

The Future as a Number: Temporal Trajectories of Hong Kong

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Abstract

This article takes a closer look at the function and importance of dates and numbers within a post-1997 Hong Kong context. Discussing Nury Vittachi's "The Queen of Statue Square" (2014), we argue that the story explores different meanings of Hong Kong identity alongside a wider reflection on the concept of democracy. The story's numerous references to dates and numbers reveal a heterogeneous political field of contestations and struggles, inviting readers to rethink the democratic potential inherent in Hong Kong's history in general, and in particular during the years following the Handover in 1997. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of auto-immunity, the article suggests that Vittachi's story articulates a new form of political subjectivity that comes in the form of an anti-democratic, subversive, illegal, and even treacherous gesture, but whose paradoxical faithfulness to the idea of democracy precisely illuminates the radical antagonism at the heart of the relationship between the people and power within the post-1997 Hong Kong context.

Keywords: Hong Kong, democracy, Nury Vittachi, numbers, 1997-2047, Jacques Derrida, auto-immunity.

Part I

When numbers are involved, we fall into “careless habits of accuracy,” observes Vivian to Cyril, in Oscar Wilde’s *The Decay of Lying*.¹ This parodic Socratic dialogue fights back against “our monstrous worship of facts.”² In the case of certain all-too-accurate facts, when it comes to Hong Kong’s numbers, our worship is far from being obviously monstrous. Indeed, we are not only careless but also unconscious in our thinking. This is even the case when we are apparently challenging the intellectual line, and making a case for specific, even unique features of Hong Kong, such as we find in recent elaborations of *post-hybridity* as a way of understanding the city’s culture. The numbers, so carelessly accurate, so apparently irresistible, make us ignore or dismiss other elements of the city’s identity.

As an example, C.Y. Shih has recently again argued against the perception of the city as “a typical site of cultural hybridity.”³ He elaborates a position similar to his earlier work that strives to introduce a temporal dimension into what he perceives as a simplistically spatial understanding of hybridity.⁴ That spatiality tends to flatten the consequences of cultural migrations and translations, according to Shih, producing a misleading synthetic version of hybridity. In Hong Kong, numerous cultural formations, instead of synthesizing, “parallel or layer each other.”⁵ Shih’s study covers both strategic cultural alignments (the kinds of things he associates with hybridity conventionally understood) and more spontaneous or internalized formations (that he thinks cannot be accounted for by most theorists of hybridity). So, Confucianism *can* align with Christianity in forming anti-Communist cultures, but it *can also* spark “natural” and “spontaneous” responses to the symbols of Communism. The latter is far harder for hybridity to explain, Shih contends. Layering without synthesis, parallels without hybridization—Hong Kong is hardly unique, Shih suggests, but is obviously a privileged strategic location to consider such resistance to theory.

Shih’s focus on Chinese Hong Kong is understandable. Of the current population of just over 7,400,000, still around 97% is identified, one way or another, as Chinese. Indeed, the number of expatriates is falling. However, there is one notable exception to that latter fact, which

is the number of domestic helpers. Indeed, the number of Filipinas is now over 200,000, and the number of Indonesians close to 165,000. This may not seem too striking a figure, and certainly leaves the helpers as a minority (however sizeable, even considered together, which grouping would itself demand further justification). Nonetheless, in the context of discussing post-hybrid Hong Kong, the numbers raise the question of who is being discussed when we think about the hybrid or cosmopolitan city. Kwame Anthony Appiah, in a recent conversation with Homi K. Bhabha, takes issue with some of our laziest assumptions about hybridity and cosmopolitanism, attacking in particular our easy association of the latter term with what he calls “platinum frequent-flyers.” Appiah makes the observation that:

many platinum frequent-flyers are not remotely cosmopolitan. They have never converged with anything. Second, some of the most convergent people, those who are picking up on things from places that they didn't start out from and doing things with them, are indeed refugees, forced migrants. Filipinos, or mostly Filipinas—in Hong Kong, or in Singapore, or increasingly, the United States—they are not platinum frequent-flyer people. They do have legal freedom of movement very often, but they don't have practical freedom of movement because it's too expensive to go to the places they want to go to, like back home.⁶

In spite of these practical restrictions, such cosmopolitans take what they find and work with it in a process of cultural translation or *bricolage*. Following Appiah, then, we might suspect that Shih is looking in the wrong place when analyzing hybrid Hong Kong, associating it far too readily with colonial Hong Kong—at least, he ought not think only about the Chinese majority. In any case, Appiah's observations usefully frame the literary example we want to introduce to think about numbers (both dates and statistics) in the context of Hong Kong, Nury Vittachi's “The Queen of Statue Square” (2014).

