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“Hong Kong Poetry: The Making of a Sinophone Literary Genre”

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong has been a liminal space for transcultural exchanges between Chinese and Western worlds since the nineteenth century. Despite its unique position vis-à-vis China and the West, however, Hong Kong has long been dismissed as lacking cultural gravitas. As such, Hong Kong culture finds itself self-consciously confronting a perennial crisis: as the People's Republic of China gains increasing recognition in the canons of world literature, Hong Kong's cosmopolitan culture is indirectly marginalised in the process. Meanwhile, Hong Kong literature is routinely underrepresented in the canons of modern Sinophone literature. Anthologies of modern Chinese poetry and poetry research, for instance, scarcely include Hong Kong poets, if at all. Given this context, this essay seeks to rearticulate the place of Hong Kong in modern Sinophone literary history. More specifically, it traces the emergence of Hong Kong poetry as a cosmopolitan literary genre in the latter half of the twentieth century. The goals are threefold: to historicise the confluence of Sinophone and Western literary traditions in the city of Hong Kong; to locate specific intersections of identity, language, and politics in the production of Hong Kong poetry; and to introduce biographical and bibliographical data on notable Hong Kong poets.

KEYWORDS: Hong Kong, literary history, Ma Boliang, Leung Ping-kwan, Louise Ho, Tammy Ho



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Hong Kong has always existed on the margins of history. The fishing hamlet on the edge of the Chinese empire became a political entity of importance only in the nineteenth century, when the Qing court ceded the island to Great Britain at the end of the Opium War. Interestingly, Hong Kong's status made it a liminal space for transcultural exchanges between Chinese and Western worlds throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. 1 During World War II, Sinophone authors across the political spectrum—from the leftist writer Mao Dun to the modernist poet Dai Wangshu and the proto-feminist novelist Eileen Chang—sought refuge in the British colony. Although Hong Kong became a world-class metropolis in the decades after, its literary scene never attained a commensurate status.

Despite its unique position vis-à-vis China and the West, Hong Kong has long been dismissed as lacking cultural gravitas. Although Hong Kong's cultural hybridity has made it accessible to the international community, its cultural offerings have fallen short for those who seek the perceived authenticity of a "national" canon.¹ Meanwhile, the imminent end of an era crept into the minds of Hong Kong people as they approached the handover of 1997. Hong Kongers worried that their way of life, popular culture, and economic competitiveness would come to an end with the city's handover to the People's Republic of China (PRC). As Mabel Cheung's celebrated film *City of Glass* ("Boli zhi cheng 玻璃之城") illustrates, Hong Kongers lived on borrowed time, as though their world would shatter on its expiration date. Ackbar Abbas calls the perennial nature of Hong Kong's transience a "culture of disappearance," a culture that finds expression only in the form of its imminent expiration.²

As such, Hong Kong culture finds itself self-consciously confronting a perennial crisis. The PRC has not only overshadowed Hong Kong by virtue of its size and hegemony, but it has also embraced Reform and Openness enough to make Hong Kong less and less relevant. This existential angst finds an equivalent expression in literary studies. In *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China*, Chu Yiu-Wai compares Hong Kong's predicament to that of Comparative Literature: as a discipline in peril, it has to articulate time and again its *raison d'être*, its reason to exist.³ However, for Chu, the move to globalise Comparative Literature, including its increasing recognition of the PRC as a cultural force, has indirectly exacerbated the identity crisis faced by Hong Kongers.⁴ In short, while Hong Kong literature is generally understood to be unique and distinct from China's, scholars and readers alike tend to know little about Hong Kong's literary canon.

¹ Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Rey Chow, *Ethics after Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity, Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). Prasenjit Duara, 'Hong Kong and the New Imperialism in East Asia, 1941-1966', in *Twentieth-Century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday and the World*, ed. by Bryna Goodman and David S. G. Goodman (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 197–211. Yiu-Wai Chu, *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013). Yiu-Wai Chu, *Found in Transition: Hong Kong Studies in the Age of China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018).

² Abbas, *Hong Kong*, p. 7.

³ Chu, *Lost in Transition*, pp. 152-155.

⁴ Chu, *Lost in Transition*, pp. 155-160.

Hong Kong literature is routinely underrepresented in the canons of modern Sinophone literature. Anthologies of modern Chinese poetry and poetry research scarcely include Hong Kong poets, if at all. One example is Maghiel van Crevel's *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*, which does not define "China" and "Chinese" as inclusive of Taiwan and Hong Kong.⁵ In *New Perspectives on Contemporary Chinese Poetry*, the editor Christopher Lupke acknowledges that "that no one has devoted a chapter to the study of Hong Kong poets is a regrettable result" stemming from the volume's size.⁶ In Lupke's subsequent edited volume *Chinese Poetic Modernisms*, co-edited with Paul Manfredi, merely two Hong Kong poets are discussed in a single chapter about Taiwan and Hong Kong poetry. Elsewhere, the Hong Kong poets mentioned tend to be associated with Republican China and Taiwan's literary scene more so than Hong Kong's. In Michelle Yeh's groundbreaking volume *Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry*, poets with Hong Kong backgrounds include Dai Wangshu (who lived in Hong Kong in the late 1930s and early 1940s) and the likes of Ye Weilian (Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉) and Zhang Cuo (Dominic Cheung 張錯) who both received their higher education in Taiwan and the United States. Consequently, a number of questions remain: why have Hong Kong poets been left out of the canons of modern Chinese poetry? Where do poets whose work speaks directly to the experience of living in Hong Kong belong? How does one anthologise Hong Kong poets who write about Hong Kong in languages such as written Cantonese and even English? Given how Hong Kong poetry has been neglected in modern Sinophone literary history, this essay seeks to describe the emergence and impact of Hong Kong poets on the world of Sinophone poetry in the twentieth century.

