

國立交通大學

外國文學與語言學研究所

碩士論文

History, Memory, and Cultural Identity
in Yesi's Writings



也斯作品中之
歷史、記憶與文化身份

研究生：林麗英

指導教授：余君偉 教授

中華民國九十七年七月

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研究生：林麗英

Student: Li-Ying Lin

指導教授：余君偉

Advisor: Dr. Eric K.W. Yu

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學生：林麗英

指導教授：余君偉 博士

國立交通大學外國文學與語言學研究所文學組碩士班

中文摘要

本文探討香港作家也斯如何藉著他的作品處理歷史、記憶與文化身份的問題。分析的作品包括小說《記憶的城市，虛構的城市》(1993)、《形象香港》(1992)裡有關天安門事件的詩、以及收入《蔬菜的政治》(2006)的組詩「亞洲的滋味」。在這些作品中，也斯展現他對個人記憶及香港歷史發展的關切，也經由他的親身經驗和觀察去引導讀者思考香港的文化身份等問題。

本文共分為三章。第一章集中討論小說《記憶的城市，虛構的城市》的敘事者如何在其異國旅途上回顧過去，回溯他在香港成長與接受教育的過程，並思考他和他的朋友身為作家與藝術家所面臨的困境。在接近九七回歸的特殊歷史脈絡中，主角時常深陷於文化身份危機的苦思，卻又將自身的憂慮吊詭地混雜入當時香港大眾普遍的政治焦慮之中，試圖獲得讀者的共鳴並為自己找尋出口。第二章檢視三首有關天安門事件的詩，其中也斯探討天安門事件對中國人民的心理衝擊，同時也指出受到當時影響的香港移民問題。第三章的研究對象是組詩「亞洲的滋味」，闡釋也斯如何巧妙地結合食物與記憶，並檢視當中涉及的歷史記憶和文化身份的關係。在『盆菜』與『黃飯』中，也斯回溯香港和印尼的歷史發展，試圖透過這兩個地方的在地食物來探索當地獨特的文化身份。而在『亞洲的滋味』一詩中，也斯則期盼亞洲各國既可尊重彼此之間的文化差異，也能建立某種互相關懷的友好情誼。

關鍵字：也斯、歷史、記憶、文化身份、天安門事件、「亞洲的滋味」、《記憶的城市，虛構的城市》

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Student: Li-Ying Lin

Advisor: Dr. Eric K.W. Yu

Graduate Institute of Foreign Languages and Linguistics

National Chiao Tung University

Abstract

This thesis explores the related themes of history, memory and cultural identity in Yesi's works. The major texts included in this study are the novel *Cities of Memory*, *Cities of Fabrication* (1993), the Tiananmen poems in *City at the End of Time* (1992), and the verse cycle "Tasting Asia" (collected in *Vegetable Politics* [2006]). In these writings, Yesi shows his obsessions with personal memory as well as Hong Kong history. His recollections and observations as a Hong Kong writer invite the reader to reflect on the making of and anxieties about cultural identity.

My thesis is composed of four parts: an introduction and three consecutive chapters. The introduction provides the readers with the basic biographical information about Yesi and outlines my undertakings in the three consecutive chapters. Chapter 1 copes with the semi-autobiographical novel *Cities of Memory*, *Cities of Fabrication*, attending to the narrator's obsessions and apprehensions as a Hong Kong writer brought up during the British colonial rule and facing the handover of sovereignty back to Red China. I try to relate his highly personal experience and

memory to the larger questions about Hong Kong identity. Chapter 2 discusses three Tiananmen poems in relation to the psychological impact of the 1989 June Fourth Incident on Chinese and Hong Kong people. Chapter 3 analyzes how Yesi skillfully writes about history and cultural identity through his depictions of some indigenous food.

Key Words: Yesi, history, memory, cultural identity, June Fourth Incident, “Tasting Asia,” *Cities of Memory*, *Cities of Fabrication*



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Introduction

Leung Ping-kwan, with the penname Yesi¹, was born in 1948 in Guangdong Province of China. His family migrated to Hong Kong in 1949 and he grew up in this former British colony. According to Li Yuan-rong (李遠榮), Yesi's parents are both well educated. (30) They used to subscribe to May Fourth Literature journals and attend a university in Guangdong, and they were fond of Western movies. When they moved to Hong Kong, they brought many Chinese books with them. Yesi's father could not find a good job in Hong Kong and soon died at a relatively young age because of constant overwork. Yesi grew up in the countryside of Hong Kong island. He lived with his mother and grandparents in a rural area called Wong Chuk Hang (黃竹坑). During his childhood, Yesi would read the books his parents had brought from Mainland China when his mother was away at work. Nourished by Chinese literary works, he started his writing career when he was only 17 years old. He graduated from the English Department of Hong Kong Baptist College (now Hong Kong Baptist University). He had been a secondary school teacher and a columnist before he enrolled in the Comparative Literature program of University of California, San Diego in 1978. He obtained his doctoral degree in 1984. Soon he began his

¹ The penname "Yesi" is a combination of two meaningless Chinese words, ye(也) and shi(斯). Leung adopted this "meaningless" name because he did not want his penname to affect his readers' perception before they read his works.

long career of university teaching at the Hong Kong University. He is currently the Chair Professor of Comparative Literature in the Department of Chinese of Lingnan University.

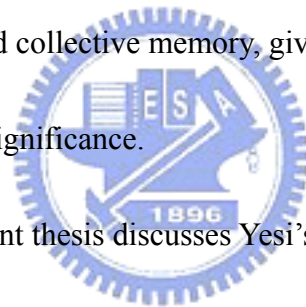
In Rey Chow's point of view, "Leung never considers himself to be 'representative' or be able to 'reflect' Hong Kong..." (140). Interestingly, his writings do touch on important issues regarding the Hong Kong identity. He is always deeply conscious of his being a Hong Kong writer rather than a Chinese from Mainland China, Taiwan, or other Chinese communities. The uniqueness of the Hong Kong colonial experience and the anxieties aroused by the colony's return to Chinese sovereignty, particularly after the June Fourth Incident, are prominent themes in many of his works. Related to the question of Hong Kong identity are the themes of history and memory. The recollection of personal history rather than big political events is the chief concern of the semi-biographical novel *Cities of Memory, Cities of Fabrication*. Yet through the true accounts of his own rather unrepresentative life experience as a highly educated Hong Kong writer, Yesi expresses his peculiar anxieties as well as the "larger" cultural problems of Hong Kong. The Tiananmen poems courageously confront the traumatic history of China. The "Tasting Asia" verse cycle, on the other hand, evokes the colonial history of such places as Indonesia and tries to delineate cultural identity of a particular Asian country or city through its

unique cultural heritage as exemplified by the indigenous food.

Yeh has worked on various literary genres. His prose works include *City Notes* (1988), *Letters Across Borders* (1996), *Working in Berlin* (2002), and *New Fruits from Taiwan* (2002). The collections of his poetry are *City at the End of Time* (1992), *A Poetry of Moving Signs* (1995), *East West Matters* (2000), and *Vegetable Politics* (2006). He has also published a collection of short stories titled *Shih-man the Dragon-keeper* (1979), a novella called *Paper Cutouts* (1982), and a novel named *Cities of Memory, Cities of Fabrication* (1993). In 1991 and 1997, Yeh was awarded the Hong Kong Urban Council's Biennial Award for Literature in fiction and poetry respectively. In this thesis, I will focus on the Tiananmen poems in *City at the End of Time*, the verse cycle "Tasting Asia" (collected in *Vegetable Politics*), and the novel *Cities of Memory, Cities of Fabrication*. In these three selected works, the relevant themes of history, memory and identity are most prominent.

Chapter One will discuss the related themes of memory, history, and cultural identity in *Cities of memory, Cities of Fabrication*. The novel is about the narrator's oversea journeys; it depicts his constant reminiscence of things past and keen observations of cultural differences in different places. In the first part, I will unfold the narrator's memory of how he grew up in Hong Kong under the British rule, including the education he had received and the literary works he was exposed to.

His unique experience led to his rather “uncommon” taste in Western avant-garde literature and art.² The narrator also recalled the predicaments some “serious” writers and artists like he and his friends had experienced in Hong Kong, betraying his own “elitist” leanings accompanied by a deep anxiety about not being warmly embraced by the general public. His rather “personal” anxieties as a particular kind of writer unable to attain great popularity, interestingly, sometimes merge with the common social anxiety about Hong Kong’s handover to Mainland China. At some point the narrator’s highly personal experience and memory are mixed with larger, commoner social anxieties and collective memory, giving Yesi’s novel a much wider resonance and greater social significance.



Chapter Two of the present thesis discusses Yesi’s three poems regarding the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The poems were probably written not long after this tragic event. The first poem “In the Great Square” stresses the psychological impact of the traumatic historical event on Chinese people. One finds a profound sense of loss and betrayal. In “Broken Home,” Yesi adopts a more reflective tone and alludes to the problem of emigration of Hong Kong people, who were frightened by what happened during the June Fourth Incident. In these two poems, Yesi clearly shows his apprehension about the totalitarian government and his support for the

² So far as Western literary works are concerned, Yesi is particularly interested in Latin American magic realist fiction and American poetry of the Beat Generation.

democratic movement. In the poem “Refurnishing,” Yesi turns to a more metaphorical writing skill, criticizing the Communist propaganda that tries to evade the cruel reality of oppression in a more implicit way. Now some twenty years after the June Fourth Incident, these poems are still very valuable as a means of helping us better understand Chinese history by recalling the collective memory of how a democratic movement was ruthlessly crushed.

In Chapter Three, I will delve into three other poems in a verse cycle called “Tasting Asia,” which was originally displayed in an installation exhibition in 2002. There Yesi attempts to discuss the intricate relationship between food and cultural identity. In the poem “Basin Feast,” Yesi tells us about the legendary origin of the indigenous Hong Kong food and, instead of using this to consolidate a “traditional” Hong Kong or Chinese identity, he subtly expresses his “Western” democratic sentiments. In “Yellow Rice,” Yesi reminds people of the colonial and hybrid past of Indonesia, and, as a Hong Kong writer, he seems to share some similar colonial experience. He uses the poem to criticize colonial aggressions in the past and advocates his ideal of multiculturalism. As a migrant to Hong Kong, Yesi also identifies with the Chinese Indonesians’ diasporic past. In “Basin Feast” and “Yellow Rice,” Yesi is able to construct local cultural identity through the history of food. Finally, in “A Taste of Asia,” Yesi attempts to promote Asian fellow feeling by

evoking Asian people's common memory of the 2004 tsunami disaster. Although most of the works discussed in this thesis depict the unique Hong Kong experience and requires in the reader some basic knowledge about the history of this former British colony, I believe my study will be of interest to those who do not know much about Hong Kong for it may hopefully shed some light on the making of and anxieties about cultural identity in general.



Chapter One

Memory and the Question of Hong Kong Identity in *Cities of Memory, Cities of*

Fabrication

This seems to be a process of self-cure, or a process that one spends some time to clarify something.”(*Cities* 278; Postscript)

At the first glance, *Cities of Memory, Cities of Fabrication* is nothing more than a detailed description of the narrator’s journey from Berkeley, through New York and Paris, and back to Hong Kong, recorded in a reminiscent way after the narrator’s return to Hong Kong. Yesi, in his Postscript, announces his intention to study how common people react to frustrations and try to overcome worries, especially during the turbulent period prior to 1997. However, we might argue that the characters in the novel are not “common people of the street;” instead, they are highly educated, being journalists, artists, writers, overseas graduate students, etc. While Yesi worked on this novel from 1983 to 1993 he witnessed a number of historical events important to Hong Kong: the Sino-British Joint Declaration (1984), the Tiananmen Square protests (1989), and the approach of the handover of sovereignty to Mainland China (1997). Regarding this transitional period, the Hong Kong critic Ackbar Abbas has

commented, “living in interesting times is a dubious advantage, in fact, a curse according to an old Chinese saying.” (1) Whether this is a curse or an advantage, Yesi has made good use of this experience and produced a truly interesting semi-biographical novel that offers its readers insights into his personal life as well as the larger social changes in Hong Kong history.

