

Visualizing Contestation of Storytelling: Kowloon Walled City Park as a Site of Counter-Memory

敘事衝突的視覺化：論九龍寨城公園作為對抗記憶之場

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Abstract

Based on the case of Kowloon Walled City Park (KWC Park) in Hong Kong, this essay examines the practice of counter-remembering from a spatial perspective. The Park was initially designed by the colonial government as a garden to suppress memories of an urban slum and subsequently redesignated as a site of collective memory by the new government and institutions. Meanwhile, the park prompted the community to question the existing memory narrative and rethink their relationship with the city's past. KWC Park became a site for counter-memory, presenting the authorised historical discourse while simultaneously creating space for the performance of counter-remembering and its recognition by society. This case study demonstrates that by visualizing the dynamic of social remembering, a site of counter-memory can illuminate the marginal voices and inspire the society and authorities.

Keywords

Colonial history, collective memory, urban space, urban redevelopment, handover, Hong Kong

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Introduction

This article draws on the notion of counter-memory to elucidate the political dynamics of remembrance at Kowloon Walled City Park (KWC Park) in Hong Kong. Despite the criticism for its lack of information, I argue that KWC Park serves as a site of counter-memory, a space capable of visualising the contestation and dialogue between diverse narratives in post-colonial Hong Kong. This case study demonstrates that counter-memory is a performance of remembering involving multiple voices and layers that coexist in conflict yet cooperate with the existing collective memory. While the memorial park provided a stage to demonstrate the official history and the authorised narrative of collective memory, the local community challenged the meaning of the site and proposed alternative interpretations of the past. The dialogue, contestation, and cooperation between governmental management and local engagement over the site visualized the tension between official history and neglected memories. The enactment of counter-remembering has transformed the memorial park into a space for retrieving the right of imagination for the local past and reconfiguring the relationship between cultural identities and urban history. This essay contributes to the fields of memory studies, heritage studies, and human geography by presenting a case study of counter-memory from a spatial perspective.

A mixed-methods approach is employed in this article. The literature analysis, based on newspaper reports, governmental documents, official records, and previous studies, provides a historical overview of the planning and management of KWC Park. Anthropological methods are used to explore the micro-scale of memory practices. Empirical data was collected through site observation and interviews conducted in 2022, 2023, and 2024. Semi-structured interviews with Hongkongers associated with KWC, including those with living experience, visiting experience, and the second generation of former residents, were conducted in-person and online during the time of my PhD fieldwork. There are 40 informants in total while 27 of them are Hongkongers (a few of them might be debatable). Additionally, interviews were also conducted with novelists, photographers, architects, game creators, and individuals involved in the production of works about KWC. This article primarily draws from the responses from six informants (W5, W18, W19, W35, W36, and W38) regarding their knowledge, perception, and experiences of KWC Park. To explore the relationship between memory and the site, I visited KWC Park, the walking trail, and surrounding facilities in the Kowloon City district on March 3rd–5th, 2023, April 20th, 2023, and October 7th, 2023. Given that I grew up in the same area, personal experiences inevitably influenced my thoughts on the observation. Sources from English and Chinese languages were used. For non-English sources, quotes are translated into English by the author. With regard to the local context, Cantonese terms were phonetically transcribed by using the Jyutping system.

Drawing upon the scholarship of heritage studies and memory studies that view reminiscence as a socially constructed and localised performance in a certain moment and place (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000; Smith 2006, 75; Harvey 2015), this essay explores the performance of counter-remembering from a spatial perspective. I consider

KWC Park as a space designated for telling certain stories and a platform for actors to perform reminiscence. Following a literature review of counter-memory and a brief historical introduction to KWC and its clearance, I illustrate how the spatial planning of KWC Park involves a series of selections, inclusions, and exclusions of memories over the years. The park was initially designed to suppress post-war memories and was subsequently restaged as a site of collective memory of grassroots lifestyle. Based on field observations and interview content, the latter two sections demonstrate how the community challenges the existing park setting and develops alternative interpretations of the past.

Counter-memory from Spatial Perspective

The term "counter-memory" was coined by Michel Foucault (1977) in his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." Drawing upon Nietzsche's philosophy, Foucault developed his methodology of genealogical analysis of history, also known as the archaeology of knowledge. To turn history into genealogical uses, he posits that there are three modalities of history: parodic, dissociative, and sacrificial, which "severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a counter-memory—a transformation of history into a totally different form of time." (Foucault 1977, 160). For Foucault, counter-memory refers to the act of resistance against the notion of "history as true knowledge" determined by the dominant power, such as governments, institutions, and professionals. Counter-memory can highlight the discontinuity of history and liberate "divergent and marginal elements" of the past (153).