Hong Kong Poets and the Emergence of Sinophone Literary Modernism

Literary modernism entered the world of Sinophone literature in the early twentieth century through the Promethean efforts of Hong Kong poets such as Ma Boliang 馬博良 (1933-) whose literary career first flourished in Republican China. Primarily known by his pen name Ma Lang 馬朗, and less frequently by his English name Ronald Mar, Ma Boliang is also a fiction writer and editor who represented the link between wartime Sinophone literature and post-war literary movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Born in 1933 to a Chinese American family, Ma moved to Shanghai in the 1940s toward the end of World War II.⁷ In mainland China, Ma quickly earned the reputation of being a

⁵ Maghiel Van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 53.

⁶ Christopher Lupke, 'Introduction: Toward a Chinese Lyrical Modernity', in *New Perspectives on Contemporary Chinese Poetry*, ed. by Christopher Lupke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 1-7 (p. 2).

⁷ Most biographies give 1933 as Ma's birth year, but he admits that it may not be accurate because he was born in wartime. By this account, Ma would have started his literary career at approximately the age of eleven. Writers of the time often

literary prodigy. The young Ma shaped the development of Sinophone literature in the literary supplements of such newspapers as *New People's Nightly* (*Xinmin wanbao* 新民晚報), *The World Daily* (*Shijie chenbao* 世界晨報), and *Free Speech Newspaper* (*Ziyou luntan bao* 自由論壇報) as well as other magazines. In 1944, Ma started the literary journal *Literary Currents* (*Wenchao* 文潮) as the founding editor-in-chief. Most notably, he publicised the talents of Eileen Chang by reviewing her short stories "Love in a Fallen City" ("Qingcheng zhi lian 傾城之戀") and "Glazed Tiles" ("Liuli wa 琉璃瓦"), both published in late 1943. As such, Ma's review has been credited as the first published analysis of Chang's work,⁸ making him a pioneer in modern Chinese literary criticism.

Furthermore, Ma expanded the horizons of Sinophone literature by experimenting with literary styles ranging from the lyrical to the surreal, and by working with Sinophone authors across the political spectrum. Ma's first collection of poetry was titled *A Pledge* (*Haishi* 海誓): as the poet-scholar Leung Ping-kwan observes, Ma's early poems showed signs of influence from Dai Wangshu, He Qifang, Chen Mengjia, and other lyric poets of the 1940s.⁹ In 1947, Ma published a collection of short stories titled *The Most Ideal Tree* (*Di yi lixiang shu* 第一理想樹). As a promising young author and literary editor, Ma befriended prominent figures in Shanghai (who were often decades his senior) such as Eileen Chang, the Crescent School poet Shao Xunmei, the modernist poet Ji Xian (a.k.a. Luyishi 路易士), as well as leftist writers. From December 1948 to May 1949, he co-edited and wrote film reviews for *Mercury Lamps* (*Shuiyin deng* 水銀燈), a bimonthly periodical that focused on Western cinema, mainly Hollywood films. Ma eventually graduated from Saint John's University in Shanghai and moved to Hong Kong in the early 1950s. As a poet of his time, Ma lived through not only the chaos and bifurcation of China in the 1940s, but also the subsequent exodus of Shanghai residents to Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong, Ma was among the earliest to introduce Western literary modernism to the Sinophone world. From 1956 to 1959, Ma published *New Literary Currents* (*Wenyi xinchao* 文藝新潮) introducing Western literature to readers in Hong Kong and Taiwan, since modernist literature was considered a

referred to Ma as a child prodigy, corroborating this account. Lianghe Wang 王良和, 'Cong Fen qin de langzi dao Jiang shan meng yu: yu Ma Boliang tan ta de shi' 從《焚琴的浪子》到《江山夢雨》—與馬博良談他的詩 [From *The Drifter Who Burned the Lute to Memory Lanes of Rain to My Dreams: Speaking with Ma Boliang about His Poetry*], *Xianggang wenxue* 香港文學 [*Hong Kong Literature*], 280 (2008), 4-12 (4).

⁸ Jiaqi Du 杜家祈 and Ma Lang 馬朗, 'Wei shenme shi xiandai zhuyi—Du Jiaqi Ma Lang duitan' 為什麼是現代主義—杜家祈、馬朗對談 [Why is Modernism—A Conversation Between Du Jiaqi and Ma Lang], *Xianggang wenxue* 香港文學 [*Hong Kong Literature*], 224 (2003), 21-31 (22).

⁹ Ping-kwan Leung, 'Modern Hong Kong Poetry: Negotiation of Cultures and the Search for Identity', *Modern Chinese Literature*, 9.2 (1996), 221-245 (227).

