

LOCAL, PLACE, AND MEANING: A CULTURAL READING OF THE HONG KONG STORIES¹

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The aim of this article is to investigate into the relationship between the Hong Kong local and Hong Kong with reference to the stories about the place.

The escalated importance of the term "local" in global discourse, in which it has been construed as supplementary, complementary or counterpart to the global, is shown by the augmentation of the exegeses of the term that has been articulated as a thematic penchant in literary discourse. The literal meaning of the term listed in dictionaries reflects a monolithic comprehension of its primary denotation of attachment to "an area", may it be small or large. It connotes "both as spatial materiality and as symbolic metaphor" (Wilson & Dissanayake 4) that marks the affiliation of people and culture to "the area" in a way that the "local" becomes a tag of identity identifying people's relations to the "place". This "place", remains as what Pred has suggested, always involves an appropriation and transformation of space and nature that is inseparable from the reproduction and transformation of society in time and space. As such, place is not only what is fleetingly observed on the landscape, a locale, or setting for activity and social interaction (Giddens 1979: 206-8; Giddens 1981: 39, 45). It also is what takes place ceaselessly, what contributes to history in a specific context through the creation and utilization of a physical setting.²

The productivity of the place is marked by the ability to generate meanings for it alludes to a social spatial dimension arrogating the past into the present, within

¹ I would like to thank Prof. Dissanayake of the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong for his insightful comments on this article.

² Requoted from John Agnew, "Representing Space: Space, Scale and Culture in social Science." *Place/Culture/Representation*. Ed. James Duncan and David Ley (London: Routledge, 1993), 262. For details, see A. Pred, "Place as Historically Contingent Process: Structuration and the Time-Geography of Becoming Places." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 1984, 74: 279-97.

which the objectification of the space takes place so as to enable the construction of the subjects' identification. The local is then a "place-bound identity" (Wilson 317). According to John Agnew, this "place is more than an 'object'," it is also a mediation of Raymond Williams's "structure of feelings" (263).

Viewed from the intimate connectivity generated by the concept of the local with reference to place, the "local" can also be understood as a site of struggle "for historical and political presence of groups suppressed or marginalized by modernization" (Dirlik 35). The presence of colonization is also noticed as a constant redefinition of the cartographic existence of power that is manifested in the form of geographical and cultural domination. The local also signifies the ethnographic presence of indigeneity.

With such premises, I allude to the importance of place and cultural meaning in a larger discursive domain of the configuration of the local through reading stories about Hong Kong as it is more realistic and productive to conceive creative literature as a cultural practice that is fabricated with the social formation and historical conjuncture in which the writer is situated. The institutional structures that sustain the work, the ideologies that are inscribed in the text, the economic production, and the nature of the public sphere that evaluates it together, then, form a complex whole. In any given historical conjuncture, culture is best understood as a terrain in which meanings are constantly being created, negotiated, and subverted. Then, literary texts thus enter into a dialogue with the social text. The representational space of creative literature has to be located and assessed in relation to other discursive spaces of society. Situations in the city were captured by the stories of Hong Kong, since these stories, like any narratives, are decidedly cultural specific. These stories, being located in their respective culture and cultural epistemologies, exemplify the distinctiveness and the meaning-generating capacities of that culture. The textually produced reader and the historical, social reader living in a specific location at the particular time interact to constitute a composite reader. This reader, in fact, becomes a co-creator of the text. It is important to bear in mind that the story is a complex terrain in which one can produce one's reading of society. One must be attentive to the gaps, ambiguities, contradictions, and the silences created. It is by paying special attention to these moments in these texts that seem to unsettle their own system of values and norms that one succeeds as Deconstructionists have admonished us, in producing more challenging and fruitful readings of these narratives. It is only then that what appears at first sight as blurry outlines in the stories expand into compelling pictures.

