FASHION, AFFECT, AND POETRY
IN A GLOBAL CITY

Winnie L. M. YEE
University of Hong Kong

ABSTRACT: Everyday life is a central theme of Hong Kong poetry. Many Hong Kong poets use the quotidian as a starting point for the exploration of history and alternative imaginings. This mundane focus, unlike the colonial dreamscape of Hong Kong as an economic miracle, allows writers to reflect upon Hong Kong as a post-colonial and global space. The Hong Kong writer Natalia Chan examines the complex nature of everyday life within the space of the global and post-colonial city. Chan’s poems deal with the essence of everydayness and use commodities to conjure up the vivacity of the urbanscape of Hong Kong. Unlike the political and economic discourse that is usually used to define Hong Kong, Chan’s work portrays Hong Kong as a city that offers the possibility of daily re-creation against the background of history. In this article, we will examine Chan’s use of the circulation of commodities in the global world and explore the way fashion becomes a point where high and popular culture, private and public domains, and local and global interests clash, negotiate, and fertilize each other. Chan’s works do not conform to the economic and prosperity discourse that has repressed Hong Kong; rather, she guides her readers to re-experience the everydayness of routines, to celebrate alternate ways of understanding the urbanscape, and to open themselves to the potentialities of art and the everyday.

Introduction

Everyday life is a central theme of Hong Kong poetry. Many Hong Kong poets use the quotidian as a starting point for the exploration of history and alternative imaginings. Since the 1970s, Hong Kong writers
have explored the specificities of local culture by looking at an ordinary
day. This mundane focus, unlike the colonial dreamscape of Hong Kong
as an economic miracle, allows writers to reflect upon Hong Kong as a
post-colonial and global city.

This idea of everyday life, however, is written against a backdrop of
danger and anxiety. Since the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declara-
tion between Britain and the People’s Republic of China (hereafter PRC),
Hong Kong has remained under the cloud of a generalized anxiety,
caught in a perpetual act of ending (its official colonial history), transition
(from former colony to Special Administrative Region), and return (to the
motherland). The development of Hong Kong from a fishing village to a
modern city has rendered it a unique space that cannot be easily subsumed
in the national discourse (Chan 1995, 3). Though Hong Kong is often
marginalized and its culture dismissed, its unique situation has been cher-
ished by many well-established poets such as Ping-kwan Leung (梁乘鈞),
Yip Fai (葉輝), and Natalia Siu-hung Chan (陳少紅). They recuperate the
space of everyday life to illuminate Hong Kong’s unusual culture and its
complex relationship with both Chinese and Western culture.

The space of everyday life, to these poets, is double-coded. Its rou-
tines have become an “historical optic” through which the larger history
can be registered. In the case of Hong Kong, this historical optic allows
us to understand the city apart from its metropolitan outlook and de-
velopmental grand narrative, and to see how memories, emotions, and
locales are interwoven and shaped by history. Reciprocally, the poetics of
everyday life urge a transvaluation where reality can be critiqued and its
values judged.

The Hong Kong writer Natalia Chan, better known by her pen names
Luo Feng and Lok Fung (洛楓), explores the dislocations caused by bor-
der-crossing, colonialism, globalization, and disruptive socio-political
changes. Chan examines the complex nature of everyday life within the
space of the global and post-colonial city. To date, she has published three
volumes of poetry, Distance (距離1988), Missed Encounter (錯失1997),
and the award-winning The Flying Coffin (飛天棺材2007). As winner of
the prestigious Biannual Hong Kong Literary Prize in 2007, The Flying
Coffin has attracted a great deal of critical attention in the local literary
community. Scholars and critics observe that Chan is able to navigate
freely between the classic and the popular and between logic and emotion to establish her own unique poetic style. *The Flying Coffin* consists of five sections: “Romantic Network,” “Deconstructing Romance,” “A Skier’s Discourse,” “City: Life and Death,” and “California Dreaming.” The 52 poems, written over the course of more than a decade, explore the nature of love and gender in the context of everyday life. With a remarkable sense of humour and keen observation, she “translates” the mundane quality of everyday life into vivid alternative images. By breaking down the dichotomies between high and popular culture, male and female perspectives, the private and the public, and the local and the global, she presents the various competing voices of women immersed in the tensions of everyday life. Chan encourages the reader to use everyday occurrences as a means of reflecting on the pressing problems of Hong Kong and other global cities.

The quotidian in *Flying Coffin* is framed by historical moments, the moments often understood to be the critical moments in Hong Kong’s history between 1997 and 2003. For most citizens of Hong Kong, these events were critical because of their magnitude, their scope, and their destructiveness. From Hong Kong’s official reunification with the motherland in 1997 to the Asian economic crisis and the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003, the disillusionment of the Hong Kong people has deepened: their high hopes for political independence and economic prosperity have been dashed. These historical events have heightened the self-awareness of Hong Kong citizens: they have been required to examine their identity in a national and global context, and to readjust their expectations for the future. Chan has described Hong Kong as a city “on the edge of time,” even after the 1997 handover. The Hong Kong people have had to find a way of dealing with the effects of globalization and to come to terms with the new relationship with the motherland. They remain at the margins in order “to keep a critical distance, to be indifferent, and avoid being indulged in or obsessed by the illusory glamour of the city” (Chan 2002, 3). Chan refrains from describing critical events directly; rather, she observes the mundane activities that register their impact. To show how Chan reveals the resonance of the everyday, this paper will mainly focus on five poems from *Flying Coffin*, written between 1998 and 2004.
In his analysis of everydayness in Japan, Harootunian reflects on Western modernity and its transvaluation in the Asian context. He maintains that the boredom and routine of a capitalist lifestyle cannot suppress the potential of the everyday. Instead, the materiality of the everyday “was called to stand in as the microcosm for the macrocosmic everyday world” (Harootunian 2000, 89). To Walter Benjamin, the microcosm of the everyday challenges the progressive, repetitive, and linear time that defines modernity. It shows “the everyday world as alienation brought on by routine yet still filled with possibility, the difference in the same” (Harootunian 2000, 107). The everyday could well be the site of “profane illumination.” Chan’s poems similarly focus on material conditions, though she does not take the clichéd view of Hong Kong as the product of economic success. Instead, she sees in the city’s economic activities an encapsulation of its liveliness and its colonial history, which can be transformative. The world of commodities is not necessarily evil and oppressive: it can be perceived as the site where the essence of Hong Kong—its vibrancy and agency—can best be appreciated. Fashion, from this point of view, is the transitory reflection of the material world that is often condemned as perpetuating unfulfilled desire. Chan sees fashion as a phenomenon that links affect, objects, body, and the city, and encourages a larger historical perspective. She not only elevates fashion’s lowly status but also relocates poetry as a means of challenging the grand narrative. In her works, fashion, commodities, and everydayness “serve as a historical optic to widen our understanding of the processes of modernity” (Harootunian 2000, 4).