This narrative is revealingly positioned as the final story in a collection of the same name, edited by Marshall Moore and Xu Xi. Nury

Vittachi was born in Sri Lanka and is a long-term Hong Kong resident. Author of a series of comedy/mystery novels about *The Feng Shui Detective*, Vittachi is also a prolific commentator on Hong Kong cultural and political life. His story “The Queen of Statue Square” is the final and titular story in a collection of fiction edited by Marshall Moore and Xu Xi, published in September 2014. According to the editors, the collection explores different meanings of Hong Kong identity, and that exploration begins with the use of English itself. Vittachi’s story develops the sense that, while English may appear to be a legacy of British colonialism, it has been put to many unexpected uses in the postcolonial city. In this, English is not unlike the Square to which the title refers, which once upon a time contained (among others) a statue of Queen Victoria, before its removal under the Japanese occupation, and its eventual relocation to Victoria Park. The Square is now transformed every Sunday by relaxing Filipina domestic helpers, and so Vittachi’s Queen is not Victoria, but instead the most powerful Filipina in what is essentially a shadow government guiding the development of Hong Kong. The story concerns a decisive intervention in what is the ‘final’ stage of that development in the postcolonial era: the end of the “One Country, Two Systems” principle in 2047. What resolution the story provides, then, gives closure to the story itself, to the edited collection, and to the narrative of postcolonial Hong Kong. However, as we will see, the story ultimately purposefully withholds resolution.

“The Queen of Statue Square” is explicitly partly about shaking up unconscious assumptions concerning what makes for a Hong Kong person. Vittachi’s story fits this brief by making *everyone* a Hong Kong person. Taking literally the tourist slogans concerning “Asia’s World City,” the story ends with the Filipina protagonist Grace Inday Masipag taking a leap of faith, pressing enter, and hoping that she has achieved her goal of transforming Hong Kong not into a Chinese city but into a world city in the full sense of the term. This leap depends on the perhaps obvious conclusion that the apparently cosmopolitan Hong Kong pre-dating 1997 was itself illusory. The story bases itself on the idea that the symbolic values of dates such as 1997 and 2047 are not really a matter of defending something that really existed against being devoured. Instead,

we are invited to think about demanding what we were told we already had, but which we clearly did not already have, and which we clearly could not have had, given many of the provisions of a legal system so vigorously defended, yet so clearly iniquitous. The alternatives would likely and obviously have been a lot worse, but *tu quoque* is generally something to avoid. 2047 is, of course, whatever else it may have meant and may come to mean, a moment of legal integration: common law and civil law will be integrated, with the assumption generally being that the latter will consume the former. Vittachi's story demands that we rigorously and realistically rethink the way common law operated.

This rethinking comes about through the grand plan at the heart of the story, through which China's legal Schedule 01 is to be quietly replaced by a secret local coalition's Schedule 00. Schedule 01 is the official schedule, the one the Hong Kong lawyers have finally had to accept, without any of their suggested changes. But Grace is part of a network of highly-connected people (many of them domestic helpers) who work for the powerful classes in Hong Kong. The plan is for this powerful shadow class to present a real alternative to official narratives imposed from afar. Using some industrial-level technologically-flavored hand-waving, including, but not limited to, the quaint "firewall," Vittachi paints a very vague picture of a dramatic sleight-of-hand that will substitute *not* civil law for common law but common law proper instead of its mere appearance. As already indicated, at the conclusion of this plan to "change the world forever," Hong Kong will become truly borderless, matching law to rhetoric, and making it a place worth defending, the place it apparently always was—but of course was not.⁷