In elucidating the idea of "local" with reference to the situation in Hong Kong, the problematics of the identity of the people in Hong Kong is central to the discussion. Concerning Hong Kong identity, Leung Ping Kwan, a Hong Kong author and critic, has such a worthy quoting comment:

The identity of Hong Kong is more complex than that of any other place. . . . Vis-à-vis foreigners, Hong Kong people are of course Chinese, but vis-à-vis the Chinese from Mainland or Taiwan, they seem to have the imprints of the West. A Hong Kong person who came from China after 1949 is obviously an "outsid-

er" or "someone coming south"; but to those who "came south" during the 1970s and 1980s, such a person is already "local". A Hong Kong person may speak English or Putonghua, but it is not the language with which he is familiar since childhood; and yet what he knows best, Cantonese, is not convenient for writing. He recites the Chinese classics while at school, but in his eventual employment he would have to acquaint himself with forms of commercial correspondence or the brief and cute wordings of advertising. Such linguistic impurities are also reflection of the impurities of Hong Kong's cultural identity.³

Leung's observation succinctly captures the complexity adhered to the Hong Kong local. It cannot be defined neither by a given language constitution, nor an ethnic composition, though most of its population is Cantonese speaking Chinese but the differences between the Hong Kong people and the mainland Chinese in the Canton area are represented by all kinds of segregation with which colonial domination is at the core. This local also defies a historiographic definition as there is an absence of history of Hong Kong before the colonial domination. The collectively imagined community is disrupted by the constant assimilation of immigrants from China into the society that complicates the history. The difficulty in pinpointing the Hong Kong local is further articulated by the impossibility of locating it culturally geographically. The intimate cultural connectivity between Hong Kong and China is reified into the materiality signifying a presence of the "Chineseness" that, however, cannot claim to signify a social entity in Hong Kong because of the existence of the British culture. Although Cohen observes that "the local Chinese culture is part and parcel of the overall Chinese culture: one cannot have a local identity without being part of the greater identity of being Chinese, and one cannot be Chinese and not have come from some parts of China,"⁴ this native imaginary is just an indicative of some portions of the pluralistic Hong Kong society only. These ambiguities induce in the Hong Kong local a referential confusion generated by hybridity, thereby, foregrounding what Susan Naquin once comments, "Hong Kong acquires its identity almost by default – as 'what it is not'".⁵ Rey Chow reminds one the importance of interrogating into the very Chineseness embedded.⁶ The existence of this Chineseness, however, signifies the fragility of treating this as the only determinant of Hong Kong's identity, and marginalizes Hong Kong's existence as evinced by China's negative representation.

³ Quoted from Rey Chow, *Ethics After Idealism Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 153.

⁴ Quoted from Tao Tao Liu and David Faure, Introduction: What Does the Chinese Person Identify With? *Unity and Diversity: Local Cultures and Identities in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), 1.

⁵ Quoted from Helen Siu, "Remade in Hong Kong: Weaving into the Chinese Cultural Tapestry," *Unity and Diversity: Local Cultures and Identities in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), 178.

⁶ See Rey Chow, "Between Colonizers: Hong Kong's Postcolonial Self-Writing in the 1990's." *Diaspora* 2.2 (Fall 1992): 151-170.

It seems that to circumscribe the Hong Kong local only then invokes a category crisis. However, the conceptuality of the term 'local' is underpinned by its affiliation with the area, thereby allowing the local to be manifested in connection with the place in which spatial discourse constantly undergoing the process of transformation. Despite the fact that Hong Kong is always labelled as a transient city by critics,⁷ the historian Elizabethan Sinn's remark that even in the cemeteries, one has yet to find a Hong Kong local,⁸ is contestable. Moreover, the Hong Kong local can be located via the socio-cultural discourse in which the struggle between the domination and the dominated is subtly crystallized. In the colonial metaphors, this struggle is less violently conducted, as what these metaphors being construed, the contestation is manifested not too much in the colonial violence experienced in the Fanonian Africa. The 1997 hand over, a pronouncement of the return of Hong Kong to China, is an essentializing manoeuvre to legitimize a national identity. However, Rey Chow describes the situation as namely, "the struggle between the dominant and the subdominant within the 'native' culture itself" (Chow 153).

The political connotation of the status "One country, two systems" with which abstraction is at its core, frames Hong Kong's relation with China. This aporetic theory of existence, however, articulates its own inadequacy in elucidating the complexity and specificity of Hong Kong. It only qualifies a fungible construction of Hong Kong's position in the grand narrative within a colonial history.

