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Place and Identity: Selected Stories of Hong Kong since the 1960s

Hong Kong has been the gate to China for more than a hundred years.¹ For a long time, the city has been a contact zone where Chinese and Western cultures meet.² When China ceded Hong Kong to Great Britain in 1842 as a consequence of China's defeat in the Opium War, Hong Kong took on a new identity as a British colony. Since then, Hong Kong's identity has been under constant scrutiny, especially since the late 1970s when the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) decided to take Hong Kong back from British rule. In 1984 the British-Chinese negotiations started and in 1997 the transfer of sovereignty took place and Hong Kong became a special region of the PRC, administered under the "One Country Two Systems" mode since then.

The unique experience of Hong Kong during the past decades has made it not just a place of interest for tourists but also for writers and scholars within and outside of this special region. In 1995, for instance, the editors of the magazine *Fortune* used "The Death of Hong Kong" as the headline of the magazine to show their disbelief in a continued autonomous and vibrant existence of the city. In 2007, however, the editors withdrew their earlier prediction with the new headline: "Oops! Hong Kong is hardly dead." These general views and careless assertions were noticed in Hong Kong.³ In a book on Hong Kong published in 1997, the

1 See the exhibition in the Hong Kong Museum of History (Xianggang Lishi Bowuguan 香港歷史博物館), and: Martin, Helmut: *Hongkong. Strategien des Übergangs*, Frankfurt a.M., 1997.

2 The term 'contact zone' was coined by Pratt. See: Pratt, Mary Louise: *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Amsterdam 2007 (2nd edition).

3 Yu, Fei 余非 and Chan, Kit-Yee (Chen, Jieyi) 陳潔儀, eds.: *Xianggang Wenxue Zheyang Du* 香港文學這樣讀 (*The way to read Hong Kong literature*), Hong Kong 2015, p. 219.

scholar of Chinese Studies Helmut Martin quoted a journalist from Hong Kong who predicted the "fate" of Hong Kong at a time when the hand-over was just round the corner, saying that China would pervade Hong Kong and shunt Hong Kong's resistance. According to the journalist, Hong Kong did not have a real history of its own.⁴

In a way the journalist was right because a look at the literary scene of Hong Kong shows that its literature has hardly been adequately appreciated so far. For decades, literary works from Hong Kong have been grouped loosely with those from Taiwan under the term "gangtai wenxue" 港台文學 (Hong Kong-Taiwan Literature). However, the regional cultures of Taiwan and Hong Kong have been quite different, and their regional literatures have also developed at different paces and taken different routes. As the contemporary Hong Kong author-scholar Leung Ping-Kwan (Liang Bingjun) 梁秉鈞 (1949-2013) observed, writers and scholars from mainland China often had only partial knowledge about Hong Kong, but they would gladly reveal the 'dark side of capitalism in Hong Kong' to show the superiority of the socialist system of the PRC.⁵ For instance, writers of mainland China, such as Ma Jian 馬健 (born in 1953), would associate Hong Kong with a "backward colonial society" and contemptuously talk about Hong Kong as a "cultural desert".⁵ However, other literary scholars in mainland China, such as Wang Yanfang 王艷芳, criticize such a judgment of Hong Kong as a "cultural desert," regarding such a view as a "prejudice".⁶ Another scholar, Zhao Xifang 趙稀方 too considers Hong Kong's contribution to metropolitan culture as crucial. This is due to the fact that in mainland China literary descriptions of rural China from 1949 onwards have often been preferred to depictions of life in the cities. Hence, in Zhao's view, the depiction of metropolitan

4 Martin, Helmut: *Hongkong. Strategien des Übergangs*, Frankfurt a.M. 1997, pp. 8-9.

5 Leung, Ping-Kwan 梁秉鈞: "Xianggang gushi – weishenme zheme nanshuo" 香港故事 -- 为什么这么难说 (Hong Kong's stories – why are they so hard to tell?) in: Leung, Ping-Kwan 梁秉鈞: *Xianggang Wenhua Shi Lun* 香港文化十论 (10 essays on the culture of Hong Kong), Beijing 2012, pp. 2-31, 3 and 10.

6 See: Wang, Yanfang 王艷芳: *Yidu Shikong Xia de Shenfen Shuxie* 异度时空下的身份书写 (*Writing about identity in changing times and spaces*), Beijing 2015, p. 5.

life in Hong Kong literature fills a gap in contemporary literature.⁷

The metropolis of Hong Kong is thus often used as the background of works of popular literature.⁸ Leung Ping-Kwan once ironically characterized the role of Hong Kong in such works:

Over the years, there has been a steady stream of people from the outside seeking to tell the story of Hong Kong. These stories invariably have an action-packed plot spiced up with sex and adventure, with invariably a touch of the exotic ... Hong Kong is hit by a typhoon, landslides, a slump in the stock-market, a run on the banks – all in the space of a week in summer.⁹

For a long time Hong Kongers accepted the stories others had written about their city, says Leung. Often, they even internalized the stories of others. The situation changed in the 1970s when one saw a rising interest in the city among writers and scholars in Hong Kong. As the author-scholar Xiao Si 小思 (born in 1939), pseudonym for Lo Wai-Luen (Lu Weiluan) 盧瑋鑾, related in an interview in 2015, she started to conduct research on Hong Kong literature after her brief research stay in Japan in 1973 when she found herself incapable of answering questions raised by her Japanese colleagues regarding the literature of Hong Kong. After her trip, Xiao Si launched her study *Xianggang wenxue sanbu* 香港文學散步 (*A leisurely walk through the literature of Hong Kong*) in which she offers her readers a guided appreciation of Hong Kong literature, highlighting places that Hong Kong writers have described in their works and could still be visited by readers today.¹⁰ Her book marks a single author's effort in constructing a literary map for Hong Kong writings, as well as in recording the presence of Hong Kong literature in the history of the city.

7 Zhao, Xifang 赵稀方: *Xiaoshuo Xianggang* 小说香港 (*Fictional Hong Kong*), Shanghai 2003.

8 See Mason, Richard: *The World of Suzie Wong*, London 1957; Clavell, James: *Noble House Hong Kong*, New York 1981.

9 Leung, Ping-Kwan: "The Story of Hong Kong", in: Cheung, Martha ed.: *Hong Kong Collage: Contemporary Stories and Writing*, Hong Kong 1998, pp. 3-13, 4.

10 Xiao Si 小思 ed.: *Xianggang Wenxue Sanbu* 香港文學散步 (*A leisurely walk through the literature of Hong Kong*), Hong Kong 1991. See: <http://hkliteraryscenes.wikidot.com/about>, as accessed on April 2, 2017.

The interest in the city in relation to one's identity formation continued to draw the attention of many authors as Hong Kong existed under British Crown rule since 1841, and has long been a place for immigrants and refugees from mainland China and Southeast Asia since the 1950s. In this study, identity can be understood as a "specific form of self-understanding, self-interpretation,"¹¹ which is not fixed, but procedural, always in flux and marked by the traces of history.¹² Literary writings are identity-related processes, says Stefan Neuhaus.¹³ The Hong Kong author Dung Kai-Cheung 董啟章 has also observed that "fiction has always been a kind of identity building".¹⁴

A close look at selected stories published in Hong Kong since the late 1960s allows readers to have a better understanding of such processes of identity building, of the intricate relations between a place and self, between history and memory, between the location of the self with a sense of rootedness and the displacement of the self with a sense of alienation, as well as between the social, political and cultural circumstances and their impact on personal experience and self-positioning. The scholar of philology and philosophy Wolfgang Klein discussed the interrelations between literature and socio-political experience. Still one should not attribute a one-dimensional, reflective representation of reality to literature. As Klein stated in "Literature and Sociopolitical Experience", literature preserves distance from society, and cannot be wholly based on its logic. It tries enlargement, plays with the possible and creates its own connections. Literature today is, according to Klein, again re-connected to the experience of the individual.¹⁵ Owing to their aesthetic and metapho-

11 Reckwitz, Andreas: *Das hybride Subjekt*, Weilerswist-Metternich 2006, p. 45.

12 Hall, Stuart: "Alte und neue Identitäten", in: Hall, Stuart: *Rassismus und kulturelle Identität. Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 2, Hamburg 1994, pp. 66-77, 72.

13 Neuhaus, Stefan: "Literatur und Identität. Zur Relevanz der Literaturwissenschaft", in: Magerski, Christine et. al. eds.: *Literaturwissenschaft im Wandel*, Wiesbaden 2009, pp. 81-95, 90.