“forbidden fruit” in post-1949 China.¹⁰ The literary journal was the first in Hong Kong to introduce modernist works from Europe and the Americas, written originally in languages such as English, French, and Spanish. Authors included the likes of T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Tennessee Williams, Yeats, de Beauvoir, Camus, Sartre, Borges, García Lorca, and Paz, to name a few. As Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞 puts it, these authors offer to Hong Kong readers “a wide range of attempts at and models of modernism in various cultures,” including “critical attitudes toward modernism.”¹¹ In the passage below, Ma describes the post-WWII climate in Hong Kong in which he and his literary friends turned toward Western modernism:

In a state of anxiety, I returned to Hong Kong. My friends and I felt lost, empty, confused. I wanted to see the world anew even more than before. Following our own senses, we sang songs, told stories, and daydreamed. Of our own accord, we opened the window to hear distant songs, distant stories. As a result, despite myriad difficulties, I found an old business colleague to help me in 1956. Through my own efforts, I published *New Literary Currents*. We chose modernism as our banner and compass, not only because it was to our taste. It was also because, when we parted the curtains, opened the windows, and saw the world outside, modernism was what we saw—that beautiful vista, dream, and hope.¹²

惶恐地回到香港，我和一些周圍的朋友感到迷失、空洞、困惑，我覺得比以前更想要重新觀察外面的世界，我們自己也要隨自己的意思唱唱歌，講一些故事，發發夢，也要自由地推開窗去聽遙遠的歌，遙遠的故事。於是，在萬難之中，在一九五六年，找到一位認識長久的生意朋友幫助我，用自己的力量出版了《文藝新潮》，認定了現代主義是我們的旗幟和方針，因為那不單是個人的喜愛，而是當我們拉開幕，打開窗，看到外面世界的時候，現代主義就是我們看見的美麗的風景，夢想和希望。

Engaging with Western modernisms, Ma’s poetry subsequently shed its earlier lyricism and exhibited the influences of W. H. Auden, André Breton, Stephen Spender, and Dylan Thomas. In turn, Ma’s contributions would shape Hong Kong’s poetry scene populated by such poets as Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉,

¹⁰ Boliang Ma 馬博良, *Fen qin de langzi* 焚琴的浪子 [*The Drifter Who Burned the Lute*] (Hong Kong: Suye chubanshe 素葉出版社, 1982), pp. 33-36.

¹¹ Leung, “Modern Hong Kong Poetry,” 228.

¹² Boliang Ma 馬博良, *Jiang shan meng yu* 江山夢雨 [*Memory Lanes of Rain to My Dreams*] (Hong Kong: Maisui chuban youxian gongsi, 2007), pp. 153-154. My translation.

Zhang Yan 張彥 (a.k.a. Xi Xi 西西), and Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞 (a.k.a. Ye Si 也斯).¹³ Through Ma's poetry and editorial efforts, the lure of Western modernisms caused a ripple effect on Hong Kong poetry and beyond.

Meanwhile, Ma re-evaluated the legacy of Republican Chinese literature. A special issue on "The Best Short Stories from China in the Past Thirty Years" resurrected authors who had fallen out of favour or had been largely ignored in mainland China such as Shen Congwen 沈從文, Duanmu Hongliang 端木蕻良, Shi Tuo 師陀, and Zhong Dingwen 鍾鼎文. More importantly, Ma's *New Literary Currents* complemented the well-known *Modernist Poetry Quarterly* (*Xiandai shi* 現代詩) from Taiwan, which his older colleague and friend from the Shanghai period, Ji Xian, founded and edited from 1953 to 1964. Consequently, Ma exerted influence over the development of Sinophone literature in Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1950s and after.

Ma's literary production came to a pause, when he turned to a career in diplomacy during the Cold War years. Sometime after the closure of *New Literary Currents*, Ma moved back to the United States where he attended Georgetown University and the Foreign Service Institute in northern Virginia, subsequently entering the US Foreign Service. It was only in 1976—three decades after *A Pledge* and *The Most Ideal Tree*—that Ma resumed publishing poetry, a collection pertinently titled *Thirty Poems in America* (*Meizhou sanshi xian* 美洲三十絃). Containing poems that Ma wrote after settling in the United States, the volume is praised by Wang Jianyuan as a classic example of poetry "that echoes the 'sound of the times' as a result of exile."¹⁴ Ma's earlier poems from 1945 to 1961 were anthologised in a collection titled *The Drifter Who Burned the Lute* (*Fenqin de langzi* 焚琴的浪子), published in 1982.

While a number of Ma's poems convey feelings of sacrifice and exile, others express nostalgia for a Hong Kong of yesteryear. For instance, Ma's well-cited poem from 1957, "A Night in North Point" ("Beijiao zhi ye 北角之夜"), describes the speaker going home on a late-night tram.¹⁵ Leung Ping-kwan recalls being delighted as a teenager in the 1960s reading Ma's poem about North Point, a

¹³ Ma's contemporaries in Hong Kong include other poets such as Li Weiling 李維陵, Lu Zhaoling 盧昭靈 (a.k.a. Lu Yin 盧因), Romulus Yang 楊際光 (a.k.a. Beinatai 貝娜苔), Stephen Soong 宋淇 (a.k.a. Lin Yiliang 林以亮), Shum Qunan 岑崑南 (a.k.a. Kun Nan 崑南), Wucius Wong 王松基 (a.k.a. Wang Wuxie 王無邪), and Cai Yanpei 蔡炎培 (a.k.a. Du Hong 杜紅).

¹⁴ Jianyuan Wang 王建元, 'Zhansheng gejue—Ma Boliang yu Ye Weilian de fangzhu shi 戰勝隔絕--馬博良與葉維廉的放逐詩' [Defeating Isolation: The Exile Poetry of Ma Boliang and Wai-lim Yip], in *Xianggang wenxue tanshang* 香港文學探賞 [Explorations of Hong Kong Literature], ed. by Chen Bingliang 陳炳良 (Taipei: Shulin 書林, 1994), pp. 159-86 (p. 191).

