance should not be understated, the negation of this phenomenon is what I am primarily interested in; the expression of ephemerality embedded in the development of subversive protest tactics, and the removal of urban intervention. I argue that the tactics developed during this time, like the yellow tape practice, are effectively fighting disappearance with disappearance, following Abbas' call. The commemoration of protest street art is visually highlighting the simultaneous *had been* and *is not there yet*. It represents a shrine

to the present moment, meaning the moment of uprising; a "vanishing present" (Cartier 2013), the mourning of what is soon to disappear.

The didactic label next to the yellow tape frame reading "paper over the cracks" precisely calls attention to the absence of what once was, but is no longer, and what is not there yet. The concept of the cult of the ephemeral that Abbas borrows from Louis Aragon is at play here. The element that takes centre stage is the disappearance, -the absence of- and not the object itself. While Abbas could not have predicted this development, I argue that the same cult of the ephemeral, the fetishization of the tension embedded within the disappearing subject is at the core of this act. Except in this example, it is not time, speed or digitization that is consuming the object of disappearance, but an external power that is easy to pinpoint - China. HongKongers may not have had a chance against the changing times, but they certainly do not have a chance against a swift, orchestrated cleanup. Hence, the articulation of it is not a fight against disappearance, but against censorship.

This subversion of disappearance can be seen in more visual methods employed by the protesters during this time. The latter half of 2020 is marked by the implementation of the National Security Law, which materializes into self-censorship. Two distinct examples come to mind. First, is the ingenious action of replacing all the motivational post-it notes on Lennon walls with empty counterparts. The imagery of a vacant Lennon wall being more powerful than ordinary Lennon walls, as they themselves constituted imagery of the consequences of the lost fight; they embodied the censorship they were fighting against. The second example comes from the development of a graphic which represented the slogan "liberate Hong Kong", derived from the form of the characters that compose it, as seen in the picture bellow.

Mockingjay, who had gotten the original slogan tattooed on her arm, implemented this solution when it became outlawed. Arguably, this graphic would now be considered equally seditious. Like many other young people, Mockingjay has left Hong Kong.

Since commemoration is a central element during this time, a useful angle to approach disappearance is the use of Thongchai Winichakul's (2020) concept of "unforgetting". In his book dealing with the memory of the October 6th 1976 massacre at Thammasat University, Winichakul establishes the concept of unforgetting as the position between remembering and forgetting, when dealing with an authoritarian regime that silences discussions around the topic. Unforgetting represents an "active silence", a notion similar to "fighting disappearance with disappearance". Self-censorship, as exemplified in the tactics described above, can be seen as an expression of "active silence".

The highlighting of disappearance as censorship did not stop the implementation of the same tactic by the authorities. Fear had taken a toll on the protesters, but while new calls to action

were decreasing by the day, commemoration ceremonies kept taking place, existing cautiously between legality and illegality. People showed up in the Prince Edward MTR station every 31st of the month with offerings for the presumed dead, and continued to lay flowers on the Alex Chow memorial Lennon wall at the TKO Spot parking lot. In this context, disappearance in the form of redevelopment first started being weaponised.

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July 17th, 2020

TKO Spot parking lot, Tseung Kwan O

"It looks completely unrecognizable and I want to cry"

Chris's words have stuck with me to this day. The parking lot had indeed undergone a make-over some time during the harshest of the Covid-19 measures, when assemblies of more than two people were outlawed. The parking lot, which had not been changed since the shopping centre was completed in 1998 (Link 2018), was hardly overdue for a make-over. The choice to redevelop it now manifested the perfect excuse not only to clear out the memorial wall, but also to deem it virtually impossible to locate the place of the death. As most parking lots tend to be, the space was a labyrinth to navigate even before the makeover, but the addition of colourful indications that separated space, the repainting of the walls and ceilings to erase any guiding stains deemed the space alien even with the aid of the map created for this exact reason. It ended up taking us over an hour to locate the spot, and once we did, the complete alterations deprived

us of all emotional connection with it. The outer part of the wall where the memorial was previously located had also been cleared, the original tilling had been removed and a fresh coat of paint was covering the whole surface. It seemed like the right to remember, previously represented in space had been removed.

I believe that Chris's emotional reaction to the makeover of the TKO Spot is rooted in the creation of a collective memory through the use of commemorations that adds particular significance to this space. Winichakul points out that collective memory is not the mere collection of all lived experience against simplistic historical narratives, but "a broad stroke of narrative that leaves aside the differences and multiple perspectives within it. Because of this, not despite it, collective memory has the capacity to accommodate the varying individual memories that may fit despite their differences" (Winichakul 2020, 37)

In this sense, collective memory provides a framework for individual stories, the relationship being much more complex than that of a part to the whole. Chris's memory of the TKO Spot parking lot is a breathing part of the generally understood significance of the space in relation to collective narratives. The framework of commemorations relating to particular spaces makes them stand out as spaces that hold memory, therefore their unforeseen change can create cracks not just in individual, but also collective memory. In the words of Elizabeth Jelin's (2003) "the social is always present in the most "individual" memories" (p.29). Steve Stern (2020) articulates the existence a memory that he calls "emblematic" instead of "collective", which he divides in four categories: salvation memory, unhealed wound, resolved but painful, and closed box memory. For this in-between, plastering stage, I believe that the concept of the "unhealed wound" is the most appropriate (nicely fitting into my own metaphor of scarring), which is characterized by a lack of resolve, and an inability to move on (Stern 2004). A similar quality of

non-resolvement can be found in the yellow tape phenomenon. I am arguing here that as the individual graffiti would have been forgotten, the practice of marking it off with tape is a conscious act of inserting it into the paradigm facilitated by the framework of collective memory. Rather than individual entities that would be lost to time, or disappearance, their non-presence becomes logged into an ephemeral cultural practice particular to 2020, that transcends the significance of the individual words put on walls. This urban practice transfers the graffiti and holes in the pavement, an attempt to claim a right to the city, to a domain of collective memory. It is precisely this practice of pointing out erasure that first urged Chris and me to pay attention to changes in the urban fabric.

