After Incommensurability: Articulating Hong Kong Identity in Fictions of Leung Ping-kwan

不可通约性之后：论香港作家梁秉钧小说中的身份认同

Dahai ZHANG [1]
Faculty of Arts, University of Antwerp, Belgium
dahai. zhang@student.uantwerpen.be

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18442188

Abstract This essay investigates two fictions by Hong Kong writer Leung Ping-kwan. The early work, *Paper Cuts* (1982), was written in the late 1970s, while the later work, *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart* (2011), was composed around the turn of the millennium. The question of Hong Kong identity has always been a focal point in Leung Ping-kwan's work. Therefore, this paper focuses on the author's perspectives and reflections on identity crisis in these two novels. In *Paper Cuts*, the exploration of incommensurability has been analyzed as a colonial cultural predicament in the Cold War context to understand Leung Ping-kwan's perspective at the time. The two female protagonists exhibit a schizophrenic double consciousness, serving as an allegory for the social landscape that reveals the communication barriers among colonial subjects. Furthermore, it is emphasized that reading incommensurability must prioritize its constituting conditions, where the linguistic complexity, the colonial order, and the Cold War structure overly determine this incommensurability. When interpreting *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart*, it is argued that the vernacular cosmopolitanism presented in the text as a solution to the identity crisis addressed in the earlier work, with its formal and thematic representation. It reads Leung's food writing in terms of the dialectic of appetite and digestion, which involves an excessive description of the world and local cuisine, implying the inclusivity and hybridity embedded in Hong Kong culture and daily life.

Keywords Leung Ping-kwan; Incommensurability; Identity; Vernacular Cosmopolitanism

1. Introduction

The renowned Hong Kong writer Leung Ping-kwan (1949–2013, aka. Yesi) dedicated his life to writing and articulating on Hong Kong identity and stories. In his essay "The Story of Hong Kong: Why Is It So Hard to Tell?" (1995), Leung noted that the difficulty

Received: 2025-09-15; Revised: 2025-12-15; Accepted: 2025-12-31.
Author: [1] Dahai ZHANG (张大海) is currently a Ph.D. student of Transcultural Studies (TricS) in the Faculty of Arts, University of Antwerp (Universiteit Antwerpen), Belgium.

lies in the fact that seemingly everyone feels entitled to speak about Hong Kong. Whether mainland Chinese scholars, Western academics, or even writers from across the strait who merely visit Hong Kong for shopping, all seem to believe they possess the authority to comment on Hong Kong. Over time, Hongkongers have abandoned any desire to argue against this. In her monograph, *Yesi's Hong Kong Story*, Wong Ka Ki (2021) states that Leung Ping-kwan has spent his life resisting two dominant discourses: narratives of the colonial West and of nationalist China. He refuses to reduce Hong Kong to a mere Western colony, nor does he wish to be incorporated by the fervent nationalism of the masses. Thus, he consistently sought to explore a path that uniquely belongs to Hong Kong itself. This rejection and reflection on the two dominant discourses is clearly shown in his early fiction, *Paper Cuts* (1982). However, most analyses of *Paper Cuts* merely emphasize its depiction of identity crisis in Hong Kong (Wong, 1997/2011), its exploration of female characters (Yip, 1988/2011; Chan, 1985/2011), or its portrayal of urban experiences (Dung, 1995/2011). I find that these readings focus excessively on the surface of the text without further interrogating the socio-historical and political context that structured "the double consciousness" (Gilroy, 1993) of Hong Kong in the 1970s. Beyond the superficial symbolic codes of East-West cultural differences, the mentality of the colonized and Cold War structures jointly constituted the conditions for incommensurability described in this fiction.

Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart (2011), as Leung Ping-kwan's final published collection of short stories, can be seen as a culmination of his lifelong quest to express Hong Kong identity. Thus, it is worth reading this last novel as his mature response to the question raised in the early writing. Besides writing novels, Leung Ping-kwan is also a poet. His poetry contains excessive depictions of food. The critic Rey Chow (1993, 2014), born in Hong Kong, has offered insightful analysis on this aspect. She observes that Leung emphasizes food descriptions because, like speech, food requires the use of the mouth. Yet unlike speech, eating involves swallowing—an act of consumption, a non-expressive gesture, which can be seen as a resistance and rejection of the incorporation of language ideology. The act of eating consumes libido rather than reproducing it. I think that beyond Chow's interpretation, Leung's culinary writing also carries an appetite/digestion dialectic. This dialectic empowers Hong Kong and its people with agency that they are not merely passive subjects awaiting assimilation by diverse cultural ideologies or the madness that is failed by interpellation (as two protagonists in *Paper Cuts*). Rather, within the context of global capitalism, Hong Kong people possess the capacity to select and digest diverse

cultural symbols/texts/food for their own purposes, transforming them into nourishment for their own growth. Therefore, through analyzing *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart*, I will examine the vernacular cosmopolitanism within the story, using this framework to understand the position of Hong Kong subjectivity that Leung Ping-kwan has discovered and embodied in this fiction.

