

# Urban Fictional History: Postmodern Space-Time Experimentation in *The Atlas* by Kai-cheung Dung

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**Abstract.** The critical examination of Hong Kong's identity and the spatial turn in narrative forms were two prominent characteristics of Hong Kong literature in the late 20th century. Kai-cheung Dung's novel *The Atlas: Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, published in 1997, the year of Hong Kong's handover, addresses this issue, embodying the pursuit and deconstruction of Hong Kong's local consciousness. This paper focuses on the postmodern features of this work from the dimensions of time and space, including: (1) the dialectical relationship between time and space; (2) the construction of the third space; (3) the latent text of Hong Kong identity. Kai-cheung Dung tries to create an imaginary space that opposes the forgotten and subverted Hong Kong of reality. It is an infinitely expanding literary universe, in which he explores the city's complex nature and pursues a sense of self-orientation born between forgetting and remembering. Through a detailed analysis of *The Atlas: Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, the opening work of Kai-cheung Dung's Series of V City, this paper aims to complete the understanding of his continually evolving literary world—revealing a stable internal unity beneath the fragmented and disjointed textual representations.

## 1 Introduction

The interaction between literature and the city essentially reflects the narrative strategies chosen by the writer. Emerging from the anxieties of a transitional period, Hong Kong literature in the 1990s continually engaged with the hybrid and diverse urban space, influenced by the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong and the complex mentality at the end of the century. Kai-cheung Dung's novel *The Atlas: Archaeology of an Imaginary City* (*The Atlas*), published in the year of Hong Kong's handover, precisely considers and responds to this structure of feeling named "Hong Kong". He explores the historical, cultural, and power implications within the maps from four dimensions: theory, city, street, and symbol. Kai-cheung Dung's purpose is not to restore Hong Kong's urban landscape, but to give various locations rich symbolic meanings and healing effects through his writing. Through a literary experiment occurring in a postmodern context, he attempts to carry the contemplation of the fate of his homeland.

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However, current academic research on Kai-cheung Dung primarily focuses on his peak period works, such as *The Natural History Trilogy*. These studies emphasize the characteristics of fetishistic and urban writing in Kai-cheung Dung's works [1, 2]. Although this shows that Dung has achieved great success after breaking through past creative themes, it also illustrates that the academia neglects the distinctive significance of *The Atlas*, which is the starting point of *The V City Series*.

At the same time, research focusing on *The Atlas* as an object of interpretation, especially concerning its spatial form fiction characterization, has shown an overall deficiency. Among the few studies, Yu Ling's *Postmodern Spatial Narrative of Hong Kong* analyzes the spatial narrative features of Kai-cheung Dung's novels through *The Atlas and Visible Cities* [3]. Ling argues that Kai-cheung Dung's narrative style subverts traditional models, characterized by discontinuity, multidimensionality, and intersectionality. This work is theoretically solid, offers unique analysis, and holds high reference value.

Building on this foundation, this paper will explore how *The Atlas*, a symbol of Kai-cheung Dung's spatiotemporal experimentation within a unique historical context, transcends traditional narrative methods and embodies postmodern characteristics. This completes the understanding of the textual world constructed by Kai-cheung Dung and aims to reflect on the response of Chinese writers within the context of the spatial turn of contemporary Western philosophy.

## 2 Zero Time: The dialectics between time and space

In the postmodern conditions filled with fiction, assumptions, and self-deconstruction depicted by Kai-cheung Dung, fantasy and reality, past and future, and the internal and external worlds intertwine, continuously interacting in unrestrained transformations. In other words, the two dimensions of time and space converge in the same direction. Thus, this paper focuses on temporalized space and spatialized time.

The concept of Zero Time originates from Italo Calvino's discussion of the ends and means of the novelistic narrative in *Zero Time* [4]. Its essence is to freeze the narrative in a moment rich with poetic meaning, focusing on the extension of spatial writing under the assumption of an "eternal present tense". As a spatial symbol, maps often struggle to align with the dimension of time. However, the brilliance of *The Atlas* lies in its ability to both cut off the progression of narrative time and independently construct historical logic.