The difficultly when deciphering these happenings lies in the fact that Hong Kong as a space has always gone through cycles of creative destruction (Harvey 2012) and re-development incredibly fast. So, one might argue that redevelopment here has much more to do with capitalism than concealment. The politics of disappearance and redevelopment intertwine on the ground, and the interpretations may overlap. Thinking along David Harvey (2012) here, new capital gets accumulated rapidly, in the city of money laundering and low taxes (Yau 2009). The limited amount of space, and the ever growing consumer and housing needs of the residents, paired with the 150 migrant permits that are granted each day to Chinese citizens (Immigration department 2015), demand the demolition and redevelopment of public space and buildings at an incredibly high rate. Mark, a friend in his late twenties who has chosen to permanently stay in Hong Kong, once mentioned that no building in this city is older than 30 years, and although that is a hyperbole for the sake of impression,[29] the point of extremely rapid (re)development is valid. It is difficult then to decipher where the need for redevelopment ends, and the need to erase and

[29] As many colonial and early post-colonial buildings still define the skyline of Hong Kong.

conceal begins. Tang (2017) speaks of the concept of "hegemonic redevelopment", focusing specifically on the case of Hong Kong, a process which goes beyond gentrification. His paper centres the political implications of redevelopment, and its ability to alienate the citizen from the urban space. In this section I will be advancing the argument of "hegemonic redevelopment" to include it into the framework of control over public space to erase memory of protest.

First, entertaining Harvey's line of thinking, seeing the reasons for redevelopment as purely economic, the wounds constitute a perfect stream for a "spatial fix". Besides, according to Gordon Mathews, whom I met personally at a later time, the graffiti would have been cleared anywhere, right?

I believe that the words of Beth, a primary school teacher in her late twenties, capture the essence of the situation effectively.

> "The repairs are happening because the Hong Kong government has money, that is the difference, and it is important […] but they could have used that money for anything. But they choose to use it to scare us so that we don't protest anymore"

The suspicious timing of the TKO Spot parking lot make-over illuminates the use of redevelopment as a tactic of intimidation, alienation and disappearance; especially considering the fact that no other part of the shopping mall was touched during this renovation. If the space is unrecognizable, its ability to hold collective memory is stripped, and its subversive potential erased. And if no spaces of collective memory exist, individual memories have no framework to understand themselves against. Furthermore, if collective memory united the community against the authorities, when it is no longer visible, people become alienated from each other, and from the urge to keep fighting. Besides, the parking lot displayed no physical wounds to be repaired,

but an alive Lennon wall. Hence, I am inclined to disagree with Mr. Mathews, and view this practice as malicious, or, to use Tang's term, hegemonic redevelopment. If the production of space represents a picture of the people we want to be (David Harvey (2012) speaking on Lefebvre (1968)), then its forceful un-production, the removal of what has been produced (in this case the memorial Lennon wall) can be said to represent the un-making of all the community wants to be. As such, if interventions into public space can be said to represent the physical form of collective memory then their removal can be said to purposefully intercept the process of collective memory formation. Chris's response to the removal of the place of mourning indicates the interruption of the process of communally grieving the present, and the commencement of a new cycle of grieving; a grieving of the ability to grieve communally, which is bound to be a much more solitary experience.

Hegemonic redevelopment also took place in the larger scale of urban space. Using Covid-19 as an excuse, spaces available for public use begun decreasing. This was particularly true for unmonitored public space, places of heterotopic potential[30]. Hong Kong as a city already featured limited public areas fit for lounging, which has led to the appropriation of space and the fostering of spatial hybridity. One major example was the semi-public pier in Kennedy town. A cargo pier by morning, the space had become a meeting spot for fishermen, elderly citizens and families looking to socialise without consuming. At night it became a popular drinking spot for university students. My interlocutors believe that the authorities feared the gathering of people in this pier as no surveillance was possible. In March 2021, public access to the pier was revoked without notice. Multiple informants told me that the new mandate had been implemented under

[30] Lefebvre's (1991) heterotopias, not Foucault's.

the excuse that "people were abusing dogs there"[31]. Additionally, the cargo workers would have to register themselves using the Covid-19 tracking system[32]. There are multiple examples of similar developments.

PolyU, for instance, was never opened back to the public, and to this day requires visitors to be escorted by students into the premises and registering their presence using their ID cards. CityU and CUHK have similar policies of registration. Raphael, an alumnus of HKU, also reported that HKU installed more cameras on their premises on top of replacing the damages, while completely bypassing the committee that is responsible for their approval. Covid-19 in general seemed to create the perfect vessel for presenting multiple anti-protest measures, with the implementation of the double mask ban (masks became both mandatory and forbidden at the same time), and the newly installed system for protest authorisation, which involved registration with a full name and the acquisition of a number to attend a protest. Disappearance here comes in the form of the immobilizing of heterotopic potential through the cementing of a normative use of space. Eliminating all non-cargo related activities from a cargo pier, all non-student civilians from universities, and all non-consuming activities from the public space, essentially turning the whole city into a space of either transit or consumption.

Luis, a pharmacist who was one of the founding members of the ChatWithYou[33] collective during 2019, reports that benches disappeared from public areas and were never replaced, making the meetings of the collective much more difficult. This development of hostile architecture aims to push people away from unmonitored space (Rosenberger 2020) and into

[31] Any member of the general public caught in the pier would be facing a penalty of HK$10.000[31] and six months imprisonment (Kwan 2021).

[32] This consisted of QR codes being placed virtually everywhere in the city, and residents having to scan them and report their whereabouts.

[33] ChatWithYou was an organization that aimed at informing foreigners about the political situation in Hong Kong in 2019 and early 2020. Mockingjay, Eileen and myself were the other three founding members.

spaces where flows are controlled. Rosenberger claims that this has the dual function of increasing consumption and surveillance. Arguably this was already the case, with shopping malls that functioned in a similar vein being excessively present in Hong Kong, functioning as "global villages" (Solomon 2012). This organization of space was therefore no stranger to HongKongers. The efficiency commanded by the fast paced lifestyle of the city resulted in a division of space that aided the swift movement from one place to the next. During Covid-19, this logic seemed to have taken hold of the entire city. The places for rest within urban space became limited, and since apartments in Hong Kong are incredibly small due to population density (Yung and Lee 2012), gatherings slowly reduced in frequency and number of participants. This governmental intervention into space, along with the increased surveillance and an already revengeful alteration of public space accelerated the demise of political gatherings, and, as I am inclined to believe, contributed to the censoring of civilian intervention into urban space.

