

## Brief Notes Towards a Collective Hong Kong Story: Place, Language, History and Politics

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### Abstract

For the last seven years, the online journal *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* has been publishing poetic works investigating Hong Kong identity and politics. As such, *Cha* provides a useful source for exploring the different thematic concerns which have preoccupied post-handover writing on the city. In this short essay, I focus on four of these thematic areas (place, language, colonial history and politics) and discuss how they reflect changing political, economic and social realities within Hong Kong.

### Keywords

Colonial history, English, Hong Kong, place, poetry, politics

This paper looks at a selected group of poems that are set in Hong Kong and published in the Hong Kong-based quarterly journal *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*. By studying these poems, I hope to explore some of the themes that particularly preoccupy the postcolonial Hong Kong experience. As the founding co-editor of *Cha*, I believe the journal, which was founded in 2007, provides a unique record of Hong Kong literature after the handover. *Cha* is the only English-language literary publication in Hong Kong that regularly launches new issues and its content is freely available on the Internet. It thus chronicles and provides a useful resource for people interested in Hong Kong and the literature that it inspires. Since the publication of its debut issue in November 2007, a number of poems describing the city have been featured in the journal. It is these poems and the post-1997 Hong Kong that they document and aestheticise that I would like to study.

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**Place**

like future chapters of Hong Kong,  
 its ferries at Victoria Harbour  
 waiting to happen  
 —from Eddie Tay’s “White Pages” (*Cha*, issue 12)

A city is often remembered by its places, spaces and unique man-made structures. Hong Kong is no exception. A street may take centre stage in a poem, such as Reid Mitchell’s “54 Leighton Street”:

**54 Leighton Street**

I open my window to better hear the rain  
 below me pedestrians under umbrellas float  
 bright blossoms on a stream  
 some signs I cannot read (*Cha*, issue 1)

The opposition of the singular “I” against the plural “pedestrians” emphasises the alienation that the individual can sometimes feel in a busy city. The persona in Mitchell’s poem is seemingly alone in his quiet room. He wants to hear the sound of the tropical rain and, opening the window to connect to the outside world, he is rewarded with the surreal sight of faceless people “floating” beneath the colourful blossoms of umbrellas. He also sees signs written in a language that he can’t read. It is probably traditional Chinese, a form of writing that still dominates the city, although its influence may be waning due to the increasing use of simplified Chinese by local and Mainland residents.

“54 Leighton Street” expresses a meditative moment of a foreigner. The street is personalised: the sound of the rain, the sight of the umbrellas and the incomprehensibility of the exotic signs are filtered through the persona’s acute first person perspective. Another poem by Mitchell, “Hiring Mourners in Wan Chai,” on the other hand, relies on the reader’s knowledge that the area is considered to be the red light district of the city.

**Hiring Mourners in Wan Chai**

I hired a whore the night my father died  
 gather ye mourners where ye may  
 and friendless I left myself by faring so far  
 a Thai woman with a Chinese face lay in my bed till day  
 I sat at this desk, drank whisky, and cried

Despite the poem’s setting, the “mourners” of the title suggests that the poem is not about carnal gratification. The opening lines contain both a Western

literary allusion and a reference to Chinese culture: “I hired a whore the night my father died/ gather ye mourners where ye may.” The reference to the first line of Robert Herrick’s poem “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,” will be familiar to most people, even if they don’t know the source. While Herrick’s poem urges the “virgins” in the title to live life to the fullest as one day they will die, Mitchell’s persona gives the line a melancholy twist by using it to describe the end that the earlier poem warned against. Instead of gathering rosebuds, the speaker urges the reader to “gather ye mourners where ye may,” a reference to the Chinese practice of hiring mourners for funerals. There is a shift in the construction of the line from “while” in Herrick’s poem to “where” in Mitchell’s. The poet is perhaps suggesting not so much that one seize the day but that the place has seized the day. Thus, the only available mourner for the persona in Wan Chai that evening is a sex worker.