2. Out of Sentence and Un-signified

In his literary career, Leung Ping-kwan continuously seeks symbols and representations to express the Hong Kong experience. His fiction, *Paper Cuts,* written in the late 70s, compiled and published in the 1980s, raises the question of Hong Kong identity. *Prima facie*, this story depicts a love story of two girls, with the narrator "I" serving as their friend and an observer of their romantic experiences. These two girls are Joe, culturally quite Westernized, and Yao, who is fascinated by traditional Chinese culture and Cantonese opera. The narrator "I" alternates between observing and intervening in their emotional entanglements. Formally speaking, the fiction employs twelve chapters or short stories narrating two protagonists alternatively, with the focus of narration shifting from one to the other constantly, giving readers a sense of splitting. Leung sought to express Hong Kong's complex situation in the 1970s—caught between tradition and modernity, East and West.

The 1970s marked a period of rapid economic growth in Hong Kong, signifying its transformation from a developing region into a developed economy. Following the political turmoil of the 1960s—such as the Kowloon Riots and the 1967 Riots—the British colonial government began addressing social issues, leading to improvements in the colony's livelihood and economy. Under the context of rapid economic growth and the influx of Western popular culture into the daily lives of Hong Kong youth, colonized subjects found it extremely difficult to express and articulate themselves. Even communication among colonized individuals became problematic. Yao and Joe represent two commonly observed, fractured "structures of feeling" (Williams, 2001) among Hongkongers at that time. The dilemma faced by Hong Kong people regarding cultural identity was whether to return to traditional Chinese culture or to embrace Western modern culture.

In *Paper Cuts,* Joe frequently receives unexpected and anonymous letters. These are love poems penned by Huang, a colleague who likes her. As Huang primarily expresses his

feelings through classical Chinese verse, Joe—whose cultural background is Westernized—finds the meaning conveyed in the letters elusive:

> Inside were a few lines of Chinese verse clipped from a book.
>
> "Green, green the reeds, Dew and frost gleam.
> Where's she I need? Beyond the stream.
> Upstream I go, The way is long.
> Downstream I flow, She's with the throng."
>
> I finished reading it, but I didn't understand what it meant.
>
> "I received this in the last day or two; I don't know who left it on my desk," she said.
>
> [...] It was just so absurd to clip ancient poetry for Joe. She could feel the lyrics of Linda Ronstadt or Janis Ian, but Chinese verse felt too distant for her.
>
> 里面是书上剪下来的几句中文诗。
>
> 蒹葭苍苍，白露为霜。
> 所谓伊人，在水一方。
> 溯洄从之，道阻且长。
> 溯游从之，宛在水中央。
>
> 我看完了，不明白那是什么。
>
> "是这两天收到的，不知是谁放在我桌上。"她说。
>
> […] 只是，剪古诗给乔是多荒谬呢。她可以感觉莲娜朗斯德或珍妮斯伊安德的歌词，中国古诗反而太遥远了。
>
> (Leung, 1982)

In this scene, the traditional Chinese verse can be read as a message waiting to be decoded by the receiver (Joe). The sender is yet anonymous, while Joe has no idea of the meaning of this message. Thus, the introduction of the narrator ("I") is significant since the narrator is the one who has the knowledge to decipher the coded message. From the narrator's perspective, it is too absurd to send a classical Chinese poem to Joe, since she cannot feel it, instead of the lyrics of Linda Ronstadt or Janis Ian. The dislocation of knowledge production between the sender and the receiver is revealed here.