Hegemonic redevelopment then seems to have taken place on three separate scales: First, the micro-scale of "wound" removal or "plasters", graffiti smudges and patches of cement. Second, the meso-scale, of individual urban projects such as the TKO Spot parking lot, and finally in the macro-scale of hostile architecture to disallow subversive use of public space. Its effects became increasingly evident, when it became clear that many of the supposedly temporary measures were transforming into permanent scars woven into the fabric of Hong Kong, becoming part of its visual culture. The next chapter follows this change of temporality, and continuous on the theme of disappearance, utilizing a forensics of urban architecture (Weizman 2017) to analyze the plasters turned into scars, and their current significance in memories of protest.

Before returning to Hong Kong in April 2024 I contacted my interlocutors, asking about the scars. Surprisingly, many reported that none were visible anymore. However, upon arriving in the city it became apparent that many changes resulting from the original wounds were still present. Therefore my focus became the investigation of the relationship between the perception of scars and memory. Instead of a city that was completely removing all signs of an uprising, and a resistance to the revocation of the right to remember, Hong Kong appeared to have developed a completely new kind of aesthetics, an aesthetics that had the dual function of hiding evidence of dissent from uninformed tourists, but highlights its suppression to knowing individuals, imposing a memory of defeat. This chapter will develop along two axes. First, it will engage with the few disobedience tactics that weaponize disappearance in a climate of censorship. Second, the tactics of concealment and hegemonic redevelopment that carry an aesthetics of revenge will be discussed. For this purpose I will utilise elements of Eyal Weizmann's Investigative Aesthetics (2017), a technique which looks at the urban fabric to trace histories of violence.

Before enquiring about the scars, I wanted to find out how life had changed in Hong Kong, and if any tactics of disobedience were still present. To find any such indications one would have to know where to look. If they were to visit a certain dessert shop in Kennedy town, a bookshop in Mong kok[34], or walk down the streets of Prince Edward, they would quickly notice some faint allusions to Lennon Walls. These constituted the very last remains of the once flourishing yellow economy. Though the wording of the National Security Law, which effectively ended the movement, was vague enough to not mention these acts by name, the general sentiment was that the display of Lennon Walls was prohibited, even in their vacant state. The phenomenon described here was comprised of fragments of protest artwork, for example a pixilated LIHKG

[34]I have chosen to treat these spaces like informants here, and omit their names to not endanger the owners.

pig figure on a window seal. This seemed to have followed from the practice of vacant Lennon walls.

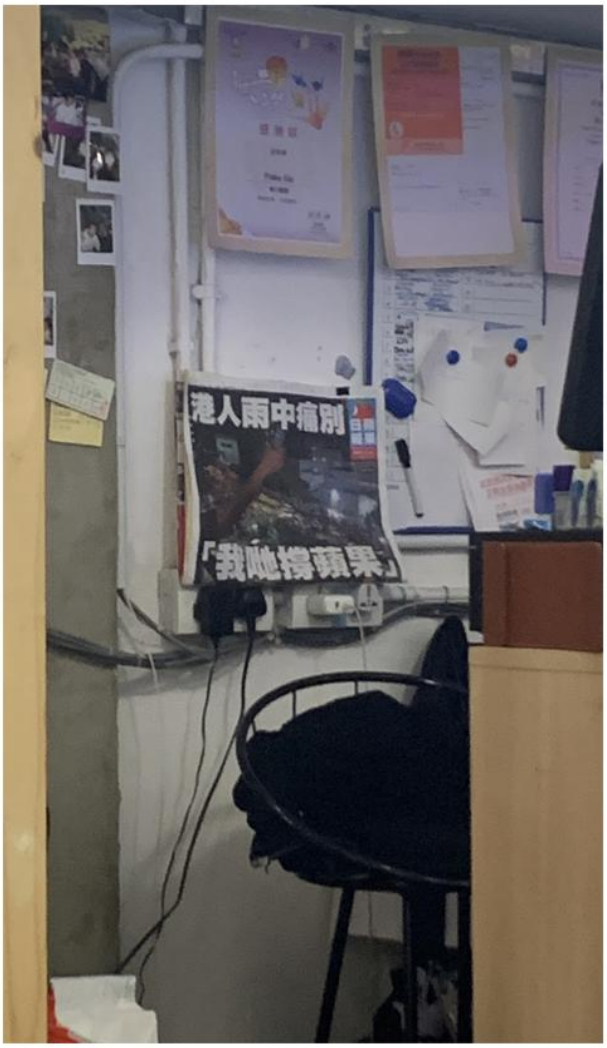
The dessert shop sported a V for Vendetta mask over its counter, and the bookshop a couple of partly hidden postcards showing emblematic protest imagery. I was eager to attempt some sort of conversation about it with the owners of these shops but ultimately decided against it, after the advice of my informants. After the implementation of the NSL, a hotline was established for citizens to report information about their potentially devious neighbors. The example given for such a practice was the possession of dangerous chemicals, or weapons, but it was a widely shared belief that the hotline was created for national security purposes.

The signs of disobedience presented above were exceptions to the rule, which had been the continued closure of yellow shops, or the removal of all protest paraphernalia. With the absence of an official guide to remind protesters which establishments were yellow, some of my informants had created their own archive, mental or digital. LIHKG also maintained a digital archive (LIHKG 2024), which was becoming more and more outdated as shops kept closing. Finding yellow shops often proved difficult, once walking for forty five minutes with Luis, only to realize that every single suggested shop had closed down. Additionally, it was almost impossible to add new locations to the list, as people were cautious when speaking of their political beliefs. However, some informants proved quite observant when looking for signs of disobedience.

"Look over there, behind the counter"

Chris pointed towards a somewhat hidden point of a restaurant, a corner behind the counter. He was directing my attention to a familiar newspaper issue, clipped onto a small rack. It was the

same one Robert had framed onto his wall. It was the very last issue of Apple Daily; an independent tabloid that used to report yellow news. In the summer of 2020, Jimmy Lai, the owner of the newspaper was arrested under the NSL. According to my informants, he was arrested and released multiple times, until Apple Daily was forced to shut down. During his first arrest in 2020, the supporters of the movement were instructed to buy copies en masse the next morning, as a show of solidarity. That day Apple Daily sold 5 million copies, in a city of 7 million people. Similarly, it seemed that the very last issue held great symbolic significance, with many participants saying they have stored a copy, and one informant supplying me with a digital version, shown bellow. However, its display was a rare occurrence, with most people having stored in away.