14 Dung, Kai-Cheung: *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, Dung, Kai-Cheung, Hansson, Anders and McDougall, Bonnie trans., New York 2012, p. xiv.

15 Klein, Wolfgang: "Literatur und soziale Erfahrung", in: Goebel, Eckart et. al. eds.: *Literaturforschung heute*, Berlin 1999, pp. 147-152, 148 and 151. For an overview of the literature of Hong Kong before the 1960s, see Wong, Kai-Chee (Huang, Jichi), Lo Wai-Luen (Lu, Weiluan) and Cheng, Shu-Sum (Zheng, Shusen) 黃繼持、盧瑋鑾、鄭樹森 eds.: *Zhuiji Xianggang Wenxue 追跡香港文學 (In Search of Hong Kong Literature)*, Hong Kong 1998, pp. 1-9.

rical nature, literary texts are able to produce or influence social discourses in a specific way, and to suspend them playfully or, in the sense of counterclaims, to transcend them.¹⁶ Literary texts can also be read aesthetically and as individual statements which deny the existence of orders. In a similar note, the Hong Kong author Lawrence Pun (Pan Guoling) 潘國靈 has also warned readers that literary critique, which is based solely on a societal contextualization of a work, is at risk of "filling theories into provided bottles" and may not meet the complexity of literary works.¹⁷

Early Stories about the Emerging Metropolis

The 1960s and 1970s saw works of realism mature in Hong Kong. It was a period of politicization – influenced by socio-political events in the PRC such as the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the influx of migrants and refugees into the British colony. Hong Kong writers in those days often criticized a rigidification of the system of their metropolis and a thematized alienation and loss of value.¹⁸ For instance, Liu Yi-Chang 劉以鬯 (born in 1918), the pen name of Liu Tongyi 劉同驛, questions the impact of the city's rapid pace of commercialization on culture and the individual in his famous story "Jiutu" 酒徒 (The Alcoholic). Published in 1963, the short story narrates the frustrations of a writer who works as a newspaper columnist. It details the cause of the narrator's dejection and the difficulties he faces as a writer in an increasingly commercialized and dehumanized city. Liu paints Hong Kong as a "city of desires" (yuwang de dushi 欲望的都市) where people such as the narrator in the story feel lost amidst the torrents of drastic social and economic changes. The columnist-narrator's attempt to numb his senses by drinking is illustrative of the frustration and depression experienced by the writer, who noticed that the majority of the readers preferred popular literature such as mar-

16 Hallet, Wolfgang: "Intertextualität als methodisches Konzept einer kulturwissenschaftlichen Literaturwissenschaft", in: Gymnich, Marion et. al. eds.: *Kulturelles Wissen und Intertextualität*, Trier 2006, pp. 53-70, 60.

17 Pun, Lawrence (Pan Guoling) 潘國靈: "Interview", in: Zihua 字花 (Fleurs des lettres), No. 62, July/August 2016, pp. 108-115, 114.

18 Chan, Kit-Yee (Chen, Jieyi) 陳潔儀: Xianggang Xiaoshuo Yu Geren Jiyi 香港小說與個人記憶 (Hong Kong fiction and individual memory), Hong Kong 2010, pp. 18-20.

tial arts novels and romances. In the story, the narrator has to write martial arts novels for newspapers in order to make a living.¹⁹ In terse language, Liu Yi-Chang expresses the sense of anxiety and estrangement felt by a Hong Kong writer at a time when the city was undergoing transition from a quiet and peaceful British colony to becoming a highly commercialized metropolis.

In a text published in the 1970s, Ye Si 也斯 (1949-2013), the pen name of Leung Ping-Kwan 梁秉鈞, also commented on writers' responses to their place or city and pointed out an interesting phenomenon in Hong Kong's literary scene at the time. He noted that Baudelaire had written about Paris, Kafka about Prague, T.S. Eliot about London, and yet Hong Kong writers had not written much about their city.²⁰ He considered the description of his city as a necessary step towards the construction of identity and a look at Leung's own writings shows how influences from the West have been assimilated.²¹

It should be noted here that in those days many Hong Kong writers had their works published in the numerous literary journals and literary magazines in Hong Kong at the time. However, essays and short stories often appeared as "tofu bites," so to say, in literary supplements of newspapers or in the feuilleton of non-literary journals.²² Even today, Hong Kong literature is still characterized by the "small literary form," which is described by Clare Hanson, professor of English, as a

"vehicle for various kinds of knowledge ... knowledge which may be at odds with the 'story' of dominant culture. The formal properties of the short story – disjunction, inconclusiveness, obliquity – are, however, connected with the function of the short story form, which is often a powerful vehicle in expressing something

19 Liu, Yi-Chang 劉以鬯: *Jiutu 酒徒* (The Alcoholic), Hong Kong 1963.

20 Leung, Ping-Kwan: *Wilde Gedanken bei bewölktem Himmel. Notizen aus Hongkong*, Gaenssbauer, Monika and Tang, Wei trans., Bochum-Freiburg 2015, p. 10.

21 Cai, Yihuai 蔡益懷: *Bentu Neiwai – Wenxue Wenhua Pinglunji 本土內外 - 文學文化評論集* (Inside and outside of the local – a collection of texts with a background of cultural critique and literary critique), Hong Kong 2015, p. 7.

22 Leung, Ping-Kwan 梁秉鈞: "Xianggang dushi wenhua yu wenhua pinglun" 香港都市文化与文化评论 (Hong Kong's metropolitan culture and cultural critique), in: Leung, Ping-Kwan 梁秉鈞: *Xianggang de Liuxing Wenhua 香港的流行文化* (Hong Kong's popular culture), Taipei 1993, pp. 5-28, 18.

suppressed or repressed in mainstream literature.”²³

As characterized by Leung Ping-Kwan – probably in reference to the scholar of post-colonial studies Homi Bhabha – Hong Kong literature can be regarded as writing in the interstice. Hong Kong authors were then skeptical about the great and national narratives. In Leung’s view, Hong Kong writers have developed a style of the unagitated, the plain and the softened.²⁴ His own writings are clearly committed to the de-exoticization of Hong Kong.²⁵

Questions about place and identity began to gain an increasingly important place in literary works in the 1970s²⁶ when authors such as Xi Xi 西西 (born in 1938), pen name Zhang Yan 張彥, started to write about Hong Kong and its people. Her novel *Wo cheng* 我城 (My City) written in 1974 and published in 1979, for instance, characterizes the inhabitants of the metropolis as people with a pioneering spirit and a willingness to do hard work. She often takes a critical, and at times ironical, tone in her examination of the modernization of the city and reflects on the achievements of the city and on the state and status of the metropolis in an allegorical form.²⁷ Well-known for her unusual narrative perspectives, Xi Xi stands in a row of authors who subdue logic and firm, authoritarian views. In her short story “Chuchuang” 櫥窗 (“Shop window”) published in 1981, for example, she delineates a family of shop window

23 Hanson, Clare: *Re-reading the Short Story*, Michigan 1989, p. 6.

24 Leung, Ping-Kwan 梁秉鈞: “Xianggang gushi – weishenme zheme nanshuo” 香港故事 -- 为什么这么难说 (“Hong Kong’s stories – why are they so hard to tell?”) in: Leung, Ping-Kwan 梁秉鈞: *Xianggang Wenhua Shi Lun* 香港文化十论 (10 essays on the culture of Hong Kong), Beijing 2012, pp. 2-31.

25 Abbas, Ackbar: *Hongkong: Kultur und die Politik des Verschwindens*, Wien 2013, p. 232.

26 Chan, Kit-Yee 陳潔儀: *Xianggang Xiaoshuo Yu Geren Jiyi* 香港小說與個人記憶 (Hong Kong fiction and individual memory), Hong Kong 2010, pp. 18-20; Martin, Helmut: *Hongkong. Strategien des Übergangs*, Frankfurt a.M. 1997, p. 67; Leung, Ping-Kwan 梁秉鈞: “Cong wu ben xiaoshuo xuan kan 50 niandai yilai de Xianggang wenxue” 从五本小说选看50年代以来的香港文学 (“Reviewing Hong Kong literature since the 1950s based on five collections of fiction”), in: Leung, Ping-Kwan 梁秉鈞: *Xianggang Wenhua Shi Lun* 香港文化十论 (10 essays on the culture of Hong Kong), Beijing 2012, pp. 65-86.