Yao, immersed in classical Chinese culture, struggles with family and work, seemingly unable to adapt to modern society and thus frequently retreating into her own fantasies. From Leung Ping-kwan's perspective, situated within a subjective position of Hong Kong, he finds himself unable to fully endorse either of these cultural orientations. When the

narrator observes Yao cutting out symbols of Chinese identity, such as pandas, he dismisses these unfamiliar objects as offering no practical benefit to their lives：

> What are you carving? Beside the oil tray, I see a panda and a little deer. They are both red and have not yet been pasted onto white paper. You just finished them, didn't you? I don't know if they are carved well; I only feel as though they are not yet complete. The fur on the panda's body looks like sharp thorns, while the protruding ears on its head look like a horn, and the deer's neck is far too long. You simply sit here all day, carving little animals you have never seen, shaping their likenesses out of imagination.
>
> 你刻的是什么呢？在油盘的旁边，我看见一头熊猫，还有小鹿。他们都是红色，还未贴在白纸上。是你刚完成的吧？我不知道刻的好不好，我只觉得好像还未完成，熊猫身上的毛像是尖刺，而头上隆起的耳朵像一个角，鹿的颈子又太长了。你整天就是坐在这儿，刻一些你从未见过的小动物，凭空塑造他们的样子。
>
> (Leung, 1982)

I read the story of Yao showing Leung's critical stance towards both the kitsch and mass culture of Western commercial modernity and the obsession of classical Chinese culture. In an article published in 1977, Leung criticizes that both Western modernity and classical Chinese culture are 'two types of illusions' (Leung, 1977: 36–38) because they are not the real life for Hong Kong people. However, he continues, people are satisfied to express themselves under masks (grand narratives) because it is safe, without exposing the real self. Thus, Joe's inability to comprehend Huang's mode of emotional expression (classical poetry) reveals a rupture in knowledge production among the colonized, where knowledge of the modern West and of the traditional Chinese cannot be smoothly 'encoded/decoded' (Hall, 1980) by each other, because they have not found their own language yet.

Through this failed decoding and un-signification, the author allegorically captures the incommensurability inherent in colonial culture. That is to say, Leung Ping-kwan argues that the colonial culture of Hong Kong cannot be reduced merely to Western colonialism nor to Chinese nationalism. For these two dominant discourses, the singularity of Hong Kong culture precisely lies in this incommensurability—a concept developed by Homi Bhabha (1994) built on a term "out of sentence" from Roland Barthes, where the term *sentence* implies structures and the language of the colonizer. The knowledge and emotions of the colonized cannot be fully expressed through the language and grammar of the

colonizer. The incommensurability of the colony is situated precisely in this "out of sentence," which means they cannot be fully articulated through the language of the master. As a result, cultural hybridity and impurity frequently appear in the accusation of Hong Kong's colonial culture. In "Finding My Way in Kyoto," for instance, someone from mainland China complains that Hong Kong television broadcasts in Cantonese they cannot understand, arguing that the significance of "One Country, Two Systems" should lie in linguistic unification—namely, everyone speaking Mandarin. Another returnee from France deemed the language spoken by Hong Kong people neither a fully Chinese nor a Western language, condemning terms like "士多啤梨" (the Cantonese translation of "strawberry") as colonial Chinese. Indeed, the unique and highly contextualized local culture cannot be understood from this essentialist perspective. Yet this linguistic and cultural hybridity constitutes the very singularity of Hong Kong's incommensurability. Thus, Leung must find a way to express it appropriately within Hong Kong culture.

I argue, the failure of encoding/decoding in *Paper Cuts* must be seen as over-determination by a typical historical-political-linguistic structure. Analyzing the conditions of this failure provides deeper insights into the contradictions that the author presents in this text. First, as a Hong Kong writer, it is worth paying attention to the sociolinguistic condition and the writing style of Leung Ping-kwan. While his works employ Mandarin characters, ordinary language used in Hong Kong blends Cantonese and English, where English serves as the official language. Within this state of linguistic hybridity, writing incommensurability can be understood as an expression of multi-layered translation in ordinary life. Consequently, reflections on language and communication have consistently formed a central theme in his work. Here, I propose drawing upon Sinophone Malaysian writer Ng Kim Chew's analysis of Malaysian Chinese literature, "Sinophone/Chinese: 'The South Where Language Is Lost' and Reinvented" (2013), to comprehend the ontological status of Hong Kong literature as a form of Sinophone minor literature. In this essay, Ng argues that the unique Chinese-language context facing Sinophone Malaysian literature can be understood through several determinations:

> **A unique kind of Chinese situated in the multilingual context**: the Chinese language of Sinophone Malaysian literature is one embedded in a pluralistic linguistic environment. This Chinese directly functions as a geographical marker, such as the Chinese language can be reduced to phonetic symbols, or it has been sandwiched between English and local dialects/vernaculars.