One important scene comes early in the story, revealing very precisely the power of numbers. Grace works for the fourth most senior lawyer in Hong Kong, who is having a rushed dinner party on the night of Handover 2.0. His guests are a British Q.C. (Queen's Counsel) and an Indian judge, who have their own tired (and to us now already familiar) arguments that depend on the power of numbers. The Q.C. observes that the whole question of China resuming control of Hong Kong is meaningless, as British rule began with a village, the total population of which could fit into a single modern tower block. The lawyer responds

that this British narrative is becoming really repetitive, and in any case ignores the fact that the city “was the miracle of the ninety percent, not the ten percent.”⁸ At this point, the Indian judge points out the centrality of Indian creativity in Hong Kong’s iconic institutions such as the Star Ferry, HSBC, or the University of Hong Kong. The lawyer questions once again just how many Indians there are in Hong Kong: population seems to be the most magical number. However, the judge responds that dates themselves are another kind of number, and his family has been in Hong Kong well over one century longer than the majority of Chinese Hong Kongers: “My family has been here since the beginning. *Before* the beginning.”⁹ This appeal to a fundamental or primordial belonging seems, perhaps fleetingly, to trump both the lawyer and the Q.C. Vittachi continues with a paragraph reminding us that this is a dinner party of friends, of lawyers invested in the system even if the system seems about to change beyond recognition: “All three were doing too well out of Hong Kong to have any real dispute.”¹⁰ It is precisely in their appeals to numbers that these three legal figures are arguing against the historical flow that the fantastic plot central to the story puts forward. They are arguing about Hong Kong that never was, while Grace, the helper, plans to realize its idealized self-image.

Ultimately, the story is an exhortation: be unrealistic, demand the possible! The impossible, it increasingly begins to feel (in the four years following the story’s publication), is universal suffrage (even if a species of that was on the table not so long ago). The possible, however, is what we are told we already have. The grand plan at the heart of “The Queen of Statue Square” leads to a substitution of just such a *schedule of possibilities*. The insider who will help the conspiracy make this substitution has a last minute attack of nerves, requiring that the plan is spelled out for him one more time (and for the reader, for the first time). The insider, Lai, wonders if they are giving up Hong Kong to foreigners, or even if they are declaring independence—the answer each time is “no”: “Our border with China will relax, just as planned. But so will our borders with the rest of the world—in *exactly* the same way.”¹¹ The substituted legal schedule will make Hong Kong a truly borderless city, a model for the entire world: “This is where the planet’s extremes all meet.

Hong Kong is perfectly suited to be a model city for a new, borderless planet Earth.”¹² Specific substitutions (there are seventy-three in total) are explained (again) to persuade Lai of the justice in his actions: property speculation will be stopped, tax loopholes will be closed, etc. Lai remains somehow unconvinced, and so one last example is given: Schedule 00 will allow *anyone* who has lived in Hong Kong for seven years the right to permanent residency. Lai simply responds, “I thought we already had that.”¹³ This response emphasizes the story as a demand that Hong Kong become what it was always supposed to be but never was, because of course through many legal challenges the right of domestic helpers (from the Philippines, Indonesia, and beyond) to permanent residency has been over and again rejected.

In Vittachi’s story, then, we see, not that 2047 has already arrived (a common enough feeling, perhaps), but that 2047 will never arrive—it can never arrive, not in the sense that the story sets up. The open-ended ending, in which what comes before is *not* redeemed (in which, as Frank Kermode might have put it, the tracts of time such as 1997-2047 are *not* given meaning),¹⁴ is necessarily open-ended: “She closed her eyes and pressed Enter.”¹⁵ What will have happened next? Rey Chow’s formulations concerning Hong Kong’s *double impossibility* will no doubt suggest themselves to many here: the idea that, just as Hong Kong could not submit to British colonialism, it will not be able to submit to China’s nationalism.¹⁶ There Chow ponders a question she thinks colonial history has not had to deal with, even if Hong Kong’s specificity is not (could not be) unique: “does it not, in its obligatory ‘restoration’ to China, in fact crystallize and highlight the problem of ‘origins’ that has often been suppressed in other postcolonial cultures because of ethnic pride?”¹⁷ The *originary*, then, for Chow is precisely what Hong Kong’s handover or restoration puts in question. It should be no surprise that Vittachi’s fantastical story ends with a leap that may (necessarily) be a fall. Specifying the outcome will be truly to have gone against the spirit of democracy, in a classically Derridean fashion; as Derrida himself said in response to Simon Critchley, “The openness of the future is worth more; that is the axiom of deconstruction.”¹⁸

Part II

Central to Derrida's reflections on the democratic is the antagonism between the *demos* and the *kratos*, one that can never fully be resolved within the horizon of the present, but instead opens the concept of democracy towards the future.¹⁹ Derrida's "democracy to come"—*la démocratie à venir*—is one that has the structure of a promise, in the sense that the concept embodies a tension between its concrete manifestation in a given present epoch (and hence is inextricably linked to sovereignty), and its deferred unfolding, its true potential, at some indefinite point in the future—the latter always being hauntingly present in its manifest form.²⁰ Democracy to come thus refers not to a specific political regime or vision, but rather to a promise that has yet to be fulfilled, not now, but later, possibly.

