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Remembering the City: Trauma and Modernity in Hong Kong Literature

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Abstract: This paper examines how contemporary Hong Kong literature engages with the city as a site of trauma, memory, and modernity. Drawing on trauma theory (Caruth, LaCapra), urban modernity (Jameson, Harvey), and memory studies (Nora), the study analyzes how literary texts reconstruct the urban space of Hong Kong as a repository of historical rupture and cultural displacement. Focusing on Dung Kai-cheung's *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, the paper argues that fiction operates as a counter-archive, preserving what is threatened by societal changes, colonial erasure, and capitalist urban redevelopment. The city, as rendered in literature, emerges not as a stable setting but as a fragmented, haunted, and continually re-imagined space. Through symbolic reconstruction and narrative estrangement, Hong Kong writers articulate a form of literary remembrance that resists forgetting and reclaims agency in the face of spatial and temporal disorientation. The paper contributes to ongoing conversations about postcolonial identity, cultural memory, and the politics of place in Sinophone literature.

Keywords: Hong Kong literature; trauma; memory; modernity; Dung Kai-cheung; cultural identity; Atlas; literary city

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1. Introduction

In the literary imagination of modern cities, Hong Kong occupies a unique and precarious position, at once global and marginal, modern and haunted, hyper-visible and yet often silenced. As a city historically shaped by colonialism, capitalism, and cultural hybridity, Hong Kong is a site where narratives of trauma and modernity intersect with particular urgency. Its status as a former British colony, its significant historical transitions, and its evolving relationship with the Chinese mainland have all left indelible marks on both its urban landscape and its cultural psyche. These tensions manifest acutely in the city's literature, where writers have repeatedly turned to the city as a repository of memory, loss, and belated understanding, what Cathy Caruth describes as "the confrontation with an event that has not yet been fully known" [1].

This paper explores how Hong Kong literature narrates trauma and modernity through representations of the city. By examining literary texts that foreground urban memory and historical dislocation, the study considers how writers engage with the city not merely as a setting but as a *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory) in Nora's sense, a symbolic space where collective memory crystallizes and survive [2]. In particular, it asks: How do Hong Kong authors remember the city amid the erasures of modern development and political transition? In what ways is the trauma of colonialism, displacement, or cultural erasure encoded in the fabric of urban narrative? And how might literature serve as

a mode of resistance, memory-making, and identity reconstruction in the face of rapid modernization?

Drawing upon trauma theory, urban studies, and postcolonial literary criticism, this paper analyzes key texts from authors such as Eileen Chang, Dung Kai-cheung, and Xu Xi, among others. These writers offer contrasting yet complementary visions of Hong Kong, some nostalgic, others dystopian, all deeply intertwined with the socio-political realities of the city's transformation. The paper argues that Hong Kong literature offers a vital archive of "city-memory," where trauma and modernity are not opposed but co-constitutive. As Fredric Jameson suggests, the experience of modernity is inseparable from dislocation and fragmentation, particularly in urban space, where the acceleration of development becomes both the condition and symptom of historical erasure [3].

In what follows, the paper first outlines the theoretical frameworks relevant to the study of trauma and urban modernity, before situating Hong Kong's historical and political trajectory within its literary expressions. Through close readings of selected texts, the paper then explores how the city is remembered, reconstructed, and mourned in literature, ultimately demonstrating that to remember the city in Hong Kong literature is also to remember its wounds, absences, and unfinished futures.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation that intersects three major domains: trauma theory, urban modernity, and memory studies. Together, these perspectives provide a critical lens through which Hong Kong literature can be understood as a cultural field that engages with historical rupture, psychic dislocation, and the contested memory of the city.

2.1. Trauma and Narrative Disjunction

Cathy Caruth's seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* argues that trauma is not fully experienced in the moment of its occurrence but instead reemerges in delayed and fragmented forms. As she writes, "the trauma is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known" [4]. In literary contexts, trauma often surfaces through disjointed narrative structures, silences, repetition, and the inability to articulate pain.