The difference between the Chinese language used in mainland China and overseas: the use of language is different between mainland Chinese and overseas Chinese, which he shows a linguistic divide between the South and the North. This divergence constitutes an ontological difference in language: mainland Chinese ties closer to the ordinary spoken language, while overseas Chinese exhibits linguistic technicality and metalinguistic qualities. This can thus be seen as a difference between the unity and separation of spoken and written language.

The reality of written history differs between Malaysia from China: historically and socially speaking, Singapore and Malaysia have lacked written experience for a long time, remaining excluded from the writing system. Northern dialects and Mandarin belong to the same linguistic system, facilitating easier conversion between spoken and written forms, whereas the history of southern dialects, as realized in written forms, is very brief. Yet the disparity between northern and southern dialects also manifests in the difficulty of northern vernaculars to express (southern) urban experiences. Thus, "the South where language is lost," existing as the periphery of writing, necessitates the reinvention of language.

In the "Appendix: Afterword to the First Edition" of *Paper Cuts*, Leung expressed his language view close to Ng Kim Chew: "writing Hong Kong in the present term, it is insufficient to merely use the language from old textbooks; we must also invent and refine the current hybrid vernacular [...]. Complex language[...] is not one-sided, but a complex perspective." "The South where language is lost" as an ontological linguistic condition must be understood as one of the social conditions for comprehending incommensurability. In other words, this ontological status of Hong Kong literature as a Sinophone minor literature structures a limit towards Chinese literature.

During Hong Kong's British colonial period, English, the official language, and the British colonizers, though not occupying the central focus in narratives, nevertheless maintained a dominant position of power throughout the structure of this story. In the textual narrative concerning Joe, the editor-in-chief at the newspaper where Joe and the narrator worked is a British man who does not understand Chinese at all. He contains an innate fear of these unfamiliar characters and holds the power to decide the employment

status of editorial staff. Although Leung does not extensively engage with this point, I argue that this plot illustrates how Hong Kong, as a colony, was constrained by the colonial structure (the colonizer/the colonized). In terms of the psychological structure of the colonized, Frantz Fanon (1952) offers a brilliant analysis in his work *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*), which examines the psyche of Black people in French colonies. For colonized Black individuals, becoming white represents an absolute process. Simultaneously, the colonizer's language and knowledge are imposed upon the colonized. This analysis indicates the colonial condition that people of Hong Kong could also suffer. Even the colonized want to become the colonizer, the coming end has always been delayed.

Combining the structure of the colony with "the South where language is lost," I argue that the incommensurability illustrated in this fiction cannot be read only as irreducibility, which means that Hong Kong's colonial culture cannot be reduced purely to Western colonialism or to Chinese nationalism. Beyond irreducibility, the two female protagonists respectively embody a labor of resisting multiple interpellations. In the essay, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?", Hall (1996) critiques both Foucault's theory of discourse and Althusser's theory of interpellation, as both presuppose a transcendental subject position—a place where the subject always already resides before interpellation, merely awaiting the call of power and ideology to seamlessly align with that position. In reality, however, identity issues arise precisely from the subject's refusal or failure to enter that position, namely the failure of interpellation. The emergence of new subjectivity stems from the process of resisting.

Paper Cuts tells precisely such a story of resistance to interpellation. I interpret the exchange of letters between Joe and Huang not only as a romantic interaction but also as a continuous, uninterrupted ideological interpellation from traditional Chinese culture—represented by classical poetry—toward the distinctly Westernized Joe (as a metaphor of Hong Kong). Due to her mixed-race appearance and upbringing within a modern Western cultural context, Joe lacks the necessary knowledge to interpret classical Chinese poetry, finding these letters confusing. She feels that she is neither the intended reader for these poems nor the girl Huang imagines her to be. Yao, the other protagonist, immerses herself in classical Chinese culture as a performative symbol to resist the interpellation of modern Western urban culture. Unable to adapt to modern life, Yao retreats into an imaginary symbolic order, evading the social upheavals brought by urbanization, modernization, and the demolition and redevelopment of neighborhoods. In this process of interpellation,

nationalism and colonialism are structurally identical. Thus, I argue that the novel's dual narrative, the double consciousness of two subjects with vastly different objects of desire, and the differentiated production of two textual styles reflect the colonial subjects' attempts to resist multiple interpellations through different modes of labor.

