LSE Media and Communications

Media@LSE MSc Dissertation Series

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The Mythmaking of the 'City of Darkness':

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Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Western online news outlets contribute to the mythologisation of the Kowloon Walled City. Mainly drawing on Barthes' observations on the myth and Bell's concept of the mythscape, a Critical Discourse Analytical approach has been applied across five Western online news articles published between 2013 and 2014.

Overall, the findings reveal three dominant framings around Kowolon Walled City's architecture, lawlessness, and community resilience, which operate as governing myths that obscure the city's historical and political complexity. Subaltern myths, as conceptualised by Bell, are either absent or co-opted. It is further revealed that journalistic practices engage with mythmaking through select narrative techniques that also contribute to Kowloon Walled City's Orientalist and depoliticised representations.

Moreover, where previous scholars have approached the Kowloon Walled City through cultural memory frameworks, this study challenges the limits of that approach and instead offers the myth as a more suitable analytical lens. It also calls for future research to employ full intersemiotic analyses, audience reception, and cross-cultural comparisons to better grasp the mythic landscape within global media.

INTRODUCTION

> *The most densely populated city on Earth had only one postman. His round was confined to an area barely a hundredth of a square mile in size. Yet within that space was a staggering number of addresses: 350 buildings, almost all between 10 and 14 stories high, occupied by 8,500 premises, 10,700 households, and more than 33,000 residents (Crawford, 2024: 1).*

Kowloon Walled City is its official name but its historical legacy if often more vividly remembered by its nickname, or what the locals used to call it, 'Hak Nam', which translates to the City of Darkness. Since its demolition in 1993, the Kowloon Walled City has transitioned from a geopolitical anomaly into a mediated icon that continues to resurface across architecture, photography, video games, and even cyberpunk fictions. Within this however, is not a neutral representation depicting its everyday life or what once was. One will often find either a romanticised account of the community that used to live within its walls, or an enclave reduced to vice, crime, and darkness. These depictions therefore are not innocent, and the reappearance of Kowloon Walled City across global media, popular culture, and within cultural productions is not a history of its return but rather a distortion. What circulates in its place today, is a myth. A system and communication of meaning that can not only simplify but depoliticise its complex past.

Thus, this research aims to interrogate not only what is remembered about the Kowloon Walled City, but how, and most importantly to what ideological effect. As such, it examines its representation within Western news coverage and more specifically asks:

In what ways do Western Online news articles contribute to the mythologisation of the Kowloon Walled City?

The motivation behind this research mainly stems from two challenges. First, despite growing attention within academia about the Kowloon Walled City and its urban and cultural phenomenon, few studies have actually given weight to how news media, specifically Western outlets, frame its meaning and representation. Second, those studies that do examine its

afterlife, often ground or expand their research in the concept of a cultural memory which assumes a coherent transmission of memory or of collective identities. But seeing how the Kowloon Walled City's history has experienced a contested colonial past also shaped by political and state erasure, highlights the need to shift from memory studies to that of the myth as a more suitable lens.

Therefore, this study will mainly draw on Bell (2003) to map the Kowloon Walled City within an ideological mythscape and investigate competing myths of governing and subaltern. In addition, Barthes' observations within his seminal work ***Mythologies*** (1957/1972) offers insight into the mechanisms of how Kowloon Walled City is transformed into a myth and how they become naturalised within news discourses. In doing so, this research employs a Critical Discourse Analysis using Fairclough's three-dimensional method and analyses five Western online news articles published between 2013 and 2014. These years were selected because they saw a spike in news engagement following the Kowloon Walled City's 20th anniversary in 2013, since its demolition.

As such, this thesis will begin with a theoretical chapter that provides a historical background into the Kowloon Walled City (KWC), highlighting its geopolitical ambiguity and framing its history as co-constructive to its myth. It then traces KWC's second life presenting how studies have theorised it within the concept of a cultural memory, challenges this, and positions to understand it as a myth instead. What then follows is a discussion on the role journalism plays as a key agent in mythmaking along with an examination into Orientalism and how it serves as the broader power context through which these myths can circulate. Together, these insights form the last section of the theoretical chapter to establish the conceptual grounding for this study. Then, the methodological justifications will be presented followed by the results and ultimately the discussion that considers the implications of this study's findings along with a critique into Bell's concept.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

KOWLOON WALLED CITY: HISTORY AND THE ROOTS OF ITS MYTHS

If one had to summarise KWC's complex past in one word only, "in-betweenness" (Lee, 2016: 9) would be a start. While territorially belonging to the British colony within Hong Kong, it remained symbolically and culturally tied to the Chinese sovereignty, yet never fully governed by either. It emerged as a geopolitical uncertainty during the late 19th and early 20th century as a result of Hong Kong's broader socio and political landscape. At that time Hong Kong was shaped by a form of collaborative colonialism which saw British rule sustained through both the local Chinese elites in Hong Kong and in China (Law, 2008).

But it was the post-Opium war treaties and Britain's forced occupation that further intensified KWC's ambiguity. Although China lost to Britain after the Second Opium War, KWC was allowed to remain under Chinese jurisdiction (Feistauer & Wisbey, 2024; Harter, 2000). Thus, when Britain took control over its territory in 1899, it was met with a wave of protests from the Chinese but during which time the Hong Kong authorities never exercised much control. Subsequently, with continued resistance from both its residents and China, British attempts to seize and demolish KWC were unsuccessful and as neither Britain, China, nor Hong Kong could agree on the future of KWC, neither party actively administered it (Feistauer & Wisbey, 2024; Harter, 2000).

Following World War II KWC grew rapidly because of unsuccessful social and housing welfare from the British and an influx of Chinese refugees fleeing from the Cultural Revolution in mainland China (Feistauer & Wisbey, 2024). Numbers of its occupancy vary but it was estimated that 31,408 residents occupied 8,300 buildings across three acres of land (Lee, 2010). On top of that, the lack of state governance fostered a place for its underground economies to boom and KWC eventually became notable for its narcotics, brothels, and gambling houses (Harter, 2000; Lee, 2010; Lee, 2016).

Understanding KWC's history as well as its historiography is essential for this study as Feistauer and Wisbey (2024: 57) note, "much of its myth and intrigue today is perhaps owed

to the scarcity of documentation and gaps in the historical record". Their historiographical analysis, through overlooked Chinese primary sources reveals how KWC has been fragmentedly documented with a large influence of British-centric accounts. More interestingly, their findings also challenge a dominant narrative, a myth even, of how KWC was not built on centuries-old imperial structures but was in fact deliberately constructed on empty government land (Feistauer & Wisbey, 2024). Such conclusions alone imply how KWC was not objectively documented but rather selectively framed through layers of interpretation, particularly through power and ideology. Additionally, Harter's (2000) critical analysis into its historiography illustrates how it has been narratively and discursively produced and often instrumentalised for colonial, postcolonial and urban-planning discourses. Overall, he observes how KWC is often presented through three symbolic phases of 'three vices', 'demolition', and 'garden' (Harter, 2000). In the first phase KWC is portrayed as a lawless slum of vice, one where colonial superiority was deemed as vital. Next, it is shown as a nostalgic anomaly of closure under the newly formed Sino-British relationship. Lastly, the garden phase—after its demolition a Chinese Qing-style park was built in memory of KWC (Fraser & Li, 2017)—recasts a sanitised version of its history, one where its colonial and political conflicts have been replaced with Chinese heritage (Harter, 2000).

What this showcases is that KWC's history can function as a discursive space in which symbolic meanings and narratives can emerge and based on Koselleck's (1985; Pickering, 2004) observation in begriffsgeschichte, also carry a reflection of the present. Essentially, Koselleck (1985; Pickering, 2004) indicates how concepts of history are often shaped through a tension of 'space of experience', what is remembered and 'horizon of expectation', what is imagined. His framework can be used to critique ideology because he argues that whoever controls a concept's definition, for example news outlets or even academics, can shape the margins of imaginable politics. For instance, when 'lawlessness' is attached to KWC it acts as a historical agent by those who introduce it, and its concept can change over time and take on new meanings based on how society views its past and future. Moreover, Foucault's (2013; Palti, 2018) conception of archaeology presents how historical "truth" is produced discursively and conditioned by the intellectual rules of a given period. Applied to KWC we can then understand that when online news outlets engage with its narrative, it can be seen as a process

of re-signification which is fuelled by modern systems of thought. Meaning that what is remembered and retold of KWC, is recalled through the societal and cultural conditions of the present.

Thus, to challenge traditional empiricists like Von Ranke on viewing the past "as it actually happened" (Eskildsen, 2008: 434), this research sees myth and history as co-constructive. KWC's myths can easily take form because of its complex history and as Bell (2003) argues, they usually tend to ease the complexity of the past by offering a simple story instead. Similarly, Heehs (1994: 1) challenges the academic urge to separate myth and history, arguing that "what we call history is at best mythistory". He calls for a dialectical approach, proposing how both serve as a means for societies to understand and narrate the past. Hence, any attempts to separate these two in the case of KWC, is not only methodologically naïve but politically laden because doing so would only ignore the ideological reconstructions that are present within its depictions today.

Although KWC was demolished in 1993, a park now stands in memory of where it once stood and while its demolition might have marked the end of its physical life, it also created the start of its 'second life' (Fraser & Li, 2017).

The Second Life Of The Kowloon Walled City

The second life is a term popularised by scholars Fraser and Li (2017) whose study has since become a notable reference within KWC's scholarship and has been cited widely by recent researchers (Cheng, 2024; Feistauer & Wisbey, 2024; Ma, 2023; May, 2022; Kong, 2024). They analysed KWC's commodification through the intersection of cultural criminology, postcolonial, and media studies and traced how its coverage today has been detached from its history, representing an ideological sanitation as well as a simulacrum, a "'copy' without [its] original" (Fraser & Li, 2017: 222). Drawing on oral histories, visual media, and fieldwork, the scholars contend that its cultural memory has turned into a second life where state memorials have erased its criminal past, global media has recast it as a dystopian fantasy, and how local youths have reclaimed it through cosplay and manga by portraying it as a symbol of Hong Kong's identity (Fraser & Li, 2017). Their research is prominent because it marked a shift

within KWC's scholarship considering how earlier studies (Lai, 2016; Lau & Lee, 1996; Lee, 2016) often engaged through an urban and architectural inquiry, whereas Fraser and Li reframed it as an ongoing cultural symbol. But this shift of KWC's study from passive to active, from its first to second life could also be a result from its passing 20th anniversary in 2013 ('Remembering Kowloon Walled City', 2013), once again awakening public and academic interest. Or from the notorious umbrella movement in 2014 (Ortmann, 2015), which heightened concerns over Hong Kong's independence and therefore could have recontextualised KWC because of its once organic self-governance. Yet, with this shift, Fraser and Li's emphasis on cultural memory and its continued use in recent studies (Cheng, 2024; Ma, 2023; May, 2022) surrounding KWC, is what demands critical attention.

