

# ISLANDS AND CONTINENTS

Short Stories by Leung Ping-kwan

Edited by *John Minford*

with *Brian Holton and Agnes Hung-chong Chan*



香港大學出版社

HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS

**Hong Kong University Press**

14/F Hing Wai Centre

7 Tin Wan Praya Road

Aberdeen

Hong Kong

Original Chinese text of stories © Leung Ping-kwan, various years of first publication

English translations of stories © Individual translators, various years of first publication

This collection © The editors 2007

ISBN 978-962-209-844-2

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Secure On-line Ordering

<http://www.hkupress.org>

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by Pre-Press Ltd.



Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

“At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed.”

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

# C ontents

<b>Foreword: ‘PK’</b>	<b>vii</b>
<i>John Minford</i>	
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>xix</b>
<b>Transcendence and the Fax Machine</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Translated by Jeanne Tai</i>	
<b>The Romance of the Rib</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Translated by Shirley Poon and Robert Neather</i>	
<b>The Dentists on the Avenida de la Revolución</b>	<b>21</b>
<i>Translated by Brian Holton and Agnes Hung-chong Chan</i>	
<b>Postcards from Prague</b>	<b>39</b>
<i>Translated by Tong Man, Jasmine</i>	
<b>Borders</b>	<b>43</b>
<i>Translated by Shuang Shen</i>	
<b>Islands and Continents</b>	<b>67</b>
<i>Translated by Caroline Mason</i>	
<b>Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart</b>	<b>91</b>
<i>Translated by Chan Wing Sze and John Minford</i>	
<b>Afterword: Writer’s Jetlag</b>	<b>117</b>
<i>Translated by John Minford and Agnes Hung-chong Chan</i>	
<b>Contributors’ Biographical Notes</b>	<b>127</b>

# Foreword 'PK'

■ *John Minford*

Over the years I have noticed people experiencing some difficulty when deciding how to address the author of these stories. For a start, there is the dilemma of whether to use the pen-name he has adopted as an author of fiction and prose, Yah See; or his more formal name as a poet, scholar and teacher — Leung Ping-kwan. Then again, these names themselves can be read either in their original Cantonese (as above), or in Mandarin, the lingua franca of the new Empire, in which case they become respectively Yesi,<sup>1</sup> and Liang Bingjun (this last looks deceptively like a Mainland writer, and very

---

<sup>1</sup> It sounds like the English 'Yes'. I always thought this pen-name originated with the progressive rock band of the 1970s, since PK was very interested in the underground culture of that period. But he informs me: 'As for Yesi, I started writing as a high school student and was too shy to want people to know that I wrote. Also in HK, people considered you crazy if they knew you were a poet! And it was popular to use pen-names in those days. But most of my contemporaries were using very sentimental or romantic pen-names, things like "red leaf", "setting sun", "drizzle", "lonely soul", "wandering soul" etc. I did not like that, I didn't want to have a name with a ready-made meaning, borrowed from some well-developed idea, like a suit of old clothes from relatives. I thought of myself as modern, and a rebel, so I picked two characters from a classical poem I was reading, words with no clear meaning when put together, and I juxtaposed them to form my name. I guess I wanted to give my own meaning to the characters by using them!'

un-Hong Kong). All of which is extremely confusing. For me, he has always been — as friend, poet and story-teller — just plain PK.<sup>2</sup> I believe that PK himself relishes the irony, the fake nostalgia, of this colonial naming device when applied to a post-colonial such as himself. It is a phenomenon true to the wonderfully complex spirit of Hong Kong, this maddening and yet lovable city that he celebrates (and laments) in so many of these stories!

It was only relatively recently that I became aware of another undercurrent in the name PK. There is a Cantonese slang expression *puk gaai*, meaning literally ‘hit the street’, roughly the equivalent of ‘drop dead’, or ‘piss off, you bastard’, and occurring in such coarse expressions as *diu neih louh mou go puk gaai jai* — ‘fuck-your-mother’s drop-down-dead boy’.<sup>3</sup> The Cantonese-speakers of Hong Kong (ruthless hybridizers of linguistic conventions and indulgers in code-shifting) commonly abbreviate *puk gaai* into the simpler PK. PK himself is proudly Cantonese, and no doubt takes a secret delight in the street-blasphemous Cantonese overtone encrypted into his colonial appellation, with its hint of the ‘no-hoper’, the ‘loser’, the person destined (despite his best efforts) to drop dead on the street. This is the sort of character he returns to again and again. His stories are un-selfpitying celebrations of failure. *Why do I always forget? Why can I never find the words?* (‘Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart’) Or they are gentle chronicles of the wounded, unsuccessful lover. *There’s the distance between us, between you and me, which has varied with time. I don’t know if I can ever transcend that distance, I don’t know if somehow one day I can cross that border.* (‘Borders’) His postcolonial world is filled with anti-heroes, with ‘marginaux’, people ‘going downhill’ — like Lao Ho, the history lecturer in ‘Postcolonial Affairs’. *He’s started losing some of his hair in the past few*

---

<sup>2</sup> If we were to universalize this usage, whereby the initial letters of the personal name are used to create a ‘Western’ name, the late unlamented Chairman Mao (Mao Tse-tung) would become T. T. Mao, Premier Zhou Enlai would become E. L. Zhou, Deng Xiaoping would turn into X. P. Deng, etc.