27 Chan, Kit-Yee 陳潔儀: *Xianggang Xiaoshuo Yu Geren Jiyi* 香港小說與個人記憶 (Fictional texts in Hong Kong and individual memory), Hong Kong 2010, p. 20.

mannequins who find themselves being shuffled around.²⁸ Read as an allegorical tale, the story reveals the isolation, helplessness, and sense of alienation experienced by the people in the metropolis and the author's conscious reflection on the realities in the seeming shoppers' paradise where issues such as refugees, educational reforms, water shortages and students' examination pressure perpetually disturb the lives of the Hong Kongers. The mannequins are hauled back and forth in the narrative – possibly a dramatization of the helpless and passive situation experienced by the Hong Kong people during the initial discussions on the change of sovereignty. Xi Xi shows the frustrations of the Hong Kongers who were excluded from the Chinese-British negotiation about the status and future of Hong Kong. This short story distinguishes itself as one of the early stories that deal with the identity crisis and the sense of helplessness experienced by the people of Hong Kong.

This identity issue was further elaborated upon in her surrealistic treatment of Hong Kong as a floating city in "Fucheng zhi yi" 浮城誌異. Written in 1986 and published in English as "Marvels of a Floating City" in 1997, Xi Xi highlights the absurd and perilous situation of Hong Kong as a city that has been kept dangling in the air. Inspired by an exhibition of the Belgian artist René Magritte's surrealist paintings in Hong Kong with exhibition posters being put up in all eye-catching places in the city, Xi Xi makes references to thirteen of Magritte's paintings in the story to concretize Hong Kong's crisis with regard to discussions on the handover issue in the mid-1980s. Xi Xi describes Hong Kong as a city of miracles, as a floating city with no roots:

"Many, many years ago, on a fine, clear day, the floating city appeared in the air in full public gaze, hanging like a hydrogen balloon. Above it were the fluctuating layers of clouds, below it the turbulent sea. The floating city hung there, neither sinking nor rising ... Most people believed that the floating city would continue hanging steadily in the air, neither rising nor sinking, forever."²⁹

She critiques the identity problem and questions the assumption of the world about Hong Kong. Xi Xi challenges the general view of Hong

28 Xi Xi 西西: "Chuchuang" 櫥窗 ("Shop window"), in: Xi Xi 西西: Muyu 母魚 (The female fish), Taipei 2008, pp. 161-188.

29 Xi Xi 西西: "Marvels of A Floating City", in: Xi, Xi: Marvels of A Floating City and Other Stories, Hung, Eva ed., Hong Kong 1997, pp. 1-27, 3.

Kong that only began to exist with the takeover of the British, as if Hong Kong had really been a 'bland rock without a history', as Lord Palmerston stated when he mentioned the new Crown colony to the English Queen. That same view of Hong Kong as a barren rock is still virulent as reflected in a review in the *Los Angeles Review* of 2013. The New York-based writer and editor Sophie Kalkreuth speaks of "this small island territory, which is turned over the course of a century, from a near uninhabited crag of rock into a great metropolis."³⁰ Xi Xi questions that perception in her story by studying the behavior and attitude of the dwellers of this huge floating rock. She is among the early Hong Kong writers who critically examined Hong Kong people's interest in identity building and wondered whether or not they would have any say or control over their fate or future: "so a floating city whose existence depends on a miracle is not a permanent city. In that case, is its destiny really in its own hands?"³¹

In "Marvels of A Floating City" Xi Xi also takes a critical look at foreigners and their dubious Hong Kong- or China-watching when she writes – in a kind of image meditation on a painting by René Magritte:

"This fantastic city has drawn numerous travellers to explore and experience it ... many of them are actually quite concerned about it. And so they stand outside and look into the city through an open window ... they cannot afford any practical assistance. But to observe is a kind of participation, too, for to observe is to monitor."³²

It is indeed true as more writers and on-lookers started to engage themselves in writing about Hong Kong with emphasis on Hong Kong's attempt to find its own place, or define its own position, in relation to China and the world. Such efforts are still ongoing; the process could be painful at times, but necessary and inevitable to the identity formation of the metropolis.

It is worth mentioning at this juncture that the British government had for many decades taken a "non-interference" approach to literary pro-

30 Kalkreuth, Sophie: "What is Hong Kong? On the Archeology of an Imaginary City", see: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/what-is-hong-kong-on-the-archaeology-of-an-imaginary-city>, as accessed on August 10, 2016.

31 Xi Xi 西西: "Marvels of A Floating City", in: Xi, Xi: *Marvels of A Floating City and Other Stories*, Hung, Eva ed., Hong Kong 1997, pp. 1-27, 11.

32 Ibid., p. 27.

ductions and publications in the city, and such a “laissez-faire” approach resulted in Hong Kong being “the only Chinese territory in which a wide range of cultural activities were tolerated and writers enjoyed a remarkable artistic freedom.”³³ As literary activities continued to flourish in the 1980s, the term “Xianggang wenxue” 香港文學 (Hong Kong literature) evolved and became a widely known and accepted independent category and concept.

The 1980s also marked a change in many Hong Kong authors' treatment of the identity issue in literature. The general concern has shifted from personal reflections on and responses to social, economic and political issues to explorations of the intricate relations between Hong Kong and mainland China. As the literary scholar Kwok-Kan Tam observed, “Hong Kong had become a postcolonial entity in the political and economic tug-of-war between Britain and China.”³⁴ Tam further noted: “Since the 1980s, there is a growing tendency for writers ... in Hong Kong to call themselves ‘Hong Kong writers’. This is a tendency that shows a growing consciousness of Hong Kong identity.”³⁵

The author Yan Chun'gou 顏純鈞 (born in 1948) has dealt with this identity issue in a very interesting way in a short story that revolves around a qualifying game for the 1986 World Cup when China's team competed against the Hong Kong team.³⁶ After the Hong Kong team

33 Chen, Ken: “The PEN Ten with Dorothy Tse”, see: <https://www.bing.com/search?q=The+PEN+Ten+with+Dorothy+Tse&form=PRDED&httpsmsn=1&refig=267c99c3add64e5a8574bb34e3ce50a3&pq=the+pen+ten+with+dorothy+tse&sc=0-o&sp=-1&q=n&sk=>, as accessed on August 6, 2016.

34 Tam, Kwok-Kan: “Voices of missing identity: A study of contemporary Hong Kong literary writings”, in: Shi-xu et.al. eds.: *Read the Cultural Other. Forms of Otherness in the Discourses of Hong Kong's Decolonization*, Berlin-New York 2005, pp. 165-176, 165.

35 Ibid., p. 167.

36 See: Yu, Fei 余非 and Chan, Kit-Yee 陳潔儀 eds.: *Xianggang Wenxue Zheyang Du* 香港文學這樣讀 (The way to read Hong Kong literature), Hong Kong 2015, pp. 189-190. The title of the story by Yan Chun'gou 顏純鈞 is: “Guanyu yi chang yu wanfan tongshi jinxing de dianshi zhibo zuqiu bisai, yiji zhe bisai yinqi de yi chang bu hen kexiao de zhengchao, yiji zhe zhengchao de kexiao jieju” 關於一場與晚飯同時進行的電視直播足球比賽，以及這比賽引起的一場不很可笑的爭吵，以及這爭吵的可笑結局 (“About a live soccer match that took place during dinner time, and the not-so-funny quarrel that arose from the match, and the funny outcome of that quarrel”). It was published in: Liu, Yi-Chang 劉以鬯 ed.: *Xianggang*

won 2-1, riots broke out in Beijing. Using the World Cup as a background, Yan narrates the conflict between a father and son over the identity issue. Being an immigrant from mainland China decades ago, the father exhibits a national feeling for his homeland China and supports both teams for he always regards Hong Kong as part of China, whereas his Hong Kong-born son sides with the Hong Kong team. A quarrel between the father and son arises when the father demands that his son should remain impartial and support both teams as both are played by Chinese. The son, however, insists that he only identifies with the Hong Kong team. Yan shows in a subtle way how the father and son position themselves in the identity issue and one notices how such a tension or conflict has eventually taken on a social dimension during the "umbrella movement or protests" as the younger generation are inclined to identify themselves more with Hong Kong alone, seeing mainland China as a separate entity quite remote from their immediate existence in Hong Kong.