Cultural Memory

Cultural memory offers a starting point in understanding how individuals or social groups remember their, or the past. Notable scholars within this field such as Erll, Assmann, and Halbwachs, have provided different definitions that include a range of cognitive processes. It can be seen as the individual act of remembering to the national, with influences of traditions and media (Erll & Nünning, 2008). Or the collectively shared knowledge of the past that informs the sense of identity amongst a group (Assmann, 2011). Or a collective memory that while seemingly individual is actually shaped by social frameworks and therefore, is impossible to be remembered outside of its group (Marcel & Mucchielli, 2008).

Clearly, the commonality is a narration of the past and a relation to identities. However, it is such a fluid concept with no coherent definition which makes its employment rather vague and could lead to conceptual confusion. In addition, while cultural memory and history are intertwined but not synonymous, the former still involves drawing upon the latter through rituals, texts, media, and symbolic forms (Assmann, 2011). But as the previous section laid out, KWC's recorded past is not an objective one from which a unified or presentable memory could be drawn from. Kansteiner (2002), who methodologically critiques cultural memory supports this as he argues that it is more shaped by present-day identity politics rather than by history itself. Likewise, Confino (1997) posits that cultural memory is often employed with little methodological reflection and cautions against treating it as a direct reflection of

historical experiences. Further adding to its critique is Olick (1999: 334) who even says that it is "a poor substitute for older terms like political tradition or myth". Moreover, he articulates that critics see a limitation in applying an inherently individual concept onto the collective. This is especially the case for KWC, seeing how its own residents experienced different recollections. For example, in Lau *et al.*,'s (2018) study, the researchers tried to challenge KWC's misconceptions of being a lawless slum by examining the quality of life through interviews with former residents. Overall, the findings show that the locals felt a sense of privacy and community satisfaction (Lau *et al.*, 2018). Fraser and Li (2017: 223), on the other hand, who similarly interviewed its inhabitants assert, that life within "was intimately bound up with the experiences of crime, corruption and makeshift politics".

While not outright dismissing this concept, it still remains challenging unless its factors can be defined well enough for the purpose of a study. For this research then, it would be more valuable to understand it through media discourses as journalist and scholar Zelizer (2014: 32) argues, "memory studies and the very notion of collective memory could not exist without journalism". Zelizer (2008) asserts that there is a recognisable trend in how journalistic engagement towards the present, will always include a mediation of the past. Through what she coins memory work, Zelizer (2008) describes that journalists employ and trigger memories of the past through content and form. In short, content engages with memory by referencing the past in times of crises to guide public understanding. Form on the other hand, textual or visual, invokes memory through comparisons in order to frame new conflicts. Like this, KWC does not need to be understood as having one coherent cultural or collective memory. Instead, it offers insights into how journalistic practices can selectively reactivate KWC through content and form.

However, as Huyseen (2001) reminds us, memory studies have emerged mainly as a dominant cultural concern within Western societies. The question is how applicable the concept remains alone, for Asian countries and Hong Kong in particular, where a type of cultural amnesia is pertinent not only within its history but in its cultural productions.

Politics of Disappearance

To understand this, Abbas' (1997) notion on the politics of disappearance articulates that Hong Kong's history has been sanitised through practices of state control, political erasure, and cultural reinvention. He gives an example with KWC, illustrating how its demolition only created a more romanticised version of the city. He describes KWC as "kitsch", because although it was known for darker aspects such as crimes and "human misery" (Abbas, 1997: 66), it continues to be presented as a place of fascination. What Abbas essentially critiques is not exactly a loss or erasure of certain elements, but rather an excess of alternative ones. Beyond this Abbas also taps into Hong Kong's cultural representations though cinemas for example and highlights how these are often reduced to clichés or binaries. He coins this the déjà disparu (Abbas, 1994) and suggests that Hong Kong's contradiction between East and West has fuelled its cultural productions to lack a definitive form. This clearly shows how KWC's representations within media today cannot simply be seen as acts of remembrance or preservation, but as postcolonial distortions fuelled by power and ideology.

Thus, this tension of remembering and reactivating KWC but from a distorted and "disappeared" past is where the myth becomes a more useful lens. It offers insights of how such fragmented histories are ideologically reassembled. This research then offers new grounds of exploration as previous scholarship surrounding KWC have not yet examined this perspective. Unlike cultural memory, the myth does not presume a stable or verifiable relationship to memories but rather centres the processes by which such narratives are generated, circulated, and eventually naturalised within its broader socio and political contexts. As Grigorieva *et al.*, (2017: 85) point out, the researcher within mythology usually aims to answer "'Why does one myth or another become important, sustainable, [and] broadcasted in time?'". In doing so the answers can explain the possible patterns of national identity but more importantly for KWC, the historical experience of "different peoples, ethnic groups, [and] nations" (Grigorieva *et al.*, 2017: 85).

Mapping kowloon walled city through the mythological lens

This study mainly draws on Bell's (2003) mythscape and Barthes' (1957/1972) observations behind the ideological workings of the myth. But first, when referring to KWC as a myth, it is not in the traditional sense of gods or cosmological origins, but rather narratives that go beyond content. They hold a form of symbolic power which not only reflects reality but actively shapes how we perceive and interpret it and thereby constitutes a way of deeper meaning-making (Grigorieva *et al*., 2017). A simpler definition by Rønning (2009: 148) is that myths contribute to postcolonial studies because such narratives emerge in the face of a "'lost' home or culture" and thus rely on history and the present to interpret cultural identities. Yet more prominently, Berger (2009: 497) provides an interesting observation of how contested historical borderlands, two countries claiming territory over one, can create powerful and competing myths of origin, due to questions of "who was there first". Bell (2003: 151) describes myths as "simplified narratives ascribing fixed and coherent meanings to selected events, people, and places, real or imaginary". His work is mainly rooted within nationalism and argues that myths are narrative frameworks that compete to organise historical representations in order to serve identity and ideology. Moreover, and to reiterate the previous claim of treating myths and history as co-constructive, the proliferation of the digital age has contributed to a field where these narratives do not just compete anymore but try and assert their claims to a historical "truth". What Toth (2023) also stresses here, is a concern not of truth or false but of the antagonism produced through this assertion. Therefore, this research will not resolve KWC's true history but rather examine through these competing myths how they mobilise selective pasts to enforce current ideological meanings.

Bell (2003) introduces the mythscape which is a discursive space in which competing myths circulate over time. Within this, he points out a governing myth and a subaltern myth. The former are dominant narratives that often serve to justify existing power structures, whereas the latter are the opposing ones. The subaltern myths can arise from marginalised groups or individuals that highlight a past of oppression but mainly serve to challenge the governing myth. But as previously mentioned, Bell grounded his mythscape within nationalism and how these myths compete internally within their own countries. This study extends his mythscape

externally onto media and journalism studies to observe how governing or subaltern myths can take form and construct KWC's representation. Moreover, Bell (2003: 152) notes, "contrasting myths of and about empire retain great force in British politics". As the historical section laid out, KWC's past has been heavily shaped by British-centric accounts. He finds that within the postwar period of the British empire, its governing myth "has tended to be a Whiggish one" (Bell, 2003: 152), where colonialism is framed as humanising and orderly, even necessary. This is an interesting observation that can be analysed within KWC's online news articles. Namely, if and how KWC is presented from a post- or colonial projection, as Bell (2003: 152) elaborates that Britain's governing myth serves to spread the story of its triumphant role in "spreading civilization to a 'backward' peoples".

Barthes' observations in ***Mythologies*** (1957/1972) on the other hand, provides a useful lens in understanding how these dominant narratives and their meanings can naturalise and become "common sense". Overall, Barthes was interested in exploring cultural phenomena and the demystification of everyday life. He argues that ordinary objects might seem simple but are in fact loaded with deeper ideological messages and can influence how we view the world. While his work is most notable within the field of semiotics, of signs and significations (Chandler, 1994), this study will borrow a critical observation he made in one of his books. Which is that the myth in modern society functions not as a lie but a "type of speech", where "its function is to distort, not to make disappear"(Barthes 1957/1972: 107). Barthes lays out that the myth is a powerful tool not because it omits but because it over-simplifies. In his words:

> *Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. (...) Myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, (...) it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves (Barthes, 1957/1972: 143).*

Nevertheless, it is also important to note that Barthes' notions were embedded in the cultural codes of mid-century France and thereby are assumed to European or Western subjects. What

is underdeveloped within his seminal work is a serious engagement with race and coloniality and the transnational dynamics. His observations on the bourgeoisie could extend onto KWC but then it remains even more critical to view the myth not only as a type of speech but also a type of power.

However, sceptics like Toth (2014) and Karner (2020) have for example critiqued Bell's mythscape of being idealistic nature. While they do agree that these myths are contested and politically situated, they also assert that we must look at who holds power over them, for instance online news outlets, and how they become institutionalised. Which is why the following section will introduce the role journalism and news outlets play in constructing KWC's myths and by doing so can address the questions and critiques posed by Toth and Karner.

