

Hong Kong, ghosts, and I: an opinionated hauntological observation

Sheng-Hsiang Lance Peng*

* Centre for Blended Realities, Falmouth University

* IAFOR Research Centre, Osaka School of International Public Policy, Osaka University
lance.peng@falmouth.ac.uk

Abstract

This article presents my hauntological reflections on the cultural and societal shifts in Hong Kong, observed during a short trip, looking into tangible aspects like street views and people, alongside intangible influences like politics and cultural evolution. In this piece, hauntology, as defined by Jacques Derrida, refers to the ongoing influence of the past on the present, underscoring how unresolved historical tensions and political changes shape cultural and societal dynamics. This piece is structured into three parts, with the first offering my general reflections on the people and culture of Hong Kong, juxtaposed with past figures, and the second presenting a conversation with my Hongkongese travel companion about the changes we noticed as we stood before Victoria Park. The final part discusses political transitions, particularly in the context of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, and their cultural implications, as analysed through literature and past cultural research. Characterised as opinionated, this article integrates personal reflections and photographic documentation, resembling a photo essay, and is focused on exploring and confronting the persistent ‘ghosts’ of Hong Kong’s cultural landscape—phenomena that seem to have disappeared but remain relevant today. This work adds depth to the academic debates on the role of historical consciousness in shaping political restructuring and societal adaptation in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Hauntology, Hong Kong, cultural memory, political transformation, anthropological observations

Waking the ‘ghosts’

This article explores my reflections on the cultural and societal shifts in Hong Kong, drawn from a short visit that allowed me to observe both tangible aspects—such as street views, architecture and the people—as well as the more intangible influences, including the ongoing political changes and evolving cultural identity. My approach is informed by Derrida’s concept of hauntology (1994), which underscores the idea that the past never truly disappears but

continues to shape the present. For Hong Kong, this means that unresolved historical tensions, particularly those arising from political struggles and colonial legacies, persistently influence its social fabric. The article is structured into three parts: first, I share my general impressions of Hong Kong's people and culture, reflecting on how they contrast with historical figures and past moments; second, I recount a conversation with a Hong Kong-based travel companion as we stood before Victoria Park, where we discussed the noticeable changes in the city around us; and lastly, I discuss political transitions, with particular focus on the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, and their broader cultural implications, drawing from literature and past cultural research.

This piece is purposefully opinionated—throughout, I weave my personal reflections into the narrative, offering my subjective view on how Hong Kong's past haunts its present, and the integration of my own perspective with photographic documentation allows the article to function like a photo essay, visually (and emotionally) capturing the 'ghosts' of Hong Kong's identity. These 'ghosts' are not mere remnants of the past, but persistent traces—figures, memories, ideologies—that still resonate in the city's streets and conversations today, and by reflecting on these aspects, this work challenges readers to think about how historical consciousness continues to influence political restructuring and cultural evolution in Hong Kong (Derrida, 1994). In this way, the article contributes to a deeper academic conversation about how societies adapt to changing political landscapes while carrying forward the weight of historical experiences.

Between neon and dusk

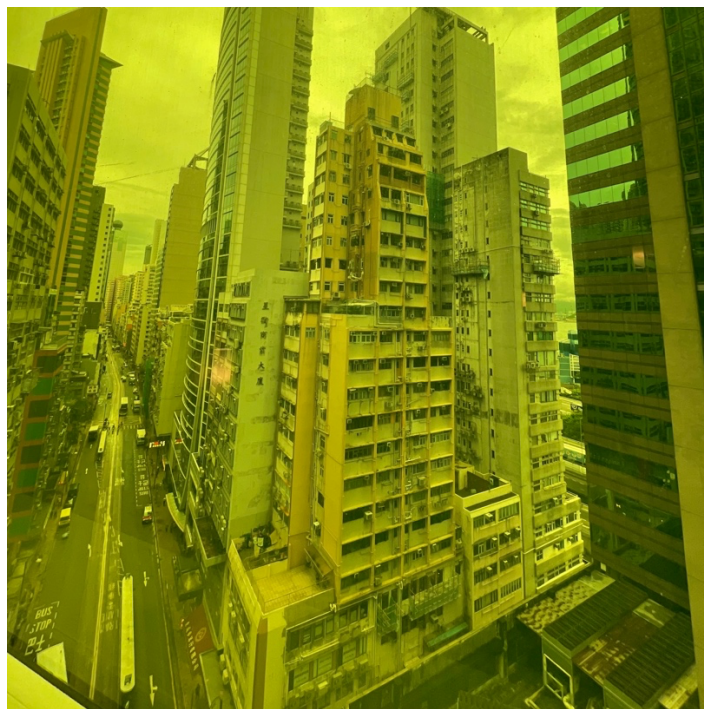


Figure 1. A city view of Hong Kong seen through a unique yellow-tinted glass. Captured by the author.