It is in this connection that Derrida brings in the concept of *auto-immunity*, which in a strict biological sense involves a living organism anomalously destroying its own immune system,²¹ and which in Derrida's use of the concept refers to what he calls democratic suicide:

In any case the hypothesis here is that of a taking of power or, rather, of a transferring of power (*kratos*) to a people (*demos*) who, in its electoral majority and following democratic procedures, would not have been able to avoid the destruction of democracy itself. Hence a certain suicide of democracy. Democracy has always been suicidal, and if there is a to-come for it, it is only on the condition of thinking life otherwise.²²

The paradox of democracy—in its absolute, unrestrained form—lies in its indivisibility and inclusivity, even when this means the potential inclusion of anti-democratic forces. Thus, any manifestation of democratic self-identity—'of a transferring of power to a people' in the concrete sense—necessarily involves sovereignty, and hence a form of violence, a violent act of limitation (e.g. the exclusion of anti-democratic forces), restriction, the erection of borders, conditionalities, essences; a sovereignty that immunizes democracy from itself, its inherent possibility of destruction, and hence protects it, ensuring its survival—

but, in the process, undermines what it was supposed to protect in the first place, the democratic principle itself.²³ Democracy to come has no space for Schmittian enemies, others, because these would always-already be included within its unlimited, incalculable and indivisible imperative.²⁴ Power to the people; not some, not a particular group of individuals, but *all*—the weak, the poor, the minorities, the refugees, as well as those who seek democratic legitimacy in order to abolish it, i.e. the Schmittian partisan, or the internal enemy.²⁵ Anything less, and the concept would already have been deferred, postponed: a democracy to come. In its present form, democracy as such will only arrive in the form of an open-ended promise of redemption, unconditional hospitality, deferred indefinitely.

Democracy to come thus aligns itself with the open-endedness that concludes Vittachi's story, and which the story in a sense further intensifies and defers. In a very concrete—almost literal—sense, what is being intensified and deferred here, and thereby re-opened for potential re-negotiations, ultimately comes down to a question of numbers, their fixedness, permanence. In that dinner scene where the government lawyer Samuel Cheuk, the British Q.C. Edward Roop, and the Hong Kong Indian judge Rajiv Sandarahlingam argue over who among them holds the right to define the meaning of these numbers, the story re-enacts the insistent connection between the seemingly depoliticized, empty objectivity of numbers and the question of political legitimacy; who is the originary, who is the most authentic Hongkonger, and—underneath these questions—who has the moral and political legitimacy to rule Hong Kong?

Nikolas Rose observes in the book *Powers of Freedom* that during times when mistrust of authority flourishes, where experts are the target of suspicion and their claims are greeted with scepticism by politicians, disputed by professional rivals, distrusted by public opinion, where decisions are contested and discretion is criticized, the allure of numbers increases.²⁶ Numbers and dates mark something unnatural, a form of interruptive manipulation of natural time; the forceful subtraction and demarcation of something particular, singular, from grey, indistinguishable matter—in order to bestow it with some kind

of meaning. As the animated discussion among the three high-ranking gentlemen in the story suggests, numbers seem especially alluring in connection with attempts to settle authoritatively the question of who holds the moral and political legitimacy to rule Hong Kong. Its history—and thereby, in a further sense, the question of political legitimacy—is in so many ways inextricably tied to a long series of epochal punctuations, datings, numberings, measures, calculations, assessments, milestones, countdowns, and anniversaries, each of which are somehow related to power transitions, new agreements, arrangements, deals, and transformations. In other words, politically insecure times are desperately in search of some kind of confirmation and stability through the power of numbers.