Journalism, media, and news as mythmakers

At the very basic level, Journalism can be seen as participating to a form of representation which Hall (2020: 45) elaborates as "the process by which members of a culture (...) use language to produce meaning". It is not us humans, our objects, nor even KWC itself that hold specific meanings but rather societies, cultures, media, and news outlets for example, "who make things mean, who signify" (Hall, 2020: 45). When it comes to media studies, the idea behind representation is to analyse how such messages within news outlets produce realities that serve to normalise, or naturalise distinct ideologies (Fürisch, 2010). While journalism is often believed to be a neutral institution of reporting, scholars (Bird & Dardenne, 2009; Entman, 1993; Entman, 2007; Hall, 2010; Zelizer, 2008) have shown that it is not. For instance, Entman (2007) describes how news reporting will often include biases such as distortion, the purposeful falsification of reality, content bias, where one side of the story is favoured, and decision-making bias, where the journalist's mindset influences the content. But more prominently, Bird and Dardenne (2009: 205) articulate that news is not simply objective reporting but "also a form of storytelling that functions in a mythological way". If myths then, as both Bell and Barthes argue, are narratives that turn complex histories and ideologies into

naturalised truths, then journalism and news can be seen as one of the sites where such tools are deployed.

Bird and Dardenne (2009) distinguish between 'news as myth' and 'news as storytelling'. The former functions on a broader cultural level, whereas the latter operates on the individualistic level of a news story. News as myth refers to the overall recognition of how journalism constructs enduring and culturally significant narratives by framing complex events in familiar or simple ways, and by offering symbolic resolutions often during times of crises. Journalists can achieve this through news as storytelling, by relying on narrative structures such as archetypes, metaphors, analogies, emphases, and moral binaries (Bird & Dardenne, 2009). More significantly, Bird and Dardenne critique that while myths provide reassurance within society, they are never neutral and are inseparable from power because they reflect the ideological choices of journalists as they control which narratives to voice, to silence, and how to frame them. This aligns with Bell's description of how myths serve political and ideological functions by simplifying histories. In correlation to this, Zelizer (2008) also points out that journalism experiences a tension between the desire of being truthful and objective, and the limitation in truly capturing the complex realities of our experiences. The result of this tension is a condensation of complicated events or stories, thereby producing a more superficial understanding of how we view the past.

Yet, moving beyond the surface level of language use, it is also important to understand the deeper ideological forces behind them, particularly for this study which is mainly situated within postcolonial discourses and contexts. Because it is not without reason that dominant framings such as its symbol of a lawless slum or its nickname of the City of Darkness, arise. Such instances usually suggest a long-standing and imbalanced structure of power behind its discourses. As such, the next section navigates how Orientalist discourse can operate as the broader ideological structure, from which narratives of KWC become mythologised through the politics of othering.

Kowloon walled city and the politics of othering

When mentioning 'otherness' or 'othering' in this section, it refers to an overarching "discursive process by which a dominant in-group ('Us' the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ('Them,' the Other) by stigmatizing difference—real or imagined" (Staszak, 2020: 25). As Said likes to remind us, analysing or even talking about the East, is to already engage with the discursive tradition that constitutes Orientalising.

Orientalism by Said (1979), is not only significant here because the dataset stems from Western news outlets, but because it is often used as a theory to criticise postcolonial discourses (Donzé-Magnier, 2017). While it was never intended as a media studies theory, it has since been applied within the field to expose how generalisations, binary representations, and hierarchical narratives continue to shape media discourses about the East (Ranji, 2021). The Orientalist gaze allows us to see how the West portrays the East as "mysterious, decadent, irrational, and backward" (McAlister, 2006: 550). Said (1979) articulates that beyond academia, it functions as a powerful means for cultural and political discourses because it highlights how power generates, encodes, and arranges knowledge about the East in a way that serves to benefit the West (McAlistair, 2006; Said, 1979). Similar to how Bell presents that governing myths about the British empire have been narrated in a way that justifies their colonial actions as humanising and necessary.

Yet more strikingly, Said's observation on "Orientalizing the Oriental" (Said, 1979: 50) also relates to myths, which he calls the Oriental tale. Similarly, he poses that these are less about factual knowledge and more about "Europe's collective day-dream of the Orient" (Said, 1979: 52, as cited in Kiernan, 1969), where such tales froze the East in time, remaining as exotic and inferior. Overlapping here is also Barthes' second-order signification as Said himself notes that Oriental tales hold a second-order knowledge, "with a life of its own" (Said, 1979: 52). This is because Said's concept is fundamentally rooted in Foucault's notion of a discourse (Donzé-Magnier, 2017; McAlistair, 2006; Said, 1979), which allows us to understand Orientalism not only as a narrative, but as a system of knowledge and of power. Therefore, Said points out that a certain vocabulary is used when talking about the East, consisting of either generalisations or opposing terms that paints a picture of otherness (Ranji, 2021; Said, 1979).

The concept of Orientalism within this study should not be seen as a direct myth but as a discursive structure and a climate, or under Foucault's idea, a system of knowledge that further enables constructions of myths about KWC. As previously mentioned, Bell's (2003) mythscape is rooted within nationalism and therefore he mainly argues that myths reflect the internal dynamics of Western nations. In contrast, what Orientalism affords is an insight not from within, but across national boundaries. In this case, Orientalist discourse offers an ideological structure situated within the context of colonial and postcolonial, as well as media and cultural studies. Because while Said's Oriental tales appear to align with governing myths, they cannot be seen as identical as these tales do not emerge from within Hong Kong, but outside, from the West. Thus, for this study, Orientalist discourse is situated as a broader discursive structure which can produce myths and circulate these where they operate hegemonically instead of competitively.

A more contemporary approach towards Orientalist discourse is also an increased observation of the Techno-Orientalism (Lok & Chun, 2020; Morley & Robins, 1995). As the name suggests, Techno-Orientalism describes the process of othering but where the West projects their fears about the East being technologically dominant (Lok & Chun, 2020; Morley & Robins, 1995). Kong (2024), who uses KWC as a case study to analyse its traveling nostalgia, finds that cyberpunk narratives, portrayed by America in particular, are often found within KWC's depiction. He highlights how it has become one of the many cybercity symbols within Asia, where its characteristics of decay are blended with a high-tech imagery. While both Orientalism and Techno-Orientalism concerns itself with the process of othering, the latter presents that the East is no longer seen as the "victim" or as pre-modern. Instead, the projection of "dominance" now, is highlighted by a fear from the West over to the East.

Conceptual framework and research question

Overall, this study situates itself at the intersection of media, cultural, and postcolonial studies and proposes to understand KWC's representation in online news articles as a mythic narrative. Myths within this research is not adopted in the traditional sense but through the frameworks of Bell and Barthes and refers to the discursive processes through which

ideological meanings and narratives are constructed, naturalised, and then legitimised. Using Bell's mythscape offers a way to map competing governing and subaltern myths, whereas Barthes' myth explains the ideological mechanisms behind them.

Moreover, three conceptual aspects have guided this study. First is the difficulty of only applying the concept of a cultural memory onto KWC, like previous scholars have done. As the historical section provided, the clash of forces from Britain, China, and Hong Kong, the contested historiography that followed, and attempts of political erasure makes reducing KWC solely within this theory lacking. Besides, doing so would only further risk reinforcing ideologies that are already pertinent within its past. Second is the recognition of journalism not as a simple producer of content but as a key agent in mythmaking. In addition, this domain of inquiry within KWC's scholarship has been largely overlooked in favour of pop culture, photography, or architecture (Cheng, 2024; Fraser & Li, 2017; Lau *et al*., 2018; Lee, 2016; May, 2022; Zhang, 2023). Third, is the acknowledgement that these representations are embedded within broader ideological structures that through the politics of othering can further enable and sustain dominant representations of KWC. Therefore, through a Critical Discourse Analytical approach, this study aims to address the following research question:

In what ways do Western online news articles contribute to the mythologisation of the Kowloon Walled City?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I will present the methodologies employed for this study and justify their suitability for answering the research question as stated above. I will address why a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach is the most suitable and how it will be applied. Next, I will introduce the overall research design following with the sampling of data. Lastly, the limitations of this research will be addressed along with my positionality as a researcher.

Methodological Justification

Overall, discourse analysis is a qualitative approach where language is examined beyond its sentence and within its context (Chouliaraki, 2008; Gill, 2000). Gill (2000) emphasises the importance of construction because discourse is not perceived as direct or unmediated but seen as having intent, a purpose.

CDA in this case is an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond the construction of texts and acknowledges that these are not produced in isolation. Instead, they are created within a complex context that shapes and is shaped by the social, cultural, historical, and political realities of our world (Fairclough, 2003). By adding a critical lens, such implications of language use are foregrounded. In essence, CDA is highly context-sensitive and problem-oriented with an emphasis on analysing ideological effects of discourses (Huckin,1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

Moreover, Wodak (2002) explains how CDA is often employed when analysing the language of mass media as they are often scrutinised as sites of power. In addition, Machin and Mayr (2012) contend that CDA is used on news texts amongst others, where ideological meanings are often masked as neutral reporting. This means that it studies the "implicit" or "indirect" (Van Dijk, 2001: 104) meanings of texts which are inferred to either explicitly or implicitly. Van Dijk (2001: 104) argues that these implicit meanings carry underlying beliefs which are not directly obvious and therefore can serve different reasons such as "the well-known ideological objective to de-emphasize our bad things and their good things". Seeing how text is used as a primary means to depict KWC within online news articles, CDA allows for the analysis of the immediate text along with a contextualisation to its wider societal context.

My research question asks in what ways do Western online news articles contribute to the mythologisation of KWC. Because this process is not a neutral nor a context-free one, an approach is needed that can trace the ideological work of language across text, production, and its sociopolitical context. CDA meets those criteria as it treats language as a site where power circulates, is naturalised, and therefore needs to be "de-mystified" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009: 3). Thus, other methods like thematic analysis are superficial in capturing this process as

they focus on the descriptive recurring of linguistic patterns without explaining why those themes might matter or how they emerge in the first place. As previously stated, Barthes is best known for his work in semiotics which studies how signs produce meaning (Chandler, 1994). But to use a semiotic analysis often lacks critical insight because it falls back to a simple coding and decoding process (Cobley, 2015). In addition, Barthes approach usually stops after the myth is exposed (Monticelli, 2016), whereas CDA continues to ask what the implications could be.

As such, the CDA approach was deemed appropriate and by using Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional method, I can unpack these layers systematically. His approach is also widely welcomed in the social sciences as it offers a clarity of application both methodologically and conceptually. Within his model, language is analysed through 'description', 'interpretation', and 'explanation'. In the first dimension, language is examined descriptively with a focus on its textual and formal structures. Next, interpretation interrogates the discursive practices by looking at how these texts are produced and consumed. Lastly, through explanation, the critical analysis is completed where the texts are situated within their broader societal context, also known as social practice (Fairclough, 2010).