In this chapter, I will start with a brief introduction to this novel. The introduction will be followed by the narrator’s recollections of his growing up under the colonial rule. He argues that he has received inadequate education because neither the British authority nor most Hong Kong people cared about history and education, so he turned to the West for cultural and literary nourishments. Besides, as a writer, the narrator also recalls the predicament of fellow writers and artists in Hong Kong, for he and his friend W did not confront a friendly environment for their creative works. With his colonial experience and special taste in Western, primarily modernist, literature and art he feels uneasy about his Hong Kong identity. The narrator is obsessed with his memory of Hong Kong during his journey: as his cultivation process involves the cultures of both Hong Kong and the West, which in turn contribute to his identity crisis. Furthermore, Hong Kong people’s anxiety over the arrival of 1997 is drawn to mix with the narrator’s anxiety of being an avant-garde writer in Hong Kong. The Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and the Tiananmen

Square protests of 1989 caused Hong Kong people's emigration, and revealed Hong Kong people's typical apprehension about the notion of "home." Liberalism and anti-totalitarianism characterize the narrator's political ideology. He does not embrace an all-powerful, united empire, but prefers pluralism and multiculturalism. Interestingly, Yesi mixes the narrator's personal anxieties with larger social anxieties, seemingly attempting to arouse the resonance of his Hong Kong readers. The narrator also emphasizes the different cultural identities among Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China by highlighting their diverse historical and social developments. In fact, the narrator constantly ponders about the urgent question of cultural identity, revisiting his personal memory and social history during the journey, and hoping to find a solution.



Yesi admits that the novel reveals his emotions and thoughts, and we may say the people and the events he has depicted are based on reality. But he has fictionalized the events, giving his characters alphabetical code names like N, Y, D, and W so as to ensure confidentiality. In this study, I do not simplistically identify the narrator as Yesi himself; nor will the search for the "real" identities of the characters be my concern. In the following discussion, I will confine myself mainly to the narrator, and strive to uncover the narrator's and his friends' memories of Hong Kong during the transitional period. So far as genre is concerned, *Cities of Memory*, *Cities of*

Fabrication is not a very conventional novel, for Yesi claims that it contains fictional events, auto-biographical elements, as well as social and cultural criticism. Through the reminiscence and reflections of the narrator and his friends, Yesi tries to depict Hong Kong from various perspectives.

Yesi attempts to recall the memory of Hong Kong during the narrator's journey to highlight its very presence. While the narrator is traveling overseas, he strongly feels the presence of his hometown, whether it is real or partly fictional. "No matter how N, W, or I comment on New York, in the end we will come back to Hong Kong experiences," (24; ch.3) so Yesi writes. I argue that Yesi seems to draw the contour of Hong Kong from other places in order to reach a greater objectivity by distancing himself from his home town. While the main character is abroad and experiencing foreign cultures, he is able to see Hong Kong much more clearly. As Huang Si-han (黃思漢) has commented on this novel, one tends to have more introspection of one's own culture while having contact with alien cultures. (32) When the narrator and his friends have left Hong Kong, they have stronger emotions towards it. Yesi might want to accentuate Hong Kong's existence within Hong Kong people's heart especially during such changeful times through the characters' reminiscence.

As the narrator was recollecting his growing experience and the education he had received, he showed disapproval and doubts. The narrator grew up in a

relatively poor family in the countryside. His parents were migrants from Mainland China. As a child, he read all the old books his parents had brought along with them. However, he preferred contemporary Western literature and movies when he had grown up. Due to such dissatisfactions with the conventional learning environment, the narrator subscribed to some foreign periodicals, such as *The Village Voice*, *TDR*, and *The Wire*. He did not even understand why he had translated many underground American literary works, French novels, and contemporary Latin American novels. (39; ch.3) In any case, the narrator had already been inspired by Western literature.

In Chapter Three of *Cities*, while the narrator, along with N and W, was wandering on the New York streets, he spotted these magazines on the newsstand and recalled his own previous learning experience. The narrator asked: “Why would a student growing up in Hong Kong grope for dissimilar literature from other cultures with a self-learning attitude while feeling dissatisfied with the surroundings?”(39; ch.3) He criticized the educational system in Hong Kong, especially when he found “the design of the teaching materials seemed to blur the whole image of truth wittingly or not.”

(45; ch.3) The narrator eventually figured out why he would feel at ease in the foreign literary world, because the education had disappointed him and the teaching materials even seemed to suppress the memory of Hong Kongers. While he recalled back from New York streets, he still perceived great depression. He remembered

when he was still a high school leaver he would sometimes sit on a chair languishingly. He would like to stand up, but he felt nameless weariness. (45; ch.3)

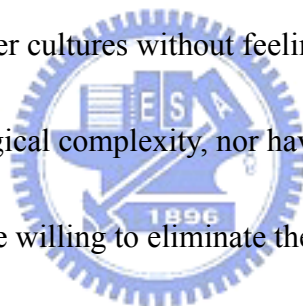
This weariness paralleled the narrator's feelings of paralysis caused by the defects of the Hong Kong education so clearly recognized in New York. Owing to his discontent, the narrator managed to acquire knowledge from various sources, like translational novels, poems from Tang Dynasty, May Fourth Literature, and modern movies, influencing him the ways of perceiving the world.

The learning experience of the narrator probably cannot typify that of most Hong Kongers, for few have an equal access to foreign literature or are interested in it. However, his memory does highlight the problems with Hong Kong education during the British rule, particularly insofar as it prevented the truthful presentation of intellectual and historical facts. People in Hong Kong receive distorted and repressed knowledge, and they ultimately find themselves numb and unfulfilled.

While in Paris (Chapter Seven), eating won ton noodles reminded the narrator of Hong Kong. (173) Suddenly, his Hong Kong upbringing and education came to his mind, although he considered these unrepresentative of Hong Kongers. He claimed that there was nothing in the past he could be proud of. In Chapter Five, while the narrator was appreciating artistic works in the Louvre Museum, he encountered a group of primary school pupils listening attentively to their teacher's explanations.

(89) He could not help envying them because they could learn history from artifacts but not from pure imagination. “WE never have such an opportunity to learn history. I do not mean to deny OUR origin, but to face it, Worry Dolls.” (88-89; ch.5) No one has a clearer mind than he does as to what sort of environment in which he has long lived, and he totally admits it and sees through all the tricks the authority might have been playing. He despises the denial of one’s own origin, but encourages people to confront and examine it.

We, including many friends of this generation, grow up in a colony, but attempt to know other cultures without feeling inferior or superior. Not having no psychological complexity, nor having no discrimination, but living abroad, we are willing to eliminate the misunderstanding by first impressions during the encounter and truly face prejudice. (*Cities* 268; ch.11)



While growing up in the colony, the narrator often makes efforts to stay positive and confronts all kinds of different problems in real life.

Yes, through the narrator’s constant recollection of the educational and upbringing under colonial influence, draw our attention to the problems of colonial education. Since most Hong Kong people are migrants, fleeing from Communist

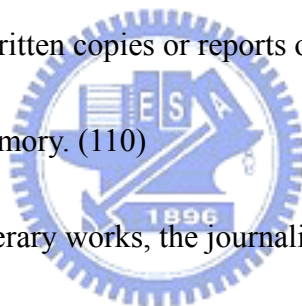
China and being practical-minded,³ many of them do not care much about the history and politics of Hong Kong. On the other hand, the British colonial authority would hardly encourage history teaching, which might arouse anti-colonial sentiments.

Under such circumstances, the narrator feels discontent with Hong Kong education and turns to foreign cultures. The early contact with foreign literature and an opportunity to study abroad allow the narrator to develop a special taste in Western literature, modernist works in particular. In the novel, we can see most artistic works and movies mentioned are from Western countries. As Yu mentions, Yesi tends to leave readers the impression that the utopia is always somewhere outside his homeland or in some distant past. (226) Additionally, the passion for foreign cultures has also led to the narrator's inner conflicts regarding cultural identity.

Furthermore, the narrator also evokes the memory of the artistic environment and media operation in Hong Kong, which reveals his concern for Hong Kong culture and somehow obliges him to admire Western cultures. From the narrator's journey, Yesi spontaneously evokes the memory of artistic performance and his exploration for Hong Kong cultural identity as a writer. In Chapter Three, while the narrator was in New York streets wandering, he directly stated, "We grew up reading fragmentary May Fourth Literature. (Chinese literature became repressed memory in itself.)" (41;

³ In this connection, John M. Carroll writes that Hong Kong is "a capitalist paradise without history or culture, where nothing matters but money; a place where the only political values are pragmatism and apathy; and a haven for sojourners and refugees with only a temporary identity." (4-5)

ch.3) He lamented the Hong Kong's failure to preserve Chinese literature, and its tendency to distort and repress whatever did survive. Because of unstable political situation, the poems dated from May Fourth Movement were barely preserved, and much wasted. In Chapter Five, when he went to a library in California, he appreciated the abundant collections of all sorts of materials from either alive or late poets, including the original manuscripts, letters, different versions of poetry, even records, and so forth. However, there were at least chances for the narrator or everyone to read some good literary works in Hong Kong, but not in Taiwan and Mainland China, from hand-written copies or reports on the newspapers, which more or less made up for the old memory. (110)



Besides the contortive literary works, the journalistic writings of Hong Kong also deeply disappoint the narrator and his friends, especially W. Chapter Three tells us how the narrator met W. W was born in a family which ran a traditional tea business in Sheung Wan (上環) and received education in Hong Kong, but later was fascinated by Western modern drama. Before he got to know W, the narrator had already seen his early play called “Dragon Dance,” which mixed myths with verses and blended dance into folk songs. The narrator considers the play “Dragon Dance” to be one of the best in the early 70s in Hong Kong. He appreciates W's brave experimentalism and what connects them might be the similar attitude against the conservative

literature and thoughts in the 70s and the expectation toward new things. However, the drama play was ignored and forgotten. Furthermore, W appeared to meet some more difficulties and even later determined to give up his passion and pursuit for drama in Hong Kong. W was disappointed at the reaction and misinterpretation of his work by both the audience and the press (including unfair press releases and grossly biased subjective reviews) for undeclared political, or even commercial reasons. When the narrator queried W about one political play, W replied, “I would rather shut up my mouth.” (31; ch.3) The distortion of reports and reviews appear to encourage the narrator to take on the responsibility of revival and retrieve truth.

Yesi even allegorizes about the problems concerning the prevailing press and publication industry, as is evidenced by the character “Mr. Huang” in Chapter Ten.

The popular columnist Mr. Huang pretends to be knowledgeable and perspicacious, but his column is actually full of errors and nonsense. Mr. Huang professes to be an objective observer, but in reality he favors his friends and creates his own fake history. He writes about utterly trivial things in his life and is able to penetrate into every reader’s brain, making him or her affectionate, diligent, pitiful, witty, amiable, decent, and so forth. It is nearly impossible to use one adjective to summarize what kind of person Mr. Huang is, but undoubtedly he lacks one crucial element for the serious writer, that is, truthfulness. “Sometimes I doubt Mr. Huang is not a person. He

must be an enterprise, a prosperous enterprise...” the narrator thought to himself. (252)

In the narrator’s vision, the press is under the control of some unknown commercial power, which dominates the development of Hong Kong culture. The narrator can do nothing about it but shrug his shoulders showing despair, hoping not to be deceived by what he sees.

In fact, the narrator might be demonstrating a certain paranoid here; as a writer, he sticks to higher culture and foreign taste, refusing to cater for the Hong Kong readers’ popular taste. He is an avant-garde intellectual under the influence of Western cultures, but his subject matters are mostly concerning the place he has grown up. He does not care much about daily trifles of Hong Kong people, but what comes to his mind are scenes of particular dramas, movies, or the worries of artistic environment. The narrator is getting incompatible with most common Hong Kong people in the streets and is thus marginalizing himself in a way. Mr. Huang represents the popular mass media, leading and influencing most Hong Kong people. The narrator’s dislike of Mr. Huang might as well betray his own yearning for popularity.

The narrator contemplates:

When I come back to Hong Kong, I find so many things have changed. In light of artistic and literary creation, it is indeed not a city where people

would support one another. (215; ch.9)

He even desperately shows great self-pity:

No matter in life or work, it seems that I do not live with a harmonious group, and I cannot get much support and be accepted from what I have done. Although I have belief, many practical efforts have been in vain.