Chan’s poems deal with the essence of everydayness and use commodities to conjure up the vivacity of the urbanscape of Hong Kong. The commodities depicted in Chan’s works represent much more than mere consumer products. Unlike the political and economic discourse that is usually used to define Hong Kong, Chan’s work portrays Hong Kong as a city that offers the possibility of daily re-creation against the background of history. In the following sections, we will show how Chan’s work deviates from the dominant discourse of Hong Kong story and will examine her use of the circulation of commodities in a global economy. Finally, we will explore the way fashion becomes a point where high and popular culture, private and public domains, and local and global interests clash, negotiate, and cross-fertilize. Chan’s works do not conform to the
economic and prosperity discourse that has repressed Hong Kong; rather, she guides her readers to re-experience the everydayness of routines, to celebrate alternate ways of understanding the urbanscape, and to open themselves to the potentialities of art and the everyday.

*Poetry as Minor Tale: A Gendered Perspective*

What strikes readers of Chan and what distinguishes her from other equally renowned Hong Kong poets such as Ping-kwan Leung or Wai-tong Liu (廖偉棠) who share her concern with the quotidian is her preference for the “minor mode.” “Minor,” in its original musical sense, refers to the interval “less by a semitone than the equivalent major interval” (Oxford Dictionary). “Minor,” in the case of Chan, refers to her intention to refrain from directly portraying major critical events in her poems. Her focus is on the “semitone,” the tone that often evokes sadness and pensiveness. Rather than making judgements on the place where she grew up, her poems challenge fixed ideas and ideologies about the way the urban space of Hong Kong should be understood. Her lack of a grand narrative and her focus on affect and feelings are both suggestive of the minor mode. Minor tales are critical because they are in danger of being overlooked. In Chan’s poems, the persona’s relation to the city is close to that of the flâneur as described by Baudelaire. By dwelling on the routines of the urban residents—their commutes on public transport, their trips to the mall—Chan presents the mundane with a kind of freshness. Like the flâneur’s wanderings, the experiences depicted in her poems must be understood as “part of a politics of strolling which relate these experiences with the cultural apparatus” (Patezold 2000, 216). While Chan shares with her contemporaries an interest in the fresh and new, her personae do not cut themselves off from the past. For Chan, a new and fresh perspective can only be generated from a conscious reflection on Hong Kong’s colonial history and a refusal to accept the dominant discourse. A gendered point of view, one that focuses on the minor, would enable such a nuanced perspective.

Feelings and emotions are often categorized as personal, subjective, and unimportant; their fate is to be marginalized, neglected, and buried.
Minor tales are critical because they escape rationalization and resist categorization. Feelings and sentiments are fragmented and incoherent. The fact that they are not easy to understand or to rationalize is what makes them attractive to Chan. The urban space of Hong Kong similarly cannot be coherently presented or represented, and Chan refuses to impose a coherent pattern. The fragmented feelings in a minor tale accurately represent the condition of Hong Kong. Our neglected feelings and memories must come to the forefront because they provide us with our picture of, and affection for, the city. The five sections of *Flying Coffin* return to the themes of love, relationships, Hong Kong’s future, and the alienated sense of being away from home. Chan presents, in this unique way, the multiple and heterogeneous perspectives that define a city. She looks at the way commodities produced gendered sentiments and reflect the physical existence of Hong Kong’s urbanscape. For example, in “In My Days of Whitening,” the persona refrains from meeting people because of her skin-whitening treatment. At the surface level, skin-whitening products are agents of women’s beautification, yet the poem appropriates them as a means of marking the passage of time:

Because of my passionate love
I am allergic to black spots
This is a kind of relationship
That ages with time
Penetrating further into the inner layer
It cannot be removed with the sea-extracted exfoliating scrub
It is a lifelong memory
That can never be removed

The passionate quest for beauty may represent a stereotypical gendered view, but the poem is about more than the function of commodities. Black spots are used as metaphors for the dark periods of life; the lament for days gone by stresses the contrast between the surface level (both the surface of the skin and the surface level of the poem) and the latent (the consciousness of time passing). People in the city interact with commodities on a daily basis, but for Chan the material satisfaction is less significant than the sentiments the commodity can inspire. Rey Chow
observes that Hong Kong’s accomplishments are often viewed as a sign of “deficiency, degeneracy, abnormality, and hence basic inferiority” (1993) and, therefore, do not provide us with any thoughtful or instructive understanding of the city. The re-enchantment of commodities is celebrated by Chan. Rather than treating them as trivial, gendered, or compensatory, Chan uses the commodities to make a space that symbolizes the city at the present moment.