This attempt to erase the past opprobrium on the part of China, invokes a Derridean self-erasure of Hong Kong as what Abbas puts forward "the politics of disappearance". He states that "[p]art of the meaning of colonialism in Hong Kong is that the city can neither identify nor break with the past. Neither continuity nor discontinuity is available, only an appearance of continuity that is already discontinuous" (300).

The subordination of Hong Kong to the British was forfeited after the hand over in 1997, of which the existence of the special administrative region that enclaves Hong Kong to China was authorized. Such a transfer did not of course cause a change in the cartographic position of Hong Kong but reinscribe new spatial existence of Hong Kong in where the promise of 50 years stability has become a collective desire that governs the people's identification with the place. This serves as an essentializing manoeuvre to articulate a foundation and exclusive parameter within which the resistance of being homogenized by China is subtly uttered. Hong Kong's identity is perplexed by this impediment that

⁷ See Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), and Rey Chow, *Ethics After Idealism Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).

⁸ Requoted from Helen Siu, "Remade in Hong Kong: Weaving into the Chinese Cultural Tapestry," *Unity and Diversity: Local Cultures and Identities in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), 178.

discourages the inclination of the people to participate into the cultural imaginary of nation-state of which identification with the nation is produced, as in Benedict Anderson's term, the construction of the imagined community.

Fanon's Algerian desire to occupy the colonizer's left over⁹ is found appropriate to describe Hong Kong people's attitude towards the colonizer. This recuperates the colonial past into the lived present. Under the administration of the British, Hong Kong had enjoyed economic privileges as a global city that invokes Gramsci's domination by consent. This was shown especially during the year 1967 when Hong Kong was undergoing a period of social unrest. These social riots can be codified as signs of obliterating the relatedness of China under the overwhelming desire for stability that inevitably involved Hong Kong into the process of self subalternity. This is reflected in Jin Yong's popular fiction *The Deer Cauldron* (1972).

Set in the Qing Dynasty in China, this fictitious historicized narrative involves the action of decenter by the peripheral of which the disruption of the central authority legitimated by ancestry and geographic location is in action. The majority, the Han people, is marginalized by the new kingship of the Qing people. The protagonist Xiao Bao occupies a position of Homi Bhabha's third space of in-betweenness. He is assimilated into the hierarchy by his rascality that enables him to fawn upon with the emperor. His complicity in the resistance against the ruling of the Qing people brings him to a dialectical situation as gradually he has developed a kind of friendship with the emperor who is his enemy. He engages himself into ambivalence when he is overwhelmed by the stability and prosperity brought by subordination, that induces his resistance to identify with the dominated of whom he shares the same collective identity. This self-subalternity is complicated for it exfoliates new spatial existence marked by a survival strategy that invokes the formation of an interstitial space in which also the people of Hong Kong occupied. This spatial existence, however temporal in its nature, corresponds to Richard Hughes' description that Hong Kong people are living in "a borrowed place with a borrowed time".

Within such a spatial temporality, the recognition of the local rests not upon neither the ethnocentric identification nor the ratified recruitment into the colonial sphere. Instead, the local occupies a spatial discourse with both the colonial government and China aiming at the maximization of economic profit that in return translates the term local. Anxiety is, thus, generated when such a strategy of survival of the local is threatened. This can be seen in the stories about 1997, in which the interactive complexities between materiality, relations of production and symbolic meanings reveal the attitude of the people anticipating the 1997 Hong Kong. These stories narrate "the eventualities" that "have arrived before the event" (Abbas 304). The formation of Hong Kong as an immigrant city is constructed with the magnification of the diasporic sentiments that are linked to the worry of jeopardization to their social and economical establishment in the territory.

⁹ Fanon, Fantz. *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1968), 160.