However, how should we interpret the contradiction and break between the two modes of production represented by Joe and Yao? The former embodies capitalist modernity/coloniality, while the latter represents traditional pre-modern Chinese mode of production— or perhaps a metaphor for the latent, yet unmanifested, socialist China? The text briefly mentions that the narrator once visited a paper-cut master who had come from mainland China. Paper-cut, as a highly esteemed folk-art form during socialist China, carried distinct political connotations. Following Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (1942), Yan'an paper-cutting began to be used to promote the happiness of farmers under the new regime, while also being regarded as a symbol of abundance, modernity, and a good life (Wu, 2014). Drawing on Kuan-Hsing Chen's framework in *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (2010), he argues that analyzing East Asian affairs requires a triadic lens of decolonization, de-imperialization, and de-Cold War. When Leung Ping-kwan wrote the *Paper Cuts* in the late 1970s to early 1980s, the Cold War persisted as a standoff between the liberal and communist blocs. As a frontline territory in this conflict, Hong Kong naturally required a stringent defense by the United States and Britain. Based on this historical context, I argue that the incommensurability within this fiction, while constrained by colonial structures, must also be understood within the context of the Cold War, as the confrontation between capitalist and socialist modes of production imposed an insurmountable boundary upon Hong Kong, situated between East and West. As the narrator, "I" may be unable to cross this limit, but "I" attempt to approach and depict this incommensurability—constrained by multiple structures—through diverse textual styles and linguistic forms.

3. Food, Borders, Space, and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism

Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart (2011), as the last fiction composed by Leung after the 1997 handover, can be considered as his mature response to both the question raised in his earlier writing (as discussed in the last section) and the new social-historical situation of Hong Kong. In this novel, we no longer find the protagonist silenced by different grand narratives; rather, we perceive more active and vivid subjects emerging

from different plots. Not like most cultural productions of the pre-1997 period, which show the fear of an unforeseeable future, this novel tries to locate post-1997 Hong Kong subjectivities in a more diversified, hybrid, and cosmopolitan approach. In this section, I argue that there is a desire for after incommensurability experimented in Leung's new approach to express Hong Kong identities in terms of the dialectic of appetite/digestion through the sensibility of vernacular cosmopolitism. I propose to read this dialectic of appetite/digestion in his later writing as a generating drive to overcome the double consciousness encountered in the earlier fiction.

In *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart*, food emerges as a prominent central theme. The characters and stories unfold around these twelve "dishes," narrated with grace and detail. Only a few stories in the novel are set in Hong Kong; most are staged in other locations such as Kyoto, Macau, Vietnam, Spain, Vancouver, and Slovenia. This transnational landscape captures the frequent cross-border movements in the daily lives of Hongkongers. Moreover, the widespread acceptance of global cuisines reflects their culturally diversified social reality. As Shu-mei Shih (2007) analyzes in her work *Visuality and Identity*, vernacular cosmopolitanism can be understood as a means for Sinophone subjects across different regions to seek their own subjectivity within the cracks of imperial structures. It differs from metropolitan cosmopolitanism, which invariably originates from the perspective of standard, mainstream, dominant cultures, thereby overlooking and discarding non-central, minority, and marginal cultures. Vernacular cosmopolitanism is the language of the non-elite, of marginal intellectuals, and of the colonized. Linguistically and culturally, it manifests as bilingualism—or even multilingualism—between local and metropolitan languages, rather than the "monolingualism of the Other" (Derrida, 1998) imposed by the colonizer. Vernacular cosmopolitanism challenges the hierarchical order of metropolitan cosmopolitanism by juxtaposing local cultures with world cultures, thereby redistributing the colonial hierarchy. I argue that *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart* reflects Leung's critique of metropolitan cosmopolitanism, revealing the vernacular cosmopolitanism he perceives in the lives of Hong Kong people through the portrayal of food and love stories. It is equally significant to possess both local knowledge and global knowledge to understand the structure of feeling in his fiction.

In fact, within the titled story "Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart," we can already sense the affective distribution logic of vernacular cosmopolitanism. This vernacular cosmopolitanism is not grounded in Western-centrism; on the contrary, it carries

a fusion perspective that treats Eastern and Western cultures equally from a Hong Kong subjective point of view. For instance, when "I" celebrated my birthday at a bar with friends that evening, they brought diverse foods: Middle Eastern dips, Spanish tapas, Italian pasta, Portuguese duck rice, Japanese sushi, and Sichuan beef tripe. This juxtaposition deconstructs the binary logic of East/West opposition. When dating Marian, the narrator also chooses a French-Thai fusion restaurant reminiscent of one in Hyde Park (London), asserting that Asian cultures deserve equal position with Western ones. Compared to the questions raised earlier in *Paper Cuts,* Leung offers a possible answer in *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart*: the issue is not choosing between the West and China. Instead, an ideal Hongkonger can digest and utilize both Eastern and Western cultures—possessing not only knowledge of cheese and wine but also the skill to prepare sliced beef and ox tongue in chili sauce ("fuqi feipian"). I term this cross-cultural knowledge production as vernacular cosmopolitanism, which dismantles established cultural hierarchies while decentralizing both Western-centric and China-centric discourses.