“Minor” works (those by authors marginalized in their homelands) can have political and collective importance.² The writing of minor tale in the form of poetry is itself political. The decision to use poetry as the platform to unravel the complex relation between the personal and the collective is a challenge to the common discourse, like the challenge offered by the petit récits à la Lyotard to the grand narrative. Chan writes about beauty products in “In My Days of Whitening” and “The Hair-straightening Lover,” about fashion in “Fashioning Passion” and “The Lover, My Clothes,” and about public transit in “The Railway Affectivity.” These ordinary subjects always trigger a more philosophical reflection on the condition of the city. The alternate way of reading Hong Kong defamiliarizes the urbanscape. Chan’s poems are all minor tales that attempt to reveal the complexity of the city and suggest that a gendered perspective has a particular resonance. Patezold’s observes that “[t]he rapidly changing urban scenes require a flexibility and openness with regard to the readings and rereadings of the symbolic meanings embodied in the urban space” (2000, 218-219). Like the flâneur strolling around the markets and historical markers, Chan’s works lead to an awareness of new images and new readings of the contemporary culture. In Chan’s case, poetry serves as a creative space of resistance that plays at the borders between high and low culture and between the sentimental and the political. Such border skirmishes challenge the common sense and the dominant (“major”) view.

The Profane Illumination of Fashion and Affective Bodies

While Deleuze and Guattari discuss the political significance of “minor literature,” Bennett’s examination of “minor tales” focuses on the
enchantment of objects and the attachment to the non-human. Bennett maintains that the disillusionment of the Enlightenment led to a tendency to cut off any affection for the world (2001, 4-5). She calls our attention to the minor tales of the people, the “alter-tale” of the everyday that allows the world to be “re-enchanted.” Chan’s poems reflect this view, but they extend Bennett’s scope to include not only objects but also the urban space and the human body, particularly the female body.

Dress and fashion always have a specific temporal and social place. Entwistle sees dress as “the visible form of our intention” and maintains that the body “is not merely a textual entity produced by discursive practices but is the active and perceptive vehicle of being” (2015, 29). Following this line of thought, fashion and its representation is both a means of attending to one’s body and also an act of actualizing a dialectic between body and self. Chan’s attention to fashion in her poetry highlights the interaction between bodily experience and personal perception.

In “Fashioning Passion,” the range of clothes in the boutique do not simply lure fashionistas to indulge their appetite for novelties but also create a space where the self is formed. The juxtaposition of internal and external space suggests a temporal collage of the cultural condition of Hong Kong, linking the personal with the urban:

This beloved boutique acts as a city in its unsettled climate  
Where one seeks solace in one’s own indulgence

At the outset of the poem, the persona is inside the boutique, but her thoughts transcend its limited space, encompass the larger urban space, and indulge in the sense of hovering in between. The poem zooms from interior to exterior: “The smog buildup/ Casts a veiled vision over Victoria Harbor.” The unclear path of the city (and its future) is symbolized by the smog. Similarly, “The black cat cloaked with a layer of gray dust” is connected to the persona “Wrapped in the checkered scarf.” This shift from inner space to an imagined urbanscape and back to personal feelings conveys the lived experience of consumption. If fashion can reflect a perception of the city, Chan’s poems indicate the indestructible connection between the circulation of commodities and the destiny of the city. The poem continues,
In the nostalgia for trend retro, we realize
No fashion could be outdated

This references to fashion cycles highlights the commodification of our memories. Hong Kong is considered a place of rampant consumerism. Fashion is ever new and ever same. It is exciting and alluring, but it can exert a numbing influence that deadens our initiative to challenge post-colonial conditions. Chan’s poems refuse to conform to or simply recycle a clichéd picture of Hong Kong:

But our act of forgetting only amplifies the awareness
Caught between the dolman sleeve and the A-line skirt
We can only accede that our complexion be, as fated,
Folded, flattened into strips or grids
For clothes are to be worn and
Nowhere else to be

Clothes become not merely commodities that encourage consumption but a reminder of one’s agency in making conscious choices. The intention to create an individual fashion style underscores the conscious mind of the persona. She refuses to be stigmatized as shopaholic, who consumes for the sake of consumption; instead, she uses fashion trends as an emblem of a rejection of forgetting. To remember fashion cycles and individual characteristics can be perceived as an attempt to highlight one’s responsibility not to be numbed by the commodification of the city. Consumers are not necessarily passive. To be aware of differences is a conscious act of an individual agent that combats forgetting. Chan’s poems about fashion allow her to repaint the city, to re-imagine the urbanscape through constant negotiation between the mundane and the creative.

Bennett values the minor because it calls attention to the “magical sites [that are] already here” (2001, 8). Although Bennett does not state clearly what magic these sites possess, her notion blurs the dichotomy of enchantment and disenchantment. The magical sites in Chan’s poetry are the sites of affect, feelings, and emotions that are created by circumstances and that shape the condition of our urban space. While Chan focuses on the mundane aspects of everyday life and the popular culture
version of glamour, she also looks at the way memories and identity are shaped by these cultural narratives, which are often considered unimportant. In “The Lover, My Clothes” (translation by Wayne Yeung), the notion of fashion is again appropriated to conjure up a city that is both progressive and cyclical. The forces of both backward-looking nostalgia and forward-looking consumerism, characteristic of post-colonial Hong Kong, co-exist in the poem. The destiny of the city is reimagined in surreal temporalities: “What if there’re two summer seasons.” It is as if the persona is asking whether the summer the city was born (July 1, 1997, was the date of the establishment of Hong Kong as PRC’s Special Administrative Region), with its disputes and internal turmoil, can be reworked:

What if there’re two summer seasons  
So that the fixed deposit of love has a longer maturity  
What if lovers are just my clothes  
So that I can change the way I miss them like the latest fashion

The poem starts with a strong thirst for stability and sustainability (the “fixed deposit”), which is immediately pulled back by the force of swift changes in fashion. This dichotomy reflects the dilemmas that have trapped Hong Kong people. Hong Kong can be viewed as a gendered body that has to be dressed up by different imaginations, especially a consumerist imagination:

Your mind is obscure behind the see-through chiffon dress  
While my tassels on the jean become a burdening mess  
No paisley prints blow away the green ending of a relationship  
The folk embroidered weaves an ageless story too good to be true

The revelation of the persona is mythical, but is quickly demystified by the following lines: “Clothes and people, once in, now out, / Drag on a shadow from this year that/ Won’t get you admitted to the next fashion show.” Dwelling in the present is impossible for a city that is premised on, and celebrated for, its speed. The moment now becomes a prosaic instant that captures the flow of the city’s fashion industry, a cacophony
of disputes that define the current condition of the city, and a personal reflection of an urbenscape produced by metropolitanism. The awakening promised in Chan's poetry is one that de-alienates the city and portrays it as vibrantly interacting with numerous internal and global forces. For Chan, there is never a shortage of opportunities for self-reflection. In this case, the revelation of potentialities and opportunities are already embedded in the repetitive everyday world. This echoes Benjamin’s “profane illumination” (1978, 179), a concept that he used to describe the materialist inspiration of the Surrealists’ experience of Parisian urban everyday life and its new object world (Gordon 1997, 204). In Chan’s case, the profane illumination can also be applied to the case of post-modern Hong Kong, where the self-imposed consumerism can be challenged and re-imagined in poetry. The emotions become a lens through which the larger historical picture can be registered and witnessed. Rather than focusing on the “critical moments,” she portrays the way the mundane can become a magical site, invoking both joy and disappointment, and shaping the world in which we live.

The portrayal of the city is further mediated by the stress on affect in Chan’s poetry. In his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, Massumi argues that affect is beyond personal feeling. He distinguishes among feelings, which are personal and biographical (links to history and experience), emotions, which are social, and affects, which are “prepersonal” (1987, xvi). The notion of the prepersonal requires some explanation: it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential. It is the body’s way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience (1987, xvii). Chan’s poems support Massumi’s view in her choice of subject matter and in her use of language. Readers would agree that the subject matter of Chan’s works shows an extraordinary range—from technological gadgets (computers, cyberspace, TV sets), popular culture (TV drama, film, music), pets (cats and lizards), to philosophical meandering (life and death, relationships, the city). This collage conveys an “unformed and unstructured potential” that encourages a different sensibility and hence a new reading of the urban life. In terms of language, her poems open up a creative space that refuses to be categorized easily. She plays with language and form, putting advertising slogans, slang, and
classical Chinese into the mix. These juxtapositions produce various effects (and affects), which compel readers to re-read her works. The complexity of feelings evoked by her works represents the many-sidedness of the urban space of Hong Kong. This many-sidedness is also evident in her depiction of different districts of Hong Kong: Tsim Sha Tsui (a popular tourist spot), Mongkok (frequented by local shoppers), Central (downtown business district). By describing the range of activities that take place in these districts and the various sentiments associated with people who frequent them (travellers in Tsim Sha Tsui, locals in Mongkok, expatriates in Central), Chan is suggesting that the city and people of Hong Kong are diverse and cannot be pinned down easily.

Another feature of affect that can be noted in Chan’s poetry is the dynamic shift between “being affected” and “affecting” that occurs in the relationship of the persona and the object described. One significant feature of affect is its two-way interaction. When you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected. This dynamic of exchanges and interactions is illustrated by the affection for objects. The objects described in Chan’s works, including clothing, technologies, and commercial products, are numerous and diversified. In “The Lover, My Clothes,” the weather, the persona’s outfit, and the events in the city are all interconnected and mutually affecting: “March mist with spring rain, putting / A bohemian embroidered blouse on me, / Weaves two separate cities with the thread of my cuff.” The two cities could be the real one and the imaginary one. The image may also have a political edge. The narrator may be referring to the connection between Hong Kong and its motherland: no matter how different their political and economic systems are, history has linked them together, just as textiles are woven together. And again, this reminds us that the poem’s intention to re-enchant mundane objects and link them to the larger destiny of the city.

Chan’s poems focus on the continued interactions between the human and the inhuman and the energy that is generated by these dialogues. The instrumentality of objects is not the issue in her poetic world. Rather we see the complex web of relationships wherein consumers and goods are shaped by each other, and the inhuman becomes a constant reflection of one’s identity. It is also important to note that the magical sites of commodity do not bring merely awe, joy, and wonder but also
incite fear and a sense of uncanny: there are many references to coffins, death, and cemeteries in her descriptions of the cityscape.

Between Local and Global: The Historical Optic of the Everyday

Another feature of affect is that it often emerges during a moment of transition. Transition in this context can refer to circulations, flows, transmissions, or contagions. Transition characterizes the urban space of Hong Kong. Times of change inspire strong feelings and open up areas of energy and potential. This is most vividly registered in Chan’s depiction of the urbanscape. In a number of her poems, she turns urban districts like Mongkok, Central, or Tsim Sha Tsui into characters in order to explore their affect. In “Poetic Entry on Mongkok,” the stores selling computer gadgets and pirated copies of films are used to evoke a critical and gendered imagination of the city:

I return from the Long Vacation of Love Generation
Bringing the film reels of memory in reverse time-space
And seeking the possibilities tantamount to the characters and plots
You’re on my mind

The references to Japanese soap operas and their English titles suggest what Giddens calls a “global reflexivity” at both the linguistic and conceptual levels. The dominant feature that characterizes globalization, according to Giddens, is people’s ability to orientate themselves to the world as a whole as both “locals” and “cosmopolitans.” Cheung argues that in Chan’s poems, the “reproduction of the global in the local is found in moments of daily consumption and appropriation of foreign commodities and cultures” (2012b, 9). The constant incorporation of popular culture and foreign elements in works of Chan highlights the cosmopolitanism of the poet as well as the city that she writes about.

