Eyeing Fear and Anxiety:
Postcolonial Modernity and Cultural Identity in the Urban Space of *The Eye*

Shana Sanusi

Abstract:

This article explores the cultural representations of Hong Kong seen in the film *The Eye* (2002) by paying close attention to how the urban space produces anxieties and is specifically implicated in haunting. The reality of Hong Kong is seen through its postcolonial modernity where the unsettling sense of isolation and alienation become apparent. This feeling is further enhanced by the city's tenuous balance between the Western and traditional Chinese influences which imposes liminality on the bodies who dwell here. The LeFebvrian notion of the production of space frames the analysis to articulate Hong Kong's predicament. Thailand is therefore imagined in the film as an alternative space that allows a nostalgic, albeit romanticized, existence that Hong Kong cannot afford.

Keywords: Asian horror film; urban space; spatial politics; LeFebvre; postcolonial modernity.

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Images of Hong Kong as "haunted" have often taken center stage in horror cinema as representative of urban concerns. Hong Kong horror films often situate supernatural forces in the city's everyday social spaces specifically to embody a sense of dread and uneasiness among its dwellers of modern life's consequences. The filmic rendition of Hong Kong is especially menacing when the urban space becomes a character or an essential geographic problem in the narrative, as in *Dumplings* (*Jiao zi*, Fruit Chan, 2004), *Home Sweet Home* (*Gwai Wu*, Cheang Pou-soi, 2005), *Re-cycle* (*Gwai Wik*, Danny and Oxide Pang, 2006) and *Dream Home* (*Wai dor lei ah yut ho*, Pang Ho-cheung, 2010). The films offer critiques of the city's spatial disparities by capturing panoramic vistas of spectacular high-rises meant for the affluent to reside existing alongside more dilapidated structures in denser, underprivileged neighborhoods. Hong Kong is further characterized as a liminal, transient state with porous borders that enable cross-boundary movement of population from Mainland China. Most of the

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films are notably set in the urban domestic sphere, thus lending themselves to be read as a bleak commentary on the traumatic exploitation and displacement of Hong Kong's othered, indigent population as the threat of land shortage and urban development persists over time.

This cinematic impression of Hong Kong echoes the terrain of everyday life in the megalopolis, capturing the collective anxiety and fear of the socio-political changes resulting from the 1997 Handover of the British colony to China. The idea of Hong Kong returning to its "original" home is akin to the psychoanalytic concept of the "return of the repressed"— the ambivalence that continues to haunt its residents stems from their reluctance to be subjected to an unaccustomed authority of Chinese socialism after 156 years of British rule. The loss of their colonial past coupled with an uncertain future of a new cultural paradigm exacerbate the dreading of the unfamiliar in the urban environment. The Pang Brothers' 2002 film *The Eye* (*Gin Gwai*[1]) articulates this notion of spatial uncanniness that affects Hong Kong by unveiling culturally specific construction of its urbanity as the space intersects with the supernatural. Released five years after the official Handover, the film acts as a discourse of Hong Kong's critical period of acclimatization among the city's earlier generations of residents to the changes of the state's political trajectory. Existing Hong Kong residents saw the need at the time to negotiate their cultural identities and sense of belonging, especially considering how the Handover inevitably allowed larger influx of Mainland Chinese immigrants to integrate with the urban community.

The Eye follows revolves around a violinist with a small Chinese orchestra named Mun who undergoes a corneal transplant to cure her childhood blindness. Along with her newly restored vision, she acquires the supernatural ability to foresee deaths

[1] The official film title in Cantonese is translated as 'seeing ghosts'.

and witness dead spirits linger at numerous haunts in the city of Hong Kong. Steve Pile (2005a, 136) suggests that "…haunting ought to be antithetical to modernity, yet ghosts seem to claw at the heels of the living, of modernity." Similarly, the film positions the city as a quintessential space that breeds ghosts while portraying sight or awareness as an accursed gift that subjects the protagonist to witness and confront the unseen and unspeakable. The aim of this article is to consider how the ghosts of which Mun encounters are cultural signifiers of the repressed, othered identities which are largely eschewed from the collective consciousness in post-Handover Hong Kong. The film draws attention to the grim reality of life in the modern megalopolis through the encroachment of supernatural agency and further problematizes the traumatic experience of otherness by bringing the issue of Hong Kong's irresolute postcolonial identity to the forefront. Moreover, the decaying cityscape of Hong Kong as imagined in *The Eye* functions as a reminder of the impending urban mutation following the "foreign" socialist influence from its motherland China.