The vernacular cosmopolitanism is also reflected in the fluidity of transnational subjects. While most stories in the novel unfold outside Hong Kong, even those core narratives set in Hong Kong reveal diverse cultural experiences through their characters. In Hong Kong literary history, there is a long discussion on the concept of "city citizenship", as the colony was a place without nationality. Yet in postcolonial Hong Kong, one distinction from mainland China manifests in passport privileges that Hong Kong residents enjoy visa-free access to far more countries and regions than mainland citizens. This transnational mobility thus becomes an advantage in Leung's story to articulate Hong Kong identity and incommensurability. The juxtaposition of multiple cultures, the portrayal of foreign lands, and the depiction of high transnational mobility all reflect the author's reflections on borders, territories, and cultural hierarchies.

The depictions of food and daily life in Leung Ping-kwan's novel also serve to deconstruct grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984). After all, the entire novel is set against the historical background of post-1997 Hong Kong. Cultural productions in Hong Kong during the 1980s and 1990s, anxiety surrounding the 1997 handover was a main theme. Everyone was deeply anxious about Hong Kong's uncertain fate after the handover. For Hongkongers, their destiny seemed perpetually beyond control, reduced to pawns in the geopolitical chessboard of major powers. Although the overall tone of Leung's novel remains bleak, it

is evident that channeling political frustration into appetite and desire also serves to dissolve the grand political narrative:

> These extravagant foods paired with the pre-handover frenzy—on one hand, patriotic TV song galas brimming with national spirit; on the other, the decadent end-of-the-world revelry of foreigners in Lan Kwai Fong. It was as if tomorrow might never come. I longed for tomorrow to be one of those dates stamped in red on the calendar, marking the birth or demise of some great food. I suppose this is a form of day worship. I couldn't care less about any big day. Yet during that period, we too inevitably indulged in feasting and drunken revelry, singing off-key and out of tune, falling in and out of love—our entire beings adrift in a state of involuntary perpetual suspension.
>
> 这些夸张的食物配合回归前歇斯底里的气氛，一方面是民族气节高昂的电视爱过歌曲晚会，一方面是兰桂坊洋人颓废的世界末狂欢，不是只有明天就是没有明天，好想这明天就是日历上一个印成红色的日子，代表了某些伟大食物的诞辰或是死寂。我想这是日子崇拜。我对什么大日子都无所谓。但在那段日子里我们也不能幸免地大吃大喝，荒腔走板地乱唱一通，又恋爱又失恋，整个人好似处于一种身不由己的始终漂浮状态。
>
> (Leung, 2009)

The "1997 Handover" was undoubtedly a momentous occasion for both Hong Kong and mainland China. Yet for the characters in his fiction, this grand event merely became a backdrop. Tonight, "I" was supposed to celebrate "my" birthday with friends at a bar—a date that seemed to imply a sense of arbitrariness and passivity. Because "I" actually had no idea what my real birthday was:

> I've never celebrated birthdays before, even as an adult. Probably because my parents came to Hong Kong illegally when I was born—I was delivered in secret, without even a birth certificate. When I applied for an ID card later, I couldn't read English, so I just wrote down the date I received it as my birthday. My family observed the Chinese lunar calendar date; my ID card bore a fictitious date for official purposes; and my aunt later calculated a solar calendar date for me from a perpetual calendar. I kept these three dates on hand but never used them consistently or verified them. Thus, I rotated through them for different

occasions, casually getting by—a practice that suited my laid-back, changeable character.

我这么大一个人，过去一直没有过生日的习惯。大概因为当年父母偷渡来港，我是死寂啊接生的，连出世纸也没有。长大以后去领身份证，看不懂英文，就把当天的日期当生日写上去了。家里提的是中国阴历的日子；身份证上是应付官方的虚构日期；还有姨妈后来替我从万年历推算出来的阳历日子，我备而不用，也没真正核对过。就这样三个日子在不同场合轮番使用，随便应付过去，倒也适合我散漫善变的个性。

(Leung, 2009)

The genesis of this birthday is both a metaphor for the narrator “I” and for Hong Kong itself. It signifies a trans-colonial knowledge production imposed upon “myself.” Whether it is the official date, the lunar calendar, or the solar calendar, none of these matters to me—they are all knowledge imposed by an external force, by the colonizer. Though “I” find myself adrift in a state of involuntary limbo, all “I” can do is feast and drink with friends here, experience love and heartbreak. “I” divert the libido of politics through the appetites and passions of daily life.