Research Design and Analytical Framework

This research adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and inductive approach to investigate how online news articles construct KWC's representation. Within qualitative studies the goal is to investigate complex social and cultural phenomena that unlike quantitative studies, cannot be measured through numbers and statistical analyses (Ahmad *et al*., 2019; Tenny *et al*., 2022). As there is no preexisting hypothesis to test, the inductive thinking allows me to start within a field of study and subsequently identify specific observations as the data is being made sense of (Ahmad *et al*., 2019; Tenny *et al*., 2022). Likewise, as qualitative studies aim to form an in-depth understanding into the topic at hand, the data gathered is "for the purpose" (Ahmad *et al*., 2019: 2829).

The decision to analyse online news articles, particularly Western and English- language ones, is grounded in my recognition of their overall authority and popularity. The choice for

Western and not for example Asian news outlets is due to their significant role in circulating dominant narratives within the media sphere. As Thussu (2007/ 2012) elaborates, they are not solely sources of information but discursive producers with a transnational agenda-setting power. Focussing specifically on news articles stems from the recognition of how journalism engages with ideological assumptions and mythmaking and not just neutral reporting. Therefore, they present a content-rich dataset for critical analysis. While non-Western news outlets are indeed proliferating, English-language journalism still remains one of the most globally accessed and widely consumed forms of media.

I focus only on the textual data within KWC's news articles and not on other forms of semiotic resources such as images. Scholars like Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) have indeed stressed that meaning can be communicated beyond just language and that images can have their own grammar because they too are shaped by symbolic and cultural values. This, however, is not in dispute. Instead, my argument is that KWC, a historical entity, is and will evidently be visualised through images taken during its time. I claim that in this case they do not present direct journalistic engagement because they act more as visual confirmations and evidence to support the narratives that are being told. As Sontag (2005: 17) supports, "photographs (...) cannot themselves explain anything" because their evidentiary power comes only *after* the event is named. Hence, the real interpretive weight lies in the words, that unlike images in KWC's case, are not fixed and where framing choices remain fluid and ideologically contested. Moreover, during a preliminary scan of news articles about KWC, it became apparent that many articles (Chan, 2015; Crawford, 2020; Lam, 2016; Kitching, 2016; Owen, 2012) use and recycle the same photographs.

With this, each selected article was analysed and divided into three steps following Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional method. In the first step I focussed on the textual analysis, giving weight to the construction of meaning through vocabulary, metaphors, analogies, archetypes, and binary oppositions. In the second step, I examined the discursive practices by looking at intertextuality and the production of the articles. Here, I noted how the journalists and authors referenced for example photographers or residents from KWC's time.

Finally, in the last step the texts were situated within their social practice where I linked the mythic representations of KWC to its broader postcolonial, media, and geopolitical contexts.

Sampling Strategy and Data

The articles were selected through Google News Search to limit researcher bias as best as possible and replicate our basic media literacy of using search engines for inquiries. Therefore, 'Kowloon Walled City' was the only search term used throughout the entire sampling process as this also captured a broader range of articles to select from. A non-probabilistic and purposive sampling strategy was adopted and to ensure analytical relevance and consistency throughout the data, four inclusion criteria were defined:

1. Explicit focus of KWC, not just in passing.
2. Textual richness and narrative structure.
3. Published by a Western and English-language news outlet.
4. Non-syndicated and non-republished content.

While this study does not conduct a full longitudinal analysis because the focus is on discursive content, the data was gathered exploratory through a temporal sampling. I was aware of selecting a sample within a timeframe of one or between maximum two years to confine the articles within a shared societal context and thereby enhance results of comparability. As such, I used a timeframe to locate a moment of discursive intensity. In order to identify this, multiple searches were conducted iteratively with the key term 'Kowloon Walled City' from 1993, the year of its demolition to 2024. Each year was searched individually and for each search only the first 10 pages of results were scanned due to researcher feasibility.

The very first search into each year served as a familiarisation with the data and to catalogue the number of publications surrounding KWC. Therefore, the four criteria were not applied so I could observe highs and lows in KWC's news engagements. With this, a total of 509 news articles were logged. More details of this can be found within Appendix A. under Table A1. These results then allowed me to narrow my final search field to the years 2013 and 2014 because it saw a significant spike, followed by a decrease in publications (see Appendix A. under Table A1.), because of KWC's 20th anniversary in 2013. While 2023 and 2024 also saw a

rise with articles mentioning the search term 'Kowloon Walled City', these were often tied to pop culture, mentioned KWC only in passing and most prominently consisted of reviews for a Hong Kong movie. In comparison, most articles published in 2013 and 2014 explicitly report on KWC. Therefore, those years were selected for the final search of articles to be analysed and as scholars (Edy, 1999; Kitch, 2002) note, media discourse and journalism especially, tends to intensify in discursive activity surrounding anniversaries.

As such, out of the 76 articles I catalogued for 2013 and 2014, five were selected for the final CDA based on purposive sampling and the four criteria I set (see Figure 1.).

Figure 1

The final selection of five articles for CDA

#	**Publication**	**Date**	**Headline**
1	Bloomberg UK	05.11.2014	Rare Maps Show Life in Hong Kong's Vice-Filled 'Walled City' (Misra, 2014)
2	CNN International	31.03.2014	Life inside the densest place on earth: Remembering Kowloon Walled City (Chan, 2014)
3	Gizmodo	19.03.2013	Kowloon Walled City: Remembering Hong Kong's Chaotic City of Darkness (Campbell-Dollaghan, 2013)
4	The Architectural Review	09.04.2013	Kowloon Walled City: Surreal photographs of day-to-day life inside the City of Darkness (Kowloon Walled City, 2014)
5	VICE	03.04.2014	A New Look at Kowloon Walled City, the Internet's Favorite Cyberpunk Slum (Mead, 2014)

Note. Created by the researcher.

These articles also offered a different thematic angle, helping reduce researcher bias. During the preliminary scan, article 1. revealed a negative tone, article 2. a community-focused one, article 4. a neutral and architectural tone, and article 5. a techno-romantic tone with article 3. reinforcing the technological but from a sensationalist perspective. Important to note is that article 2. flagged as published in 2014 under Google News Search but was changed and updated by the author in 2015. To keep consistency, I retained the original article published from 2014 and used that version for the CDA. Links to all the articles including article 2.'s old and new link can be found within Appendix A. under Table A2.

Lastly, a small dataset is methodologically fitting for CDA because the goal is not to generalise findings across a population but to conduct an in-depth and contextually grounded analysis (Ahmad *et al*., 2019; Machin & Mayr, 2012) and therefore depth over breadth was favoured. Moreover, because of the scope and time constraint and previous published MSc dissertations, this size of sample was deemed appropriate.

Reflexivity, Limitations, and Positionality

First, ethics approval for this research has been approved and no ethical considerations were required as this study did not involve human participants, only publicly available sources.

Second, there are a few limitations within this study that need to be addressed. While the small sample size is common for qualitative and CDA approaches, it nevertheless still limits the representativeness of the findings. But I do not aim to generalise these across all news outlets. Instead, I want to highlight a critical entry point into the underexplored mythologisation of KWC. In addition, the timeframe between 2013 and 2014 from which the sample was collected, ensured a contextual coherence but at the same time was constrained as counter-narratives or shifts in representation from other years fell outside the scope of analysis. To add, the initial recording of the 509 articles through Google News Search is also a limitation as any articles not indexed or catalogued by Google did not have a chance to be considered for the analysis in the first place. I also recognise that excluding images from the dataset may be considered a limitation. Yet, I argue that it is methodologically sound to either focus solely on one semiotic resource, or to conduct a full intersemiotic Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis which can

do justice in analysing the entire news article and thereby its effects, compared to only a partial analysis.

When it comes to CDA, the main concern has always been researcher bias and subjectivity. From a systematic level, CDA is an approach that does not offer a strict framework to follow (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Therefore, when researchers engage with CDA it is not only under their own interpretation of the theories and methodologies applied, but also through their cultural lens and theoretical standpoint. Moreover, Bloomaert and Bulcaen (2000) contend that the researcher's subjectivity can influence the findings because interpretation often blurs with analysis. For my research, where I am interpreting these myths, it is therefore recognised that what I conclude within the news texts, might not be the same as every other reader or researcher.

Therefore, and third of all, I must present my own positioning as the researcher within this study. My mixed but Asian heritage, half Chinese and half German, has always shaped my curiosity in seeing how countries, peoples, cities, and cultures in East Asia are being presented, particularly by others. As such, my interest in this topic is inevitably shaped by my personal background. Which is why I relied on Google News Search as the first point of contact with the data, so I could limit an initial bias during the selection. Originally, using more than one search term was considered but ultimately rejected to avoid skewing the results towards a more positive or negative framing. This was also noted for the selection of the final five articles where, to my best abilities, I tried to include narratives that presented different perspectives rather than one. Lastly, because of KWC's history between Britain, China, and Hong Kong, I want to elaborate that I do not hold a strong political stance on the China and Hong Kong relationship. My engagement with this topic is purely academically grounded and not emotionally. If anything, my dual cultural background puts me in a position of "insider" and "outsider" where I'm familiar but not deeply embedded to. While this does not excuse any potential biases and subconscious subjectivity, it has allowed me to approach this topic with a critical distance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following chapter is divided into two sections. First, the results will be presented and interpreted from the CDA analysis conducted across the five Western online news articles from Bloomberg UK (BU), CNN International (CNN), Gizmodo (GM), The Architectural Review (TAR), and VICE. Overall, three main discursive framings were identified, and these will be illustrated through Fairclough's three dimensions of 'description', 'interpretation', and 'explanation'. These are narratives focussed on KWC's architecture, its lawlessness, and its residents and their community. What then follows is an overall discussion that includes the role journalism plays so that the main research question of this study can be answered which is: In what ways do Western online news articles contribute to the mythologisation of the Kowloon Walled City?

Stacking the City into a Governing Myth

The opening line from CNN directly urges us to "picture a colossal empire of little houses stacked on top of each other" (Article 2.), already constructing KWC's architecture as a vertical spectacle. This dominant frame appears throughout all five articles and while seemingly describing a 'dense' or 'vertical' city, functions as a governing myth within KWC's mythscape. It presents a simplified and aestheticized narrative of how KWC grew uncontrollably by organic growth, displacing the reality of its colonial conflicts.