Ghosts that haunt urban sites may in fact reveal to be a certain past that lingers in the present to presumably resist the challenge of being forgotten. "Ghosts in the City," a seminal essay on the architecture of renovation by Michel de Certeau (1998) explains the tendency for uncanniness to lurk in modern cities as emerging new buildings begin to replace the old. Cities are continuously haunted by the "stubborn" past that "intersect[s] with the present imperatives," such as the existing older buildings that interfere with new urban planning (ibid., 133). This is what makes the city of Hong Kong, as depicted in *The Eye* especially, haunted due to its constant destruction and reconstruction, leading to what Ackbar Abbas (1997) identifies as the "culture of disappearance." The old Chinese rituals in Hong Kong, for example, are replaced by new Westernized ones because of the rapid changes to "living styles" that negotiate modernization and urbanization (Lam 2008, 21). When the "newness" of the city is

unable to compromise with the old remnants of Hong Kong's past, all that exists in the city's presence becomes a "collective memory" that creates cultural anxiety (ibid., 23). The ambivalence felt after the Handover is induced by Hong Kong's nostalgic predisposition— a place of memory, trauma and loss in which its colonial past has indeed become a ghost or ghostly. Although *The Eye* does not qualify as a nostalgia film, it invokes the "postcolonial nostalgia" of Hong Kong, which according to Natalia Chan (2012), has been a social phenomenon since the 1980s. This significant trend captures the social feelings of discontent, depression and yearning for the past. Hong Kong's postcolonial nostalgia is complex and encompasses the anxiety not only of the Handover but also the terror of Communist takeover and late capitalist technological advancement (ibid., 252).

Hence, this article also meditates on the ghostliness of the Hong Kong cityscape by approaching Henri LeFebvre's philosophical reflection on how modern built environment tend to distress the lived space and social welfare of any urban community. In his masterpiece The *Production of Space* (1991)[2], LeFebvre ruminates on the pervasiveness of capitalism as a system controlled by bureaucratic- technocratic elites in any given city that continuously commodify space through the real estate market, thus encouraging social-spatial and economic segregation. He lists the "state, of political power, of the world market, and of the commodity world-tendencies" as the malefactor of unequal societies in fragmented modern cities (ibid., 65). The centralization of power relations affects any space that is produced under its system; each space will become hegemonic and exemplify the ideals of the dominant culture. In the era of global capitalism, Hong Kong certainly exhibits characteristic complications resulting from free market practices including socio-economic imparity,

[2] For LeFebvre (1991, 33), space refers specifically to the 'space of the city.'

commodification of land and building as well as the creation of citizen-consumers. It is also important to note how the ocular theme of *The Eye* resonates with LeFebvre's (ibid., 19) critique of contemporary architects' tendency to concentrate on the graphic and visual qualities of buildings rather than envision a space of comfort for individuals to dwell in. The surface of the modern city is meant to be a mere spectacle that pleases "the eye" at a distance that is far from the ideal space) despite the discomfort it causes to the social well-being of its inhabitants.

LeFebvre also notes that everyday spaces, from public localities to private dwellings, are constructed without any regards to the lived experiences and spatial practices of individuals for they are only meant to be privatized in due course. Those responsible for conceiving space, or more specifically the architects and urban developers, are only capable of envisaging an immaterial "representation of space" that does not necessarily translate into actual space that can be socially or even individually appropriated (ibid., 44). Both public and private housing, for instance, are to be perpetually conceived as products instead of buildings which are suited to be dwelt and experienced. For LeFebvre, the dominant culture and norms resulting from the prevailing capitalist system has effectively impressed upon the urban developers, thus coercing them to shape the city based on the hegemonic positivist and scientific approaches rather than building upon human nature everyday habits (ibid., 165). The positivist hegemony in the production of space is often equated to "positive" modernity and progressiveness despite the urban distress that it has simultaneously created. Similarly in *The Eye*, there exists an underlying tension among the Chinese people of Hong Kong as they negotiate their traditional, pre-modern beliefs with the demands of rational modernity. Advancements in biological technology, for instance, is central to the film's narrative premise as seen through Mun's ocular surgery and the depiction of suicide deaths caused by modern-day pressures all suggest that the traditional Chinese

way of life is asynchronous to the demands of contemporary urban Hong Kong. *The Eye* depicts the struggle an individual undergoes between embracing modernity and adhering to traditions, all framed against the backdrop of the cityscape. These two conditions coexist and intermingle with one another, similar to how the dead assimilate with the living in the city.

Haunting Modernity in Hong Kong

Surrounded by South China Sea, the territory of Hong Kong amasses a total land area of approximately 2754 square kilometers and currently boasts a population of 7 million people. Bordering the city in the north is Shenzhen – China's southeastern metropolis in the province of Guangdong and separated by the Pearl River estuary to the west is Macau, a Special Administrative Region with a colonial past similar to the harbor city. Postcolonial Hong Kong is a booming megalopolis of hybrid cultures made up of traditional Confucian beliefs and Western democratic values. This hybridity is shaped by Hong Kong's past different powers and ideologies, particularly British colonialism, Western capitalism, China's communism and Hong Kong's own nationalism, all of which complicate the question of Hong Kong Chinese identity (Mennel 2008; Teo, 2001). Due to its strong colonial background and globally integrated economy, Hong Kong (alongside Tokyo and Singapore) was one of the first few Asian cities to reach the status of a "global city" similar to those in the West (Breitung and Gunter, 2006). Hong Kong's development as an urban space surpassed Mainland China's cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing (ibid., 104). Hong Kong's early global position embodies advance Asian modernity that exceeds many other urban developments of postcolonial nations within the region. At present, Hong Kong has the greatest number of skyscrapers, towers and high-rise residential as seen in its signature visually-compact skyline, making it one of the most spatially-complex cities to exist.