To me, Hong Kong is ‘amber yellow’—a dim, warm hue that encapsulates the city’s essence (Figure 1). This amber-yellow glow feels like a memory suspended in time, a quiet light that both illuminates and obscures. It’s the colour of streetlights refracted through humidity, the sepia tones of weathered architecture, and the faint luminescence of neon signs struggling to shine in an ever-modernising skyline. This amber yellow isn’t just a visual experience but an emotional one, blending nostalgia, longing and quiet resilience, and it’s a colour that embodies a city caught in transition, its past etched into its present, its future perpetually uncertain. Walking through Hong Kong, I find this hue everywhere—on the peeling walls of tong lau buildings in Sham Shui Po, in the golden reflections on Victoria Harbour at dusk and even in the glow of a cha chaan teng sign inviting passersby to linger in a space both timeless and ephemeral.

This amber-yellow hue feels like it lives in the works of Hong Kong’s cultural and literary voices, many of whom capture the city’s essence as one of contradiction and nuance. Xi Xi’s *My City* (1993) comes to mind, where her poetic reflections on Hong Kong’s streets evoke a city that is alive and haunting, ordinary and extraordinary. Xi Xi’s imagery (1993) resonates with this idea of amber yellow, where the city is a living archive of its people’s stories and struggles, and similarly, Dung’s *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City* (2012) paints Hong Kong as a palimpsest, a layered cityscape where past and present coexist. The amber yellow of the city’s light becomes, for me, a metaphor for this coexistence—where the future is not yet written, and the past is not entirely erased. In architecture, this colour finds its expression in the juxtaposition of old and new. The gleaming glass façades of Central’s skyscrapers stand against the aging tenement blocks of Mong Kok. These tong lau buildings, with their balconies stacked precariously like timeworn memories, seem to absorb the amber glow of the streetlights, casting a melancholic warmth over the narrow streets below, and meanwhile, the Star Ferry, with its green-and-white livery, carries passengers across Victoria Harbour—a ritual unchanged for decades. Even the double-decker trams trundling through the city, their exteriors weathered but steadfast, feel bathed in this yellow light, as if carrying traces of every journey taken, every moment of quiet contemplation within their wooden interiors.

This amber yellow also takes on political connotations, evoking the yellow umbrellas of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. For me, the colour is not just a representation of resistance but also of persistence—a quiet, determined glow that refuses to be extinguished. The streets of Admiralty during the protests, lit by both artificial and symbolic light, became a canvas for this amber yellow, a testament to the city’s enduring spirit even in the face of uncertainty, and it is a colour that feels heavy with the weight of history but also alive with the potential for change. In film, Wong’s *In the Mood for Love* (2000) captures this amber yellow with haunting precision. The corridors of old apartment buildings, the glow of streetlights spilling onto rain-slicked pavements, and the sepia-toned interiors of cafés all echo this hue. The amber light in his films feels like a visual sigh—a momentary pause that holds more meaning than the chaos around it. Wong’s work (2000) mirrors the city itself: a place where fleeting moments and ephemeral connections become the most enduring memories, and his amber yellow is not

just a colour but a mood, a lens through which Hong Kong's layered identity comes alive. To me, amber yellow is Hong Kong's emotional spectrum—its hope and resilience, its melancholy and longing. It's the colour of the city at dusk, when the sun dips below the skyline, and the lights begin to take over, illuminating spaces that feel both intimate and vast. It's the colour of memory, history, and resistance, blending into the streets and stories of the city, and this hue reminds me that Hong Kong is not just a place but an experience, a mosaic of light and shadow, of what was and what might yet be. It's a city that lingers in the imagination, much like the amber glow that defines it—a light that persists, even as the light begins to fade.

This amber yellow extends even into food culture, an integral part of understanding Hong Kong's cultural landscape. Food in Hong Kong is not merely about sustenance; it is a tapestry of memories, rituals, and relationships—a dynamic space where the past meets the present, and this amber-yellow hue is found in the steaming bowls of noodles, the golden crusts of pineapple buns and the glistening surface of milk tea poured from kettles with practiced ease. Food culture in Hong Kong mirrors its architectural and political landscapes, where the blending of Chinese traditions with colonial influences has created something entirely unique, and the city's food speaks to resilience and adaptability, echoing the amber yellow's sense of warmth and persistence. Each dish tells a story, capturing the spirit of Hong Kong's people and their ability to thrive amid constant change.