For a poet who uses fashion and commodities to reflect on life in the city, a logical setting would be the shopping mall. Shopping malls can be viewed as repressive institutions where identical mass-produced commodities incite desires and fantasies. They can also, however, be viewed
as places that allow people to traverse various cultures and traditions. In “Traversing between the New Year’s Eve and the New Year’s Day in 2003” (translation by Esther Cheung), the new year is crystallized in the acclaimed shopping paradise—Hong Kong. The phantasmagoric images of globalization and consumer society appear in miniature form in the shopping mall:

A polar bear shakes its head on a man-made snow scene
Announcing the possibility of the revival of a dead city
One day in the middle of the shopping mall
An imposing Christmas tree reaches the fourth floor
Its green plastic or silky leaves
Are perfect matches with the glittering, white crystals

The celebration of the Western tradition, New Year, is undercut by the poem’s caustic observations. The dichotomy between the nature represented and its artificiality, between the liveliness of the shopping mall crowd and the dead city further conveys the poem’s revelation of disillusionment in a prosperous city.

Seeing the intertwined branches and twinkles under the spotlight
She starts to believe
She has already been free from the tragic fate of an ugly duckling
Transformed into a swan
Desiring flight
But the illusory lights weigh her down
All the way to the far end of the staircase

The critique of the false promises of capitalism and its fabricated desires is vividly evoked. Rather than dwelling on the evidence of economic success embodied in the circulation of commodities in the shopping mall, the narrator calls for a new beginning. This new beginning is not just the persona’s but Hong Kong’s as well. It is time to get beyond the false promises that have lingered since the colonial past: “She has put on her overcoat again / Allowing time to be thinner than her clothing / Allowing her apparel to outlive time.” The reference to outliving time suggests the
persona’s willingness to think ahead to new possibilities, to have a pair of fresh eyes for the New Year. The poem also hints at a moment of crisis for the city. Benjamin’s discussion of the necessity to subject the modern world to scrutiny is a useful reference point here. He maintains that “[h]istorical materialism wishes to retain the image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger” (1968, 255). To articulate this moment of danger, especially in the fluid city, artistic responses and creative works of reflection must be timely and immanent. In classical Greek tragedy, the resolution of a crisis is not fated but depends on the characters’ actions and personalities. Individual agency is required to make changes in society: “It is clear that crisis in this sense requires the subject to exercise its capacity of making judgement by evaluating and reflecting upon past and present experience” (Cheung 2004, 249). Given that Chan presents the struggle at the transition between the past and the future, the present becomes the moment when reflection and evaluation must take place.

What links these temporalities together is the emphasis on circulation among people and things—the mutations of the city. The changes in a city are not reflected in the historical events that are considered critical moments but in the continual mundane changes to the living space. As shown in “Traversing between the New Year’s Eve and the New Year’s Day in 2003,” we are affected and the city is imagined through these mundane changes. The changes in space and in our life are best understood through our feelings and affect. The uniqueness of affect is the passage from one state to another: it is an intensity characterized by an increase or decrease in power. In Chan’s poems, this intensity is registered in three mutations: the mutations in the city, in the poet’s feelings towards the city, and in the constructed relation between the city and history. The changes in state create a chain reaction leading to a new convergence of feelings, body, and external stimuli. This convergence, in turn, influences the individual’s capacity to act in the world. It is hinted that the stronger the intensity of the convergence, the stronger the resultant capacity to reshape the world. In a way, the affect provides the poet with the power to engage in the social dialogue. This is in keeping with the notion of “minor”—the individual (or the affect) is always social and political.
Conclusion: Art as Praxis and Poiesis

In the preface to *The Flying Coffin*, Chan comments on her debt to Hélène Cixous. She reiterates Cixous’s idea of writing—as both natural and necessary. Writing is a way for Cixous to fight against illness, silence, and discrimination based on race, language, and gender. Chan notes it is not that Cixous chose writing in her life, but the reverse (Chan 2007, xxxvii). Chan also finds in poetry a tool that allows her to get close to death, fear, and loneliness in the city. Through writing about death, the poet is allowed to be reborn and to look at the world with a pair of fresh eyes. This also explains why Chan continually challenges herself by dealing in an ever-increasing range of subject matter. It is only through these shifting perspectives and positions that readers will be able to understand the city differently.

To conclude, Chan’s focus on fashion can be perceived as a kind of mnemonic act reminiscent of Western writers such as Baudelaire: “It is through such a dialectic of the empirical and the utopian that alienation can be disarticulated” (Cheung 2012a, 82). Chan’s poems can be interpreted as possessing a similar magical power: her poetry reconfigures the everyday, both particular and general. What Chan has demonstrated in her poetry is a constant focus on the trivial, the mundane, and the affective—those aspects of life that fail to capture the attention of historians. Her fresh perspective penetrates the microhistory that defines the cityscape of Hong Kong. The lived experience that conjures up the city is better illuminated through microcosms than macrocosms. Her works are not simply reflections but critical negotiations of the local and global. As Cheung points out, Chan’s urban poems deal with the dialectic between suppression and reflection, public and private: “Chan’s local place-writing has become a means to produce a worlding process where the historically placed places are now cast as points of critiques of life in a global city” (2012b, 5). Chan’s poems succinctly deploy the everyday to critique the post-colonial condition of Hong Kong and the state of the world. Fashion and commodities closely link gender to the body. They also provide worldviews based on the process of consumption. Still art can use fashion and commodities to register enchanted moments when everyday objects convey the uniqueness of Hong Kong. Chan succeeds
in revealing anew the importance of the everyday and re-imagining the potentialities buried in the *longue durée* of commodification.