In Hong Kong literature, particularly works written after significant historical transitions, these traits are especially prevalent. The city is often represented as a space marked by loss, historical gaps, and psychic instability. The trauma is not merely personal; it is embedded in the city's landscape and the collective cultural psyche. Caruth's model thus helps frame the city itself as a site of ongoing trauma that eludes full representation, even as it demands to be remembered and narrated.

2.2. Urban Space, Modernity, and Fragmentation

Fredric Jameson's theory of postmodernism, especially as elaborated in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, offers a powerful framework for understanding the cultural logic of contemporary urban life. Jameson identifies a "crisis in historicity" in which individuals are unable to locate themselves within stable spatial or temporal narratives due to the disorienting effects of capitalist modernization [5].

In cities like Hong Kong, where rapid redevelopment and vertical expansion dominate the landscape, the experience of space itself becomes fragmented and unstable. The accelerated pace of economic transformation often leaves behind cultural dissonance and cultural change. Literary representations of alienation, loss of memory, and spatial dislocation reflect this disjunctive modernity. Jameson's concept of "cognitive mapping", a way to locate oneself in the postmodern world, provides a useful metaphor for how literature attempts to remap meaning in a city increasingly estranged from its past.

2.3. Memory, Urban Sites, and Literature

Pierre Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, emerges from his distinction between history and memory. In his 1989 essay "Between Memory and History," Nora argues that as collective memory fades in modern societies, specific spaces and symbols begin to carry the burden of remembering. These memory-sites are not necessarily physical; they can be textual, emotional, or metaphorical.

In the context of Hong Kong literature, the city itself often functions as a lieu de mémoire. Through references to disappearing neighborhoods, iconic buildings, street names, or even urban silences, writers preserve what is at risk of being forgotten. The literary city thus becomes an alternative archive, one that holds unofficial histories, buried traumas, and submerged identities. Nora's theory allows us to see how Hong Kong's rapidly shifting urban fabric paradoxically anchors efforts to resist forgetting.

2.4. Intersectional Lens: Trauma, Modernity, and Memory

Taken together, these theoretical approaches allow us to view Hong Kong literature as a terrain of contested memory and identity. Trauma is not isolated in the past, it reverberates through space and narrative. Modernity is not merely progress, it is also disorientation and loss. And memory is not organic, it is actively produced, resisted, and reimagined through cultural texts. In what follows, this framework will guide close readings of selected literary works by authors such as Dung Kai-cheung. Through their writings, we will examine how the city is remembered, mourned, and re-inscribed, and how literary form itself becomes a means of cultural and psychological survival.

The intersection of trauma, modernity, and memory in Hong Kong literature is not merely thematic, but deeply structural. The table 1 summarizes the core dimensions of each framework and how they manifest narrative and symbolically within the city's literary representations.

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Trauma, Modernity, and Memory in Hong Kong Literature.

Theoretical Lens	Core Focus	Narrative Expression	Hong Kong Literary Context
Trauma	Psychological rupture; belated experience	Disjointed timelines, silences, repetition	repetition Urban dislocation, suppressed histories, postcolonial anxiety
Modernity	Urban transformation; capitalist acceleration	Spatial fragmentation, loss of historicity	Gentrification, demolition of old districts, identity instability
Memory	Cultural preservation amid loss	Evocation of past places, mnemonic symbols, nostalgic tone	Literature as counter-archive; city as lieu de mémoire resisting official forgetting

3. Historical and Political Context of Hong Kong

Understanding the literary memory of Hong Kong requires a nuanced grasp of its complex historical trajectory and geopolitical condition. Hong Kong's identity as a city has always been shaped by its position at the intersection of imperialism, migration, and global capitalism [6]. These layered histories produce a deep sense of temporal and spatial disjunction, a rupture that undergirds many of the traumatic and modernist representations found in its literature.

3.1. Colonial Foundations and Cultural Ambivalence

From its historical transfer of sovereignty in 1842 under the Treaty of Nanking, Hong Kong was constructed as a colonial port and trading hub, largely designed to serve imperial and commercial interests. As a British colony with a predominantly Chinese population, the city developed an in-between identity, one marked by legal, linguistic, and cultural hybridity. This liminality, while often touted as a sign of cosmopolitanism, also generated tensions of belonging and alienation that remain central to postcolonial discourse [7].