Figure 2. I had a meal at Australia Dairy Company. Captured by the author.

One of the most iconic institutions in Hong Kong's food scene is the Australia Dairy Company, a cha chaan teng that has become synonymous with the city's fast-paced yet rooted dining culture. Known for its no-nonsense service and swift turnover, the café embodies the spirit of Hong Kong's relentless rhythm. Two of its standout offerings—牛肉通粉 (beef macaroni in

soup) and 炒蛋多士 (scrambled egg toast)—capture the essence of amber yellow in their very appearance and texture (Figure 2). The beef macaroni arrives in a light, clear broth, its pale yellow macaroni complemented by thin slices of beef, evoking a sense of comfort and simplicity, and meanwhile, the scrambled egg toast, with its perfectly golden, buttery eggs perched on a lightly toasted slice of bread, feels like a small burst of sunshine on a plate.

For me, these dishes are more than just food—they are a sensory representation of Hong Kong's amber yellow. The beef macaroni's humble presentation reflects the practicality and no-frills approach that defines much of Hong Kong's culinary traditions, and yet, within its simplicity lies a complexity: the broth's flavour, subtle yet satisfying, feels like an embrace of the everyday, a reminder of the city's grounding in routine and resilience. On the other hand, the scrambled egg toast, with its vibrant yellow eggs, captures a fleeting moment of luxury in the ordinary, and the richness of the eggs feels almost celebratory, a brief pause in the city's ceaseless movement to savour something indulgent yet approachable. Food culture, like architecture and politics, serves as a lens through which to explore Hong Kong's identity (Chan, 2019). The dishes at Australia Dairy Company are emblematic of the city's history of blending influences—Western ingredients like toast and macaroni are reimagined through a distinctly Hong Kong perspective, creating something entirely its own. The amber yellow here is more than a visual element; it's a mood, a taste and a metaphor, and it speaks to the city's ability to transform the mundane into something meaningful, to find beauty and warmth in the seemingly ordinary. It is a colour that connects past and present, tradition and innovation, much like the food itself, and dining at Australia Dairy Company feels like stepping into a time capsule—its rushed service and packed tables evoke a Hong Kong of decades past, yet its popularity among locals and tourists alike situates it firmly in the present. The amber yellow of its dishes feels like a bridge, connecting generations of diners who have found solace and satisfaction in these unassuming plates of food. For me, this café represents more than just a meal; it is a living archive of Hong Kong's food culture, where the amber yellow is a colour and also a symbol of the city's enduring spirit, and through its humble macaroni and decadent scrambled eggs, Australia Dairy Company reminds us that even in the rush of modern life, there is always room for moments of quiet reflection and warmth, much like the glow of amber yellow that continues to define Hong Kong's cultural identity.

The Causeway Bay Books is permanently closed!



Figure 3. A sign announcing the permanent closure of The Causeway Bay Books. Captured by the author.

Causeway Bay Books was an independent bookstore originally located in Hong Kong, specifically on the second floor of 531 Lockhart Road in Causeway Bay. The store, situated near Sogo Department Store and the MTR Causeway Bay Station (Exit D2), had a floor area of approximately 300 square feet. Known for its unique selection, the bookstore sold general literature and historical works and also a range of politically sensitive books, and these included titles banned or unavailable in China, as well as some that were previously published there but are now out of print. This made it a popular destination for Chinese tourists visiting Hong Kong who sought out these politically themed publications. The bookstore was founded in 1994 by Hong Kong resident Lam Wing-kee, and on April 25, 2020, Lam reopened Causeway Bay Books in Taipei, Taiwan, on Nanjing West Road in the Zhongshan District, marking a new chapter for the iconic bookstore.