The concept of counter-memory is widely employed in research pertaining to memory politics, heritage making, social movements, and art activism to demonstrate the resistance against the dominant narrative. Counter-memory acknowledges the existence of multiple voices and diverse forms of commemoration within society, suggesting the potential for alternative interpretations of the past (Ashplant 2000; Legg 2005). Such marginalized voices can be utilised as a counter-narrative, evoking motivations and political forces to challenge the authority and influence policy-making (Hearty 2017). Counter-memory can also generate power to challenge the authoritarian perspective of history and the censorship of media (Assmann 2008), although it can also be manipulated by authorities to legitimise their power (Bandlien 2013). Furthermore, counter-memory stands in contrast to the construction of collective memory in many cases, as it emphasises the memory that is repressed, marginalized, and forgotten, seemingly positioned on the opposite side of the idea of "collective" (Land 2023).

Geographers, anthropologists and sociologists have recognised the interplay between memory and place in various contexts, including city space (Crang and Travlou 2001), human rights movement (Dwyer 2000), heritage tourism (Dwyer 2000; Hanna et al. 2006), and construction of national identity (Till 2003). As a practice of remembering, counter-memory is also enacted in a certain moment and location, involving actors to deliver the performance. As proposed by Maurice Halbwachs (1992), the concept of "collective memory" can only be comprehended by referring to the notion of "social frames." Collective memory

must be a product of communication and interaction within a specific social, cultural, or political framework (Mills 2006; Winter 2016; Tang 2021).

Legg (2005, 181) suggests that the site of counter-memory can shed light on the moments and places that individuals refuse to forget and "rebut the memory schema of a dominant class, caste, race, or nation, providing an alternative form of remembering and identity." Counter-memory serves as a method to illuminate the power dynamics of memory politics within a spatial context. By paying attention to a specific site, we can observe "small motivations and chance encounters behind this place of contestation" (Legg 2005, 196). Therefore, the exploration of the site of counter-memory can visualise the process of resistance and allow us to understand memory marking within a particular sociocultural context. In a similar vein, Land (2023) posits that collective memory and counter-memory are mutually dependent concepts that reflect different aspects of the contested urban space.

The examination of spatial practice of counter-remembering, as well as its interplay with collective memory, can provide a deeper understanding of public engagement in the construction of collective commemoration. It illuminates the politics of remembrance, including production and reception; inclusion and exclusion; promotion and rejection of memories from a spatial perspective. It reveals the trace of power in the selection of memories through its spatial management and unveils the diversity of memory narratives within society. It provides a lens for illuminating the dynamics in various dimensions of commemoration by demonstrating the power negotiation between actors actively involved in reshaping the memory network.

The concept of the site of counter-memory offers valuable insights into the analysis of memory politics surrounding KWC Park. Located at the heart of Kowloon City district, southern Kowloon Peninsula, KWC Park serves as a memorial dedicated to KWC, a vanished urban slum from the post-war colonial era. The construction of this memorial park at the same location aimed to erase, cover, and replace the social memory associated with this notorious slum. The KWC Park was initially staged by the colonial government as a symbolic space projecting a positive image of the new era and was subsequently restaged by the Chinese Hong Kong government as a site of collective memory aligned with the urban redevelopment plan. Despite the design and management by the government and institutions, the park provides a platform for society to discover and rethink the local history. Visitors could critically challenge existing narratives and develop their own interpretations of the past. KWC Park not only serves as a venue for presenting the authorised discourse but also as a site of counter-memory, visualising the tension of different remembrances in post-colonial Hong Kong.

Demolition of KWC and Construction of Memorial Park

The earliest history of KWC can be traced back to a military outpost established during the Song dynasty (960–1279) for managing the production and trade of salt along the southern coast. In the second half of the 19th century, KWC, located at the edge of Kowloon territory, served as a fort monitoring the frontier between the Qing and British Hong Kong.

Following the Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory in 1898, despite being exempted from cession, KWC lost its military function and became a Chinese enclave within a British colony (Sinn 1987; Lu 2018)¹. Along with the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the incapacity of the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China to govern KWC, and the fact that Britain technically held no jurisdiction over the territory, KWC became an anarchic city.

In post-war Hong Kong, KWC was widely recognised as a lawless slum or a city of "Saamibatigun"² (三不管, Cantonese for "non-governed by three sides"), which indicates the absence of effective control from the British, Chinese, and Hong Kong governments. The rapid and massive construction of high-rise buildings in the KWC area commenced around the mid-1960s and responded to the escalating housing demand of the time. While the entire Kowloon City and Wong Tai Sin areas were replete with squatter huts, KWC remained as one of the most accessible and affordable settlements of this region. Apart from its architectural style, what made KWC distinct from the surrounding area was its ambiguous sovereignty. It provided a grey zone for gangsters, prostitutes, drug addicts, unlicensed doctors, family factories, and numerous illegal businesses to flourish inside. As the businesses inside were not regulated by the government, they needed not pay taxes and adhere to legal regulations, such as hygiene and safety standards. For the colonial government, KWC was a persistent social and political problem that they consistently sought to address.

