

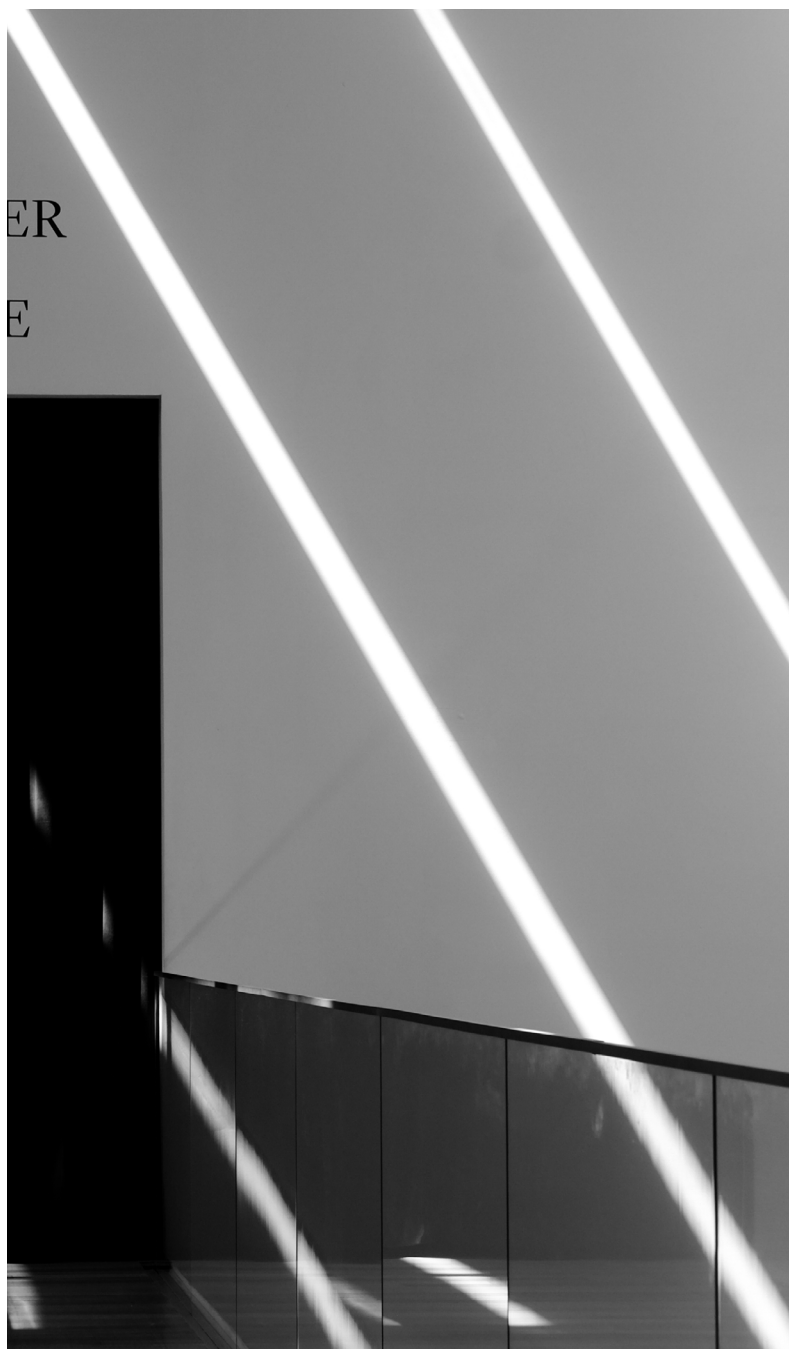


REVIEW

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*"Leung Ping-Kwan's
Satorial Images"*

"Hong Kong is a lady whose every piece of clothing is designed for appealing the needs and interests of the dominating masculine figures, first Britain and later China."



Leung Ping-Kwan's Sartorial Images

“Hong Kong has always had style. We’ve been channeling the East-meets-West look and making it our own for the last six decades”. One claim from a fashion guide magazine of Hong Kong can be a commentary on the sartorial images in Leung’s poems. Sartorial images in Hong Kong are popularly discussed as a typical text of urban writing and imagination. Clothes are not merely objects for wearing but cultural phenomena as reflections of Hong Kong politics and economy. Ackbar Abbas sees cloth as a substitute to the “political idealism” in Hong Kong people’s energy. He comments that “if you cannot choose your political leader, you can choose your own clothes”. To Abbas, fashion consumerism is a kind of negotiation, or even an escape, from political loss and marginality.

