

# CITY VOICES

## HONG KONG WRITING IN ENGLISH 1945 to the Present

Edited by Xu Xi and Mike Ingham  
with a foreword by Louise Ho



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# Writing on the Margin: Hong Kong English Poetry, Fiction and Creative Non-Fiction

*Mike Ingham*

## Background

As recently as the late 1980s the new Head of English at the University of Hong Kong, former Oxford linguist Roy Harris, infamously referred to Hong Kong English as 'the worst in the world' in his provocative inaugural lecture. Whether his more affectionately remembered predecessor, the prolific Oxford poet Edmund Blunden, would have subscribed to Harris's view is a matter of speculation. However, given Blunden's reputation for nurturing Hong Kong creative English writing at the university in the boom period of the 1950s and 1960s, it is highly unlikely he would have approved of Harris's cultural insensitivity. It is thus somewhat ironic that the decade that has passed since Harris delivered his scathing, and in retrospect influential, critique of local English standards has seen an impressive renaissance of Hong Kong creative writing in English, not only to match the seminal work of the Blunden era, but in some respects to surpass it, and lay the foundations for the resilient, albeit marginal, circle of present English-language writers in Hong Kong. It is also ironic, incidentally, that Harris should have co-edited a book on Asian Voices in English, the proceedings of a 1990 conference at the University of Hong Kong, which was characterized by the exclusion of Hong Kong English voices.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, there remains the old nagging doubt about the viability of indigenous or expatriate English-language fiction, poetry and drama. In a community that is approximately 98 percent Cantonese speaking and one that is, in theory at least, post-colonial in consciousness, it is clear that for the population at large and for the burgeoning Chinese-language literary scene, local English writing must be seen at best as an irrelevance, at worst an irritating excrescence generated by the colonial era. Consequently it is curious and perhaps paradoxical that the first literary festival of Asian writers in English in May 2001 saw a resurgence of interest amid an eclectic audience coming to hear talks by a wide range of writers, including Hong Kong-born but UK-based literary heavyweight, Timothy Mo. The 2002 Festival was even more ambitiously conceived and was hailed as a big success by visiting and local participants. The work of local publishers Asia 2000, Chameleon and Hong Kong University Press, as well as the collective efforts of creative writing academics such as Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Louise Ho, Dino Mahoney and Agnes Lam in promoting this new wave of English writing should not be underestimated. Nury Vittachi's now well-established literary magazine, *dimsum*, has played a vital part in promoting and publishing new material, both prose and poetry, and has a very enlightened approach to selection. Equally significant is the contribution of the Hong Kong Writers' Circle energetically championed by Lawrence Gray and Chinese Indonesian writer, Xu Xi, whose Hong Kong-oriented fiction is *sui generis* and

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<sup>1</sup> From the conference proceedings, *Asian Voices in English*, 1991, Hong Kong University Press, though not from the conference itself, which was co-organized by the British Council.

frequently challenging to more conservative Hong Kong attitudes and conventions regarding sexuality and femininity.

If the two halves of this literary puzzle do not quite fit together to make a coherent whole, it is scarcely surprising. It is difficult to assess literary movements and developments without the benefit of hindsight. When respected Hong Kong University academic Mimi Chan (whose semi-fictionalized memoir entitled *All the King's Women* is featured in this anthology) wrote her authoritative account of the Hong Kong literary scene in English for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Post-colonial Fiction and Travellers' Literary Companion to South-east Asia* more than ten years ago, the majority of works represented in the present anthology had neither been written nor alluded to on grounds of their obscurity. The forerunners of the present crop of Hong Kong English writers such as Han Suyin (*A Many Spendored Thing*), Lin Tai-Yi (*Kamphoon Street*) and others, as well as the already established Timothy Mo are featured together with an earlier generation of expatriate writers, of whom Blunden was the most pre-eminent. More space was allotted, however, to internationally-known popular authors such as James Clavell (*Taipan*), Richard Mason (*The World of Suzie Wong*) and John Le Carre (*The Honourable Schoolboy*), whose use of Hong Kong milieu for ambience and local colour in their work had inevitably presented limited and stereotypical facets of the territory's existence.

Based on the extracts and full pieces included in this first anthology of Hong Kong fiction and poetry in English and featuring around seventy authors, it would appear to be the case that a newer type of writing voice has been struggling to assert itself in the past decade or so. The contemporary boom in English writing can trace its roots back to Han Suyin and her successors, but ultimately it is more preoccupied with post-colonial and post-modern uncertainty and angst. In her insightful collection of stories, *History's Fiction*, Xu Xi has charted the changes over the past four decades in Hong Kong as they have affected the lives of ordinary people. The decade-by-decade structure of the collection gives a fascinating overview of Hong Kong life at various stages of development from the 1960s to the present, much as the films of Wong Kar-wai have done in a different medium. As is often the case with this type of writing, it is suffused with a deeply ingrained sense of autobiographical experience, beautifully transposed into the realms of imaginative fiction. Indeed, this strain of autobiographical writing has been evident in much Hong Kong English fiction from Han Suyin and Richard Mason onward, but it is important to make a distinction between this more imaginative semi-autobiographical work and the straight memoir form as popularized by Jung Chang, Adeline Yen Mah and others, which has found such a lucrative niche market in the West.

### **Finding a Voice: Short Fiction or the Novel?**

Thus, whilst it is true for Hong Kong English writers that we cannot expect to know who we are or where we are going, without knowing where we have come from, there is a clearly discernible focus on the here and now, which contrasts starkly with the orientation of Timothy Mo's *magnum opus* on Hong Kong's transformation into a colony, *An Insular Possession* (1986). Mo has of course been resident in Britain since the age of ten, and in much of his writing related to Hong Kong, particularly *The Monkey King* (1978) and *Renegade or Halo*<sup>2</sup> (2000), there is a sense of critical distance, almost alienation, somewhat akin to Kazuo Ishiguro's writing on Japan.

This question of genealogy also touches on issues of identity, which so-called 'ethnic writers' exiled or simply resident in the West are expected to agonize over at length in their works in the cliché-ridden climate of international book marketing. Interestingly, none of the longer or shorter fiction writers anthologized here indulge in such a deliberately restrictive approach to their creative work. Sexual identity and group identity, in contrast to ethnic identity, are explored as major themes in many of these works. Intercultural aspects of Hong Kong life, marginalization, isolation and the position of the social misfit or outsider are certainly significant themes in this literature. But the idea that a deliberate and crude strategy of exploitation of the hackneyed Asian memoir genre might also work commercially in the Hong Kong context would fortunately be anathema to these Hong Kong writers.

Hence there is a serious problem for these writers in being suitably promoted and reaching a wider audience. If the Hong Kong fiction-reading population is more than adequately served by Chinese-language fiction, not to mention the plethora of other fictions in or translated into English, and the overseas market is trained to appreciate no better than *Wild Swans* and other identikit sob-stories constructing a particular image of 'China', does this necessarily mean that Hong Kong English writers are doomed to a kind of literary twilight zone, struggling to get published and then remaining largely unread and ignored?

That they occupy an extremely marginal position on the periphery of the Hong Kong literary world is hardly surprising, but they may take comfort from the reflection that Hong Kong writing is itself pretty marginal, both in the context of classic and contemporary Chinese writing and of world literatures in English. Thus, if Hong Kong fiction were to achieve its moment of international recognition in the future, it will in all probability be English-language writers who reap the rewards. To come back down to earth again, however, the problem of finding a wider audience outside a narrow circle of intimates remains as acute as ever. Rather like Pirandello's six characters in search of an author in the eponymous play, Hong Kong English fiction is faced with a constant search for a stable readership. If Hong Kong writers are to retain their artistic integrity and avoid the awful fate of becoming Amy Tan clones, they need to write what they wish to, as opposed to what publishers believe the international English fiction-reading public wants.

Avoidance of cliché and essentializing narrative description and characterization must remain the self-appointed task of the Hong Kong English fiction writer, particularly in depicting the elusive and hybrid metropolis itself. The city is characterized by its modernity and Hydra-like multiplicity, but the attempt to fix its reality in representational terms can become as vainly quixotic as that of Calvino's Marco Polo seeking to evoke the melancholy invisible cities of that work's title. It often resists stable and tangible realistic depiction, no matter how well the writer knows the milieu, partly because of a cultural and linguistic divide, which may obstruct vision or more importantly aural perception. In other words, writers in English may see Hong Kong but they cannot always hear it in all its nuances of sound.

Novels by non-Chinese writers such as Christopher New, Martin Booth and Nury Vittachi have attempted to cross what is palpably a cultural divide by evoking a broader social spectrum and a specificity of milieu. Xu Xi's *The Unwalled City* and Simon Elegant's *A Chinese Wedding* also aim to present a more intercultural perspective on Hong Kong in their characterization and setting. By contrast, many ethnically Chinese novelists in English writing about the territory, including Lin Tai-Yi (*Kamphoon Street*), Lee Ding Fai (*Running Dog*) and Lily Chan (*Struggles of a Hong Kong Girl*) have preferred to portray the predominant Chinese community and their vicissitudes, from post-war poverty and post-Cultural Revolution

insecurity and hardship to greater social stability and economic independence. This sheer diversity of social and literary perspective according to individual authorial experience and point of view offers a rich mosaic of fictionalized Hong Kong life in the last half-century. It is tempting, therefore, to see Hong Kong novels in English as somehow complementary segments of a whole view, simply on account of their salient feature of East-West dichotomies. Such a view would, I believe, be an overly simplistic one. We should guard against the temptation to essentialize and read too much into the phenomenon of the Hong Kong English-language novel. Generically and stylistically they are rather like the short fiction examples we find here, heterogeneous in nature. In other words, they are not conducive to being grouped within the confines of a unifying literary movement.