Along with the advent of Handover (the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China), KWC became the final political impediment that needed to be overcome. On January 14th, 1987, 25 months after the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, a clearance plan for the KWC was announced under the agreement between Britain and China. A total compensation of HKD 2.7 billion was distributed to residents, with some opting for the offer of public housing instead. The city was known for its high population density, with an estimated 50,000 residents during the peak time, despite the absence of official records. According to the freezing survey in 1987, it was discovered that approximately 33,000 residents were residing within the KWC, still making it the densest settlement in the world². The demolition of the KWC started on March 23rd, 1993 and was completed in April 1994. Following the demolition, the construction of the memorial park commenced and was completed in 1995 (Jones 2011; Lai and Chua 2018).

The construction of KWC Park was a symbolic gesture aimed at repressing the dark memory in terms of its social issues, political problems, and colonial history. It also represented Hong Kong's transition towards a new era as a city of China. In contrast to the Lingnan style, which is relatively rooted in local culture, the garden adopted the Jiangnan style, a general stereotype of Chinese gardens (Padua 2007). This plan was

1 The wall of KWC has been torn down by the military force of Imperial Japan during the occupation period in WWII.

2 Chan, Wilfred. 2015. "Kowloon Walled City: In Hong Kong, It was the Densest Place on Earth." *CNN*, January 2, 2015. <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/kowloon-walled-city/index.html> (Accessed May 28, 2024).

affected by an unexpected archaeological discovery of two stone plaques, which led to an increase in the project's cost from HKD 59 million to approximately HKD 61 million³. The additional expense was seemingly worth it, as the park received a diploma at the 5th International Horticulture Exhibition Expo, an event held only once a decade⁴. During the opening ceremony on December 22nd, 1995, Chris Patten, the last governor of Hong Kong, commended the park's transformation "from a black spot to a beauty spot that all can treasure" and "an oasis of leisure" in the urban Kowloon, which can inspire the restoration of other historical sites⁵. Patten's speech reflected a sense of relief that Hong Kong had finally overcome the KWC's notoriety for being an enclave, slum, and crime city. It is time to move on to the post-colonial era.

The primary objective of KWC Park was to provide a leisure space in the urban area that can serve as an educational platform for visitors to learn about Chinese culture and history (Harter 2000). Entering the main entrance of KWC Park (Figure 1), besides an old wall and an iron cannon, visitors immediately see the restored Yamen (administrative office) and the remnants of the south gate. Remnants of the South Gate⁶ and the Former Yamen Building⁷ were registered as declared monuments in Hong Kong in 1996. Notably, two granite plaques bearing the Chinese characters for "South Gate" and "Kowloon Walled City" were unearthed at the original South Gate⁸. The unexpected discovery of these plaques deviated from the original construction plan. Plaques were placed in the open area without undergoing proper restoration by the Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO). A representative from the Architectural Services Department (ArchSD) recounted that "The AMO said that the plaque was not important and that it was cracked when it was dismantled. When the experts were repairing the documents of authorisation, papers, and inscriptions of conferences, we borrowed some glue from them to patch them up [.....] We put it somewhere on the ground. It's not as beautiful as the others hanging on the wall" (Hong Kong Architecture Centre 2015, 95). While these two plaques were not part of the original plan, their association with the Qing dynasty allowed them to stay.

In contrast to monuments reflecting the early history, the iconic high-rise buildings were not considered worthy of preservation. KWC Park was designed as a historical site

3 Chin, Michelle. 1995. "Walled City Garden Nears Completion." *South China Morning Post*, August 8, 1995.

4 SCMP Repoter. 1994. "Walled City Park Project Wins Top Award." *South China Morning Post*, January 12, 1994. <https://www.scmp.com/article/58879/walled-city-park-project-wins-top-award>.

5 Flint, John. 1995. "Walled City's Transformation Sparks Hope for Other Sites." *South China Morning Post*, December 23, 1995.

6 Antiquities and Monuments Office. 2024. *Remnants of the South Gate*. Antiquities and Monuments Office. https://www.amo.gov.hk/en/historic-buildings/monuments/kowloon/monuments_62/index.html (Accessed May 31).

7 Antiquities and Monuments Office. *Former Yamen Building*. Antiquities and Monuments Office. https://www.amo.gov.hk/en/historic-buildings/monuments/kowloon/monuments_63/index.html (Accessed May 31, 2024).

8 The Chinese title of the park is named after the inscription on the plaque from the Qing dynasty, Gau2 Lung4 Sing4 Zaa16 (Kowloon Fort City), but not its name known in post-war Hong Kong, Gau2 Lung4 Zaa16 Sing4 (Kowloon City Fort).

of Qing China and a leisure facility, rather than serving as a memorial to the slum in the post-war period that most of the Hongkongers perceived. The post-war history of KWC is not conducive to the take-off of a new Hong Kong, and therefore, it is excluded from the memorial park. The actual purpose of building the park is to visually suppress the memory of the post-war era through the construction of a Chinese garden. Pattern stated explicitly in the opening ceremony: "This wonderful park not only beautifies the present and showcases the past but also symbolises the future aspirations of our city."⁹ The message is very clear: for the sake of Hong Kong's development, we wish to silence any discussion of this slum.