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As far as non-visible tactics of disobedience went, Eileen pointed out to me that she still refused to go to China, and looked down on her former comrades that had forgotten their hatred for the Mainland. She also avoided using the MTR. I asked if she still visits only yellow restaurants

"Yes of course!"

"And do you have a list of them?"

"It's in here… [she raises a finger to the side of her head], I will never forget"

"And is there a way to find out which new restaurants are yellow?"

"Too dangerous!"

"So you can only remember? Do you ever try to make guesses?"

"Sometimes you can tell by some things. This new bubble shop will have a small sign telling to not use Octopus card […] It is because they can track which establishes you support, and if it's only yellow shops it could be dangerous…"[35]

As Eileen's example shows, a lot of the visual elements of disobedience displayed in the city, used by HongKongers as renewed tactics to point out disappearance, seem to have been incredibly minimized, turning into small signs or being hidden. HongKongers' highlighting of disappearance had started to cave in on itself, turning into actual self-censorship, the active silence slowly transforming into total silence. This seemed to offer an explanation of the perception of scars as gone. With the absence of tactics like the yellow tape, the framework of collective memory which recognized them as elements of resistance was removed. However, the scars were still there, but within this renewed context of censorship, their perception seemed to had shifted from signs of resistance to signs of defeat, marking them of as an unpleasant reminder of the happenings. With this in mind, I begun visiting the plastered spaces I could remember.

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[35]This is a practice that remains from 2019, when tried as hard as they could to not use their tractable octopus cards for payments to yellow shops.

The treatment of the plasters varied greatly, some having been untouched since I last saw them, and some having undergone further repairs.

Starting from HKU, the largest visible scar was an area on Lower University Street, where new bricks had been laid out. During 2020 it had been covered with cement, and it now featured rows of vibrant bricks which stood out from the weathered old material.

One level up, on Main University Street, another example can be found on a wall.

This is the mural Mockingjay created during the original occupation. It depicted “Lady Liberty”, her flag reading “Liberate Hong Kong, the revolution of our times”. The Chinese characters on the walls under “HKU” were the shortened version of the phrase “revolution university”, a nickname given to HKU. The picture on the right shows the state that the mural was in now, having been power-washed. Interestingly, this is the state I left it in already in 2020, which means no further attempts had been made to erase it completely, and while fresh eyes would probably not be able to identify the design, my friends who were on campus in 2019 were quick to point out it out as a relic.

I sent the picture to Mockingjay.

“I like to think that the cleaners did a shitty job on purpose, because they are on our side”

Mockingjay’s answer was uncharacteristic of the usual response. Most of my participants reported feelings of numbness or even oppression upon the sight of these remains.

The next two pictures show part of the floor in one of the most frequented spaces of HKU. The first one is a faded depiction of Winnie the pooh[36], and the second one depicts the characters "革命", meaning "Revolution". Many more of these instances can be found on the campus.

"I never saw this for what it was" was Chris's prompt response to seeing these pictures. When we visited the campus of HKU together later that week, I asked him about his emotional reaction and memory related to these scars.

> "I just feel numb. Grief is a very slow process [...] At some point you just feel numb, and you move on with your life, focusing on things that make you happy"

***

[36]The chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping is said to resemble the popular children's TV show, which has led to its banning in the mainland of China. During the protests people weaponised this imagery, hence the graffiti on the floor.

An even stronger response came from Ben, who spoke to me about the practice of "squaring-off" graffiti with paint, a different kind of scar, much more frequent in the rest of the city. I found it most apparent in a tunnel near PolyU, where the wall had turned into complete patchwork.

Ben spoke of the underpass he uses on his way to work, which was full of covered graffiti. He told me that he pretends to himself not to see them.

> "When [the graffiti] was there it was so hopeful… Now it just reminds me of what the government did to us. That we didn't manage to win, and so many friends are in prison now and I don't want to think about it […] I think people don't see it, or pretend to not see it."

Ben's body language betrayed a heightened emotional response to my questions. He was incredibly animated and distracted, blankly looking in the distance, interrupting my questions and stumbling over his words, all very uncharacteristic of his usual composure. Despite this he

kept saying he is eager to talk, but I decided to keep this interview very short, not wanting to distress him. Ben expressed an alienation from the city, which, according to Stern's categorization placed his memories in the "resolved but painful" category, meaning he had accepted them as past and was trying to move on even though they were still painful. He explained that he does not want to remember anymore, but is forced to by the visuals of the city.

> "Because we tried, and I was ready to die for this city, but now I am trying so hard to leave […] I don't recognize- people are not consuming anymore, people don't want to do anything anymore. We lost Hong Kong; being here reminds me of… I want to forget and I can't forget"

Paralleling Stern's modes of remembering, Elizabeth Jelin (2003) suggests three modes of forgetting: "necessary" encompassing the regular limitations of the human brain, "definitive" or "deep", involving the complete erasure of recollection, and "evasive", which is often identified in individuals who experienced traumatic social events, employing this tactic of not recalling painful memories so that they can continue living. It seems that the large majority of my informants displayed a form of "evasive forgetting" to unburden themselves from painful memories, or at least were attempting to. The prohibition of memory apparent in the example of the TKO parking lot redevelopment seemed to have been reversed. An imposition of memory now seemed to be at play, utilizing an "aesthetics of defeat", manifesting through the scarring of the city. It was not the wounds that symbolized the right to the city anymore, neither the weaponization of disappearance that decorated the walls with yellow tape, but a complete removal of those efforts, that was mostly visible in the city in 2024. Under this light it made sense that people were avoiding to acknowledge the scars, and I became very critical of my own approach, only speaking to those that wanted to engage with my questions, as to not keep

bringing about painful memories. That being said, it seemed that quite a few participants were eager to speak out, as Robert put it "speaking about it is all I have left".

Ben's example is striking, but I would argue that even Chris's state of being "numb" and focusing on what makes him happy also echoes a conscious choice not to remember. Even Eileen expressed that she chooses to remember selectively, and it correspond to things she has control over.

> "I can't believe friends go to Mainland… I can't! So many things they took from us but I can still remember some yellow shop, or I can still not use MTR, why do they go?"

When I asked her about the scars she thought very hard and told me her neighborhood doesn't have any, so I did not ask anymore.