Despite this progressive exterior, postcolonial modernity in Hong Kong has caused collective anxiety among its people over the concepts of national and cultural identity. Barbara Mennel (2008, 84) asserts that the people of Hong Kong often question their "vague notion" of Chineseness. Steven Teo (2001, 225) outlines Hong Kong's situation as a space that is "caught" between the foreign modern world introduced by its Western colonizers and the local traditional Chinese values that come from its motherland China. The Handover has further deepened its people's identity crisis as they try to negotiate a new, geo-political identity that straddles both the modern and the traditional (Yeh and Ng 2009). Abbas (2001, 624) points out that to many commentators of the Handover, this negotiation is a form of "postcolonial resistance" against both Britain and China; indeed Hong Kong is more interested in positing its own unique postcolonial identify as a "third space." In other words, the need for the Chinese people of Hong Kong to define their own distinct identity has less to do with its past colonial relationship with Britain or its current affiliation with China. Hong Kong's return to China indeed suggests as an act of reclaiming the past while positioning itself, along with its hybrid postcolonial culture, as a newfound nation.

This hybridized, post-Handover existence has led Hong Kong to become more fragmented as a culture, thus resulting in a lack of collective sense of its people (Gan 2010, 111). The Hong Kong Chinese also continue to struggle to preserve any forms of collective memories that are based on their culture as more (old) sites and buildings are demolished to make way for more public housing as migration from Southeast Asia and South China continues to be on the rise (Cheung 2012, 7). This concentration of "compressed" urban population, in turn, degrades the city's community spirits and gradually erases the people's memories of their distant past (Huang 2004, 24). This certain loss only serves to alienate individuals from one another rather than foster communality in such a modern society. LeFebvre (1991, 97) believes that such feelings

of alienation which pervade the urban society engender "disillusionment" that "leaves space empty— an emptiness that words convey." This spatial emptiness eventually devastates the city with the lack of social interaction due to modernism's emphasis on individualism.

The Eye opens with blurry, unfocused shots of Hong Kong's skyline at its busiest. The effect of this blurred perspective is parallel with a myopic vision that foreshadows Mun's eventual recovery from blindness. Mun sits alone in the corner of a ferry; her voiceover narrates her optimism as we see indistinct glimpses of the city: "Some people say that this world is ugly, yet it is beautiful at the same time[3]." The following shots gradually become crisper and sharply focused, showing Mun navigating the congested city with her walking stick among throngs of people. Throughout this opening scene, the urban surroundings of Hong Kong are bathed in a drab gray tone, suggesting a foreboding sense of alienation and estrangement. Framed from the point-of-view of Mun, the visual geography of the cityscape once again appears deathly in the scene where Mun and her sister Yee are riding the taxi after her successful surgery. Skyscrapers and high-rise structures which compose the skyline of the city materialize as ominous, vertical tombs against the overcast sky. From the corner of her eye, Mun sees a deserted, male figure dressed in a suit standing in the middle of the highway. She finds the sight to be unsettling as the cars that pass by rapidly seem to ignore the man's desolate existence. Bereft of the city's attention, the ghostly figure metaphorically signals the concrete jungle as a space devoid of human connection. The manifestation of such ghost is due to this pervading sense of a lack of community that directly culminates the urban dread.

[3] Based on the film's official English subtitles.

The majority of the film's ghosts and hauntings take place in the dilapidated neighborhood where Mun resides with her grandmother. Their home is a small, nondescript apartment unit located in crammed public housing estate. The space of her unit and the apartment building's surroundings are rendered as constantly limited and limiting. Such living arrangement reflects the form of housing, mainly overcrowded high-rises subsidized by the government, that are made available to half of Hong Kong's population to solve the issue of space (Huang, 2004). The changing of family institution during post-Handover and the rise of inequality in the age of rapid globalization have also attributed to a dramatic increase in land and property prices (Wong 2017, xv). The overcrowding and over-construction of Hong Kong's urban space exacerbates the increasing disconnection between people, thus exemplifying "a paradoxical kind of alienation" (LeFebvre 1991, 308) seen commonly in consumerist capitalist cities. Mun epitomizes many Hong Kong inhabitants who are conditioned to live in overcrowded accommodations because of the high population density (Breitung and Gunter 2006, 102). A city's density, according to Pile (2005a, 242), is what attracts ghosts to gather and haunt in "greater numbers" and in "wider variety." Ghosts can also be read as a symbolic outcome of the capitalist practice of commodifying every single element, from buildings to individuals, in the urban space. LeFebvre's (1991, 340) description of commodity takes on a ghostly appearance— "divorced, during its existence, from its materiality" yet desiring to materialize in any given opportunity. Adam Knee (2009b, 73) also contends in his discussion of *The Eye* that the city is imagined as a place where ghosts call it "home" as much as the city dwellers. He highlights the fact that there are many "disused public spaces" even in concentrated sites that appear desolated, causing an unpleasant feeling of unease that is often associated with being haunted (ibid., 73).