But first, the articles engage with this framing through an expressive language consisting of spatial metaphors and a frequent use of superlatives and hyperboles. The words 'dense' and 'densest' are common denominators across all articles but are used differently. For instance, CNN calls it "the densest settlement on earth" (Article. 2), VICE as "stunningly dense" (Article 5.), and TAR as the "densest urban environment" (Article 4.). These invoke an immediate sense of awe and fascination and are cemented as credible statements because the texts then anchor these strategically with numerical data. In combination with '33,000' or '40,000' people "crammed" (Article 3.), "packed" (Article 5.), or simply "living" (Article 2.) in KWC, the tone shifts from awe into overwhelming. While these all imply close living quarters and physical

proximity, they start to paint a picture of claustrophobia, a sense of spatial absurdity and unregulated growth.

This is increased using spatial metaphors where the reader is urged to "visualize" (Article 2.) the vertical city rather than critique why it came to be. As Barthes (1957/1972) reminds, the myth emerges once the historical conditions are simplified. This is evident from BU's beehive metaphor stating how KWC "grew up organically, clearly constructed without (...) a single architect" and "buzzed with life" (Article 1.). Here, any implications of spatial neglect through geopolitical conflicts are erased. At first glance it beckons a natural structure of compactness but then a sense of productivity and cooperation known to bees. But ultimately it naturalises KWC's unregulated growth by offering the reader a simpler narrative of an efficient and organic entity. Moreover, modalities of "clearly" (Article 1.) and "unsurprisingly" (Article 4.) which are used in relation, only further imply that this narrative is self- evident or the "truth".

Yet even when the articles do mention KWC's growth due to colonial tensions like GM, TAR, and VICE, they do not offer an alternative or contradicting narrative to this governing myth. Instead, they reinforce it. By employing hyperboles of "no-man's-land" (Article 2.; Article 4.) for example, it constructs a story of origin where chaos is inevitable, and foreign interventions are expected because the land is already tainted. In addition, rhetorical questions such as "and what else could you say?" (Article 5.) directly address the reader and foreclose any critical interpretation.

Moreover, through intertextual references from *Wall Street Journal* (Article 5.), local architects, academics (Article 2.; Article 5.), movies and video games (Article 2.), it not only builds credibility but a multi-vocal narrative that shifts from political and colonial abandonment to cultural fascination and commodification. A narrative turned into a cultural product that can resonate more easily with all audiences. Interestingly, when these are referenced, the products that were inspired by KWC remain as such, but KWC itself is described as "haunting" (Article 2.) them. More specifically, the BU article referencing Wall Street Journal's feature quote of a "donut hole of Chinese sovereignty" (Article 1.) exemplifies Orientalist logics. Not only are Western news outlets referencing each other on the failure and exoticness of others but also

reinforcing the notion of how the West both produces and certifies knowledge about KWC, the East.

In addition, one discursive practice that further enables this governing myth is through the technological fascination. VICE for instance merges KWC's historical reality with the cyberpunk genre. By calling it the "internet's favourite cyberpunk slum" or "the modern pirate utopia" (Article 5.), KWC is reframed into a narrative of futuristic decay. The article discursively repositions it as a symbol of an alternative urbanism and thereby appeals to audiences by invoking fears of the future.

Within the level of social practice, this dominant framing aligns with and further spreads the modern colonial imaginary where non-Western spaces are depicted as irrational and therefore in the need of intervention. It exemplifies Bell's (2003) observations on the British empire's governing myth of imperial control deemed civilising. Crucially, while simple metaphors like that of the beehive might seem neutral or even admiring, they strategically function within a discursive system that supersedes historical and political accountability. Passive constructions like "buildings grew taller" (Article 5.) actively erase any colonial actors and reimagine KWC as a natural growth. Furthermore, the dominant aestheticisation and intertextual references of products we know, like the movie *Batman Begins* or the video game *Call of Duty* (Article 2.), allow this governing myth to spread within Western media as it cements into an object of cultural desire. This governing myth then resonates more easily across audiences as KWC becomes both the exception and the exemplar.

Yet, within this discursive framing there are no subaltern myths by Bell's (2003) definition. Instead, what presents itself are narratives that mimic these, but ultimately serve hegemonic functions. For instance, both CNN and TAR highlight residents' adaptability by digging wells, installing rooftop bridges or building informal networks amidst KWC's growth. TAR even directly references planners and developers who happily expanded their buildings across KWC's rooftops. This directly contradicts the "chaos through no architect" claims (Article 1.; Article 3.) because it shows a bottom-up urbanism. But these are informally presented and most of all voiced through external sources like photographer Greg Girard or architect Aaron Tan. Not only does this distance the stories from the reader but also reinforces an epistemic

hierarchy where the residents are only acknowledged by outsiders. These perspectives then are essentially instrumentalised within the governing myth, used by those already in power to present subjective curiosities. Moreover, TAR describes KWC's rooftops as the "lung" and "invaluably sanctuary" for its residents to "breathe fresh air and escape the claustrophobia" from (Article 4.). This shows how these narratives are mostly rendered lyrical and emotional rather than political or critical and thereby fail to challenge or destabilise the governing myth.

Governing Myths of Order and Control

Whereas the texts previously mythologise KWC's form, presenting an aesthetic spectacle that erased historical and political causality, this discursive frame centres around its function. Here, KWC is framed as lawless and autonomous and serves as a governing myth that reinforces the narrative of state power by showcasing what happens in its absence. But KWC's characteristic of autonomy does not act as a subaltern myth but rather as a romanticised version of caution and serves as an exemplar or the "original experiment" (Article 3.) for where society is headed today.

Within this frame, the language is sensational, dramatised, emotionally charged, and steeped in Orientalist tropes. Crime and deviance are heavily foregrounded through specific lexical choices. VICE lists for example "prostitutes, opium dens and unlicensed doctors" (Article 5.) while BU labels KWC with a metaphor of "brothel of the East" (Article 1.). In combination with adjectives of 'ungoverned', 'unlicensed', 'dark', and 'lawless', KWC is reduced to a space beyond governance and invites a sense of shock and moral panic. Stylistically, the texts also lean heavily on juxtapositions with BU comparing "drug kingpins, prostitutes, and gangsters" to "fish ball makers, mailmen, and hawkers" (Article 1.). Or CNN pitting KWC's "wild appearance" and its "building's darkness" against its residents' ordinary lives and how "a variety of small businesses [still] flourished" (Article 2.). Moreover, BU and CNN for example, employ immediate fear and moral inducing frames that set the tone of KWC being lawless. The former's sub headline already brands KWC as the "infamous, secret city" that "most refused to enter" (Article 1.), whereas the latter introduces this by claiming its corridors were "so dark even police was rumored to be afraid of them" (Article 2.). But more significantly the

concept of lawlessness and ungoverned is presented as a given for KWC by using passive voices that neutralise any political conflicts. As seen in BU that describes KWC as "being tossed" (Article 1.) between Britain and China.

When it comes to the discursive practices it becomes evident that the articles continue to repeat or recycle sources favoured by South China Morning Post (Hong Kong news outlet) or from Greg Girard and Ian Lambot's photography book ***City of Darkness: Revisited***, creating a tightly knit knowledge system. The dominant reference cited is the photography book across CNN, VICE, and TAR including direct quotes from the photographers which gesture the reader towards a credible authoritative witness. However, more crucial is the VICE article offering a simple Wikipedia link that explains triad organisation control instead of dissecting this in the text and thereby only reinforces the generic crime label attached to KWC. Through this, the governing myth of lawlessness continues to be recycled as legitimate, circulating with the same mediated accounts from visual and textual archives which have already been shaped by outsiders.

Yet this notion of 'outsiders' continues onto the level of social practice where narratives about KWC's lawlessness are almost only defined by those who observed from a distance. What this implies is that discourses surrounding KWC's disorder and criminality are naturalised into a governing myth without competition. This then obscures the multifaceted social, economic, and political structures that allowed KWC to function in the first place. And through which this "lawlessness" actually arises, rather than just pre-existing. Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong, often referenced alongside KWC as both being Hong Kong's "hearts of darkness" (Mathews, 2011: 212), offers a useful comparison to showcase this. Mathews (2011) contends that it has been shaped under a form of globalisation from below, which is the cross-border movements of people, goods, trade, and practices that operate outside the norms known to multinational cooperations. In the context of KWC it is this socio-economic condition which gave rise to the illegal clinics, unlicensed factories, self-governing networks, and many of the small-scale food productions which served both locals and outsiders, ill- and legally (Harter, 2000; Lee, 2010; Lee, 2016). Yet these conditions are not foregrounded within the discourse and therefore also positions KWC as the other. A space beyond governance and thereby is further

romanticised as the extraordinary where no competing narrative exists to contradict this view. Thus, the articles' focus on KWC's autonomy or lawlessness as a static condition rather than a dynamic socio-political outcome reinforces the overall governing myth of justification by external control and erasure.

Narrating for the Residents of Kowloon Walled City

While all five articles depict KWC literally through its nickname of the City of Darkness, they still include a recurring narrative of its residents and their community structures by focussing on their adaptiveness and resourcefulness. At first glance this emphasis on human agency might appear to soften or challenge the previously mentioned governing myths. Yet the CDA reveals that this framing is not subversive to but rather in support of them.

Within this narrative, the linguistic style varies across texts, employed through metaphors, juxtapositions, passive voice, and lexical framings. CNN for example quotes Greg Girard on how the residents were still doing ordinary things while describing the city as a "piece of machinery that worked very well" (Article 1.). This metaphor enables a sense of coherence and interdependence yet also abstracts the lived experiences into a technical marvel. VICE uses syntactic mirroring to emphasise their isolation and autonomy by stating it was "built on itself largely by itself" with an "industry mixed into itself" by a "self-sufficient" (Article 5.) community. TAR on the other hand offers lexical choices that invoke warmth and familiarity noting how the residents' rooftops became "sanctuaries" and an "exciting playground" (Article 4.). In stark contrast, however, is BU that uses a temporal distancing of "back in the day" and a vague collective of "people" (Article 1.) to evoke nostalgia but without intimacy. Modalities like 'just' and 'still' are also used to reinforce a subtle exceptionalism of KWC's community.