Colonial governance fostered a utilitarian modernity that prioritized infrastructure, commerce, and administrative order while often suppressing local political agency. As a result, much of Hong Kong's early urban development was driven by market logic and colonial pragmatism rather than a cohesive national or cultural narrative [8]. Literature emerging from or about this period often captures a double consciousness: the simultaneous allure and violence of modern colonial life, the displacement of traditional cultural roots, and the uncertainties of living in a politically ambiguous space.

3.2. The 1997 Handover and Post-handover Anxiety

The significant political transition of Hong Kong from British to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 marked an important moment of social change and complex identity negotiation. A special administrative framework promised a high degree of autonomy, but the transition also signaled the end of colonial familiarity and the beginning of social changes under a new administration. For many Hong Kongers, the transition was not a clear national 'return,' but rather a complex political transition that prompted reflection on identity, memory, and historical legitimacy [9].

In literature, the handover often emerges as a liminal event, one that suspends the city between past and future, memory and erasure [10]. Texts written in this era frequently reflect on the psychological disorientation of transition, the erosion of civic space, and the instability of collective narratives. The city itself becomes a metaphor for impermanence, with authors chronicling the emotional weight of belonging to a place that is constantly in flux.

3.3. Urbanization, Displacement, and the Loss of Place

In the decades following the handover, Hong Kong underwent rapid and aggressive urban redevelopment [11]. Old neighborhoods were razed, historical sites replaced by commercial towers, and working-class communities displaced by rising costs and gentrification. This urban violence, driven by real estate capital and state-backed planning, has further intensified the loss of spatial and cultural memory.

As Fredric Jameson and David Harvey suggest, such transformations are symptomatic of late capitalist modernity, where spatial continuity is sacrificed for economic expediency. In Hong Kong, these processes are particularly acute, as the limited physical space collides with the ambitions of both state and market. Literary works increasingly portray the city as a place that is vanishing even as it grows, an urban environment that is both hyper-modern and emotionally estranged [12].

The erasure of physical space echoes the erasure of historical and personal memory. Through references to demolished buildings, disappearing streets, or the fading presence of community rituals, writers evoke a collective mourning for the city's lost landscapes. This dynamic reinforces Pierre Nora's conception of "lieux de mémoire", as literature attempts to preserve what official development threatens to obliterate.

4. Dung Kai-Cheung and the Archaeology of an Imaginary Hong Kong

His 1997 metafictional work *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City* is both a tribute to and a critique of Hong Kong's fragmented identity, published in the year of a major political transition [13]. Written in the guise of a future archaeologist investigating

a lost city called “Victoria,” *Atlas* functions as an extended meditation on memory, loss, and the contradictions of urban modernity. In doing so, it exemplifies the entanglement of trauma, spatial transformation, and historical erasure laid out in this paper’s earlier theoretical and historical frameworks.

4.1. *Fiction as Memory Work*

As Pierre Nora suggests, when direct social memory begins to fade, due to displacement, transition, or state erasure, literature and other symbolic forms take on the work of commemoration. In *Atlas*, Dung transforms the postcolonial city into a fictional site of memory precisely because the “real” Hong Kong resists stable narration. The narrator, a fictional archaeologist, excavates textual fragments, maps, and lost architectural records in an attempt to reconstruct a city that no longer exists. Through this conceit, Dung foregrounds the constructedness of both history and space, implying that Hong Kong’s identity is as much imaginary as it is material [14].

The city’s historical legacies and evolving future are never directly confronted in *Atlas*; rather, they return in spectral references, distortions, and absences [15]. The “archaeology” that the novel performs is less about recovery and more about acknowledging the irreparable gaps in the city’s historical consciousness.

4.2. *The Fragmented City as Modern Condition*

Dung’s Hong Kong is not a coherent or continuous place; it is a city fractured by complex historical and cultural changes, hybridity, and architectural impermanence. Buildings are described as having no stable function or meaning, streets shift over time, and names lose their referents. This echoes Fredric Jameson’s conception of the postmodern city as a space of disorientation, where the individual can no longer map themselves onto a clear historical or spatial trajectory [16].