¹⁵ Ma, *Fen qin de langzi*, pp. 67-68.

neighbourhood on Hong Kong Island where they had respectively once lived.¹⁶ Indeed, Leung would compose “At the North Point Car Ferry” (“Beijiao qiche duhai matou 北角汽車渡海碼頭”) in 1974 with the knowledge of Ma’s earlier text. Ma himself would reprise the theme of trams in 1993, when he wrote “The Island’s Streetcar Named Desire” (“Daoshang de yuwang hao jieche 島上的慾望號街車”) after a trip to Hong Kong:

“The Island’s Streetcar Named Desire”

On a streetcar, neither here nor there,
savouring
the spicy remnants of beef brisket noodles.
Remnants of *pu’er* destiny
finally succumbing
with the moonlight
to a rivalling
teppanyaki. That
fiery
forlorn love affair
missing one stop after another.
Beyond the streetcar window
chattering
likely the sounds of roasting chestnuts.¹⁷

《島上的慾望號街車》

在不著邊際的街車上
回味著
有一點點刺激的牛腩粉
一點點普洱的宿緣

¹⁶ Ye Si 也斯, *Xianggang wenhua kongjian yu wenxue* 香港文化空間與文學 [*Hong Kong’s Cultural Domain and Literature*] (Hong Kong: Qingwen shuwu 青文書屋, 1996), p. 2.

¹⁷ Ma, *Jiang shan meng yu*, pp. 97-98. My translation. To my knowledge, this is the first published translation of Ma’s poem in English.

終於陷入了
和月光
爭風的
鐵板燒那樣
熊熊然的
無告的戀愛
錯過了一站又一站
車窗外
傳來
好像炒栗子的聲響

Ma's casual poem on the urban and culinary dimensions of Hong Kong life conveys a familiar cosmopolitanism. As the speaker rides the colonial-era tram on Hong Kong Island, he relishes the aftertaste of rice noodles with beef brisket, *pu'er* tea, and Japanese *teppanyaki*. A subtle moment of *onomatopoeia* intervenes at the end of the poem: *chuan / chyun* 傳 ("relay") and *chao / chaau* 炒 ("fry") suggest the sounds of roasting chestnuts. While chestnuts are roasted in ovens or machines today, they were traditionally cooked in black sand heated in a large cast-iron wok. The vendor would repeatedly turn over the mixture of sand and chestnuts with a shovel, creating a stream of *ch-ch* sounds. In Ma's poem, everyday experiences such as commuting on public transportation, remembering a good meal, and pondering about lost love attain the level of commemoration, an aesthetic that Leung would elevate further in his own work. As a poet and literature scholar, Leung likely knew about Ma's poem when he penned *Foodscape* (*Shishi diyu zhi* 食事地域志), his 1997 series of poems on the relationship between food and the city.

"The Island's Streetcar Named Desire" also signals Ma's declining production of poetry in the 1990s and 2000s. During this period, Ma wrote mainly restaurant reviews and features on food and wine for Sinophone and English publications. In addition to feature journalism, Ma worked on a film script for the legendary Hong Kong-Taiwan director King Hu who unfortunately died before the film could go into production. Ma's literary production had not stopped, however. In 2007, Ma visited Hong Kong and published the poetry collection *Memory Lanes of Rain to My Dreams* (*Jiang shan meng yu* 江山夢雨). A selection of his short stories *Half a Century of Shadows Passing* (*Ban shiji lüeying* 半世紀掠影) appeared in 2013, in which "A Street under the Sun" ("Taiyang xia de jie 太陽下的街") is considered to be one of his best-known. It is intriguing that, despite his singular impact on modern Sinophone

literature, Ma is virtually unknown in the Sinophone world outside academic and literary circles. There is also little Western scholarship on his oeuvre.¹⁸ Ma Boliang's Promethean contributions to the Sinophone literary world—from Republican China to post-war Hong Kong, Taiwan, and beyond—should be duly recognised and credited.

Sinophone Literary Production and Cosmopolitanism in Cantonese

Hong Kong poetry played a key role in highlighting Cantonese as a language of Sinophone literary production. What distinguished Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞 (1949-2013) from most Sinophone authors was that he spoke and worked primarily in Cantonese, not Mandarin. Along with writers such as Liu Yichang 劉以鬯, Jin Yong 金庸 (Louis Cha 查良鏞), Xi Xi 西西 (Zhang Yan 張彥) and Li Bihua 李碧華 (Lilian Lee), Leung introduced Cantonese literature to the Sinophone world and beyond. Widely known by his pen name Ye Si 也斯, Leung was a Hong Kong poet, fiction writer, essayist, and scholar who wrote primarily on post-war Hong Kong's everyday life, cultural heritage, and linguistic peculiarities. He published over thirty volumes of poetry, fiction, and essays and was recognised with the Hong Kong Biennial Award for Chinese Literature (1991, 1996, 2011), Hong Kong Medal of Honour (2006), Hong Kong Arts Development Council Award (2010), and Hong Kong Book Prize (2012). His international reputation as a Hong Kong poet was solidified at the Frankfurt Book Fair, Salon du Livre Paris, Berlin International Literature Festival, and Slovenia's Vilenica International Literary Festival as well as individual poetry readings in Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and Romania. In addition to literary activities, he collaborated with artists, photographers, dancers, musicians, fashion designers, and dramatists working in Hong Kong.