<sup>3</sup> See Christopher Hutton and Kingsley Bolton, *A Dictionary of Cantonese Slang* (Honolulu, 2005), p. 95.

years. He hasn't been able to withstand this inescapable part of historical necessity. I've known him for many years, and I've watched him going steadily downhill. Or like the writer's lonely friend in 'Islands and Continents', a man haunted by his failed love affair, by the torture of his infatuation — quite incapable of any normal transaction with the world.

The word 'marginal' is in a sense the key to this book. PK sees himself as marginal: marginal to the academic world and the city in which he works to earn a living — *pushed out to the margins of a closed community*; marginal to the 'greater Chinese' context to which he supposedly 'belongs'. *Where should I stand in the sculpture garden? In the centre or on the periphery? Should I sit cradled in the arms of a giant statue? Or should I watch from the edge...* ('Borders') Hong Kong itself (*the commercially-minded society of this small border island*) is a place on the margins, a border town, an island, as opposed to a, or the, continent (or mainland).<sup>4</sup> There is a recurring tug-of-war between the grandeur of the 'motherland', and the proudly independent voice of Hong Kong, a paradoxical relationship between border towns like Hong Kong and Shenzhen, and the huge mass of China. *Somewhere behind the transitional shabbiness of Shenzhen, there was also a certain magnificence to China.* ('The Dentists on the Avenida de la Revolución') This is the dual landscape of his stories, a fluctuating, insecure world, where islands and continents co-exist: *all the little islands and hills, stretching into the distance... and behind them, very faint in the background, the mountains of the mainland, the great continent.* ('Islands and Continents')



This book of stories mirrors one that appeared a few years ago in French.<sup>5</sup> It consists of four longer pieces ('Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart', 'Borders', 'Islands and Continents' and 'The Dentists on the Avenida de la

---

<sup>4</sup> In Chinese, the word *lu* or *dalù* can mean either continent (as in the European or American continent) or mainland (as in Mainland China). This important ambiguity is impossible to reproduce in English.

<sup>5</sup> *Îles et Continents et autres nouvelles*, translated by Annie Curien, Paris, Gallimard, 2001.

Revolución’);<sup>6</sup> two shorter, and more light-hearted, or surreal, stories (‘The Romance of the Rib’, and ‘Transcendence and the Fax Machine’), and the even shorter ‘cameo’, ‘Postcards from Prague’. The collection acquaints the reader with contemporary Hong Kong’s most eloquent voice, a writer whose gentle humour is shot through with a lingering sense of melancholy, and whose involvement in serious intellectual and cultural issues is tempered by a childlike and engaging naïvety. It may be helpful here to round out the acquaintance by placing some of PK’s poetry beside his fiction.<sup>7</sup> The poetry can provide an illuminating counterpoint, sometimes echoing the humour, sometimes drawing out the subdued lyricism, sometimes exploring the intellectual preoccupations. Here, for example, are two very recent, unpublished lyrics, sent last week from snowbound Cambridge. They show him writing in his minimalist, intimate style, echoing the folk lyrics of the ancient *Book of Songs*.

### Marsh Mulberry

On the street between redbrick houses,  
 So many umbrellas, so many colours;  
 Suddenly I ran into you,  
 And around us the colours shone so bright.

On the road spotted with rain,  
 Damp reflections of lamplight.  
 Suddenly I found you,  
 And the light held words that couldn’t be said.

---

<sup>6</sup> An earlier draft of the translation of ‘Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart’ appeared in the US Quarterly *Persimmon*, in 2001. Similarly, an earlier version of Caroline Mason’s translation of ‘Islands and Continents’ (under a different title, ‘The Island and the Mainland’) appeared in the Hong Kong publication, *China Perspectives*, no. 30, July/August 2000.

<sup>7</sup> There are two books of English translations available: *City at the End of Time* (1982), and *Travelling with a Bitter Melon* (2002). Otherwise there is a selection of early poems in the Hong Kong Special Issue of *Renditions*, 29-30, 1988 (pp. 210-221), and a more recent selection in *West Coast Line*, a journal of Simon Fraser University (1997).

On the street of fresh snow,  
 Patches of black and white.  
 Suddenly I found you.  
 And around us the cars sounded so distant.

In the drizzle the street-lamps flared;  
 Why don't they spew out their fire?  
 Perhaps it's best to store it,  
 A little warmth each day for the heart.