Perhaps because critics tend to draw trite conclusions and make superficial analogies in order to pigeon-hole novels and place them within an existing framework for the sake of convenience, there is a greater tendency to assign the novel to preconceived categories than is the case with the short story. With novels the reader probably expects similarity, with the short story, difference. Hence, the most striking quality of the short stories anthologized here is their heterogeneity in theme, tone, style and ideology, their fundamental diversity and idiosyncrasy. The scope of authorial vision and expression does not seem to be encapsulated entirely within a framework of social realism. Milieu, characters, social background, temporal setting — all these relatively more concrete and painstaking elements of the Hong Kong English novel — give way to deft, quirky and lightly sketched vignettes, which are necessarily elliptical and evocative. It is not so much what the short story puts in as what it leaves out that makes it so effective. If this dictum is true for the form in general, it is doubly true of the relationship between Hong Kong shorter and longer fiction in English.

The literalism of realistic depiction in some, the laboured humour or repetitive lyricism in others, yields to a pithy, understated narrative, which paradoxically convinces us of its authenticity and virtuosity by not trying too hard. We can read the short fiction here as part of a greater Hong Kong narrative perhaps, but in stories like *Lau the Tailor*, *The Captain*, *Valediction*, *Lost River*, *Transcript t/23-098076/89*, *Conversion of a Village Ghost* and *Until the Next Century*, we find an allusive, frequently metaphysical quality that epitomizes short story writing at its best. It is, of course, unfair to expect Hong Kong English writing to produce its *Ulysses*, but judging by the diverse merits of its short fiction writers, it is not too far-fetched to compare the lightness in touch in many of these stories with that of other collections about a particular city like *Dubliners*, in which the ‘unreal and teeming city’, to refer to both Baudelaire and T.S. Eliot’s evocations of other cities, is conjured up out of the existential angst of its miscellaneous inhabitants. No explicit novelistic description can match such narrative economy, in which the reader’s imagination is wholly engaged with the latent spaces of the dream-like urban landscape. Baudelaire’s prose poems say far more about mid-nineteenth-century Paris, for example, than all the more realistic descriptive passages of his realist contemporaries, with the possible exception of Hugo’s *Les Misérables*.

The short story form is therefore better equipped, perhaps, to articulate the speed, restlessness, fragmentation and nervous transience of Hong Kong by virtue of the very compression and succinctness of its vignettes of city life. Longer and more leisurely oeuvres, tinged as they often are with more than a hint of imperial nostalgia and decline, such as Christopher New’s *The Chinese Box* and *A Change of Flag* from his *China Coast Trilogy* for all his fine Greene-like authorial voice, cannot be seen as representative of Hong Kong English writing at the turn of the millennium. It is clearly not an easy task for the aspiring Hong Kong

English novelist to avoid the pitfalls of exoticizing stereotype and formulaic depiction of character and locale.

Few novels can support a predominantly Chinese cultural context, in which English is a natural medium. Unlike a work of Chinese fiction in translation, which functions as a cultural/linguistic transposition on its own terms, the Hong Kong novel in English has frequently set itself the task of expressing a Chinese consciousness through the primary conduit of the English language. As a literary contrivance in the novel it tends to strike a false note with the reader, more readily than in the short story, perhaps for quantitative rather than qualitative reasons. Therefore, with a certain degree of healthy scepticism in mind regarding the viability of the extended novel, we should celebrate the more truncated forms of contemporary English expression in Hong Kong, not forgetting mixed-code theatre writing and especially the thriving creative poetry and short fiction scenes. There may be a novel in all of us, to echo the publicity for creative writing courses, but it is salutary to reflect that it is probably not a very good one, or at least a highly self-indulgent one. As the short fiction of David T. K. Wong, Xu Xi and the talented but under-published Rodney Davey testify, there are small gems to be unearthed in the English short fiction in Hong Kong. It is not necessarily, as a cynic might imply, the motivation of pecuniary awards for short fiction, which alone provide the powerful incentive for inspiration. Nevertheless, it is true that the *South China Morning Post* short story awards have in the past provided a useful platform for creative development. If there were to be a Hong Kong equivalent of the Booker Prize for extended fiction, it is more feasible that a new Timothy Mo will burst upon the scene.

### Historical Fiction, Memoirs and Newer Voices

It is also significant that the historical fiction (or 'faction', to use Truman Capote's clever appellation) genre, as exemplified by Mimi Chan's *All the King's Women* and Xu Xi's *History's Fiction* tends to be more engaging and persuasive in both the narrative voice and the loosely connected narrative structure than any of the more extended conventional novel extracts. There is a poignant and empathetic quality, tending to matter-of-factness, understatement, irony and implicit critique, as opposed to the sentimental excesses of the popular fictionalized memoir or chronicle of the best-seller variety that recommends both *History's Fiction* and *All the King's Women* to the reader, who wishes to transcend the formulaic clichés of that genre. *All the King's Women* stands out from much of the run-of-the-mill, Chinese female 'victim literature'. For one thing, it avoids the cheap sympathy syndrome for manipulating reader response so typical of the genre, by opting for a more lucid but at the same time empathetic portrait of female resilience in a patriarchal ex-Shanghai family in Hong Kong. As well as being a lively, semi-fictionalized version of events, it also constitutes a personal family history and a tribute to Chan's 'unsung heroines'.

Clearly, there is a thin line between this type of 'history' of Hong Kong and the non-fiction writing included in this anthology, a substantial portion of which offers the reader an insightful and diverse commentary on the 1997 Handover of the territory to China, from the expatriate whimsy of Charles Martin's 'Colonial Life and Times' piece to Jesse Wong's perceptive *Lives in Transition*. The latter captured the 1997 *zeitgeist* beautifully in all its tension and uncertainty, tinged with a spirit of pragmatic optimism, in his skilfully executed pen-pictures of a range of Hong Kong residents in the period leading up to the date with destiny. A refreshingly

divergent perspective on Hong Kong's less recent past can be found in the selections from Austin Coates's fascinating 1968 account of his experiences as a colonial administrator and JP, *Myself a Mandarin*, and the tough and inspirational prose of Hong Kong doyenne, Elsie Elliott (Tu), in her 1981 retrospective, *Crusade for Justice*. The latter's frank exposé of her hard-fought battles with endemic graft, bureaucratic humbug and incompetence in establishing schools and improving the lot of the less fortunate in an often unforgiving social environment, is essential reading for anyone who is interested to know how Hong Kong made the painful journey from a third-world to more of a first-world infrastructure. The extract from Jackie Chan's 1998 autobiography also provides a fascinating glimpse of bygone Hong Kong days and an insight into the action star's early dedication to a hard profession. The rationale for English language as publication choice for Chan's memoir, as opposed to Chinese, is based on the actor's celebrity status and enormous popularity in the West. As a co-authored work, however, *I am Jackie Chan* cannot rank with Elliott's memoir for sheer gutsy readability.

To return to the fiction genre, one major development in Hong Kong English writing over the last decade has been a distinctive shift towards local writing with a stronger accent on the perspective of younger Chinese writers, both male and female. This trend is evident in the newer voices represented in the present anthology. Hark Yeung's work, for example, blends travelogue and social documentary with fictional narrative and dialogic conventions. Her travelogue idiom in stories such as *Walking on the Melting Ice*, an account of an almost transcendent experience on the ice floes of Greenland, as well as her perceptive and sympathetic exploration of her parents' generation in *Our Elders* (in collaboration with Fong So) offers a keen photographic vision to complement a deceptively straightforward narrative style.

Among the newer voices, the precocious talent of *South China Morning Post* short story contest winner, Divya Vaze, stands out. Her story, *Bid for Carpet Woven with Memories*, is the seamlessly interwoven narrative of past and present in the consciousness of a 62-year-old Indian man now resident in Hong Kong. It fuses his escape from Lahore in 1947 during the chaos of partition to safety in Hong Kong with his trip to an auction to recover a family heirloom, the carpet woven with memories of the title, a symbol of what he has lost and also of what he has gained. Other writers who have featured in university creative writing magazines *Writing in English* (the Chinese University of Hong Kong) and *Yuan Yang* (the University of Hong Kong) show considerable promise. Nancy Tsui Yuk Chun's *Addiction* underlines how far Hong Kong writing has come from the male expatriate world of Mason, Clavell, Davies, New et al. with their seductive but adoring Chinese sirens to Chan's marijuana-induced insight that 'the woman is 5 million light years from the man'. Much of this newer writing is steeped in post-modern scepticism and isolation, a recording of fragmentary experience rather than the more kaleidoscopic worlds of Suzie Wong or Han Suyin's Eurasian woman doctor in *A Many Splendored Thing*.

Lex Lao's email narrative 'Press Enter' provides a stimulating example of the possibilities of a fresh kind of epistolary fiction based on electronic communication, with its roller-coaster techniques for surprising, intriguing and thoroughly engaging the reader's interest and emotional response. His tale of a family divided by recent bereavement deals with the themes of generation gap, healing and reconciliation through the unlikely mediating force of information technology. Although no ICQ narrative writing is at present available for inclusion in this anthology, this medium seems an inevitable next step for Hong Kong young writing to take for the fundamental reason that it is such a vital and popular form of communication



among the younger generation of Hong Kongers, and is, moreover, truly international in scope. Finally, Andy Barker's *The Monkey Trap* gives us a contemporary Hong Kong, in which the epicentre of activity is fittingly Lan Kwai Fong, playground of the *jeunesse dorée*. In its unsentimental portrait of a bunch of twenty- and thirty-somethings, it is brutally authentic, but observed with Mo-like critical distance. Barker's debut novel is clearly a work of promise, based partly on the author's personal experience, which is perhaps one of the reasons why it is highly entertaining.

