

Marshall Moore and Xu Xi, ed. *The Queen of Statue Square: New Short Fiction from Hong Kong*. Nottingham, UK: Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, 2014. 159 pages. ISBN 978-1-905510-43-6.

The Queen of Statue Square: New Short Fiction from Hong Kong (2014), co-edited by Marshall Moore and Xu Xi, is an anthology with eight recent short stories that provide a glimpse of the Special Administrative Region's vibrant English writing scene. The book collects stories from the deeply personal to the openly public, from ghost stories to dystopian political fables, sampling a wide range of rising trends, currencies, imaginations and preoccupations surrounding Hong Kong. Although the contents of this volume are drastically different from Xu Xi's last Hong Kong-themed collection *Fifty-fifty*, there is still a line of continuity. Many stories in *The Queen of Statue Square* leave their protagonists as well as readers hanging, unsure and unclear about their future.

In the introduction to *Fifty-fifty* (2008), Xu Xi described Hong Kong people as a "perching" group in the first decade after the handover. The word "perch" epitomised the still "waiting, wondering" state of mind that, at the same time, maintained a great deal of hope. The book's call for submissions, despite its emphasis on the city's future uncertainties, carries a generally positive tone, a deep sense of belonging and a yearning for freedom:

What are the odds on the Special Administrative Region, the S.A.R., beyond 2046? If we were punters, as so many in this city are, would we say it's "fifty-fifty" that China will engulf us or that it will set us free? Or is politics not even the issue on our thoroughly post-modern, hilly rock, where film, fad and fashion lead, and where the harbor promenade enshrines the footprints of our "stars"? This is a call for submissions to a thinking person's book. What do writers and poets have to say about these times in this city, and how do they choose to say it? Will we, like the poet Agnes S.L. Lam, call Hong Kong "the city/with a history/unforetold"? And even if the odds on our city are fifty-fifty, is this always home, regardless? (Xu 9-10)

"Will China set us free?" is perhaps a question that nobody would ask now. In fact, in mere six years, it has become a rather naïve question, especially after the Umbrella Movement and the on-going dispute over the pro-vice-chancellor's election at the University of Hong Kong. Politics is everything. Although these

events are not addressed in the book's introduction,¹ Moore draws readers' attention to unsettling controversies such as the SAR government's rejection to HKTV² and the longstanding issue of domestic helpers' right of abode.³ These pressing issues make Hong Kong a space full of worthwhile debates, not only in relation to China but also in relation to the world.

This new short story collection seeks to redefine Hong Kong and expand views on this dynamic city by opening possibilities to a broader group of fiction writers. The call for submissions this time puts stress on contributors' identity:

Contributors should ordinarily be residents of Hong Kong and stories should have Hong Kong or its culture as a theme or setting. The series is designed to represent Anglophone writing in a linguistic context in which English is not the sole or dominant language and to convey a strong sense of place and particular culture. By implication, the volume is not intended as a vehicle for expatriate writers who happen simply to live there temporarily; neither is this a collection of Hong Kong Chinese diaspora writing. However, Hong Kong's unusual political situation – it has never been an independent nation or city-state – gives rise to an Anglophone writing that departs from the usual colonial/postcolonial literature. Therefore both expatriate and diaspora authors might, in some instances, render a more persuasive contemporary fiction than a 'native' resident (Moore and Xu 5).

As promised, the book includes stories written by people with diverse backgrounds and extended knowledge of the city. Strictly speaking, only two out of the eight writers are "Hong Kong Chinese," whereas more than half of the writers in *Fifty-fifty* are local Chinese writing in English.⁴ Most of the writers in this volume are expatriates, non-Chinese residents or, as Xu Xi puts it, Chinese "astronauts." In other words, they are to some degree "outsiders" who have found roots in Hong Kong. Having said that, it is equally important to note that Hong Kong is not these writers' primary or only muse. Curiously though, both this outsiders' perspective and the English-language writing create a space that set many sensitive topics free.

¹ *The Queen of Statue Square* was published in 2014, and the introductions were presumably written well before the pro-democracy protests known as "Occupy Central" and "The Umbrella Movement" that started in September 2014.

² HKTV's failure to gain a free-to-air broadcasting license in October 2013 was generally perceived as a political act of silencing alternative voices. In April 2015, through juridical review, HKTV challenged the government's decision and its application for licence is being reconsidered.

