

The Hong Kong Poetic Community: Ten Poets' Experiences¹

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Abstract

Because publishing is by definition a public act of creativity, the development of a poetic or literary community is inextricably tied to the development of individual writers within the community. This article attempts to delineate the Hong Kong poetic community through an analysis of the experiences of ten poets who are participants in the Hong Kong community. They were interviewed by the author from 2009 to 2010 as part of a larger study on Asian poetry in English (Lam, 2014). Using extracts from a book on that study, this article addresses how the community has supported the poets' development, how they in turn have contributed to the growth of the community and their resultant sense of poetic community. Four of them came from English-speaking countries and one from the China mainland while the other five were born in Hong Kong. While not all the poets had their initial publications in Hong Kong, they have all benefitted from support from Hong Kong. And regardless of their provenance, they have all contributed to the growth of the community in various ways. In terms of their identification, a whole range of communities, from the local to the international or virtual, were reported. This is consistent with Hong Kong's position as an international city with a Chinese centre.

Keywords

Hong Kong, English, poetry, community, Asian, development

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Introduction

Hong Kong (area: 1,104 square kilometres; population: 7.17 million) (*Hong Kong – The Facts*; *Hong Kong Statistics: Population*.) consists of Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon Peninsula (ceded to Britain in 1842 and 1860 respectively) and the New Territories and many outlying islands (leased to Britain in 1898 for 99 years) (Lam, “Language Education Policy in Greater China” 412). In 1997, Hong Kong reverted to Chinese rule and its official name became the HKSAR. The official languages are Chinese and English and competence in both forms of Chinese (Cantonese and Putonghua, the standard dialect on the China mainland) and English is an educational goal. While the majority of the population is Chinese-speaking (89.5% Cantonese speakers; 1.4% Putonghua speakers; 4% other Chinese dialect speakers) and speakers claiming English (3.5%) and other languages (1.6%) as their usual languages are in the minority (*Hong Kong – The Facts*), the actual language use is more complex as many Cantonese speakers have some familiarity with Putonghua and many Chinese speakers also know some English (*Hong Kong – The Facts*).

Although both Chinese and English may be adopted as the languages of instruction in the schools, English is often the language of higher education in Hong Kong, especially in the more competitive programmes (Lam, “Language Education Policy in Greater China” 412-13). This is in keeping with Hong Kong’s prominence as a world city in financial services. On the literary front, Hong Kong is becoming more appealing as well. The home of the Hong Kong International Literary Festival from 2001 (*How Did the Festival Get Started?*) and of the Man Asian Literary Prize from 2007 (sponsored by the Man Group till 2012) (*The Prize*), the city is also blessed with quite a few programmes in creative writing such as the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing in English at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), the low-residency MFA in Creative Writing at the City University of Hong Kong and a new bilingual Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Creative and Professional Writing at Hong Kong Baptist University. Since 2008, Proverse Hong Kong, a publisher based in Hong Kong, has held an annual international competition for a publishable book-length work of fiction, non-fiction or poetry. From 2010, HKU has also offered a poetry prize open to anyone around the world planning a first collection.

The cosmopolitan mix in the Hong Kong English writing circle offers an unusual opportunity to understand the dynamics of a fairly fluid poetic community with creative energies stemming from home but also transplanted from abroad; some of the poets writing in English, with or without Hong Kong roots, seem to be constantly arriving, departing, passing through or returning. Hong Kong’s position as a travel hub in Asia has probably contributed to this phenomenon. This article characterises the poetic community in Hong Kong through an analysis of the experiences of ten poets based in Hong Kong. The poets were interviewed by the author between 2009 and 2010 as part of a larger

study on Asian poets writing in English (Lam, 2014). Their brief individual profiles are presented below before a discussion of their community.

Ten Poets in Hong Kong

The ten poets are Gillian Bickley, Louise Ho, Elbert Lee, David McKirdy, Judy Keung, Madeleine Slavick, Timothy Kaiser, Arthur Leung, Jennifer Wong and Tammy Ho (Table 1).