(215; ch.9)

The environment of creative works is so unfriendly that some people doubt the existence of “Hong Kong culture,” which exclusively belongs to this land and its people. “What students need to learn is, of course, European culture; as for Hong

Kong culture, is there such an existence?” Yesi writes. (245; ch.10) It might be

ironic that the narrator comments “I remember all the French movies that I first contact with.” (41; ch.3) While foreign cultures have deeply impressed him he

cannot find his own culture in Hong Kong. Such a negative viewpoint is not

uncommonly, Wong, Li and Chan has remarked that: “Hong Kong has long been

known as a ‘cultural desert’ and some people even think promoting culture in Hong

Kong is like ‘planting trees arduously on a concrete island.’” (Wong, Li, and Chan 95)

However, the narrator does not abandon any possibility of cultivating Hong Kong

culture, and he considers art, regardless of its forms, as closely related to cultural

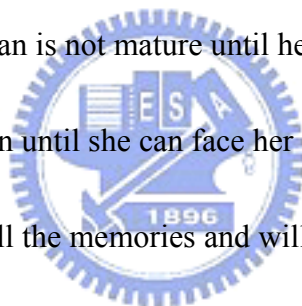
memory. Where there is memory there is art. The reason why Hong Kong has

been challenged is that its people have long refused to confront their memory during such turbulent times. When the narrator came to Paris, he wondered “Aren’t literature and art also heavy memory? They are memory, which reminds people not to forget.” (82; ch.5)

Although he finds:

Hong Kong has no memory; it is a city that has lost its memory. However, I still want to keep track of the details, hoping one day to make a man regain his memory. (35; ch.3)

He holds the belief that “[a] man is not mature until he can face his own memory; a country is not mature and open until she can face her own memory. (84; ch.5) He is always brave enough to take all the memories and willing to examine and record them.



In Chapter Seven, on the way back to Santiago, the narrator wished he were the poet in Aristophanes’ play “The Frogs,” which is a comedy upon a restless time. This play is about a journey that Dionysus leaves for the end of the world, the Hell, to search for a poet with wisdom from the dead to save the world. On the other hand, he also looks forward to being the celebrated ancient Chinese writer Lu Ji (陸機) to create magnificent works against restless times. The narrator surmises that “because he (Lu Ji) encounters the chaos of the world, he especially emphasizes the order in literature, attempting to search for any possibility of order in literature.” (168) The

narrator frequently has recourse to personal and cultural memory, and conveys the idea of Hong Kong's disorder. He wishes to create a new order in the artistic world based on authentic collective memory, but, at the same time, he uncovers his sensation of unfulfillment. The sense of unfulfillment results in his turning to the West; however, while admiring the Western model he writes in Chinese and yearns to become a popular writer in Hong Kong, his homeland.

Yesi also highlights the influence of the intricate politics at the time before and during his writing (1983-1993). He urges Hong Kong people, even though most of them are migrants, to fight for their unique local identity and the civil rights that they fully deserve. However, during such turbulent times, people tended to float with tides and lose the sense of direction, and they do not even know the position for which they should stand. In Chapter Ten, the narrator recalled that "all kinds of dialogues are in progress, on and off." (246) Though the narrator did not mention the subjects, he gave readers only a clue: "Who is talking to whom? That's not my voice." (246) Eric Yu points out that the dialogue might allude to the negotiations between the UK and PRC governments on the future of Hong Kong. (241) In 1982, the two governments resumed their dialogues on the handover of sovereignty in 1997, which was like a tug of war between democracy and Communism, or between the colonizer and the motherland. Most Hong Kong residents were afraid of the loss of present

prosperity and uncertain changes of the future after 1997. In 1984, the future of Hong Kong was eventually settled under the Sino-British Joint Declaration.

According to this agreement, Hong Kong would go back to the arms of Mainland China on July 1, 1997 and become a Special Administrative Region of the PRC.

Since then, Hong Kong people had a contradictory feeling about the “expiration” of the colonial rule in 1997, and many of them joined another wave of emigration to

Western countries. The narrator mentioned that “the emigration is not news any

more among some friends, but I am truly worried about recent development.” (212;

ch.9) Moving in and out of Hong Kong created both social transformation and

anxiety. “Is it funny that we Hong Kong people want to emigrate soon and also not

too soon?” (214; ch.9) People looked forward to make changes of their lives, but

simultaneously they expected maintaining status quo. Their imagination led them to

make decisions, because none was sure about the future.

Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 also accelerated Hong Kong people’s emigration and intensified the social anxieties. In retrospect, it is interesting to notice that when Hong Kong Island was ceded in 1842 under the Treaty of Nanking after the First Opium War (1839-1842), its population boomed.⁴ Most people came

4

time	Population of Hong Kong Island
May, 1841	7,450
March, 1842	12,361
April, 1844	19,009

from Mainland China for refuge. However, after the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and particularly the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, people moved out in a wink for fear of losing their freedom.⁵ A document collected by David Faure points out that “[t]he immediate point of this discussion is that 1989 clearly plunged Hong Kong society—and the future of its economy—into a state of great uncertainty.” (368)

Indeed, as Faure states:

The 1980s and 1990s will be remembered as a time of anomaly. The decision reached by the governments of the United Kingdom and of the People’s Republic of China in 1982 on the turn of Hong Kong to China in 1997 altered the fundamentals of Hong Kong’s existence. (351)

The awareness of uncertainty and fear also appear in the narrator’s memory, and he agonizes over the decisions he has to make. In Chapter Three, he complained, “We always hope to get in a right line and do what we should do: protect the completion of our territory, strive for Mandarin’s legitimacy, and protest against corrupt officials.” (43) However, the key point does not lie in how the narrator stands in an adequate

During the first ten months of Hong Kong Island’s cession, the population increased two-thirds suddenly. (Wong, Li, and Chan 29)

Year	Canada	USA	Australia	Others	Total
1986	5,615	7,742	4,441	1,191	18,989
1987	16,254	7,411	5,208	1,125	29,998
1988	24,588	11,777	7,846	1,606	45,817
1989	16,400	12,800	10,900	1,900	42,000

(Faure 368)

line, but in the hesitation and dubiety that he gets haunted in. There is an atmosphere of fear and anxiety hovering over Hong Kong, from which people hope they can escape.

During the journey, the narrator also brings readers to the problem of Hong Kong's identity:

There is no exit for our furor, and our passion is oppressed forever. We become indignant, and argue with everyone we meet. Our identity is not clear, and we belong to none. (43; ch.3)

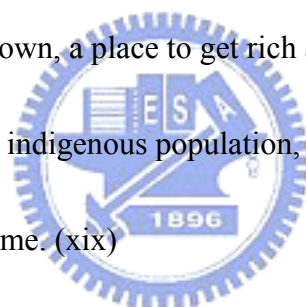
Particularly when he is outside Hong Kong, he is more aware of his identity as a Hong Kong citizen. Once when he wrote “tour” in the blank for the purpose of his trip to Mainland China at the custom at Lo Wu station (羅湖), he was despised by the armed Liberation Army officers. He said, “For the first time we are conscious of our marginal identity.” (208; ch.9) Because of the peculiar colonial experience, Hong Kong citizens are sometimes obliged to ponder over their peculiar identity. In Chapter Nine, the narrator once asked himself:

Do I yearn for coming back to such a thing like “Homeland?” Wait, I know I still cannot find it even if I go back to Hong Kong. (216)

He is so sure that he cannot find his homeland in Hong Kong for the time being, but at least he expressed his yearning for having a homeland. The idea of “home” or

“homeland” actually is quite modern in Hong Kong’s history. Some critics comment that “a group of Hong Kong people are suddenly aware of the existence of ‘our town’(我城) at the beginning of the negotiations between the the UK and PRC governments.” (Wong, Li, and Chan12) In fact, as Ingham mentions,

Like the European administrators, soldiers, merchants and businessmen who arrived from mid-nineteenth century onwards, most of the Chinese and other nationalities who made their home here previously regarded the place as a temporary haven from persecution and political instability, or as a glorified gold-rush town, a place to get rich and leave for good. Very few, apart from the small indigenous population, would have seriously thought of Hong Kong as home. (xix)



Few people consider Hong Kong as their permanent home and, what’s more, most people disregard its well being. The attitude of taking it for granted indeed bedims Hong Kong’s existence.

After the British colonial rule for over a hundred years, Hong Kong ultimately returned to Chinese sovereignty. However, some Hong Kong people do suffer from an identity crisis:

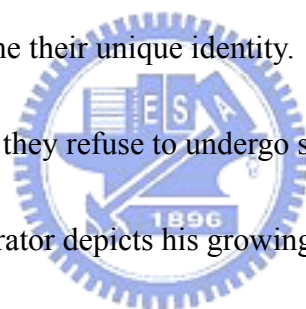
In Hong Kong, we often (as a group or as an individual) desire to be a real “Chinese,” but simultaneously we often do not want to [...] We turn over

again and again in the hot pot of identity longing. (Wong, Li, and Chan 271)

The two great powers take control of Hong Kong, and force it to be like a “concubine of two masters.”(Ngo 2) Deprived of a strong, autonomous local identity, the notion of “floating” identity might be more welcome, as Abbas argues:

Now faced with the uncomfortable possibility of an alien identity about to be imposed on it from China, Hong Kong is experiencing a kind of last-minute collective search for a more definite identity. (4)

In my opinion, Yesi and most Hong Kong people still dare not face their cultural memory and dread to determine their unique identity. People’s fear drives their thinking of identity away, and they refuse to undergo so many unexpected changes.

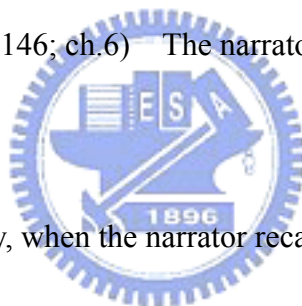


Interesting, when the narrator depicts his growing and learning experiences, he uses “I” to be the main character. However, when he mentions Hong Kong people’s anxiety and identity crisis, he jumps to “we.” It is interesting to note that the narrator sometimes seems to fuse his personal experience with common social experience. For instance, the narrator’s personal anxiety of being a particular kind of aspiring writer fuses with the anxiety about the handover of sovereignty to Mainland China in 1997. In so doing, the narrator in effect has found a way to unleash his worries and frustrations and gains certain social resonance in his writings at the same time.

In fact, the narrator is deeply conscious of being a Hong Konger. No matter where he is, the narrator always thinks about Hong Kong and gets in touch with Hong Kong friends. In his point of view, Hong Kong people are different from people of China and Taiwan, and so do their cultures differ. In Chapter Three, before he left Hong Kong in 1978, the narrator tried to utilize Cantonese Dialect to translate Western drama in order to explore the plasticity of his mother tongue. The narrator confessed that his idea came from some Taiwanese writers' discussion on "Pure Chinese" in Hong Kong, and he would like to revive Cantonese. Moreover, in Chapter Five, the narrator went to the theater to see an old movie in memory of his friend, T. He mentioned the Taiwanese director did not understand Hong Kong, so the movie presented distortion and his wild guess. In these cases, the narrator appears to experience cultural shock between Hong Kong and Taiwan.

On the other hand, the narrator also reminds readers the gap between Hong Kong and Mainland China. In Chapter Six, the narrator disagreed with S, while S said: "Hong Kong is over; what do you go back for?" (140; ch.6) This is the first sentence S said to the narrator, which reveals totally negation and the intention of disconnection. Actually, S did not stay in Hong Kong for a long time after he had escaped from Mainland China. The narrator finds him to be too subjective and self-centered, so S would never take others' growing background and personal history

into consideration and make fair judgments. The narrator tried to rebut: “Isn’t it easy for you to make such comments? In terms of your situation, it is more like a kibitzer’s comments.” (141; ch.6) People like S tend to be cynical, skeptical, agitated, and passive, for they have given up any chance to improve the whole society. On the contrary, few people like the narrator would introspect and cherish every bit of hope to make better changes. However, the narrator did not blame S for his passionate denial, though he grumbled that “We, Hong Kong people, sit there, not knowing whether to laugh or cry when finding ‘Hong Kong’ again becomes something handy for others.” (146; ch.6) The narrator was aware of the misuse of Hong Kong identity.