As mentioned, these depictions are largely shaped by an intertextual loop of the same external voices. All five texts either cite Greg Girard, Aaron Tan or cultural references. Only GM offer one direct quote from a resident but sourced from the South China Morning Post which quotes:

> *We all had a very good relationship in very bad conditions (...) people who lived there were always loyal to each other. In the Walled City, the sunshine always followed the rain (Article 3.).*

Yet this first-hand account is brief, emotionally driven, and directly engages with the narrative of community resilience which could have been selectively chosen for emphasis. CNN for example also features a lot of commentary from architect Aaron Tan, but he reveals, "people could be more intelligent than us, the designers" (Article 2.). This appears to highlight agency but only further positions the residents as an object for outsider admiration. They are validated but only from someone with cultural capital. A valiant attempt, however, is from VICE which links a Reddit blog discussion from someone who lived in KWC. But that individual starts the blog by stating "I lived in KWC when I was 2-3 years old but I have no recollection of that time" (Crypt0n1te., 2011). Which is more symbolic than substantive. Similarly, GM draws on a quote from a fictional character out of a sci-fi futuristic novel that reads "drug and whores and gambling. But people living, too" (Article 3.). Such examples show that while its residents are featured prominently, they are ultimately reframed as fascinating because of their adaptiveness to an improvised urban life.

What then emerges across these texts is not just a reoccurring narrative about a community, but one filtered through an outsider lens that reflects broader ideological systems. These portrayals of "an ingenious community" (Article 2.) do not serve as subaltern myths because they do not challenge any governing myths. Because the community is no longer presented as a crisis to be solved but rather an efficient bottom-up system that can be admired. Therefore, falling back to such a frame allows Western audiences to consume the narratives of KWC's urban failure as a story of triumph without having to ask which structures caused it. Consequently, this narrative works to support the governing myth as it essentially excuses state governance and colonial actors from any responsibilities and thus offers admiration in place of accountability.

Discussion

This study set out to critically examine KWC's mythologisation in Western online news articles which has shown that these are mainly structured around three dominant myths. The depoliticised myth of its unregulated growth, the myth of lawlessness mainly functioning as a cautionary tale, and lastly the romanticised myth of its residents' resilience. Under Bell (2003), these can be classified as governing myths which are narratives that stabilise collective understandings and serve to justify existing power structures or meanings. Yet despite Bell's (2003: 73) assertion that these myths are "constantly contested by subaltern myths" and therefore will inevitably fail to impose their views, the analysis has shown that for KWC, no genuine subaltern myth emerges. What appears instead is a curated discursive field in which this resistance is either absent or absorbed. Or better yet, excluded from surfacing by other forces such as journalists and news platforms.

In theory, Bell's mythscape presents a compelling map to trace how competing narratives can circulate within public discourses. But its pluralism assumes that alternative voices can surface and even take on traditions of their own (Bell, 2003). Yet in practice, for a place like KWC where countless structural conditions like its colonial past or its mediated afterlife and Orientalist framing constrain who can speak and how, this assumption falters. The subaltern myths across the five articles are not missing because its residents had no stories to tell, but rather that journalists or news outlets also only amplify them when they align with the dominant narratives already circulating. Journalism then, is clearly not a neutral medium, as already shown in the theoretical chapter, but also a mythmaking institution. This aligns with Barthes' observation on how the myth operates not by hiding meaning but rather by presenting it as natural or as common sense and the truth. The mythologisation of KWC through journalistic practices therefore does not deny its socio-political and colonial origins but instead simplifies it and recasts it as self-evident and within features of a mystery and the exceptional urban space. As Barthes (1957/1972: 143) says, the myth "purifies" history and therefore renders ideology blissfully evident, a process clearly seen in the aetheticised, romanticised, dystopian, and depoliticised framings of KWC across the articles.

But more specifically as Zelizer (2008) has shown, journalism's tension of trying to be objective and trying to report on complex phenomena will often result in superficial narratives. To add with Bird and Dardenne's (2009) observations on news as storytelling it then becomes clear that these practices are evidently found within KWC's news coverage. The binary oppositions like 'drug kingpins, prostitutes, and gangsters' versus 'fish ball makers, mailmen, and hawkers', or sensational metaphors like the 'brothel of the East' and the 'colossal empire of little houses' all become narrative arcs to make KWC's complex past more resonant. But most notably and where the subaltern myth really fails to emerge is the selective engagement of KWC's memory through content and form. Form in particular, where journalists will draw on memories from the past to frame new conflicts such as the fear of futuristic decay by highlighting KWC as the 'modern pirate utopia' or the 'cyberpunk slum'. In addition to selecting authoritative outsider voices such as photographers, architects, historians, and academics, the seemingly subaltern myth of its residents only reinforces the dominant narrative.

This is where the concept of cultural memory, at least for understanding KWC's news coverage, neglects to account for the discursive functions evident around it because it usually depends on notions of transmission and the collective remembrance. But as the analysis has shown those "memories" of KWC are not transmitted by its own community but rather constructed and perpetuated from and for external audiences through journalistic practices. In this case, cultural memory becomes more of a performance of nostalgia and not a product or transmission of the collective experience. Which also simplifies the political and colonial conflicts from KWC's past and thereby continues to reinforce the hegemonic or governing myth.

In addition, Foucault's (2013) concept of discourse helps clarify this further. In archaeology, it is not that things remain unsaid but that they are unsayable within a given discursive formation. Therefore, when it comes to KWC, it is not just shaped by what is remembered but by what is permitted to be remembered. As seen in the five articles, journalists cite photographers Greg Girard and Ian Lambot, architect Aaron Tan, the South China Morning Post, Wall Street Journal, and even fictional characters from a cyberpunk novel, instead of first-

hand testimonies from its residents. As such, those who control the discourse also control the memory or the nostalgia and by extension control the myth.

To add, the absence of the subaltern myths and the dominance of governing myths within KWC's mythscape is also sustained by deeper ideological frameworks tied to Orientalist discourse. As Said (1979) argues, the West will continue to portray the East through reductive and oppositional categories of 'chaos' versus 'order'. For KWC such binaries in its news coverage appear not only in framings of lawlessness or its spectacle architecture, but also in the fascination with its dystopian imagery and its residents which help naturalise Western ideas of superiority.

But to circle back to Bell's concept on the mythscape. While it is effective at bringing out and identifying dominant and governing myths, it is perhaps less applicable for media discourses because it assumes a level of narrative access and penetrability which within the context of KWC's news narratives does not really exist. The subaltern myths might well occur in the real world but unless the discursive field within media and journalistic practices allows them to circulate, they will remain silenced.

As such, the myth that spreads about KWC's community and its residents cannot be seen as the subaltern myth. At best it would be seen as a governing myth in disguise because it only offers emotional depth without any political resistance. The myth here then, is not just a story but a form of control and a way to remember just enough, without remembering too much.

CONCLUSION

This research has shown that Western online news articles, based on the five analysed, contribute to the mythologisation of KWC by constructing a tightly controlled discursive field in which governing myths, under Bell's (2003) definition, dominate unchallengedly. Through aestheticised and romanticised narratives of its architecture, its lawlessness, and resilient community, these articles have simplified KWC's complex past by rendering them symbolically resonant for wider audiences to consume. Drawing on Barthes' notions on the myth, the analysis revealed how journalistic engagement through narrative techniques such

as selective framing, sourcing, and sensationalism, naturalises these ideological representations and masks them as self-evident, the truth, or common sense.

Theoretically, this research also questions the boundaries in applying Bell's mythscape onto media discourses. While Bell argues the mythscape is uneven but nonetheless existing of governing and subaltern myths that compete, this study has shown that in journalism, particularly Western reporting of postcolonial sites like KWC, subaltern myths are not absent but also systematically excluded. This is further complicated by the notion of a cultural memory as they often suppose narrative continuity when clearly political and cultural erasure and media fragmentation dominate within KWC's context.

Empirically, this study is limited in several constraints. While it examined Western articles, the exclusion of Chinese, Canotnese, or other non-Western news sources could perhaps have offered the representation of these subaltern myths and counter narratives that were absent within this analysis. The dataset, while analytically rich was also limited to five articles published in 2013 and 2014 which is a period that cannot account for more recent developments or shifts in news discourse today. Additionally, the analysis was confined to only a textual analysis which excluded visuals, layout, design, or platform dynamics and thereby limits the semiotic scope. Also, the absence of data to account for audience reception means that we cannot understand or determine how readers interpret, internalise, or resist these myths.

Methodologically, this research is also limited. First, the non-replicable search method for the dataset by using Google News introduces opacity in sampling. Results can vary drastically by time, location, or personalisation based on algorithms. The inductive approach and the small sample size also means that the results cannot represent the broader landscape of Western media or fully dissect the mythological discourses across time and platforms. In addition, the data was interpreted by a single researcher which can raise concerns surrounding researcher bias. CDA is interpretive by nature but having multiple coders and analysts would enhance reliability and help triangulate the meanings analysed more robustly.

Thus, these limitations can point towards several directions for future research within this field. First, as mentioned within the methodology chapter, a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analytical approach can allow for a richer analysis of all semiotic resources and how they work together to construct myths of KWC. Second, reception studies like focus groups or cross-cultural interviews from British, Cantonese, and Chinese for example, could highlight how different audiences receive or challenge these dominant myths. This would critically test the assumption of Barthes whether such myths are truly self-evident and would also reveal whether subaltern myths are absent or just not foregrounded by journalistic discourse. In doing so it would expand this current study's focus on textual production and move beyond into the domain of meaning-making as well as consumption. Comparative case studies might also want to examine how KWC aligns with or differs from media representations of other informal settlements like Dharavi in Mumbai, Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro or Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong in order to expose global patterns of exoticisation.

Finally, future research must also critically pay attention to the political economy of mythmaking and examine who these platforms belong to, what editorial logics or commercial benefits further drive the representations of places like KWC and how algorithmic infrastructures can also privilege certain myths whilst rendering others invisible.