### **Sun in the East**

Sunlight shines through the eastern window.  
 The tea's warm; in the hall, shelves of books  
 Tumble from ancient dynasties, pell-mell into the room.  
 We leaf through them, hoping to find some little thing.  
 You move closer, lightly  
 Your pink socks brush the soles of my feet.

Moonlight shines through the eastern window.  
 The tea's cold; don't put on the water again,  
 You say. No end to the reading of books.  
 Chance discoveries on the page stay longest in the heart.  
 You stand in the doorway, softly  
 Your pink socks rest on the soles of my feet.

In the stories in this book, from time to time we encounter this same voice, a quietly observed everyday street setting for a sudden impulse of the heart, a shared chance discovery, some carefully drawn interior montage, where intimacy is slowly and delicately etched, like a scene from a Wong Kar-wai movie, giving us a little warmth each day for the heart.

Back in the mid-1980s, when Mainland China first started exporting its new poets to Hong Kong and the West, PK was already established as one of Hong Kong's leading modernist poets and critics. These lines are from a 1983 poem, 'Leaf Crown', one from a difficult, almost metaphysical series entitled 'Lotus Leaves'.

I wait in faith, to hear  
 The sepal breath, I am heavy and clumsy,  
 Thwarted by mud. You drift lightly across the water  
 Shedding the petals of yesterday, a fresh clean face again  
 In a public world, gaining wide circulation.  
 My leaves and stalks have their share of hubbub too, but  
 Are muddy, sluggish, caught in private nightmares and  
 Perilous deluges of dawn, and my roots, tangled  
 In silt, can never make themselves clear...<sup>8</sup>

During those years, as Hong Kong's own future became uncertain, and China embarked hesitantly on its new chapter of 'reform' (to be cut short so brutally in June 1989), PK welcomed the young newcomers from the long-frozen North with characteristic generosity. It was in the presence of members of that Volant Tribe of Bards from the Mainland that I first encountered him.<sup>9</sup> Even at that early juncture, the tension between his brand of home-grown (if European- and US-educated) modernism, and the more tormented trajectory of Mainland Chinese modernism, reborn from the ashes of the Cultural Revolution, was clearly discernible. The contrast between the cultural environments of the 'island' and the 'continent', the conflicting demands of a deep feeling for the land and literature of his ancestors, and the questioning, questing free spirit of the soon-to-be-returned colony, were to become recurring themes in much of his work. They are strongly present, for example, in the semi-autobiographical story 'Borders'.

Later, in the 1990s, as Hong Kong came to terms with its new identity as a Special Administrative Region of China, I spent many enjoyable hours with PK in various bars across the territory, going over drafts of translations, plotting events together. One of these events was in London in 1997, a two-

---

<sup>8</sup> *Renditions*, Hong Kong Special Issue (1988), p. 212

<sup>9</sup> Among others, Yang Lian (now resident in London), and Gu Cheng (whose death in 1993 deprived contemporary Chinese poetry of one of its most authentic voices). The term 'Volant Tribe of Bards' is taken from the *Renditions* Special Issue of 1984, where the 'tribe' of Misty poets was first introduced to a Western readership.

man-show on the South Bank devoted to Hong Kong culture. That summer was a poignant juncture for PK, as Hong Kong approached the grand Handover ceremony (what Prince Charles has so cleverly called the Great Chinese Take-away). For the South Bank PK wrote a poem, in which he 'spoke' to Sir Cecil Clementi, a former Hong Kong Governor and author of the extraordinary Kiplingesque 'Hong Kong Rhapsody', written in 1925:

Grandly here the Master Builder's power  
Crowns the work of England in Cathay.<sup>10</sup>

At first, in his Response to Clementi, PK expresses his ambivalent relationship to his own colonial past;

See how hard I have to try  
To squeeze myself into your foreign rhyme!  
For years I've had to stammer like this  
    In your borrowed tongue!  
So what do I feel now? Indifference?  
Or a strange nostalgia?

Then he turns to speak to the new mandarin masters from the North.

An older rhetoric  
Takes the measure of us now  
Trusses us up  
In the strong calligraphy of tradition,  
Condescends to dribble a drop of casual scholar's ink  
And there we are — cultural waifs...<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Cecil Clementi, Governor of Hong Kong from 1925 to 1930, had earlier (1905) translated the Cantonese Love Songs of Zhao Ziyong. Clementi was an interesting man of letters, and instrumental in establishing Chinese Studies at the University of Hong Kong. He was sarcastically attacked by Lu Xun in 1927, after his visit to Hong Kong.

<sup>11</sup> The poem is contemporary with the story 'Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart'.

Another (more enjoyable) event took place the following year at the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre. PK wrote some lighter poems to accompany an avant-garde fashion show, designed by his young friend, Wessie Ling. (PK loves to involve himself with designers, artists, photographers, filmmakers, chefs, musicians, dancers...) One of the poems at the ‘post-modern’ fashion show was simply entitled ‘Barbie Doll’.