It seemed, therefore, that the situation had been reversed. The scars of the city seemed to weaponize memory in its imposition, rather than its erasure. People were being forced to remember, and contrary to what I expected, the scars had not become part of a culture of underground resistance, but a painful reminder of a lost battle.

***

Despite the conscious weaponization of urban aesthetics, I believe that the authorities did actually attempt to "repair" the city. However, I argue that this effort only aimed at concealing the recent happenings from the uninformed viewer- potentially the tourist. This maintained a dual function. The scars simultaneously constituted reminders of painful memories for those

aware of the happenings, while concealing evidence of dissent in the city from the uninformed observer. Robert called this “damage control” in regards to Hong Kong’s image.

This intention became clear when looking at an underground passage near PolyU which got an additional treatment. On top of the “squaring-off”, this passage got covered with a floral wallpaper.

I believe that the intention was the complete covering of a wall that had undergone too many patchwork repairs to be inconspicuous to tourists. Many HongKongers told me that the “ridiculous” wallpapers around Hong Kong reminded them of the defeat of the protests, feeling like they were being “mocked” by this new intervention, often drawing a parallel with the “nothing happened here” attitude China had toward the events at Tiananmen Square.

Maya, a current student of HKU elaborates on the "mocking" by offering a very specific example, speaking about the removal of the *Pillar of Shame*[37] from the campus:

> "[…] And they have added those funny "eggs" [in its place]"
>
> "Eggs? What do you mean eggs?" Raphael jumps in.
>
> "I call them eggs, you know those sofas that are so uncomfortable and look ridiculous, yeah, where the statue used to be"
>
> "Oh yeah, those things, they are ridiculous"
>
> "You know it's like 此地無銀三百兩, ah how to explain, it's almost like they made it ridiculous on purpose. I feel like they're mocking us."

The Cantonese saying offered by Maya, literally translates to "No 300 pieces of silver are buried here" and refers to an old Chinese folktale of a peasant man who came to posses 300 pieces of silver. Not owning a safe, and being afraid of it being stolen, the man frantically tried to come up with a solution for hiding it. He ended up burying it in his backyard, and adding a sign above it reading "No 300 pieces of silver are buried here". The silver of course was stolen. The shortened version of the saying "此地無" ("No silver here", lending this thesis its title), has come to refer to anything that is clumsily concealed, as to highlight the very thing it is supposedly trying to hide.

[37] The pillar of Shame in Hong Kong was part of a sculpture series by artist Jens Galschiøt, which commemorates the loss of like in different events in history. The one on the campus of HKU was dedicated to the victims of the Tiananmen massacre (Galschiøt 2022).

I believe that this same lens can be applied to the rest of the scars, their clumsy concealment being "good enough" as articulated by Chris, to hide the happenings from tourists, but intentionally clumsy enough for HongKongers to feel mocked.

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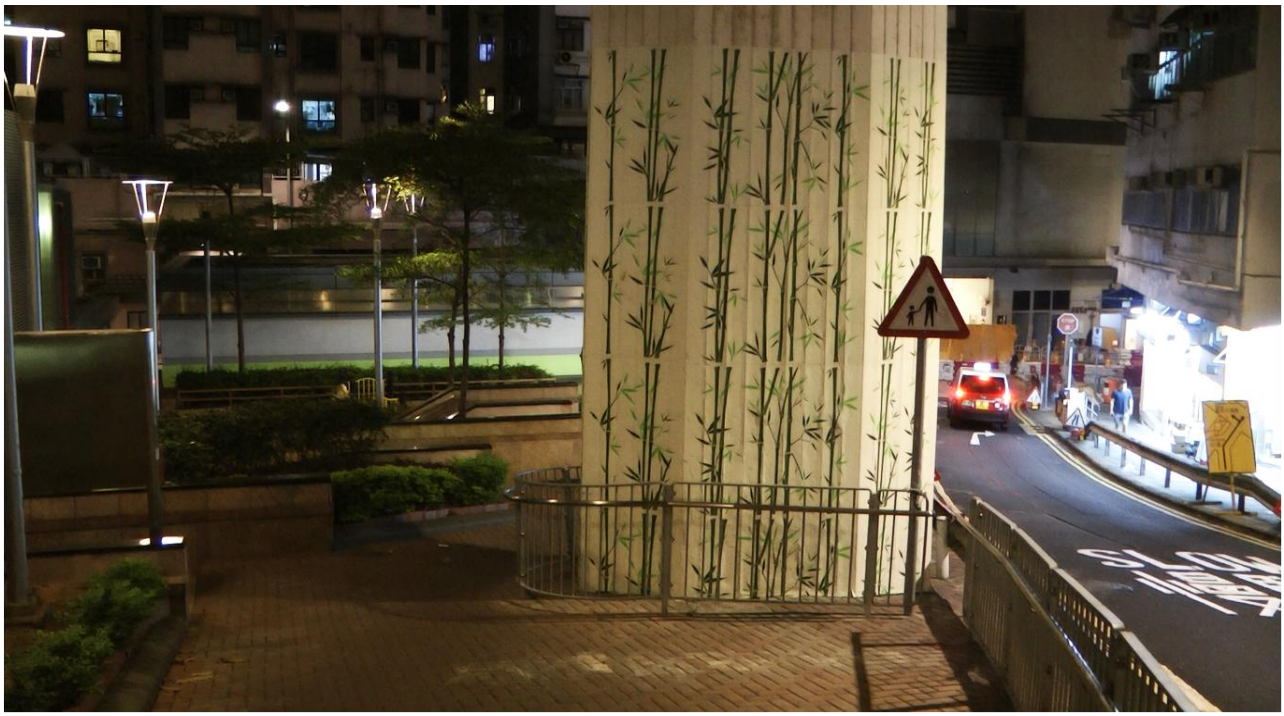
The same use of wallpaper could be observed on a pillar under a bridge in Kennedy Town, which used to serve as a Lennon wall. In this case, an extra step had been implemented; new rails can be seen circling it. The absurdity of this addition becomes more apparent paired with the information that no other pillar had gotten the same treatment.