Figure 1. *The Front Entrance of Kowloon Walled City Park*
Source: Photograph by author in 2025.



Re-staging History in KWC Park since the 2000s

Following the Handover, the image of KWC underwent a gradual transformation from a notorious slum into a significant part of Hong Kong's history and culture, particularly about the lives of the grassroots community. The re-inclusion of KWC into official history coincided with the growing interest in local history and culture among the society. The public recognised the importance of collective memory in shaping social identity and actively advocated for the preservation of historical sites from demolition. In 2004, the government released the inaugural list of intangible cultural heritage, which included many ordinary objects, such as egg tart and rice dumping¹⁰. These grassroots memories, which had often been overlooked, became pivotal in the construction of community bonding (Chu 2007).

9 Ming Pao Daily. 1995. "Kowloon Walled City Park opens, Governor calls for forward-looking approach." (九龍城寨公園開幕 港督籲向前看) . December 23, 1995.

10 Intangible Cultural Heritage Office. "Intangible Cultural Heritage, Inventory of Hong Kong." https://www.icho.hk/en/web/icho/ich_inventory_of_hong_kong.html (Accessed February 24, 2025).

In the mid-2000s, a series of reconstructions took place in KWC Park, despite some of these having little to do with the historical introductions, such as a series of corrections of Chinese poetry inscriptions. In 2002, the Leisure and Cultural Service Department (LCSD), the responsible agency of KWC Park, established a counselling committee for the Chinese language, which included Chinese literature scholars from four local universities, to provide advice for the use of Chinese poetry in 18 facilities managed by LCSD. The rhythm and format of 14 pieces of poetry in KWC Park were considered problematic and were either replaced or removed in 2004¹¹. Together with these revisions, description texts and exhibits about the post-war KWC were replaced¹². This is evident from the new content, as the publication dates of many references are during or after the construction of the park. A historical introduction and a sectional illustration of the building structure were placed at the entrance. Texts and images in the exhibition halls were also renewed.

In the renewed park, KWC is portrayed as a site of collective memories and nostalgia, albeit with a mixed attitude. The panels of the historical introduction "City of Thousand Faces" located in the Yamen building generalise the lifestyle of KWC as a part of generational memory in old Hong Kong: "The Kowloon Walled City is not merely a story of extraordinary history; it represents the collective memories of the previous generations of the people of Hong Kong. They once lived and worked here. Not only did they earn themselves a living, but they also contributed to the economic development of Hong Kong..." KWC is no longer viewed as a dark side of Hong Kong history that should be forgotten but rather as a representation of the lifestyle of grassroots society, which is now respected as "a story of extraordinary history." KWC now occupies a significant position within the generational memory of the entire Hong Kong, while its former residents, rather than a group of outcasts, are now recognised as contributors to the economic development in the post-war era.

However, the approach towards the history of post-war KWC is inconsistent. The official introduction to the KWC, written by Kwan-Yiu Wong, a Chinese literature scholar from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, is inscribed on a newly placed tablet at the entrance. The introduction primarily focuses on the early time of KWC, while the post-war history is merely mentioned in a few sentences regarding the dramatic growth of population and the demolition: "After the war, the number of residents increased. It became known as the Kowloon Walled City, occupying 29,000 square metres and housing 33,000 people. In early 1987, the British Hong Kong authorities obtained the consent of the Chinese government to announce the demolition of the Kowloon Walled City, and the demolition of the Walled

11 Nicholas Chan, a Chinese literature scholar from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, reviewed the history of this project and explained the corrections in detail. See: Chan, Nicholas Louis. 2023. "A Newly Engraved Poetic Couplet in Kowloon Walled City Park has been Badly Criticised by Four Experts as being Out of Order?" 寨城公園新鐫詩詞聯語 慘遭四大專家評為失格? *Master-Insight*, April 20, 2023. <https://www.master-insight.com/article/28944> (Accessed May 30, 2024).

12 Regarding the time and details of the replacement of exhibits, the park manager answered me that they kept no record for it but might not be within these 10 years, according to her memory.

13 Originally in Chinese, translated by author.

City was completed in 1994.¹³ The post-war period of KWC is considered a secondary aspect of its overall history, overshadowed by its thousand-year history and the archaeological findings from the Qing dynasty.

Furthermore, there is indeed a practical reason for the re-inclusion: endorsing the urban redevelopment plan for the Kowloon City district (Figure 2). In 2011, the Hong Kong government declared a revision of the Urban Renewal Strategy, a district redevelopment plan that emphasises the importance of urban rejuvenation "by way of redevelopment, rehabilitation, revitalisation, and heritage preservation."¹⁴ Kowloon City, one of the oldest districts in Hong Kong, is at the forefront of the plan. To mitigate resistance to the redevelopment, the government leveraged local history and culture to legitimize the necessity and inevitability of changes in the local landscape. In 2018, a local history project titled "Kowloon City in Transformation: The Kowloon City Themed Walking Trail" was launched to rejuvenate the local culture by connecting various historical sites and buildings within the district. The project was funded by the Urban Renewal Fund and managed by the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui (Anglican Church). Apart from the walking trail, the project engaged the public through various events, guided tours, and the publication of newsletters and books.

