

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Embracing the Angel: Hong Kong Poems*. Hong Kong: Department of English, City University of Hong Kong, 2014. 26 pp. No ISBN.

During her tenure at the City University of Hong Kong in 2014, poet and academic, Shirley Geok-lin Lim witnessed the Umbrella Movement, otherwise known as the universal suffrage movement in Hong Kong. Her chapbook, *Embracing the Angel: Hong Kong Poems*, published by the Department of English at City University of Hong Kong, is a response to this movement. This collection, shared through the eyes of a straits-born Malaysian Chinese American, prods its readers to investigate and endorse democratic ideals.

The New York Times and other sources call this Umbrella Movement a revolution, but, as Lim said in a lecture at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, this was a peaceful protest, and not an attempt to overthrow any type of government.¹ The protesters initially called this movement, Occupy Central With Love and Peace (Hilgers). Hence, the word, movement, proves more appropriate. The activists reacted to a proposal by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Beijing's leadership, that Hong Kongites "could vote for chief executive, but... could not nominate the candidates" (Hilgers). The protesters desire a democratic approach: the ability to elect *any* individual from the Communist Party.

In her introduction to *Embracing the Angel: Hong Kong Poems*, Lim writes, "The poems... were composed between October 1, 2014, the National Day observed in the People's Republic of China [PRC] and in Hong Kong, politically a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the PRC, and the end of November" (3) of that same year. This phase of the movement ceased in mid-December of 2014 (3).

During that time, according to journalist Lauren Hilgers, one protester wrote "essays on her phone." Lim also recalled the consideration she ought to give students who might miss lectures due to the movement (Lecture). Students slept in tents and distributed water bottles. Lim called the movement a "keyboard frontline" (Lecture).

In the poem, "National Day (Hong Kong, Oct. 1st, 2014)," Lim writes,

I look out
for my students, costumed in plastic
and masked, hiding in plain sight
from the gas their uncles and aunties
have thrown at them.... (4)

¹ According to Lim, the protesters pushed this aim only for those who live in Hong Kong, and not for those who live in mainland China.

Students taped surgical masks to their faces to prevent tear gas from entering their mouths and noses. They wore raincoats and sported umbrellas, as a means of defence against the gas. The symbol of a young person sporting a yellow umbrella quickly became the icon of the movement (Lecture).

Lim, who wore a yellow ribbon at her lecture in Dallas, compared the icon of the umbrella holder to the “Statue of Liberty, the goddess of democracy” (Lecture). She noted that the movement had ceased, for now, and mentioned her pride for her students who participated in this “keyboard frontline.”

One cannot fail to note the youth of the protesters. In “The Children’s Movement (‘I’m here because I love Hong Kong,” at the protests, Sept. 30, 2014),” the poet muses, “You are nine, or eleven, or perhaps/ thirteen or sixteen. In all your years/ you’ve obeyed father and mother...” (5). Perhaps Lim has in mind someone like then-17 Joshua Wong Chi-fung, one of the leaders of the movement (Hilgers).

According to Hilgers, responses to the movement have been severe, a topic Lim does not fail to suggest in her poems with references to “red cuts suppurating/ to yellow” (11): “Late in the protest, when China’s president, Xi Jinping, made a trip to Macau on a rainy day, journalists were not allowed to carry umbrellas” (Hilgers). Hilgers also notes, “In mainland China, those thought to be supporters of the protest – even those who just expressed support online – have been thrown in jail” (Hilgers). Articles published in news sources in January also noted the questioning of individuals like Wong in Hong Kong’s High Court (Campbell).

As the chapbook probes the movement, it describes “gutted fish” in wet markets (17), pup tents (23), and the ebb and flow of politicised streets (20). During her lecture, Lim also showed images of the Union Jack flag, used during the movement, and John Lennon’s Wall of post-its,² created during the movement. Inquiring minds – minds that bristle at the idea of sequestered independence – will seek this chapbook, and will wonder what will ensue in Hong Kong in election years to come

Works Cited

Campbell, Charlie. “Hong Kong Student Leader Joshua Wong Questioned Over Pro-Democracy Protests.” *Time* 16 January 2015.

² The Lennon Wall in Prague contrarily was comprised of graffiti that included lyrics to songs by the Beatles as a means of resistance to Communism. See Adam Chandler, “The Life and Times of John Lennon’s Wall.”

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