Leung moved fluidly between literary circles and academia, between Hong Kong and the world. Having studied English and Chinese literature at Hong Kong Baptist College (now Hong Kong Baptist University), he pursued doctoral studies in Comparative Literature at the University of California, San Diego in the United States. Under the direction of Wai-lim Yip, himself a renowned poet-scholar and author of *Diffusion of Distances: Dialogues Between Chinese and Western Poetics*, Leung completed a dissertation titled *Aesthetics of Opposition: A Study of the Modernist Generation of Chinese Poets, 1936-1949*. While his family emigrated to Canada, Leung returned to Hong Kong where he taught English and Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong from 1985 to 1997.¹⁹ In 1997, he joined Lingnan University where he was Professor of Comparative Literature and Chair of the

¹⁸ Leung, "Modern Hong Kong Poetry," 1996. Chris Song, 'Ronald Mar and the Trope of Life: The Translation of Western Modernist Poetry in Hong Kong', in *Chinese Poetry and Translation: Rights and Wrongs*, ed. by Maghiel van Crevel and Lucas Klein (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 249-263.

¹⁹ Yip, Wai-lim, *Diffusion of Distances: Dialogues Between Chinese and Western Poetics* (Florida: University of California Press, 1993).

Department of Chinese and the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences until his death in 2013. His scholarship focused mainly on Hong Kong literature, cinema, culture, identity, and urban life. Leung also showed a sustained interest in the literary and cultural developments in Hong Kong and China from the 1930s to the 1950s, especially modernism. Moreover, he is known for editing and translating Western literary works into Chinese. He published three volumes on modern and contemporary literature from the United States, France, and Latin America and translated the works of Ezra Pound and Gary Snyder. In academia, Leung's cosmopolitanism, or his desire to engage multiple cultural traditions, earned him visiting positions at York University, University of Heidelberg, University of Tokyo, and Harvard University as well as residencies in New York, Berlin, and Saorge in southeastern France. In 2012, he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Zürich, Switzerland for his creative and scholarly contributions to Sinophone literature.

In addition to his academic pedigree, Leung was a prolific writer of poetry, fiction, and essays. He began his writing career as a columnist in the 1960s and published his first work in 1972, a collection of essays titled *Grey Pigeon Mornings* (*Huige zaochen de hua* 灰鴿早晨的話). In the 1970s and 1980s, he wrote poetry as well as serialised fiction for newspapers. His first collection of poems *The Thunderbolt and the Cicada Song* (*Leisheng yu chan ming* 雷聲與蟬鳴) appeared in 1979, shortly after he left for doctoral studies in the United States. Since the 1980s, Leung produced not only creative and scholarly works in Chinese, but also academic articles in English on subjects such as modernism in Chinese literature, Hong Kong urban culture, and Hong Kong cinema. Major collections of Leung's poetry include English translations such as *City at the End of Time*, *Travelling with a Bitter Melon*, and *Fly Heads and Bird Claws* as well as Chinese volumes such as *A Poetry of Moving Signs* (*Youli de shi* 游離的詩), *East West Matters* (*Dongxi* 東西), and *Vegetable Politics* (*Shucai de zhengzhi* 蔬菜的政治).

Meanwhile, he continued to publish fiction and essays in *Islands and Continents* (*Dao he dalu* 島和大陸), *Cities of Memory, Cities of Fabrication* (*Jiyi di chengshi xugou di chengshi* 記憶的城市・虛構的城市), and *Lights and Shadows* (*Shan guang shui ying* 山光水影). Among his later works are award-winning books such as *Postcards from Prague* (*Bulage de mingxin pian* 布拉格的明信片), *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart* (*Hou zhimin shiwu yu aiqing* 後殖民食物與愛情), and *Tastes of the Floating World* (*Renjian ziwei* 人間滋味). Due to their popularity, many of Leung's out-of-print works have since been reissued in Chinese and translated into languages such as English, French, German, Portuguese, Swedish, Japanese, and Korean.

Integral to Leung's poetry is a subtle process of translation, the constant negotiation between written Chinese and spoken Cantonese. Although his poems are composed in the written Chinese script, the sound, rhythm, and syntax of his lines bear traces of the Cantonese unique to Hong Kong. The issue of

mutual intelligibility between Chinese dialects (or “languages” as some linguists would argue) cannot be overstated: if Mandarin speakers were to listen to a Chinese text read aloud in Cantonese, they would not comprehend it any more than a Berliner would Swiss German or a Parisian would Portuguese. Nevertheless, what brings speakers of different dialects together is that they are able to read the same text on the page. In his negotiations between script and sound, Leung proves to be a loyal Hong Kong poet. He once told his translator Gordon Osing in an interview: “I do not believe in the purity of the Chinese language.”²⁰ By his own admission, some of his poems “probably sound better in Cantonese.”²¹ Leung’s poetry reminds us that “the Chinese language” is not equivalent to Mandarin Chinese. Cantonese and other Chinese languages can produce literary works of value, not unlike the “minor literature” theorized by Deleuze and Guattari and later adapted to the Hong Kong context by Rey Chow.²²

From the standpoint of the colonialist or cultural purist, however, Hong Kong literature is never “Western” or “Chinese” enough. One poem demonstrates the liminal space in which Leung’s writing exists. “An Old Colonial Building” (“Lao zhimin di jianzhu老殖民地建築”) begins with the description of a beautiful colonial-era structure under renovation, the Main Building of the University of Hong Kong:

Through sunlight and shadow dust swirls,
through the scaffolding raised-up around
the colonial office edifice, over the wooden planks
men live on to tear it brick by brick, the imperial
image of it persisting right down, sometimes
to the bitter soil in the foundation, sometimes finding, too,
the noble height of a rotunda, the wide, hollow corridors
leading sometimes to blocked places, which, sometimes,
knocked open, are stairs down to ordinary streets.²³

這麼多的灰塵揚起在陽光和
陰影之間到處搭起棚架圍上
木板圍攏古老的殖民地建築

²⁰ Leung, *City at the End of Time*, p. 204.