I argue that Leung’s food writing should not be understood solely as a strategy of consumption (Chow 1993, 2014). Even if consumption can be interpreted as a form of dis-identification, such an interpretation overemphasizes its passivity. Instead, I interpret Leung’s meticulous depictions of food as a dialectic of appetite/digestion. It is precisely through this process of encountering foods from different cultures that the characters in this novel demonstrate unprecedented inclusivity and adaptability. They do not dogmatically champion their own food and culture based solely on their national identity. On the contrary, many characters exhibit critical perspectives and self-reflection toward such attitudes. This capacity to accept and digest diverse cultures is the very approach Leung employs in *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart* to address the proposition raised in *Paper Cuts.* Here, characters are no longer torn by double consciousness stemming from East-West cultural clashes, nor do they succumb to tragic fates of madness. While most critics note an underlying gloomy tone in this story, I argue that this cross-cultural adaptability provides Hongkongers with the fundamental capacity to thrive anywhere, namely, transplantability. As Deleuzian concepts of the rhizome and deterritorialization propose, the subjectivity of the Hong Kong people is built upon the dialectic of appetite/digestion, enabling them to navigate fluidly between various cultures

and territories. Thus, the sense of being Hong Kong people has been redistributed and deterritorialized, rather than being governed by a transcendental signifier.

If we turn our attention toward the form of this fiction, we will notice that the dialectic of appetite/digestion is also illuminated through the changing narrative genres and styles in different short stories, indicating that the author can digest and combine different forms in a novel, including:

Genres	Title of stories
Urban realism and culinary prose	Amélie in Tuen Mun Vancouver's Secret Recipes Salty Shrimp Paste Happy Buckwheat Noodles
Campus novel and intellectual fiction	Ghosts of the West Chamber Sequel to the West Chamber
Suspense fiction	The Macau Killer
Travel literature	Finding My Way in Kyoto Slovenian Tales Searching for Duras Along the Mekong
Allegory fiction	Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart The Love Story of the Postcolonial Food God

The diversity of narrative genres in this novel formally echoes the author's intent to express Hong Kong's multifaceted and hybrid identity. This mimicry is not merely the imitation of the colonized; rather, it is a deliberate choice of parody. Through parodying different genres, Leung Ping-kwan challenges the postcolonial imperative that the subaltern cannot speak (Spivak, 1999) and presents readers with a novel steeped in Hong Kong flavor.

4. Conclusion

This paper examines how Hong Kong writer Leung Ping-kwan employs vernacular cosmopolitanism as a representational strategy in his novel *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart*, thereby subverting and challenging the awkward predicament of Hong Kong's untold stories. Through a retrospective analysis of his early work *Paper Cuts,* I discovered that Leung had already begun contemplating issues of Hong Kong identity in the late 1970s. In this fiction, he rejected two dominant discourses of incorporation—colonial Western and nationalist Chinese. Simultaneously, the incommensurability within

Hong Kong culture emerged as an ongoing challenge for the author. My analysis of *Paper Cuts* focuses on three constraining conditions of incommensurability in the history of Hong Kong: the unique Chinese literary context (the separation of spoken and written language), the colonial power structure, and the position of Hong Kong during the Cold War. I argue that these three structures constitute the conditions of possibility for understanding incommensurability. This reading applies not only to this particular work but also, I believe, to the critical social context for understanding Hong Kong literature during the colonial and Cold War eras. In analyzing the novel *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart*, I discovered that Leung has found a way to surpass incommensurability. Through the movement and alternation of food, space, and boundaries, he expresses the vernacular cosmopolitanism inherent in Hong Kong people's postcolonial knowledge production. This vernacular cosmopolitanism manifests as a preference for high receptivity and integration of Eastern and Western cultures, as well as a fluidity that transcends borders. The dialectic of appetite/digestion serves as the primary textual dynamics and a drive to shape Hong Kong subjectivity. This dynamism also manifests in the author's attention to literary form and style. Stylistic shifts across different stories functionally echo vernacular cosmopolitanism that redistributes the sensibility of metropolitan cosmopolitanism. Furthermore, the work employs everyday appetites and desires to subvert the grand narrative of the "1997 Handover" that underpins its setting.