I’m a Barbie doll  
 Living in a Barbie city...  
 Ken is always at the other end of my mobile phone,  
 Saying, ‘You’re not happy!  
 Let’s go have some fun together!’  
 I love the PLA hunks,  
 I fancy all men in uniform,  
 Their leather boots turn me on...  
 I’m a Barbie doll  
 Visiting a Barbie Legco...

It is the same bright, glittering, evanescent world so well described in ‘Postcolonial Affairs’, another Handover piece. PK evokes more vividly than any writer I know the shifting sands of Hong Kong’s urban mythology, and the stoical courage that enables its ‘cultural waifs’ to ‘have some fun’ in the face of such insecurity.

Side by side with his post-modern mask, part serious, part playful, PK has increasingly taken on another persona, that of the timeless Chinese scholar-poet, a laughing, latterday Zen layman, slightly dishevelled, one foot on the path to enlightenment, the other foot trudging worldwearily through the Red Dust. Sometimes (as I have told him more than once) he makes me think of lines by the eighteenth-century Manchu lyricist Nalan Xingde:

Heart burned to ash,  
 Hair intact,  
 Not yet totally a monk;  
 Wind and rain have worn me down.  
 Here, at this life-death parting,

Lone candle,  
 I seem to know you.  
 It's my heart stands between me  
 And enlightenment.<sup>12</sup>

More and more, PK travels internationally, and writes as a citizen of the world, as part of world culture. During the early weeks of 2005, he wrote a short poem in response to the devastation of the Asian Tsunami, entitled 'A Taste of Asia'. Its poignant understatement gives it the feel of a classical Chinese poem:<sup>13</sup>

The jar you sent had just arrived, stood unopened,  
 When grim tidings blew in on the grey clouds  
 From the coast north of you. The earth's contractions  
 Have brought forth a tsunami. Hotel swallowed in an instant.  
 Train thrown from its tracks, continuing derailed, driverless  
 On a journey from this life to the next.  
 Ocean suddenly overhead. Human lives  
 Oilslicked and black, flotsam doors, provisions adrift, homeless...

I open the tightly-sealed jar. Pickled garlic.  
 What is this taste? Bitterness  
 Buried deep in layers of mud? Harshness of trees torn apart?  
 Stench of ocean, shattered coral, fish floating belly-up?  
 What does it mean, your message, wafted my way this sunny afternoon?  
 Something brewing in the dark? Something growing in turmoil?  
 Pity and cruelty, glimpsed in the heaving motions of nature?  
 Can a drop of sweetness temper the infinite brine of this world's woe?

But still, whether as a participant in international gatherings, in Paris, Berlin and New York, or in his continuing dialogue with other Chinese writers from the Mainland, Taiwan and the exile community, PK remains the proud

---

<sup>12</sup> Nalan Xingde, *Nalan ci jianzhu* (Shanghai, Guji, 2003), p. 170.

<sup>13</sup> See for example the Tang dynasty poet Bo Juyi's early poem 'The Charcoal-Seller', in Minford and Lau, *Chinese Classical Literature*, vol. 1, pp. 874-5.

representative voice of Hong Kong. In late 2005, by a strange coincidence, there were two literary events on the same day in Hong Kong. In the afternoon, the exiled poet from the North, Bei Dao, was talking at Hong Kong University. This was a rather solemn, humourless retrospective, a pretentious public musing on the historical significance of the shortlived magazine *Today*, published by his group of poets nearly thirty years ago in the years after the end of the Cultural Revolution. At the gathering there was an almost sanctimonious air of reverence. Everything took place in Mandarin. There was a certain condescension towards the audience, coming as they mostly did from the Cantonese-speaking ‘Cultural Desert’ of Hong Kong. The literary VIPs on stage seemed strangely like exiled party cadres caught in a time warp, nostalgically recreating a Mainland political meeting from the old days. All except for PK, who sat there looking slightly bemused, an outsider at the banquet... *I could tell I'd got it wrong once again. Wrong company, wrong food. It's a mistake I keep on making.* (‘Postcolonial Affairs’)

Later that same evening, down by the harbour, on the top floor of the old Western Market, a second, very different literary event took place. PK met with a motley group of friends to read his poetry, in Chinese (Cantonese, of course), in various English versions, and in Sayed Gouda’s Arabic. The atmosphere was very relaxed and good-humoured. There was a generosity of spirit. Good wine was shared. *East and West can cook together, they can merge.* (‘Postcolonial Affairs’) People wandered around the rooftop site, chatting and looking at the various art objects on display. There was poetry in the air, and a certain amount of spontaneous improvisation. Poetry about food (always one of PK’s favourite subjects), short poems celebrating everyday life, bittersweet evocations of relationships gone astray, cameos of the Hong Kong alternative fashion world, wry protests at the pompous rigmarole of politics. There were even ironic references to the 1997 Handover, now eight years in the past, not a heavy-handed retrospective, but the heartfelt expression of an ongoing, private reluctance to be co-opted.