Table 1 Ten Poets in Hong Kong

<i>Name</i>	<i>Place(s) of residence</i>	<i>Language(s) and dialect(s)</i>	<i>Selected publication(s)</i>
Gillian Bickley	South Wales ^B , Devon & Worcester (The United Kingdom), Lagos (Nigeria), Auckland (New Zealand), Hong Kong, Andorra	English ^H , French, German*, Latin*, Cantonese*	<i>For the Record and Other Poems of Hong Kong</i> (2003) <i>Moving House and Other Poems from Hong Kong</i> (2005) <i>China Suite and Other Poems</i> (2009)
Louise Ho	Hong Kong ^B , Mauritius, Norwich & Cambridge (UK), the United States of America, Australia	Cantonese ^H , French, English	<i>Local Habitation: Poems</i> (1994) <i>New Ends Old Beginnings</i> (1997) <i>Incense Tree</i> (2009)
Elbert Lee	Guangzhou (China) ^B , Hong Kong, Canada, New Zealand	Cantonese ^H , English, French*, Putonghua*	<i>Rain on the Pacific Coast</i> (2013)
David McKirdy	Greenock (Scotland) ^B , Hong Kong, Australia, UK	English ^H , Cantonese*, French*, Italian*	<i>Accidental Occidental: A Collection of Poems</i> (2006)
Judy Keung	Hong Kong ^B	Cantonese ^H , English, Putonghua*	<i>Footprint and Other Poems</i> (2005) <i>Jump for Joy: Poetry Parade</i> (2009)
Madeleine Slavick	Indiana (USA) ^B , Germany, Hong Kong	English ^H , German*, Latin*	<i>Round</i> (with Barbara Baker) (1998) <i>Delicate Access</i> (2004)

		Cantonese*, Putonghua*	<i>Something Beautiful Might Happen</i> (with Shimao Shinzo (2010)
Timothy Kaiser	USA ^B ; Saskatoon (Canada), Costa Rica, Japan, Hong Kong	English ^H , French, Spanish*, Japanese*, Cantonese*	<i>Food Court</i> (2003)
Arthur Leung	Hong Kong ^B , Cambridge (UK)	Cantonese ^H , English, Putonghua*, German*	'What the Pig Mama Says', Edwin Morgan International Poetry Competition (3 rd prize) (2008)
Jennifer Wong	Hong Kong ^B , Oxford (UK), Beijing (China)	Cantonese ^H , English, Putonghua	<i>Summer Cicadas</i> (2006)
Tammy Ho	Hong Kong ^B , the mainland (China), London (UK)	Cantonese ^H , Putonghua, Hakka*	<i>Hong Kong U Writing: An Anthology</i> (Editor) (2006) <i>Cha: An Asian Literary Journal</i> (Co-editor with Jeff Zroback) (from 2007)

Key: ^B Place of birth. ^H Home language at birth. *A language the poet has been exposed to or has studied but has not gained fluency in.

Four poets (Gillian Bickley, David McKirdy, Madeleine Slavick and Timothy Kaiser) were born in English-speaking countries outside Hong Kong. The six ethnic Chinese poets, except for Elbert Lee born on the China mainland, were all born in Hong Kong; all spoke Cantonese as a home language while growing up and, except for Louise Ho, also have some familiarity with Putonghua; except for Judy Keung, all had spent extended periods abroad, mostly as students. At the time of the interview, seven of them had already published at least one collection; of the other three, Elbert Lee had prepared a manuscript for his collection (eventually published in 2013), Arthur Leung had won an international poetry prize and Tammy Ho had edited an anthology as well as a journal. (The profiles below were reconstructed from interview data. Quotations on the writers' experiences or their views in the rest of the article were also selected from their interview transcripts.)

Gillian Bickley was born in the United Kingdom. Her parents were both teachers. "[B]rought up in a culture which value[d] books," she was heavily influenced by her parents who made borrowing books a "weekly event." She "read Shakespeare from a very young age" as well as the originals of the English

classics. Bickley went to university in Bristol. At twenty-two, she started to do her Master of Letters (MLitt). Later, she obtained her Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) from Leeds. Bickley has taught English and English literature in various places around the world. Currently based in Hong Kong, Bickley is a co-publisher and a co-director of Proverse Hong Kong.