It is in this sense that Vittachi's story reimagines a city whose fate was always traversed by numbers and dates, conjured up as so many attempts to strap down and control what was from the very beginning a fluid, indefinable and indeterminate entity: a city, a nation, a people, peoples, others, friends and enemies, East, West—and anything in-between. As Douglas Kerr observes:

It used to be quite common to meet a disbelief that Hong Kong could be thought of as home. It was a city of exiles, populated by people who had come, for the most part, from the mainland of China in search of business opportunities or political refuge, and the wind that had blown them to the colony might just as easily carry them further in due course, to other cities in Southeast Asia, to Australia, or North America. Hong Kong was a transit camp of the Chinese diaspora, a city of sojourners, economic migrants and refugees, and not a place to develop sentimental ties.²⁷

Here, it is crucial to remember that it was only in the early 1970s that the majority of Hong Kong's population came to be made up of those born locally. It was around the same period that the idea of a specific 'Hong Kong identity' began to resonate in a wider sense.²⁸ Thus, the process of national standardization and homogenization that Benedict Anderson brings up in connection with the idea of an imagined community had

a very special, and different, resonance in a Hong Kong context, not only because the city was built on a colonial foundation, with all the temporal implications this would involve, but also because the process in a certain sense did not lead to increased homogeneity, but rather to the opposite, from its experience of rupture and discontinuity.²⁹ One could even argue that the temporality that Anderson talks about in connection with national homogeneity, that is, the time “measured by clocks and calendars,”³⁰ *prevented* an actual collective historical consciousness from emerging—as if the dates and numbers, both the past and the future ones, constantly reminded people of a radical and irreconcilable fracture at the heart of the notion of a ‘Hong Kong identity.’

It is difficult to think of Hong Kong without at the same time thinking of very specific dates. While Anderson’s nation is one that continuously draws on myths, the older the better, that is, the more legitimate, the Hong Kong date—which of course explicitly inscribes itself in a modern temporal framework—almost takes on a mythological dimension.³¹ Here is a listing of the most consequential dates for the history of Hong Kong:

- 1842: Treaty of Nanking
- 1860: The Convention of Peking
- 1898: The Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory
- 1941-45: Hong Kong Occupied Territory
- 1950: The closing of the border with China
- 1970s: Discussions of the Handover between UK and China
- 1984: Sino-British Joint Declaration
- 1985-1989: Basic Law
- 1989: Tiananmen Square
- 1984-1997: Large-scale Emigration
- 1997: Handover, 30 June
- 2003: Massive protests, 1 July: 500,000 people demonstrate against the government’s Article 23 National Security Legislation
- 2014: Umbrella Movement
- 2047: The “One Country, Two Systems” blueprint comes to an end

Hong Kong is a place inhabited by people living on a borrowed territory,

ruled and owned by outsiders, non-locals. Ever since the signing of the Treaty in 1898, Hong Kong's days have literally been numbered.³² That is, as a place with an exact expiry date, a place already-dying—in radical contrast to Anderson's concept of the nation, whose homogeneity is typically intertwined with a vision of eternity, an unchangeable present merging unnoticeably with an everlasting future.

It was only during the 1970s that the sense of an ending more broadly manifested itself in Hong Kong, almost around the same time as when the idea of a specific Hong Kong identity emerged. According to the anthropologist Hai Ren,

Hong Kong's modern historical experience can be divided into three temporalities: the colonial time of British rule (1842–1997), the transitional time of the Hong Kong countdown (1984–1997), and the national time of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR; 1997–2046).³³

All three epochs were characterized by international agreements, the making of which by and large ignored those who would have had the greatest emotional (albeit evidently not financial) investment in a concept like 'Hong Kong identity'—the so-called "people."³⁴

Dates and numbers, however objective and factual they may seem, do not simply refer to a pre-existing reality. As Nikolas Rose has observed, "The apparent facticity of the figure obscures the complex technical work that is required to *produce* objectivity."³⁵ Dates, numbers, and other forms of numericized inscriptions are produced and circulated within a heterogeneous field of contestations and struggles, often serving specific political objectives at different times. A given consensual notion of common political reality is shaped, standardized, and made visible by numerical technologies; here, numbers and dates are not merely deictic or referential, but precisely *constitutive* of political reality. This political ontology of numerical production has only become intensified in the post-1997 epoch. Prior to the Handover, the date '1997' became a kind of 'deadline' that promised, at least potentially, a kind of 'reordering' of the temporalities of past, present, and future, but also signified

the opposite—a kind of apocalyptic end of time itself. Terms used to refer to the historical event included: return, handover, transition, decolonization, reinstatement, restoration, reversion, retrocession, reunification, “returnification,” “fall,” “death,” judgment day, deadline, and expiration date.³⁶ Meanwhile, the Hong Kong countdown clock at Tiananmen Square was another explicit example of an increased temporal awareness, which, especially after what happened there in 1989, came to represent not the countdown to something celebratory to many of Hong Kong’s inhabitants, but rather the opposite.³⁷