Hong Kong's independent bookstores have always existed in a flux, much like ephemeral shadows cast by a flickering light (Tang, 2019). These stores, though often without the overt label of 'cultural', serve as ghostly traces of a time when spaces for reflection and alternative thought could still linger in the cracks of an otherwise commercial metropolis, and high street rents have long haunted these ventures, forcing many to retreat to second-floor spaces, where they could escape the glare of mainstream markets and quietly offer more niche collections—serious literature, philosophy, and art (Tang, 2019; Yee, 2022). These upper-level sanctuaries were liminal spaces, suspended between survival and disappearance, offering a quiet resistance to the relentless commodification of the cityscape. In the 1990s, a distinctive second-floor bookstore culture emerged, characterised by spaces that were more than mere shops. They were sites of gathering, where the community could sit, read and participate in literary events that felt almost otherworldly, and these stores became waystations for ideas,

echoes of a world where the written word could hold sway over the relentless march of progress (Tang, 2019; Yee, 2022). Yet the spectre of financial instability always loomed, and in Hong Kong's unyielding economy, literary sales alone could never sustain these spaces. When one of these bookstores closed, it wasn't just the end of a business—it was as if a ghostly presence evaporated, leaving behind an empty husk where stories, ideas and communities had once thrived (Tang, 2019).

The closure of Hong Yip Bookstore, a pioneer of the second-floor bookstore trend in the 1990s, marked the beginning of the end for this unique cultural phenomenon (Tang, 2019). Today, only a few such bookstores remain, clinging to existence like fragile memories that refuse to fade, and many have moved to higher floors, further removed from the ground-level life of the city. The simple act of sitting down to read in a bookstore now feels like an echo from a past life, a spectral presence barely perceptible in the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong's ever-modernising streets, and yet, the real threat to these spaces isn't the lack of readers; it's the relentless upward spiral of rent, a force as inevitable and insidious as time itself (Cheng, 2008; Tang, 2019). Even for those stores that manage to cultivate loyal patrons and stable sales, the doubling or tripling of rent feels like a cruel twist of fate, one that no business model can withstand. This haunting cycle played out even during the early days of CEPA agreements and the brief boom in mainland tourism that brought an influx of customers to Hong Kong (Tang, 2019). At first, the economic tide seemed to lift these cultural havens, but soon the spectre of rising rents returned to displace them. Urban redevelopment and gentrification only compounded the issue, as old neighbourhoods were hollowed out, leaving behind the faintest traces of the vibrant communities they once housed, and these shifts resemble the relentless erasure of a palimpsest, where each new layer of economic progress obscures what came before, though the faint outlines of history persist, waiting to be rediscovered. There's a saying in Hong Kong's cultural circles: when the economy falters, bookstores thrive. It's a paradox that speaks to the ghostly resilience of these spaces, which often flourish when the rest of the city stumbles (Tang, 2019). In times of economic hardship, the community seems to rediscover the quiet power of books and the spaces that house them. But when prosperity returns, the delicate balance tips, and bookstores find themselves once again at the mercy of profit margins too slim to withstand the pressures of an upwardly mobile city. In this way, bookstores become haunted spaces—not just by the memories of those who once gathered there but by the spectre of what they represented: a slower, more thoughtful pace of life and a refuge for ideas that could not find a home elsewhere, and each closure marks the fading of another ghostly light, leaving the cityscape a little dimmer, a little less connected to the cultural and intellectual past that gave it depth (Tang, 2019). These spaces linger in the collective memory, faintly etched like the outlines of forgotten landmarks, waiting for someone to invoke their spirit and bring them back, however briefly, into the present.

The closure of Causeway Bay Books represents the end of an independent bookstore that has long been a part of the local community. It signals the loss of a place where people could engage with a variety of ideas and perspectives, and with its closure, the city feels a little less

diverse in terms of the cultural spaces it offers. This is the loss of a physical location and also the absence of a space that facilitated discussions and connections around different topics. In reflecting on this change, I would like to offer one of Zhang's micro-poems (2020) as an example, though it should be noted that this is my interpretation, not a direct translation of Zhang's intent:

徜徉在回憶的小徑

我一路撿拾你遺落的影子

Wandering along memory's pathway

I gather the shadows you left behind,

one by one, along the way.