In fact, during the journey, when the narrator recalls his growing and learning experience, he feels discontent. On the other hand, he refers to the predicament of being a writer in Hong Kong. These are the reasons why he chooses to pursue Western and modern literature and art and he has quite particular taste, which is somehow out of tune with common people in Hong Kong. The narrator is obsessed with these memories while having conflicts in figuring out cultural identity. Political development also influences the narrator’s tendency. During the process of Hong Kong’s historical development, especially the approach of 1997, the narrator is conscious of Hong Kong identity and the cultural identity within his heart. As Yu

suggests, if cultural identity can be compared to a piece of luggage, which symbolizes ownership, then the narrator has indeed been carrying his luggage all along his journey. (236) Although we cannot simply identify the narrator to be Yesi, in some ways Yesi does indicate his obsession with the Hong Kong identity. In this semi-autobiographical novel, Yesi has dug deep in his memory and searched for the cultural identity of Hong Kong with reference to her unique historical development.



Chapter Two

Traumatic History and Memory in the Tiananmen Poems⁶

Memories evaporated; the walls sweat them out again.

The antique tile dragons were cracked badly.

“In the Great Square,” *City at the End of Time* 69

Memory is a recurring theme in Yesi’s writing, and he focuses not only on his personal history but also on social history. Both history and History are equally important to him as a writer. Many of his works involve the remembrance of things past and he values memory considerably. This chapter mainly deals with the big “History,” concentrating on Yesi’s experience with regard to political developments and social problems. In fact, some significant events (e.g. the fall of the Berlin Wall and the transfer of the sovereignty of Hong Kong) are reflected in Yesi’s writings from time to time. Some of his poems, in particular, make direct references to the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 (i.e. the June Fourth Incident) and reinforce certain woeful memories regarding the big History of Mainland China. To be specific, this chapter will focus on how Yesi interprets the Tiananmen Square protests

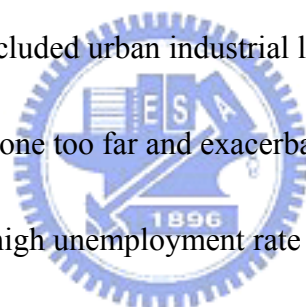
⁶ Yesi has written three poems about Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, which are “In the Great Square,” “Broken Home,” and “Refurnishing,” and Abbas refers to them as a triptych. Besides, Leung Chi-hua(梁志華) refers to these three poems to be finished during May and June in 1989. (48)

of 1989 using his unique poetic language.

I will begin with some relevant background information of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 and its impact on Hong Kong people. The three Tiananmen poems to be discussed are “In the Great Square,” “Broken Home,” and “Refurnishing.” In “In the Great Square,” Yesi explicates the psychological impact of the June Fourth Incident on Chinese people. The content reflects Chinese people’s sense of loss and fear. In “Broken Home,” Yesi starts by questioning if the Chinese people should leave their home, i.e., homeland, for all sorts of doubts and questions have arisen after the incident. Meanwhile, the question might also demonstrate Hong Kong people’s anxiety about returning to China (their “home”) in 1997. The poet’s reflection brings hope, but soon the hope is destroyed by the remembrance of the bloody images of the traumatic historical event. In “Refurnishing,” the tone is calmer and more rational than one finds in the previous two poems, and Yesi incorporates sarcasm into his writing. He criticizes the Communist propaganda that depicts only wonderful and prosperous scene but at the same time tries to remind people of the cruel truth. Yesi purposely uncovers the cruel reality in order to arouse people’s apprehension about the totalitarian government. In these three poems, we can find Yesi’s sympathy for the innocent people who suffered during the Tiananmen Square protests and his opposition to

totalitarianism.

The Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 have had an enormous impact on Chinese history. Deng Xiaoping had proposed a series of economic and political reformations since 1978. However, with the gradual liberation and development, there were two groups of people feeling frustrated about the government led by Communist Party of China. One group was composed of students and intellectuals, probably influenced by Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalization, conceiving that the reforms were not good enough considering their incomes and social and political controls. The other group included urban industrial laborers, who held the opposite opinion that the reforms had gone too far and exacerbated poverty. Economic problems like inflation and a high unemployment rate had resulted in laborers' discontent. Meanwhile, the government also experienced a political turmoil (i.e., the fighting between conservatives and liberals). With rising public dissatisfaction, eventually a series of demonstrations, made up by students, intellectuals, and labor activists, took place between spring and summer of 1989. However, during the protests, they still could not reach a consensus through peaceful dialogues. Seeing the protests had been expanded and gone out of control, the government ultimately declared martial law on May 20th and launched military crackdown, which was the least desired action. There were demonstrations and oppositions all over Mainland



China as well as the rest of the world to support the democratic movements. The number of deaths during the incident remained unclear and the estimates ranged from hundreds to thousands. The government has never released any accurate figure of casualties.

Even today, the June Fourth Incident is still a taboo topic to discuss within Mainland China; however, it did cause a ripple in international history. People's Republic of China earned an unfavorable reputation for its military crackdown on the protesters, who struggled with their bare hands. In turn, the United States and European Union declared prohibition on the sales of armed weapons and called for peaceful treatment of her people. During the extensive military operations in Tiananmen Square, foreign media coverage was hampered and some correspondents' freedom was restricted. When the news of the incident was eventually spread all over the world, many people showed their sympathy for the seemingly unattainable freedom and democracy.

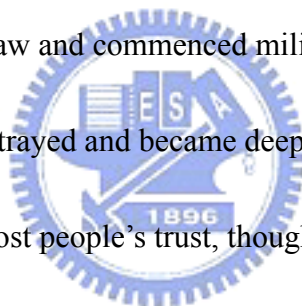
This catastrophic event not only caused lasting traumas to Chinese people all over the world besides the domestic residents, but also led to ceaseless worldwide reviewing of the event at that time. People who received the most direct influence were those idealistic activists on the scene and their intimate family members. They were physical and psychological hurt and the government's crackdown was the last

thing they could ever imagine. So many innocent young people stood out to fight for their demand at the cost of their lives, but all that generated was the sense of loss.

Though some people were shot to death, more people were heart broken. What really hurt people were not those concrete bullets or tanks, but those invisible constant fear and uncertainty. Apart from the sense of loss filled with people's heart, the sense of betrayal by their respected government also evokes widespread compassion.

During Zhao Ziyang's prominent speech on May 19th, 1989, those joining the hunger strike were inspired and encouraged.⁷ However, less than twenty-four hours, the

government declared martial law and commenced military actions. People soon found that their ideals were betrayed and became deeply disappointed, and, furthermore, the government lost people's trust, though the determination of military crackdown was very complex.



Until today, people are still waiting for a good explanation and clarification from the government, but they have not received any satisfactory answers. In this regard,

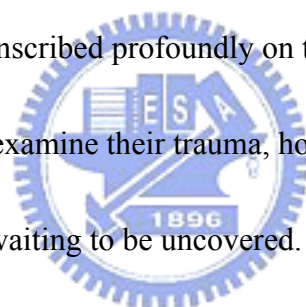
Kay Schaffer and Xianlin Song comment in *Asian Studies Review*:

Unlike other sites of traumatic human rights abuse in the late twentieth century, traumas that have been revisited in memoirs and campaigns for redress, the state has not allowed any transformation of this experience into

⁷ Zhao promised to keep on the dialogue between the activists and the government, managing to provide satisfactory solutions to all the issues. Meanwhile, this heart-stirring speech seemed to arouse certain hope deep within.

public discourse: no campaigns for redress, no recognition of the suffering of Chinese citizens, no reparations, no tribunals, no reflection, no apologies, no healing processes. In this instance, the “truth” of the past has been buried in an amnesiacal fold of history, secretly held in people’s hearts and minds. (161)

The traumatic memory has been erased intentionally and rudely from books and media; nevertheless, it can never be completely wiped out of people’s collective memory. Chinese people as well as people around the world underwent the whole process and the incident was inscribed profoundly on the wall of their heart. People are prepared to revisit and re-examine their trauma, hoping one day their wounds can be healed. The truth is still waiting to be uncovered.



After the June Fourth Incident, Hong Kong was also under great influence. Many people emigrated to foreign countries owing to the distrust of the People’s Republic of China government’s commitment to the so-called “one country, two systems” policy after the return. It was reported that “one million people took to the streets of Hong Kong in protest as confidence in the Joint Declaration evaporated” in 1989. (McDonogh and Wong 106) In *New York Times* Barbara Basler wrote in June 11th, 1989, that “[a]lmost every aspect of life [there] has been touched in some way by the events unfolding in China.” The political situation had changed, and some

government officials even resigned their commission to convey their dissent.

People's anxiety also led to rapid stock market decline. Until now, there is magnificent candlelight vigil held in Victoria Park on every anniversary. The fear and doubt prevailed before and after the handover in 1997 and certainly increase more difficulties to the return, for Hong Kong residents are afraid of deterioration in freedom of expression. Yesi is among the writers who are deeply concerned and write about Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, and he even participated in an improvised performance, called "Objectivities", responding to the event 6 weeks after June 4th, 1989. Ackbar Abbas calls those three poems of Yesi's on the June Fourth Incident as "a contemporary triptych." (Abbas132) They are "In the Great Square," "Broken Home" and "Refurnishing," collected in *A Poetry of Moving Signs* (23-28) and *City at the End of Time* (68-75). In the following paragraphs, I will discuss Yesi's interpretation of the traumatic event in these three poems respectively.

"In the Great Square" gives readers feelings of a sudden change. Yesi speculates on how to manifest the alterant process of memorial formation more completely regarding this tragic event. The "Great Square" in the title may refer to Tiananmen Square, but it can be understood metaphorically as the invisible square in people's hearts. The invisible square within people's heart preserves their collective memory and sense of belonging, and it is a space of security and dignity. The

tangible square (Tiananmen Square) can be rebuilt no matter how devastatingly it has been damaged, yet the intangible square within remains a problem for it is hard to tell where the Chinese people should begin the reconstruction of a proper sense of belonging. The first stanza delineates the shock within a very short time after the event and raises the question of settlement for people's bodies and souls:

After days of Spring rains we awakened
 in a shabby parlor jammed with beat-up furniture
 and no place left for the waking to really live,
 between ourselves and the piles of old bedding. (*City at the End of
 Time* 69)⁸



Yesi compares the democratic movements in Tiananmen Square of 1989 to “spring rains,” alluding to the initial hopes inspired by the democratic movements.

Ironically, spring rains that usually flourish of all living things and nourish the earth here cause gloom and sorrow instead. The “furniture” may refer to the things people have long depended on and lived on, but the furniture has been “beaten up” or destroyed. Hence, there is “no place left” for people to live their lives. “The old bedding” is probably an allusion to the “old” Communism, for after the democratic movements people might figure out more problems and truth in Communism. Yesi

⁸ The English versions of these three poems are all cited from *City at the End of Time*.

also exaggerates the variation and the shock shortly after the June Fourth Incident.

After only a few days of raining, the diversity of the whole situation has become too formidable to comprehend and they can hardly catch up. People wake up to see the sudden change and their bodies and souls simply cannot fit into newly-changed

environment and surroundings. What people have always relied on, or the

“furniture,” has undergone changes all of a sudden. The shock leads to more doubt

and instability. In fact, the economic and political reformations proposed by Deng

Xiaoping have inspired people’s democratic thoughts. However, this “new”

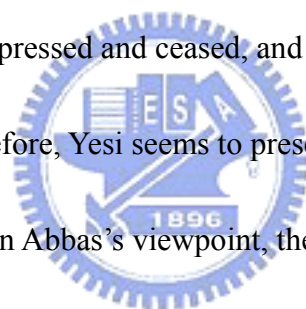
democratic movements are oppressed and ceased, and people’s hope is soon

completely destroyed. Therefore, Yesi seems to present people’s frightening mental

state in the sudden change. In Abbas’s viewpoint, the beginning image of spring

cleaning reveals “how ramshackle the house has become” as a result of the

unavoidable damage. (132)



The second stanza emphasizes the aftermath and people’s memory:

There scattered in the eye were the travels of generations.

One poked in the stuff for what one loved.

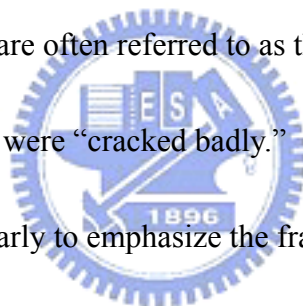
Memories evaporated; the walls sweat them out again.