## A Rich and Vibrant Voice: Hong Kong Poetry

The English poetry scene in Hong Kong is remarkably vibrant and diverse. One characteristic difference between the prose fiction and poetry selections in this anthology is that the fiction selections almost picked themselves, whereas for poetry there were harder choices to be made. Whilst English short story writing has established a strong presence and novel writing, despite some clearly talented contenders, is still an emergent discipline, the more performative mode of poetry and the popularity of poetry reading groups ensure a steady flow of fresh material and, arguably, a more immediate and democratic outlet for creativity and a more responsive audience.

The Outloud group, meeting variously at the Fringe Club, the John Batten Gallery and formerly at Visage Free in Central's 'Arts hub' around Soho, has provided a valuable seed-bed for new talent as well as an opportunity to hear more established poets. The introduction of a City Poetry event as part of the Fringe Club's annual City Festival during the 1990s also helped to promote the writing and appreciation of poetry and to identify an enthusiastic audience. Multilingual events, in which poems were read in their original language as well as in newly translated versions, have played an important part in communicating the idea that poetry is meant to be heard as much or even more than to be read. Another significant aspect of the Outloud group and other poetry reading and creative writing groups in university contexts has been the mutual support and synergy that such gregarious enterprises can generate. Collections of new original poetry, such as the 2002 Outloud anthology, and creative writing journals published by the university English departments, have stimulated enthusiasm and interest in poetry as a form of self-expression that crosses cultural borders. It is significant that two of Hong Kong's most reputed and prestigious Chinese-language poets, Leung Ping-kwan, whose *City at the End of Time* (1992) has to be one of the milestones of modern Hong Kong literature, and Laurence Wong Kwok-pun, a master of elegant lyricism, are both capable of the Beckettian feat of writing their poetry bilingually with equal facility. Remarkably Hong Kong's English-language poet laureate, Louise Ho, is only capable of writing in English, which she does with an unerring ear for the *mot juste* and an elegiac precision.

The poetry represented in this anthology spans the same period as the fiction and non-fiction, i.e. starting in the 1950s with Edmund Blunden's arrival to take up the Head of English Department post at the University of Hong Kong. As a published war poet (the First World War, rather than the then very recent Second World War), Blunden's name inevitably adds *gravitas* to this kind of anthology. However, it is clear from the three poems included here, as well as from his poems published in anthologies of war poetry, that Blunden was no Wilfred Owen or Ivor Gurney. Nonetheless, his mellow, reflective style in 'Hong Kong House', 'An Island Tragedy' and 'Lamma Island' conveys an awareness of the changes Hong Kong is

embarking on, and is in its old-world way better poetry than the comparatively tame and to my taste over-sentimental war poems on which his reputation rests. In theme and tone, it would appear that Blunden's work pays tribute to a Chinese or Japanese poetic spirit, as did that of Pound and Brecht and other modernists who flirted with the elusive idea of Asian poetic and pictorial forms and nuances. 'And now a dove and now a dragonfly / Came to the garden; sometimes as we sat / Outdoors in twilight noiseless owl and bat / Flew shadowily by.' ('Hong Kong House')

Blunden's legacy as an inspirational role model and teacher for those who followed is echoed by the more recent success of Shirley Geok-lin Lim, who as Head of the English Department at the University of Hong Kong was instrumental in encouraging the recent renaissance in creative writing at the university. Her contributions to the publication of the *Yuan Yang* (tea-coffee) journal of creative writing and the groundbreaking Moving Poetry project, have also been extremely important. Moving Poetry has really fostered an air of exciting creativity among primary, secondary and tertiary students and helped to promote poetry as a communal and educationally valid form of communication. Shirley Lim's own impressive poetry is more oriented towards her homelands of Malaysia and the United States, but her influential role as a major Asian-American poet and academic is acknowledged by the inclusion of one of her Hong Kong-inspired poems, 'Passports', which evokes an Aberdeen waterfront scene strangely reminiscent of C. Y. Lee's 1960s' novel *The Virgin Market*.

Joyce Hsia's 1977 poem 'A Matter of Time' echoes Blunden's wistful lyricism with a pointedly intertextual, pastiche-like reference: 'Hong Kong House: A soon-to-be-relic / of a passing era of leisure and space / where sun pierces verandah windows / splaying a red carpet and acquiescent piano; / hibiscus blooms in an untended garden and / a vine's tendrils straddle a king palm.' Here there is a much deeper sense of imminent and profound change than in Blunden's poem, an ironic allusion to the inevitable passing of this tranquil, orientalist evocation surrendering its privileged air of time and space suspended to inevitable and encroaching modernization 'in an eclipsing case of glass and steel'. Other 1970s' poems such as Walter Sulke's tribute to Hong Kong, 'An Unfinished Symphony for Five Million Instruments' (population at the time of the present anthology being 6.7 million, with over 8 million projected for 2020), convey a more prescient sense of the geometric progression of infrastructure development over the following two decades. 'Symphony' is less pretentious than the title may suggest and its pivotal device of a five-movement musical suite with tempo markings such as *allegro* and *andante* is perfectly suited to the rapid variations and sharp contrasts of living in Hong Kong's hybrid environment. 'From the greatest population density in the world / To a lesser greatest population density in the world' stands in stark antithesis to Blunden's leisurely and contemplative pastorales. In his 'Western Approaches' of the same year, Peter Moss captures the city's fascinating blend of reality and chimera: 'The city is reality / and all our fickle day / a passing mirage / lulling us / momentarily / with its sweet conceit / of centuries retrieved.' Moss's Western modernist voice with his short lines and internal rhymes catches echoes, as we shall see, in the more extended and prolific poetic work of Louise Ho. Also in this period, Martin Booth's poems attest to his versatility as a writer of international talent, although his prose fiction is ultimately more developed. 'Those Not Swimming' and 'Dead Bones' reminisce and speculate eloquently about the bones of those who died in the Japanese occupation, while Booth's tribute to Blunden in 'On a Poet' ends with what may be a fitting epitaph to Blunden's achievement: 'I last saw you distantly / across a student distance / gowned and still / and I saw kindness / not knowledge.'

As we see from the anthology's irregular proportions, its poetic density expanded as its population swelled in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, the thematic scope, diction and style of the poetry as represented here become more diverse, as we read on into the 1990s. The genteel and often elegiac, expatriate tones of earlier decades — the 'slow drawing down of blinds' on the Hong Kong House (to recontextualize Wilfred Owen) — gives way to a more local Hong Kong voice, as evidenced here by the selections from Ho Hon Leung, Jim Wong-Chu, Alex Kuo and Louise Ho. Their poetic worlds are intercultural spaces, occupied by real Heung Gong Yan (Hong Kong people), instead of plants and old colonial buildings. Ho Hon Leung's reflections on the impact of modernity on Chinese tradition in 'After the Three Characters' — 'Today speed is / as important as simplicity' — sees Hong Kong's increasingly frenetic lifestyle as 'a loose horse' with all the cross-linguistic resonances the character 'ma' evokes in the poem. 'I see a horse / run across a bar of my prison' begins the poem in a beautifully economical and graphic piece of imagery. Jim Wong-Chu articulates a sense of kinship with those who came from across the border, an increasingly common theme of the 1980s in all genres as the Sino-British Joint Declaration came and went. In 'the old country' and 'fourth uncle', we get a glimpse of a cultural schism and an aspiration to rediscover roots, as well as the growing awareness of the schizoid linguistic and cultural experience of Hong Kong's unique situation. The closing lines from 'fourth uncle' — 'At the end of my life / will I too have walked a full circle / and arrive like you / an old elephant / to his grave' — seek common ground between the Chinese émigré of an older, much less affluent generation and the newer type of overseas migrant.

The Chinese diaspora is important for an understanding of the writing of the period, as more and more people became 'astronauts', that is living in space between Hong Kong and elsewhere (usually Australia, the United States or Canada, rarely Britain!). This experience is also reflected in the poems of Alex Kuo, such as 'The Immigrant' (1986), and later more whimsically in the early 1990s in Andrew Parkin's 'Astronaut'. In these poems, the distances have become eclipsed in suitably post-modern fashion; it seems as though the poet's Hong Kong life is also that of an astronaut of a different kind, as 'Government House, Kowloon Clock Tower, harbour / narrow tub of bobbing toys / Legco Building, echoing with new voices / and Victoria, surrounded by penile monuments / well-oiled with wealth' all go rushing by.