**Acknowledgements**

This work was fully supported by a grant from the Louis Cha Fund (Chinese Studies) at the University of Hong Kong. Thank you to the editors and anonymous reviews at ESP for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this article.
In My Days of Whitening

In my days of whitening
I refused visitors
Afraid of light
I failed to face the glint on my friends’ lenses
The sympathy and consideration
Though warm
Kill all rejuvenating cells

Because of my passionate love
I am allergic to black spots
This is a kind of relationship
That ages with time
Penetrating further into the inner layer
It cannot be removed with the sea-extracted exfoliating scrub
It is a lifelong memory
That can never be removed

SKII has a new mask that can render your face as fine and smooth as eggs
The dark pigments would be lightened in twenty-four hours
Use it for twenty-eight days straight
With wholehearted trust and patience
You always carry an aging weary face
On your rambling returns
Unfortunately I am allergic to eggs
And have no particular sensitivity to the causal dilemma between the
  chicken or the egg
And fail to clarify
Whether we should fall in love and then break up
Or the other way round
Hence decided to have both processes
Run parallel

Obviously
I have no intention to treat you as
Incurable suffocating pores or blackheads
Because deep cleansing and whitening
Would bring inevitable pain
I can only cut off my thoughts for you
Under the condition that my skin does not have to be fully cured

In my days of whitening
I am an inch taller, two kilograms heavier
Insomnia, anorexia, and fatigue no more
The skin is hydrated
Looking back grateful to love myself
Could reduce wrinkles and blemishes
Let sunshine bring with it the chirping of the bird

1. 2. 2015

我在美白的日子

我在美白的日子
謝絕探訪
因為怕光
便不能應付朋友閃亮的鏡片
那同情和諒解
自以為灼熱
其實最會殺死正在更生的細胞

最近由於戀愛
所以患上了黑斑過敏症
那是一種會隨年月
而衰老的情愛
而且深入皮膚的內層
任算天然海底植物提煉的磨砂
也磨不掉的
一生的印記

聽說SKII有剝殼雞蛋的面膜
可以二十四小時再生暗啞的傷口
祇要循環使用二十八天
一心一意的信任和等候
你總會帶著在外面因遊蕩
而老去的容顏回來
可是我天生對雞蛋敏感
而且無法釋懷雞與蛋先後的次序
終於也搞不清楚應該
跟你相戀然後分手還是
先分手才再相戀
於是最後決定這兩個護膚程序
同一時間進行

當然
我並不想真的
把你看成無藥可救的黑頭或粉刺
因為深層的潔淨和漂白
會帶來切膚之痛
但在不能換臉的情勢下
祇好戒掉對你的念念不忘

我在美白的日子
長高了一英寸 長胖了兩公斤
Fashioning Passion

An attractive and well-dressed salesperson
Wearing a trending big hot fuchsia smile
Confided to me,
“It will turn chilly next week!”
Seizing two bags of clothes and a pair of shoes from him
I truly believe that
This beloved boutique acts as a city in its unsettled climate
Where one seeks solace in one’s own indulgence

The smog buildup
Casts a veiled vision over Victoria Harbor
The black cat cloaked with a layer of gray dust
The tangerine velvet stained with a lavender foam
Coupled with harlequin-colored sprinkled beads of love
The color-blinded confusion ignited the unimaginable sense of softness and glow
Upon prehension the arms be sheltered for warmth
Wrapped in the checkered scarf
That should be no longer than five feet
Don’t burden the shoulders!
Enshrouded in seven feet of love
Is an unbearable fashion for the wounded neck
Graciously, spring and summer pass
Autumn also withers with no expected surprise
Winter too is safe and sound
Without just cause
Would not stir any lingering thoughts for you or him
But like Amelie, the angel whimsically fancies a spectacle
In the nostalgia for trend retro, we realize
No fashion could be outdated

But our act of forgetting only amplifies the awareness
Caught between the dolman sleeve and the A-line skirt
We can only accede that our complexion be, as fated,
Folded, flattened into strips or grids
For clothes are to be worn and
Nowhere else to be

Not until heaven and earth meet at the horizon
Can I be separated from you

1. 5. 2015

衣戀
長得整齊好看的售貨員
用這一季大熱的桃紅色的笑容
跟我說：
下星期天氣轉涼了！
從他手上接過兩袋衣物及一雙鞋子
我真情地相信
窩心的服裝店是陰晴不定的城市
最使人沉溺的歸宿處

近日發生煙霞
維港拉起視線的障礙
黑色的貓蒙上灰色的塵
橘紅的絲絨漂染粉紫的泡沫
就連藏青的愛情也斑斑點點
色盲的錯亂使我前所未有的溫柔和明豔
終於也覺醒保護容易著涼的手臂
便要披上千鳥格子的圍巾
圍巾的長度最好不要超過五尺
別叫肩膀太沉重啊！
七尺昂藏的情愛
是受傷的後頸所無法承受的時尚

輕質化地渡過春天和夏天
秋天亦無驚無險 期望
冬天也出入平安 不會無緣無故
搞起對你或對他的思前想後
但愛美麗的天使總喜歡肆意地華貴
懷舊的時裝潮流裡我們必須面對
沒有一套流行款式會已成過去
我們對彼此的遺忘祗會不斷重覆的辨認
於是A-Line短裙與蝙蝠衣袖的去而復返間
我們祇好宿命地將彼此的容顏
摺成扁扁平平的橫紋與格線
因為衣服都穿在身上 不留別處

直到天地合
乃敢與君絕

8. 11. 2003
The Lover, My Clothes

What if there’re two summer seasons
So that the fixed deposit of love has a longer maturity
What if lovers are just my clothes
So that I can change the way I miss them like the latest fashion

March mist with spring rain, putting
A bohemian embroidered blouse on me,
Weaves two separate cities with the thread of my cuff
But leaves a gap in the shape of the rugged edge of the stamp.
April, with the cruelest sun, has an overcast face,
Flanked by showers and rainbows, which matches with an amethyst butterfly knot
Animating an aura, a frequency of the heartbeat
That could hold your hand as you jay-walk just in time,
Fill it with an inviolable force.
Stars pinch holes on the sky of May
As I sprinkle delicate glittering lip gloss
And tint slithering eyebrows, shining under the streetlights
My shadows at evenings striding behind your eyes.