Your proclamations sit heavy on the stomach,  
 Destroy the appetite;  
 The table is altogether overdone.  
 May I be permitted to abstain  
 From the rich banquet menu,  
 To eat my simple fare, my gruel, my wild vegetables,  
 To cook them, to share them with you?<sup>14</sup>

PK's poems and the rooftop readings, along with the traffic sounds from the fly-over just outside the window, were very much part of the rich texture of Hong Kong cultural life — as were the lack of overt importance and the apparent absence of a Party Secretary to spy on the political leanings of those present.

China has a grand literary tradition. Unfortunately, during the twentieth century politics has distorted every branch of human creative endeavour in China, not least the weaving of illusion that is the writing of fiction, and the difficult, sensitive activity that calls itself poetry. Ever since the early decades of the last century, it is China that has been a 'Cultural Jungle', where only a few tough cultural goannas have survived. Hong Kong, by contrast, has quietly preserved and cultivated a space in which the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' is still possible.

This is the space within which PK functions so well, leaving his readers with a poignant sense of the soul beneath the hard surface of Hong Kong, not afraid to descend on occasions to its darkest depths. *Don't be surprised if I don't write again. Once the light is off, I am the nameless chaos, I am the writhing in the dark, the multitude of things buried beneath the ordered light of day, of things lost in the relations of normal life.* But despite the darkness, there is a human tenderness, a fierce affirmation of individuality. *There, in that darkness, I possess my own imaginary world, a world that is both independent and strangely fruitful.* ('Islands and Continents') It is a warmth,

---

<sup>14</sup> From the poem 'Cauldron'.

a precious, hard-won optimism, that he shares generously with friends and readers. As he puts it in the final sentences of 'Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart' (my personal favourite of the stories in this collection): *Somehow we manage to stay together. Maybe in the end we learn to be kind to one another.... It's late at night now. Outside the streets are empty and desolate. But we can still sit in here, we can linger awhile amid the lights and voices, drunk on the illusion of this warm and joyous moment.*

PK left Hong Kong some weeks ago for a six month spell in the US, just as I was finally sitting down to write this (long overdue) foreword. He has wandered off the map again... The floating world of this city feels strangely empty without him. He is probably in a warm library in Cambridge, busy writing another story or poem, taking refuge from the snows of the North American winter, revising some unfinished manuscript that he has trundled across yet another border, or replying to letters delivered to a previous address. *A hopeless case, a wanderer by nature, a man who enjoys crossing borders and as a consequence often ends up alone like this, an orphaned ghost without a home. Always one step behind reality.* ('Borders')

Hong Kong

# T ranscendence and the Fax Machine

■ *Translated by Jeanne Tai*

I am thirty-seven years old and single, I work as a research assistant at the Institute for Cultural Research, and I moonlight at an accounting firm. In my spare time I like to read the Bible, the Koran, and Buddhist sutras. My field used to be British and American literature. But with the emergence of a Chinese Studies clique among the local scholars and the importance they attached to bibliographic citations, and since I was never on particularly good terms with these people, I began to find my name and my writings excluded from every bibliography and anthology they had a hand in preparing. As time went by I began to sense the presence of bibliographies everywhere: no matter where I went, no matter what I was doing, there always seemed to be an enormous pen hanging right over me, which, with one fell swoop, would make me vanish into thin air. After that I began reading anything and everything. I even began subscribing to certain French journals, including several that focused on religion and literature. Perhaps people involved in the study of religion are more tolerant and considerate; in any case, I would occasionally send them an unsolicited article, and to my surprise they would always respond.

I have remained single for one reason only: I am not very good at interpersonal relationships. Before the age of thirty-five, I used to idealize every woman I met, seeing only the good points and finding plenty of things to love in each of them. And, of course, it always ended in absolute disaster for me. After thirty-five, by way of compensation, I found faults and shortcomings — many of them — in every female I came across. Under these conditions I no longer fell in love with anyone. My heart was calm and serene, like a placid lake, and I expected to live like this happily ever after.

But something unexpected always happens.

One drizzly evening I was out with my photographer friend Li Biansheng. Over a couple of drinks, I mentioned to him that I had been invited by some French scholars to submit a paper for their upcoming conference on Literature and Transcendence. But corresponding with them by mail was time-consuming and very inconvenient. Biansheng was convinced that the solution to my problem was to get a fax machine. Later, while we were walking around Causeway Bay, both of us feeling kind of light-headed, he suddenly said: ‘Wait, weren't you going to buy a fax machine?’ And he took me to an electronics appliance store. It was just like what my girlfriends used to tell me: if you wander around aimlessly in Causeway Bay, you'll always end up buying something. Since Ah Sheng knew the manager, it didn't matter that I didn't have a cent on me. By the time I left the store I was no longer lonesome — I was on my way home with my fax machine.