The consciousness of and trouble with one's identity in relation to the place of Hong Kong is explored with a different emphasis in a story by Wong Bik-Wan 黃碧雲 (Huang Biyun, born in 1961). Written in 1986, Wong's "Shengshi lian" 盛世戀 (Love in blooming times)³⁷ is an exemplary story that delineates a young woman's sense of estrangement in a booming Hong Kong in the 1980s. Zhao Mei is portrayed as an immigrant, or 'xin yimin' 新移民, from mainland China, who came to Hong Kong with her divorced mother when she was a teenager years ago. The story traces her struggles to acclimatize herself to the Western city life in Hong Kong and her perpetual sense of isolation and alienation in the city. The narrative centres on her emotional entanglement with two men: Fang Guochu, a Western-trained sociology professor in his 30s and a young undergraduate student Zhou Zu'er. Both men woo the young woman and she is attracted to the two men for their very different qualities in the beginning. Presented as a loner who is self-reflecting throughout the story, Zhao Mei's efforts to adjust to life in Hong Kong and to understand her professor, and later her husband, are depicted in a detailed manner. At the same time, her "coolness" and "detachment" are

Duanpian Xiaoshuo Bai Nian Jinghua 香港短篇小說百年精華 (*The gems of a 100 years of Hong Kong short stories*), Hong Kong 2006, vol. 2, pp. 213-223.

37 Wong, Bik-Wan 黃碧雲: "Shengshi lian" 盛世戀 ("Love in blooming times"), in: *Qihou* 其後 (*Thereafter*), Hong Kong 1994, pp. 19-47.

repeatedly emphasized to highlight her spiritual aridity and emotional aloneness in the metropolis.

The story focuses on Zhao Mei's stressful life in Hong Kong, first as Fang Guochu's graduate student who struggles to catch up on her knowledge of sociology and later as Fang's teaching assistant who tries to complete all her assigned duties perfectly in order to impress her professor. Zhao Mei's infatuation for Fang is soon developed into an affair between the two. At first she considers her feelings for him to be natural and spontaneous, but those feelings come under scrutiny after she marries the professor, who proposed to her one day out of impulse. Although Zhao Mei loves Fang, she soon realizes that they are incompatible. Their marriage proves to be problematic because she does not feel like she belongs. Very often she takes a critical view of Fang's behavior, values and approach to life. At times, she even refuses any form of sexual intimacy with Fang because she comes to see him as a complacent middle-aged Hong Kong professor, who is content with a life of comfort with his respectable profession, handsome salary, a group of good friends and a young wife. His lack of aspirations and purpose in life – spending his days on various forms of entertainment such as playing “mahjong” with his friends – often makes Zhao Mei frown. In many ways, he is typical of many middle-class Hong Kongers who just want a stable life and remain apathetic to socio-political issues.

The story delineates how the couple increasingly grow apart and become alienated from each other regardless of their good will and “love” for each other. Zhao Mei tries to turn to her former date Zhou for reassurance and attention, only to be disappointed when she finds that Zhou has already got a lover. Written at the time when many Hong Kongers accused Great Britain of seeing only the economically lucrative Crown colony in the city and not investing enough in the political-democratic development of the metropolis, Zhao Mei's complaint about her husband's insensitivity to her needs and feelings seems to carry a subtle double meaning. At the same time, her sense of insecurity and estrangement is also characteristic of many new immigrants who have flocked to Hong Kong daily since the early 1980s as a result of an agreement between the government of Hong Kong and mainland China. It is apparent that such increased contact between people from mainland China and Hong Kong has created tension among the residents, causing frustrations from the immigrants and bewilderment to local residents such as Fang, who fail to understand the habits and attitudes of the new immigrants represented by Zhao Mei.

An interpretation of the narrative could point to the anxiety and distress experienced by Zhao Mei, who feels “homeless” and “rootless” in the metropolis. By moving into a small apartment, Zhao Mei hopes to live an independent life, freeing herself from her entangled life with Fang, together with his Westernized habits and nostalgic accounts of his youthful university days as a socialist-activist. For Zhao Mei, Fang’s political engagements in the past were trivial compared with her own first-hand experience of the Cultural Revolution in China as a child. Their divorce at the end not only shows their incompatibility in terms of values and outlooks on life, but it also points to their failure in bridging the social and cultural differences between people from two places at a time when the city was booming and contacts with mainland China became a fact of life. Her decision to divorce her husband and live an independent life also typifies many China-Hong Kong marriages at the time. Viewed in this light, the story can be read as a reflection of the intricate relations between Hong Kong, mainland China and Great Britain at a critical juncture in the contemporary history of Hong Kong.

During the same period in the mid-1980s, Hong Kong author Ng Hui-Bun 吳煦斌 (Wu Xubin, born in 1949), pen name Betty Ng, has also dealt with questions of identity crisis and a young man from Hong Kong’s sense of insecurity, as well as his sense of rootlessness, in an unusual way. Her short story “Yi ge yundao zai shuichi pangbian de Yindi’anren” 一個暈倒在水池旁邊的印第安人 (“A Red Indian who has fainted by the pond”), which was written in 1985,³⁸ is presented as the notes left behind by a Chinese/Hong Kong research assistant of a research institute of Oceanology in California. As the only Chinese whose physiological features somehow resemble those of a Red Indian, this narrator and research assistant from Hong Kong who is pursuing postgraduate studies in the institute, is assigned the task of taking detailed notes of the daily behavior of a Red Indian. As he watches the daily behavior of that ‘primitive man’ closely, this Hong Kong man gets interested in the life and thoughts of the Red Indian and starts wondering: “Has he lived alone in the woods? He is afraid of the world.”³⁹ In order to better understand the

38 Ng, Hui-Bun 吳煦斌 (Wu, Xubin): “Yi ge yundao zai shuichi pangbian de Yindi’anren” 一個暈倒在水池旁邊的印第安人 (“A Red Indian who has fainted by the pond”), in: Wu Xubin Xiaoshuoji 吳煦斌小說集 (Selected Stories by Ng Hui-Bun), Taipei 1987, pp. 123-138.

39 Ibid., p. 129.

Red Indian, the narrator develops a simple communication system by drawing things on cards like mountains, caves, trees, water, wind, joy, tears, and so forth. The two men manage to “communicate” with each other by placing these flash cards in different orders. Through such a means, the narrator comes to learn that the Red Indian’s father was killed when the latter was very young, and that his mother, sister and another relative also died eight years ago (which the Red Indian expresses by placing eight cards of fallen leaves in a row), and that he is all alone now.

Through their communication, the narrator comes to see a number of similarities between his own experiences and state of being in the United States and those of the Red Indian; that they are both lonely and isolated and that they are afraid of the world around them. While the Native American-Red Indian is afraid of the world around him because of the language barrier, and his long, isolated life away from civilization, the narrator realizes that he fears the world because he feels dislocated and alienated in the foreign country. He senses the strong walls around him keeping aliens like him away from other locals or Americans. His is a cultural barrier quite different from the barrier of civilization that distances the Red Indian from the place and its people. Another thing that the narrator sees in common with the Red Indian is the fact that both of them have left their place of origin because of a crisis. The narrator speculates that the Red Indian must have attempted to flee from the invasion of civilization but got lost and ended up outside the research institute by accident. In his own case, he is fully aware of his reason to leave Hong Kong for America because of his fear and uncertainty caused by the impending political changes, that is, the handover of sovereignty in Hong Kong.

The narrator’s informal notes also record the Red Indian’s inquiry about the narrator’s feelings. Placing a card representing happiness before the narrator one day, the Red Indian poses this question of happiness to the Hong Konger, prompting the latter to ponder over his self in relation to his home city Hong Kong and his alien status in America: “What am I doing here? This country and I have been indifferent to each other. What am I afraid of losing by not returning (to my city)?” Making reference to his own experience, the narrator feels close to the Red Indian, whom he considers his only friend in the States. As he jotted down in his notes, “We are both living on this piece of land by sheer accident. He is still looking for a safe habitat, whereas I feel insecure everywhere I go and yet I feel too weak to fly.” The final note of the narrator records the Red Indian’s sudden departure to save himself from the scrutiny and analysis

of endless groups of scientists who flock to the institute to study him. Urged by the narrator, the Red Indian runs and soon disappears from sight of the people chasing after him. The story ends with a postscript from the editor of the notes, informing the readers that the research assistant-narrator also disappeared the day after the Red Indian's departure and that no one knows where he went. From the author's emphasis on estrangement and bewilderment throughout the story, one sees an analogy between the Red Indian and the Hong Konger as both feel helpless in the process of being discussed and examined by different interested parties who have never taken their wish or views, nor their well-being into consideration. The Hong Kong people's anxiety arising from the imminent 1997 handover is made most explicit in the story through the narrator's reflection on his rootlessness and his sense of insecurity, loss and uncertainty in face of drastic socio-political changes in Hong Kong. His disappearance at the end of the story can thus be regarded as his "awakening" to action. The open-ended story allows the author to leave the subject of the two men's fates and futures to the free interpretation of the readers since no one had any clue at the time.