Both “54 Leighton Street” and “Hiring Mourners in Wan Chai” are narrated by a foreigner, whose presence points to the city’s continuing cosmopolitan make-up after the handover. But other works in the journal capture the experiences of local residents. In Elbert S.P. Lee’s “Ginger Flower Woman” (*Cha*, issue 1), for example, the persona describes what he encounters in Wah Fu Market:

### **Ginger Flower Woman**

Slaughtered chickens hung by their nostrils, already skinned...  
raw fish lay with stretched-out bellies...  
I and these desolate beings, we exchanged glances,  
each contemplated the other’s karma.

In this tamed entanglement  
of life and death, of need and sacrifice,  
a woman passed by...  
she bought a stem of ginger flower,  
to decorate her humble steel and concrete home.

*(November 29, 1997; Wah Fu Market)*

The persona exchanges glances with slaughtered chickens and gutted fish in the market. This is certainly an unpleasant sight reminding the reader of the final destination of all living creatures. In this market that is full of dead or otherwise trapped bodies, the persona is drawn finally to a passing woman who has just bought “a stem of ginger flower.” The persona speculates, rather assertively, that the woman, whose age is indeterminate and thus can be both old or young and represent women of all ages, will use the flower stem to brighten her

“humble” home. The last line of the poem is simultaneously sad and optimistic: there is little a tiny flower can do to drastically elevate a modest home, and yet, the persona suggests, one can still find beauty in the smallest things – the plucked flower might give life to an apparently lifeless “steel and concrete home.”

But how do people in Hong Kong collectively navigate the city outside its locked rooms, locked homes? At one point in Eddie Tay’s “Notes for a Minor Photography (Hong Kong Delirium),” we are taken to the streets:

*from* **Notes for a Minor Photography (Hong Kong Delirium)**

Anyway, how does one think on the streets of Hong Kong?

With enchantment of skyscrapers.

With a law of crossing streets.

...

I am in a corner, in a spotlight,  
a footnote beneath billboards and signs. (*Cha*, issue 17)

Hong Kong, according to the persona of Tay’s poem, is a web of skyscrapers and crisscrossing streets, crowded both vertically and horizontally. Billboards and signs compete for attention and so immense and numerous are they that the persona feels overwhelmed, reduced to a “footnote”: not entirely dispensable in the visually busy narrative of the city, but also not entirely necessary either. These billboards and signs are one of the most recognisable and photogenic features that define the Hong Kong cityscape. They tell us this is an image and text saturated city. Perhaps Hong Kong is so full of texts that the city is inevitably turned into a manuscript to be read, even though some of its writings might only be decipherable to certain portions of the population.

## Language

under his breath, translates  
from Cantonese. *Shirt, pants, undershirt*  
—from Evelyn A. So’s “First Trip to Asia, September 1998. Part 2: Hong Kong” (*Cha*, issue 18)

After 1997, the Hong Kong government implemented the Bilingual Triliterate Policy in schools in the hope of equipping students to read two languages (Chinese and English) and speak three (Cantonese, Mandarin and English).

While there is an increasing risk that the importance of Cantonese is eroding, it remains the dominant language in the city, at least for now. Cantonese, flexible and vulgarly elegant, provides much of Hong Kong's unique local character.

Louise Ho, for example, in her poem "Incense Tree" is adamant that the English "Hong Kong" fails to capture the authenticity and meaning of the Cantonese original, "Heung Gong," which literally means "Incense Port." Ho first provides the origin of the city's name in the first two stanzas and then in the fourth, she powerfully criticises the inferiority of the English transliteration:

*from* **Incense Tree**  
**Aquilaria Sinensis**

Incense root incense fruit  
Incense loading at the port:  
Groves of incense trees  
Lined the harbour once  
At Aberdeen.

Joss sticks, agarwood, potions, scents,  
Thriving commerce  
Export trade  
That once was,  
Gave "Hong Kong" its name:  
Incense Port, and its fame.

Truly fragrant truly harbour,  
But not the  
Exoticised "fragrant harbour":  
Incense Port its true name.