Strangely enough, Parkin's more introspective or lyrical work such as 'In the Forum at the Chinese University' and 'On a Mountain above Tolo Harbour' or the beautifully minimalist 'Hong Kong Tanka' resonate with what could almost be described as Asian poetic sensibility, whilst his colleague at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Louise Ho, writing in a pithily elegant, ironic and precise vein, has sometimes on her own admission been described as 'more British than the British'. This refers, however, to her style rather than her subject-matter, which is indomitably post-colonial and politically aware. 'New Year's Eve, 1989' is a masterpiece, the poetic counterpart perhaps to Xu Xi's short stories 'Manky's Tale' and 'Danny's Snake', but less oblique: 'Yes, I remember Marvell, Dryden / Yeats, men who had taken up the pen / While others the sword / To record the events of the sword. . . . The shadows of June the Fourth / Are the shadows of a gesture / They say, but how shall you and I / Name them, one by one? . . . As we near the end of an era / We have at last / Become ourselves / The catalyst / Was our neighbour's blood.' The echo of Yeats's 'Easter Rising' (on the brutal British suppression of the 1916 Irish rebellion) in 'we too have changed, if not "utterly", / And something beautiful was born' brings a literary consciousness and a perceptively allegorical mind to bear on a China-Hong Kong event that was difficult to write or even talk about with

breadth of vision in the white heat of world reaction. Ho's poems I and II from her *New Ends Old Beginnings* collection in 1997, a publication year pregnant with meaning, about the 1967 Hong Kong riots against the Star Ferry fare increases specifically and British colonial repression aim at a different target: 'Stand your ground / even if for only / two foot square . . . the sentry stood / khaki shorts / rifle in hand / still as a statue / and held his ground / of two foot square. / This too is pomp and circumstance / without fanfare.' That 'pomp and circumstance' skewers the bombast of imperialism on the cold, keen knife of poetry. As we see from her poems and hear from her own readings, Louise Ho is a presence and a great Hong Kong voice.

By contrast, Leung Ping-kwan — perhaps the most distinctive and internationally representative of all Hong Kong poetic voices — writes, as he puts it, 'between Chinese and English'<sup>2</sup> and describes the two languages as becoming 'tangled' in his mind when writing some poems. His poems included here have been written in 'NICAM', with Chinese and English versions of the same poems. He doesn't blend the two languages in a single poem, but blends cultural feelings and flavours, rather like the concept *yuan yang* (tea-coffee) of which he writes in another poem entitled simply 'Yuan-yang'. This is both a bilingual and bicultural phenomenon. But unlike the work of Ho, which is steeped in a specific British literary consciousness, it speaks with a resonantly Hong Kong voice: 'The suns of our good old songs go out, one by one' ('At the North Point Car Ferry'); 'We'd rather not bend; / neither of us is in love with flags or fireworks' ('An Old Colonial Building'). This 'we' is aware of the eternal dialectic but knows where it stands, just like the protester and the sentry of Louise Ho's poem: 'Please don't make an imperial scene, or shout / anthems to the downpours; don't pretend, with the breezes, / to grant us our ditties. Have you ever noted a marginal leaf, / observed the veins converging like noisy streets, / that challenge your blueprints' rectangles?' ('The Leaf on the Edge'). These are poems redolent with pre- and post-colonial references and implicature, which seek to sing new their own (our) ditties rather than 'yours'. 'We need a fresh angle, / nothing added, nothing taken away / always at the edge of things and between places. / Write with a different colour for each voice', Leung avers in 'Images of Hong Kong'.

Without the crucial English-language channel of Leung's and Laurence Wong's culturally Chinese but exquisitely translated writing, it would be hard to cross between the separate currents of Chinese and English writing, and for each to interact. The cultural interflow that has emerged particularly from these two poets is invaluable for the English-language strand of Hong Kong's poetic consciousness. Wong writes with elegance and simplicity in 'I Fear I May Grow Old Before Frost Fall', 'The Great Bell of Yongle' and 'Rhapsody on a Rainy Night', in a limpid style that is somehow reminiscent of Arthur Waley's memorable translations of *The Book of Songs*. 'Rhapsody' in its very title makes a culturally resonant allusion to T. S. Eliot's *Cats*-inspiring poem of an almost identical title.

Another locally born poet whose voice has acquired increasing authority and timbre, both in her public readings and in her writing technique, is Agnes Lam. Lam grew up in Hong Kong and began to be published in Singapore, but the best of her work to date can probably be discerned most clearly in her recent collection, *Water Wood Pure Splendour*, which appeared in 2001. The poems from that collection represented here range from the lyrical and almost mystical ('Writing in the Middle of the Road', 'I Have Walked on Air') and the whimsy tinged

<sup>2</sup> 'Writing between Chinese and English' in *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and Creativity*, ed. Kingsley Bolton, special issue of *World Englishes*, Vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 399–404 (Oxford and Boston: Blackwell, 2000).

with melancholy of ‘White Dust’ to the historically reflective (‘Water Wood Pure Splendour’ — Over this land / of thousands of years / as earth becomes heaven / in water wood pure splendour / can the Chinese not forgive?) and the accusatory, politically aware (‘You Say’ — I could go on / but if I do / I shall sound / just like you). This is one of the most viscerally satisfying and acerbic responses to NATO/US arrogance and double standards in the wake of the infamous Belgrade Embassy bombing in 1999 that it has been my pleasure to read. Lam embraces the cultural symbiosis of the post-1997 era with ‘a voice that comes from you and me’ (to paraphrase a line from Don McLean’s classic song.) ‘Apology’ is a particularly poignant example, as the poet explains to her mainland university counterpart that there is no need to apologize for the basic but homely hospitality, since ‘I too am Chinese / This too is my country / If you must apologize/ Then should I? / For my navy Ferragamo shoes / My Max Mara suit a darker blue / My white blouse from Episode / . . . Ten years apart in time, / a few thousand miles in space / exchanging parents / I could have been you / and you, / me. / ’.

Other more established poets regularly heard at Outloud, such as Madeleine Marie Slavick, Tim Kaiser, Jamila Ismail and Mani Rao, are also featured both in this anthology and in the Outloud anthology, published in March 2002. ‘Let Us Move from Lonely to Alone’, Mani Rao’s abrasively solipsistic ode, hard-edged yet oddly wistful in its tone, could only come from Hong Kong, where ‘the guard with no name . . . knows you by your floor.’ The rhythms of this and other Mani Rao poems — ‘home is where the heart is, and the heart is full of habit’ — leaps off the page and demands to be spoken aloud or Outloud! Slavick’s ‘Mid-Levels Front Door’ also illustrates the point that a very short poem, rather like a haiku, can be beautifully compact and complete in its succinct imagery. Ismail’s work, such as ‘translit’ and ‘country-’n-chinese’, explores more esoteric formal and tonal effects than most Hong Kong English poets. Her diction is jazzy, often quirky but always thought-provoking, seemingly full of free association, but in fact carefully articulated and laid out on the page. Memory, word-play, intercultural mosaic and sensual pleasure of language — all of these are conveyed in her poems, particularly ‘translit’. Of the new voices contained here, Ted Mathys’s ‘Hong Kong Nocturne’ shows him to be a writer of tremendous promise with a precociously Rimbaud-like gift for the felicitous phrase and the *mot juste*, despite being a transitory Hong Kong poet. ‘Rave on Hong Kong’, he writes. Rave on, Ted, wherever you are! Ted’s imagery is nothing short of seductively visual and tactile, a rare quality in a poet. Other exciting new voices talk of a Hong Kong experienced in childhood and evoke the smells and touch of Hong Kong street life, as in Michelle Fok’s moving ‘Fried Chestnuts’: ‘You bought me fried chestnuts / and the yellow mist in your eyes thickened. / . . . I won’t buy fried chestnuts again / as, soaked with tears, / they are bitter.’ In many cases the new voices in English are local tertiary or postgraduate students from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the University of Hong Kong, City University of Hong Kong and Lingnan University. Sharon Sung Sau Fun’s ‘The Tear Collector’, for example, reflects in its three short stanzas the frustrations of life and the tears that are shed and collected by the masochistic Tear Collector, who torments all of us eventually: “‘What do you want them for?’ I ask. ‘To chain them together and put them around your neck one day.’”

## Pedagogical Applications

In this introductory piece, there have been frequent references to the strong connection

between university creative writing teachers and courses and the development of Hong Kong's English literary ethos. Not surprisingly, then, this anthology was envisaged partly, but not exclusively, as a teaching and learning tool. An increasing number of schools and universities are showing interest in indigenous literature and culture, which is to some extent a manifestation of post-colonial consciousness and a sign of validation of local English (and Chinese) writing. Of course, there have been reactionary attitudes shown by cultural snobs from a number of quarters, who would like to resist this tendency in Hong Kong education, but increasingly local writers are collaborating with schools and universities on critical and creative programmes designed to teach literature and culture from a Hong Kong cultural perspective.

Nowadays in many countries students' interest in learning history is captured by learning about local history on the grounds that it is more immediate and meaningful to them. This paradigm can also be applied to the study of local literature and culture. The perennial debates about the standard of Hong Kong English fail to take into account that the way English is taught and learned in Hong Kong can often be described as vapid. Frequently it is a subject without an authentic, or indeed remotely interesting, content, except in those contexts where English is the medium for the learning of real content, such as in EMI secondary schools (i.e., the schools using English as the medium of instruction), English for academic purposes and, of course, in culture and literature courses. There are a number of university Asian Voices courses, which teach films and novels by Asian writers, and authors writing about Hong Kong are beginning to appear on these syllabuses. The Advanced Level English literature syllabus also has an Asian Voices section.

It is to be hoped that the teaching and learning of literature and cultural studies in English will not be sacrificed in the curriculum reforms, which are projected for the second half of this decade by the Education Department. The contributions of the Moving Poetry project and the efforts of a small but dedicated group of literature-in-English teachers in secondary schools, as well as other school-based initiatives have been crucial in maintaining students' awareness that English can be used to express ideas, experiences and feelings, rather than existing solely for the purpose of making reports and writing memos.