—Haipeng Zhang

The permanent closure of Causeway Bay Books evokes a sense of absence, but it is an absence that lingers like a ghost, haunting the city in ways that are not immediately visible but deeply felt. From a hauntological perspective, the closure doesn't mark the end of its existence; rather, it transforms into a spectral presence, still casting its shadow over the landscape, even though its physical manifestation is gone, and this idea resonates with Derrida's concept of 'haunting', where the ghost of the past is never fully gone, but instead exists in a state of 'being there' without actually being present (Derrida, 1994). The bookstore has disappeared from the streets, but its absence is filled with a complex layering of memories, ideas, and possibilities that continue to reverberate, like a faint echo (or a whisper) that cannot be fully silenced, and the closure doesn't erase its impact; instead, it causes the place to exist in a new, intangible form—a memory in motion. In the context of Zhang's micro-poetry (2020), this idea of absence is beautifully captured in the line. The act of gathering shadows is a metaphor for how we collect fragments of what once was, trying to hold onto what we cannot physically grasp anymore, and with each passing day, the shadow of Causeway Bay Books becomes a little more elusive, but it doesn't vanish completely. It remains scattered along the paths we once walked, tucked away in the corners of our memories, and just as Zhang's poem (2020) suggests, there is an ongoing process of gathering the pieces of something that is no longer fully present—picking up the remnants of a cultural space, piecing together the experience from the fragmented shadows that remain.

Derrida's ghosts (1994) aren't simply spectral figures that haunt us; they are also the absent presences that shape our perceptions of the present. The bookstore was more than a place to buy books—it was a space that allowed for the exchange of ideas, a forum for reflection and dialogue that cannot be easily replicated, and as a hauntological presence, its closure

marks a rupture in the continuity of the cultural fabric of Hong Kong. What is gone now is not just the physical space but also the possibility of spontaneous encounters with the ideas and narratives that once filled its walls, and in this way, the ghost of the bookstore is not a singular, static entity; rather, it is a dynamic presence, continuing to affect those who once visited and those who may never have had the chance. It speaks to the ways in which cultural and intellectual spaces shape us, even after they are no longer physically accessible. The streets may have shifted, the neighbourhood may have changed and the bookstore's doors may have closed for good, but the process of gathering its shadows continues, and in the quiet moments of reflection, in the forgotten corners of the city, the bookstore's spirit persists. Its memory, much like the shadows of Zhang's micro-poem (2020), continues to shape the journey forward. The more we try to move beyond its absence, the more its traces reveal themselves in our lives—be it in the books we still hold, the conversations we continue to have or the ideas that keep reappearing, unbidden. The ghost of Causeway Bay Books isn't simply a thing of the past; it is a presence that walks beside us, carrying its subtle imprint on our ongoing paths, and in this sense, the closure becomes an end and also a transformation into something else—a quiet, invisible force that continues to influence and guide.

Chill in the air, sweetness in the cone: Victoria Park and Mister Softee

I remember my visit to Hong Kong, standing in front of Victoria Park with my friend, who was born and raised in the city, and it was fascinating to hear their perspective, shaped by years of familiarity with the place, as we discussed the noticeable changes around us. As I took in the vibrant scene before me, I couldn't help but notice how much the city had transformed—there was a palpable energy in the air, but also a sense of something quietly slipping away, and my friend spoke about how certain spots, like the park we were standing in, had evolved over time. They reminisced about how different things had been when they were younger—certain areas felt less bustling, and even the rhythm of the streets had shifted. I, being a first-time visitor, was struck by the contrast between the city's past and present, and the streets seemed alive with change, but I also noticed how some of the traditional aspects of life still lingered, quietly standing their ground amidst the wave of modernisation.

As we walked around the park, my friend pointed out specific places and stories that held personal significance, some of which seemed to be fading into the background as the city rapidly adapted to the times. For me, it was a lot to take in, this mixture of the old and the new, the way memories seemed to exist side by side with the present moment, and I could see the affection my friend had for Hong Kong, a deep connection to its streets, its rhythm, and its people. It was clear that, even as change was all around us, there was an undeniable link between the past and the present, something that couldn't easily be separated, even if it was slowly being transformed. The conversation naturally turned to how much the city had changed in terms of development and infrastructure. My friend mentioned how some places, once bustling with life and energy, had evolved into newer, more polished spaces, and they spoke about the inevitable shifts in neighbourhoods, the ways communities were growing and changing and how it made them feel both nostalgic and hopeful. For me, as an outsider,

I saw both the excitement and the challenge of a city in transition, a place that was clearly moving forward but still holding onto echoes of its history, and in that moment, I felt like I was witnessing a dynamic that was both exhilarating and bittersweet—the rapid changes on the surface, but also the deeper, quieter connections to the past that still lingered beneath it all.



Figure 4. I enjoyed an ice cream from Mister Softee in Hong Kong. Captured by the author.