Heung not Hong  
Gong not Kong;  
In any case  
Transliteration into English sounds  
Of monosyllabic tonal Chinese  
Is alchemy in reverse  
Changing all that is gold  
Into dross, loss and mockery. (*Cha*, issue 4)

Ho seems to suggest that the process of Hong Kong's degradation – turning from gold into "dross, loss and mockery" – is symbolised in the usurpation of the city's Cantonese name by its English transliteration in the colonial era. It is not only the Cantonese pronunciation that is lost, but Cantonese identity as well. However, when Ho wrote "Incense Tree" (the poem was published in *Cha* in August 2008), she could not have foreseen the key role that Cantonese would

play in resisting Beijing’s political, ideological and linguistic encroachment. This has been particularly evident in the Umbrella Movement of 2014, a civil disobedience campaign that demands electoral change and full democracy in the city. Jason S Polley’s “Constituent Command” makes reference to the important role of Cantonese in the Umbrella Movement:

*from* **Constituent Command**

The sound the sound  
The Cantonese resound

Umbrellas  
Confronting  
Interrupting (*Cha*, issue 25)

As we can see in the previous two poems, the linguistic fortune of Cantonese has changed in the post-1997 era. Ho’s description speaks to the threat that English posed to the Cantonese language and culture during colonial times, whereas Polley’s speaks to the role Cantonese has undertaken in challenging the political and linguistic intrusion of Mainland China.

Cantonese users show communal appreciation towards the expressiveness, adaptability and creativity of the language and indeed, Cantonese contributes to the consolidation of a unique Hong Kong identity. But it should be remembered that Hong Kong is a place where a number of languages can be heard, sometimes all at once. For example, in “Conversations,” Suzanne Hermanoczki describes the interaction of Cantonese, Japanese, Malaysian and English.

**Conversations**

people speak  
in short slow  
glimpses  
of phrases—  
an explanation  
an negation  
a laugh  
*m goy mgoyyyyy*  
Cantonese.  
a group of summer tourists  
shading fans to faces  
*Kawaiiii*  
Japanese  
‘*Your kopee, Sirrrr,*’

Malaysian  
‘Thank-you.’  
Generic White man in suit  
*bindo ab?*  
at 3 o’clock  
*Mow ab mow ab*  
she replies with a shake of her head.

The White man takes a sip,  
while the Cantonese pack up their voices  
and the Japanese continue on their trip  
a Philippino comes over to mop up  
the words  
that are left  
on the tables—  
lost  
in conversations. (*Cha*, issue 2)

Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that Hermanoczeki’s poem portrays the *non*-interaction of the aforementioned languages, as the speakers do not seem to be truly communicating with one another. In Hong Kong, members of different language groups are often imprisoned in their respective linguistic comfort zones, making little effort to learn other languages. The poem captures this situation and portrays a common enough Hong Kong scene where a collection of strangers are thrust together but do not genuinely communicate. The words they utter, to the others’ ear, are sometimes mere sounds, empty signifiers. At the end of the poem, we are told that “a Philippino [sic] comes over to mop up/ the words/ that are left/ on the tables—/ lost /in conversations” (note the Filipino is silent, not given any words, perhaps reflecting his or her lower social status). The words that have been expressed have become nothing more than garbage to be swept away, noiselessly.

### Colonial History

These balmy March days, we would practice  
in Victoria Park, stay out most of the morning  
—from Russell Leong’s “Form of Flesh” (*Cha*, issue 1)

Hong Kong is as much defined by its filial connections to China as by its colonial ties with Britain. Hong Kong’s colonial history still conditions how the city is perceived both by citizens old enough to remember British rule and by certain visitors. It is therefore unsurprising that some poems published in *Cha* explicitly use Hong Kong’s colonial past as a reference point. Michael Gray’s

“Letter to Queen Victoria from the People of Hong Kong, 2012” is an example:

**Letter to Queen Victoria from the People of Hong Kong, 2012**

Another storm. Birds fly like small umbrellas.  
 Typhoon gales break. Trees pull up white tiles and block  
 major roads. And the border's blurring even more these days.  
 Mainlanders reach the end of the East Rail Line (a kind of faster train)  
 and transfer. We catch them, yelling: Leave. The answer: No.  
 Our firm reply: You have the wrong country. Go north. They  
 move across your harbor in boats, or underneath, using our roads.  
 Other foreigners (who look like you), eyes gleaming in Mong Kok's  
 neon, flash cameras at what they now find exotic.  
 SIM cards for our mobile phones (this is how we talk) click. No.  
 They slide in without a sound. At Chungking Mansions,  
 crowds emerge from elevators or rain, exchanging their cash  
 for what we use here: money ridged like Kowloon's hills  
 and housing estates you never imagined on any local map.  
 The smell of curry fills the air, still very fresh. The naan's  
 still warm, wrapped in crumpled foil. And some TVs (what we  
 watch) show people speaking your English,  
 no matter where they're from. (*Cha*, issue 18)

Hong Kong became a British colony during Queen Victoria's reign and the city's harbour and some of its streets and bars still carry her name (“They/ cross your harbor in boats”). Gray's poem describes a contemporary Hong Kong that the Queen would not recognise: concrete forests, modern technology. That the “people of Hong Kong” in the poem want to inform the Queen of these changes and what the city has become in 2012 suggests that they still feel some affiliation with her, as though she is a distant, benevolent grandmother. The letter ends with a comment about the Queen's English: more than one hundred years after Victoria's death, people everywhere are still speaking her language, thus demonstrating the powerful influence English continues to have in the city. The overall tone of the poem is gentle, matter-of-fact, patient (especially the explanatory asides in parentheses). For a letter to the Queen, it also feels very conversational and informal and provides a more positive view of the city's colonial past.

Nicholas YB Wong's “Postcolonial Zoology,” in comparison, offers a more biting response to the British monarchy, and is perhaps more in the vein of Ho's “Incense Tree” in its view of Hong Kong's history:



**Postcolonial Zoology**

*1997, Hong Kong, returning to China*

It's not the pedigreed corgis they left  
at the handover, but the effigy of the Queen  
on toothed stamps being self-important

in dusted albums. We bolted to banks to trade  
for new coins. We went to the West, away  
from communist coxswains, but were whittled

to sculptures called 'second-tier citizens',  
second to terriers. Our being could start  
a chapter in zoology: we're inedible

bilingual centaurs spreading swine flu  
at the turn of century, we're comrades  
of a blue whale found ashore due to sonic

confusion, caribous on a cruise to Malibu.  
Even what we remembered migrated to corners  
invisible in brain scan. In Mandarin Oriental,

India, a TV host devoured British scones  
and circumscribed cucumber sandwiches  
on his sun porch that looked over to rice fields.

A butler next to him. He called the experience  
authentic. So were the bees buzzing in their air,  
sick of their queen too lazy to move. (*Cha*, issue 19)

Already, in 1997, the people of Hong Kong in Wong's poem are happy to see the back of the Queen (in this case, Queen Elizabeth), eager to turn a new leaf by using "new coins" and forgetting the image of a "self-important" monarch. The speaker in the poem is indignant about the city's colonial history and its outcome: Hong Kong people are turned into "inedible// bilingual centaurs/spreading swine flu." Monstrous, disease-laden, inhuman. Food items and cultural practices that recall the British Empire are scorned: scones, cucumber sandwiches, butlers. At the end of the poem, the queen bee echoes the Queen on "toothed stamps" in the first stanza. The speaker compares the Hong Kong people to buzzing bees who have grown tired of a queen bee "too lazy to move." This provides a cutting metaphor for how the residents of the city have become fed up with a monarchy that lives off of their efforts but contributes nothing.

## Politics

You're Hong Kong born-again,  
 Knowing finally who you are,  
 Subject, not subordinate slain  
 —from Shirley Geok-lin Lim's "Hong Kong in Black Today" (*Cha*, issue 25)

Hong Kong was "returned" to China in 1997 and became "the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China." Part of what makes it "special" is the "One Country, Two Systems" constitutional principle, which dictates that Hong Kong, though part of China (hence "one country"), continues to enjoy a high level of political autonomy and social freedom and maintains its own capitalist economy (hence "two systems"). Despite the promise of "One Country, Two Systems," the Hong Kong government has had a difficult job balancing independence and the growing influence of the Chinese regime. Many Hong Kong people, who yearn for democracy, have consistently demonstrated their discontent through public displays such as marches and protests when they felt that their basic right to political freedom has been challenged.