So how can the extracts in this anthology be used to develop students' linguistic and aesthetic awareness and appreciation of their own cultural milieu? The following are simply a few suggestions. Possibilities for exploiting the texts are legion and limited only to the imagination:

**Reading:** vocabulary work; exploring synonyms; identifying keywords and lexical and syntactic repetition; analysing discourse features, e.g. changing tenses or deictic pronouns to see what effect this has; exploring subtext (reading between the lines); predicting what will happen next (in the case of the novel extracts/short stories); highlighting the use of slang or bad language in the text; highlighting the use of metaphor; deciding why specifically literary words and phrases are used by the writer as opposed to more common alternatives; try the alternatives.

**Writing:** summarizing; writing reports/reviews for an online book club; setting up a website to review stories, poems, films etc; simplifying the text for a younger reader; writing speeches/letters/emails etc. in the

character of one of the protagonists of the story; writing a biography of the author; writing an invitation to the author to speak at the school/university.

- Speaking:** reading aloud (particularly poetry), recording, reciting, performing poetry; dramatizing scenes; holding debates on the issues and moral conflicts of the texts studied; role-playing characters and asking them questions to explain their actions.
- Creative adaptation:** turning a poem into a story; writing a poem based on a story; writing a poem based on another poem (poem into poem); writing a story/poem from another character's or persona's viewpoint; writing a reply to a critical essay; writing a film treatment for a favourite story.

These are some of the approaches that teachers of language and literature use. In my own experience of teaching Asian Voices in English courses, I find that students can relate to many of the writers and contexts, including those of the diaspora. These courses are popular and motivating on account of the content, which is closer to students' personal experience and awareness of the world and of their immediate environment. Although at the outset of the course students often lack a sense of how the past is contained in the present, they become more conscious of this relationship, especially *vis-à-vis* Hong Kong, as the course progresses.

The older liberal arts tradition encouraged the use of literary texts in learning language, since it sensitized the learner to the effects that language can create. This is exactly how and why an older generation of fluent English speakers in Hong Kong became so proficient. To teach only Anglo-American literature would clearly be inappropriate now, but the lesson provided by those who fell in love with English through reading *Pride and Prejudice* in Secondary Four (or perhaps Secondary Two in the so-called 'brand-name' schools) remains as true today as in the 1950s. The reading of local writers (and perhaps later international writers) together with the creative responses such reading can generate offers a meaningful strategy for motivating Hong Kong students to engage with the English language. One only has to look at the popularity of Japanese cultural products among our students to see the attraction of an engaging content that does not alienate.

## Language Issues and Concluding Observations

The use of romanized transliteration of both Cantonese and Mandarin terms is common to virtually all of the writers in this anthology. Whilst the device is advantageous in its ability to convey the plural language and culture of a hybrid city with strong cross-cultural currents, it can easily degenerate into literary shorthand as well as empty signifier. One axiom for original writing in any language is that the writer can impart new meanings to old words. Therefore, such mixed code and code-switching vernacular in Hong Kong English-language writing needs to be expressive of semantic invention and ambivalence as opposed to convention, stability of meaning and *idée reçue*. Language in works of art, as the formalists and the post-structuralists coming after them recognized, should defamiliarize the reader in order to counter-balance the staleness of official and everyday discourses. Thus, the choice of Chinese transliterations, or of any other extraneous codes needs to be weighed up carefully by the writer at any given point in the text. There is, furthermore, a qualitative difference

between the frequent use of Chinese-language expressions in direct and reported speech as opposed to omniscient authorial narrative. In the latter, it can have a jarring effect where it is used seriously. By contrast, Nury Vittachi often achieves his whimsical-cum-farcical effects in his idiosyncratic, comic sub-genre precisely through the use of these linguistic accretions.

There is, therefore, no reason *per se* why contemporary Hong Kong literature in general, and fiction in particular, should not be represented in some small part by English-language voices. The post-colonial critique of the language of the colonizer, as defined so incisively by Fanon, Memmi, Said and others, is rapidly becoming superseded by the cultural and linguistic depredations of global imperialism and monoculture, as well as a Western geopolitical hegemony, in which English is the language of power and capital. Such empires are often most effectively critiqued from within, as Fanon recognized. There is a need for the kind of critical fictional discourse that English can provide, albeit in a minor key. Much, though not all, of the fiction anthologized here offers critical insights to complement the wider scope and representativeness of indigenous Chinese fiction. In this connection, it is equally important to nurture and value non-English or Chinese literature coming out of Hong Kong for reasons of its very difference, as non-official languages. Those further margins are capable of affording critical and aesthetic perceptions of the city and its inhabitants that both the Chinese centre and English inner margin are unable to express. The Japanese, Pakistani, Filipino and French voices, to name but a few, have their Hong Kong stories too.

In conclusion, it is important that this collection of poems, novel extracts and self-sufficient shorter pieces should be seen as a representative sample of the creative work of disparate Hong Kong voices, rather than as a definitive canon. The literature of a small minority cannot constitute a canon, which is probably a distinct advantage for newer, younger writers, since there are fewer burdens of tradition on their shoulders. The irregular output and lack of continuity reflects the historical limitations and marginality of this medium of writing. However, as tertiary institutions encourage greater emphasis on creative writing in English as opposed to the merely functional and mechanical modes of writing, English writing appears to have a robust future in the territory. Given the choice of medium and language, perhaps young bilingual writers will prefer to express their thoughts and experiences and work out their narrative ideas in English because they feel greater freedom from precedent or a degree of impersonality or anonymity. Authors like Martin Booth, Christopher New, Jane Camens, Louise Ho and Xu Xi probably do not have much choice as to their writing code, whilst for others like Han Suyin, David T. K. Wong, Agnes Lam, Lily Chan, Lee Ding Fai and Yang Yi Lung, the use of English was probably a conscious choice from two options. The Irish writer Samuel Beckett consciously chose to write in his adopted tongue, French, before translating his work back into an English-language version, because he thought that the French language endowed his writing with greater rigour, discipline and exactitude than would be the case if he wrote initially in English. Likewise, a small but significant group of Hong Kong indigenous creative writers are sensitive to the qualities of English as a medium of expression. The language belongs to them as much as it does to expatriate writers. They no longer need to sound more British than the British, as Timothy Mo sometimes does, since the language has become common property. Now that we talk of 'world Englishes', it is entirely conceivable for a novel, short story or poem to be written in Chinglish, just as Singaporean and Malaysian writers have used mixed code or local patois forms.

Whatever the developments in the next ten years in Hong Kong English poetry and fiction, the creative surge of the mid-to-late 1990s will be seen as a watershed. Some of the newer



voices will almost certainly produce formally exploratory work, such as Simon Elegant's 'Transcript', Jamila Ismail's 'translit' and Alex Kuo's 'The Catholic All-Star Chess Team'. The influence of overseas writers will also probably result in more elliptical, discontinuous and less coherently organized fiction and poetry, reflecting more *avant-garde* tendencies. The sentimentality and earnestness of tone, which we detect in earlier writers, such as Lily Chan, together with the lyricism of a Han Suyin, is unlikely to be replicated in the harsh climate of the twenty-first century. I think, however, that English poetry and fiction writing in one form or another will survive and even prosper in Hong Kong, just as English-language theatre has done.<sup>3</sup> If English creative writing does, it will owe something of a debt to its creative precursors, to Richard Mason, as well as Han Suyin and Timothy Mo. It will also be one of life's great and somehow satisfying ironies if post-Handover Hong Kong proves more prolific in producing new writing in English than prior to the 'Change of Flag'. Nobody would have anticipated such an outcome, but then truth is often stranger than fiction.

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<sup>3</sup> The forthcoming anthology of Hong Kong playwriting in English will focus mainly on the 1990s because it was only in this decade that original new voices emerged writing plays on local issues and themes.

# From and of the City of Hong Kong

Xu Xi

When I first proposed compiling this *dungsai*,<sup>1</sup> it was partly because disparate voices were squawking — like so many surly teenagers — in an unruly and chaotic chorus. Was it the ‘great’ or ‘meagre’ Hong Kong story we were telling in our various genres? We were all accidents that happened upon this former British colony on whom the Muse, or some lesser goddess, foisted her imperative, *in English* to boot, and made us what we are.

Yet as we hover at the top of the twenty-first century, I look back at my own writings, and those of others, that emerged out of what was once an extremely narrow sphere, and realize that a body of work now exists, which, while hardly a cornucopia, represents the beginnings of adult, as opposed to adolescent, squawking. Over the last decade, especially, the volume has risen steadily, and shows little sign of softening.

This anthology was born of necessity: no other volume like it exists. In the last twenty-five years, there have been a few anthologies of only poetry in English, although Chinese-language poets in translation are included in most.<sup>2</sup> One recent anthology takes an historical look at Hong Kong writing, primarily in English. Given its focus, the majority of the authors are English, and the selections articulate a colonial sensibility which is unrepresentative of contemporary writing and culture.<sup>3</sup> However, it is very Hong Kong-entrepreneurial to invent our existence, and hence, history, and this anthology lives because city voices in English have existed and continue to do so.

It is time we were heard in tandem, from our novels, short stories, essays, memoirs and poetry. This current era is an appropriate one — the ‘borrowed time’ of fifty ‘special’ years as the ‘SAR’<sup>4</sup> — the ideal construct for our accidental, but hardly ‘barren’ culture.

In compiling this anthology, the goal was to provide as *representative* — if not as comprehensive — a selection as possible to reflect the voices over time. Selections are from previously published work, although a small number of unpublished pieces is included. There is also a final section of new voices, chosen from the work of creative writing students and other emerging writers.