Louise Ho was born in Hong Kong and has lived in Mauritius, England, America and Australia. As a child, she had “intellectual frustration” because she was “never introduced to reading.” Nonetheless, she “read everything” she “was exposed to.” A book she dug up in those days but could not comprehend thoroughly was *The History of Renaissance Art*. She “scribbled poetry” at a young age and “always wanted to be a writer.” That desire prompted her to become a student in the English Department of HKU. There, she was encouraged to write. Upon graduation, she went on to teach at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) where she started the poetry programme. In 2003, she retired from her teaching position at CUHK.

Elbert Lee moved from Guangzhou to Hong Kong at a young age. Educated in a Chinese-medium primary school, he had “both English and Chinese books to read at home.” He transferred to an English-medium secondary school, where English was the “common language” since “a lot of [his] classmates were non-Chinese speakers.” In senior secondary school, he had an “illuminating” English literature teacher who taught him Shakespeare and Yeats. Lee then went to Canada to study psychology. He completed his Master in Psychology and taught at tertiary level in Hong Kong. In 1988, he went to New Zealand to read for his PhD in Psychology. He now teaches part-time at the Hong Kong campus of a private American university.

David McKirdy came from Scotland and spent his formative years in Hong Kong. He developed “an ability to read and write” before formal schooling as his mother taught him at home. He read mostly in English as a young boy. McKirdy remembered, “I always liked reading.... The school was quite oriented towards reading and pushed the kids to read.” He would read books like Enid Blyton’s *The Faraway Tree* series and airport novels outside the curriculum. He left school at sixteen and started working but continued reading. At the age of forty, he received his honour’s degree in Western Arts and Humanities from the Open Learning Institute (now Open University) of Hong Kong. He has his own business – repairing cars.

Judy Keung was born and bred in Hong Kong. She started to read in both Chinese and English in kindergarten. In secondary school, an English-medium one, she read Agatha Christie, Enid Blyton and later the Brontë sisters and

Louisa May Alcott. She had a peer group that was passionate about books and formed the habit of “going to the library” after school. In 1983, Keung graduated from HKU where she double-majored in comparative literature and English literature. She also earned her Certificate in Education, Postgraduate Diploma in Creative Writing in English, Master in Education and MFA in Creative Writing there. She has taught English and literature at various levels.

Madeleine Slavick was born in America to a family of scholars and artists. Her father is a university professor of American Literature. “Because my father loves to read,” Slavick noted, “all of the walls in our house... are lined with bookcases.” Yet, as a girl, she thought it was “too lonely, too antisocial... to read books.” She was never fond of books until university. It was through personal letter writing that she began to “appreciate the power of language.” After earning her Bachelor’s degree in Social Work from the University of Wisconsin, she enrolled in a number of creative writing workshops. Over the years, Slavick has worked in various areas: social work, environmental campaigning, freelance writing, photography and teaching English and literature at high school level.

Timothy Kaiser was born in America and grew up in Canada. Because of his father, a pastor and a poet, there was “always a storytelling element” to his family, which “had stories, celebrated stories and told stories and enjoyed stories.” They had “a habit of nightly reading.” Thinking back on his boyhood in Western Canada, he noted that “poetry is not something [one] seek[s] out.” Kaiser read history and anthropology in Saskatchewan. His interest in poetry began with what he called “a moment of vanity” at university, where he read poetry and thought he could do better than the poets he read. He took it up as a “personal challenge” and started to write. Kaiser taught in Japan and Canada before making Hong Kong his home with his Chinese wife. Currently, he is with the Canadian International School in Hong Kong.

Arthur Leung was born in Hong Kong. His formal education was all in English. In primary school, he was “asked by [his] schoolteacher to borrow books from the library.” He recalled enjoying “[g]host stories... detective stories” and Chinese martial arts novels. The first writer he was aware of was Agatha Christie. The poets he came across included Coleridge, Wordsworth, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats. Leung graduated from HKU with a Bachelor’s degree in English and Music and the University of Cambridge with a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) in Linguistics. He also obtained his Masters in English Studies and in Cultural and Literary Studies and his MFA from HKU. He won the third prize in the 2008 Edwin Morgan International Poetry Competition. Leung now works in the area of arts management for the government.