In sum, this study has contributed to a deeper understanding of how journalism constructs myths and revealed that these online news articles do not just report on the Kowloon Walled City but contain it and reframe its past through mythic narratives that homogenises its political and historical complexities and ultimately recast it as a cultural spectacle.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Tables and Figures relating to the Methodology Chapter

This Appendix lists the results of the first preliminary search conducted, to narrow down the final collection of samples within the years 2013 and 2014 (see Table A1.), as well as a table of the five articles selected for CDA and their URLs (see Table A2.).

Table A1

Tables and Figures relating to the Methodology Chapter

Year	**Number of Articles**	**Notable Publications Observed**

2024	100	Le Monde.fr, Screen Daily, South China Morning Post, The Guardian, The Standard, The Sun
2023	32	CNN, Discover Magazine, HowStuffWorks, South China Morning Post, The New York Times, Variety
2022	28	South China Morning Post, Time Out, Variety, WIRED
2021	33	South China Morning Post, The Standard, Time Out, TODAY
2020	33	Observer, South China Morning Post, Time Out
2019	32	Forbes, South China Morning Post, The Economist, The Guardian, The Standard, Time Out
2018	35	Atlas Obscura, China Daily, South China Morning Post, The Guardian, The Independent, Time Out
2017	31	Business Insider, China Daily, South China Morning Post, The Guardian, The Independent, The Telegraph

2016	38	ArchDaily, Business Insider, Daily Mail, South China Morning Post, The Guardian, The New York Times
2015	38	ArchDaily, Business Insider, CNN, HowStuffWorks, South China Morning Post, VICE, WIRED
2014	39	ArchDaily, Bloomberg, CNN, South China Morning Post, VICE, WSJ
2013	37	ArchDaily, HuffPost, South China Morning Post
2012	13	Business Insider, China Daily, Daily Mail, The Guardian, VICE.
2011	8	Untapped New York
2010	3	N/A
2009	0	South China Morning Post
2008	0	N/A
2007	0	N/A
2006	1	N/A
2005	0	N/A
2004	0	N/A
2003	0	N/A

2002	0	N/A
2001	0	N/A
1999	0	N/A
1998	0	N/A
1997	0	N/A
1996	0	N/A
1995	0	N/A
1994	0	N/A
1993	2	South China Morning Post, WIRED

Note. *These results were catalogued with no specific criteria set. Only the search term 'Kowloon Walled City' was used for each year and each search noted all articles within the first ten pages. The 'Notable Publications Observed' served as a note for the researcher and not all outlets were recorded.*

Table A2

Tables and Figures relating to the Methodology Chapter

#	**Publication**	**Date**	**Headline**	**URL**
1	Bloomberg UK	05.11.2014	Rare Maps Show Life in Hong Kong's Vice-Filled 'Walled City' (Misra, 2014)	https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-11-05/rare-maps-show-life-in-hong-kong-s-vice-filled-walled-city
2	CNN International	31.03.2014	Life inside the densest place on earth:	https://web.archive.org/web/20140402020054/http:/edition.cnn

			Remembering Kowloon Walled City (Chan, 2014)	.com/2014/03/31/travel/kowloon-walled-city/index.html Revised 2015 Article: https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/kowloon-walled-city/index.html
3	Gizmodo	19.03.2013	Kowloon Walled City: Remembering Hong Kong's Chaotic City of Darkness (Campbell-Dollaghan, 2013)	https://gizmodo.com/kowloon-walled-city-remembering-hong-kongs-chaotic-cit-5995070
4	The Architectural Review	09.04.2013	Kowloon Walled City: Surreal photographs of day-to-day life inside the City of Darkness (Kowloon Walled City, 2014)	https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/kowloon-walled-city
5	VICE	03.04.2014	A New Look at Kowloon Walled City, the Internet's Favorite Cyberpunk Slum (Mead, 2014)	https://www.vice.com/en/article/a-new-look-at-kowloon-walled-city-the-internets-favorite-cyberpunk-slum/

Note. Article 2. Contains both links for the original publication in 2014 and the later revised version by the journalist in 2015. The 2014 (first link) version has been used within this research for the CDA.

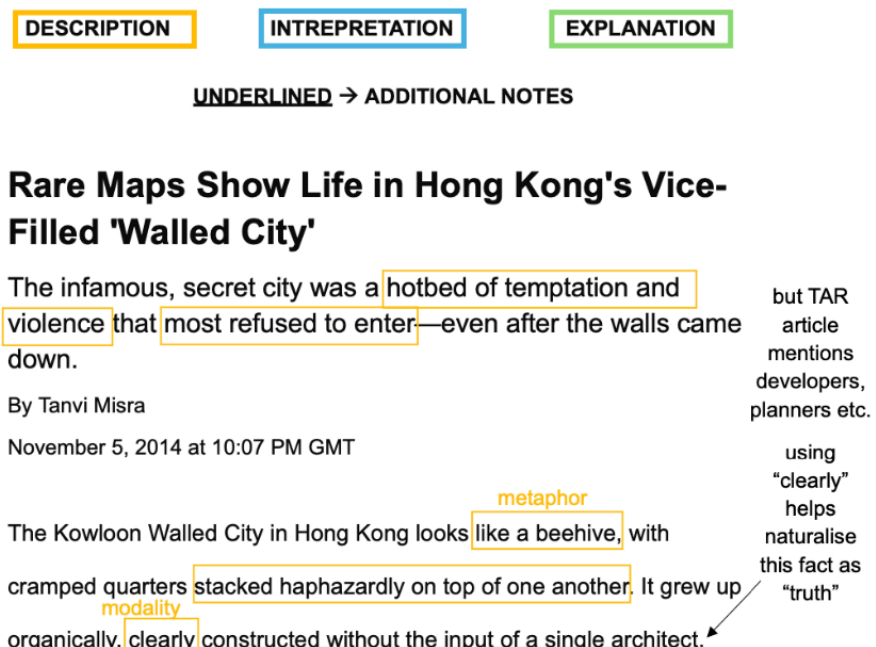
Appendix B

Sample of Coding Process

This appendix lists three articles from the CDA analysis and presents a sample of the coding process. The articles listed are from Bloomberg UK (Article 1.) (see Figure B1.), CNN International (Article 2.) (see Figure B2), and Gizmodo (Article 3.) (see Figure B3.). The articles were copy and pasted from their websites.

Figure B1

Sample of Coding Process



tossed between the Chinese and the British forced the city into legal limbo.

"legal limbo", abandonment of state, a chaotic space instead of one filled with community

"It really was like a mad art director's vision of a dystopian future," he says. "It was all botched together and it was this kind of crazy, chaotic architecture."

metaphor for entangled, creates sense of trap-like organism

anchoring with numbers

Back in the day, around 33,000 people lived in the webbed high-rises, making the city one of the most densely populated places in the world. To outsiders, it was a hotbed of vice and violence that most refused to enter—even after the walls came down in the mid 20th century.

narrative of fear and exclusion, reinforces "outsider" perspective

These hyper-detailed maps illustrate the true density of life in the city. They come from a rare book released in 1997, shortly after the colonial government decided to demolish the city and relocate the residents to public housing complexes. They were produced by Japanese researchers led by anthropologist Kani Hioraki, writes artist Johnny Strategy on his design blog.

academic resource → enhances validity of texts' narrative

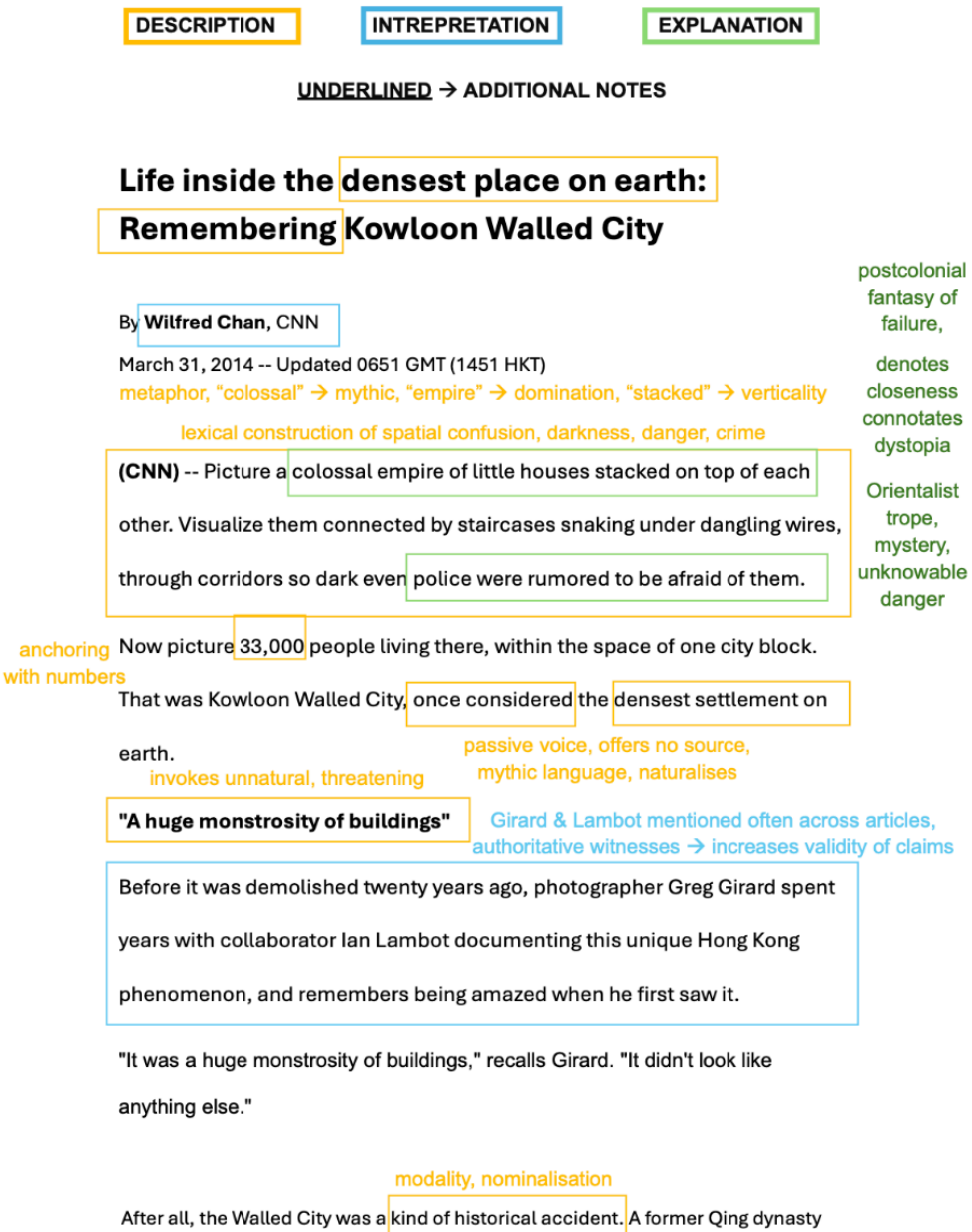
"I think what surprised me most was the sheer level of detail that was captured and then reproduced," Strategy writes in an email. "The more you study the map the more you realize that life was actually pretty normal—people did laundry, practiced gardening, fixed leaks, and generally made the best of what life offered."