Figure 2. *Street View in the Kowloon City District. The Residence Building under Construction (back) and the Old Buildings Pending to be Acquired (front).*
Source: Photograph by author in 2025.



¹⁴ KDevelopment Bureau. 2011. *Urban Renewal Strategy*. https://www.devb.gov.hk/filemanager/en/Content_3/URS_eng_2011.pdf.

KWC serves as the inaugural route (Walled City Historical Walk) of the entire walking trail highlighting its significance as the genesis of local history and culture. On the one hand, its pre-modern history establishes a historical connection between Hong Kong and China dating back to ancient times. On the other hand, its contemporary history, marked by the construction of illegal buildings, demolition, and subsequent redevelopment into an urban park, demonstrates the changes of the local landscape over time. In the 15th issue of the monthly newsletter, the cover story "The Legend of Kowloon Walled City" portrays KWC as a metaphor for redevelopment: "The seemingly unplanned buildings demonstrated the utilization of limited land." The tiny yet refined living space provided shelter to the lower class, which was a good entry point for understanding the lifestyle in the past. The post-demolition planning and conservation policy has left a footnote for the future development of Kowloon City¹⁵. Therefore, the history of KWC and the memorial park is read as an allegory to reinforce the narrative of urban development by creating the illusion that "nothing permanent except for change."

To incorporate KWC Park into the walking trail, Kowloon City in Transformation also influenced the setting of the park. A sub-project titled "Sound Stories: Immersion in Old Kowloon Walled City" promoted KWC as a site of collective nostalgia through exhibitions and in-situ installations. The content was based on 10 life stories collected from former residents of KWC. One can listen to the voice acting of these stories on a smartphone application by interacting with panels surrounding the park. These stories address the similarities between the life inside and the general society of Hong Kong during that time. The storytelling often begins with the older generation sharing their life experiences with the children. The close connection of the community is generalised as a collective memory for not only the former residents but the entire generation who lived in that era. "Sound Stories" aims to demonstrate that the value of KWC extends beyond the sense of nostalgia among former residents and can serve as a cultural heritage for all generations.

According to a staff from the information centre, event participants are typically from other districts, as she stated, "Local residents might be too busy to work. Most of those living here are from the grassroots. Culture and history are not their things." This reflected that the targeted participants of the project are indeed people from all over Hong Kong. In this sense, KWC is redesignated as a site of collective memory for the entire Hong Kong, which encapsulates the social development in post-war Hong Kong and the transformation of the urban landscape over the past several centuries.

Rediscovering the Oblivion

It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that remembering is a form of forgetting. Said (2000, 185) addresses collective memory as a "field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning." From

15 Kowloon City in Transformation: The Kowloon City Themed Walking Trail. 2022. *Newsletter*. Issue 15, pp7. <https://kowlooncitywalkingtrail.hk/en/media/details/kowloon-city-themed-walking-trail-newsletter-issue-15/> (Accessed May 30, 2024).

the constructive perspective, authorities can leverage collective memory to shape national identity and invent traditions in mass societies "by manipulating certain bits of the national past, suppressing others, elevating still others in an entirely functional way" (Said 2000, 179). However, drawing upon the concept of counter-memory, Assmann (2008, 70) argues that historians can illuminate "forgotten episodes and shameful moments" in history and collective memories, thereby facilitating critical self-reflection for the nation and society. In other words, collective memories inevitably involve practices of omission, exclusion, and rejection. Nevertheless, acknowledging neglected pasts enables us to challenge prevailing narratives and reconfigure social relations from a transcultural perspective.

The colonial government had no intention of preserving anything related to KWC. The only purpose of the clearance was to eliminate it from Hong Kong. The original design of KWC Park did not intend to showcase its post-war memory as a lawless slum, but rather to suppress it and emphasise the pre-modern history of the Chinese fort. Only relics from the Qing dynasty have been retained as antiquities for educational purposes. These remnants of the fort can even symbolise the history of resistance against British colonisation. Padua (2007, 236) argues that KWC Park serves as a tool to remind Hong Kong people of their historical association with China and "affirm their identities as bearers of Chinese culture." In contrast to the fort remnants from the Qing dynasty, which are considered Chinese heritages that deserve to be preserved, the chaotic slum buildings that reflect no "Chineseness" but rather the dark side of society during that era are deemed unnecessary and have been excluded from the overall presentation of the park.

Figure 3. *Street View in the Kowloon City District. Thai Groceries and Restaurants on the Main Street.*
Source: Photograph by author in 2025.