Here, I wish to explore the enduring nature of Mister Softee (Figure 4) alongside the dynamic changes that have shaped Victoria Park over the years. Mister Softee, a beloved icon of soft-serve ice cream culture, originated in the United States in 1956. Founded by William and James Conway, the company revolutionised the way people enjoyed ice cream by introducing mobile trucks equipped with state-of-the-art machines, and over time, the brand became synonymous with nostalgia and childhood joy, its jingle an unmistakable herald of summer afternoons. In Hong Kong, Mister Softee holds a special place in the cultural memory of its people. Known locally as the 'Mobile Softee', the brand has been a consistent presence on Hong Kong's streets since the 1970s and its red-and-white trucks are a familiar sight, and the jingle it plays stirs a deep sense of nostalgia for many who grew up in the city. Though simple in its concept, Mister Softee's enduring appeal lies in its connection to collective memories, making it a symbol to explore alongside the evolution of Hong Kong itself. Victoria Park, often referred to as the heart of Hong Kong's social and cultural life, provides a fitting lens through which to examine these parallels. Located in the bustling district of Causeway Bay, the park has transformed significantly over the decades, mirroring the shifts in Hong Kong's identity and political landscape, and from its beginnings as a recreational space, Victoria Park evolved into a site of immense historical and social significance, hosting everything from the annual Lunar New Year Fair to political rallies and demonstrations, including the June 4th candlelight vigil. Its evolution speaks volumes about the city's changing priorities and its people's

resilience in the face of transformation, and just as Mister Softee trucks have remained an unchanging presence despite the shifting urban landscape, Victoria Park stands as a testament to the city's enduring spirit, even as it adapts to new realities. By drawing a parallel between the enduring presence of Mister Softee and the transformations witnessed in Victoria Park, I see how symbols of continuity can coexist with agents of change. Mister Softee's jingle and simple ice cream offerings provide a comforting constant, a thread of familiarity in a city often defined by its rapid development and tumultuous socio-political shifts, and meanwhile, Victoria Park reflects the complexity of Hong Kong's narrative, a space where past and present collide and where the city's identity continues to be negotiated. Together, these symbols—one a commercial artefact and the other a public space—illustrate how everyday experiences and collective memories weave into Hong Kong's story, and they invite us to consider how such enduring elements anchor us, offering solace and even a sense of identity amidst relentless change.

Fisher's concept of *The Slow Cancellation of the Future* (2014b), introduced in his seminal work *Ghosts of My Life* (2014a), goes into the ways in which contemporary culture has become trapped in a loop of repetition and nostalgia, unable to envisage or realise new futures. Fisher (2014b) argues that the cultural imagination, once a site of innovation and aspiration, has stagnated, characterised by a recycling of past aesthetics rather than forging new trajectories. This phenomenon, Fisher (2014b) contends, reflects broader societal and economic conditions—namely, the pervasive influence of neoliberalism, which has diminished collective dreams of alternative futures. Drawing on theorists like Jameson (2005), Fisher (2014b) critiques the way late capitalism erodes temporal boundaries, leaving us with a persistent present where the past is continually reanimated but stripped of its transformative potential, and the idea of 'hauntology' permeates Fisher's work (2014a), suggesting that the ghosts of unrealised futures linger, reminding us of what could have been. This framework invites us to reconsider the relationship between continuity and change, between the spectral remnants of the past and the possibilities of imagining a different tomorrow. Using Fisher's concept (2014b) to look at the enduring presence of Mister Softee and the transformations witnessed in Victoria Park offers a lens through which to explore Hong Kong's narrative. Mister Softee, with its timeless jingle and soft-serve offerings, embodies a kind of temporal stasis, and its presence on the streets of Hong Kong evokes a longing for simpler times, a yearning for the comfort and familiarity of a past that seems increasingly elusive amidst the city's rapid transformations. Viewed through Fisher's framework (2014b), Mister Softee can be seen as a spectral reminder of a bygone era, one that persists even as the city around it reshapes itself. Its existence in the present feels like a small rebellion against the relentless forward march of urban development and political change, embodying the cultural loops Fisher critiques, and the truck, always the same, never changing, seems almost like a ghostly echo of a Hong Kong that no longer exists in its entirety. Victoria Park, on the other hand, epitomises the tension between continuity and transformation that Fisher (2014b) discusses. As a space that has witnessed both the