Within the agreement on the Handover from the UK to China, there were a number of formulations vaguely hinting at some form of democratic potential to be redeemed during the period of “One Country, Two Systems 1997-2047.” The political unrest during the last two decades—especially the 2003 protests and the 2014 Umbrella Movement—at least at some level testifies to the postponement of this potential.³⁸ The Umbrella Movement emerged against the background of a political debate over electoral reforms. In the National People’s Congress ruling in 2007, it was stated that Hong Kong may implement universal suffrage for the election of the fifth Chief Executive in 2017.³⁹ Shortly after the Umbrella Movement—or Occupy Central—had officially been announced, CY Leung, the then-Chief Executive of Hong Kong, gave a disturbing interview to foreign media. Hard-pressed, CY Leung exclaimed that if political authority in Hong Kong came down to “a numbers game—numeric representation—then obviously you’d be talking to half the people in Hong Kong who earn less than US\$1800 a month.”⁴⁰ CY Leung’s interview came in response to the demand for universal suffrage, and more specifically for keeping a promise that had been vaguely formulated in the agreement during the 1997 Handover. Many people, expressing their anger on social media, saw the remark as being revealing not only of the fundamentally undemocratic political rule of the city, but also of the government’s blatant and inflexible adherence to a form of rule deriving from the political monopoly of tycoons, billionaires, and their close allies among the Mainland elites. To them, the political ontology of Hong Kong could not possibly—in the present circumstances—be reduced to a simple numbers game, which would

almost certainly mean loss of power.⁴¹ Protecting—or immunizing—the city and its people against itself, its inherent auto-immunity, remained the main task, at all costs: democracy, possibly, but not now.

To Derrida, of course, the democracy to come designates the exact opposite of the right to wait, to defer, like Kafka's man before the law; it is an injunction, an urgency, something that will never rest until it has been achieved.⁴² It is in connection with a discussion of this urgency—"with all one's heart . . . with all one's force"⁴³—that Derrida defines democracy as essentially a numbers game: "the question of democracy is in many respects, if not entirely . . . the question of calculation, of numerical calculation, of equality according to number"⁴⁴—an observation with which CY Leung, as we have seen, would no doubt have fearfully agreed. But underneath the simplicity of a numbers game, Derrida further comments, we see all the workings of sovereignty: "How does one count? What should count as a unit of calculation? What is a voice or a vote? What is an indivisible and countable voice or vote?"⁴⁵ Here, Derrida touches upon the theme outlined by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), in which the latter explores the formation of modern subjectivation, or, the process of political individualization in the age of modernity, i.e. the normative categorization of subjects into lawful citizens, criminals, mad people, etc. To Foucault, of course, this process of subjectivization is not simply a repressive process, but on the contrary something that produces—creates—subjectivities, identities, and docile bodies. To Derrida, the democracy to come is ultimately one that involves the production of a political subject, anchored in the democratic imperative of the present, countering the sovereign's immunizations against its promise.

It is in many ways precisely at this political subject that Vittachi's story arrives—the figure of auto-immunity. Within the charged political present of Hong Kong, true democracy—the story suggests—comes in the form of an anti-democratic, subversive, illegal, and even treacherous gesture. But it is a gesture whose paradoxical faithfulness to the idea of democracy precisely illuminates the radical antagonism at the heart of the relationship between the people and power, *demos* and *kratos*. Thus, in Vittachi's story the political subject emerges as an *internal enemy*,

threatening to subvert that which was supposed to offer it protection (e.g. permanent residency), but which never actually did. By switching the official Schedule 01 with a similar—but in crucial ways different—document, Schedule 00, Hong Kong may become what it was always supposed to be but never was.