³ Hong Kong's Basic Law grants "permanent residence" to those who have lived in Hong Kong for seven consecutive years, excluding domestic helpers. There have been human rights protests against this biased policy, but no change seems likely.

⁴ It is also important to note that *Fifty-fifty* is a collection not only of short stories, but prose and poetry.

“Make-Believe” and “Saving Grace” alarm us about alienation between younger and older generations in a globalised environment. “Make-Believe” may appear a ghost story, but in effect it depicts a rather pervasive phenomenon of the “empty nest.” After the death of her son, a single mother and successful businesswoman fails to keep alive the bond with her only daughter. As a result, when the daughter finally leaves for Britain for college education, the mother resorts to a stranger’s child as her surrogate son. “Saving Grace” portrays a group of Hong Kong’s international school kids (also known as “Third Culture Kids”), who play daredevils by selling drugs, not only because they are bored, but also because everything they do escapes their big shot parents. The two stories reveal genuine social problems, but their revelation lacks subtlety. Both stories fall into the pitfall of trying to do too much work for the readers.

“Swimming in Hong Kong” and “Neville’s Painting” showcase different life styles of expatriates working in Hong Kong. Ruth, an international firm employee, establishes an unlikely friendship with a retired local person nicknamed “Froggy,” through the language of swimming. Froggy’s nonverbal help parallels Ruth’s discovery of herself and her recovery of confidence as an African American woman. Neville, on the other hand, is the very opposite of low self-esteemed Ruth. A sly lawyer and a bossy employer, he exploits local Chinese’s goodwill and mild manners. His is but a face of a clichéd westerner whose arrogance and lack of self-knowledge possess him to continue the old “colonial” way. Both stories have great moments of psychological description that capture the minds of those who initially come to the city for business’s sake and end up developing strings attached to the unique cultures of the metropolis.

Peter Philips’ “The Troubled Boyhood of Baldwin Wong” chronicles the life of a cosmetic tycoon’s son, who is privileged in terms of his financial status, but underprivileged because of his deformed head. This is a particularly interesting tale as it works against the stereotypical portrayal of the glamorous rich that we read in local tabloids or in entertainment news. As eyewitnesses of Baldwin’s tragic birth and his frustrating sexual journey, readers can easily sympathise with this supposedly comic figure. In the same way as the “E.T. head” he was born with, Baldwin’s inheritance of the family business is forced upon him. The story is bluntly cynical and wittily humorous concerning money, beauty and marriage in the profit-driven community. In addition to Baldwin’s own compelling accounts, what propel the story are sparkling dialogues Baldwin has with his mother. The mother is such a long-term fortune seeker and opportunist that one can be sure whatever she says will be appalling. Nevertheless, she is also a character whose advice always rings so true that one cannot wait to be appalled by her next piece of wisdom. In a nutshell, Philips manages to make the story of the unrelatable relatable, which is a rare talent.

Nury Vittachi, “without whom no collection of Hong Kong short fiction

would be complete” (Moore and Xu 9), chooses the significant imagined moment of “the second handover” (2047), in which the superhero destined to liberate Hong Kong turns out to be a Filipino helper. The story tends towards a political satire, while it also infuses elements of journalism, science fiction and detective fiction. Alongside the suspense-driven plot, Vittachi throws in long paragraphs of social commentary that are highly relevant to Hong Kong’s anxious realities. Indeed, Vittachi packs a lot in a short space and time, but perhaps it would have worked better if he used the material for a longer fiction, where characters can be fully developed without becoming simplified caricatures.

The volume’s finest entries are two stories about the dead that very much come alive: “The Seventh Year” by Jenn Chan Lyman and “Field, Burning” by Ysabelle Cheung. The former focuses on a single weekend in Hong Kong, while the latter sweeps across more than a century. Both of these stories have striking depictions of the urban space that have irresistible staying power. For instance, the opening of “Field, Burning” is set in a cemetery in Hong Kong:

In the morning there are no crowds, only the yolk of the sun and a few whistling rock thrushes, disappearing into the gaping maw of the mountain.... I take lunging mouthfuls of air punctured with rain and foamy sea. Up here, way up here, I can see the flat tongue of land where the sound of drilling perforates the air: then, silence. In Hong Kong, buildings are being torn down, built up again in glass and steel, spilling onto cramped streets. (103)