mundane rhythms of daily life and the seismic shifts of political upheaval, it serves as a site where the past and the present collide. The park has held firm as a gathering space for protests, vigils, and celebrations, yet its role and symbolism have evolved alongside the city's socio-political landscape. Interpreting Victoria Park through Fisher's lens (2014b) reveals the ways in which its historical significance haunts its present function, and the park carries the weight of its past—of moments of collective action and resistance—even as its current role becomes increasingly contested. This duality reflects Fisher's assertion (2014a) that we are living in a state where the future feels perpetually deferred, where spaces like Victoria Park are caught between their historical legacy and an uncertain tomorrow. By drawing a parallel between Mister Softee and Victoria Park, Fisher's ideas (2014b) help illuminate the interplay of stasis and change in Hong Kong's cultural and physical landscapes also. The ice cream truck and the park may appear to occupy different registers—one a lighthearted artefact of consumer culture, the other a stage for serious societal discourse—but both serve as vessels for collective memory and nostalgia, and in a personal sense, I find this juxtaposition really moving. Mister Softee, with its unchanging tune and flavours, feels like an anchor, a constant in a city where so much has shifted, and Victoria Park, meanwhile, reminds me of the resilience and adaptability required to navigate such changes. Together, they underscore Fisher's haunting insight (2014a): that our ability to imagine and realise the future is always entangled with the ghosts of our past, and this dynamic, deeply human and richly complex, resonates far beyond the boundaries of Hong Kong, offering a way to think about how we inhabit time and place in an ever-changing world.



Figure 5. The napkin I found at a café featuring intriguing writings. Captured by the author.

This discussion reminds me of a caption I saw at a café in Hong Kong. On their napkins (Figure 5), they had these thought-provoking lines printed: in English, 'Are you alive or just existing?'

and in Mandarin, ‘如夢如幻月 · 若即若離花’, which loosely translates to ‘Like a dream, like an illusory moon; like a flower, near yet distant’. From a hauntological perspective, the question ‘Are you alive or just existing?’ reflects the tension between vitality and inertia, presence and absence. It confronts the existential weight of being caught in a liminal state, where life becomes a passive repetition of routines rather than a pursuit of meaning or purpose. Hauntology, particularly in the framework developed by Fisher (2014a), critiques this kind of inertia, suggesting it is symptomatic of a world haunted by futures that have been foreclosed, and the question suggests a haunting of potential, where unrealised possibilities linger like spectres, reminding us of what life could have been if not constrained by the dominant forces of the present. This existential query resonates with the enduring presence of Mister Softee in Hong Kong, a nostalgic remnant of simpler times that persists in a landscape of rapid transformation. Mister Softee’s continued existence—unchanged, yet ever present—mirrors this haunting state of being, and it stands as a ghostly figure, evoking memories of childhood and past urban rhythms, but also raising questions about its own vitality in a city that has drastically changed around it—is Mister Softee truly alive, evolving alongside its surroundings, or is it merely existing as a cultural artefact frozen in time?

The Mandarin phrase—‘like a dream, like an illusory moon; like a flower, near yet distant’—provides a poetic meditation on ephemerality, beauty and the tension between presence and absence. This imagery resonates with hauntology’s concern with spectrality and the way the past and future linger in the present. The dream and illusory moon suggest something fleeting and intangible, always out of reach, while the distant flower evokes longing for something that seems close but remains unattainable. This resonates with the transformations witnessed in Victoria Park, a space that has undergone significant changes yet retains traces of its historical and cultural identity. Like the moon and flower in the phrase, the essence of the park as a symbol of public life, protest and community feels simultaneously present and elusive, and the transformations, whether they are political, social or physical, have altered the park’s character, yet echoes of its past persist, haunting the present with reminders of what it once represented.

These two quotes, when considered through a hauntological lens, echo each other and also illuminate the intertwined dynamics of Mister Softee’s presence and Victoria Park’s transformations. The English phrase asks us to consider the spectral life of Mister Softee—how it persists in a static form, haunted by its own history and the cultural significance it once held, and it raises the question of whether Mister Softee has adapted to the new realities of Hong Kong or if it exists merely as a spectral reminder of the past. In contrast, the Mandarin phrase captures the affective dimension of Victoria Park’s transformation—the way it simultaneously holds on to its past identity while becoming something new. The flower’s nearness yet distance reflects how the park’s history is always within reach but no longer fully tangible, altered by the forces of political and social change. Together, these phrases create a dialogue that mirrors the relationship between Mister Softee and Victoria Park. Mister Softee, static and enduring, represents a presence that lingers unchanged, while Victoria Park,

dynamic and evolving, embodies the tension between continuity and transformation. Hauntology allows me to interpret these cultural elements not as isolated phenomena but as part of a broader narrative about how memory, loss and unrealised futures shape the urban experience. Both Mister Softee and Victoria Park become sites of haunting, where the past refuses to fully leave, and the future struggles to emerge, and in this landscape steeped in echoes of what was and what might have been, there lingers a chill in the air, a sweetness in the cone—reminders of the fleeting yet enduring moments that tie the present to the spectres of bygone eras.