Adopting a different perspective, Peng Cao 蓬草 (pen-name of Fung Suk-Yin 馮淑賢) in her tale "Hong muma" 紅木馬, which was translated into English as "The Red Horse" in 1988, approaches the identity issue, the notion of estrangement and the idea of memory and history in an absurdist way. Told from the perspective of a child-spirit, who looks at his mother's visit to his grave and reflects on his view of the place, the author captures the fast disappearance of old values. The child-spirit explains why he decides to end his own life on his fourth birthday and to leave the world with his red wooden horse by deliberately falling from it. It turns out that the old worn-out wooden red horse is the same horse he used to ride on in his former life. Thus the old wooden horse represents those old values, dreams, or "treasures" that are fading away, discarded and disappearing fast from the metropolis. It shows in an indirect and metaphorical way the author's view on the situation of Hong Kong through the lens of the deceased four-year-old child: "Only I know where the red horse went, and as long as I don't mention the name of the place, the grown-ups will never be able to find him. Perhaps before long, people will forget the red horse's disappearance, and the child's accident. Even my mother may forget all of it. Perhaps she'll even forget 'that man'. But if grown-ups persist in their infatuation with things dead and gone or embrace some pointless hope for 'the future', then there is bound to be a

time of catastrophe like the city's destruction, which will simply and brutally bury for them all their dreams and desires. I need to be off on my red horse."⁴⁰

This sense of estrangement also underlines the narrative of "Fengxiu" 鳳誘 (Miss Feng's seduction) by Hong Kong author Lee Bik-wah 李碧華 (Li Bihua, born in 1959). Published in 1989, the story is a reminiscence of the good old days when love and life were simpler and people's relation to a place was stronger. By rewriting the well-known Ming legend about the romance between a village girl Li Feng and the Ming Emperor Zhengde,⁴¹ Lee reveals the rootlessness of some Hong Kong people who have nowhere to go. The story depicts how a young married medical doctor in Hong Kong travels back to the Ming Dynasty via a time machine that takes the form of a special mass transit train and meets the legendary Li Feng in her habitat. In his second visit to Li Feng's village, the doctor discovers that Li Feng has already been seduced by the Emperor and was contemplating suicide for she saw herself as a fallen woman. In order to save Li Feng from committing suicide and from her fate of dying young in the Ming palace, as recorded in the book of the legend, the middle-aged doctor decides to take the Ming villager girl to contemporary Hong Kong and keeps her as his mistress.

The story focuses on Li Feng's bewilderment and estrangement when she gets spiritually and physically displaced in Hong Kong. Being a "new immigrant" from China (and from the Ming Dynasty), Li Feng tries but in vain to find her place in the metropolis. She participates in a local beauty contest with the hope of securing a future for herself in the city. When she fails to become the beauty queen in the contest, she decides to return to her home village for she has no place and no root in Hong Kong. With great reluctance, the doctor lets her go for he too sees that Li Feng does not belong there, especially with her Ming values and traditional attitudes. The doctor also comes to see his own spiritual and emotional "displacement" in the city: "I do not fit Hong Kong or Hong Kong does not fit with me." His observation reveals his nostalgia for the traditional past and his sense of alienation in the booming metropolis where he has no life

40 Peng Cao: "The Red Horse", Wickeri, Janice trans., in: Hung, Eva ed.: *To Pierce the Material Screen: An Anthology of 20th-century Hong Kong Literature. Fiction*, Hong Kong 2008, pp. 110-116.

41 Lee, Bik-Wah 李碧華: "Fengxiu" 鳳誘 (Miss Feng's seduction), see: <http://www.bwsk.net/gt/1/libihua/000/005.htm>, as accessed on August 15, 2016.

but a work life. Like the sociology professor in Wong Bik-Wan's "Shengshi lian" 盛世戀 ("Love in blooming times"), the doctor in this tale feels entrapped in his existential condition with no way out. Like a prisoner, he is confined to his work in his clinic, tied to his affluent material life in a city of apathy, knowing all the while that his is the life of a hollow man, of a living dead in an increasingly dehumanized society characterized by material abundance, human indifference, daily boredom and moral phoniness. He envies Li Feng for she has a hometown she could return to for shelter and comfort, whereas he has no place that he could call home.

Stories of Hong Kong in the 1990s

The anxiety expressed by the child-spirit and the reference to the changing values in the city is treated in a different way by Wong Bik-Wan, who took up Xi Xi's topos of the floating city in her thriller "Shi cheng" 失城 (Losing the city).⁴² She depicts the sense of loss, alienation and distress, which is caused by psychological, social and cultural dislocation, experienced by an architect. The middle-aged architect has chosen to immigrate with his newly married nurse wife to Canada before 1997 in search of freedom, only to find that they have escaped from the affluent "prison" of Hong Kong to end up in the vast, strange and snow-covered prison of Calgary. The story traces the "flow" or physical displacement of this architect, with his expanding family, from Calgary to Toronto and then to San Francisco, accentuating his increasing sense of alienation and non-substantiality in the process as he fails to develop a sense of belonging. He often contemplates murdering his wife and children, seeing that act as a solution to his miserable life and to the suffering of his wife and children. Frustrated by his own sense of failure and troubled by the crying babies and his wife at home who is a nervous wreck, the architect subsequently leaves his wife and the children and returns to Hong Kong. However, he is soon rejoined by his wife, who has succeeded in tracking him down. With the relocation of the family back in Hong Kong, the architect thought his life would be back to normal as in the past. To his dismay, he soon realizes that Hong Kong is no longer that same peaceful city he once knew. Overwhelmed by his spiritual disorientation, confused identity, lost self, and increasing sense of alienation in his home city and

⁴² Wong, Bik-Wan: "Losing the City", Cheung, Martha transl., in: Cheung, Martha ed.: *Hong Kong Collage. Contemporary Stories and Writing*, Hong Kong 1998, pp. 205-232.

in his family, the architect finally kills his wife and his four children one night when he finds he can no longer cope with his hopeless situation.⁴³

The story is doubly intriguing and engaging in that the architect's sense of loneliness and alienation seems to find an echo in the British police inspector Evans, who is in charge of the murder case. Evans came to Hong Kong as a young man from Dublin decades ago and took Hong Kong as his home (for he had spent more time in the city than in Dublin, his city of origin). During his investigation of the murder case, Evans' feeling of loneliness, sadness and loss heightens as he finds that he too feels increasingly estranged just like the architect. Evans finds that his familiar city of Hong Kong is becoming less and less familiar to him and he is afraid that his once-familiar Hong Kong, the British colony, will be lost as a result of the 1997 handover, which seems like a hangover to him. This general sense of loss, of uncertainty and of alienation seems to cast a cloud over the police inspector, making him feel suffocated and dejected. He comes to understand the architect's psychological anxiety, sense of loss and helplessness and one's ineffectuality in the increasingly estranged city.

A sense of nostalgia for the old days and the fading of past values and practices in the face of drastic socio-political changes are explored in an interesting way by Chung Hiu-Yeung 鍾曉陽 (Zhong Xiaoyang, born in 1962), an author from Hong Kong who now lives in America. In her story "Aimili, Aimili" 愛蜜麗 愛蜜麗 ("Emily, Emily") from 1997,⁴⁴ Chung delineates the helpless situation of a middle-aged medical doctor, who feels trapped in a boring marriage with his wife Emily. The return of his former lover Emily, whom he has known for twenty years, unsettles his daily routine life. On the surface, the story seems to focus on the doctor's mid-life crisis as epitomized by the song casually sung by his fourteen-year-old daughter: "living in hell and yearning for heaven/love feelings buried/and yet jumping over to have a look/hating so much/living in hell and yearning for heaven." In reality, it deals with the doctor's existen-

43 The artist Hung Liu has also addressed the negative impact of emigration on individuals. In her view the process of emigration leads to marginalization and exclusion. Cited in: Shih, Shu-Mei: *Visuality and Identity. Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*, Berkeley et.al. 2007, p. 77.