Kai-cheung Dung has repeatedly stated in interviews that his creative inspiration comes from Italo Calvino. Educated in a formal academic setting, Dung accumulated extensive textual reading during his studies, inheriting the consistent tradition of Hong Kong literature while fully absorbing the creative nutrients from the Western literary world. It can be said that Calvino initiated Dung's endless attempts to expand the possibilities of novelistic form.

On the one hand, the author focuses on the map as a physical space carrier, analyzing various versions of Hong Kong maps. The map's form limits the progression of time, yet under this constraint, the text expands into an exceptionally rich and vast narrative universe within the spatial dimension. As described in the *Multitopia* section: regions are "side by side without connecting: it often happens that one space suddenly steps into another space" and they frequently "overlap each other" [5].

This resembles a mechanism of substitution, and the map serves as a condensed entry into imagination: the once unified urban space is divided into four juxtaposed and intersecting parts—Theory, City, Street, and Symbol. Each part is composed of shorter chapters linked together. The narrative's climaxes and ups and downs of the plot are dispersed. Each time a term or a noun is introduced, the reader must once again engage with the absolute moment summoned by the author. Zero time implies a demand on the reader. Although the concept

of time is essentially blurred, there is the possibility of entering a larger world if patiently picking up the fragments on the broken timeline, further integrating them as a unified whole.

On the other hand, although the anxiety of the subject in question occurs in the present, the implicit historical lineage still exists. As a whole, *The Atlas* conducts an archaeology of the city in an imagined future timeframe. The reader's perspective, following the future archaeologists, is positioned advantageously between the present and the future, and is better able to retrace the process of construction. The future shapes the past, giving it the potential for change, so that time is no longer forever irreversible. Simultaneously, the past reflects the future. It is through this interplay of mutual influence that the chain of zero time continuously slides forward, and the history of Hong Kong City unfolds. In the final chapter of the Symbol section, The Orbit of Time, a peculiar rule of fantasy is described: map archaeologists have a special way of reading the timetable of the Kowloon-Canton Railway. By boarding a train at Kowloon Station at specific times, one can cross through different extents of time. This is a metaphor for the narrator's desire to access space at different times.

The city is preserved in people's memories as a spatial collage, while memory is a nostalgic reflection of historical time. In the warp and woof of time and space, the city in Kai-cheung Dung's works appears dilapidated yet eternally existent. The spatial form and temporal context complement each other, giving the novel actual meaning and allowing readers to discover plots and draw conclusions without getting completely lost in aimless deconstruction. Hong Kong's cityscape has been built on the symbolic construction of streets, place names, history, and characters. Simultaneously, it accumulates legends and anecdotes over time, thus undergoing constant transformation and becoming difficult to encapsulate in words.

### **3 Constructing the Third Space: metaphor, fiction, misreading**

"Third Space" is a spatial concept proposed by Lefebvre and deepened by Edward Sawyer in the context of the multidisciplinary spatial turn after 1960. In *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Edward Sawyer defines it as an "othered", "reproduced space" that is "full of symbols, politics, and ideology, entangled with the real and the imagined, replete with social relations of production, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and subordination" [6].

Calvino keenly recognized the devastation of post-industrial society on humanity and human society. In *Invisible Cities*, he constructed a Third Space filled with the spatial power struggles among genders, races, and even between the living and the dead, using a rich imaginary space to bear the weight of social realities, particularly the uneasy urban environment in a postmodern context. Similarly, in *The Atlas*, Kai-cheung Dung constructs a space of difference beyond colonial standards and national standards that blends reality and imagination, presenting an intertwined state of time and space, history and future. However, compared to Calvino, his method of construction more clearly reflects on elaborate narrative structures and language games. Relying on postmodern geography, Kai-cheung Dung utilizes the so-called historical materials to objectively weave his personal historical imagination. He recreates Hong Kong's colonial experiences and traces, thereby constructing a third space for viewing colonial and racial issues. Essentially, this is a state that exists independently of, yet integrates, both reality and imagination, intertwining history and future.