Her looks were nothing out of the ordinary, but somehow they came to be more and more pleasing to my eye, perhaps because I was growing, uh, accustomed to her face. I understand that a fax machine is just an instrument for the facsimile transmission of documents — nothing to make a big fuss over, really. But ever since the day she came home with me, my life changed. When I finished something I was writing I no longer had to wander all over the city looking for a real mailbox among all the toylike receptacles on the street, or stamp my feet in frustration in front of the locked doors of the post office, or dodge trams in my quest for some safe deposit to which I could entrust the bundle of intimate, red-hot confidences I was holding in my hands.

No more would I be condemned to roam all creation like a lost soul, stopping in at some telecommunications centre or the Foreign Correspondents' Club for a temporary respite, a chance encounter; never again would I dread the emptiness of an endless weekend or an idle weekday. Though the world outside might be filled with deception, and communication between people might be fraught with traps for the unwary, I could be certain of at least one thing when I got home: she would always be there, faithfully receiving, transmitting, ingesting, an absolutely trustworthy connection linking me and places far away.

What a comfort it was to insert a piece of paper inside her and to know that its soul would appear on the other side of the world. My beloved written word was now able to stand its ground against the evanescent waves of sound and speech. My most personal musings could be flipped over and, in total privacy, poured into a solitary black earpiece. Even the nastiest customs official was powerless to intercept and examine those electromagnetic waves as they wafted through space. And wonder of wonders, there was even material evidence of my intellectual intercourse with the world of the spirit: afterwards there would always be a corporeal copy for my files — a facsimile record, a faithful fuss-free summary of my various mental odysseys. Even if my memory were to fail me in the future, I would still be able to retrace with certainty the footsteps of my soul.

Furthermore, I was now spared the trials and tribulations of daily living. No longer would I have to listen to someone's sighs over the telephone or watch tears trickling down someone's cheeks. Pettiness and jealousy were less likely to ensnarl me when conveyed on paper. No more would I have to answer calls from cantankerous friends who had the habit of slamming down the phone with a suddenness and vehemence that always left my ears ringing. Indeed, thanks to a simple fax machine, my life had undergone a complete transformation. I could now go to sleep, my mind at ease, and when, in the middle of a dream, I heard her muffled coos and murmurs, they sounded like a soothing lullaby reassuring me that all was well.

Little by little I became quite dependent on her. It had been a long time since I had opened my heart to anyone, but she looked so innocent and guileless it was almost inevitable that she would become my one true friend. At work, caught in the daily skirmishes of office politics, I couldn't help but think of her, of her cheerful and open countenance, of how she seemed to represent a kind of communion that was more genuine, more real. After work I wanted nothing else except to be with her. I would make a plate of spaghetti or a salad and pour myself a glass of red wine, relieved just to be in her company. Together we would listen to some music or watch some television. She was my only support in my dealings with the transcendental world. On days when there were no incoming messages, I would switch on her copier mode and feed her what I had written, and it would be reproduced automatically. Expressions such as 'the concept of transcendence in Romantic poetry' or 'Kant's views on the categorical imperative' would materialize on that special paper bearing her unique scent, and to me it was as though she were voicing her concurrence, perhaps even her compliments, thereby giving my confidence an enormous boost.

Precisely because of all this, our first tiff came as that much more of a blow. Right in the middle of a transmission she abruptly clammed up, as if in silent protest against the synopsis of my paper. Several pages went swishing through the machine all stuck together — did she find my style too verbose? Quickly I picked up my manuscript from the floor and reread it from a new perspective. Yes, perhaps points two and three could be combined, and the middle section on page two could be deleted. Maybe some of the issues were a little too abstract? And the conclusion, yes, it was rather abstruse, especially for the younger generation (I had to keep in mind that my fax machine was the product of a new generation and no doubt shared many of the values and viewpoints of her peers). Or was my conclusion too definite, too dogmatic, or perhaps too distant? So I sat down and revised the whole thing, cutting it down from four pages to three. When I tried sending it again, the first page went through smoothly, but the second one stopped halfway through the machine. I waited for a long time but finally had to redial and

feed it through again. In the same way, the third page also stopped in the middle of the transmission, and once more I had to resend the whole page. After it was all over I got the usual message: 'Transmission OK', but I couldn't be absolutely sure that the pages actually arrived where they were supposed to go. Was my machine making some sort of protest by her silence, by going on strike today? I grew nervous and uneasy, and fell to speculating about all sorts of possible reasons for the situation.

After that, things went on pretty much as before, as though nothing unusual had happened — until one day, two or three weeks later, when I tried to send a letter and a bibliography to my usual distant destination. Halfway through the transmission, in the middle of the second page, the machine stopped again. When I pulled out the pages and put them back into the feeder for resending, the paper in the roller began to turn instead: the machine was receiving a transmission from somewhere, abruptly cutting off my heartfelt report. As the paper emerged from the other end and slowly flattened out, I began to see a multitude of messages: people leaving Hong Kong to emigrate, selling their furniture at bargain prices ... used cars for sale ... are you in the market for a reliable maid working by the hour ... *udon* noodles ... freshly husked new rice ... a surcharge on taxi fares. They were like installments of a serial, and the story they were telling was not mine. After reading them over carefully, I was convinced they were not some kind of response sent by my far-off correspondents. Most likely my telephone number had found its way onto a master list somewhere, and I was now being sent the gospel according to some advertising agency or communications company.