In many scenes, the hallway of her residence is shown as poorly lit and claustrophobic with cold, steel-gray walls. The rows of end-barred doors of each unit appear homogenous and columbarium-like; it is difficult to distinguish the homes from one another. This image can be interpreted as a manner in which the lines are blurred when the dead inhibits the realm of the living, reflecting the ambiguity of life and afterlife. The repetitiveness of the apartment units as well as other modern high-rise structures which appear in the film are all products of capitalist commodification whereby the built environment (including living quarters) bears a reproducible quality that LeFebvre (1991, 75) criticizes as "artificial and contrived" and without traces of "spontaneity and naturalness." Additionally, modern architecture in urban space gravitates toward homogeneity in which the [con]fusion "between geometrical and visual" (ibid., 200) conjures only a sense of discomfort for the city's inhabitants. The cityscape of Hong Kong, in this regard, is an exchangeable product in its entirety.

This indistinguishable quality also hints at the homogeneity of the Chinese population in Hong Kong, with recent immigrants being those who came from China itself (Breitung and Gunter 2006, 102). But as the megalopolis becomes more heterogeneous in the age of globalization, the Hong Kong Chinese now desires to retrieve the lost community that stems from a "homogenous social space" (Huang 2004, 38). *The Eye* casts the postcolonial city as an unspeakable third space that still remains oblivious to the implications of social otherness. In the film, modernity offers a range of fears to the city's population as suggested by the different ghosts that manifest before Mun's eyes. Her initial blindness shelters her from seeing these ghosts, or otherwise, the othered bodies. In the scene following her violin recital, Mun reacts uneasily to the sight of an albino man who works for the orchestra organization. His physical appearance is symbolic of otherness— one whose presence seems unfamiliar and foreign in a space where homogeneity reigns. The gaining of eyesight for Mun is

symbolic of gaining awareness of herself and the other bodies, especially those which are trapped in the liminal "realm of otherness and of becoming-other" (LeFebvre 1991, 187). She cannot tell if he is a ghost or a living person after encountering several spirits in her surroundings since regaining her sight. This scene depicts Mun's confusion as her sight strengthens for she finds great difficulty in drawing a distinction between the living and the dead. What this implies is that city life is made in the context of "misrecognition of people by people" (Pile 2005a, 246).

Mun's ability to see the departed souls demonstrates her ability to see beyond Hong Kong's modern, affluent façade. Her grandmother has always recognized Mun's special disposition—that she "can see what others can't see and feel the pain that others can't feel[4]." Her capacity for seeing and feeling the pain becomes a burden because part of this is witnessing the victimization of certain types of bodies within the city. The dead in *The Eye* are predominantly women and children. Leonie Sandercock (2005, 219) argues that many urban fears are based on social bodies that produce disorder and "dis/ease" particularly bodies of women and children. The majority of women in modern Hong Kong are no longer conforming to traditional roles, therefore radically changing the familial patterns in the fabric of its society. Their distant, unreachable status is othered by traditional Confucian gender paradigm. The film insinuates that Mun has been brought up by a grandparent instead of her own mother. In one scene, she is shown viewing a video recording of her as a blind child. Her grandmother indicates that Mun's parents have since divorced and that her father has migrated to Canada. The maternal figure is clearly absent from Mun's life and replaced instead by an aged grandparent. The character Ying, a young cancer patient, also shares a similar situation with Mun. Throughout the film, she is seen wandering the hospital

[4] Based on the film's official English subtitles.

without her parents in sight. When she finally succumbs to cancer, Ying Ying dies alone.

The maternal has become a symbolic ghost of feminine past. From a Confucian perspective, motherhood implies power and agency for women whose primary responsibilities include child begetting, bearing and rearing (Tao 2004, 166). Within the traditional Chinese framework, mothers command high respect because of their commitment to the family. Traditionally, the mother acts a "cultural transmitter" early in the lives of her children (Tu 1992, 72). The lack or absence of mother(hood), as the film suggests, shows the "lost state" that Hong Kong is in at the point of returning to Mainland (motherland) China, after having been separated by politics (communism/capitalism) and colonization for many years. As China's child, Hong Kong has "mixed feelings" toward its mother due to postcolonial ambivalence (Ng and Yeh 2009, 150). China, in this light, has nurtured Hong Kong and holds its distant, cultural past; the Handover, however, subjects the citizens to negotiate this with their hybridized, urban identities. The desolation of bodies and identity crises depicted in *The Eye* represents the outcome of Hong Kong's separation from its cultural origin, China and the peoples' difficulty in threading the liminal state of the city. Here, the lack and postcolonial ambivalence that Hong Kong suffers is apparent. China has long been absent from the political consciousness of Hong Kong prior to its return to motherland and as a putative "maternal" figure, it is aligned with the general "unfamiliar", difference and otherness in the collective consciousness of the residents, leading on to their ambivalence.

Sandercock (2005) also sees children as fearful or threatening bodies in the urban space. This is because children in cities are divested of the qualities with which they are traditionally associated with, such as innocence and purity, and have instead become agents of violence. The city affords them with experimentations that often veer

toward the dangerous (Tilton, 2010). Conversely, children are also often victims of cultural conditions. Despite Hong Kong's modernity, its education system is still based on a traditional Confucian framework, one that is based on examinations and merit-based performances. Due to the increasing commodification of education, many Chinese adolescents are forced to become competitive and subjected to the pressures of achieving academic excellence in hopes of improving their socio-economic status (Banks 2012, 1109). This situation also hosts a space for the growing trend of suicides among the young in Hong Kong. According to a study by Lai and McBride-Chang (2001) on suicide ideation in Hong Kong, the common factors that influence adolescents' suicide behaviors include depression, poor self-esteem, family problems and most of all, poor school performance.