In the City section, Dung metaphorically describes Hong Kong as the "Centaur of the East" to explain the mixed nature of Eastern and Western street names in Central Hong Kong. He points out that the centaur "perfectly harmonious yet distinctly separate and non-interfering" cannot last long, whereas only a hybrid of East and West can endure. In another example, the sugar factory in Sugar Street, which was formerly a mint, transformed its identity and even led to a change of street name, reflecting the tug-of-war between colonial

power and local culture [5]. These examples are direct spatial metaphors in *The Atlas*. The city deconstructed by metaphor in the narrative reflects how Hong Kong can be subverted in reality.

In addition, fictionalization and misinterpretation have also become ways for Dung to construct possible spaces that coexist with the real space of Hong Kong. For instance, in *Commonplace*, Dung lists different spaces on various maps, such as “Hongxianglu Shan” and “Hongxianglu Xun”. Based on their highly similar names and the overall care of the surrounding landmarks, it can be inferred that it is a misplacement of the same place on different maps. Kai-cheung Dung argues that even so, there is no place on any map that can be attributed to the same location as a place on another map, because at the moment the mapmaker defines and draws the location, it already exists independently. This gives historical space its richest imaginative and autonomous life.

Similarly, many place names in *The Atlas* were created due to misinterpretation of sounds, such as “Hong Jiang” for “Hong Kong”, “Kau Lung” for “Kowloon”, and so on. In Dung’s view, these misread symbols create an imaginary space, and the places these names refer to indeed exist within this imagined space, because of the meanings given to them through the writers’ spiritual molding. By transforming maps into readable texts, Dung endows them with the potential for misreading and arbitrary interpretation, thus giving them vibrant life. In such a space, he continues to place the history and anecdotes of the street, such as the tragedy of the collective suicide of the seven righteous sisters in Tsat Tsz Mui Road, and the strange tale of the sugar factory’s warehouse dumping in Sugar Street, which turned the sea water of Victoria Harbour into sweetness. In *Histories of Time: The Luster of Mute Porcelain*, he still exclaims, “I have unintentionally realized my dictatorial kingdom! I ruled over history and territory, time and space. I deconstructed history and fictionalized it at the same time. [7]”

Kai-cheung Dung juxtaposes imagination with archaeology, naturally blending fantasy and reality, simultaneously deconstructing and constructing. Foucault pointed out, “Fiction can function in the truth, fictional discourse can produce truth effects, and true discourse can create or generate something that does not yet exist, thus fictionalizing it” [8]. *The Atlas* deconstructs the linear view of time and the spatial view of the map of the whole, while its fictional nature allows for the presentation of multiple histories. The clash between power and ideology fosters new perspectives and narrative spaces, embodying the concept of creating reality through fiction.

## 4 The latent text of imaginary root-seeking

The essence of novels is fiction, while history pursues facts and truths of the past. As an experimenter in postmodern discourse, Kai-cheung Dung uses words to retell maps and the inherently uncertain history of Hong Kong. This inevitably infuses fiction into his work, resulting in a blurred state where reality and fiction are hard to distinguish.

In *The Atlas*, the academic theoretical language creates the surface reality of the text, which makes it difficult for readers to equate it with clearly fictional works like *Invisible Cities* and *My City*. As a result, readers can hardly enjoy the multidimensional interpretations generated by the contrasts of various spatial forms without any burdens. However, beneath this surface reality, fictional imagination often intrudes.

The act of map-making, fundamentally grounded in the pursuit of truth, is repeatedly faked by Dung through his novelistic approach. His parodic historical writing experiments unsettle the readers’ acceptance. This is directly explained in the novel.