Vittachi's story hauntingly measures the extent to which sovereignty has created an almost virtual, self-referential history of infinitely reiterative and thus endlessly celebrated numbers and dates that seem to circulate in a universe more or less entirely disconnected from actual, material reality—that is, the reality of those who according to CY Leung earn less than US\$ 1800 per month—and whose final destination, on the night of the 2047-Handover, is the self-identity of the 1997-Handover: the celebration of perpetual sovereignty, repetition with no difference.

In a haunting scene contrasting with the one in which the three powerful gentlemen jovially discuss numbers and political legitimacy, we find the main character of Vittachi's story, Grace, repeating another history, also built around dates, albeit ones that are entirely encrypted, unknown, and un-celebrated:

In the 1970s, Hong Kong servants were Chinese women called 'black and whites' because of their uniform: black pyjama-style trousers and white tunics. By the late 1980s, they had almost all been replaced by women from the Philippines after Hong Kong parents realised that Filipinas spoke fluent English and would save them a fortune on language tutors. By 2000s, Indonesians and Sri Lankans had entered the market . . . By 2020s, there were other nationalities, including staff from Bangladesh, and later, Cambodia and Vietnam. By the 2030s . . . [workers came] from the outlying parts of Indonesia, the poorer states of the Philippines, the rural parts of Burma and Laos . . . In Hong Kong, there was a general belief that when 1 July 2047 arrived, domestic helpers would be quietly packed back to their original homes as their contracts ended, to be replaced by women from mainland China.⁴⁶

This is the history of the downtrodden, as Walter Benjamin might have

said, which stands in sharp contrast to the earlier one involving the three powerful gentlemen. It is a history that recalls a very different and ultimately more disturbing primal scene of Hong Kong, which already from the beginning contained the promise that Grace is so intent on redeeming on the night of the 2047-Handover: “The world’s first totally free state,” the borderless world city, a place of unconditional hospitality.⁴⁷ It goes without saying that this vision would be unrealistic, unthinkable, in practice, no doubt—and not only because this auto-immune subversion would potentially undermine an already overpopulated and fragile infrastructure. It would also, as Vardoulakis has observed, likely lead to an even more violent and restrictive form of sovereignty.⁴⁸ But the point here, in Vittachi’s story—and in a further sense in terms of ‘the openness of the future’ with which the story minimally concludes (the push of a button)—is rather the celebratory reiteration of the commitment to the democracy to come; the revitalization of the antagonistic relationship between *demos* and *kratos* through the birth of the political subject. Amidst sovereignty’s commemorations of the enshrined dates of power transitions—1842, 1898, 1984, 1997, 2047—the number of the future remains open-ended.

Notes

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2010), 26.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ C.Y. Shih, “Significance of Hong Kong’s Perspective on China: Reflections on Intellectual History,” *China Report* 54, no. 1 (2018): 15.

⁴ See for example C. Y. Shih and Josuke Ikeda, “International Relations of Post-Hybridity: Dangers and Potentials in Non-Synthetic Cycles,” *Globalizations* 13, no. 4 (2016): 454-68.

⁵ Shih, “Significance of Hong Kong’s Perspective on China,” 17.

⁶ Kwame Anthony Appiah and Homi Bhabha, “Cosmopolitanism and Convergence,” *New Literary History* 49, no. 2 (2018): 189.

⁷ Nury Vittachi, “The Queen of Statue Square,” in *The Queen of Statue Square: New Short Fiction from Hong Kong*, eds. Marshall Moore and Xu Xi (Nottingham: Communications Press, 2014), 134.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 150.

¹² Ibid., 151.

¹³ Ibid., 152.

¹⁴ See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

¹⁵ Ibid., 155.

¹⁶ Rey Chow, *Ethics after Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity, Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 151.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, trans. Elizabeth G. Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 105.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 34.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 78.

²¹ In the essay "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida observes that auto-immunity involves a living organism "protecting itself against its self-protection by destroying its own immune system." See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, trans. Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), 80.

²² Derrida, *Rogues*, 33.

²³ As Derrida argues, the "new power *itself* then had to interrupt the democratization under way; it had to interrupt a normal electoral process in order to save a democracy threatened by the sworn enemies of democracy. To immunize itself, to protect itself against the aggressor (whether from within or without), democracy thus secreted its enemies on both sides of the front so that its only apparent options remained murder and suicide; but the murder was already turning into suicide, and the suicide, as always, let itself be translated into murder." Ibid., 35.