44 Chung, Hiu-Yeung 鍾曉陽: "Aimili, Aimili" 愛蜜麗 愛蜜麗 ("Emily, Emily"), in: Chung Hiu-Yeung 鍾曉陽: *Ranshao Zhi Hou 燃燒之後 (After the fire)*, Hong Kong 1997, pp. 243-262.

tial condition and explores the notion of freedom and fate. The medical doctor feels lonely, lifeless and dispirited as he carries out his daily routine in his clinic and at home. He yearns for freedom and new sources of hope, but he is not prepared to give up his well-established life in Hong Kong to go for it. The return of his former girlfriend Emily, however, rekindles the doctor's desire to live an honest life as he is reminded of his past. Being his new source of hope and vitality, the doctor meets his mistress Emily secretly in his clinic and feels excited because of the secrecy of their rendezvous. Although the two still have fond memories of their past and feel close to each other, they are aware that Emily chose to marry an old Englishman and moved to Britain some twenty years ago, leaving the doctor in Hong Kong. The author shows that in times of socio-political crisis, love alone may not be strong enough to keep the lovers together. As in Emily's case, she has abandoned the doctor and Hong Kong in search of a new life in Britain.

What makes the story interesting is the way the author deals with the lovers' choices. Emily's return forces the doctor to examine the banality and triviality of his existence and offers him a second chance to think of his and their future. Readers are invited to engage in their dilemma, wondering if the doctor is ready this time to go after happiness and his love Emily, or if he will choose to stay in his boring but stable marriage with his wife Emily. In the end, the mistress' decision to return to her husband in England helps to resolve the doctor's moral dilemma. As he confides in his wife later, he accepts the fact (of his mistress' departure) as his fate and will not see the other Emily again for there exists a vast distance between him and Emily in Britain. In a subtle but powerful way, Chung shows the reasons for a Hong Konger to stay in the city: he has been deserted by his former love who abandoned him for Great Britain and he has no choice but to stay with his wife Emily from whom he feels alienated and indifferent. The two Emilies in the story represent two distinct options for the doctor, but he remains passive and ineffectual, not knowing what to do with himself and his life. One may also ask, after reading the story, about the possibility or impossibility of identity (building) in an international metropolis like Hong Kong where self-actualization and happiness seem like a dream, which remains remote and intangible for many.

As one takes a look at Hong Kong literature in the 1990s, one notices that there are also literary works that deal with the identity problem faced by those who have decided to leave the place. One witnesses the development of a literature of nostalgia, which explores place and

identity in relation to history and memory. Dung Kai-Cheung's 董啟章 (Dong Qizhang, born in 1967) fiction "Yongshengjie xingshuaishi" 永盛街興衰史 ("The History of Bloom and Decay of the Street of Eternal Prosperity") is a prime example.⁴⁵ Published in 1995, the story is told from the perspective of a young Hong Konger who left Hong Kong with his parents for Canada in 1989 and now returns to the city six years later, trying to look for a job as well as his identity. He attempts to trace his ancestors' past with the hope of constructing his identity and his connection with Hong Kong. The fact that the protagonist Lau Yau-Shun fails to find Wing Shing Street (which literally means the street of eternal prosperity) on which his ancestors' house is supposed to be situated, allows the author to explore issues pertaining to location, history, memory, nostalgia, identity, and loss. After much effort, Lau succeeds in locating his ancestors' house on another street in Sheung Wan, which is an old district of Hong Kong. By going through his grandmother's photos, the old newspapers and belongings of his ancestors left in the house, Lau struggles to piece together a picture of his family history and to understand his ancestors' past lives. At the same time, he tries to relate his family history to the colonial past of Hong Kong in the process. The well-known song "Ke tu qiu hen" 客途秋恨 ("The autumnal remorse of a traveler") from a Cantonese opera is used as a recurring motif in the story, allowing the author to link the by-gone days of Hong Kong with the present contemporary life in the metropolis. It reinforces the theme of nostalgia, reminding the young man, and perhaps the readers too, of the old Hong Kong, together with its values, people and history. Some people like the protagonist may find it interesting and worth studying, but most people fail to register its significance as part of the city's history; many fail to see its relevance to contemporary Hong Kong.

The young man's interest in restoring his family past, and indirectly preserving a small part of the colonial history of Hong Kong, becomes even stronger when he learns that his father has decided to sell the ancestors' house, which will then be demolished. While he works doubly hard sorting out his family's past, Lau also tries hard to sort out his intricate relationships with three women, namely, his grandmother, his university

45 Dung, Kai-Cheung 董啟章: "Yongshengjie xingshuaishi" 永盛街興衰史 ("The History of Bloom and Decay of the Street of Eternal Prosperity"), in: Xu, Zidong 許子東 ed.: *Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan* 香港短篇小說選 1994-1995 (*Selected short stories from Hong Kong, 1994-1995*), Hong Kong 2000, pp. 85-107.

girlfriend whom he left when he immigrated to Canada in 1989 and his current girlfriend. As he reflects, the three women represent different values and phases in his identity formation, linking him to different times in Hong Kong. People often said that a colony does not need to have a history and that colonies have no history, but in this young man's case, he does not want his past to be left blank. He is determined to preserve his past, his family's past, and the colonial past of Hong Kong. In the process of re-constructing his family history, it dawns on him that writing about his family history, or any history, is in itself a form of fiction writing, a form of re-writing history, because both involve imagination, creativity and subjectivity. It is impossible for anyone to re-construct the real past, or to give an accurate or true account of past events, for history is made up of bits and pieces of information, always subjective and disconnected, and at times confusing and nonsensical, and is thus open to interpretation.

By going back and forth in time in his narrative, Dung shows how one can easily get lost in one's own memory of the past, and become confused in one's recollection and restoration of the past. Although the protagonist is afraid of losing an important part of his own past in the fading family history, as well as missing a precious part of Hong Kong history amidst the rapid pace of socio-political change, he is eventually led to see the futility of his attempt to compile an organized and objective record of history. He finally comes to see that his recollection of the past is a form of rewriting of history, something that has nothing to do with the real past that is forever gone. Viewed in this light, the narrator's earnestness in tracking, registering and making sense of his family history parallels the efforts made by some Hong Kong writers like Xi Xi and Dung Kai-Chueng who try to record the history of Hong Kong in their own ways so that it will not be forgotten or wiped out with the passage of time and the change of sovereignty. Read in this light, Dung's story captures a general mood of anxiety and anticipation of change prevalent at the time when some people feared the potential loss of their links with their local cultural roots and colonial past. In an indirect way, the story elucidates the identity crisis many Hong Kongers had to deal with before and after 1997.

This sense of helplessness, hopelessness, estrangement and dismal emptiness is fully delineated in a dystopian story "Chongfu de chengshi" 重複的城市 (The repetitive city) written by Wong King-Fai 黃勁輝 (Huang

Jinhui).⁴⁶ First published in the literary magazine *Xianggang Wenxue* 香港文學 (*Hong Kong Literature*) in 1998, Wong's story presents a dystopian society where its residents remain nameless and self-less. Like actors, they are each assigned a specific role to perform repeatedly and they will each receive a performance report detailing areas for improvement every evening. Anyone who performs well will be promoted to a higher grade with better meals.

Told from the first-person point of view, the story describes how the narrator wakes up one day to find himself in a bizarre situation. He is assigned to play the role of a taxi driver by a weird-looking bird-like being with protruding eyes, green feathers, a triangular human face and a beak. The narrator could not recall his past identity and the only thing he knows is that he is expected to repeat his role-play daily according to a script. For instance, he knows from the script that he will pick up his last passenger at 5:30 pm and that the latter will be shot dead by a gang of jewelry robbers when he gets out of the taxi on a specific street. When the story begins, the narrator performs his usual role and predicts: "We will be in a robbery." The robbery and shooting happen as expected, but what makes his daily routine unusual this time is that when he goes to have his dinner with his assigned wife after work in a huge dining hall that can accommodate over a thousand diners, he finds the supposedly-killed passenger sitting next to him on a bench, waiting for the announcement of the arrival of their food trays. Readers can easily relate this story to the traditional ghost stories (*zhiguai xiaoshuo* 志怪小说) in classical Chinese literature in which the protagonists have close encounters with the deceased. In Wong's story, however, there is no verbal exchange between the taxi-driver and his deceased passenger, who is identified as W444.