Despite the renewal of KWC Park in the 2000s revealing an attempt to reinclude the post-war history of the area, this inclusion is also a result of selection. The local memory is redefined by de-emphasizing the non-Chinese memory and neglecting the diversity of

the community. Kowloon City District, like Hong Kong itself, is not a pure Chinese town and houses a significant population of Chiuchow and Thai (Figure 3). Ann Bang On Leung, a Thai woman who married a Hongkonger in 1980, recounts that when she worked as a tour guide for Thai visitors at the time, she got to know many Thai shop owners in KWC and eventually opened a Thai grocery store with her sisters, who also moved to Hong Kong and married a local man¹⁶. Leung's experience reflects the deep connection of the Thai community with KWC. They have resided in the Kowloon City district for over half a century and have made significant contributions to the local economy. Nevertheless, they are frequently excluded from the narrative of KWC's history and even the development plan implemented in recent years. The Thai community was never consulted during the local consultation process and remained unaware of the local redevelopment until the freezing survey was conducted in the area¹⁷. Regarding the neglect of ethnic minorities, the spokesman of the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) claimed that they did not recognise the existence of the Thai community in the district¹⁸. The existence of non-Chinese communities challenges the discourse of Chinese heritage and the narrative of urban redevelopment.

Figure 4. The cross-sectional illustration and bronze model are displayed at the entrance of Kowloon Walled City Park.

Source: Photograph by author in 2023.



- 16 Tsui, Stephanie. 2019. "I can't eat spicy anymore: Hong Kong's Thai community look back at five decades in the city." *South China Morning Post*. Published May 4, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com.ezproxy.eduhk.hk/news/hong-kong/society/article/3008776/i-cant-eat-spicy-anymore-hong-kongs-thai-community-look-back>.
- 17 Choi, Martin and Shirley Zhao. 2019. "In Hong Kong's 'Little Thailand' of Kowloon City, redevelopment brings fears for community." *South China Morning Post*. March 24, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3003042/hong-kongs-little-thailand-kowloon-city-redevelopment-brings>.
- 18 Lee, Wai Kwan. 2019 "Kowloon City - Redevelopment - Fear of Disappearance of Little Bangkok - The Urban Renewal Authority's words broke the hearts of Thai residents." 九龍城 - 重建 - 小曼谷恐消逝 - 市建局落區一句話傷盡泰國居民心 HK 01. Published April 11, 2019. <https://www.hk01.com/%E7%A4%BE%E5%8D%80%E5%Bo%88%E9%A1%8C/316484/%E4%B9%9D%E9%BE%8D%E5%9F%8E-%E9%87%8D%E5%BB%BA-%E5%Bo%8F%E6%9B%BC%E8%Bo%B7%E6%81%90%E6%B6%88%E9%80%9D-%E5%B8%82%E5%BB%BA%E5%B1%80%E8%90%BD%E5%8D%80%E4%B8%80%E5%8F%A5%E8%A9%B1%E5%82%B7%E7%9B%A1%E6%B3%Bo%E5%9C%8B%E5%B1%85%E6%Bo%91%E5%BF%83>.

The making of Chinese heritage is also done by undermining global memories. In contrast to the absence of local records, numerous foreign media have preserved textual and visual information about KWC. The renewed KWC Park reluctantly but inevitably draws upon these foreign materials. At the entrance, there is a sectional illustration of the building structure and a bronze model of KWC (Figure 4). These are based on the research outcome of a group of Japanese architects who investigated the city right before the demolition. They published their findings as a photo-book, *Grand Panorama of the Kowloon Walled City*, in 1997. However, a subtle difference exists between the English and Chinese captions. The English caption states, "Following the clearance of the Kowloon Walled City by Hong Kong Government in 1992, a Japanese research team surveyed and measured apartments in the City. This cross-section drawn up by the research team gives us an insight into daily life in the Walled City." Conversely, in the Chinese version, although the major content is essentially the same, the expression differs, as it states, "After the Hong Kong Government completed the clearance in 1992, they **arranged** a Japanese research team to survey and measure apartments in the City" (emphasis added). Although the illustrator, Hitomi Terasawa, is credited in a relatively small font at the bottom corner, the book *Grand Panorama of the Kowloon Walled City* itself is not introduced. Their efforts are also downplayed as an arrangement by the Hong Kong government.

Additionally, photographs from *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City* (1993), a photo-book that features detailed interviews with residents in KWC, are extensively used in the exhibition within the park. This book is considered a sole record of lives within KWC, yet the contributions of its authors, Lan Lambot and Greg Girard, remain unacknowledged. Ryuji Miyamoto, a Japanese photographer who published a photo-book of KWC in 1988, told me that the park used his works without notification¹⁹. In response to this matter, an officer from the park administration office claimed that the visual materials featured in the exhibition were outsourced to a third-party studio, thereby they were not involved in the production process. If this is indeed the case, the downplaying of global memories may not be a plan but rather an unintentional consequence. Once the visual materials align with the narrative the authority seeks to convey, the sources are unconcerned.