Jennifer Wong was born and brought up in Hong Kong. She attended a Chinese-medium primary school but switched to an English-medium secondary school. She largely spoke Cantonese at home but her mother would borrow English books for her from public libraries. In junior secondary school, she began reading poetry, started to “speak more English” and read “silly stuff – like *Sweet Valley Twins*,” books by Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl. She also began writing poetry then. After a year at HKU, Wong received a scholarship to do her Bachelor’s degree in English Language and Literature at Oxford. Upon graduation, she worked for the Hong Kong government and then the private sector. In 2009, she earned her Master’s in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. She is now pursuing PhD studies in the United Kingdom.

Tammy Ho was born in Hong Kong. At her Chinese-medium primary school, she began reading Chinese novelists, “mainly female authors” like Yi Shu, Li Bi Hua and Huang Bi Yun. In secondary school, an English-medium one, she was taught “abridged versions” of celebrated English books and read English classics like *Pride and Prejudice*. In 1999, Ho went to HKU where she double-majored in English and Translation and began to savour the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and the Romantics. Upon graduation, she taught in a secondary school for a year and went back to HKU for her MPhil studies. Later, she taught in the School of English at HKU and went on to do her PhD on Neo-Victorian fiction at King’s College London. Ho now teaches at the Baptist University of Hong Kong.

As indicated above, three poets (Louise Ho, Slavick and Wong) are now not based in Hong Kong but their works continue to be included in Hong Kong representations (Lam and Dawes, *Prairie Schooner Fusion No. 6: Water*; Muñoz, Ho and Morales, *Desde Hong Kong*). The discussion below focuses on three aspects of the Hong Kong community: how it has supported the poets’ growth, their contribution to the community and their sense of community.

Support from Hong Kong

Support from a community for a poet’s development can be gauged in several ways. The analysis below focuses on three aspects of the support received by the poets from the Hong Kong community: whether their first attempts at publication were directly facilitated by another writer based in Hong Kong, whether they received funding from Hong Kong for their publications, and the availability of forums for poetic exchange.

Initiation into the Community through Publication

In Lam’s model in *Becoming Poets* (313-19) for the development of poets, a poet’s first publication is conceptualised as an act of initiation into the community of

writers and readers. Akin to the coming-of-age ceremonies in some societies, a poet's debut is often facilitated by someone more experienced from that community. Four of the ten poets (McKirdy, Lee, Louise Ho and Leung) were initiated into publishing by another writer or a teacher based in Hong Kong. McKirdy recalled being invited by Xu Xi, a well established Hong Kong novelist, to submit an excerpt of the journal he was writing for a volume she was editing (Xu & Ingham, *City Voices*):

... we had exchanged our interest in writing. Then I told her, '... I wrote this thing about the handover... it's just a bit of fun.' So she said, 'Let me look at it.' She said 'Look, I would like to put this as an excerpt in *City Voices*'.

Lee's first poems were published through the mediation of Louise Ho who solicited his works for an English-German anthology she was co-editing with Klaus Stierstorfer from Germany. Louise Ho herself had her first poem in English published in *Students Weekly* when she was thirteen but she did not consider that professional publishing. It was her HKU teachers who encouraged her to publish more widely:

... Ian McLachlan – my tutor at HKU... encouraged me to write. He thought my poetry was good. Mary Visick encouraged me too. They both thought I was a good poet.... Ian helped me with some contacts. Later, I had some publications in magazines in America, Canada, Australia and UK.

Likewise, Leung's works were sought out by Shirley Lim, an award-winning writer who emigrated from Malaysia to America, during her sojourn as Professor at HKU:

I was encouraged to do that by our teacher, Professor Shirley Lim.... She told me about this particular anthology that the department was planning.... If I knew about that publication, even if she didn't ask me, I would still submit. Because that would be my first publication ever. I would be curious to try.

Leung was ready to submit his work even without Lim's invitation but then, without her invitation, he might not have known about the publication in the first place.

Of the rest, three poets (Bickley, Slavick and Kaiser) published their first poems before coming to Hong Kong; all three were encouraged by their teachers to do so. The other three poets (Wong, Keung and Tammy Ho) made

their debuts on their own. Wong published her first poems in England when she was studying there:

I started writing poems in university.... I wrote a poem, and I felt that may be I could just send it off to some literary journals.... And then, they said, 'Oh, we are going to get it published.'

Keung submitted an entry to a poetry website without prompting by anyone and it was published. Tammy Ho's first works were also published on her own initiative.