In the film, the ghost of the schoolboy who lost his report card speaks of this social ill in Hong Kong. The schoolboy continues to haunt the apartment building and repeatedly jumps off a window during nighttime[5]. In one scene, the parents of the schoolboy express their remorse over their loss. Mourning lanterns are hung at the entrance of their apartment unit. A medium shot shows the schoolboy's framed photograph placed on an altar and surrounded by joss sticks. The living space is filled with memories of him such as live action figures and *Playstation*. The lost report card signifies the boy's fear of academic failure, and ultimately, disappointing his parents. There is also a clear breakdown, as suggested in this scene, in terms of the relationship between children and their parents, which also can be interpreted as a causational factor of his repeating deaths. One of the important Confucian obligations for a child is filial piety to his parents; the mother is, in fact, the main credit for a child's achievement (Birge 1989, 352). The obligation remains an instrumental yet intricate part in

[5] In Chinese folk beliefs, ghosts who have been wronged or have transgressed are therefore trapped in this world and cannot proceed to the next unless they are pacified.

becoming a virtuous and successful person by subordinating oneself to the parents, typically by being diligent in achieving academic excellence (Li 2014, 105-106)[6]. This filial obligation is what draws the schoolboy's ghost back to his parents, where he can be seen eating the food offering laid out for the departed in front of their apartment unit. But the manner of which the schoolboy haunts demonstrates such submissiveness to his elderlies. He continuously asks Mun in the stairwell to see if she has seen his lost report card in fear of his living parents' (strict) expectations.

Finally, offerings and appeasement to the dead are portrayed as a common social practice among the Chinese in Hong Kong. Performed within the modern high-rises, such depictions represent the conflicting constructions of cultural identity that emerge in contemporary Hong Kong. *The Eye* illustrates how modern biological technology (in the form of ocular surgery) has exposed Mun to the horrors that surround the city which no positivist medication can help erase the spiritual disturbances. Ancient Chinese medicine, sorcerers or masters are often looked into to "cure" such occurrences despite the availability of legitimate, Western medication. The developments following Mun's constant encounter with the dead schoolboy reveal some interesting manifestations of traditional (Mainland) Chinese culture in postcolonial Hong Kong. Mun's grandmother has witnessed her grandchild conversing with the ghost of the schoolboy, who was a neighbor. When Mun returns home later in the evening, her grandmother and Yee are seen burning joss paper to appease the spirit of their neighbor's dead child. According to Eva Wong (2011, 114), this ritual is done in appeasing or placating the restless spirits with such offerings. In Taoism, some spirits of the dead are believed to be roaming the earth in disgruntlement because their former

[6] Filial behavior needs remonstration by the child if the parents do any wrong. Without this, respect for the elderly tend to become mere submissive obedience, hence disrupting the harmonious relationship needed in the family (Li 2014, 106).

manifestation was killed, mistreated or led to committing suicide (Wong, 2011). Likewise, Hong Kong horror films often features ghosts who linger on earth when reincarnation becomes impossible for them. The recurring theme of reincarnation is metaphorical for Hong Kong's hybridity that makes its people caught between modern worldviews and traditional Sino beliefs (Teo 2001, 225). Reincarnation suggests that the old persists in what seems to be in new forms.

An intense exorcism scene ensues after the grieving parents invite a Taoist master to conduct the rigorous ritual. The goal of such exorcism is not to destroy the spirit but to prevent it from returning in a displeased state by capturing, rehabilitating and sending it to the underworld (Wong 2011, 112). In a very elaborate cross-cut sequence, the exorcism shows the Taoist master performing the ritual with close-ups of joysticks and talisman, accompanied with the forceful, violin tones deriving from Mun's performance at her recital. Medium close-up shots of the boy's photograph on the altar are interspersed with those that show Mun rapidly bowing on her violin. The intensity of both the master's exorcism and Mun's performance mirrors their need to put the ghosts at bay from the living. Once the exorcism ends, Mun passes out on stage. The Taoist master serves as a symbol of history and tradition, thus overshadowing Hong Kong's modernistic values of science, logic and reasoning. By presenting this ritual, *The Eye* overtly and actively addresses the citizens' desire to address certain needs by way of the prism of the Chinese past.