Louise Ho's "Marching," for example, describes how five hundred thousand Hong Kong people were driven to the streets on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2003 (the day of an annual public holiday celebrating Hong Kong's return to China) because of the proposed "Article 23 Bill," which required the Hong Kong government to enact laws against sedition, subversion and secession.

### Marching

The people flowed,  
 Like so much water between gorges,  
 As they poured through  
 The main arteries of the city.

It is another July the first.  
 Under a scorching sun  
 Hemmed in by towering city blocks  
 They walked.  
 There were placards and banners and drums.  
 People chanted in unison,  
 Alternating between  
 "One, two, three,  
 Down with Article 23" and  
 "One, two, three,  
 Down with Tung Chee-hwa".  
 People from upper windows

Waved and clapped.  
A policeman was seen  
Chanting along.

Young parents pushed their young in prams.  
They said,  
One day we will tell him  
He was here this day.

An elderly man was failing.  
Supporting him, his daughter-in-law  
Rang the chauffeur  
To bring up the car  
And meet them at the next corner.

The young, the old, with friends, family or alone;  
The poor, the rich, professionals, workers, others,  
They walked:  
Each person giving the other space,  
United in one purpose,  
Five hundred thousand marchers  
Moved on without incident,  
Unhurried, unruffled, undeterred. (*Cha*, issue 4)

In the end, the Article 23 Bill was withdrawn and Tung Chee-hwa, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong at the time, resigned, along with Regina Ip, the Secretary of Security, who was a strong proponent of the Bill. For many in the city, the demonstrators' triumph over the government strengthened their resolve to fight for a more democratic Hong Kong and to believe in their collective civic power. There is a sense in the poem that the majority of the people in Hong Kong, regardless of their different backgrounds, can be united under a common cause, "unhurried, unruffled, undeterred."

In 2014, people in the city have taken to the streets again. This time, the protesters are seeking "genuine universal suffrage" as a means of selecting their own Chief Executive instead of accepting the electoral process outlined by the Chinese government on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2014, which only notionally allows for full democracy by providing a limited number of pre-selected candidates. The events that have taken place in the months following Beijing's announcement, and which are still continuing, have become known as the "Umbrella Movement" – "umbrella" because of its use by protesters to fend off the sun, rain and, most importantly, tear gas and pepper spray.

In October 2014, *Cha* published "Whither Hong Kong?" a special section containing poems in response to the current situation. A number of the

poems focus on the experience of young people in the protests, who are the true heroes and heroines of the Umbrella Movement:

We sit on the road  
We do our homework  
Sometimes we sleep  
Or attend an open-air class:  
History, politics, even origami  
(I've learnt to fold a paper umbrella!)  
—from Wendy Gan's "Lessons"

They are killing  
the Umbrella Children  
cannibals feeding  
on the dreams of the brave  
shooting gas  
spraying pepper  
bending lives  
breaking bones  
the streets running  
with anger and blood.  
—from Stephanie Han's "Umbrella Songs by Buffalo Girl (aka) Cherie Meling Baker (1994-2014)"

We are not tired, nor angry,  
nor naïve. We are learning to love,  
shoutingly, tenderly, feelingly.  
In the circling darkness, there is a center  
and in that center  
we are chasing  
the sun.  
—from Natalie Liu's "Even So"

To talk, or not to talk: that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outraged public opinion,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles?  
And by opposing end them?  
—from Peter Gordon's "The Student Protester's Dilemma"

It is still uncertain what the outcome of the protests will be. One can only hope for the best. What can be said for sure, however, is that these protests are a clear and dramatic manifestation of the social and political transformations the city has been undergoing since 1997. Hong Kong remains a city in flux and it continues to wrestle with its British colonial past, the growing influence of the

Chinese political regime, its Chinese cultural heritage and its unique Hong Kong identity and desire for democracy.

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