

**Stephanie Han, *Swimming in Hong Kong*. Spokane, WA: Willow Spring Books, 2016. 137 pp. ISBN 9780983231769.**

Stephanie Han's debut short story collection *Swimming in Hong Kong* explores the themes of identity and belonging, the segregation of people due to class and race, and how our prejudices shape our experiences and interactions with those perceived as different from us. *Swimming in Hong Kong* has won the Paterson Fiction Prize, and was the sole finalist for both the AWP Grace Paley Prize for Short Fiction and the Spokane Prize.

Han is a Korean American writer who divides her time between Hawaii and Hong Kong. Having lived in Hong Kong on and off for nineteen years, I believe that her experience being an "outsider" in Hong Kong has given inspiration to her short stories presented here. Han has stated in an interview:

My existence here has always been very much periphery. I don't really have command of the language. I'm not a returning Chinese American so I don't have homeland feelings. It allows me a certain level of – what might be construed as quite negative – being an invisible person, and the power to move invisibly. When you're viewed so invisibly that people don't count you, you can be very observant and allowed to be observant, because people think you're irrelevant. (*Still/Loud* interview)

Han's collection of short stories reflects a people in constant flux and negotiation – negotiation with the self, with others and with society. The characters in her stories are in a constant search for their own sense of identity through interacting with "the other." In many ways, it is only through interacting with people from different cultures, that we are able to understand more about our own ethnic background and culture, and thus establishing a firmer sense of self. Growing up in Hong Kong myself, I have always felt this "split-identity" between the East and West. I am still in a process of constant negotiation with myself, trying to bridge and come to terms with what appears to be two clashing and very different aspects. Therefore, I found Han's collection highly relatable and relevant in times where multiculturalism is prevalent. Han prefers to use the term polyculturalism, referring to it as: "I'm talking about polyculturalism, not multiculturalism: multiculturalism is where everyone is hellbent on their point of origin within the structure of the state. But polyculturalism draws from the idea of polyphony, which is a musical term. We need to look at the symphony as a whole, and understand that all are important to the symphony; we need to value not just our origin, but how we exchange" (*Still/Loud* interview). It is this "exchange" and "negotiation" between the different cultures represented by the characters in her collection, that I found to be so illuminating and human.

Han's collection begins with the short story "Invisible," which explores issues of status between the different races in colonial Hong Kong. "Invisible" focuses on the story between a Korean American woman, her British expatriate husband and the expatriate community. The protagonist, a Korean American woman living in Hong Kong, struggles with finding a sense of identity and belonging: "You are not a *gweilo*, a foreign devil, or a ghost person, a term of insult, but a foreigner of another kind. You are seen as belonging to the local Chinese if your husband is absent and you are silent, and to the expatriates only if you are on his arm – your husband called either more or less a man because he is with you" (11). Issues of colonialism and white privilege are explored: "If you were with your husband, this man across the bar would fast approach with a greeting. But tonight you are alone, and as you have experienced at various times around the city, your English husband's presence or absence determines your status. You are seen or you simply disappear" (14).

This "exchange" between the East and the West continues in "My Friend Faith, 1977" which details the friendship between a young Korean American girl Debbie, and her friend Faith, the white daughter of a US missionary in Korea. Debbie, having been born in America, seems to have "lost touch" with her Korean roots:

Like my Hawaiian-born Korean mother, I understood only rudimentary Korean used to enforce discipline and describe bodily functions. We did not pray, I preferred jeans to skirts, and my parents' concerns were not so much that I understand the feminine virtues of docility and grace, but that I proudly embrace my Korean heritage. Their goals were neither lofty nor unreasonable, but were incompatible with my own which were to assimilate with my white Christian American peers. (97-98)

It is through Debbie's encounter with Faith and Reverend Cooke's (Faith's father) prejudice against Koreans, labelling them "a dishonest bunch," that Faith's Korean identity is eventually reclaimed and restored: "I'm Korean," I said. All summer I had longed to distinguish myself from the 'Korean-Koreans' as I called the locals, vehemently declaring my American birthright and culture, and resisting the idea of belonging to a group whose language and opinions I failed to understand. Now I claimed it. I'm Korean" (111). This is a story in which the postcolonial concept of mimicry and hybridity are displayed at its fullest. Due to Debbie's upbringing in America, she is exposed to white hegemony, and thus tries to adopt the attributes of the dominant race and culture. She denies her own ethnic roots, until she encounters Faith and her family. Their "friendship" seems to have been a sham, when Debbie realises that Faith had gotten her the cheap and ugly jade imitation necklace as her going away present: "Faith and I were friends, but I was glad to be leaving Seoul. After she gave me my going away

present, I wasn't sure what I felt about her" (112). In this story, I believe that Han has cleverly weaved in an undercurrent of colonial exploitation.

The stories of marginalised groups in Hong Kong are told, such as the two old ladies Yuk Ki and Che Sum who collect cardboard for recycling in "The Ladies of Sheung Wan"; and a poor local man and his daughter who is barred from watching a football game from outside the pub window where "rich foreigners drink" in "Hong Kong Rebound." Han manages to weave her observations of marginalised groups – people on the periphery (as she has described herself) – and gives them a voice. I found Han's collection of stories to be both human and touching. Han manages to explore the delicate intricacies of human relationships, exposing human vulnerabilities, and presents an honest and brave account of people on the search of, and reclamation of, their identity. *Swimming in Hong Kong* has made me re-think and reassess my own prejudices and experiences growing up in Hong Kong; it has been both a thought-provoking and an affecting read.

## Works Cited

Han, Stephanie. "Writing Race in Hong Kong: A Conversation with Author Stephanie Han." Interview by Still/Loud 24 July 2017. <https://still-loud.com/2017/07/24/writing-race-in-hong-kong-a-conversation-with-writer-stephanie-han/>. 25 September 2017.

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