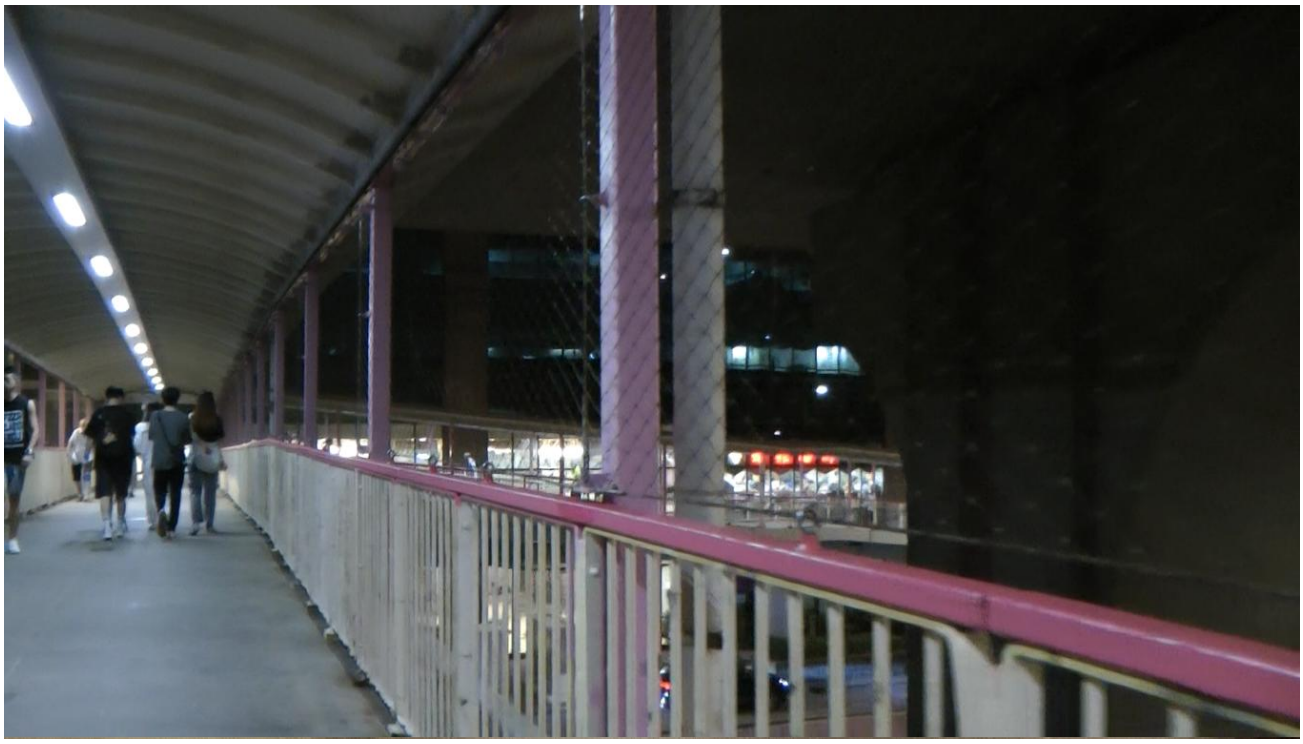
This brings me to what Chris called "architecture hostile to protests", which I argue should be added to the list of scars. He first used the term while standing in the middle of University Street

in HKU, looking at what used to be a bench whose back was used for Lennon walls. The space had been transformed to fit planters.

> "it's so people don't sit around and conspire, it's hostile architecture, architecture hostile to protests"

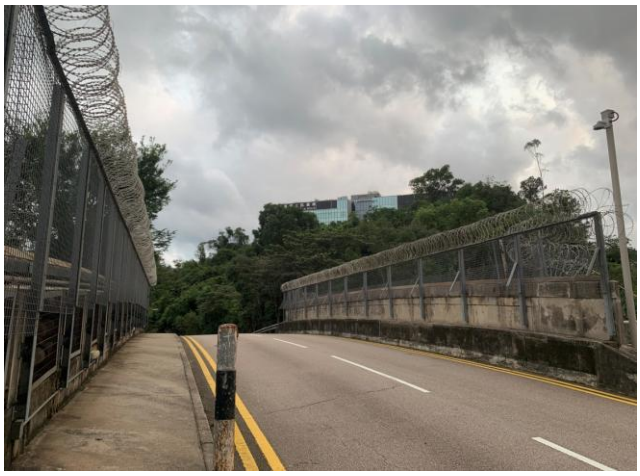
This remark brought to mind Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (2003), and the redevelopment of Paris after the French Revolution. While the lack of space in Hong Kong did not allow for the creation of boulevards to prohibit roadblocks, smaller elements were added to the urban fabric, which discouraged protesting. In *Handbook of Tyranny* (2018), Deutinger outlines the small additions of hostile architecture elements in cities for the purpose of policing populations against subversive behavior; I believe a similar tactic was implemented here. Continuing from the example of the TKO Spot parking lot, I argue that there is more at play here than a mere spatial fix; these additions appear to be a mediated intervention into public space to remove the right to the city.

Chris's understanding would later expand to include all changes in the urban fabric that had been implemented to control space. Other striking imagery was the addition of wire over bridges in key areas around the city. The picture bellow shows a bridge in the area of Wan Chai.



Bridges are an integral part of the spatial flows of Hong Kong. As space on the ground is limited, pedestrian bridges can be found virtually everywhere in the city. During *Be Water* they were used as vantage points. Roadblocks were constructed underneath them in the main arteries of the city, which the protesters would defend by throwing bricks from above. The wires made this impossible, an effect which was epitomised by bridges number 1 and 2 of the CUHK campus, where "the battle of CUHK" took place[38], shown in the pictures bellow.

[38]Before the siege of PolyU, CUHK was the main university campus occupation, which was mostly defended from these bridges.



I am unsure what the original motivation for this wire was. However, my informants who lived on Hong Kong Island said that it was a measure against the throwing of rocks and molotovs, while those in the New Territories said it was so that protesters would not throw off rental bikes after demonstrations. A report was generated during my time in Hong Kong, stating that the wire in six bridges had been removed as it was only a "temporary measure" (LCQ10: Construction and Protection of Public Facilities 2024). However, when enquiring about it nobody could point to a bridge where the wire had been removed.

When asked about "architecture hostile to protests", Jasper and Eileen spoke to me about the "hammered-in screws", which made it impossible to remove rails. Mark described the practice of replacing the missing rails, and then destroying the screws by hammering them into the poles. However, I was unable to locate any instances where this tactic was implemented. I suspect that this was either a practice that took place in the four years of my absence and those screws had now been replaced anew, or equally plausibly, what the people were describing as "hammered in", is a new type of screw which Beth called "enhanced".