Funding

While not all the poets were helped by a mentor based in Hong Kong when publishing their first poems, a good number have subsequently enjoyed funding support from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) for publishing one or more of their poetry collections. Bickley was not only awarded HKADC funding for publishing her own poetry; as a publisher, she has also guided several poets through the grant application process:

... the Arts Development Council is really good. There are funds. It's a very complex process. But now I've done it several times. And so what I do when somebody submits a manuscript, if I think it's something we like to publish, then I would say, 'May be we could help you apply for a grant.'

Slavick, Wong, Kaiser, McKirdy and Lee (*Rain on the Pacific Coast*) also received HKADC support. The award is viewed as an endorsement for one's work. Some private organisations might also sponsor poetry events; for example, Swire organised Poemography to encourage young students to write poems in parallel to photographs. In addition to support for publication, the poets would like the government to do more in the area of literary awards for the community, writing prizes at the secondary school level or poetry writing in the school curriculum, "secondary or even primary."

Forums for Exchange

In terms of venues for exchange, many poets cited Outloud and some mentioned other forums such as Joyce is Not Here, Kubrick Poetry, Nadwah, Jazzetry, the Hong Kong Writers' Circle and the Hong Kong International Literary Festival. For a while, Haven Books, a publisher, also tried to organise "meet-the-author meetings" at cafes to bring poetry to the public. Journals based in Hong Kong include *Asia Literary Review* and *Cha*, and other recent publications include *Fifty Fifty*, *Not a Muse* and *Imprint*. Publishers of poetry collections include Chameleon, Proverse and MCCM Creations. Asia 2000,

which published some poetry earlier, is no longer an option; Louise Ho had her collected poems published by HKU Press.

As a whole, the Hong Kong poetic community writing in English “tends to be very supportive.” One concern is whether the smallness of the community might result only in positive critique. Yet, the geographical compactness of Hong Kong has some advantages; in Slavick’s view:

Hong Kong is the kind of place where, if you want to make something happen, you can make it happen... there are people here who will support you or will find a way... people are savvy here.... I don't know if that's so possible in another city, because it's a small city in general... things are more accessible... opportunities here are quite high.

The Poets' Contribution to the Hong Kong Community

Regardless of their provenance, the poets have all been contributing to the Hong Kong literary community in various ways such as providing feedback, offering creative writing workshops, organising poetry readings and festivals, editing anthologies or journals and publishing.

Feedback Providers

One of the most common ways to support other writers in the community is to provide feedback on their writing. Louise Ho mentioned that she had always been “very encouraging” when other people showed her their poems or emailed her for advice; as Louise Ho used to teach creative writing at CUHK, this is not surprising. Leung, having undergone a Creative Writing programme, also appeared quite open about giving feedback, even negative feedback:

We learned giving and receiving support in our Creative Writing Programme.... I find it easy because I think this is necessary for the development of... creative writing in our community.... But... most of the time, to give positive [comments] is much easier than negative ones, even though we also need to give negative ones because both are important for writers.

Wong, however, reported it was “not that easy to give feedback” because of the personal nature of writing:

Sometimes my friends send me their poems and I say like, ‘For me, I think I would do this.’ But, I don’t know whether it’s a good way to do so because it’s my personal feeling about how the words should go....

McKirdy shared Wong’s diffidence in giving feedback because he was uncertain about how it would be received and he did not feel quite qualified to do so:

I am quite reluctant to give feedback unless it's asked for... because a lot of people... don't... actually want feedback. They want approval, so if I don't know them – and who am I to give feedback? I am just a fellow who writes poetry and I am not an expert on the art form.

He would prefer a bilateral give-and-take situation:

One-on-one with Sayed as a friend, we've been able to give and take feedback and particularly when he was translating my stuff.... He gave me some of his stuff – something he had already translated into English and asked me to look at it, so I changed a few things and gave him a few suggestions, 'Look, this word is better culturally'.... And he did the same.

Tammy Ho also pointed out the value of a writing partner:

As an editor, we do sometimes give feedback. It is hard to give feedback actually, because you cannot be completely honest with writers – since they may be offended. These days I often show my poems to my friend, Reid Mitchell. We are kind of like writing partners.