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<sup>1</sup> Cantonese. Literally, ‘east-west’, meaning ‘thing’ (in Putonghua, *dongxi*).

<sup>2</sup> *Hong Kong: Images on Shifting Waters*, ed. Joyce Hsia and T. C. Lai (Hong Kong: Kelly & Walsh, 1977); *Vs*, (Hong Kong: Big Weather Press, 1993); *From The Bluest Part of the Harbour* Hong Kong, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); *Tolo Lights: A Collection of Chinese and English Poems*, compiled by Andrew Parkin and Wu Ningkun (Hong Kong: Shaw College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1995); *A Collection of Poems: Hong Kong in the Decimal System and HK 1997*, publication of the first Hong Kong International Poetry Festival (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Arts Centre and The Provisional Regional Council, 1997); *Outloud: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from Outloud Readings* (Hong Kong: Xtraloud Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> *Hong Kong: Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth* (Hong Kong, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Special Administrative Region — Hong Kong’s official designation by the Chinese government.

What this volume offers is an introduction to literature from and of Hong Kong in English, one of our two official languages, from post-Second World War until the present day. A point on language in this bilingual culture: we did include a few local Chinese poets — meaning those who are bilingual but publish primarily in Chinese — whose selected poems *originate in English* or are *self-translated*. However, the bulk of selections originate in English, regardless of the authors' mother tongue.

As one of the authors in this anthology, I believe I speak for my fellow authors by saying that our texts speak for themselves. As an editor, however, I feel somewhat responsible to make a few remarks on two fronts. First, by offering a brief autobiographical note of the evolution of my own voice, I hope readers will find a useful introduction to understanding how marginal literatures like ours can and do emerge, survive and thrive. Second, the process of selecting and whittling down the final contents of this anthology was instructive, consoling and delightful to me as reader. I therefore wish to share a little of that experience in the hopes that others will be instructed, consoled and delighted as I was by these voices that echo my city, Hong Kong, this place I sometimes call home.

## Evolution of One Hong Kong Voice

While everyone is scrambling to tell the great Hong Kong story, many artists and writers in Hong Kong don't seem to be keen to take part in the race.

from 'The Story of Hong Kong' by Leung Ping-kwan (Ye Si)  
translated by Martha Cheung (1997)

When both ideas and reality are foreign to his audience, the writer has an added burden — that of making accepted and universal what is strange and esoteric, that of making accepted and familiar what is repulsive and rejected. By converting into starkness, realism, what his audience regarded as unthreatening exoticism, the writer disturbs, profanes, *foists a new nakedness upon those piteously clad in the phantasms of conformity*.

from the Plenary Lecture by Han Suyin  
*Asian Voices in English* (1991)<sup>5</sup>

I became one of Hong Kong's 'voices in English' by accident, which is pretty much the history of my home city — an accident, that is, a city that, like some surly teenager still cries, 'but I never *asked* to be born,' to whom the thinking parent replies, 'but you were, so live.'

We in Hong Kong exist in such a perpetually tense present of frenzy that the idea of 'racing' to tell any kind of Hong Kong story, *especially* in English, seems like an unnecessary effort. It isn't profitable, which our culture instinctively abhors, and does not seem to suit the international buyer's market that prefers the musings of those who write 'real' English, an added burden indeed for the hapless writer.

In reflecting on the shaping of my own voice, my earliest encounter with 'Hong Kong writing' was almost entirely fiction by Western residents and visitors for whom English was

<sup>5</sup> *Asian Voices in English* ed. Mimi Chan and Roy Harris (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1991).

a native tongue, both linguistically and culturally. Their perspective was frequently that of an outside observer — often romanticized or orientalized — with little, if any, of what could be described as a local aesthetic or sensibility. In 1981, the American writer James Clavell<sup>6</sup> had this to say in the epigraph to his novel, *Noble House*:

Of course this is a novel. It is peopled with imaginary persons and companies and no reference to any person or company that was, or is, part of Hong Kong or Asia is intended.

I would like to apologize at once to all Hong Kong *yan* — all Hong Kong *persons* — for rearranging their beautiful city, for taking incidents out of context, for inventing people and places and streets and companies and incidents that, hopefully, may appear to have existed but have never existed, for this, truly, is a story . . .

His ‘apology’ is not unlike that of a parent who says, ‘I *am* sorry I gave birth to you, but there you are, it happened.’ In Clavell’s case, that apology is only due for profiting at the expense of literature, which, unfortunately, is not a crime.

There was nonetheless *some* fiction, within what was an otherwise barren culture that spoke to me about my city. *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957) by Richard Mason did, because, unlike *Noble House*, it truly *is* a story that, in its day, defined Hong Kong in fiction, even if it did eventually become what is expected by the West of novels about Hong Kong. An even earlier book, *A Many Splendored Thing* (1952) by the Eurasian author Han Suyin, was courageous in its frank handling of cross-cultural passions, an unspeakable theme in the very Confucian, polite society world of her day. Her ethnicity was important as well because she was the only role model of a part-Chinese writer who voiced a Hong Kong story in English. To be sure, these were solos from the margins, sounding empathy for ‘unsavoury’ characters and situations.

But by writing in English, wasn’t I also part of this ‘mongrel’ margin?

Growing up in Hong Kong, my contemporaries chattered, as did I, in Cantonese, Cantolish, Eng-ese, and English. Chinese friends recited dynasties and were children of legal concubines; I was spared those ‘trials’ thanks to being the offspring of *wah kiu*<sup>7</sup> Chinese-Indonesian immigrants. My parents’ native tongues were Javanese, and in my father’s case, Mandarin as well. English was their second or third language, Cantonese their least fluent, acquired purely for survival in their borrowed land, Hong Kong, in which they separately arrived after the war. They met and married in the city which is where I was born and raised. Despite half a century’s residence, neither one of my parents ever sounded like a Hong Konger in either of the city’s ‘native’ tongues. My private language at home was English, but really, like that of my parents, ESL (English as a second language). The public one was often Cantonese, but more accurately, CSL.

Today, I am more fluent in English than Chinese, and rarely read in Chinese. When I do, it is limited to contemporary fiction or newspapers, with the aid of a well-thumbed pocket

<sup>6</sup> Clavell lived in Hong Kong for a number of years and wrote several novels about Asia (*Shogun*, *Tai Pan*, *King Rat*, *Gaijin*) that were commercially successful.

<sup>7</sup> This refers to ‘Overseas’ Chinese. In Hong Kong, the term (in Putonghua, *huaqiao*) was mostly applied to those from Southeast Asia.

dictionary. I hardly ever write Chinese. When I speak English, I have been told I sound like a New Yorker — or slightly British — depending on the listener's acculturation. Somehow, I still manage to sound Hong Kongese, or so I'm told, when speaking my reasonably competent Cantonese or far less fluent Putonghua. A mongrel's voice, indeed.

However, English was the *only* 'official' language of Hong Kong until the mid-1970s. My writing language proved a weird brand of power under colonial rule.

Determining when I first saw myself as part of a 'voice' of Hong Kong isn't easy, mostly because I kept leaving the city and returning. No one wrote in English, or so I believed, because I did not meet writers who did. During the mid-1970s, the only 'local' novelist I could find was Derek Maitland, a long-time resident and author of *The Only War We've Got*, an acclaimed novel about Vietnam.

As late as 1991, Leon Comber, formerly the managing director of Heinemann Asia and also publisher of Hong Kong University Press, wrote in his introduction to *Prizewinning Asian Fiction*:<sup>8</sup>

It will be noticed that no *indigenous* writers from Hong Kong are included in this collection of stories. While, of course, writers in Chinese abound, it would seem that creative writers in English are not yet ready to emerge, although there is no shortage of skilled speakers of the language. There is perhaps a further reason for their present 'writing block', apart from the language not being their own. It is that Hong Kong is reverting to Chinese suzerainty in 1997 and there is a move towards learning *Putonghua*, the national language of China.

Heinemann did publish one Hong Kong writer, Lee Ding Fai (pen name) whose novel *Running Dog* (1980) is excerpted in this anthology. While Comber was right that few writers emerged, I believe the lack of a culture that supported, encouraged or published creative work in English was more the cause than a question of readiness. Certainly, a 'writing block' was never an issue for me and the language was one I considered my own.

But I should begin at the beginning because, as fiction demands, there must be a beginning, middle and end, with the ascent to a climax somewhere near to, but not at, the end, followed by a denouement. This is the classic dramatic arc, and, after all, Aristotle *said so*, and who are we to argue?

As a graduate student at an American MFA programme,<sup>9</sup> I could not exclusively buy that premise.

Chinese fiction evoked timelessness without such seemingly rigid formulas. The classic novel, *A Dream of Red Mansions* sent me floating endlessly through red dust. The works of early twentieth-century writer Eileen Chang (Cheung Oi-ling), such as *The Golden Cangue*, invoked and sustained an emotional mood to tell its inner story. These were at least *artistically* relevant to a Chinese writer — albeit of a Hong Kong Chinese culture — inasmuch as classic, modern and contemporary novels by English-language writers were. Similarly, the study of

<sup>8</sup> This was an anthology of short stories published between 1981 to 1988 by the Hong Kong-based regional magazine *Asiaweek*.

<sup>9</sup> Master of Fine Arts. A 'terminal' degree, generally in the graduate English departments of many American universities, in the area of creative writing. At present, only a handful of universities offer doctorates in this field.