And then so goes June, and then August,
Let’s not mention July when we go sour.
Time to lay out-of-season clothes in peace
To sort them out and bid farewell
Your mind is obscure behind the see-through chiffon dress
While my tassels on the jean become a burdening mess
No paisley prints blow away the green ending of a relationship
The folk embroidered weaves an ageless story too good to be true
Clothes and people, once in, now out,
Drag on a shadow from this year that
Won’t get you admitted to the next fashion show
Turns out it’s not as hard as commonly believed
To throw away old clothes or get carried away by fashion
Lovers are my clothes
Close is my tight hugging skirt, but closer is my cool skin
And sweat stains.
And gossips run about
How the dress doesn’t flatter you!
If I had two summers
I’d give love a re-boot
Because how easily it slips off your memory
That July is my birthday
While a grey scarf once slipped into your wardrobe
Some day in winter on your birthday.

Translated by Wayne Yeung
2015

愛人. 衣服

期待有兩個夏季
可以延長愛情的定期儲蓄
期待愛人如衣服
隨每天的潮流更新想念的姿態

三月的霧和雨連成一線
特意搜一件波希米亞的通花上衣
讓袖口的絲縫起兩座城市的間隙
剪成郵票錯體相連的齒痕
四月的太陽有一張陰陽的臉
驟雨中彩虹配一條紫水晶的蝴蝶結
讓磁場拍和心跳的振率
相信及時拉住你亂闖馬路的手
有恆久拍翼的能量
五月的夜有星星洞穿了的天
小心翼翼塗上閃金的唇彩
描出蛇的眉額在街燈的映照下
你的眼睛印下我的影子

然後六月和八月都過去了
吵罵的七月給我們遺失或遺忘
是時候把過時的衣服好好殞藏
分門別類再分道揚鑣
see through 的雪紡仍看不透你去留的心思
牛仔褲的流蘇拉得太長變成糾纏的負累
田園的印花吹不開一個愛情綠色的結局
刺繡的民族圖案不過是騙人的不老傳說
去年流行的衣服今年已成舊人
今年緊緊抱住的身影無法過渡
明年春季的花生騷
原來拋棄一件衣服或給潮流甩掉
並不如想像中困難
原來愛人如衣服
曾經緊貼然後冷卻是體溫
因汗漬而斑駁
別人還會說三道四
說衫長褲短衣不稱身呢
如果我有兩個夏季
會重新選擇愛情的起點
因為七月是我出生的日子
而你總會刻意忘記
其實某年冬天你生日的時候
曾偷偷給你放下一條灰領巾

1.5.2002
Poetic Entry on Mongkok

1. Shun Wo Centre (take two)
En trance d into the Japanese soap opera disc market, entranced into The Love Generation’s Long Vacation

Pressed between bodies trudging to and fro,
In cramped narrow alleyways with no fire escape
In search of a lost smile
That has been for a time abandoned on the roadside
Piano notes float timidly around the corner
Played gently by hesitant fingers, youth is
The will to stay in the hollowed chamber in solitude
Would you still hang around
The empty shot imbued with furniture leaves a heavy anxiety from within and without the frame
I take a step forward to avoid the restless crowd behind
To almost be compressed onto the TV screen
When the eyes of the protagonist leaned close to my face
I stole a glance at our resemblance and in an instant
Again that glamour, that suspense, and that passion have been felled and stepped on by
A large retinue of foot prints
Flattened into illegal pirated CD-ROMs

2. Sin Tat Plaza (take one)
Like a working camera
At the speed of light you
Dolly around the cramped space between the pressed bodies
Kindachi, Black Jack, the Childish Kimura Takuya and Matsu Takako who shrugs with delight
Whose smile would you like to capture
On your face
Following your light speed in the flying pose of Ultraman
I forebode
To become the black speck of the universe
For the exit door is occluded by the projected light from the TV screen
Our relationship has reached an impasse; regrets no more
At the season finale you still have not informed me
Whether there’ll be a sequel?

3. Shun Wo Centre (flash back)
The criss-crossed escalators scattered with scrap papers
Akin to a pair of time tunnels in chiasmus
I return from the *Long Vacation of Love Generation*
Bringing the film reels of memory in reverse time-space
And seeking the possibilities suggested by the characters and plots
You’re on my mind
Through the reflected glass pillars behind,
The two different TV screens play the same scene in unison
Where the game show host exerts much effort in his performance
From comic depictions of melodramatic suffering shown by dipping his hand in boiling water
To puckering the rounded mouth into
A triangular-shaped kiss on the camera lens
I gaze at the bounding bodies on the screen, devoid of any desire to laugh only
The swift neon lights flit past like the Taipei high-speed rail on heart-beating axels;
Slowly frozen into a pale white face
Having been away from the city
The Japanese soap operas have changed their subject
In the multitude of visual images we can only grasp
The fleeting color and sounds
Only memory and imagination represent the present
Creeping beyond the edges of the city
Setting aside the promises made in history
We will then not only brush pass

1. 12. 2014
詩錄旺角

1. 信和中心 (take two)
走進日劇的光碟市場走進
戀愛世代的悠長假期

身體與身體擠壓的空間沒有
走火防火的通道上來來回回

尋找被時間遺棄於路旁
一個掉在過去的笑容

轉角有羞赧的琴聲滑動
猶豫的指頭青春原來是
獨自坐在虛空的房子內的意志
Would you still hang around
佈滿傢俱的空鏡凝聚鏡內鏡外
等待的焦慮
我挪前一步避去人群站在後面的急躁差點便給擠進了電視的熒
幕裏
當主角的眼睛湊近我的臉龐時
竟瞥見你我的顱像　剎那
瀟灑滿地驚疑的喜怒哀樂
再給前呼後擁的鞋印踩成
不合規格的翻版光碟