“By extension, Victoria City can also be described as a fictionalized city. It is continually sketched out in dashed lines on maps, always combining the present, future, and past tenses. If you compare a map of Victoria from the 1840s with one from 1996, you will be surprised

to learn that the city is fictionalized to a degree that rivals the most apocryphal of novels. Moreover, the dashed lines keep developing, like an endless story. [5]”

This description is inseparable from Hong Kong’s paradoxical and fractured urban history and characteristics. The city has endured the rewriting of its original cultural memory by colonizers, being cut off from the cultural connection with the mainland. After the retreat of colonial culture, Hong Kong has actively removed the humiliating colonial markers. For instance, in the Spring Garden Lane, the historic street has deteriorated into one of the many narrow alleys in the old Wan Chai district. As the street declined with the reclamation projects, people’s recognition and memory of Spring Garden Lane were also submerged.

This easily reminds readers of Edward Said’s famous discussion in *Culture and Imperialism*. He pointed out that land is the core issue of imperialist wars, and specific issues about land, such as ownership, habitation, and planning rights, are reflected, debated, and even decided in narratives [9]. Kai-cheung Dung replaces “narrative” with “maps” and takes Hong Kong’s urban space as a concrete object for discussion imposed by the colonial sovereign and the mother country. In this dual dilemma, Hong Kong people, though longing for identity, inevitably face the problem of amnesia and struggle to escape the grand narratives constructed by authorities after forgetting. When such collective memories are stripped from space and materiality, citizens are left unable to articulate their own identities.

Dung emphasizes the fictional nature of the city, yet meticulously collects maps and examines the shaping process of Hong Kong’s history. This illustrates he still yearns for the truth of Hong Kong in essence. It is to counter the real-world dilemmas that the intentional writing of contradictions and paradoxes becomes Dung’s way to city-building. As Francois Penz said, “Language is the mediator between personal mental space and the broader public cultural space” [10]. These special spaces are places depicted through Dung’s self-chosen words, where the subjective consciousness of self-projection descends. Although fictional and playful, they are not detached from reality but exist juxtaposed with it, carrying intentional conflicts. Dung continually demonstrates the interplay of existence and fiction, historical geography, and imaginative occupation, all of which are potential texts of Hong Kong consciousness.

To summarize, it does not matter whether it is a real historical space in Hong Kong or not. Kai-cheung Dung never deliberately avoids questioning the existence of an absolutely correct history. Out of his skepticism about the scientific nature of maps and the use of maps by those in power to modify the historical imagination of the people, he prefers to pursue nebulous legends rather than retell the writing that has been standardized and orthodoxized.

Therefore, the purpose of *The Atlas* is not to retrieve lost memories, but to use imaginary space to bypass the venues of power struggles to conduct a historical imaginary search for roots in virtual geography. This seeks to construct a local Hong Kong consciousness, awakening readers to re-examine their existing space and contemplate and discover their own Hong Kong cultural identity.

## 5 Conclusion

*The Atlas* is characterized by fragmentation and collage, yet fundamentally, it embodies a certain unity. This unity is manifested in two primary ways.

On one hand, in Kai-cheung Dung’s consideration of time and space, the evolution of the city results from their interaction. Whether time destroys space or space conquers time, these dual dimensions inherently possess an inseparable nature. The creative integration of time and space is essential for the development of future literature. Thus, even when examining Kai-cheung Dung’s worldview within the context of the spatial turn in Western philosophy, one cannot definitively assert the supremacy of space.

On the other hand, the deconstruction and construction of historical reality are present throughout the novel. Through his writing of *V City*, Dung responds to the complexity of Hong Kong's modernization process. Reality is dissected, questioned, and mocked layer by layer, while the pursuit of Hong Kong's local consciousness and the attempt to construct a "relative" cityscape remain consistent. Kai-cheung Dung's creative experiment is an endless encyclopedia that attempts to exhaust all knowledge in the world, covering all possibilities of multiple infinite universes. As the readers enter his textual world, the infinitely expanding urban space, within this intricate network of time and space, truth can be found in fiction, and what seems bizarre is just commonplace.

Geographically, Hong Kong is on the periphery, and its literature has long remained silent. However, in Kai-cheung Dung's writing, the city is undeniably an eternal center. It is with the cherishing of "My City" that Dung employs postmodern creative techniques to explore a self-positioning born between forgetting and remembering. Through the multiple reflections of the past, present, and future, he creates a discourse space for local voices.

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