The antique tile dragons were cracked badly. (69)

Even though only a few days have passed, it seems several generations have travelled

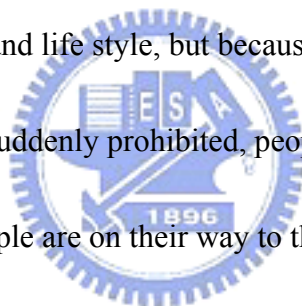
through. Yesi still attempts to point out the huge variation or the difference generated in front of people's eyes. People seem to look for the sense of homeliness and familiarity from the old things, for the furniture they live on has been beaten up. Yesi describes that the memories easily "evaporated," but people still struggle hard with "sweat" to keep them. "Memory" is doomed to stay, so anyone who intends to wipe out his memories just tries to set a meaningless and unattainable goal.

Therefore, whether it is the government that attempts to destroy the record or it is the people involved who are afraid to retain all those dreadful memory, there is definitely no way out. Chinese people are often referred to as the descendents of the Dragon; nevertheless, the dragons here were "cracked badly." Yesi uses the diction of "antique tile dragons" particularly to emphasize the fragility or the weakness of people concerning the impacts of the event.



In the third and fourth stanzas, Yesi presents people's urge to have a brand new start but encounter some obstacles. "Surrounded by the piles of used-up words and junk that made us, we'd make our own windows and doors." (69) People are under government's control and have lost their free will which they have always longed for. People do not want to walk on the set path, but they intend to build their own way. Therefore, they "begun again housecleaning, sorting importances" (69) and endeavor to pursue their own mode. To some extent, having a new beginning symbolizes hope

and chances. However, before the new opportunities of positive changes arrive, people have already experienced desperation and depression. Their houses are broken into pieces, so they could only build temporary tents “in the grandest of plazas,” where their pain starts. “But we’d lost the roof and our parlor’d been ransacked” (69) implies the cruel measures taken by the Communist government, and the oppression people have to face. It seems that after the June Fourth Incident the original rules and cultural norms are smashed up, so people are forced to search for new regulations and adjust to them. The problem does not lie in the destruction of the “old” Communist system and life style, but because the “new” democratic movements and thoughts are suddenly prohibited, people, therefore, fall into a panic. Especially in Hong Kong, people are on their way to the return to China, but unexpectedly they lose their faith in their future Chinese government. Therefore, some people even call for the postponement of the return and pursue the assurance of Hong Kong’s future democracy. “We’d searched for new lines to lay out and measure ourselves, picking our way carefully in the ruins.” (69) People strive to overcome the existing imperfection of real life, desperately breaking the constraint of Communism. Nevertheless, is it exactly what people want? Do people have confidence in new regulations or new arrangement? Yes implies reluctance and resistance from people, showing his sympathy to a certain degree.



The last stanza holds a much more acrimonious tone of expression, which leads to a transition in its description and implication:

...Desperately one

tried to hold on to oneself, but things were beyond control.

At midnight, pandemonium! We only wanted to change a few things,

to draw the curtain over that blemished picture---

wild sand scattered our signs, thunder blasted our tables and chairs. (69)

The usage of these words “desperately, pandemonium, wild sands, thunder” leaves readers an impression of “power, force, and the inescapable.” The memory seems to be refreshed again and the images are still vivid though after several days of spring rain. Originally the narrator wakes up for a new beginning, but in the last stanza, he appears to trace back to the time with clear and impressive images in his head.

“Things were beyond control” while the narrator yearns for the least wish to stick to himself. As for all that happens, which can hardly be changed, what people can do is “draw the curtain” to cover the undesirable image. People have suffered so much that they might just wish to erase those mental images. The picture can also refer to the worship of the Communist idol or the leader, so people try to cover it and to get rid of any Communist influence. In this stanza, Yesi conveys the overwhelming despondency concerning people’s collective memory of the Tiananmen Square

protests of 1989 and depicts people's struggles and frustrations.

There are some verbal references to the June Fourth Incident, such as "square" in the title and "midnight," "spring," "ransacked," "pandemonium" and "signs" in the poem proper. The melancholic memory still exists after the dramatic event, keeping people in search of new hope. Nevertheless, the sense of security and stability seems to decline as time goes by. Yesi attempts to compare the Great Square to people's home, endeavoring to connect the concept and perception to people's experience.

Therefore, the image of home is far from oblique and is deeply inscribed into people's

mind. The poem reveals the psychological impact of the June Fourth Incident on

Chinese people. In fact, during the earlier economic and political reforms, people in

Hong Kong have observed internal contradictions within Communism, and resulted in

the distrust of their future government. Initially, Hong Kong people also cherished

some hopes on the democratic movements and they feared they might not enjoy

freedom any more after the return. However, since the protests utterly failed and the

Chinese government saw the democratic movement as "unrest,"⁹ the atmosphere of

Hong Kong was filled with anxiety and uncertainty about the handover of

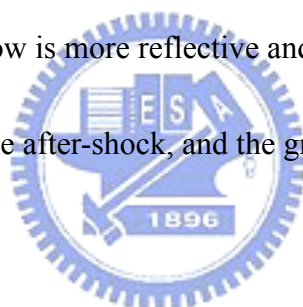
sovereignty.

The second poem is "Broken Home," which divulges the fractured image of

⁹ In Mandarin Chinese, the official expression is "dongluan"(動亂).

home and gives readers a vivid first impression. Different from the firmer tone of “In the Great Square,” the tone of “Broken Home” is much more uncertain. The two stanzas start with the following question respectively: “Do we really have to leave this house (home)?” and “How can we abandon all this.” (71) Ironically, the house and what people try to abandon are ruined and shattered, so people need to put great efforts to repair them. Yesi also alludes to the problem of mass migration after the event and before the colony’s return to “home” (read Chinese) rule. There are doubts and discontent within people’s mind, but there seems to be scarcely a way out. In Abbas’s words, “the tone now is more reflective and the emphasis is placed not on the moment of shock but on the after-shock, and the growing perception of betrayal.”

(132)



In the first stanza, Yesi presents people’s adjustment through the course of the event:

we’ve become each other’s furniture

We made changes they said couldn’t be made.

We took down walls and cleaned up old grime,

to make a much larger sitting room

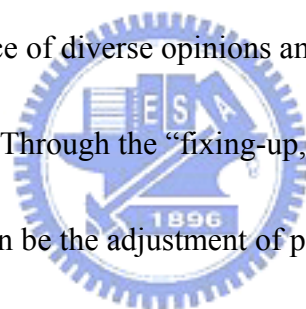
for all our different kinds of friends.

We’re deeply connected,

through the days of fixing-up,
 although the floor is more than littered with scraps and people;
 though nobody can reach the ceiling,
 anybody who stretches the yawns touches new stars.
 It's happening—what we only dreamed of yesterday,
 is taking shape around our sniffles and coughing. (71)

After the event, people realize how important everyone is to one another; in Yesi's words, people have become one another's furniture with pivot and necessary position.

Yesi also suggests the existence of diverse opinions among people and between people and the government. Through the "fixing-up," people are tightly connected together. The "fixing-up" can be the adjustment of people or the measures taken by the government. Yesi also allegorizes that the difficulty of reaching the ceiling resembles the obstacle of making a dialogue with the government. People survive in the little space, in which they will easily touch the strange stars even when stretching and yawning. During the process, people eventually make modifications and tear down the walls between people and the government, and these are formerly thought to be impossible. Despite widespread suspicion, people introspect themselves striving to face the music, coercing themselves into accepting whatever the situation is. In this part, people appear to relieve their flustering emotions, yielding their insistence



for better dream in the future. In turn, Yesi still intends to give people some hope to live on:

It's not much, but we can see a long way.

You tell the wide sky you choose freedom.

If we have someone to mourn and things to criticize

don't stick slogan-labels on us.

We're talking on the front porch, not out back in the alley.

Let our message go out in all directions. (71)

This part depicts the deepest yearnings of all Chinese people, conveying the significance of freedom of expression. Though people might easily touch “the new stars”, they still can regard it as a “wide sky”. Yesi does not directly indicate whom people mourn for and what are the things to be criticized, but he indeed expresses dissatisfaction under such a nameless pressure. Yesi continues to fight for democratic movements, hoping that people do not need to leave, for they can stay for some hope. He attempts to speak for those involved in the democratic movement in order to make China a better future, for in this case people can stay on and support one another. In “Broken Home,” Yesi attends not only to people in Mainland China but also to Hong Kong people's sentiments as well.

In the second stanza, Yesi again returns to the traumatic memory with clear

images:

How can we abandon all this,
 though you say you think we'd better,
 now that the trucks and tanks are closing in,
 and people are running and screaming all around
 and flares light up the entire square. (71)

The picture Yesi delineates is so lively that even after a period of time people can still feel the fear and bloody oppression. People thirst for the abandonment of the traumatic memory, but they find it impossible to do so. The image and memory keep haunting people, and the more people want to get rid of them, the clearer they become. Yesi applies specific objects and vivid images to intensify the tension and people's fright, such as "trucks and tanks," "running and screaming," and "flares."

These images seem inerasable for all people, as Abbas mentions "the event is still fresh in the mind but it has already receded a little into historical distance." (132)

However, though the condition is tense, people hold a pretty firm attitude to convey their request:

Here we sit dumb,
 hardly trembling in the chilly night.

Yesi might refer to the hunger strike but emphasizes people's determined spirits.

Though actually the nights were not so chilly in May and June, it reflects people's mental state. Yesi honors their courage and resolution, appreciating their spirits.

Yesi apparently tries to return to the original scene:

Listening to us consoling each other,

who can hold back tears!

Suddenly all the lights are gone and

people at the southeast corner slowly get up together.

Then an explosion and crackling sounds!

Deafening and around us, among us, everywhere!

The earth shakes and spirits are shattered like glass, broken like flower pots.

I bend down to lift you from the trampled ground

but find you and your promises of rebuilding a home with me

can't stand up.

People's eyes are full of tears, and the only thing they can do is to console and support one another. The lights symbolize hope, so when the lights are gone, everything begins to change. In a BBC news report, entitled "Witnessing Tiananmen: Clearing the square," the interviewee Zhang Boli, the deputy director of the students' hunger strike at Tiananmen Square, reminisces: "The lights (at the square) were switched off. When the lights were out the students thought the troops would start shooting. So,

many students huddled together.” The lights were essential to all people there and with the fade-out great unknown horror arose. Yesi seems to allude to such historical moments, preserving the memory for the future generations of Chinese people. Towards the end of this poem, Yesi emphasizes the deep senses of betrayal and loss. Even though people unite together and suffer for the common goal, they are doomed to accept the failure. The second stanza goes back to the traumatic memory, undermining the previous hope. Yesi might want to present the struggles and contradictories within people’s hearts, or he might present the truth that the hope is broken.



In “Broken Home,” the clues to the June Fourth Incident become more and more obvious, including “choose freedom, someone to mourn, things to criticize, slogan-labels, trucks and tanks, flares, square, sit dumb, explosion.” The poet still does not make any reference to the exact June Fourth Incident, yet he leaves readers some cues to stitch up the whole image. Especially in the second stanza, the memory displays in a documentary way, and it becomes so real and destructive that people can still feel the pain.

The third poem is “Refurnishing,” and the title strongly implies the process of recovery from the broken state. In fact, the title is more metaphorical in itself, for the way it refers to the June Fourth Incident is much more indirect, if compared with

“In the Great Square” and “Broken Home.” Unlike the other two poems discussed above, Yesi changes the doer to be the government side. In “In the Great Square” and “Broken Home,” Yesi uses first and second person point of views, which efficiently make association with those protestors in the square and people identifying with them. It seems that the poet is able to build an emotional connection with his readers. By comparison, Yesi uses the third person point of view for a greater sense of objectivity. In light of this, Yesi attempts to create the distance between the government and the masses. The title “Refurnishing” literally refers to the government’s re-establishing the promising vision, but its connotation might be people’s re-adjustment towards the newly-arranged illusion. Yesi probably does not promote the concept that “time heals,” for the memory is like a ghost haunting people all the time.



The poem begins like this:

Well, they returned with their grand old tables and chairs

The solid stuff, the elegant, classy stuff that has

Symmetry, unmistakable aesthetic appeal. Nothing better.