Isolation and Indifference

In his analysis of Hong Kong culture, Abbas writes:

> Hong Kong's history is one of shock and radical changes. As if to protect themselves against this series of traumas, Hong Kong people have little memory and no sentiment for the past. The general attitude to everything, sometimes indistinguishable from the spirit of enterprise, is cancel out and pass on. (1997, 26)

Hong Kong's particular "cancel out and pass on" approach to life was prevalent among its citizens before the island state's return to China. The city is often perceived as "transitional" and many of its inhabitants do not see Hong Kong as a final destination but instead a place to acquire wealth before moving on to the West. According to Abbas (1997, 26), any changes in the socio-political climate quickly disappear just as they appear, making the cultural space of Hong Kong unpredictable and subjective. Emilie Yeh and Neda Ng (2009, 147) also describe Hong Kong's reluctance to go "home" to its motherland as a fear of "re-encountering an alien "origin"." Having little memory of this particular "origin" makes China seems a "strange and familiar" place to call home, and one way for the Chinese in Hong Kong to negotiate a sense of belonging is to suppress such anxiety, to take a "wait and see" attitude, and move forward in isolation. The yearning for the past happens to be a common method of coping among the residents of Hong Kong.[7]

The film stresses isolation and the lack of connection not only between the ghosts that haunt the living but also between the living themselves. Each ghost haunts separate sites and hidden corners of the city of Hong Kong. The motif of having a solitary existence is, as the narrative suggests, a crucial link to the condition of modern living in a consumerist society. The inhabitants of Hong Kong may be a part of a huge, metropolitan crowd yet the film renders them as isolated individuals who only happen to live in close proximity to each other. Despite Mun's overcrowded living condition, for example, she is often seen alone in the vicinity except on occasions when the ghosts appear before her. Empty spaces are shot at canted angles; the use of predominantly long shots, medium shots and selective focus[8] throughout the film mirrors the

[7] This explains the social phenomenon of nostalgia, which according to Chan (2012, 257), has been entrenched in Hong Kong since the 1980s and becomes, ultimately, a profitable "popular genre."
[8] The image of each ghost tends to be blurry in perspective.

loneliness of the living as their deceased loved ones continue to linger unseen. The painful separation between life and death is unbearable, and the living must continue to cope with loss.

A separate scene shows the ghosts of a mother and child haunting an old restaurant where Mun goes to have lunch. Although they haunt as a pair, the mother seems alone and unconnected to her child. The ghostly pair also functions as a powerful metaphor for absent maternalism that is on the increase in a modern society like Hong Kong. We learn from the waitress that they frequently pay a visit to the reserved restaurant owner, who is the husband and father. The monotonous, almost soulless moves of his meat-chopping, his stoicism and his silence do not easily externalize the pain of losing a wife and child. Instead, his longing for them can only be seen through their family photographs lining one of the walls of the restaurant. His refusal to sell his shop to developers who wish to demolish it in order to make "way for modern construction" (Knee 2009b, 73) alludes to Hong Kong's politics of disappearance as expounded by Abbas (1997). *The Eye* articulates the issues of isolation and alienation that pervade Hong Kong and the indifference that the city breeds, which is further symbolized by the restaurant owner's selling the meat to feed the city's insatiable capitalistic desires.

Pile (2005b, 1) reiterates how the city is a space made up of social relations, and which supposedly "bring[s] together people." Yet, the reality is that many modern cities intensify the psychological and physical distance between them (ibid., 8). Technology such as telephones, Pile (ibid., 18) writes, allows people to connect with one another, but it also absolves the need for them to meet face to face. In fact, a number of public crowd scenes in the film depict Hong Kong as a city of strangers despite the importance of communal living amongst Asians. For example, the film introduces Mun as an unassuming blind girl at the beginning of the film, who finds her way in the cold,

crowded streets of downtown Hong Kong. Each pedestrian in the crowd seems to be preoccupied with his or her own thoughts. A woman walks alongside Mun only to speak into her cell phone than being mindful of her surroundings. Each person in this scene, including the protagonist herself, seems alone, detached and indifferent to one another. In one of the recital scenes, Mun sits alone among her among her blind colleagues after a rehearsal—they do not engage in any forms of communication, preferring instead to concentrate on packing their instruments and leaving the auditorium.

In a later scene, Mun retreats into her bedroom and draws the curtains shut to replicate the blindness that she is familiar with to drown the overwhelming feeling of fear from seeing the dead. She refuses all contact with her family and does not leave her bedroom until her psychotherapist, Dr. Wah forces his way in and breaks her isolation. Modernity is exemplified in this scene as "blinding" and overwhelming—seeing what lies in the city has been an uncanny, painful and challenging experience for Mun as she has to deal with this quandary alone. Her eventual isolation is a declaration of discontent but also indicative of wider social problems of disconnection. Abbas (2010, 25) notes that such unhappiness is not only relative to the emotional state of mind but also related to the structure of space and time that has become disjointed. Thus, an unhappy city is a place that is disconnected from its historic past and present relations. These all emphasize the unfavorable living conditions of Hong Kong, thereby denying the urban space as a place fit for human survival. As Andrew Lees (1985, 215) observes, cities in general has been vilified historically due to its propensity to bring large numbers of people into close proximity yet urban living fosters fear and reduces social contact. The Hong Kong megalopolis only maintains a façade of sociality while the inhabitants remain profoundly alone and lost, with no roots to hold on to—much like the lost souls of the ghosts we see in the film. *The Eye* focuses on the lack of a

sense of belonging for both the ghosts and the city's inhabitants alike, thus implying a denial of Hong Kong's cultural identity that is dependent from China's (Leung 2002, 227).