***

According to Weizman's *Investigative Aesthetics* (2021), politics can be read on the most mundane architectural elements which mediate the control of spatial flows. In his work on Palestine, one example he brings up is the establishment of highways that connect Israeli settlements, facilitating the movement of citizens, while Palestinians are constantly delayed through checkpoints. Multiple interlocutors from the New Territories referenced the recent connection of the main Mainland railway to a station in Hong Kong, which brought people over the border in less than an hour. This facilitates the quick transport of Chinese citizens into Hong

Kong[39][40]. At the same time, the elements of "architecture hostile to protests" exemplified a control of space that disallowed proximity to spaces of dissent through the use of rails, wires and screws, once again removing the right to public space. Weizman also reports a Foucaultian (1920) panopticon effect achieved by the Israeli watch towers. A similar effect was implemented here through the extensive use of CCTV cameras, and the reporting hotline; a feeling of constant surveillance, which led to self-policing. The added layer of distrusting your neighbor had also led to a severing of ties between communities

> "I can't talk because I don't trust" Jasper tells me
>
> "For example, I don't know if he changed his mind [talking about his boss], or why he doesn't talk, but I don't want to talk. And I don't usually talk with Eileen because it makes her sad."

The silence around it seems to be doubly facilitated by "evasive" forgetting as well as conscious self-censorship. In Winichakul's words "in authoritarian societies being silenced and voluntary silence, being censored and self-censorship are hardly distinguishable" (Winichakul 2020, 45). I have avoided using the term "authoritarian" to describe the situation in Hong Kong so far, following Gordon Mathews' advice to not contribute to sensationalisation. However, I believe that this quote can function in reverse; when those elements are hardly distinguishable, one can begin speaking of an authoritarian society.

Authoritarian signs can also be indentified through an examination of the "aesthetics of occupation" (Weizman 2007). Weizman points to the tactics of using architecture to essentially

[39] The dislike of this movement carries the same element of "othering" of Chinese citizens present in the encounter with the hegemon during Be Water. I have chosen not to engage with the xenophobic undertones in this thesis as its politics are too nuanced and the plethora of opinions on the matter would digress too far from the topic.

[40] With the mass emigration that has taken place since the implementation of the NSL, there has been the general sentiment that the CCP has an agenda of replacing the Hong Kong population with Mainland counterparts. Whether or not this is true I could not say, but a lot of the opinions of my interlocutors seem to stem from this belief.

colonise space. The example he brings up is the use of "Israeli architectural aesthetics" to establish ownership over Jerusalem. According to my informants, in Hong Kong this took the form of "Mainland aesthetics" being established. A repeated example was the proliferation of "Mainland restaurants" where traditional cha chaan tengs[41] (茶餐廳) used to be. Beyond the fact that local restaurants were slowly becoming obsolete[42], the new restaurants often operated in Mandarin, forcing HongKongers to speak Mandarin as well, which they viewed as the language of oppression[43]. Another disappearing element is the so-called "Hong Kong font", characteristic of films from the "golden era of Hong Kong cinema" (Bordwell, 2000), which was found in most street signs. Due to tightening regulations on unauthorized neon signs, this emblem of Hong Kong had started disappearing (The Guardian, 2023), the signs that replaced it sporting "Mainland fonts". This is not a tactic explicit to Hong Kong. As Hen and Qian (2023) have argued, the governance through an imposition of aesthetics in urban environments is common in China. Their study of Guangzhou, a city in the Guangdong province which is also Cantonese speaking, highlights the element of "post-political" governance in China; one which utilizes tools such as aesthetic (re)development, which often trample grassroot resistance. They include this tactic in their toolbox of "hegemonic governance".

The element of disappearance can be distinguished in these examples, which bring Mainland to Hong Kong before 2047. "Mainland aesthetics" constitute a mirage of times to come, appearing closer than they are meant to be chronologically, having a tactile representation in the present, another instance of lapsing time. The contradiction of a "tactile mirage" here stemming from the

[41] A type of traditional Hong Kong restaurant, serving food that incorporates Chinese and European cuisines.
[42] Eating out culture in Hong Kong is extremely prevalent, which is partly why the yellow economy became such an important part of the movement. The replacement of cha chaan tengs with mainland restaurants is not a peripheral change but a core alteration in the habits of HongKongers.
[43] This perception is heightened by the switching of teaching Mandarin rather than Cantonese in schools.

flipped version of Benjamin's quote about that which one knows they will not have "becoming an image", perhaps stated as "the image of that which one is soon to experience takes a tactile form in the present". I believe this to be another iteration of disappearance, of a future materializing before its time, displacing elements of the present. Ultimately, whether articulated as "hegemonic redevelopment" (Tang 2017) or "post-political aesthetic governance" (Hen and Quian 2023), I believe that this tactic transcends a mere process of gentrification. Or, at the very least, one could speak of a gentrification that caters to the "aesthetics of occupation" (Weizman 2007).

Finally, in *Architecture after Protest* (2013), Petti, Hilal and Weizman utilise the notion of "the morning after revolution", to speak about the reclamation of previously colonised space. The book talks about the conversion of newly decolonised military basis into spaces of leisure as a form of subversion. In the case of Hong Kong and the failure of *Be Water*, the subversion came from the authorities, who reclaimed spaces and flipped their purpose. So, in the case of the Lennon wall pillar, in the wake of "the morning after", its subversion became the disallowance of spreading information. An acquisition of the explicit negation of its former use: an aesthetic of prohibition of speech- censorship. Hence, I argue that the aesthetics of defeat created by the scarring, also encompassed elements of revengeful subversion, occupation and forceful disappearance. The total reinstating of a normative mode of previously appropriated space marks the end of claims to the right to the city. The aesthetics of architecture hostile to protests, (re)developed the city in an authoritarian direction, which ultimately matched the view HongKongers had about China as a hegemon. Hong Kong protest culture had developed from

appropriating disappearance, to fighting censorship with disappearance, to reach a stage of this tactic also being censored[44].