They cleaned the floors till they shone like trackless water;

They soaped away the smells of cutlery, until

Nothing had happened; the last smoke went up the ventilators. (75)

“They” here might allude to the authorities, the Communist government. After the devastating destruction, they return to friendly construction. Yesi skillfully satirizes all the stuff given by the authorities with “nothing better;” however, these “best” stuff might not accord with what people exactly expect. The externally good-looking furniture, however beautiful, appeals to nobody. Ironically, the authorities become the cleaners and intend to wipe out all the evidence and to present an illusive image that nothing bad has ever happened. Rey Chow also holds a similar view that Yesi applies the sarcastic method to dismantle the official history. (140-141) In addition,

Yesi implies the control from the authorities:

They hung their paintings and calligraphy where you couldn't not see,
couldn't not honor the good old snows,...

...

the nubby cucumbers, the plump new kidney beans won't allow

Insidious interpretations. ...(75)

While people are provided with a prosperous social condition, at the same time they are restrained. People have no choice but accept what they are given. No “insidious interpretations” are allowed, for the strong and powerful regime does not permit much free will. This poem also implies the traditional political hierarchy:

The master will grind ink for new poems. A circle of notables

will answer poem for poem sonorously and praise his most.

He'll strut and compose, a new piece on last night's storm,

a high-sounding, historical work, fit to be framed for posterity. (75)

The relation between the master and notables seems to resemble the expected relation between the authorities and the intellectuals at the time. The master welcomes all the praise and composes a brand-new historical work to fit in his expectation. On the other hand, the notables can only answer with poems of compliment. Yesi does not directly mention the underlying connotation, but instead provides readers this ancient classical image. The good old memory is now transformed into another interpretation. People do not expect this superficial harmony, but they want true dialogues with the authorities. Toward the end of this poem, Yesi switches from the thriving scene to the dreary celebration of New Year:

Are there shadows of the old year wandering in the streets?

Close and lock the windows against any possible chill. (75)

In contrast with the spree of cheerful abundant year, people lock themselves in a confined space, keeping away from any undesirables. The visible parts are remarkable and favorable, but the invisible turn to be scaring and bothersome.

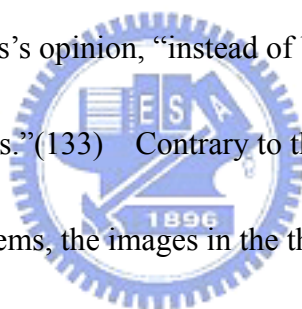
The great old furniture, hauled into the parlor, is History,

solidly in place today, with the usual words in New Year's

couplets trimming every safe and silent and locked front door. (75)

“The great old furniture [...] is History,” for the government has invented the wonderful and prosperous picture to cover up the cruel reality. The “History” here is of course official history, which could hardly represent common people’s real experience. People pursue their “safety” at the cost of their freedom under the control of Communism. People are physically locked behind the door of the guardian from the government and psychologically haunted by their memory.

“Refurnishing” looks at the event from a very different point of view, which is much more passive. In Abbas’s opinion, “instead of brute force, what the authorities now use is the power of images.” (133) Contrary to the cruel, dreadful, and helpless images in the previous two poems, the images in the third poem are apparently attractive and flourishing. Yesi might want to highlight the false reading of the external beauty, and the result is “a restoration of old stabilities to blot out popular memory,” in terms of Abbas. (133) The memory in this poem is distorted, covered up, or even erased by intentional measures, such as official propaganda, but consequently the significance of the underlying true memory emerges. Yesi has seen through Communist tricks, fearing the cruel reality and gloomy memory might be erased or hidden. Therefore, he indirectly recalls and records history, and hopes to generate positive meanings. Yesi intentionally digs out these true memories about



June Fourth Incident in order to criticize the government's ideological control, and attempts to evoke people's collective memory as a resistance.

Yesi's Tiananmen poems present his reflection in different periods, but the three poems indeed share some common grounds. There is no direct treatment of the event -- the Tiananmen Square, the protestors, hunger strike and so forth are not explicitly discussed. But the allusions to the traumatic event are already quite obvious. Yesi's poetic language is able to convey and evoke strong emotions without dwelling directly on the unsavory details of the traumatic historical event. Besides, the figural rather than realistic approach allows for more interpretations. The home metaphor, in particular, is very powerful, for it is close to everyone's everyday experience and can easily inspire people's profound feelings.



Chapter Three

Food and Identity in the “Tasting Asia” Verse Cycle¹⁰

“Tasting Asia” is a series of poems originally written for the namesake installation exhibition at Hong Kong Cultural Centre between October 27 and November 10, 2002. The poems were published in the journal *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* in 2005 and collected in the book *Vegetable Politics* (2006).

In this project, Yesi cooperated with the designers and artists from eight different Asian countries, working together as a team under the name “The Design Alliance.”

In the original context, the series, a total of twelve poems, was to depict the characteristics of each Asian culture and the interaction among them. More precisely, Yesi intends to explore “Asian cultures and histories, such as the colonial past and the conflict between tradition and a more aggressive popular culture,” and he tries to “use a more subtle and less provocative form, more imagistic, less judgmental, attempting more to see and feel from other perspectives.” (“Interview” 30) In this chapter, I will probe into the intricate relationship between memory and food in Yesi’s “Tasting Asia,” and explore the historical implications and the question of cultural identity.

I will begin with some discussions between memory and food in light of Marcel

¹⁰ In this chapter, I will use “Tasting Asia” (in quotation marks) to represent Yesi’s set poems in order to distinguish from the same name of the installation exhibition.

Proust's and David Sutton's writings, for they have given me inspirations on dealing with this topic. In fact, compared with Proust and Sutton, Yesi develops more historical meanings and searches for the implied cultural identity in the representative dishes. The three poems I have chosen to discuss from this verse cycle are "Basin Feast," "Yellow Rice," and "A Taste of Asia." In "Basin Feast," Yesi starts with a Southern Song Dynasty legend, which tries to identify Hong Kong's history in a way. With the nostalgic atmosphere and Hong Kong identity, Yesi also speculates on the possibility of his democratic ideal. In "Yellow Rice," Yesi probes into Indonesia's colonial past and her hybrid cultures. He can relate to the historical and cultural complexity and attempts to search for the resolution of harmonic co-existence of multiple cultures in food. In "A Taste of Asia," the 2004 tsunami disaster brought Asian people closer together. In view of various cultural exchanges and conflicts, Yesi tries to improve Asian people's fellow feelings despite the cultural diversities involved. In these three poems, Yesi not only writes about each representative dish, but also reveals his interest in building distinctive cultural identity and his criticism of imperialism and colonialism.

Some famous writers, such as Marcel Proust (1871-1922), have tried to explore the relation between food and memory. For Proust, "the senses of smell ('l'odeur') and taste ('la saveur') are the most stimulating, for they bear unremittingly 'l'edifice

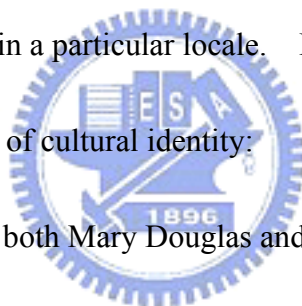
immense du souvenir' [the vast structure of memory]." (Nalbantian 60) In Proust, memory might be triggered or aroused when people taste a certain kind of food. The smell and the taste of the food would involuntarily lead the subject to the memory of his or her personal past, but not necessarily to the history of the food itself. In his celebrated "*The Madeleine*" episode, Proust attempts to figure out the reason why he feels so pleasant after the taste of a crumb of madeleine soaked in lime-flower tea. "And suddenly the memory returns." (Proust 296) Proust thus realizes the magic of the food he has just tasted, for the madeleine brings back his good old memory out of the blue:



But when from a long-distance past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (Proust 296)

Food here serves as a trigger or a stimulus that brings back related memory and helps to create an atmosphere of nostalgia. Proust emphasizes not the historical development of a particular food itself but the cherished personal memory related to it.

In “Tasting Asia,” Yesi does not exactly share the Proustian concern with private, involuntary memory; instead, he wishes to deal with food in relation to larger cultural memory of different places. In this perspective, it is important to note that most foods in the world, with respect to how they are cooked, consumed, and especially what they mean to people, will not always remain the same; instead, they keep changing in history. Such changes may be due to the changing climate, social, economic, and political conditions, and so forth. Therefore, a study of food can shed light on cultural changes as well; food offers us historical clues and brings back collective memory of the past in a particular locale. David Sutton reminds us that food is essential to the making of cultural identity:



Food, in the view of both Mary Douglas and those working on ethnicity, is a particularly good “boundary marker,” perhaps because it provides a potent symbol of the ability to transform the outside into the inside. In more current terminology food is about identity creation and maintenance, whether that identity be national, ethnic, class or gender-based. (5)

In Sutton’s view, food can serve as a boundary marker that works historically and geographically, helping to create and maintain different cultural identities. Each place has its own distinctive history of food, depending as much on the local conditions as on its foreign contacts, so the food becomes an explicit marker to

differentiate different places. Each food has its own characteristics and also a peculiar history in relation to cultural changes and exchanges. Moreover, Sutton holds the belief that food has the power to turn its own material quality into symbolic significance. In this connection, Yesi is not only aware of the physical qualities of different foods but he has also attended to the social meanings concerned.

In “Tasting Asia,” Yesi delves into the connection between some Asian dishes and the collective cultural memory associated with them. In my opinion, Yesi combines the two kinds of relationship elaborated above; that is, food as a stimulus for recollecting the past and the cultural history of food itself. Yesi may or may not have actually tasted all the special dishes or food he describes before his composition, but in any case food has inspired him to engage in interesting historical and cultural imaginations. He explains that the writing of his “food poems “started as random, spontaneous efforts.” He tells us that he did not “just write about all the food [he] tasted”; some foods he likes “but did not write about it.” (“Interview” 30) The food acts as an inspiration for voluntarily exploring the related cultural history rather than as a trigger to involuntarily arouse his personal memory in a Proustian fashion.

Let us begin our discussion with Hong Kong basin feast, or Pun Choi. This special kind of food is chosen for the representation of Hong Kong during the installation exhibition, and indeed Yesi enlarges the significance of this traditional

feast by not only presenting to us the delicious taste but also unearthing the now obscure cultural memory of the past. Legend has it that about 700 years ago, toward the end of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279 A.D.), the last emperor escaped to the New Territories from the chase of the Yuan forces. The emperor, along with his officials and soldiers, was treated with this provincial feast by the Hong Kong villagers. Because their arrival came all of a sudden, the villagers did not have time to get enough plates and so they used a big wooden basin filled with five or six layers of food to serve them. One must remember that the villagers belonged to the relatively culturally unrefined Southerners, this basin feast already showed their greatest respect and hospitality to the emperor and his company. However, it is difficult to prove the truth of this legend, though there are indeed some historical sites related to the emperor's escape to Hong Kong.¹¹ The Hong Kong basin feast may have undergone some changes in the course of time, but its historical, or, rather, legendary meanings should not be forgotten by Hong Kong people and the food is a good reminder of this distant past.

Traditional basin feast needs complicated preparations in advance, and only

¹¹ Michael Ingham refers to the Sung boy's rock in Kowloon with an illustration:

What is certain is that the Sung-era rock carving in a small park in Sung Wong Toi Park near the old Kai Tak airport still bears witness today to these heady events. The giant boulder under which the boy emperor remained in hiding became known as the Sung Emperor's (*Sung Wong* in Cantonese) Rock, and a terrace and balustrade around the sacred site were constructed in later times and preserved under the terms of the 1898 lease between the Chinese and the British. (4, italics original)

certain indigenous people of the walled villages in New Territories know the exact method of how to make this dish. When there are some occasions to celebrate, such as getting married, baby's completion of its first month, or worshiping the ancestors, the villagers in New Territories will gather together for the basin feast in order to memorize the delightful moment. Strictly speaking, most Hong Kong people are migrants, and even Yesi himself is a migrant from Guangdong Province. However, in order to construct Hong Kong identity using a unique local food, Yesi turns to this famous food of the indigenous people. With this legendary cultural imagination and the creation of nostalgia, Yesi intends to represent a collective Hong Kong tradition.