Cultural hauntings in times of change: a look at Hong Kong's protests

The ghosts in political transitions are not just symbolic; they are woven into the present, influencing both the political landscape and the cultural dynamics of societies undergoing change. In Hong Kong, the protests against the Extradition Law Amendment Bill in 2019 were an instance of how such ghosts manifest in political movements. The protests, triggered by concerns over the potential erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy, were more than a reaction to a specific law—they represented a broader sense of unease about the region's future. The 'ghosts' at the core of this movement were those of past political struggles and also the uncertain future ahead, and these spectres were felt in the streets, where a significant number of people came together to express their concerns. It wasn't just about a particular piece of legislation; it was about the broader issues of identity, belonging and the future trajectory of the city, and the movement's focus on defending autonomy invoked historical echoes of Hong Kong's past, especially concerning the handover in 1997 and the promises made at that time, which many felt had not fully materialised as expected (Tang & Cheng, 2022; Yeoh, 2020). The cultural implications of these events were significant. The protests were not just political expressions; they were also cultural reflections that brought past and present tensions to the forefront, and for many, the movement was about political concerns and also about the preservation of a cultural identity. In Hong Kong, where history can sometimes feel fragmented due to its colonial past and its relationship with mainland China, the ghosts of past ideologies—whether colonial, democratic or cultural—emerged with relevance. These ghosts weren't simply abstract notions but had a tangible influence on the way people perceived their current reality, and the streets, once known for their dynamism and global character, became spaces where people came together to express both their concerns and their hopes for the future, symbolised through various forms of protest. From a theoretical perspective, the protests could be seen as a response to both present challenges and past influences—an attempt to address the intersection of history and identity, as well as a desire to navigate future possibilities.

When reflecting on the cultural implications of these events, it's clear that the protests also became a reckoning with the legacy of colonialism. The 'ghosts' of British rule, in terms of legal systems, institutions and cultural practices, were still felt, particularly by those who remembered a different era, and the protests reflected not just resistance but also a complex emotional attachment to certain freedoms and values that many associated with Hong Kong's

past. However, this attachment was not necessarily to the colonial system itself, but to the sense of openness, rights and cultural autonomy that some felt had been a hallmark of the city. The ghosts in this case are political and cultural, representing a desire for a certain kind of Hong Kong that, while evolving, also holds on to key aspects of its unique identity. Beyond Hong Kong, the broader cultural implications of these events extend to global conversations about identity, autonomy and cultural preservation in the face of broader geopolitical forces. The protests and their cultural undercurrents resonated with many beyond the city, particularly in diasporic communities who also faced questions about their own cultural identity and autonomy (Fong, 2022), and this broader resonance speaks to the universal challenges of balancing historical legacies with contemporary realities. The events in Hong Kong served as a reminder of the complexities of political and cultural transitions, and how the past, present and future are often linked in ways that shape societal experiences, and ultimately, the legacy of the 2019 protests is one of navigating the intersection of memory, identity, and the future—a reminder of how political transitions are never purely about the present moment, but are always informed by the ghosts of what has come before and the uncertainties of what is yet to come.



Figure 6. The Hong Kong Tramways are affectionately known as ‘Ding Dings’ due to the distinct ringing sound of their bells as they navigate the city’s streets. Captured by the author.

As I think about Hong Kong, I’m drawn to the image of the Ding Dings—the trams that glide through the city (Figure 6), their bell ringing like a heartbeat, both timeless and ever-moving. These trams are more than just a means of transport; they are a metaphor for the city itself—a place where history and modernity are always in motion, where the past lingers just as closely as the future beckons. Like the Ding Dings, which have been part of the city’s rhythm

for over a century, Hong Kong navigates its journey between old colonial remnants and the towering skyline of a future yet to be fully realised, and each stop, each turn, reflects the layers of its identity—haunted by memories of what was, yet propelled forward by the uncertainties of what is to come. The Ding Ding, with its steady course through the streets, captures this duality—of being both anchored in the past and forever on the move toward something new, and it is a city in transit, where the ghosts of history ride alongside the hopes of tomorrow, all under the same sky.

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