The unusual encounter prompts the narrator to reflect on his own disorientation and existential condition. He relates his surreal experience to the bird-like being, who turns out to be the director, assigning the number Z184 and the role of a taxi driver to him on the first day of his arrival at the strange city. He further recalls how he has been performing his assigned role dutifully since then according to the given script until

46 Wong King-Fai 黃勁輝: "Chongfu de chengshi" 重複的城市 ("The repetitive city"), in: Liu, Yichang 劉以鬯 ed.: *Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Bai Nian Jinghua* 香港短篇小說百年精華 (*The gems of a 100 years of Hong Kong short stories*), Hong Kong 2006, pp. 374-382.

his repetitive daily routine was disrupted one day when his last passenger suddenly deviated from the script and assigned role, trying to assert his self-identity:

"I'm W₄₄₄. I'm not the fxxxing last passenger. I am 'I' myself. Do you understand? ... Why do we have to follow the scripts assigned to us by that fxxxing director? I just want to say whatever I want, do whatever I want. I am my own self. ... Let me prove it to you. If we do not play our role according to the assigned script, everything can be changed. We can become our own selves again."

The story takes another twist at this point for the narrator finds, to his great dismay, that he and his last passenger have arrived at the same usual place without their knowing, and that the last passenger was again shot as prescribed in the assigned script. However, he notices a difference in the details: the last passenger did not fall after the shot this time. Instead, he looks at the narrator and laughs, saying: "All this is just a game! All this is just a game! Hahahaha!"

The unusual W₄₄₄ incident leaves the narrator wondering for a short while if W₄₄₄ has been killed, or if he is mad and under treatment. But the author is quick in showing the readers that this sense of wondering is short-lived, and soon the taxi driver settles down to his daily routine again. Readers come to note the allusion to the socio-political situation in Hong Kong when the narrator comments on his own pathetic and hopeless situation: "Everything is pre-arranged here. The story has to continue, and the roles have been fixed. It does not really matter who is going to play that role. One man gone [sic] and he will be replaced by another naturally, and there is no end to this. What I care about is how to enhance my performance and to improve my living index. The rest is no longer important. Slowly I too have forgotten W₄₄₄ amidst the repetition of the endless repetitions." Viewed in this light, this dystopian story can be regarded as a commentary on Hong Kong people's general attitude toward the 1997 handover, seeing it as an arrangement that has been there for a long time and that all participants, or actors, of this "political game" have their assigned roles to play. It also echoes the sense of entrapment and helplessness expressed by the medical doctors in Chung Hiu-Yeung and Lee Bik-Wah's stories discussed earlier.

The years around the 1997 handover were also noted for the emergence of literary works that dealt with the "disappearing Hong Kong". In his collection of essays *Ditu ji* 地圖集 (*Atlas: The Archeology of*

an Imaginary City, which was written in Chinese in 1997, Dung Kai-Cheung insists that one should not take a macroscopic view of Hong Kong. Instead, he proposes to zoom in on the map, from the city to the district, from the district to the street, from the street to a particular building, then to an apartment in the building, a room in the apartment, a desk in the apartment, the person sitting in front of the desk, and, finally, the words on the paper: "This is an image of individual autonomy made possible for me by a map on a 1:1 scale with a three feet by three feet square border."⁴⁷ That is to say, one should be attentive to individual writers' selection and arrangement of events as well as their personal responses to socio-political changes. The literary translator Eva Hung also pointed out the "threat of forced assimilation" in Hong Kong as a result of the city's return to China and asked her readers to be alert to such issues in their reading of Hong Kong literature.

Stories in the 21st century

A general sense of bewilderment, helplessness, loss, or anxiety characterizes many literary works published after the 1997 handover. The story "Lüxing zhi jia" 旅行之家 (The travelling family) written by Hong Kong author and university teacher Dorothy Tse 謝曉虹 (Xie Xiaohong, born in 1977), for example, clearly captures this general feeling of anxiety. Collected in *Hao hei* 好黑 (So dark) published in 2005,⁴⁸ Tse's "The Travelling Family" can be read as an allegory of 1997. Told from the perspective of a young girl, the story traces first the anticipation and later the bewilderment and confusion experienced by the narrator. The young narrator feels excited at first when she learns about the family's travel, but gets completely lost later when she sees what the travel entails. The story details how she loses her family members one by one whilst travelling. The first to go is her father, who decides to join the gangsters who robbed them of their belongings. Then goes her mother who was recruited by a group of 'crying performers,' for she turns out to be one of the very few in the country who can still cry. The narrator then loses her sister when the latter was selected to enter the 'Butterfly House.' The last to go is her grandmother, who informed the narrator of the purpose of

47 Dung, Kai-Cheung: *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, Dung, Kai-Cheung, Hansson, Anders and McDougall, Bonnie trans., New York 2012, p. 38.

48 Tse, Dorothy 謝曉虹: "Lüxing zhi jia" 旅行之家 ("The travelling family"), in: Tse, Dorothy 謝曉虹: *Hao hei* 好黑 (So dark), Taipei 2005, pp. 70-82.

their travel, that is, to leave their 'disappearing home' in search of a place where they feel that they belong. Watching her grandmother slowly turn into a speck of dust and blown away by the wind, the narrator is left wondering about herself in relation to place.

The ideas of desertion, abandonment, disorientation, displacement and the absurdity of life are emphasized in this story. The narrator's repeated dreams of riding a bicycle through the winding streets of her hometown in search of a place that she can call her own epitomize her strong sense of loss, frustration and distress: "Sometimes, I really hope that I can end this endless search. Perhaps, I am searching for another home? I believe I am the only one who still holds on to this illusion in my hometown. And yet, that is merely my hope occasionally. I can tell if things by that time will become much better than [sic] they are now."⁴⁹ It must be noted here that Tse presents, on the one hand, a bleak picture or fear of the disappearing or disappeared family, home, or city and yet she also offers a glimpse of hope through individual effort in the form of an incessant quest, on the other. Although her story reveals a socio-political reference, in her view literary works do not always need to be interpreted along political lines. As she observed, she and her colleagues from mainland China wanted to talk more about literature and less about politics.⁵⁰ This story is illustrative of her mastery in dealing with a number of topical issues in a highly artistic and innovative way.

As the Chinese academic Leo Ou-Fan Lee observes, fiction authors in Hong Kong are especially interested in the history of the city.⁵¹ A look at the young author Leung Wai-Lok's 梁偉洛 (Liang Weiluo) award-winning story "Huanghou fangzhou" 皇后方舟 (Queen's Ark) will support Lee's view. Presented as a fantastic narrative with different realities and time planes and slightly subversive features, "Queen's Ark" can be read as another allegory on Hong Kong too. 'Fabula' and 'historia' are united here.⁵² This 2010 award-winning story was inspired by a topical incident

49 Ibid., p. 82.

50 Chen, Ken: "The PEN Ten with Dorothy Tse", see: <https://www.bing.com/search?q=The+PEN+Ten+with+Dorothy+Tse&form=PRDED&httpsmsn=1&refig=267c99c3add64e5a8574bb34e3ce50a3&pq=the+pen+ten+with+dorothy+tse&sc=0-0&sp=-1&q&sk=>, as accessed on August 6, 2016.