In the city’s ruthlessly quick-changing landscape we behold less humanity than in the land of the dead. Cheung’s haunting personal tale effectively goes hand in hand with a brief history of modern China since the Sino-Japanese War. The first person narration convincingly leads us through a woman’s violent and dark incarnations. The story’s major weight lies in her “first life” in Shandong province in the 1930s and 40s where she served as a midwife. From time to time, the story is heartbreakingly graphic like Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum*. Additionally, it renders simple but profound meditations on life and death, remembering and forgetting: “I am scared of the living. So I live by the dead...” (103); “And I kept living and living when all I want to do is die, or at least to forget. Well. I do not know if they are the same thing” (107).

“The Seventh Year” is about literally exhuming the dead, as the heroine digs into a grim and mysterious past. In the process of unveiling the secret of her husband’s deceased ex-wife, Connie, the heroine of the story, ends up allowing herself “a mystery to take to the grave.” Admittedly, the story is reminiscent of a few plot lines of Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, but put in the context of contemporary Hong Kong, it is a very refreshing story of

revenge and triumph. “The Seventh Year” ticks every box for an excellent short story: it is bold and wicked, beautifully written and well-paced; it pays attention to details, unfolds characters masterfully and is intriguing till its last moment. Through Connie, a seemingly innocent “*zuk sing mui*,”⁵ we are able to smell the city, taste it, hear it and see through its customs and family relations. Exemplary is a paragraph delineating her arrival in Hong Kong:

On the prescribed Saturday, we arrived in Hong Kong and hour and a half late. Although Shanghai’s Pudong Airport was even more modern than Hong Kong International and just as packed with travelers, as we joined the rush of bodies and trolley suitcases I couldn’t help but notice an inherent order in the way people moved in Hong Kong, stepping efficiently around and beside other bodies rather than over and into them. The air felt more oxygenated, crisp with Cantonese, rather than a muggy blend of Mandarin and Shanghainese. Relaxing my grip on the handle of my suitcase, I took in the familiar scent of the airport, which reminded me of the way my dad’s suitcase used to smell after his trips to Hong Kong when I was a kid, that massive leather case filled to bursting with various mundane items Mom was homesick for, like white flower oil and mentholated Tempo tissue packets. She would take out a tissue and press it to my nose, and as the menthol tickled my nostrils she would say, ‘That’s what home smells like.’ (30)

Through the immediate change of pace and the uniquely familiar smell, Lyman knits together a neat and precise comparison between Hong Kong and Shanghai, mingles past and present, as well as link an idiosyncratic homesickness to the sense of smell. One of the most distinctive features of the story, as I mentioned, is its attention to detail. Everything in the story is vividly Hong Kong-flavoured: the father-in-law’s aloofness and sharpness like “a newly sharpened pencil,” the “breakneck speed” of mini-buses, and the different ways people talk around the dinner table. Lyman consciously infuses Romanised Cantonese to make the story more convincingly local-sounding; meanwhile she also demonstrates her acute sensitivity to nuanced differences between English and Cantonese. “Words like *sorry* and *bon* in Cantonese came out either too brittle or too syrupy” (36). Personal as it is, the story still brings out deep undercurrent of anxiety: the massive emigration wave in 1990s and the return in the 2000s are only mentioned as the husband Edwin’s personal background, but it is undeniable that these gap years in Toronto contribute to the tragedy of his first marriage. Without revealing too much, I’d like to say that Connie’s final

⁵ “Zuk Sing” (竹昇, “bamboo stem”) is a Cantonese term to describe Chinese people born in western countries, who are “hollow” inside in terms of their knowledge of Chinese culture and tradition. A more common name that is widely used in Mainland China is “bananas,” which are yellow outside and white inside.

“measure for measure” is a possible solution to Hong Kong’s current political difficulties. Sometimes one has to resort to devious and wicked methods in the face of injustice and absolute power.

Needless to say, a collection of English fiction still has its limitations. English to some extent remains a language exclusive to those who are relatively privileged and well educated in Hong Kong, so the issues concerned in this book are frequently “upper-middle-class” issues. Nonetheless, this collection follows closely Hong Kong’s streets and people, its loneliness and confusions, its struggles and fear. In a way, its multiple voices preserve beautifully the city’s endangered diversity.

Works Cited

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