²⁴ Thus, "[w]hen assured of numerical majority," Derrida observes, "the worst enemies of democratic freedom can, by plausible rhetorical simulation ... present themselves as staunch democrats." And a little later: "for the force of the *demos*, the force of democracy, commits it, in the name of universal equality, to representing not only the greatest force of the greatest number, the majority of citizens considered of age, but also the weakness of the weak, minors, minorities, the poor, and all those throughout the world who call out in suffering for a legitimately infinite extension of what are called *human rights*." Ibid., 34, 36.

²⁵ Ibid., 30-31.

²⁶ Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 208.

²⁷ Douglas Kerr, "Louise Ho and the Local Turn: The Place of English Poetry in

Hong Kong,” in *Hong Kong Culture: Word and Image*, ed. Kam Louie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 78.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1991), 24.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The amplification of the significance of the date is perhaps a characteristic of most modern states; e.g. Israel (1948, 1967, etc.).

³² Kerr, “Louise Ho and the Local Turn,” 78.

³³ Hai Ren, *Neoliberalism and Culture in China and Hong Kong: The Countdown of Time* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 130.

³⁴ As Veg points out, “Hongkongers were never consulted on the handover during the 1980s. Beijing hoped to preserve both of these colonial legacies—capitalism and Chinese cultural pride—and to use the latter to integrate Hong Kong into the PRC polity. In some respects, Hong Kong continued to be run like a colony after 1997. Despite its anticolonial rhetoric, Beijing developed a typically colonial discourse presenting Hongkongers as children who need to be ‘taught’ about the nation in ‘patriotic education.’” See Sebastian Veg, “Legalistic and Utopian: Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement,” *New Left Review* 92 (2015): 55-74.

³⁵ Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 208.

³⁶ Ren, *Neoliberalism and Culture*, 130.

³⁷ Ibid., 131.

³⁸ Some important dates during the Umbrella Movement: Law Professor Benny Tai publishes an article outlining a civil disobedience proposal to “Occupy Central,” January 16, 2013; September 28, 2014 marks the official beginning of the Umbrella Movement, and December 15, 2014 signifies the end of the Umbrella Movement.

³⁹ Samson Yuen, “Hong Kong After the Umbrella Movement: An Uncertain Future for ‘One Country Two Systems,’” *Current Affairs* 1 (2015): 49.

⁴⁰ On October 20, 2014—the 23rd day of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong—CY Leung gave an interview with three foreign media organizations, *Financial Times*, *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. The further legal context involved the date of 2017 by which candidates for the Chief Executive post could potentially be elected by a popular vote, instead of an election committee—albeit with the caveat, as Yuen points out, that “they must be selected by a nominating committee to ensure that the elected leader would not oppose the central government and that he/she would ‘love the country and love Hong Kong,’ a requirement set out by numerous Chinese officials.” Furthermore, Yuen observes, “Hong Kong’s Basic Law requires this nominating committee to be ‘broadly representative’ and to operate ‘in accordance with democratic procedures,’ but it does not clearly outline the composition of the committee or the nomination procedure.” Ibid., 49.

⁴¹ As Po-Keung Hui and Kin-Chi Lau argue, “After the 1997 return of Hong Kong’s sovereignty to China, with China going further in its modernization cum capitalist path resulting in serious social polarizations, the bonding between the minority ‘nouveau riche’ in mainland China and the minority ‘old rich’ in Hong Kong has generally consolidated... whereas the majority population in Hong Kong have increasingly become superfluous in the economy.” See Po-Keung Hui and Kin-Chi Lau, “Living in Truth’ versus *Realpolitik*: Limitations and Potentials of the Umbrella Movement,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 16, no. 3 (2015): 350.

⁴² Derrida writes, “the democracy to come certainly does not mean the right to defer, even if it be in the name of some regulative Idea, the experience or even less the injunction of democracy.” See Derrida, *Rogues*, 29.

⁴³ Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 74.

⁴⁴ Derrida, *Rogues*, 29-30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁶ Vittachi, “The Queen of Statue Square,” 143-44.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁸ Dimitris Vardoulakis, “Autoimmunities: Derrida, Democracy and Political Theology,” *Research in Phenomenology* 48 (2018): 42.