Thailand: Romanticizing the Past

The drawback of postcolonial Hong Kong that we see in the film is further illustrated with the inclusion of Thailand as another prominent setting. Knee (2009a, 87) writes that Southeast Asian countries, especially Thailand, are often represented in Hong Kong cinema as fearful places with "strong association with the supernatural,"[9] particularly sorcery, witchcraft and black magic. He asserts that Thailand is often cinematically imagined as a site that is also "socially and technologically backwards, less developed and less prosperous" when framed against Hong Kong (ibid., 88). *The Eye* is partly set in Thailand to elucidate the binary opposition between the modern, rational and positivist Hong Kong with its biomedical technology and Thailand as the source of "inexplicable forces" that threaten to disrupt Mun's life (ibid., 85). What is important to realise is that Thailand is one of the countries in Southeast Asia that was never colonized— a circumstance that is in sharp contrast to modern postcolonial Hong Kong.

The Handover has also rekindled a form of consciousness among its people to reclaim their traditional Chinese roots while negotiating a distinct, modern identity of

[9] Thailand's film portrayal, in fact, seems to accord to the supernatural beliefs of the Thai race that the dead indeed live among us. Ghosts and spirit cults are still carried out in present-day Thailand to assure agricultural fertility, maintain family and communal cohesion as well as to ease social anxiety and tension (Kitiarsa 2012). The supernatural remains an important part of the everyday life whereby the ritual processes involving 'ancestral ghosts' are shown to be the core of the Thais' traditional institutions (ibid., 205). Ancestor worship and spirit possession in mostly rural Thailand are also perceived by some scholars as a "site of resistance" toward modern development centered in Bangkok (Horstmann 2012, 184).

their own. To decode and to understand this "strange" yet "familiar" past is to imagine what the past must be like. This re-imagination of history is portrayed in the film through Thailand, a space that has long become an emblem of the diasporic dimensions of modern Chinese identity in many Hong Kong films (Knee 2009b, 84). Knee writes:

> This identity is herein implicitly characterized as involving supportive emotional ties to a larger quasi-familial community but subject to constant movement, uncertainty and instability, a function of the geographical, national, social and temporal dispersal of the community. (ibid., 84)

Chinese ethnicity, in this context, is flavored by its geographical situations. Therefore, the identity of the Chinese in Hong Kong is imagined and constructed by certain regional space and culture—that of rural Thailand. Their identity is unstable or "floating" due to the internal struggle between upholding modern, rational values and preserving traditions which are rooted in cultural history (ibid., 84). LeFebvre suggests a need for resistance of power and reformation of urban social and spatial structure—this, includes the necessary changing of space, architecture and the arrangement of the city, in order to ameliorate living standards, consolidate everyday conditions and ultimately, "change life" (1991, 190). Only with those changes can an alienating city be made habitable and exists as a Utopian alternative to "existing 'real' space" (ibid., 349). This notion of Utopia points to "the return of an idea to an ideal state" where "work spaces, leisure spaces and living spaces" (ibid., 59) are no longer divided into private/ public dichotomy nor controlled by bureaucratic power agents and dominant hegemonic ideologies. He acknowledges the "obsession" with a certain "space of history" (ibid., 122) that describes traditional dwelling spaces and social practices which are considerably lost in contemporary modern settings. The traditional social relations and structure are believed to be founded predominantly on kinship and group ties whereas the urban, consumerist community in which LeFebvre describes tend to express a clear lack of socialization and communal existence. In such a context, rural

Thailand serves as a romanticized space for the Chinese of Hong Kong to imagine how the past could serve as the panacea for all the anxieties brought forth by the modern.

The Eye's narrative extends to show Mun traveling to Thailand with Dr. Wah to determine the source of her ocular gift. The corneal implants that Mun receives in Hong Kong once belonged to the late donor Ling, a Sino-Thai woman who had the same ability to foresee deaths. The eyes of Ling that Mun inherits are symbolic of the alterity of a ghostly, foreign past. The inheritance of sight is a conversation between the diasporic Chinese in Thailand and those who share common lineage within China's boundaries. *The Eye*'s motif of haunting vision also gauges the commensurability of Chinese transnationality in present-day Thailand and Hong Kong (Furhmann 2008, 94). Notions of Thai nationhood and modernity had in part depended on the Chinese exclusion since the early 20th century (ibid., 95). Traumatic aspects of Sino-Thai history are revived through the connection that Mun has with her Thai donor. The uneven history of anti-and-pro-Chinese sentiments in Thailand has in fact caught the Sino-Thais in the middle of denigration, denial and current reassertions during the process of cultural assimilation (ibid., 106).

The main backdrop of Thailand in *The Eye* is Siem Rach, an underdeveloped province where Ling once lived. As the narrative moves into the countryside, the colors of the environment become more sepia-toned, suggesting an antiquated feel of space itself. To contrast Hong Kong's modernity with rural Thailand, Mun and Dr. Wah are seen riding an old Volkswagen bus to the Sayam Rat hospital where Ling's documents are housed. The space appears decrepit with its wooden walls and spinning ceiling fans; its hallways are narrow and congested with patients. The dark wood interior of the hospital indicates that it is a timeworn government building. Meanwhile, a black crow perches next to a curtain moving in the wind. In contrast, the hallways of the hospital we see earlier in Hong Kong appear to be an ordered space with a professional, albeit

sterile and dispiriting ambiance. This hospital scene in Thailand reflects from the point of view of a patient in a state of traumatic injury rather than the seclusion and remoteness that the hospital patients endure in Hong Kong (ibid., 102).