2. 先達廣場 (take one)
像啟動的攝影機
你以光的速度游行於
一堆身體互相擠壓推撞的空隙之間
金田一、怪醫秦博士還有
永遠孩子氣的木村拓哉與常常
喜歡聳肩的松隆子
你願意把誰的笑容攝入
自己的臉上
追隨你的光速像吉田超人飛行的姿勢我害怕
終會變成宇宙的黑點因為
逃生的前門已被熒光屏的激光堵住

我們的關係便必須因為後無退路而義無反顧
但當連續劇結束的時候你還沒有
告訴我有沒有續集的可能？

3. 信和中心 (flash back)
佈滿廢紙的自動電梯上下移動
像穿過兩條方向相反的時光隧道
我從戀愛世代的悠長假期中回來
帶着回憶的膠卷在倒轉的空間裏
尋找人物與情節兌現的可能
you’re on my mind
反光的玻璃柱上我看見身後
兩個不同的熒光屏放着相同的畫面
遊戲節目的主持人賣力地演出
各種滑稽的動作例如把手掌掉到
鍋裏煮湯再用驚呼的表情
把圓形的嘴巴拉成
三角的圖案然後吻在鏡頭上
我緊緊盯着銀幕上跳動的肢體卻沒有發笑的衝動 祇有
台北高速滑動的虹影在心跳的軸輪上漸漸凝住一張臉孔的黑白
離開這城市一段日子
日劇的熱賣已改變了內容
光影的世代裏我們往往祇能抓住
一些匆匆的顏色和聲音
祇有記憶和想像才是現世的
爬過城市的邊緣
甩掉歷史的承諾
我們才不會擦身而過

5. 1998

**Traversing between the New Year’s Eve and the New Year’s Day in 2003**

I put on the apparel of time
Allowing its sleeves to outgrow my arms
I leave time in my dress
Allowing its visage to outlive the vogue

Ever since winter time
The thermometer is changing faces all the time
My heart expands and contracts
Following the rising and falling notes of the Christmas carols
I turn to the last page of the calendar
Does tearing off the page of debt bring about a better year?
On the New Year’s Eve the cancer-stricken singer
Finishes her terminal journey
In this new, festive beginning
I am caught by total surprise
The air-conditioner in the shopping mall is raised an octave higher
The freezing invisible air solidifies an icy visible landscape
A polar bear shakes its head on a man-made snow scene
Announcing the possibility of the revival of a dead city
One day in the middle of the shopping mall
An imposing Christmas tree reaches the fourth floor
Its green plastic or silky leaves
Are perfect matches with the glittering, white crystals
Deck the tree with names of commercial sponsors
And the white labels of the paper swan cutouts
Seeing the intertwined branches and twinkles under the spotlight
She starts to believe
She has already been free from the tragic fate of an ugly duckling
Transformed into a swan
Desiring flight
But the illusory lights weigh her down
All the way to the far end of the staircase

Treading on the layers and layers of the escalators
Starting from the lowest level
Our every step is an upward bound
Looking up to the glass roof on the top floor
Stars, moons, suns are within reach
With a closer look
She discovers the patterns of laser projections
Carol and hymn singing comes from afar, sublime and sweet
She has nothing but only an oversized coat
New year wishes can be rich and light
As light as the upward balloon and the moon
Wind is blowing from the corner of the staircase
Between last year and the next
She has put on her overcoat again
Allowing time to be thinner than her clothing
Allowing her apparel to outlive time

Translated by Esther M. K. Cheung
15. 1. 2013
走過除夕與元旦的交界2003

將歲月披在身上
讓它的衣袖比手臂長
將衣裳留在歲月裡
讓它的容顏比潮流恆久

入冬以後
溫度計時刻反臉無常
冷縮熱脹的心情
隨著聖誕的歌聲浮浮沉沉
把日曆紙翻到盡頭
撕下舊賬是否真的可以新年進步?
除夕之前患癌病的歌手
趕上她最後的旅程
原來「從頭開始」的時節
是這樣令人措手不及

把空調昇到第八音節的購物中心
讓隱形的空氣凝結可見的冰天雪地
人造的雪景和會搖頭的北極熊
告訴沉溺死亡的城市再生的可能
商場的中央從某天開始
矗立了一座四層高的聖誕樹
塑膠或絲織的綠松葉
配襯會發亮閃光的白水晶
樹上高高掛著贊助商的名字
以及天鵝剪影的白色商標
抬头仰视射灯下纵横错乱的枝叶与闪光
她从此相信
自己也是一隻天鹅
早已脱离醜小鸭的磨难
渴望飞翔但灯光的幻影使她沉沦不起
直到楼梯盡頭

走过重重叠叠的自動升降機
從底层開始
每一步都是上昇
仰望顶层玻璃的天幕
星星、月亮和太阳彷彿垂手可得
但走近了才知道
原来那是激光投映的图案
遠处传来雄健愉快的歌詠和聖詩
面前只有两手空空抱住一件oversize的大衣
原来新年的祝愿可以如此饱满和轻盈
轻得如昇空的汽球或月球
樓梯的彎角有風
在來年與去年之間
她重新披上大衣
讓歲月比衣裳薄
衣裳比歲月長

1. 1. 2004
References


**Notes**

1. All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

2. Deleuze and Guattari, in their discussion of Kafka’s literature, maintain that “minor literature” can be identified by three features: deterritorialization, an emphasis on politics, and collective value (1986, 16-27). Their extensive discussion of Kafka’s work may not be directly related to Chan’s case, but it sheds light on the function of the minor mode—the writing of the marginalized—in the reflection of larger historical and cultural contexts.

3. Both *Long Vacation* and *Love Generation* are Japanese TV series that were immensely popular in Hong Kong in the late 1980s. The names of these series are given in English in the poem.

4. The phrase “you’re on my mind” is written in English in the poem.