²¹ Leung, *City at the End of Time*, p. 225.

²² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 16-27. Rey Chow, *Ethics after Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity, Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 178-179. Rey Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

²³ Leung, *City at the End of Time*, pp. 88-89. Translation by Gordon Osing.

彷彿要把一磚一木拆去也許
到頭來基本的形態仍然保留
也許翻出泥土中深藏的酸苦
神氣的圓頂和寬敞的走廊仍
對着堵塞的牆壁也許劈開拆毀
梯級也許通向更多尋常的屋宇

In the bilingual edition, *paang ga* 棚架 is translated into English as “scaffolding,” but the term is used much more frequently by Cantonese speakers than Mandarin speakers who prefer to say *jiaoshoujia* 腳手架 instead. The process of rendering Leung’s poem into English thereby reveals internal discrepancies between Cantonese, Mandarin, and the Chinese script. However, none of this tension is evident in the final product, on the façade of the printed page. It is as though Cantonese were the true scaffolding in the poem’s translation from one imperial language into another. Cantonese is dispensable, once the handover of the poetic edifice is complete.

Leung’s poetry is therefore all the more important for giving voice to the mundane details of Hong Kong life. Esther Cheung calls it his “poetics of quotidianism.”²⁴ “In Ap-liu Street” (“Yaliao jie 鴨寮街”) conveys precisely the objects, places, and experiences that constitute the collective memory of Hong Kong people. Named after nearby duck farms (*aap liu* 鴨寮) before the area’s urbanisation, the well-known street boasts a vibrant market that sells everything from cell phones and audio equipment to electrical components and used goods. Items with conspicuously Cantonese names such as *chaap sou* 插蘇 (electrical sockets) and *nap dat dik ping dai wok* 凹凸的平底鑊 (a dented pan) populate the poem. In Osing’s alliterated diction, the street is “a packed arcade” and “a paradise of accessories.”²⁵ However, the original Cantonese is closer to “a shopping mall for humans” (*yan dik seung cheung* 人的商場) and “a heaven for spare parts” (*ling gin dik tin tong* 零件的天堂). Humans conduct business at the stores and kiosks, while spare parts congregate in this paradise of sorts. The parallel syntax suggests that both humans and nonhuman objects are elated to be there. Under Leung’s pen, all beings—however mundane—exude a sense of Hong Kong identity.

²⁴ Esther M. K. Cheung, ‘New Ends in a City of Transition’, in *City at the End of Time: Poems by Leung Ping-kwan*, ed. by Esther M. K. Cheung and Ping-kwan Leung (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), pp. 1-19 (p. 2).

²⁵ Leung, *City at the End of Time*, pp. 93.

Another poem in Leung's *Foodscape* series encapsulates this Hong Kong ethos:

"Tea-coffee"

Five different types of tea leaves make
the brew fragrantly strong—steeping in cotton bags
or, legend has it, silk stockings, so tender, forgiving, muddled.
Poured into another teapot, enduring the measure of time,
the tea varies in strength and taste. Can this fine sense
of balance be maintained? If the tea

pours into a cup of coffee, will the strong brew
dominate or obliterate the other?
Or, will it hold a blend of flavors: like roadside food stalls,
sensible and worldly from their daily stoves,
mixed with a dash of gossip and grace, hard-working but
a little sloppy ... an indescribable taste.²⁶

《鴛鴦》

五種不同的茶葉沖出了
香濃的奶茶，用布袋
或傳說中的絲襪溫柔包容混雜
沖水倒進另一個茶壺，經歷時間的長短
影響了茶味的濃淡，這分寸
還能掌握得好嗎？若果把奶茶

混進另一杯咖啡？那濃烈的飲料
可是壓倒性的，抹煞了對方？
還是保留另外一種味道：街頭的大牌檔
從日常的爐灶上累積情理與世故

²⁶ Ping-kwan Leung and Ka-sing Lee, *Foodscape* (Hong Kong: The Original Photograph Club Limited, 1997), pp. 2-3.

混和了日常的八卦與通達，勤奮又帶點
散漫的.....那些說不清楚的味道

Here, the quintessential Hong Kong drink *yun yeung* 鴛鴦, or “tea-coffee,” is at once a symbol of hybridity and a product for consumption. As if to decipher Hong Kong’s tasseography, the speaker wonders whether one could sustain this organic, yet delicate, blend of flavours. The Handover of 1997 was perceived as the end of an era for the people of Hong Kong. It is therefore not surprising that Leung presented this poem in the year of the Handover at an art exhibition pertinently titled “City at the End of Time: Hong Kong 1997.” In his work *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Ackbar Abbas argues that Leung’s poetry “does not wish to make any claims to be representative, ‘to speak for Hong Kong’.”²⁷ While Abbas’ assessment may have been true at the time, Leung’s oeuvre has accumulated new layers of meaning in the years since. Now that everyday life in the city has become a site of contention between Hong Kongers and Mainlanders, even trivialities can become flash points for social and political conflicts. In this context, Leung’s poetry serves as a crystallisation of the past hopes and fears of Hong Kong people and a barometer for their possible futures.