Among the Hongkongese informants I interviewed, all of them are aware of the existence of KWC Park. Some simply perceive it as a leisure park within the Kowloon City district. For instance, W38, a former resident who does not consider KWC a place with historical or cultural significance, views the park as a beautiful garden to visit with her grandchildren. Conversely, many informants criticise the limited information provided about the post-war period in the park. W5, who lived in KWC during the time of kindergarten, advocates for the preservation of at least a portion of the buildings as an exhibit for an on-site museum. For W5, KWC Park has nearly no connection to KWC except for its location. In another case, W35 and W36, the father who has lived in KWC for approximately 30 years and the son born after the demolition, criticise the lack of information and exhibits about the post-war period, which they believe is

19 Interview with Ryuji Miyamoto on December 5, 2022.

the most captivating part of KWC's history. W36 proposes that the park should have been redeveloped into a museum showcasing the building structure and the lives of its residents. W36 also recognizes the photo-book *City of Darkness* as a valuable resource for learning about his family history, yet he expresses his regret that, compared to the local community, foreigners have shown greater interest in the history of Hong Kong.

As the resistance to cultural disappearance has long been regarded as a method of constructing the local sense in Hong Kong (Abbas 1997; Chu 2007), rediscovering the suppressed memories of a vanished slum is also a means of remapping the relationship between everyday life and the past. KWC Park stands as a tangible manifestation of cultural disappearance, prompting W5 and W36 to confront the loss and oblivion in the history of Hong Kong. For W5, the physical disappearance of KWC and the absence of local records ignited her interest in heritage, ultimately becoming a driving force behind her pursuit of a master's degree in history and culture. The recognition of neglected history and records preserved by foreigners cultivated W36's interest in learning about the local past, fostering communication with W35 regarding their family history.

Performance of Counter-Memory

Despite the stage being set, the actors are not obligated to follow to the script completely. I have talked with administrative staff and conducted interviews with two informants (W18 and W19) in the park. Through site observation and interviews, I find that the park provides a space for visitors to rediscover the forgotten past and challenge the discourse constructed by the government and institutions. However, the dialogue between the development of interpretations and the authorities reveals that collective memory and counter-memory are interrelated processes of memory-making, which can facilitate public reflection on their everyday lives and the urban space. This, in turn, enables the authorities to acknowledge the existence of contested memories within society.

W18 is an example of the performance of counter-remembering and its re-integration into collective memory. W18, a former technician at the Hong Kong Telephone Company, was involved in the telephone installation project at Kowloon Water Corporation (KWC)²⁰. In 1979, he purchased a property in KWC and has lived there with his family for six years. Despite KWC being the most affordable settlement in the urban area, he decided to relocate to a more suitable place for their daughter's upbringing. W18 finds the introduction of KWC in the park inadequate. The entire building structure has been demolished, while the small exhibition in Yamen offers only limited information about the lives inside. He expresses particular dissatisfaction with the chronological disorganisation of the arrangement, where "new and old things are mixed together." W18 believes that visitors may encounter difficulties in learning the original cityscape from such a Jiangnan garden. He advocates for the preservation of a part of the buildings to showcase the unique structure, which he asserts is the thing that most visitors want to see. Today, W18 actively shares his personal experiences

20 Hong Kong Telephone Company held a franchised license of fixed-line telephone until the 1990s in Hong Kong.

by delivering talks and leading tours about KWC (including events organised by Kowloon City in Transformation). His motivation stems from an encounter with a school trip at KWC Park. A teacher introduced a group of junior students to the history of KWC and made a derogatory remark, claiming that "those living inside were criminals." A student asked W18 whether he was a "bad guy", simply because he sat nearby in the park. This experience had an impact on W18, inspiring him to "correct the misconception surrounding KWC."

Among the Hongkongers I have talked with, the one most actively engaging in the memory-making of KWC is W19. Despite the fact that W19 only visited KWC several times, he regularly visit the park since his retirement in 1999, offering free but unofficial "private guided tours" and promoting his paper-tearing art. The tour languages include Cantonese, Mandarin Chinese, and English, depending on the majority of the audience. The tour provides a comprehensive overview of KWC, spanning from the military fort in the Qing dynasty to the lawless slum in the late 20th century.

During the tour, W19 reiterated his desire to rectify the errors and misunderstandings created by the government and experts. He criticises the park management and the quality of conversations. He vehemently opposes the replacement of Chinese poetry, asserting that it is merely "a meddlesome work by arrogant experts." Showing me pictures of the previous installations that he posted on social media and the comments below, W19 contends that many people agree with him. He also condemns the inaccurate restoration of Yamen, which misrepresents the history, and the sedan chair positioned in front of Yamen, which is irrelevant to KWC. I asked W19 how he obtained the "correct knowledge" about KWC. He claimed that he learned from "multiple sources that state the truth".

W19 also drew attention to the "second life" of KWC that flourished after its demolition (Fraser and Li 2017). He highlighted cultural recreations of KWC in global media, such as the Japanese animated film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and the Hollywood live-action film (2017), as well as *Batman Begins* (2005), while all of these are absent from the park. Therefore, the KWC Park that he presented is a living site of memory, a place where local history meets the global culture. The KWC did not vanish but continues to survive in the global media. The park transcends the recollections of old generations and ancient history, connecting to the contemporary cultural experience and even global memories.