A practical joke? Maybe. Then again, maybe not. When these messages began coming through a second time, I thought to myself: could there be some special significance, some larger meaning to my being singled out like this? So I studied these faxes even more closely, examining at length each and every sign, symbol, signifier. There didn't seem to be any connection whatsoever between these messages and the texts that I had sent out previously, but on the other hand, maybe there was. Yet what exactly was

the nature of that connection? I read and reread the advertisements as they poured out, one after another, in a seemingly endless stream. As for transmitting my own thoughts — well, by then I couldn't get a word in edgeways.

The whirring and humming finally stopped and the communications from the outside world came to an end, for the time being at least. I picked up the pages I had set aside earlier and was about to feed them into the fax machine when, for some unknown reason, I began to feel a little apprehensive — I couldn't send them on their way without looking them over once more. But having just read all that other stuff, I couldn't help feeling an urge to revise the discussion of my proposed paper that I had in front of me. I couldn't help thinking that it was not concise enough, that it carried too much intellectual baggage and was too idealistic, that as a result it sounded unfocused, a little vague. So I revised it yet again.

But when I faxed my letter to the Abbé in Provence, I inadvertently included an advertising circular for plumbing services. Not only that — when I sent a message to the number on the plumbing ad, asking them not to fax me all that junk mail every day, I included, again inadvertently, the letter I had sent earlier to the French cleric. We all work under excessive pressure and end up leaving everything to the last minute. Well, it wasn't until after I had hastily transmitted both of my communiqués that I realized what a blunder I had made, but by then it was too late. The reactions on both ends were just about diametrically opposed. The lofty scholar-critics expressed their concern and misgiving over what they saw as my inclination to 'superficiality' and 'frivolity', because in their view I had introduced mundane and vulgar conceits into what ought to have been a transcendental reverie. The ad agency's reply was predictably terse and impersonal, but even so I could sense the writer's annoyance at having been accosted with meditations on another world, the inordinate gravity of which seemed to embarrass him or her immensely. The respondent didn't quite know what to say, since there were no words in the world of advertising to express such things. But the

frosty tone clearly insinuated that I was a religious fanatic completely out of touch with reality.

The paper was much more difficult to write than I had imagined, more so than was usually the case with conference papers: I was much too entangled in the affairs of this world, and it was next to impossible for me to find an unoccupied corner of my mind in which to regroup and reorganize my otherworldly ruminations. The infighting at the office, my mother's rheumatism, the budget for the next fiscal year that I had to prepare posthaste — I was under so much pressure I could hardly breathe. With the deadline for the submission of papers looming just ahead, one after another the clergymen and the professors sent me anxious faxes asking why I hadn't been heard from in so long. Racking my brains, I laboriously composed an abject, mealy-mouthed reply explaining my situation. When I punched in the number for the transcontinental call, however, the machine emitted a loud beep but never got through to the other end. It was as if I had sent a series of signals to a planet in a distant galaxy, only to find that, in traversing the intervening vortices of light and shadow and colour and sound, my message had somehow gone astray and eventually disappeared without a trace.

I stayed up several nights in a row; even so, I barely managed to finish my first draft the day after the deadline. There were still a few footnotes that had to be checked and several points in the body of the paper that needed further elucidation, but I was already exhausted. Dragging my bone-weary body to the fax machine, I glanced up at the clock on the wall and realized that it was half past four in the morning.

Slowly and tenderly I inserted my manuscript — still warm to the touch, perhaps from the heat of my exertions — into the machine, taking care not to cause her any pain or discomfort. I caressed her dainty, delicate buttons as I gently moved the sheets of paper in and out of the feeder. Afterwards, I leant over her, waiting quietly, hoping fervently that nothing would go wrong this time. I prayed that my message would get through to them, and theirs to me. I longed for the moment when the short, shrill notes of her calling mode would modulate into the rapturous and blissful cadences of contact, coupling,

communication. In my quest to consummate the connection, I shuffled the pages, shifted them around, tried this, that, and the other position. But alas, it was to be no more than a series of futile knocks, one unanswered call after another, like someone crying out in the wilderness or searching in vain for home in the infinite void of outer space. When all was said and done, some sensitive yet crucial link, some delicate and subtle liaison was never established, and the pearly gates never opened for me.

No matter; we would try again. In my mind's eye I could see those exalted clerics and academics basking in the beautiful Provençal countryside, taking in a glorious sunset or lifting their voices in songs of praise, unencumbered by the toils and troubles that bedevil common people like us. With the echoes from their hosannas reverberating in my ears, I sank into an exhausted sleep. The heady bouquet of a good Bordeaux, the dazzling palette of the Impressionists — these things permeated my dreams as I drifted in and out, in and out of a fitful slumber.