Workshop Teachers

Some poets also reported giving feedback in an explicitly educational setting. Bickley, for example, “supervise[d] a couple of creative writing projects” as a teacher at Hong Kong Baptist University. Kaiser taught in the creative writing programme at HKU for one term and “really enjoyed that experience.” Keung did a workshop at the Hong Kong Institute of Education on how to promote creative writing in the classroom. Several of the poets, McKirdy, Slavick, Kaiser also taught in the “Moving Poetry” project based at HKU aimed at introducing poetry writing to primary and secondary school students. Periodically, some of the poets might give talks at schools; Slavick did so at Glenealy School; Leung also recalled:

... school events organized by the Hong Kong Literary Festival. I did one with the South Island School.... And St Stephen's Girls' School.... I love reading to the students... it's like promoting poetry writing.

Bickley also helped to judge writing competitions:

The Budding Poets Society – it's a collaboration between the Gifted Education Section and the English Speaking Union.... I give a creative writing workshop once a year. I've only done it once, but I will be doing it every year.... I am one of the judges for their poetry writing competition....

Outloud and Festival Organisers

In terms of general support for adult poets in the community, Slavick was active in Outloud, an open microphone poetry group which started meeting every first Wednesday evening of the month from around 1999 at the Fringe Club; she was one of the co-ordinators from around 2000 to 2005. Slavick and another poet, Barbara Baker, also “led a writing group for six/seven years.” When Baker left Hong Kong, Slavick continued leading this group for a while by herself:

I think it's wonderful particularly for people when they are starting out, perhaps when they are first to Hong Kong... it doesn't have to be so serious – only about poetry... we usually have a meal together and talk.

McKirdy also helped to organise Outloud sessions for some years:

I just enjoy the camaraderie of writers... such a lovely event to go there and listen to other people's work and present your own work; that was the start of the writing really.

For a good while, he also sat on the board of the annual Hong Kong International Literary Festival. Occasionally, individual poets might organise one-off events such as that held by Lee on Peng Chau, an offshore island:

The festival that I held on Peng Chau... many people came. You can donate books... it was very good... very warm. It had quite an impact... quite a lively atmosphere... in two days, about 2000 people...

Several of the other poets (Bickley, Slavick, Leung and Tammy Ho) turned up to read at the Peng Chau festival.

Editors and Publishers

The feedback, the workshops and the poetry readings would ultimately build up to writing output which would need the support of editors and publishers; some of the poets took on these roles as well. Louise Ho would help her students publish whenever she could; she co-edited an English-German anthology of Hong Kong poetry (*Hong Kong Poems*):

Many of the students' works – I heavily edited them. I knew the essence was good, but the language was awkward. So, I don't think I was dishonest... and they approved of it.

Keung helped with editing *Imprint* published by Hong Kong Women in Publishing. Tammy Ho co-founded *Cha* because she wanted something based in Hong Kong:

I wanted to have something that is based in Hong Kong, especially when I see that, in Singapore, they have *QLRS* [*Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*]... even though, just like *Asian Cha*, they publish writers from all over the world – but there is something based somewhere. That’s quite important and I wanted that. Also, I was looking for places to submit works. And there are not many in Hong Kong. There are *Asia Literary Review* and *Yuan Yang* – but just that.... It’s a sense of belonging....

Leung also served on the editorial board of *Cha* as well as *Yuan Yang* which was published periodically at HKU. Bickley founded her own press, Proverse, and worked with young poets like Patty Ho and Jennifer Ching on their books. Slavick helped to run Sixth Finger Press for bilingual poetry:

I was really interested in bringing together the Chinese-speaking writing community and the English-speaking community, of readers, not just writers. So, we did things at the Book Fairs, at bookstores.... Just little things – just trying to mix things up.

It is evident that, regardless of where the poets came from, they have been quite ready to support the Hong Kong poetic community in various capacities. Such solidarity that transcends ethnic or national affiliations is not something that can be taken for granted in all international cities.

The Poets’ Sense of Community

The poets seem to have a range of identifications. Some feel they belong to the Hong Kong community; others feel they could identify with both the local and the international communities and still others believe they only have an abstract community or no community, or perhaps sub-communities for every sort of poem, depending on the subject. This could partly be because there might be a difference between the community or communities being addressed, which could be very wide, and the community that the poet speaks from or interacts with more frequently, which might well be situated in a particular locale.