Although the reliability of W19's tour is debatable, it demonstrates that the stage setting of KWC Park is not impregnable. The unofficial tour of W19 acts as a performance of counter-memory, challenging the authorised discourse and fostering an alternative interpretation of the past. W19 always attracts a larger number of tourists compared to the official guided tour organised by the park. Perhaps it is because W19 often remains in the park for an entire day and starts his tour whenever a certain number of visitors gather around. It may also be attributed to the use of a portable speaker, which inadvertently mislead some visitors regarding the nature of the tour. As a historical park and a heritage site, KWC Park is a relatively well-known tourist attraction. Many tour groups from local Hong Kong and mainland China visit the park, particularly during the weekend, and these tourists usually join W19's tour. Interestingly, I have observed that some tourist guides greeted W19 and appreciated his service, revealing the collaborative relationship between

W19 and local tourism. On the other hand, W19's contributions are not always welcomed. A professor who teaches courses on Hong Kong history and culture at a local university informed me that he occasionally conducts study trips to KWC Park. As W19 actively tells visitors his version of the story, the professor needs to "distract" W19 to allow students to study the park.

In contrast to W19's tour, fewer people joined the official tour organised by the park. According to the schedule, only four sessions per day are open to the public during the weekend and public holidays. The two sessions on weekdays are exclusive for groups and schools with reservations. Additionally, unlike W19's trilingual introduction, the official tour is only available in Cantonese. Tour guides are freelance workers who have received training from LCSD and AMO. These tour guides usually report to multiple facilities in various districts, making KWC Park merely one of their job locations. Based on my participation experience, the official tour strictly adheres to the official narrative and schedule. I have inquired staff from the park office about W19's unofficial tour. They responded that they have no intention of halting what W19 has been doing as long as he does not disturb other visitors in the park, but they have no comment on the content of W19's tour. The bureaucracy leads to a negative (non-active at least) approach to the promotion of the official narrative. Consequently, the park has been transformed into a site of counter-memory that creates room for the development of alternative interpretations of the past.

The performance of the counter-remembering and the staging of the authorised narrative are mutually dependent. While the counter-memory could be utilised to endorse the authorised narrative, the public could also express their memories through official channels. The monthly newsletters issued by Kowloon City in Transformation constantly introduce personal stories related to specific sites in the district and individuals actively engaged in the local culture. KWC is one of the highlights, particularly in the 15th issue Legend of Kowloon Walled City. The deep connection between the Kowloon City district and the Chiuchow and Thai communities is illustrated in their events and newsletters (such as the 17th issue "The Chiuchow and Thai Culture"). The 20th issue of newsletter describes W19 as a "tour Uncle Man, whose history-telling and paper-tearing art-making skills identify him as one of the park's cultural attractions too" (7). Apart from Kowloon City in Transformation, W19 has been reported and interviewed by many online media. Similar to W18's sharing of living memory, W19's unofficial tour does not act as a complete confrontation with the authorised discourse but rather functions as an agency in the process of memory-making and networking. It collaborates with other local organisations and institutions to rework the collective memory.

Conclusion

This essay employs Foucault's notion "counter-memory" from a spatial perspective to analyse the memory politics over KWC Park. I demonstrate that KWC park is made to be a counter-memory site in Hong Kong, visualising the tension between the enactment of cultural policies, spatial planning by authorities, and public engagement in memory-making

surrounding the KWC. The park was established by the colonial government to suppress the dark history of lawless slum and was subsequently restaged as a Chinese heritage site for the entire Hong Kong. Despite the lack of information about post-war history, the park sparked critical reflections on history, ultimately motivating Hongkongers to challenge the existing narrative, rediscover the forgotten past, and develop alternative interpretations of it. While counter-memories of the local community have flourished in the grey zone of official history, institutions have also incorporated marginal memories to reinforce their narratives, ultimately enabling minor voices to join the constructive process of collective remembering. Eventually, KWC Park functions as a living space of memory politics that facilitates the encounter, confrontation, and cooperation of diverse narratives.

Despite the nature of "countering," the performance of counter-remembering and the construction of collective memory are not necessarily mutually exclusive or antithetical to each other. They are rather two facets of the same coin of social remembering, co-dependent yet constantly in conflict (Land 2023). The case shows how counter-memory serves as a vehicle of knowledge, unveiling the neglected memories, encouraging people to learn about the past, and inviting the authorities to recognise the marginal voices. The institutionalisation of counter-memory can be attributed to the shifting of political environment and the collective interest in the social consensus (Dwyer 2000). In this sense, a site of counter-memory, according to the essence of Foucault's concept, functions a place where history turns into knowledge for both the society and authorities, despite a long-term observation on the interplay between the process of policy making and the acknowledgement of marginal memories is needed. The recognition and utilization of suppressed voices could be another round of memory selection and management.

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