In the poem "Basin Feast," Yesi starts with the following lines:

There should be roast rice-duck and pan-fried prawns on top

Order of the classes are clearly laid out in layers

But the poking chopsticks gradually reverse

the lofty five-spice chicken and the lowly pigskin (11)¹²

At first glance, these four lines seem to merely indicate the physical characteristics of basin feast; however, they might as well foreshadow the legend of the Southern Song Dynasty described later in the poem. The "roast rice-duck," "pan-fried prawns," and

¹² In this chapter, the poems cited are all from the journal *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*. Furthermore, there is a slight difference in the 4th line in the English translation of "Basin feast." In Mandarin version, Yesi just depicts the five-spice chicken and cheap pigskin, but in English version, the opposite relationship is emphasized between these two ingredients by using the two adjectives, lofty and lowly. It's clear to identify the huge gap between them.

“five-spice chicken” might allude to the emperor along with the officials and soldiers, who used to enjoy higher social status and living standard. On the other hand, “pigskin” might refer to the common people or the villagers. In a traditional basin feast, the expensive and rare ingredients are usually put on the top layers, while those cheap and common ones are placed on the bottom layers. The ordering of the different ingredients, in a way, resembles the social hierarchy. “There should be” implies that the roast rice-duck and pan-fried prawns should always be put on the top, but the original order has been messed up. “The poking chopsticks” may be responsible for the reversing and disturb the (social) order. In this poem, the poking chopsticks can be associated with the Yuan army and those betrayers that forced the Southern Song Dynasty emperor to exile to the “barbarian” south. Because of the Yuan army and those betrayers, the emperor was degraded to experience the life of common people and left his glorious palace, so the original social hierarchy was temporarily broken. However, in the present day custom, when people eat basin feast, it is a rule to mix up all the layers and reverse every ingredient. This action means “working together” and “time has turned to one’s favor,”¹³ so people do it for a good reason. It is interesting to notice that the reversion could have mean the degradation of the Song emperor, but it has come to mean good fortune and equality

¹³ In Mandarin, “working together” means “tong xin xie li”(同心協力) and “time has turned to one’s favor” means “shi lai yun zhuan.”(時來運轉)

in modern days. To sum up, in the first four lines, the original order has been broken up, and consequently comes every possibility of changes, which can be either doleful or delightful.

The first stanza concludes with the following four lines to remind the readers of the legend about the basin feast:

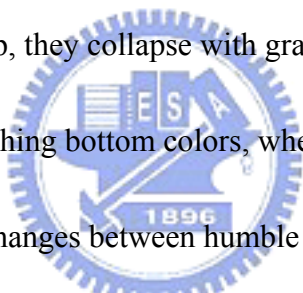
The Sung army once sought shelter here after defeat
 wolfed down the fishermen's reserves from big wooden basins
 dined on the beach in crude circles, with no elegance of the past

Away from the capital, they tried wild flavors of the rural folks. (11)

Yesi directly delineates how the defeated army of the Song Dynasty was in a predicament, depicting precisely the sense of loss. These escaping soldiers were so hungry that they “wolfed down” the food from wooden basins and tried rural flavors outdoors just on the beach. Where was their dignity? How embarrassed they were to condescend to common people! The Song army must have felt depressed, but at last they received hearty help from the villagers. Yesi attempts to narrate with details to emphasize the melancholic tone, which primarily comes from the sense of loss and helplessness. Their pride and dignity had become something “of the past,” and they could not recover any more. This atmosphere of despair at the time of the soldiers’ wolfing down foods is quite contrary to the delighting celebration or the

solemn worship of ancestors when people gather together to eat basin feasts at present days. However, it is not awkward for Yesi to combine these two parts, the reversed layers of basin feast and the Song legend respectively, in the first stanza, because he seems to remind people of the past and the origin. Yesi urges that the basin feast is not only an appetizing dish but also something with historical significance and slight gloomy beauty of the past.

In the second stanza, Yesi again plays on words that contain double meanings or even more:



Unable to stay on top, they collapse with gradual consumption
 No escape from touching bottom colors, whether you like it or not,
 no way to block exchanges between humble mushrooms and rare squids
 Reversed relationships taint each other and affect the purity on top
 Nobody can stop the meat juice from trickling down, and let
 the bottom-most turnip absorb all the flavors in all its sweetness. (11)

The literal meaning of this part may be quite accessible because Yesi continues the discussion of the mixture of the layers in the basin feast. The top layers cannot always stay on the top during the process of consumption, and there are definitely interactions among layers. While being eaten, the layers will mingle together and thus it is almost impossible to distinguish the expensive ingredients from cheap ones.

The end is that the meat juice and the bottom-most turnip conjointly bring out the sweetness with all the flavors mixed together. Yesi's celebration of the mixing of food which implies the breaking down of social hierarchy here goes well with his characteristic democratic spirit. In this poem Yesi has made two somewhat contradictory moves. On the one hand, his evocation of the legend about the last Song emperor's escape to Hong Kong, in a sense, "deepens" the sense of history of this formerly little-known, "uncivilized" place in old Chinese history. Besides, when Hong Kong has already become a highly modernized metropolis, one of Asia's "little dragons," with a large population composing mainly of migrants from Mainland China, Yesi writes about a traditional indigenous food and reminds Hong Kong people of a more communal agricultural past. On the other hand, the democratic leanings suggested by the food-mixing metaphor might as well betray his reluctance to see Hong Kong as simply a part of Mainland China.



Another poem I would like to explicate is "Yellow Rice," (or Nasi Kuning in Indonesian) which invokes much of Indonesia's colonial past through this representative dish. As a matter of fact, Indonesia has an even more complicated colonial history than Hong Kong, and some people there also attempt to search for their own unique identity. In this part, I will focus on the cultural interactions between Indonesia and the countries mentioned in the poem, and try to abandon its

obscure politics. Some books about Indonesia's modern history start with the spread of Islam, which was followed by many foreign Asians' settlement in Indonesia.

(Ricklefs 3)¹⁴ During the ninth century, there were frequent contacts between China and the Islamic world, and such contacts “would have been maintained primarily via the sea routes through Indonesian waters.” (Ricklefs 3) Consequently, many Indians, Arabs, and Chinese came and settled down along with their cultures, religious believes, eating habits, and life styles. With the trading importance in its geographical position and later the thriving of spices, Indonesia's history was gradually led to its colonial destiny. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese came first for Indonesia's abundant spices, “which meant somehow finding the way to Asia to cut out the Muslim merchants who monopolized spice imports to Europe.” (Ricklefs 25)¹⁵ Later, the Dutch grabbed the control of the spice trade and established a spice monopoly (known as VOC¹⁶) until 18th century. By the turn of the 20th century, the consciousness of nationalism developed and rose there, so the people began to challenge the oppressive colonial rule of the Dutch, which lasted for nearly three centuries. After bitter struggles, the Republic of Indonesia



¹⁴ There are two main processes of the conversion of Indonesians mentioned in Ricklefs' book, and one of them is that “foreign Asians (Arabs, Indians, Chinese, and so on) who were already Muslims settled permanently in an Indonesian area, intermarried and adopted local lifestyles to such a degree that in effect they became Javanese or Malay or whatever.” (Ricklefs 3)

¹⁵ “Upon hearing the first reports of Malacca's great wealth which came from Asian traders, the Portuguese King sent Diogo Lopes de Sequeira to find Malacca, to make a friendly compact with its ruler and to stay on there as Portugal's representative east of India. All did not go well for Sequeira when he arrived in Malacca in 1509.” Later, in 1511, the Portuguese merchant Albuquerque arrived at Malacca with a force of some 1200 men and 17 or 18 ships. (Ricklefs 25)

¹⁶ VOC stands for Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie.

eventually announced its independence on August 17th, 1945.

With such a unique historical background, the poem “Yellow Rice” can be analyzed in terms of multiculturalism and colonialism in Indonesia. Though he is not an Indonesian, Yesi seizes the chance to fathom the Indonesian people’s mind and their memory of the past. The poem directly points out the hybridity of Indonesian culture at the beginning:

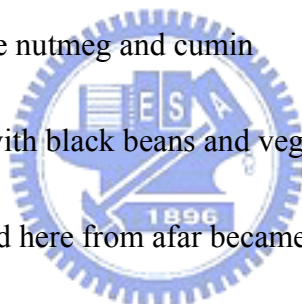
India brought over spices and curry

Arabian Shish Kebab became satay

The Dutch seized the nutmeg and cumin

The Chinese came with black beans and vegetable seeds

The soy sauce landed here from afar became sweet (18-19)



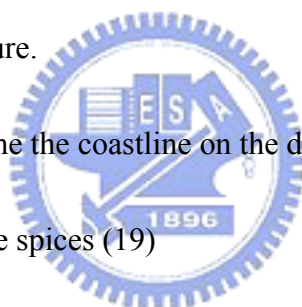
Different peoples brought along different influence on the land, no matter what their initial aims were. The Indians and Arabians might come for trading, while the Dutch came here to colonize and exploit the land. On the other hand, the Chinese fled from disasters. Situated half way in the great trading route between India and China, Indonesia, accordingly, was enormously affected. The spices, curry, black beans, and many foreign ingredients rooted here and became part of everyday life. The exotic stuff may also adapt to the local and adopt slight changes, so the soy sauce became sweeter than ever and the barbeque was transformed into another flavor.

These different peoples might come for trading business, better living condition, or colonizing, but ultimately they generated certain alteration which is beyond measurement. Yesi draws on these five lines for the memory of Indonesia's colonial and hybrid history, and expresses it coherently in past tense. Yesi foreshadows the problem about the co-existence of multiple cultures, and as Indonesia has its own intense native feature, later he provides a different attitude to alleviate such conflicts in the light of his observation of rice.

In the following two lines, Yesi uses a metaphorical language to strengthen the magnificence of the local culture.

Numerous islands line the coastline on the dining table

Nobody can colonize spices (19)



Indonesia is an archipelago country, made up of 17,506 islands, but Yesi compares these islands along the coastline to the dishes on the dining table. Though the ambitious Dutch indeed colonized Indonesia, the spices or people's practice of everyday life cannot be colonized or totally transformed. Yesi indeed shares some resonance of his own colonial experience in Hong Kong. He stirs up people's emotions of the miserable colonial history and affirms the decolonization of the essence.

Then, Yesi turns back to the main dish discussed:

Turmeric dyes my fingers yellow

Padan leaves always have a strong fragrance

The fiery chili pepper refuses to bow to anyone

Hot as volcanic lava

Rugged as ocean rock. (19)

Though Yesi introduces many foreign ingredients at the beginning of this poem, they eventually still could not totally assimilate and take the place of the local food. The ingredients of yellow rice are mainly native, featuring the local characteristics. Yesi displays intense visual, olfactory, and gustatory impressions to the readers, highlighting Indonesian uniqueness. The fiery chili pepper's refusal seems to refer to Indonesians' resistance to the colonizer, and once again Yesi goes back to the colonial past. In Yesi's point of view, Indonesians are as passionate as volcanic lava and as strong as ocean rock with contagious power, fragrant elegance, and rational resistance. This traditional dish represents and also presents Indonesian features.

However, Yesi commences with the multicultural past, expands through contemporary local tradition, and endeavors to search for the best way to harmonize all the diversities. His answer would be:

...Only

Rice is our common language

Rice is our consoling mother

Rice encompasses all colors

Rice soothes the old wounds in the stomach (19)

Rice is the staple of south Asia, and part of the main course for almost every meal.

Yesi proposes people's learning from the tolerance and attainable communication of

rice, releasing historical pains from deep within. Indonesia is "populated by 230

million people speaking more than three hundred languages" (Taylor 1) along with

some foreign languages from Europe and Asia. With such a complication, mutual

communication becomes fairly significant. Rice here has its symbolic importance of

mutual understanding and symbolizes the role of mother to embrace all the

differences impartially. The color white can match all other colors, disclosing the

utmost tolerance. No matter where the wounds stem from, we should all follow the

lessons of rice to relieve the trauma. Besides the conflicts from the co-existence of

multiple cultures, Yesi might also want to refer to recent Indonesia's anti-Chinese riots

in the late 1990s and East Timor Independence in 1999.¹⁷ So many people died from

¹⁷ Herlijanto mentions that "They [Chinese Indonesians] often become the target of discrimination, violence and riots, especially when the country faces an unstable political situation." (65) When the New Order regime came to power, the situation was getting worse. "By this policy, Chinese Indonesians were forced to assimilate themselves into Indonesian society by abandoning everything which could be perceived as 'Chinese', at least in the public sphere." (65-66) In the May 1998 Riots, most of buildings owned by Chinese Indonesians were damaged or burned and even some Chinese Indonesian ladies were raped. (69)

Ien Ang also indicates "people of Chinese descent have systematically been treated as second-class citizens, and they are constantly referred to as 'foreigners' or 'aliens,' despite the fact that most Chinese Indonesian families have lived in the country for generations." (23)

On the other hand, according to a report commissioned the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Geoffrey Robinson summaries that:

hostility and inhumanity, while most of them were innocent. Yesi realizes the sublime of rice and, therefore, highlights the notion of peace through metaphorical language.