Kaiser had both the Canadian and the Hong Kong audiences in mind when he compiled his collection, *Food Court*:

I divided the book into East and West because I knew that readers back in Canada would only really truly identify with the Western section. And readers here in Hong Kong would only really truly identify with the Eastern section.... I had two audiences in mind.

In terms of a sense of belonging though, he identifies more with the literary circle in Hong Kong. Leung shares Kaiser’s duality in terms of intended reader-

ship depending on the subject matter:

... both speaking to the Hong Kong local Chinese audience and the international English community, depending on the subject matter... when I write a poem on a Chinese theme, sometimes I would like to exoticize it and make it a little bit different. My intended audience would be the English international community. For some other poems, which may contain some specific social contexts of Hong Kong, my intended audience would be local Chinese because they would have resonance with those poems. But for some other poems... they address everybody. The subject matter tends to be more universal.

Notwithstanding this duality, Leung feels a greater sense of belonging with the “literary circle in [his] place of residence” – Hong Kong:

Although I am also involved in a lot of international publications, I don't view myself as much identified with them.... The occasions are usually very transitional. Usually I just submit... I didn't even see the publisher, and then... they sent me the complimentary copies. But in Hong Kong, I do readings in *Outloud* at the Fringe Club, I can see the faces of the audience.... We can discuss the poetry.... I really interact with the audience and identify with them. But for international publications, I feel so distant.

Like Leung, Tammy Ho feels she could identify with both her ethnic group as well as the international community, but feels some inadequacy in either voice:

I can identify with both groups – the international community and also my own ethnic group, but the identity is a bit complicated actually. I often feel that my voice is not international enough. I also feel that I don't write enough poems that can reflect on my identity – as a Chinese.... [W]hen I write poems about Hong Kong... or about my parents, then I have this audience [in Hong Kong] in mind that they may understand my work more, or better. But when I am writing other general poems, I don't actually think in terms of an audience.

Like Tammy Ho who might not be particularly aware of her audience when writing general poems, Lee reported that he would not think of the issue of community “consciously”:

I don't know what the community is because it is very diverse – you can have English speakers from a range of ethnic or cultural backgrounds. But, yes, when I write, I feel that I am translating something... very local to something quite universal.

Like Kaiser and Leung, Lee feels closer to the Hong Kong literary community but admitted that there could be concentric psychological loci for his writing, with Peng Chau, where he lived, at the centre:

... the line is quite blurred. For me, sometimes the local community is just Peng Chau. But sometimes it's like Hong Kong. And sometimes the Pearl River Delta... I am more rooted here... it is a place, a niche for myself... If the international community... is interested in reading my poems, that's fine. But... I do not want to adjust... my poems for this particularly international community.

Lee does not preclude speaking to the international audience as well but does not wish to adjust his writing with this particular audience in mind. McKirdy's conceptualisation of audience is similar to Lee's – from self to community to a universal readership:

First and foremost, you speak for yourself as a poet – the incentive to write, the encouragement, and the inspiration comes from within... and thereafter, one hopes that you are additionally speaking for your community.... If there are additional people who... can be communicated with, I am happy as well, so I suppose there's a universal readership ...

In terms of a sense of belonging, McKirdy claimed Hong Kong as his circle.

While the five poets above recognise some form of local identity and are generally ready to speak to a universal audience as well, other poets resist the demarcation along geographical lines. Slavick wishes to abandon all boundaries to move in the direction of one humanity:

I really try not to associate with only one particular ethnic group... my parents are from different cultures and most of my siblings have married somebody from another culture.... I am totally into... getting rid of boundaries.... I work in English, but I have been as influenced by Chinese poets in translation as much as by American poets and some German poets.... I don't think I am speaking for a geographical community. It's probably more for my kind of social justice background... that kind of general love for the world and love for anybody no matter who they are.

In her poetry, Slavick would not like to be tied to any particular group; if there is any community she is writing for, then it is the whole world. Wong's sense of audience is also geographically borderless:

I am speaking to whoever is interested in poetry or whoever wants to read more about it. I think, writing in English ... you can cater to more people – you don't have to limit it to just your own people.