Leung Ping-Kwan has similar opinion to Abbas on fashion consumerism. For example, in the poem “In Ap-liu Street” written in 1992, Leung writes that “[y]ou buy designer clothes to save your shaky nerves”. If we interpret the “shaky nerves” as representing Hong Kong people’s disappointment with Hong Kong’s political future, sartorial image (“designer clothes”) plays a role as a replacing focus of political failure in Hong Kong society. Loss, disappointment, and confusion were increasingly stronger since June Fourth Incident in 1989; Hong Kong people were marginalized from all political events of handling Hong Kong’s future. Hence, political prostration is the subtext of Hong Kong’s sartorial culture. This selection will discuss a poem by Leung Ping-Kwan written in 1992, “In Fabric Alley”, based



on Hong Kong's historical background since 1984. In Leung's poems, sartorial images are the representation of Hong Kong identity; also they show Hong Kong people's confusion and wondering in the transition period.

The poem "In Fabric Alley" describes a lady in Fabric Alley looking for fabrics to make a new clothes. The eye of the speaker is very similar to a camera, following the lady step by step. In the first stanza, the speaker describes patterns on the lady's cloth: "[b]road leaves", "vines" and "petals"; these images are fragmented and meaningless. The speaker asks: "how endless and many are the disguise concealed by revealing". Then, in the second stanza, the camera gives a close-up on the lady's eye; the speaker uses the image "kaleidoscope" as a metaphor to describe images reflected in it, showing chaos and fragmentation of the alley. The camera moves to the alley to describe the gaze of people; and in the last stanza, the camera focuses on various fabrics on the street: "silk", "cotton", and "wool". The speaker takes the lady's voice and asks:

Their many lyrics gone sour, also their erotic suggestion:

Can we really see ourselves remade in any of these?

The question is extremely challenging to answer; many scholars, such as Esther M. K. Cheung and Ackbar Abbas have discussions on it and interpret it as Leung Ping-Kwan's question on political changes in the coming new period. They see the new political and social institutions after 1997 as a new clothes for Hong Kong. Hence, sartorial

image fabrics in this poem is a set of "palimpsests", as Esther M. K. Cheung writes: "[h]istory is a presented as a profound set of palimpsest, composed of objects as mundane as fabrics". Palimpsest of history is a remarkable metaphor regarding fabric because it suggests that Hong Kong identity is registered and never possible to abandon, like the patterns on the fabrics. Hence, Leung Ping-Kwan ends this poem with another question:

Yet these are all we see in front of us.

How to go about tailoring something new,

To make it so it wears the body well?

For the lady, it is impossible to throw over the fabrics but she can get a better tailoring to make the cloth suit the body.

In "The Last Emporium: Verse and Cultural Space", Abbas tells a story of Chris Pattern, the last governor of Hong Kong, as a commentary on the poem. He sees Chris Pattern's break of "sartorial tradition" as the suggestion that "the same colonial body that is still ruling Hong Kong, it now wears a new style of clothes". Abbas emphasizes that the change of clothes is a signifier of the change of colonial system. Along with Esther M. K. Cheung's and Abbas's interpretations, the poem can also be read from the perspective of the female figure in the poem. The desire for an idealist cloth drives the lady to go into the alley and to search for her fancy fabrics. The struggle in her mind is also the confusion about identity of Hong Kong people in the transition period: what is the real Hong Kong identity? Whether we can rebuild the identities as Chinese? Whether we can

keep balance between the past and the present to achieve the ideal situation? To answer these questions, Hong Kong should look back to history; thus the alley symbolizes the collective memory of Hong Kong that may provide the solutions. In this sense, sartorial images of fabrics and clothes show the lack and loss of identity. In the first stanza, the speaker describes the “lack” of mother identity:

The usual Chinese pagoda

*is folded in fragments, and I've no means to tailor
for you*

garments of worlds to come

The Chinese tradition is in tatters like a fragmented Chinese pagoda on fabric in Hong Kong society. To the speaker (the tailor), it is impossible to rebuild the original Chinese identity based on the fragments of culture. Thus, the lack of mother identity drives the lady (Hong Kong) to go deeper into the alley (history). The speaker then describes how the lady establishes her identities:

*until the scene has her outside herself utterly, in a
maze*

of fabrics, trapped in the gaze of others;

in a jacket criss-cross weaved, in an outer wrap

or cloak of denial, it is herself she's obsessed with

It is the outside, but not the inside, elements that contribute to the lady's identity. John Berger's idea of gaze can provide a commentary on the process of the lady's self-identification: “she comes to consider the surveyed and the surveyor within her as the two constituent ... Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another”. Berger points out that women build their identity based on the gaze from

others (a collective masculine figure); that is, “men act and women appear”. Thus, the important problem will be ignored if we think identity is simply built by the influence of the surrounding when reading these four lines. Hong Kong is a lady whose every piece of clothing is designed for appealing the needs and interests of the dominating masculine figures, first Britain and later China. In this sense, the sartorial image of “a jacket criss-cross” is also a symbol of political chains. Although Hong Kong people recognize that may not suit them, they have no ideas about what to change:

A body wants a change

But hardly knows what it needs to want.

In this poem, Leung Ping-Kwan describes a female character as an allusion to the situation in Hong Kong, and uses the sartorial images to symbolize the identity crisis caused by political prostration.