The idiosyncrasies of Hong Kong life are captured in poetry as ephemeral insights. Ma Boliang’s poetry reflects a particular period in Hong Kong’s history, in which the memories of wartime China were still fresh, colonial Hong Kong had yet to become a global city, and Western modernism loomed large as a concept in the minds of Sinophone writers and artists. Arguably, Ma’s cosmopolitan experiences were as much a product of historical forces as it was of his personal journey. For subsequent generations of Hong Kong poets, in contrast, their cosmopolitan experiences were rooted in the confluence of British and Chinese hegemony. Many, including Leung Ping-kwan, had received a British colonial education allowing them to work in multiple languages such as Cantonese, Mandarin, and English. Whereas Ma travelled discreetly as a member of the US Foreign Service, Leung exercised his privilege of mobility through postgraduate study in the United States, visiting professorships, and literary festivals abroad. Interestingly, America played a pivotal role in both their personal journeys, and American English likewise left a mark on their speech and writing. However, their respective recognition differs markedly: Ma as a singular game-changer in modern Sinophone literary history is hardly known beyond academic circles, while Leung who followed the path blazed by Ma and his generation attained the status of a cultural icon in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Together, the respective works of Ma and Leung sketch Hong Kong poetry’s trajectory as a Sinophone literary genre in the twentieth century.

Hong Kong Poets in the Time of Crisis

²⁷ Abbas, *Hong Kong*, p. 129.

Hong Kong poets bore witness to pivotal moments in Hong Kong's history, including the temporal demarcation of the 1997 Handover. Leung's pertinently titled collection, *City at the End of Time*, originally published in 1992, echoes the uncertainties that overwhelmed Hong Kongers in the years leading up to the Handover. Hong Kongers in the hundreds of thousands chose to emigrate to countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Singapore. As for the Hong Kongers who stayed (or could not leave), the PRC reassured them with promises of freedom, autonomy, and a privileged identity distinct from that of Mainlanders. Slogans such as "one country, two systems" (*yiguo liangzhi* 一國兩制), "a high level of autonomy" (*gaodu zizhi* 高度自治), and "Hong Kongers governing Hong Kong" (*gangren zhigang* 港人治港) were reiterated in the official discourses of the PRC and Hong Kong SAR governments.

Meanwhile, the persistent sense of Hong Kong's imminent expiration ushered in a new Hong Kong consciousness. Since the early 2000s, Hong Kong had become increasingly recognisable to Hong Kongers, Mainlanders, and the international community as a geopolitical and sociocultural entity dissimilar from the British Commonwealth and the People's Republic. The hopes and fears of Hong Kongers, first experienced in the prelude to 1997, returned in waves of civic activism against China's hegemony and intervention. From the anti-Article 23 demonstrations in 2003 to the Umbrella Movement in 2014, and to the broad-based, pro-democracy activities of 2019-2020, Hong Kongers unleashed their creativity, yearning for an echelon of freedom and autonomy never before reached.²⁸

Poetry reflected the culture of protest that had been inseparable from Hong Kong society and life. In the 1950s and 1960s, waves of civil unrest rocked the British Crown Colony. The rivalry between Nationalists and Communists playing out across the Taiwan Strait spilt over to their respective supporters in Hong Kong, sparking violence and confrontations with the police. As the culture of political and civic activism spread, residents gathered in 1966 over a drastic price hike of the Star Ferry, a crucial means of cross-harbour transportation linking Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. The protests became a proxy for Hong Kongers' discontent with British colonial rule, police corruption, and poor living conditions. During this period, a number of leftist militants, building on Chinese Communist influence, local labour strikes, and decolonial sentiments around the world, terrorised the city. Improvised explosive devices—colloquially called *tuzhi boluo* ("locally grown pineapples," since grenades resemble pineapples)—killed local residents as well as members of the Royal Hong Kong

²⁸ On the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement of 2019-2020, see Jeffrey Wasserstrom, *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2020); Louisa Lim, *Indelible City: Dispossession and Defiance in Hong Kong* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2022); and Christopher K. Tong, "'Hong Kong Is Our Home': Hong Kongers Twenty-five Years After the Handover", *Education About Asia*, 27.3 (2022), 5-10.

Police Force and British Forces stationed in Hong Kong. In the following poem, the poet-scholar Louise Ho considers the complexity of the intensifying protests in 1967 and the resulting curfews:

“Hong Kong Riots I, 1967”

At five this morning
The curfew lifted.
Receding, it revealed
Shapes that became people
Moving among yesterday’s debris.
Stones, more so than words
Are meaningless,
Out of context.²⁹

Ho’s poem conveys the debris, chaos, and aporia that the riots left behind. Though not a poem supporting the protests per se, Ho’s poem points to the long history of protest culture in Hong Kong. Written in English, the poem is self-consciously cosmopolitan and would have been accessible only to an educated or international readership at the time.³⁰ Given that the poem was written in the language of British colonisers, it would have also likely alienated less privileged Hong Kongers who had little access to English instruction. Indeed, the politics of language exemplify the vast gulf in cultural capital, political clout, and lived experience between Western expats and local Hong Kongers, and between Hong Kongers of different classes, that sparked the riots in the first place.