Putonghua in the 1980s ought to have been *required* of any Hong Kong writer who wished to observe the cultural and linguistic shifts in her society. However, those arguments fell flat at my American university, resulting in the loss of my fellowship, which was reinstated only because my advisor, the novelist Tamas Aczel, strenuously argued my case. He wrote in English and Hungarian, having fled Hungary in 1956.

The first time I left Hong Kong was in 1971. I spent the next three years completing my BA in English in the United States and *never* wanted to go home. I called myself Indonesian-Chinese, rather than the reverse, touting passport over culture. At the time, I had not even been to Indonesia. But my family maintained our Indonesian citizenship, even transforming our Chinese surname into a pseudo-Indonesian one in the late 1960s, partly because of my father's business dealings in Indonesia where any hint of our Chinese cultural heritage was anathema to Suharto's regime. Another less pragmatic but perhaps more significant reason was that my parents did not see a long-term future as 'Hong Kong British' subjects (the other passport available to us), especially since 1997 hung over our city like Damocles' sword.

I had begun writing as a child, at first because it came naturally, but later to articulate the frustrations of living 'my Hong Kong' as a 'minority' *wah kiu* who spoke English too well to be truly 'local' or Chinese. On top of that, I was ethnically mixed with two Asian bloods, as locals were quick to comment of my appearance. This often made me feel that I did not belong in Hong Kong, even though it was, at that time, the only place I considered 'home'.

An idyllic life as a college student in America of the liberated (and liberal) post-1960s era, where classification as a minority 'Asian' was straightforward (although not without its own issues) coupled with my immersion in literature and creative writing — without question *in English* — was as close to heaven on earth imaginable. Had the possibility of living in the US after graduation been an option, I probably would never have returned.

Speaking as the writer I have become, I am eternally grateful for that lack of choice.

Colonial life during the 1970s bred in me a fondness for the work of Anthony Powell. His twelve-volume comic opus about upper-class English society, *Dance to the Music of Time*, echoed the world I lived and worked in with one exception: Hong Kong was 98 percent Chinese.

In my bilingual world, this detail could almost be overlooked. The 'noble house' at which I earned my daily noodle bowl hired only 'Oxbridge' and Hong Kong University graduates — apart from a few odd exceptions, myself being one — and perpetuated a two-tiered management track, for expatriate British and 'locals', meaning anyone Asian regardless of nationality or country of origin. Locals got fewer vacation days, benefits and opportunities than expatriates. My Australian-Chinese colleague, who never lived here until he came to work for the company, was deemed 'local', and received only partial 'expat' benefits. This was similar to the civil service, universities and other spheres of the ruling elite. English was still the 'power language', and, other than the rich Chinese, expatriates ruled. Less than thirty years later, many middle-class 'local' Chinese professionals run the noble houses of this city where English still has currency. But it is Cantonese, Hong Kong-style, that has become the 'power language' of the SAR — this linguistic outpost that does not yet chatter comfortably in *Putonghua*.

Back then, however, Chinese Hong Kong — meaning the majority local culture with limited or no access to the English-speaking world — perpetuated its own path, regardless. As a colony, we did not pretend to be a democracy. The ruling elite, both Chinese and expatriate, could forget about the majority as long as the natives were not restless. As a middle class took root, local culture and literature in Chinese naturally evolved, chronicling voices from society at large, restless or otherwise. Whether or not these writers had access to the

bilingual world is immaterial; all Hong Kong Chinese learned English, even if they would not choose to write in that language.

To write in English therefore meant one of two things. Either I was a part of that Chinese bilingual elite or I belonged to the non-Chinese and/or mongrel caste who might or might not be 'elite'. In any event, it was the language more widely used around the world than Chinese.

This seeming privilege had a downside. Like any writer, I naturally wrote of what I saw and knew of my society, just as a Chinese-language writer would. Thus in 1981, I left home for a second time, because, despite my local, bilingual life, I was too 'mongrel' to fit among the local elite and therefore had nothing to lose. More importantly, however, I had to do something about all that background noise. It was deafening.

Distance provides a useful, almost necessary perspective for any writer. Squatting in America as a more mature, and hence, less surly being, I was able to ignore the day-to-day milieu of my home city. Consequently I was able to 'hear' clearly for the first time, what and why I needed to write of Hong Kong.

It is a universal truth that a woman writer, having acquired a room of her own, will eventually emerge with *something* to say. I was finally able to heed the siren call of my 'city village' and write about it from both heart and mind, and ultimately return to Hong Kong to draw from its soul for my work.

Today, I live somewhere between New York and Hong Kong. Both cities play a role in my sense of home and identity. However, the search for voice transcends place, race and even language. Hong Kong is in my blood no matter what I may choose to write about, and 'heart's blood', this rather useful Chinese term, is what any writer pours into her work.

## Voices for the City

It is not my intent, in these few pages, to comment on all the selections. However, I would like to detail my response as a writer and editor in reading and selecting some of the more important voices in this anthology as well as those that foisted 'a new nakedness' on my consciousness.

What was surprising and heartening was just how much literature existed, although much of the earlier work is out of print and ignored, and more importantly, how good some of it was, not all of which could be included in this anthology. Until I began the search backwards in time, it was unclear how academic neglect, or perhaps, fear of the unknown, prevented the exposure of this body of work. This seeming timidity might have been due in part to the sheer volume of popular work, especially in fiction, that appropriated the city.

My earliest encounters with the city's voices were in novels. A literary education ensured I would distinguish Blake from Dickinson and Shelley from Whitman, but a writer's life demanded I learn from those who did what I wanted to do. Since the age of 11, I knew I wrote fiction ahead of any other form, and that Hong Kong figured in it somehow.

During my teenage years, it was easy to read *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957) and *A Many Splendored Thing* (1952). Both novels were readily available in the 1960s and their movie versions dominated the popular imagination. I devoured these books, feasting on this literature which I did not think of as 'marginal' at the time. What was startling to me, when I returned for a third time from the West in 1992 to live and work in Hong Kong, was the absence of these two books from public view even as a host of sensationalist new work featuring the city,

of a far inferior quality, continued to appear. In revisiting these texts for this anthology, I was refreshed anew by both authors' candid and honest vision of life in this city, some of which feels remarkably contemporary. Of the two, I preferred Mason's novel as a teenager (due no doubt to my own youthful romantic notions). Its narrative retains a vibrancy on the re-reading although the setting and plot lock it into a specific time and place. Han Suyin's novel, however, holds greater appeal for a more mature and inquisitive reader and has a resonance in the voices that followed.

Likewise, the shock of recognition on first reading Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* (1982) was personally important in understanding my peculiar Chinese perspective. Here was an aesthetic sensibility and language extremely unlike my own (so British, I thought, since this was in the 1980s and I was by then 'so American'). Yet, there was a familiarity about his treatment of Hong Kong culture that I hadn't experienced in reading Chinese-American or other Chinese diasporic writers. Mo brought an insider's voice to the experience that I was struggling to articulate.

Mo is, of course, the most widely recognized voice for Hong Kong in contemporary literature. It is his irreverence I like best, coupled with his wickedly comic perspective, that makes his voice such a liberating force. Both these qualities characterize the particular selections of Mo's novels in this anthology. As well, the 'Asian expatriate' protagonist in *Renegade or Halo*<sup>2</sup> (2000) is a departure from the more typically Western expatriate character in much English-language fiction of Hong Kong.

The process of uncovering texts from the two earliest works of the 1950s through to the present day yielded a mini avalanche of emotional responses. In retrospect, those responses can all be described as the consolation of shock.

Reading Edmund Blunden for the first time was rather like being sent back to secondary school again. In my ignorance, I had barely heard of him except in passing. Despite his stature as a poet in England and Hong Kong, we did not read his work in school (and certainly not in American universities), nor did his 'Hong Kong House' exist except, perhaps, in the privileged world of ivy-covered walls. Yet the ambivalence, even fear, expressed in 'On Lamma Island' (1962) gave me pause. Although Blunden's colonial world has all but vanished, songlines remain to remind us of what we once were, inasmuch as we may wish to bury that past.

Similarly, the music of Chinese poetry and language colours the work of Laurence Wong Kwok-pun and Leung Ping-kwan. This is English poetry that moves beyond the traditional canon. Hong Kong is a natural birthplace for such work, especially by poets who are fully bilingual and bicultural, as both Wong and Leung are, and reading their work was, for me, an adventure and discovery of how Chinese poets could enrich English when they take on the language and make it their own.

The encounter with Louise Ho's poetry was the shock of delight and rigour. Here was a voice for the city's culture and history that recorded and commented on our uncertain and confused identity. 'Home to Hong Kong' (1994) and 'Well-spoken Cantonese' are poems that establish a call and response of 'right on!' On a more serious note, 'New Year's Eve, 1989' (1995), the pair of 'Hong Kong Riots' poems (1997) and 'Island' (1997), among others, force me to confront the issues of history and language in my own work. Ho's approach is always rigorous, demanding of the reader an appreciation of the literary canon she alludes to as well as a local historical knowledge and sensitivity. It conjures up being whipped for pleasure. As the first Hong Kong Chinese poet in English to win critical recognition, Ho stands out as a 'must read' for anyone engaging in the subjects, verbs and objects of this city.