References

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The post-colonial and the post-modern: The question of agency. In idem., *The Location of Culture* (pp. 171–197). Routledge.

Chan, P. C. (2011). Yesi xiaoshuo zhong de nüxing xingxiang [The female image in Yesi's fiction]. In S. Chen (Ed.), *Yesi zuopin pinglun ji: Xiaoshuo bufen* [A Collection of Critical Essays on Yesi's Works: The Fiction Section] (pp. 219–231). Xianggang wenxue pinglun chubanshe. (Original work published 1985)

Chen, K. H. (2010). *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smwwj

Chow, R. (1993). Things, common/places, passages of the port city: On Hong Kong and Hong Kong author Leung Ping-kwan. *Differences*, *5*(3), 179–204. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-5-3-179

Chow, R. (2014). Thinking with food, writing off center: The postcolonial work of Leung Ping-kwan and Ma Kwok-ming. In idem., *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Languaging as a Postcolonial Experience* (pp. 69–87). Columbia University Press.

Derrida, J. (1998). *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin* (P. Mensah, Trans.). Stanford University Press.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Dung, K. C. (2011). Chengshi de xianshi jingyan yu wenben jingyan (jie xuan): Yuedu "Jiu tu," "Wo cheng," he "Jianzhi" [Urban realistic experience and textual experience (excerpt): Reading "The Drunkard," "My City," and "Paper-cuts"]. In S. Chen (Ed.), *Yesi zuopin pinglun ji* (pp. 254–260). (Original work published 1995)

Fanon, F. (1967). *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*). Éditions du Seuil.

Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Verso.

Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language* (pp. 128–138). Hutchinson.

Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who needs 'identity'?. In S. Hall, & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (pp. 1–17). SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221907.n1

Jameson, F. (1981). *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1st ed.). Cornell University Press. http://www. jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1287f8w

Leung, P. K. (Yesi) (1982). *Jianzhi* [Paper Cuts]. Suye chubanshe.

Leung, P. K. (2012). Xianggang de gushi: Weishenme zheme nan shuo [The story of Hong Kong: Why is it so difficult to tell?]. In idem., *Xianggang wenhua shilun* [Ten Discourses on Hong Kong Culture] (pp. 3–25). Zhejiang University Press. (Original work published 1995)

Leung, P. K. (2011). *Hou zhimin shiwu yu aiqing* (Rev. ed.) [Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart]. Oxford University Press.

Leung, P. K. (2015). *Paper Cuts* (B. Holton, Trans.). Research Centre for Translation, CUHK.

Leung, P. K. (1977). Liangzhong huanxiang [Two types of illusions]. *Haowai* [City Magazine], (15), 36–38.

Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/ 1772278

Mao, T. -T. (1996). Talks at the Yan'an forum on literature and art. In K. A. Denton (Ed.), *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945* (pp. 458–484). Stanford University Press. (originally published in 1942)

Ng, K. C. (2013). "The South where language is lost" and reinvented. In S. Shih, C. Tsai, & B. Bernards (Eds.), *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (pp. 163–172). Columbia University Press.

Williams, R. (2001). *The Long Revolution*. Broadview Press. (Original work published 1961) https://doi.org/10.7312/will93760

Shih, S.-M. (2007). *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (1st ed.). University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.2713

Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjsf541

Wong, K. K. (2021). *Yesi de Xianggang gushi: Wenxueshi lunshu yanjiu* [Yesi's Hong Kong Story: A Study of Literary History Discourse]. Zhonghua shuju (Xianggang) youxian gongsi.

Wong, P. (2011). Shenfen de mishi yu renting: Yesi xiaoshuo de yi zhong dufa [The loss and identification of identity: A reading of Yesi's fiction]. In S. Chen (Ed.), *Yesi zuopin pinglun ji* (pp. 121–130). (Original work published 1997)

Wu, K. (2014). Paper-cuts in modern China: The search for modernity, cultural tradition, and women's liberation. *Modern China*, 41(1), 90–127. https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700414526133

Yip, F. (2011). Fuju jiegou, muxing xingxiang ji qita: Xu Yesi "San yu ji" [Complex sentence structure, maternal image, and others: Preface to Yesi's "Three Fish Collection"]. In S. Chen (Ed.), *Yesi zuopin pinglun ji* (pp. 204–218). (Original work published 1988)

[Editors: Rui ZHOU, Fanghao CHEN]