More than half a century later, a pro-democracy movement spread throughout the city with the broad-based support of Hong Kong residents. In the spring of 2019, legislators, activists, and residents began to push back against the Hong Kong government’s proposed amendment to the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance, which would have allowed PRC authorities to extradite suspects from the city and essentially enforce PRC law on Hong Kong soil. Residents from all walks of life—from seniors to families with young children, civil servants to animal advocates, nurses to religious leaders—joined in the demonstrations. A vocal Anglophone poet, founding co-editor of the first Hong Kong-based Asian literary journal *Asian Cha*, and formerly Associate Professor at the Baptist University of Hong Kong,

²⁹ Louise Ho, *Incense Tree: Collected Poems of Louise Ho* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), p. 3. Original in English.

³⁰ One may ask whether Louise Ho’s poem constitutes an Anglophone text about Hong Kong or an example of what Shu-mei Shih calls “Sinophone” literature written in a non-Chinese language. See Shu-mei Shih, ‘The Concept of the Sinophone’, *PMLA*, 126.3 (2011), 709-718; Shu-mei Shih, ‘What is Sinophone Studies?’ in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Shu-mei Shi, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 1-16.

Tammy Ho Lai-ming penned a series of poems capturing the city's zeitgeist at the time. Dated July 31, 2019, "Anecdotes for the Future" concludes with the following stanza:

The disobedient citizens
are determined to be,
to be disobedient,
in all parts of the city—flowers
blossom everywhere. All
walks of lives, all hues of hair,
cut open our regular existence
to forge a new Hong Kong.³¹

Here, Tammy Ho signposts the multifarious meanings of a protest movement transpiring in real time. The references in Tammy Ho's text operate in an explicitly cosmopolitan manner: though written in English, it draws on the vocabularies of Hong Kong and PRC history. On the one hand, the poem alludes to the short-lived Hundred Flowers Movement (*Baihua qifang*) of 1950s China, a campaign that originally invited ideological diversity, but later culminated in Mao Zedong's crackdown of critics and intellectuals. On the other hand, the poem evokes Hong Kong's multiethnic population through "all hues of hair," referencing not only modified hair colours, but also Western expats, domestic workers from various parts of Asia, Hong Kongers of South Asian descent, and other non-Han Chinese residents of Hong Kong. In Tammy Ho's poem, the expansive social movement attains coherence insofar as it is oriented toward the future of a new Hong Kong.

Hong Kong poetry has always been transcultural, transnational, and even translingual. If, in the words of Haun Saussy, "all literature has always been comparative, watered by many streams,"³² then one could say that Hong Kong poetry is uniquely positioned at the juncture of multiple literary currents. In June 2020, with the passage of the Hong Kong National Security Law, a new political climate has taken hold in the city. The law drastically altered Hong Kong's legal and legislative infrastructure, sparking an exodus of residents, expats, and businesses. As the 25th anniversary of Hong Kong's Handover came to pass in 2022, Hong Kong residents in the hundreds of thousands have emigrated or returned to their home countries.³³ In this new era, who will continue to read, write, and teach Hong Kong poetry? And

³¹ As quoted in Andrea Lingenfelter, *At This Moment, Everyone Is a Revolution: The Poems of Tammy Ho Lai-Ming and the Hong Kong Crisis* (2019), *Los Angeles Review of Books* <<http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/poetry/moment-everyone-revolution-poems-tammy-ho-lai-ming-hong-kong-crisis>> [accessed June 4, 2021]. Original in English.

³² Haun Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 5.

³³ Jessie Yeung and Kathleen Magramo, *Hong Kong Suffers Biggest Ever Population Drop as Exodus Accelerates* (2022), *CNN* <<https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/12/asia/hong-kong-population-record-fall-covid-intl-hnk/index.html>> [accessed June 4, 2023].

in which languages: English, Cantonese, or Mandarin? How will Hong Kong poems of the past, present, and future be interpreted and canonised? Whose ideals and lived experiences will future anthologies of Sinophone poetry reflect? What are the responsibilities of the academic community, including Western scholars of China, in studying Hong Kong?³⁴ Given the current political climate of Hong Kong, such conversations will not be easy to have and are therefore more important than ever.

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³⁴ Faculty and students at Hong Kong universities and NYU Shanghai, for example, did not feel comfortable discussing the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong freely. See Jon Levine, *NYU Shanghai Campus 'Self-Censoring, Politically Neutral' on Hong Kong* (2019), *New York Post* <<https://nypost.com/2019/10/19/nyu-shanghai-campus-self-censoring-politically-neutral-on-hong-kong-faculty/>> [accessed July 1, 2022]; Timothy McLaughlin, *How Academic Freedom Ends* (2021), *The Atlantic*, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/06/china-hong-kong-freedom/619088/>> [accessed July 1, 2022]. Meanwhile, PRC authorities have censored Western publications on topics related to Xinjiang and Hong Kong. See Maev Kennedy and Tom Phillips, *Cambridge University Press Backs down over China Censorship* (2017), *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/aug/21/cambridge-university-press-to-back-down-over-china-censorship>> [accessed July 1, 2022]; Mathew Y. H. Wong, and Ying-ho Kwong, 'Academic Censorship in China: The Case of *The China Quarterly*', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 52.2 (2019), 287-92. In addition to direct censorship and self-censorship, there has been evidence of peer censorship during the review and editorial process. See Elizabeth Redden, *Censorship in a China Studies Journal* (2019), *Inside Higher Ed*, <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/19/another-case-censorship-china-studies-journal>> [accessed July 1, 2022].

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