The community Wong identifies with can only be actualised by interaction:

I identify with friends who share ideas with me. It doesn't matter to me where they live or where they are. Because, sometimes, even over email, I have friends – we send each other poems and we try to make some comments for each other.

Likewise, the audience Louise Ho would like to speak to is not tied to physical locations but where she is speaking from is clearly Hong Kong:

I speak to people who know about English poetry. But... I would like to concentrate on Hong Kong as a subject.... This is very vain of me... I hope to be able to put Hong Kong on some sort of, no matter how small, a map.... It's a search for the Hong Kong identity – for myself as well as for Hong Kong... a city which acts like a country...

She feels “very lonely” in her writing because she cannot interact face to face with Hong Kong poets more:

I feel very lonely.... May be if I stay on in Hong Kong longer and get to interact with poets here more... I would like to – just that when I was lecturing at CU [Chinese University], I did not have the time and energy. And now, I am not living here.

Spending most of her time in Australia after her retirement, she feels that her community exists only in virtual space:

... they are so distant. Some of them were in Hong Kong; some of them were in England. We didn't see each other constantly.... It's a kind of abstract community. Yes, it's always been that – a virtual community. But I'd like to have a real community – to get to know more poets and get to see them.

Despite having been largely based in Hong Kong since 1970, Bickley seems to share Louise Ho's sense of isolation as a poet:

I don't particularly perceive myself as a member of any community. Remember, I am an only child.... I am writing more about the subject.... I am not writing for my nation.... I don't identify.... I go to OutLoud and I

participate on some occasions.... But I wouldn't say I was integrated in a group.

Neither would she identify the community she is speaking to or from as she feels she is “just speaking” on subjects. Keung also feels she is writing for “whoever was there to understand what [she was] writing” but feels she might still have mutual identification with different sub-groups depending on the topic; she conceptualises these sub-groups as “tribes”:

... to me, poetry is for expression, for sharing, so I speak for individuals... one term that I learned from my Creative Writing course is interesting; they call it ‘tribes’ – people you feel you belong to.... I speak to dog lovers because I write about dogs... I write for the Chinese because I write about June 4th.... I do workshops with teachers... I wrote... a teacher’s soliloquy, about the hectic workload... and they all nod. So... may be I am also speaking for English teachers in this community.

In terms of a sense of belonging, Keung feels closest to the sub-community of teachers in Hong Kong; if asked to choose between the Hong Kong community, the ethnic Chinese community or the international community, she would claim closer ties with Hong Kong.

Conclusion

The experiences of the ten poets show that while Hong Kong might be fluid in membership, there is a core within the diffusion in terms of the support the poets receive and give to the community. Their sense of community also reflects this. The topics they write on range from the local to the universal; their interaction with other poets also moves from Hong Kong as a locus to any place around the world. Hong Kong is an interesting case to appreciate how local and expatriate members can co-operate to create a small supportive community, where almost every poet knows or knows of everyone else. Perhaps this openness is possible because the city identity is probably more salient than national identity in Hong Kong, at least in these transitional years. Several of the poets who have transplanted themselves to Hong Kong from elsewhere can and do take leadership positions in the poetic community, which might not be as possible in a place with a stronger sense of nation than Hong Kong, such as Singapore. The geographical compactness of Hong Kong and the highly efficient public transport also make it easier for poets to meet, something not as readily enjoyed by poets in geographically more sprawling cities such as Delhi or Mumbai in India. However, Hong Kong is not in a position to offer to writers the enormous range of publishers and literary journals found in some other international cities in countries with many more resident writers and large hinterlands reading in English. The publication of collections seems fairly

possible and may even be supported by grants from the HKADC but Hong Kong poets writing in English may sometimes have to look elsewhere to publish their poems before they have enough poems for a collection. This is in spite of valiant and friendly efforts such as the *Asia Review of Books, Cha* and the *Muse* magazine (which was unfortunately discontinued). To look ahead, a promising feature of the Hong Kong community is the increasing number of creative writing graduates from the degree programmes in creative writing, which may eventually lead to a larger community of writers and readers. Several of these graduates are already publishing successfully in other genres such as fiction and creative non-fiction as well and have been awarded scholarships and residencies overseas. All these bode well for the future of Hong Kong writing in English.

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