Furthermore, unlike Mun's crammed residence in Hong Kong, Ling's home is a two-story wooden house located amidst the tropical backwoods of a village where her surviving mother, Aunt Chui lives. This is where Mun learns about Ling's mysterious foresight. A black-and-white photo of young Ling is placed in the living room[10] and a marked-up Chinese calendar hangs on the wall, showing how Aunt Chui has been counting the days since Ling's death. Later that night, in a form of a flashback sequence, Ling's spirit emerges and reveals to Mun that her uncanny gift of seeing the future has caused the villagers to perceive her as an unwelcome bearer of misfortune. She also regrets her failure in saving them from a catastrophic fire she had earlier foreseen. A series of abrupt cuts shows Ling stepping up onto a chair and repeatedly hanging herself every night. Mun realizes that Ling is caught in a "time warp" of suicides, similar to the schoolboy back in Hong Kong. This suicide is inevitably linked to the law of Buddhist karma that many Thais adhere to. Peter Harvey (2003, 286) notes that suicide is deemed ineffective according to Buddhist principles because the next rebirth may be a severe one, and a devout Buddhist should be willing to live patiently through despair or unpleasant experiences. The rebirth can exist in the form of hell or a "frustrated ghost," leading to a more "intolerably painful" existence afterlife (ibid., 286; Mulder 2000, 84). Ling exemplifies this suffering and continues to reach out to Mun to bring her back to her past or her "home" so she can be united again with her grieving mother.

[10] This is a Chinese way of commemorating death as previously shown in the family apartment of the schoolboy who committed suicide in Hong Kong.

The representation of Ling's desires to return to her mother resonates with the Confucian beliefs in filial piety. According to Niels Mulder's (2000) observation on Thai education, the mother is the most important person in a child's life for she has given life to the child, suffering for and feeding it at great psychological and physical cost to herself. While the idea is similar to Confucianism, the mother inherently becomes a moral debt upon her child that can never be repaid (ibid., 70). Ling's suicide is deemed disrespectful to this principle for her suicide is an unappreciative gesture to her mother who has "produced" her life beforehand. Aunt Chui is initially portrayed as unforgiving in her disappointment and grief after Ling's death. She insists that Ling was the one who left her when she was always trying to protect Ling all her life. Mun steps in as a substitute for Ling and hangs herself to help reconcile Aunt Chui and her daughter. The film climaxes with Aunt Chui finally relenting and running to save Mun from suffering Ling's fate. Subsequently, Ling is released from the tormenting cycle once her mother has forgiven her.

Conclusion

The communal rural Thailand is a space where Mun gets the opportunity to "see" an ideal world where human connection is greatly valued. Unlike Mun's absent mother in Hong Kong, Ling's mother remains emotionally and physically available to her daughter even after the latter's death. The reconciliation gives a sense of relief and fulfillment for Mun, thus enabling her to appreciate the beauty of her surroundings as she has earlier speculated in the film's opening scene. This fragile relationship between mother and child is analogous to Hong Kong's postcolonial ambivalence toward China. Regardless of the Handover, *The Eye* necessitates the need for Hong Kong (as a "child") to return to its motherland China as well as to correspond with its own precolonial past that will help heal the collective anxieties stemming from estranged,

modern mechanism. Thailand's rural space can also be read as the LeFebvrian solution to the drawbacks of urban life— a topography that consolidates a "harmonious whole, as an organic meditation between earth and heaven" (1991, 271). The idea of peacefulness is further reinforced when Mun and Dr. Wah visit Ling's grave in the lush countryside. The green space is a far cry from the alienating darkness of urban Hong Kong as clear sunshine alights the burial ground. Mun also sees children swimming in the murky river and playing football in the muddy fields while the adults communicate with one another in a tiny market. Her smile is reflected on the window of the bus, suggesting that she has found peace within herself away from the suffering and pain that seem characteristic of modernity and urban spaces. This idyllic environment of Thailand mirrors Hong Kong's imagination of what their (human) roots are meant to be.

Pattana Kitiarsa (2012, 184) notes that while tradition and modernity are generally interconnected and complementary to one another in Thailand, the nation-state often perceives Western-style modernity with caution and doubt. Thais are generally receptive to science, technology and development but they have also been conscious of the growing tensions created by the conditions of being modern (ibid., 184). Urban Bangkok, for example, is portrayed in the film as a space that bears striking resemblance to the skyline of Hong Kong, with its concrete flats and billboards (as seen during the arrival of Mun and Dr. Lo in Thailand). Toward the end, horror begins again in downtown Bangkok where Mun forecasts an explosion that will kill many lives. In her attempt to warn the others, Mun loses her sight again from a flying shrapnel. The film seems to suggest that big cities such as Hong Kong and Bangkok are fraught with dangers and drawbacks of modern life. Indeed, modernity in the Thai context implies something imported, "foreign" and also the "radical break-up" of social life (Horstmann 2012, 204). This form of cultural nostalgia is a way to retrieve ideas that a

local past is better than the present modern. *The Eye* evidently romanticizes rural Thailand as a desirable space that is associated with simplicity and connectedness while Hong Kong's progressive disposition is rendered anomic.

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