KWC's residents represented by an outsider, narrated through artefacts or secondary commentators → distances reader more from the reality of its community

text outsources empathy

Figure B2

Sample of Coding process



juxtaposition

Deep within the building's darkness, a variety of small businesses flourished.

"The places that stuck out were the meat factories," says Girard. "There were pig carcasses laying splayed out on the floor; they'd burn the hair off with a blowtorch, it was all pretty open and of course there were no health laws governing the place."

indirectly draws comparison to Western norms of governance and hygiene

But despite the City's wild appearance, the photographer found that the people inside lived just like people anywhere else.

wild vs. normal, sensational framing

"People were doing very ordinary things," he says. "It's just that all these ordinary things were happening in an extraordinary place."

residents voiced through secondary source

An ingenious community

The complexity of the Walled City also fascinated local architect Aaron Tan, now the director of Hong Kong firm Research Architecture Design. A graduate student then, he wrote his thesis on the Walled City as it was being torn down.

Aaron Tan cited across multiple articles

metaphor, seen as mechanical and in-human but at the same time efficient

"I was fascinated -- it was like a piece of machinery that worked very well. The demolition was like taking the machine apart -- the first time you could see what was inside.

relies on expert testimony and witness, shift of tone and focus from exoticism to fascination and admiration

"It was a really humbling process for me as a designer -- when we met this Walled City, we started to see that people could be more intelligent than us, the designers -- that they could think of ways to solve problems that are outside the traditional academic world."

Tan was especially impressed by Kowloon Walled City's water system. To support its dense population, residents dug extra wells and built thousands of pipes that twisted through the building. But since pumping water to the City's roof tanks required plenty of power, the people would take turns conserving electricity so that water could be shared successfully.

"It revealed the community inside -- that no matter the challenges, they would find some intelligent way to solve it," says Tan.

juxtaposition, foregrounds state's rationality instead of community adaptation

Despite the ingenuity of the Walled City, by 1994 it was completely torn down by the city government, which was eager to replace the chaotic and unregulated community with a public park.

implies enthusiasm

evaluative

"Seeing the Walled City fall into disuse was sort of melancholic," says Girard. "Every city realizes too late to start caring about their architectural heritage -- it's a mistake that gets repeated everywhere. By the time you start caring about it, it's too late to save it."

Today, visitors to the site of the old Walled City will find a placid garden with swaying trees and cloudy ponds. In the park there is a small museum in honor of Kowloon Walled City. But when you look to the sky and imagine the colossus of Hong Kong life that once stood, it's easy to see that something significant has been lost. aestheticises absence, becomes nostalgia rather than its political memory

CNN Travel: Why we love the Kowloon City neighborhood

cross-media intertextuality → framed through Western cultural consumption, commodification

The City is not dead

Even today, the City's legacy lives on. A walled neighborhood called the Narrows in the 2005 film "Batman Begins" was based on Kowloon Walled City. The City is even a level in the video game "Call of Duty: Black Ops."

Because of the continued interest, Greg Girard is working with his fellow Kowloon Walled City photographer Ian Lambot to finish a new book of their stunning photographs, entitled "City of Darkness: Revisited." (Click here to visit the book"s crowd-funding campaign).

"You don't want to romanticize a slum, you know. Because it was that. But it was much more than that. The Walled City was a kind of architectural touchstone in terms of what a city can be -- unplanned, self-generated, unregulated. It was vital and vibrant and every part of it was being used."

strategic selection of quote, text hints towards complexity without taking the claim

Tan believes the spirit of the Walled City continues to pulse through the heart of Hong Kong itself.

"Go to The Peak and look down upon this amazing collection of buildings coming together -- it's almost like a blown up version of the Walled City, right? Each building is related to the next building. New programs evolve because of the connections."

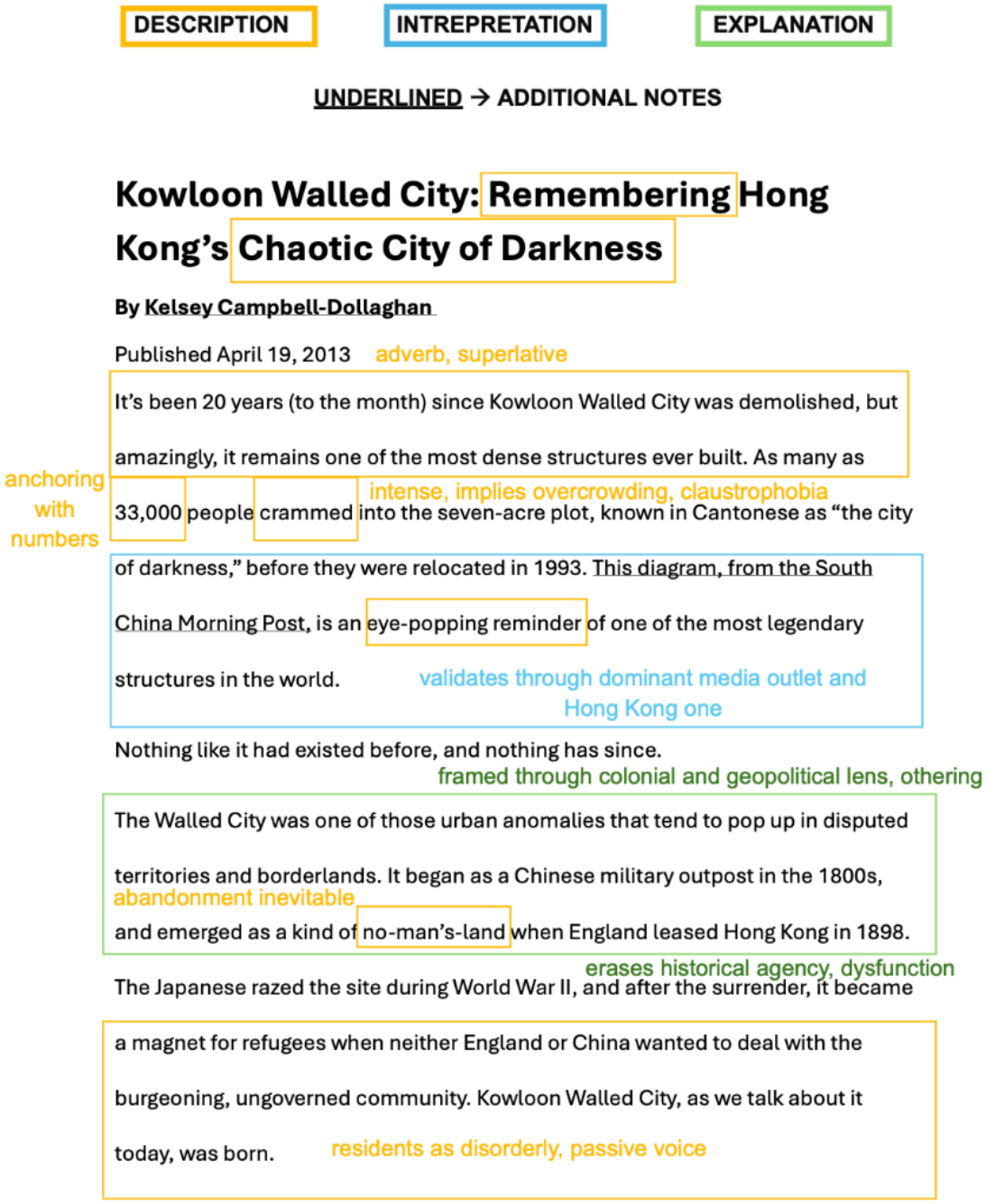
juxtaposition

This organic chaos, he says, has been an inspiration for his own work.

"Many architects and urban planners like control," he says. "But people like to get lost in the city. In my design process, I always consciously try to allow accidents, to allow others to participate, to surprise me."

Figure B3

Sample of Coding Process



romanticises informality, evokes ingenuity but still exceptionalises

visual metaphor of organic growth

In the years that followed, 300 towers rose on the site—soon, these buildings were woven into a dense interconnected network of ad hoc infrastructure. There was never an architect or planner involved, just an army of residents and carpenters who worked to fill the cracks. Without city services, residents got water from wells, and trash was hauled up to the roof. Every resident had an average of 40 square feet of living space. Unsurprisingly, a William Gibson character describes it best, in 1997's Idoru:

metaphor, dramatises agency, implies resilience

intertextual reference to cyberpunk, substitutes own voice

> There was a place near an airport, Kowloon, when Hong Kong wasn't China, but there had been a mistake, a long time ago, and that place, very small, many people, it still belonged to China. So there was no law there. An outlaw place. And more and more people crowded in; they built it up, higher. No rules, just building, just people living. Police wouldn't go there. Drugs and whores and gambling. But people living, too. Factories, restaurants. A city. No laws.

evaluative

What's really interesting about the Walled City is how much we still talk about it, two decades after it disappeared. It's taken on a life of its own as a cultural touchstone for ideas about ungoverned urbanism: Gibson's Bridge Trilogy describes several different iterations of Kowloon-esque walled cities, while architects wonder if 3D-printing technology could lead to a second coming. Kowloon has become a way to describe a whole set of ideas about cities and government today, well beyond the scope of the original experiment. [South China Morning Post, images courtesy of Greg Girard]

cultural production over historical experience

decontextualises history in favour of techno-future