My paper on literature and transcendence never did get faxed. Instead, on my machine, eventually a series of red lights began to flash, followed by a green light, then another red light. Worse, she started making all kinds of strange clucking noises. Finally she spewed out a puff of white smoke. Heavens, she'd come down with something!

I was completely distraught. The deadline was well past, but I still hoped to make it somehow. I really wanted to connect with that sublime transcendental world I so fervently believed in, to communicate my ideals and aspirations to others. At the same time, I felt very strongly that the most important task at hand was to take care of this earthly, earthbound fax machine. In her hour of need, there could be no doubt that my duty was to help her through her crisis and see that she recovered completely.

So I tried everything: I gave her massages and shiatsu treatments, fed her all kinds of mild paper purgatives, took her pulse and checked her heartbeat. To help her clean out her gastrointestinal system, I scooped up whatever sheets of paper were at hand and gave them to her for a diagnostic run-through. That was how a dissertation about transcendence came to be

interleaved with directives on nutritional therapy and plumbing repair. When I took her pulse again, pressing gently against her acupoints, this hodgepodge of a composition went sailing through the machine. I had no idea where those incongruous pages would end up nor what the reactions of those who received them might be. Anyway, such things were not my concern. Caught as I was between transcendence and the fax machine, all I could do was to take care of the most urgent matters to the best of my ability, given the circumstances, and hope that somehow through all this I would be able to find a way out.

# Contributors' Biographical Notes

**John Minford** studied Chinese at Oxford and the Australian National University and has taught in China, Hong Kong and New Zealand. He edited (with Geremie Barmé) *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (1988) and (with Joseph S. M. Lau) *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations* (2000). He has translated numerous works from the Chinese, including the last two volumes of Cao Xueqin's eighteenth-century novel *The Story of the Stone* and Sunzi's *The Art of War*, both for Penguin Classics. He has also translated *The Deer and the Cauldron* (2000-2003), a three-volume Martial Arts novel by the contemporary Hong Kong writer Louis Cha. He is currently Professor of Chinese at the Australian National University.

**Brian Holton** is currently teaching translation at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He has published several volumes of translations of Yang Lian's poetry, including *Concentric Circles* (2005), *Notes of a Blissful Ghost* (Hong Kong, 2002), *Where the Sea Stands Still: New Poems* (Newcastle, 1999) and *Non-Person Singular: Collected Shorter Poems of*

*Yang Lian* (London, 1994), as well as translations of Chinese literature into Scots, including *The Nine Sangs (Chuci Jiu Ge)*, several chapters of *Men o the Mossflow (Shuihu zhuan)*, and a great deal of pre-modern Chinese poetry.

**Agnes Hung-chong Chan** obtained her first degree in Translation and Chinese from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 1994 and her master degree in English Studies from the University of Hong Kong in 1997. She edited the first volume of 含英咀華, *A Chinese Companion to Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations* (2001). She translated (with Brian Holton) Yang Lian's *Concentric Circles* (2005). She now works at the Centre for Translation Studies of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

**Chan Wing Sze** was a student of translation at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She is now a teacher of English at a secondary school.

**Caroline Mason** taught Chinese language and literature at the University of Durham, UK, for many years and now works as a freelance translator. She also teaches translation at the University of Newcastle.

**Robert Neather** studied Chinese at the University of Cambridge, gaining a PhD in Chinese literature there in 1995. He also holds a postgraduate diploma in translation and interpreting from the University of Bath, where he later returned to teach. He is currently an Assistant Professor at City University of Hong Kong, and teaches various courses in the Chinese translation programme. His areas of interest include literary translation and the use of translation in museum display.

**Shirley Poon** studied Translation and Chinese in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and obtained a scholarship to study English and Linguistics at the University of Durham. She received her MA in Translation and Interpretation in 2004, and is now pursuing another MA in Applied

Linguistics. 'Romance of the Rib' is the second piece she co-translated and published with Dr. Robert Neather.

**Shuang Shen**, an Assistant Professor in the English Department of Rutgers University, is the author of a number of articles in both English and Chinese on Chinese diasporic literature, Hong Kong literature and film, and Asian American literature. She was a co-editor with Leung Ping-kwan of a special issue of 'Literary Review' focused on Hong Kong literature. Currently she is working on a book project on English-language magazines and cosmopolitanism in the semi-colonial city Shanghai.

**Jeanne Tai** was born in Hong Kong but now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she occasionally dabbles in translations.

**Tong Man, Jasmine** received her BA (Chinese, Translation and Interpretation) and PhD (Translation) from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She taught in the Language Centre of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology from 2001 to 2003. Currently she is a Teaching Fellow of the Department of Translation at Lingnan University in Hong Kong.