***

To end this chapter I would like to bring forth an argument of all the elements described above intertwining together in revanchist tendencies, as articulated by Neil Smith (1996). In *The New Urban Frontier* Smith defines the revanchist city as one which enacts legislation to punish populations after a political shift. In the case of Hong Kong, these tendencies materialized in both legislation (the NSL being a prime example) and through the aesthetics of the city.

The collection of half-erased scars which simultaneously conceal and reveal, the "architecture hostile to protest", and the imposition of painful memories reveal a picture of a mediated effect of revengeful behavior. From the new brick pavements, to the smudged and repainted walls, to the removal of resting spots in public space, the addition of wire over the bridges, "enhanced screws" and CCTV cameras, the intervention into public space achieved two things: it concealed the signs of protest from uninformed passers-by while simultaneously "mocking" HongKongers through the maintenance of an aesthetics of defeat, punishing them for their attempt at revolt.

I believe that these changes in the urban fabric revengefully pushed HongKongers away from spaces of protest, which simultaneously advance assimilation into China. This thesis has focused on the effect on urban space, but I suspect the scope of this logic to be much further reaching. Given that maintenance of Hong Kong (protest) culture seemed to be quintessentially important to HongKongers, its erasure seemed like a calculated vengeful act which transcends disappearance, aiming at eradication.

[44] Meaning that not even the aesthetics of Lennon walls are allowed, which shrinks displays of resistance in the urban fabric.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to show the trajectory of disappearance embedded in Hong Kong culture as it has become evident in the scarring of its urban fabric. Incorporating new tactics as they took shape, I have developed an argument about the transformation of disappearance into censorship, the removal of the right to the city, and the adoption of the relevant "aesthetics of defeat", which are comprised of three separate elements. First, the adoption of a dual function of scarring left in the city, which aims to conceal the happenings from uninformed observers, while imposing a painful memory on those that witnessed the happenings. Second, the (re)development of spaces of memory and the implementation of "architecture hostile to protests", which disallows the subversive use of public space. Third, the "Mainlandisation" through the implementation of an "aesthetics of occupation" (Weizman 2007). The collection of these tactics reveal revanchist tendencies, which punish HongKongers for their attempted revolt, while simultaneously advancing the agenda of forceful assimilation into China through a "non-political governance" (Hen and Qian 2023) which manifests through the "aesthetics of occupation" (Weizman 2007).

To end this thesis with hope, I would like to direct my focus on a fortunate side-effect of this political trajectory; the creation of new forms of solidarity with the Mainland:

> "Ben, do you think there will ever be a protest wave as big as this last one?"
>
> "Oh yeah, I think there will be. A massive one, but not just in Hong Kong, in the whole country. Whether that is next year or in five years I don't know, but it will happen."

I ask Chris the same question "does he think there is another protest wave coming?"

"What about the Mainlanders? I think they will bring in new attitudes that will spark things"

In a separate conversation, he continues

> "I think there always will be [protests], not explicitly about this [democratic rights] but somehow tied to it. The reality is that the people in Hong Kong need to be pushed to a breaking point, same with China, because the situation is not that bad, but once the people realize that the economy is shit, something will happen"

Robert seems to have developed similar views

> "I don't think any more protests will happen in Hong Kong, the time to rock the boat has come and past, and some people were very tactical about this from the start. They did everything they could, and they lost, it has reached its climax. […] I have hope for China, and I see the future of Hong Kong very much tied with China, and I think something will happen, the people will snap".

He went on to recount an incident which took place on the campus of HKU, when a white-paper protest was hosted by Mainlanders. White paper protests were a development inspired by the vacant Lennon walls, which first appeared in Mainland China initially as a reaction to a fire that broke out in a quarantine building in Urumqi[45]. The protest was attended by a handful of people, and he has a vivid memory of one participant pleading for HongKongers to join their efforts. This took place in 2022, which is astonishing to me, since there seemed to be bilateral hostility in relation to protests in 2020.

[45] A Chinese city.

This seemed like an unprecedented positive development. The main goal of *Be Water* seemed to be separation from China, and the upholding of "one country, two systems". The progression from the "five demands, not one less" to "Hong Kong Independence, the only way out", had signified an ever increasing desire to break away from China. Chinese people were viewed indiscriminately as agents of the state, spies for the CCP who were out to get anyone that voiced disagreement. Only those who had proven time and again that they were on the side of HongKongers, by defying their fears and being vocal were deemed worthy of trust, and given the honorary title "HongKonger".

This move toward a country-wide solidarity was an unforeseeable development. I believe the lapse of space and time facilitated by disappearance to be of crucial importance here. While China is entering Hong Kong, fragments of culture, including the element of disappearance that was utilized in the white paper protest are crossing the border, fostering the development of country-wide identification. An academic I spoke to while in Hong Kong offered the opinion that Chinese citizens are becoming increasingly more critical, and that if one wishes to continue studying the trajectory of Hong Kong protests, they should look to the Mainland. An explanation of this can also be found in Abbas' (1997) text. According to him, before the handover, China was about to find itself in the position of having to handle a gadget from the future, in the wake of its new found governance of Hong Kong, in an unprecedented situation where the colonizer state is "less advanced" than the colonized state. Abbas points out that this will become increasingly accentuated in the implementation of "one country, two systems", which is truly just "one system, two speeds". Both societies will be operating under a capitalist trajectory, with China lagging behind at the time of his writing. Perhaps one can extrapolate that as China has arguably caught up and is beginning to surpass Hong Kong's level of technological

advancement, the protest movements in the two cities are bound to become more eager to associate with each other and converge in their strive towards democracy, whatever that may look like in such a complicated climate. Or, perhaps more cynically, utilising Mathews' (2007, 2020) work, HongKongers have done the math and realized that despite not being able to identify as Chinese, they will have to rely on the masses across the border.

Finally, in the realm of further research, my findings point in a direction away from Hong Kong, and anyone that wishes to collect data about this case, or in a broader scope about social movements in authoritarian regimes should outsource knowledge from places outside of Hong Kong. I believe this can be done in two separate directions. First, the diaspora in search of more democratic societies is a great place to start enquiring about further development of protest culture, as well as details about a changed perception of the happenings from a distance. A second direction would be China itself. If the claims of my participants are to be considered seriously, I believe that the next step would be a careful tread into Chinese territory. A final remark from Chris sums it up perfectly:

> "If we consider the CCP a dynasty, and I believe we should, historically it will fall, and HongKongers as well as Mainlanders will be ready when that happens"

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