The formed anxiety is destructive in its nature. In Liu Yi Chang's "1997" (1983), the mythologized struggle of the poor illegal immigrant to be a proprietor is undermined when his protagonist Shi Jiang vacillates between his desire to immigrate to other countries or to stay in Hong Kong with the fear of facing the Chinese Government that once he has chosen to escape from. His anxiety is proliferated from the fear that the hand over will jeopardize the economy whereby most of the people of Hong Kong attach their achievements to. Such an affiliation articulates a parameter within which the Hong Kong "local" becomes a sign of signification foregrounding "the rise of apolitical materialism" (Liu 173). According to Abbas, this has been attributed to the colonial administration that "provides almost no outlet for political idealism (until perhaps quite recently); as a result, most of the energy is directed towards the economic sphere" (5).

The desire to have a better life generates economic self-interest, which is manifested by the speculation of stock and property market. A conversation between a fat woman and a thin woman, both symbolizing the general public, is intruded into the story and made up the second chapter. This part is structurally linked to the other parts by its articulation of the significance of speculations that have fabricated into our lives. The experienced helplessness in the uncontrollable ups and downs of the markets steers people to depend on some external elements, such as worshipping gods and consulting Feng Shi masters, for a better luck with their speculations. Their naiveté becomes a way to counter this helplessness.

Such a kind of feeling is also experienced in the face of the uncertainty after the hand over in 1997. The year 1997 has turned into a spell influencing all the speculative activities that in a way becomes an indicator of people's behaviour, such as the husband of the fat woman and Shi Jiang. He is obsessed by the problem of when to sell his stocks and his estate property before their prices crash down as the markets are sensitive to all these political arguments between China and Britain despite the fact that most of the people are political apathetic. He is fully occupied with his worries of money matters that are being magnified by his bad behaviour towards his wife and paramour and his children.

His desire for money is a response to his helplessness in encountering the uncertainty of the future. Shi Jiang's revelation of his concern for money discloses the fact that only with money can confirm in him a sense of security guaranteeing not only material comfort and the possibility of settling in other countries with both his wife and his paramour. Moreover, he sees money as an attribute to love because only with money, can he possess both his wife Shuang Ning and his paramour Xiu Jin. Summing up all these, it forms a picture of his a happy life. His thought is laid open as in the first four lines, he has already mentioned the word money for eleven times (6).

He is led astray by his paranoid reaction to the ambivalence, which is heightened by his uncertainties of the future of Hong Kong and his regret for not being able to bring his paramour and their son away. His distress is surfaced as he turns up to be not so a loving father and a caring husband and thus changes his

relations with his wife who to him no longer is mild, and his paramour now shows unusual long faces. The pessimistic attitude of Shi Jiang leads him to frustrations gradually along his estimation of his financial ability. Hong Kong, once enables Shi Jiang to enjoy economic privilege, is a nightmarish space full of contradictions. Only death can eschew him from this anxiety which is also his paramour's final remark (15).

Moreover, stability in Hong Kong is signified by the continuance of a free way of life that enclaves metaphorically a capitalistic laissez-faire attitude towards differences in the society so as to maintain the city's economic achievement. This way of living is concretized by the saying of "the horse race will continue, and the dance in ballroom will not stop". This emblematic slogan is codified with a collective desire for the status quo of Hong Kong. Then, Hong Kong is measured by its commodified availability, which in return becomes the mediation of a collective consciousness towards contrariety arisen from the return to China. However, confidence in the possibility of keeping the promise is diminutive and is articulated in the discursive formation of volunteered exile.

Writers turn this into spectacular, such as in James Liu's *A Vagrant's Travel Notes on the 97 Hong Kong*. The protagonist experiences a displacement and relocation through his shifting of locale composed of geographical and occupational nuances. This is ironic that he loses his marriage in a place representing stability to him, and he regained his love in a place that he deserted. The irony achieves its viability when operating as a self-aware strategy as when "working within existing discourses and contesting them at the same time" (Hutcheon 73). In order for the discourse of the local cultural practice to function as irony, "those engaged in them must have not only a contestary aim, but they must be conscious also, to the extent possible, of their own position" (Kadir 433). The protagonist is moved from a more self-contained environment of the academic professionalism to participate into the social body conscious mass media as he resettles in United States so as to qualify his spectatorship. The condition in Hong Kong now becomes a comprehensive object of knowledge to him within which a commonplaceness of Hong Kong is solidified and experienced. This commonplaceness consists of the spatial practice of which debauchery as a sign of prosperity constitutes the every day life experience.