The poem “Yellow Rice” not only presents the traditional dish of Indonesia, but also reveals its abundant history. The abundance and uniqueness explain why yellow rice is chosen to represent Indonesia. In reality, the history of Indonesia is not well known to the world, probably including part of Indonesians, due to its perplexing religious, economic, and political evolution. However, Yesi wittily combines food and the historical memory to twist people’s conventional notion of food and simultaneously remind people of Indonesia’s cultural identity. Food travels across space and time and leaves traces for the descendants to follow and to research about its rich past. The colonial history of Indonesia may be far-reaching, cruel, and inhuman, but according to Yesi, food becomes a metaphorical way to express good will.



Interviewed by Lo Kwai-Cheung about the “Tasting Asia” project, Yesi mentioned his ideas of Asian commonalities in his poems:

On a superficial level, there are the spices and the rice. If you look into it,

In the course of 1999, East Timor was the scene of terrible violence. Between early January and late October at least 1,200 civilians, and perhaps as many as 1,500, were killed. Some were shot dead, while others were decapitated, disemboweled or hacked to death with machetes. Many were subjected to torture and ill-treatment. Women and girls suffered rape and other crimes of sexual violence. The systematic violence fueled the forcible displacement of the population on a massive scale. (1)

the spices are the biting, sharp pain of tumults, the sour, sweet, and bitter colors of the imperial and colonial histories; the rice is the daily, the homely, the common folk, the endurance and the soothing balm for the pain. The imagistic and the discursive. The picture and the music. The hidden, distorted identity, and the cover-up mask on the surface. ("Interview" 31)

Spices and rice are two unparalleled ingredients in Asians' meals, but they should not be perceived as food only. As far as Yesi is concerned, through the intensive inspection of spices and rice, various memories and symbolic meanings can be found.

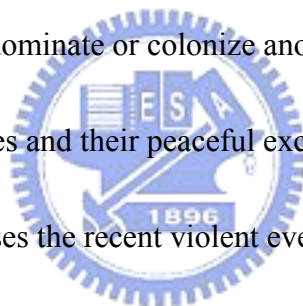
Yesi intends to figure out the true cultural identity under the "cover-up mask."

According to Schivelbusch, in the Middle Ages, "Spices as a link to Paradise, and the vision of Paradise as a real place somewhere in the East-their source-fascinated the medieval imagination." Furthermore, "pepper, cinnamon, and nutmeg were status symbols for the ruling class, emblems of power which were displayed and then consumed." (125) Owing to the attraction to the Europeans, the history was, therefore, gybed to another direction. The spices contain the exotic allure for the Westerners but represent the brutal colonial memory for the Orient. In the past, spices were not merely the food additives, but they also symbolized status, power, and wealth. On the other hand, rice tastes plain but gives people sense of security and satisfaction. Contrary to the flavorful spices, rice comforts people's heart. Rice is



connected to the land and the mother earth, uncovering people's desire of pursuing self-identity and harmony with the environment. Behind the surface of spices and rice, there are people's various wounds and happiness, the abundant past.

In "Yellow Rice," Yesi evokes certain immigrant history of Chinese Indonesians, tracing back to the diaspora past. He might also recall his own immigrant experience and relate to those Chinese Indonesians. On the other hand, sharing similar colonial experience, Yesi seems to reveal his resistance to colonialism and relies much on the co-existence of different cultures. He believes that it is impossible for one culture to dominate or colonize another. Instead, he encourages the tolerance of diverse cultures and their peaceful exchanges. In the last stanza about "rice," Yesi ironically uses the recent violent events in the restless Indonesian society, wishing to arouse the basic harmony for its people.



The third poem "A Taste of Asia" serves to unite and vivify the common memory of the 2004 tsunami disaster in Asian countries. This poem does not belong to the original set poems displayed in the installation exhibition in 2002, but it was added later by Yesi to the series in attempt to promote transnational relationship. Yesi might want to evoke Asian fellow feeling through this food poem. The other poems in this series center on one dish for one particular Asian country, but this poem "A Taste of Asia" unearths the common memory shared by most Asian countries after the

2004 tsunami disaster. “The 2004 tsunami disaster seemed to bring many Asian countries together,” according to Lo Kwai-Cheung and Pang Laikwan’s comment, though these countries and organizations might have very different purposes. (1)¹⁸

The tragedy aroused most Asians’ compassion and humane concern, and created a strong bond within many Asian nations. This poem is novel in combining food and the momentous event.

The devastating 2004 tsunami disaster was an undersea earthquake occurring on December 26th near the west coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, while most people, including residents and tourists, were enjoying the Christmas vacation. The violent earthquake caused tsunamis with huge waves up to 30 meters tall, killing approximately over two hundred thousand people from eleven countries. After the disaster, countries around the world, especially in Asia, were devoted to rescuing missions. Owing to the destructive tsunamis, a platform was offered for Asian countries to gather together and introspect what had been done and what had not been done. Yesi strikes out the linkage of a jar of the pickled garlic with the memory of this gloomy event. The poem “A Taste of Asia” is divided into two parts, before and after the opening of the jar. In the first stanza, the jar of pickled garlic introduces the reminiscence of the bad news:

¹⁸ Many performers seized the chance to attend the fund-raising show to access the huge transnational audience. On the other hand, the governments of some Asian countries competed to take the active roles in the rescue work.

The jar you sent had just arrived, stood still unopened,
 When the grim tidings blew in from the grey clouds
 North of your coast. The earth's contractions
 Had brought forth a tsunami. A hotel swallowed in an instant.
 A train thrown from its tracks, continuing derailed, driverless
 On a journey from this life to the next.
 The ocean suddenly overhead. Human lives
 Oilslick-black, flotsam doors, provisions adrift, homeless... (26)

The jar triggers the recall of the devastating tsunamis that have just happened, and it is like “a message in a bottle” which sends news from a distant place. Yesi perspicuously etches the process during which Asians were hurt and describes how the violent earthquake destroyed hotels, trains, houses, and food people lived on.

The deceased seemed to join in a journey to the next life without a return trip. Yesi displays humans' vulnerability and the power of our mother nature. The contractions of the earth easily crumbled preceding harmony and shook the original order. Before the jar is opened, Yesi has already filled the air with complete bad news and grief. However, he still prays for little hope that might come along with the opening of the jar.

The second stanza starts with the opening of the jar, which might symbolize the

uncovering of superficiality:

I open the tightly-sealed jar. Pickled garlic.

What is this taste? A bitterness

Buried deep in layers of mud? A harshness of trees broken apart?

A stench of ocean, shattered coral, fish floating belly-up?

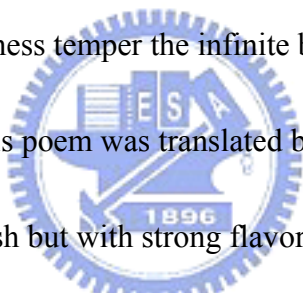
What does it speak of, your message, wafted my way this sunny afternoon?

Of something brewing in the dark? Of something growing in turmoil?

Of pity and cruelty, glimpsed in the heaving motions of nature?


Can a drop of sweetness temper the infinite brine of this world's woe!

December 2004 (This poem was translated by John Minford.) (26)



The pickled garlic is never fresh but with strong flavor, and Yesi intends to associate this flavor with the painful experience of the tsunamis. However, Yesi depicts the difficulty of telling the exact flavor of the pickled garlic. He might intend to emphasize the melancholy that makes everything tasteless, or he might refer to the intricate mixture of the real taste of the food and that of the disaster. Yesi raises many questions to reinforce the sense of doubt and confusion. Moreover, Yesi again uses the idea of “a message in a bottle” and tries to interpret the message sent along with the jar. He wishes to overcome the negative bitterness and yearns for the least sweetness from the pickled garlic to console the fragile human beings. Yesi reveals

his craving to remind people not to give up any hope for the world, and uses the tasty food to figuratively harmonize the infinite hardship. Yesi names this poem “A Taste of Asia,” rather than “A Taste of Pickled Garlic” or “A Taste of Tsunamis,” for he shows his great intention in strengthening the relationship among Asian countries. He presents the sympathy for all Asian countries, and strengthens Asian fellow feeling through food. Interestingly, Yesi combines the food and the memory of the tragedy. Although a jar of pickled garlic brings along bad news, but simultaneously it represents hope. Yesi promotes cultural exchanges among Asian countries but discourages cultural conflicts, trying to respect the diversity.



In this chapter, I have attempted to explore the delicate relationship between food and memory in Yesi’s “Tasting Asia” series which originally was a part of an installation exhibition in 2002 and later were published together with some additions in the journal and book. Yesi expands the interpretation of food and associated cultural identity by means of contemplating innovative ways of reading and conceiving them. In “Basin Feast,” the various layers of ingredients are connected to a historical legend and Yesi’s consciousness of Hong Kong identity. The memory of the past influences the fabrication of modern imagination, and enriches the content of their interplay. In “Yellow Rice,” Indonesia’s colonial history as well as the underlying reality of tasty spice and basal rice is recounted. The dish serves best as

the anodyne, or the pain-killer, to relieve the bleeding wounds and in the meantime Yesi reveals his discouragement towards colonialism and imperialism. Furthermore, in “A Taste of Asia,” Yesi gathers most Asian countries in memory of 2004 tsunami disaster triggered by the arrival of a jar of pickled garlic. These poems do exemplify the unique bond between certain food and memorial retrieval.

Yesi once refers to these poems as traditional Chinese *yongwu shi* (poetry about things) and what he has done is doing some modifications.

Of course there are various kinds of encounters between the mind/heart and the outside object, and it is not necessary that a poet always projects his interpretation of the world and turns the objects into mere symbol; it could also be an exploration into the immanent world. The encounter could be meditative, absurd, humorous, satirical, hysterical, discursive, imagistic, public, or private. (“Interview” 30)

The encounter between certain particular food and the poet does generate new exploration into the world and its historical memory. It is not necessarily personal, but, instead, it can be of the public. In his food poems, Yesi seems to hold a wrestling game in which the past battles with the present. Compared with Proust’s concept about involuntary memory:

In his literary work, Proust proceeded to firmly ground spontaneous

memory in the material world through a concentration on the trigger mechanism which evokes it. (Nalbantian 63)

The objects serve as triggers in both cases, but Yesi expands the objects for further interpretation, which is much more abundant and national, while Proust mostly focuses on the personal memory evoked by particular senses of smell and taste.

While asked how he would position his work in relation to Asia, Yesi answers:

[Yesi] as a writer I also see that we share the shattered histories of Chinese and English languages, the bitter and sour histories of colonialism, and the vain and expansive tastes of modernism or postmodernism. (“Interview” 31)

In the poems previously discussed, Yesi emphasizes the significance of history, shares the similar colonial experience, and attempts to construct unique identity in each culture. Through these representative foods, Yesi finds special meanings to their cultures and recalls their awareness. In spite of the differences in languages, customs, and historical background, Yesi calls for respect for each culture and preserves precious histories.

This thesis traces the change of tone in Yesi’s writing career. In his *Cities of Memory, Cities of Fabrication*, first released in a newspaper in a series under the name “Journey of the Trouble Dolls” during the 1980s, he wrote about Hong Kong’s sense of uncertainty and the question of its identity during the pre-1997 period. The

Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 greatly shocked him, and paradoxically he turned to share the frustrations of the Mainland Chinese. His three Tiananmen poems revealed the powerful impact that the June Fourth Incident had on him. At the same time, he ceased to emphasize the difference of being a Hong Konger as in the novel. Finally, in the 2002 “Tasting Asia” project, he applied a calmer and friendlier tone, ending with a Utopian vision.



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