But it is Agnes Lam's voice that provides me with poetic consolation, for in her work



resides the ‘unheard melodies’ yet to come of this literature. It was a shock of recognition, not unlike reading Mo, except this time, the familiarity was in *language* as well as perspective. Lam’s poetry captures the diction and rhythm of contemporary Hong Kong. ‘Writing in the Middle of the Road’ (2001) is one of my favourite examples of this, because it sounds the way Hong Kong people speak English — frenetic, almost but not quite naïve, profound at unexpected moments — transformed into art by the poet. Lam calls her own poetry ‘pedestrian’ and tells students and young writers that anyone can write poetry. This seems unduly self-deprecating and overly generous. If, however, by ‘pedestrian’ she means the second language English voice of Hong Kong Chinese people, then yes, this is it, and thank heaven for it too. Lam, a linguistics scholar, instructs teachers of English and is fluent in Chinese, although she writes poetry only in English. This might account for her special sensitivity to the language of the people.

It was also intriguing to see parallels in the intensely personal work of Brent Ambacher and Agnes Lam. Ambacher’s ‘One Perfect Kiss’ (1995) and Lam’s ‘First Draft’ (1997) validated the kind of artistic ‘confession’ that colours some of my earlier work. This quality is hardly exclusive to Hong Kong writing, but that such literature does emerge from the pens of two indigenous poets, whose obsessions dovetail at times with mine, offers solace to one without a native literary tradition.

Turning back to the prose, a strain that intrigued me was the appearance of ‘localized’ non-Chinese characters in several of the novels, by which I mean the atypical expatriate who interacts closely with the Chinese community. Hong Kong’s image in numerous popular novels gives the illusion that the only books from and of this city must include *tai pans*, triads and tricks of the trade, preferably slant-eyed and devious. Above all, East and West are twain, unmet. Small wonder it is the Eurasian Han Suyin who leads the ‘empire’ in writing back, with Simon Elegant not far behind.

Coming upon Elegant’s *A Chinese Wedding* (1994) was like receiving an invitation to a feast. In the novel, a young American woman marries into a Hong Kong family, and lives and eats her past through the courses of the wedding banquet. No visitor to this city can fail to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of restaurants per square foot. Somehow food references are bound to appear in the literature, as in Elegant’s novel and Mo’s *Sour Sweet*, as well as in several others.

Almost thirty years before Elegant, however, C. Y. Lee featured an American priest in *The Virgin Market* (1965), a remarkable novel about Pigtail, a red-haired Eurasian orphan raised among the boat people. This Eurasian, unlike the Dentons in Christopher New’s novels, speaks no English and can only wonder at her supposed American father, the closest image of whom she can imagine being the priest who works among the fishing community of Aberdeen. Lee’s novel startled the most, because it chronicled the world of the boat people and their day-to-day travails, employing a main character who is almost ‘profane’ (as Han Suyin might say) yet far from unrealistic in this city. Lee is also the author of *The Flower Drum Song*, better known through its Broadway and Hollywood incarnations.

Another priest appears in *An Iron Tree* (1993) by Martin Booth, a British author who, like the American Ambacher, grew up in Hong Kong. The world Booth details is the underbelly of Western expatriate life, a sharp contrast to the privileged existence in noble houses, government, media and universities of much popular fiction, where the *lingua franca* is English.

Mimi Chan’s first novel *All The King’s Women* (2002) was the only one included where the author acknowledges the roots in family history. The personal tone of the narrative was a

delight, and the lives of the concubines she details were fascinating because of her matter-of-fact tone, without the disturbances of 'exotica' or the memoir *des misérables*.

Among the short stories, the one that 'shocked' like a shower of red dust was Alex Kuo's 'The Catholic All-Star Chess Team' from *Lipstick*, a collection that won the American Book Award. I first read the story in manuscript in 1998, and was so struck by the brilliant collision of fact and fiction — one that could almost *only* happen in Hong Kong — that I foisted it upon the editors of *dimsum* where it was first published in 2000. For me, this is the brilliant diamond among a selection of gems, the kind of short story that re-invents the form (as well as time, place and circumstance), allowing layers of meaning to settle and reside and is truly fiction at its most challenging.

An interesting contrast in terms of language and perspective is in the stories of three Chinese writers, David T. K. Wong, Yang Yi Lung and Hark Yeung. The first publishes only in English while the other two also write and publish in Chinese.

Wong's story 'Lost River' (1990) has a poignancy and yearning that characterizes a number of his short stories, even while providing a commentary on Hong Kong society, which he does directly in 'The Cocktail Party' (1996) and other tales. Wong is to date the most prolific short story writer among us.

Yang Yi Lung's (John D. Young) stories were an unexpected find. A noted historian, he had begun to write short fiction in the 1990s, but sadly, was killed in an accident. He would have been a welcome addition to our literary scene. We are fortunate to be able to include one of his unpublished stories and an essay that appeared in the now defunct *Asia Magazine*.

Hark Yeung (pen name) is a Chinese-language journalist with a background in translation. Her first book of essays *Our Elders* (2000) signalled the presence of a distinctly Hong Kong English voice in prose, just as Agnes Lam's is for poetry. Her extremely spare prose and almost deliberately unsentimental perspective has a kind of defiance that feels, to me, very much like our contemporary culture. In reading the work of new and emerging young writers, I often heard echoes of Yeung.

Lest readers think that our city never laughs at itself, I must remark on the comic work selected. The most notable writer in this area is indubitably the Sri Lankan author and journalist Nury Vittachi, a long-time resident of Hong Kong who is also the editor of *dimsum*, the first journal of Asian English-language fiction. A few excerpts from his numerous books which satirize the foibles peculiar to Hong Kong life appear in this anthology. Vittachi also has a talent for seizing on examples of the grammatically and syntactically unusual English in Asia and turning it on its head.

What surprised me was the number of authors who have written in English satirizing Hong Kong. Most of the work contains overtones of the colonial master laughing at the natives, with little or no understanding of local culture, and celebrates, or at least posits, an 'us and them' comic vision. Vittachi is unique in his ability to adopt the 'native's' point of view in a deliberately farcical manner as in the piece 'Why Compromise? Get Divorced Instead' (1993). Likewise, the American author Charles Philip Martin, reaches across a broad range of perspectives, as in 'Colonial Life and Times' (1997), one of his many amusing columns from the *South China Morning Post*, as well as in his rather darkly comic short story 'Lau the Tailor' (1998).

Although we did not include journalistic reportage, the one exception was Jesse Wong's piece 'Uneasy Riders' from his book *Lives in Transition* (1997), a close-up look at ordinary lives around the time of the Handover. The historical event coloured much of the contemporary literature, and Wong's writings, which first appeared in *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, captured

the uncertainty and confusion by personalizing the voice of the masses. Unlike many of the English-language journalists in Hong Kong, particularly of Wong's generation and earlier, he has the advantage of Cantonese fluency and access to local society in a way others do not.

There were few autobiographies of notable citizens, which are the memoirs I most enjoy. Reading Elsie Elliott's (Elsie Tu) *Crusade for Justice* was an education in local history where her place is unquestionably assured, just as, for completely different reasons, Jackie Chan's place is. His book is also excerpted in the anthology.

A few words on the new voices. There was a remarkable wealth of talent to choose from, a heartening experience for this reader. In fact, I would like to think that it will not be too long before an anthology of contemporary writers in English in all the genres will follow this one.

Nicole Wong Chun Chi's story 'Back Street' (2000) foisted that 'new nakedness' both by its tightly-wound language and immersion in a completely local world. In the latter respect, it was reminiscent of Lin Tai-Yi's 1964 novel *Kamphoon Street*, which is excerpted. Lin authored several critically acclaimed novels in her day about Chinese life, but all have disappeared from view. Perhaps she was ahead of her time, by writing in English, just as C. Y. Lee did, whose books are also almost all out of print. The emergence of writers like Nicole Wong Chun Chi, Nancy Tsui Yuk Chun, W. H. Y. Wong Ho Yin and others among the new voices may create a resurgence of interest in earlier work.

There was even more poetry than fiction to select from, which is not surprising, since poetry seems to be the preferred form for many fledgling writers in Hong Kong. Among my personal favourites are 'Coming Through' by Canti Lui and 'She asked "Who is Franz Kafka?"' by Raslo Layton. Both voices embrace a courageousness that rings through loud and clear; they tackle challenging subjects, the way Louise Ho and Agnes Lam do. Call me mongrel if you will — marginal to suit academe — but at heart, I believe first and foremost in words for the soul, the only charge of the writer in her time.

It is courage and creativity, as Han Suyin implies, that will ensure the continuation of a literature in English or indeed, any literature. It is up to us to disturb, even to *profane*, in order to get at the truth of what we have to tell.

Yet remarkably, English, this 'borrowed' tongue, may serve us well in this city that manages to thrive in survival. It is interesting that Leung Ping-kwan, a Chinese poet who never wrote in English except for critical work, has begun, in recent years, to write poetry in English, some of which appears in this volume. His thought-provoking essay on writing in both languages (from *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and Creativity*)<sup>10</sup> is a useful study for any cross-cultural writer or indeed any creative writer who cares about the nature of language.

In the end, this English language is merely an instrument to voice human passions.

So it need not be a 'great' story we have to tell, but it is a Hong Kong story-in-progress, occasionally nostalgic for a British or Chinese world that was and was not ours, perhaps irreverent and a little defiant because of its tenuous beginnings, but above all engaged in this city — real or imagined; as emigrant, immigrant or native; defining or liberating — the place, people and spirit transformed by our words. The city has given birth to this mongrel crew, comprised of 'running dogs' who attempt to outrun their 'masters'. If our 'gamble' pays off, our story is one that will continue into a future, where time and place are owned, not borrowed.

<sup>10</sup> *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and Creativity*, ed. Kingsley Bolton (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2002).