In the narrative, the hand over of Hong Kong to China instantiated a relocation of the place to a special spatial temporality within which the Chinese culture has played too significant a part that effaces the presence of "Hong Kong". The traceability of the absurdity fabricated in this particular collage of two similar but different cultures underscores the presence of a Hong Kong culture that Wei Min (a direct transliteration of the Chinese term for the survivor of a former dynasty) once experienced. This absurdity is there immediately when he arrived at the immigration of the Hong Kong Airport. He was astounded by the Chinese slogans that were hung on the walls decorated with all kinds of commercial advertisements (3), thereby pronouncing the commodified identity of the place where names are replaced by codes.

The transformations of Hong Kong along with its political transfer is mapped by the possible transmutation brought by the presence of China's authority over the territory. In the narrative, such a presence of the authority is metaphoricized by the stratification of the space by two different kinds of "languages" namely, Putonghua (written Chinese) and Cantonese (spoken dialect). This writing collage is further articulated and experienced as a problematic identity issue. Although Wei Min's multiple identities qualifies his spectatorship, his connection with Hong Kong is effacing into a nostalgia that complicates his position.

His position being an outsider astounds him as he finds satisfaction in his fetishization of the dance girl, who works in the Ballroom signifying the decadence of capitalism of which Hong Kong is figurized. The ironic part of the happy ending, apart from showing the author's subjective desire of not having tragedy, is the fact that although they confirm their love in such a spatial temporality, they decide to leave. Still, Hong Kong, disregarding of all the happy endings, is a temporary place. Heedless to his possession of a passport issued by the United States, the local in Wei Min depends not on a form of physical appearance that initiates the association between him and Hong Kong, both an Immigration Officer (2) and a foreign ball girl (41) still recognize him as anyone in Hong Kong. This local, however, is actualized in his participation into this nostalgia of the place, whereby its primordial colonial existence is predestinated. During his stay in Hong Kong, his attempt to prove the stability of Hong Kong, the operation of one country two systems, reduces the past to a sign of signification of a collective utterance of desire.

The dislocation of Hong Kong after 1997 marking the disjunctive order, attributes to the deconstruction and reconstruction of a Hong Kong local that further substantiate its connection with the place as a city, in which the spatial experience of every day life changes with the influence of the global. This de Certeau sense of "place" is essential to the understanding of the constitution of a new spatial experience in which the local is tied to. Thus, this local associated with "the notion of a particular bounded space" (Featherstone 47), underwrites the arrogation of the past into the new, "something which turns the location of their day-to-day interactions from a physical space into a place" (47). The physical space becomes a semiotized space, a cultural space or a historicalized space as reflected in some Hong Kong stories devoted to the search of a local, such as Dong Qi Zhang's *The Archaeology of An Imaginary City* and Xi Xi's *My City*.

The construction of cultural locations through fiction demonstrates the power of cultural meaning that transforms physical topography to cultural location. One must also note that cultural meanings in modern societies are not stable, monological, and unitary but volatile, plural and fragment. Xi Xi's *My City* constitutes a place formed by fractures of space through the multiple perspectives that become a protocol of legitimating the city space as a place. These multiple perspectives enter into a competition for the determination of whose city is this. Through the Bakhtinian heteroglossic dialogue, all these perspectives converge as the my city becomes our city as reflected in Ah You's concern

of the city when he is away (174). His constant concern reveals a deep attachment to the city that no longer is just mine but ours (Chapter 14). These characters are trying to locate their positions in this city via the inter-relation with not just Ah Guo but the environment. Simply put, they are defined by this city.

This is specially sensed when the protagonist Ah Guo recognizes that he does not have a nationality but a cultural citizenship (150). This signification of the identification of the city articulates the situation in the Hong Kong local. Ah Guo becomes a narratee in this narrative of everyday life. His cultural citizenship is confirmed by his establishment of a new spatial practice by legitimizing the construction of rules in the maintenance of his inherited house and its environment that in a way reflects his recognition of the city in which his house is located. Ah Guo is experiencing John Friske proposition that the creation of space of between (33) that the actualization of the spatial practice is actively mastered by the one who lives in it. The nature of Hong Kong as a "borrowed place and borrowed time" does not determine the spatial existence of the city but rather city is being treated as a place that consists of different spaces. Ah Guo is, like any Hong Kong citizen, creating his own spatial existence heedless to the fact that who governs the place. The subject and the city is linked together when Ah Guo and Ah Sha go to the temple for the blessing of the city (170).