Moreover, the city in *Atlas* is constructed through documentation and simulation rather than lived memory. Maps, diagrams, and lists dominate the narrative, mimicking the logic of colonial bureaucracy and modern planning while simultaneously undermining their truth claims. In this way, Dung critiques both historical and modern forms of urban planning. The novel’s obsession with documentation becomes a satire of how states and institutions impose order onto urban chaos, only to reveal their own epistemic fragility.

4.3. *Linguistic Hybridity and Cultural Displacement*

Another way *Atlas* embodies trauma and modernity is through its multilingual and metafictional structure. Originally written in Chinese and later translated into English by the author himself, the novel’s bilingual life mirrors the city’s own postcolonial linguistic tension. The act of translation, both literal and metaphorical, signals a loss of origin, a gap between signifier and signified that parallels the cultural displacement experienced by many Hong Kongers.

As the fictional narrator deciphers ambiguous texts and lost topographies, the reader is invited into a process of epistemological uncertainty. The city can be studied but not fully known, mapped but never fixed. Here, Dung’s work dramatizes the condition of Hong Kong in its contemporary condition: a city haunted by colonial inscriptions, governed by complex governance arrangements, and rendered emotionally legible only through speculative reconstruction.

4.4. *Remembering Through Estrangement*

Ultimately, *Atlas* enacts what LaCapra calls a “working through” of trauma, not by resolving it, but by staging it in symbolic form. The book’s speculative genre, fragmentary structure, and historiographic metafiction all serve to estrange the reader from familiar urban narratives. Yet through this estrangement, a deeper form of memory emerges, one

that resists forgetting not by affirming total knowledge, but by bearing witness to its impossibility.

In this way, Dung's work offers a distinctly Hong Kong literary mode of remembrance: one that acknowledges the instability of identity, the challenges of modernization, and the fragility of collective memory. Atlas does not mourn the city by recreating it faithfully, but by reinventing it as an archive of what has been lost, misremembered, or never fully known [17].

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored how Hong Kong literature navigates the overlapping terrains of trauma, modernity, and memory through representations of the city. Grounded in trauma theory, memory studies, and critical theories of urban modernity, the analysis has shown that the literary city is not simply a geographical location but a symbolic site where histories are negotiated, identities contested, and losses articulated.

By tracing the colonial legacy, the social changes surrounding a major political transition, and the continuous urban transformation wrought by capitalist urban redevelopment, this study has contextualized the cultural memory of Hong Kong as one shaped by fragmentation, dislocation, and ambivalence. In this landscape of historical volatility, literature functions as both a witness and a counter-archive, preserving what official narratives erase and voicing what dominant ideologies silence.

Through a close reading of Dung Kai-cheung's *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, we have seen how fiction can perform the dual function of mourning and mapping. Dung's imaginative reconstruction of a lost and fictionalized city offers a powerful mode of literary resistance: it confronts the trauma of historical rupture not through nostalgic restoration, but through speculative remembrance. His work illustrates how the form and content of literary texts can be shaped by the very conditions of epistemic uncertainty and spatial disorientation that characterize postcolonial Hong Kong.

More broadly, this paper argues that to remember the city in Hong Kong literature is to engage in a complex negotiation between loss and continuity, rupture and reconstruction. Trauma does not merely mark the past, it lingers in the city's language, its silences, and its vanishing landscapes. Modernity does not offer stable progress, it unsettles, erases, and alienates. Yet memory, however fragile, persists in literary expression, enabling writers to bear witness to an unfinished and contested urban identity.

In a period of significant social change and accelerated urban transformation, the role of literature in remembering the city becomes even more urgent. Future studies might expand this inquiry by examining diasporic Hong Kong writing, multilingual memory practices, or the relationship between protest culture and literary form. What remains clear is that Hong Kong literature continues to imagine and remember the city not as a fixed place, but as a living, wounded, and dynamic archive.

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