Dong Qi Zhang's *The Atlas: The Archaeology of An Imaginary City* spatializes Hong Kong history¹⁰ although this is a fictional history. The position of Hong Kong as a place is juxtaposing with its status as space through the inscription of this spatial fictional historicized dimension of narrative. Hong Kong is a counterplace, commonplace, misplace, displace, antiplace and nonplace, and as well as multitopia. Yet, Hong Kong is textualized by the inventive composition of the seemingly inter-related but at the time, disengaged sites of representations that strive for the construction of cultural meanings. The disengagement of these sites suggests the possibility of looking at the spatial history of the place from other perspectives that however, creates the effect of dubiety of not only questioning the possibility of having a history within the linear temporality, but also the recognition of a more multi-layered space in where Hong Kong as a place possesses of. The created dubiety further plays down the concept of disappearance because Hong Kong's existence is dubious. According to Wang, this Hong Kong is stretching into the mapping of power, the construction blue print, and in the literary signification (293). The fluidity of this spatial existence is articulated again.

The author attempts to fictionalize Hong Kong's existence through the intra-textualization between the precursor text is of the theorizing of the Hong Kong maps reading by trying to verify the cartographic existence of the territory through reading of maps, real or imaginary; the seemingly fictive history of different places in the territory, and the site of signifiers, such as the airport, of which the author considers as a way of evacuation (156), echoing Abbas's con-

¹⁰ For further details, see Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

cept that Hong Kong is an airport city.¹¹ The airport's existence is actualized by the building of an artificial island that becomes a sign of both Hong Kong's self-supplementarity, and its ability to extend itself. The existence of the airport as an imagination before its taking form signifies the parenthetical fictive essence of Victoria city and as well as other cities (79).

Dong's endeavour is aiming at intertextual and contextual competence. This representation refines into visibility Hong Kong's spatial existence by making use of its past to produce the multiple component and abrupt shift in its heterotopic existence, remarking certain historical specificity elided by the all encompassing trajectories of being a colony, and then a special region of administration. Such seemingly fictive discursive history of places turns the narrative into a site of cultural imaginary involving the colonial legacy. Lured as the background of the narrative is the very idea of hybridity marking the essence of Hong Kong and its local. Dong alludes the search of a Hong Kong local to "geological" investigation of the territory as a possible way to delineate the development of the city (165). His queries of what kind of root this local can have finds his solution as the capacity of the city has become the metaphorical definition of the local. This Hong Kong local is changing, disappearing and yet re-emerging as a self supplementary form, extending its definition into grand narrative.

Hong Kong people's identity is closely linked with the location. This location of Hong Kong generates spaces of discourse for various writers who want to capture faces of Hong Kong. They enter into dialogue with the place. The 1997 signifies changes that affects the people very much in the formation of their subalternity. The colonial administration brought to the people of Hong Kong economic prosperity of which is still highly treasured, caused self-subalternity and to experience the working of the domination by consent before 1997. The local of Hong Kong could not formed by ethnocentric identification with China that once was repelled, and yet, Chinese cultural influence was not cut from the people. They were inevitably stuck in the interstic space in which they were going to create their identity associated with the place. The 1997 marked a special spatial existence that was constituted by anxieties and uncertainties that drove people to leave the place so as to looking for a new life that was out of the threat of changing status. This is shown in the narratives as destructive force. It is also ironic in the consideration of return to Hong Kong and the return to the mother China. Then, the local is configured in the forming of a cultural citizenship of its own thus resisted discontinuity by arrogating the past into the constitution of the present. The narratives on Hong Kong allow one to have a glimpse of how the people of the place react to the change and contribute to the building up of a local that is neither Chinese nor British. It is central to the understanding of Hong Kong and Hong Kong literature.

¹¹ For details, please see Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997).

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