51 Lee, Leo Ou-fan: *Reading Hong Kong, China and the World*, Hong Kong 2011, p. 25.

52 Leung, Wai-Lok 梁偉洛: Huanghou Fangzhou 皇后方舟 (The Queen's Ark) in: Lai, Hoi-Wah (Li, Haihua) and Fung, Wai-Choi (Feng, Weicai) 黎海華/馮偉才 eds.:

that happened in Hong Kong in 2007 when a group of young people demonstrated near the Queen's Pier on Hong Kong Island, demanding the preservation of the pier, which was ordered to be demolished so as to reclaim a piece of land for a new road and a new shopping mall. In a surrealistic mode, the story narrates a young man's visit to the pier to support his friend Fa, who is one of the demonstrators, and his subsequent encounter with Ann, a young journalist of a popular leisure magazine who goes there to collect data about the demonstration for her article. While Ann interviews the demonstrators, who express their wish to preserve a public space for people to go for a chess game, to have a cigarette, to look at the harbor, or just to feel the ocean breeze after work, the narrator goes about observing the common people, who remain apathetic to such protests. They continue to play chess at the pier and seem oblivious to the demonstrations taking place around them. That sight prompts the narrator to reflect on his own purpose at the pier:

I come here not simply because I wanted to visit Fa; I also want to prove to myself that I have not lost my feelings to [sic] my monotonous and mundane life. I still care about the fast disappearance of things around me and am still capable of feeling sad of [sic] their disappearance. And yet such a thought also shows that I have long lost that courage I found in Fa. Out of my own will, I have chosen to play a silent role amidst drastic changes.⁵³

There is a spatial displacement in the narrative when the narrator suddenly finds himself in Spain and meets the mother of Emir Boabdil, who has just surrendered the Islamic city of Granada to the Christian Queen Isabella without a fight. The Emir's mother complains that her son has not "kept our country like a man and fought for it." The Emir wants her to return to Africa, but she finds that the city of Granada has become her home and that her soul is connected with the place. Again, there is a twist in the narrative and the narrator finds himself at sea. To his surprise, he finds himself sitting with the demonstrators on the drifting pier, which has torn itself off the Victoria Harbour and is floating aimlessly in a stormy sea. "The pier has chosen the sea," the narrator notes, "and if that is the wish of the pier, we should respect it."⁵⁴ As the

Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 香港短篇小說選 2010-2012 (*A selection of Hong Kong short stories, 2010-2012*), Hong Kong 2015, pp. 186-198.

53 Ibid., pp. 191-192.

54 Ibid., p. 195.

narrator continues to reflect on his situation, "On this vast open sea, we do not know where we are going, but we are full of hope. We will leave our fate to the pier and let it take us to wherever it wants to go...feeling the stability of the pier, drifting along slowly. ... We are all waiting for a huge ship, just like the legendary ark to take us away from this ghostly place."⁵⁵ A desire for salvation is explicitly expressed in the story, which ends with the pier returning to its original location at dawn and with that dream-like voyage secretly kept in the hearts of those who participated in it. As the narrator relates, even the police officers witnessing the incident decide to keep that unusual event to themselves and would not record it in their report on the demolition of Queen's Pier. The story ends with the re-encounter of the narrator and Ann years later. Nothing seems to have changed except the fact that Ann has moved to work for another popular magazine. When asked about the name of the magazine, Ann said, "Not bother! It's still a popular magazine. We have nothing else in Hong Kong." The narrator notices the paleness of Ann's shoulder, which is subtly linked to the paleness, blankness, or listlessness the author noticed in the dispirited or "ghostly" existence of the young people in the post-Queen's Pier days. Leung's story received the "Award for Creative Writing in Chinese" in 2010 for its innovative writing style and its incisive comment on the Queen's Pier incident that shows not just the young people's response to the demolition of a pier but to the government's handling of Hong Kong, with its historic landmarks and its social, cultural and political heritage.

Published in the same year (2010) is Hong Kong author and university teacher Wu Yin-Ching's 胡燕青 (Hu Yanqing, born in 1954) "Haixin ren" 好心人 ("The kind-hearted")⁵⁶ that deals critically with a professor of sociology, who leads a spiritless and monotonous life under the curate of his mother and wife. His mundane existence is upset one morning when he discovers that the cleaning woman at his institute has stolen one of his five twenty-dollar banknotes he had left on his office desk. The incident prompts the professor to start a secret experiment to study the psychology of the cleaning woman. He starts leaving his money on his office desk on purpose every morning in order to test the cleaning woman's reaction. The professor records the date and amount of money taken

55 Ibid.

56 Wu, Yin-Ching 胡燕青: Haixin ren 好心人 (The kind-hearted), in: Wu, Yin-Ching 胡燕青: *Haixin ren* 好心人 (*The kind-hearted*), Hong Kong 2010, pp. 64-69.

meticulously in a booklet. Such an experiment has given the professor a purpose in life, bringing vitality and excitement to his repetitive and uneventful life. This secret “give and take” relationship brings him great excitement, demanding a re-prioritization of his daily activities and expenditures, offering him a sense of expectancy too. Viewed in this light, the experiment can be considered as the professor’s unconscious resistance against the two domineering women (mother and wife) in his life, or it can be read as a manifestation of the professor’s hollow life, accentuating his monotonous existence in a stifling and dehumanizing institutional system.

The irony is made explicit when the cleaning lady is caught red-handed for theft by the head of the department one day. To the dismay of the professor, who has treated the entire money issue as a game, as a human psychology experiment, the cleaning woman has all along treated the “professor’s money” as a gesture of his kind-heartedness. It never occurs to her that taking the professor’s money constitutes as theft. Shocked by the unforeseeable outcome of his “kind-heartedness,” the professor sees how his own stupidity and playfulness have ruined the reputation of an innocent lady, causing her to lose her job. With an indirect and ironic twist of the plot, Wu invites the readers to re-examine the notion of truth in relation to the seeming good and evil, and the kind-heartedness and the ill-intent, in the story. This story reminds the readers of what the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne once reflected on various aspects of his identity: “I give my soul different faces, according to which side I turn it. When I talk differently about myself, it is because I consider myself to be different.”⁵⁷ The social anthropologist Helmut Plessner has also pointed to the fundamental exteriority of man, which allows identity only as a differential role game.⁵⁸ It also reminds one of the board member of Next Digital Ltd. Dong Qiao’s 董橋 (born in 1942) remarks in 2015, that “Hong Kong literature does not necessarily have to tackle Hong Kong-related topics in order to be considered as such. No, because there is freedom of creation in Hong Kong; writers in this environment are able to create literary works that correspond to their interest and style.”⁵⁹

57 de Montaigne, Michel: *Essays. Erste moderne Gesamtübersetzung von Hans Stillet*, Frankfurt a.M. 1998, p. 167.

58 Plessner, Helmuth: *Conditio Humana*, Pfullingen 1964, p. 49.

59 Cited in: Yu, Fei 余非 and Chan, Kit-Yee 陳潔儀: *Xianggang Wenxue Zheyang Du* 香港文學這樣讀 (*The way to read Hong Kong literature*), Hong Kong 2015, p. 205.

The inter-relationship between place and identity gets increasingly complicated after 1997. As Zhou Yongxin 周永新 observes, some of the young people in Hong Kong seem to reject a Chinese identity which in his perception is a reality. Many young people in Hong Kong call themselves Hong Kongers, but reject a self-designation as Chinese. For them, the one identity actually excludes the other. Zhou considers it essential to re-establish a common identity in Hong Kong. This identity issue continues to haunt many Hong Kongers who have mixed feelings. As reflected in some of the stories discussed, Hong Kong people may find it easy to identify culturally with China, but politically some may have their reservations.⁶⁰ What complicates the matter is the fact that under the “One Country Two Systems”, Hong Kongers are not recognized as Chinese nationals. Instead, they continue to be classified as “gang’ao tongbao” 港澳同胞 (Hong Kong and Macao compatriots). That explains the complexity of the identity crisis and Hong Kong’s unique location, which is adjacent to mainland China. A look at a story by Hon Lai-Chu 韓麗珠 (Han Lizhu, born in 1978) is illustrative of some of the issues mentioned. Published in 2015, Hon’s “Chuzou” 出走 (The Exodus) is a story about flight and identity change.⁶¹ All attempts of telling the future, which is one thread of this narrative, slip into the absurd and prove to be cliché as reflected in the story.

Using the folk practices of prognosis that are popular in Hong Kong, the story conveys a sense of inevitability and fate from the beginning. Hon employs a dual perspective, intertwining Hei Guo the police detective’s narrative with that of a female pet-shop assistant Lin Bai. The story explores the notion of freedom and confinement from different angles and examines individual choice in relation to circumstantial conditions and fate. The story unfolds with the police detective’s decision to resign from the police force after twenty years of excellent service because his confidence is shattered by a difficult case that is beyond his grasp and comprehension. As the protagonist in Austrian author Marlen Hausho-

60 Zhou, Yongxin 周永新: *Xianggang ren de Shenfen Rentong He Jiazhi guan* 香港人的身份認同和價值觀 (*The recognition of identity and the value system of people in Hong Kong*), Hong Kong 2016, p.iii. See also: <http://www.voanews.com/a/poll-hong-kong-citizens-chinese-identity-all-time-low/3401295.html>, as accessed on March 12, 2017.

61 Hon, Lai-Chu 韓麗珠: „Chuzou“ 出走 (The Exodus), in: Hon, Lai-Chu 韓麗珠: *Shiqu Dongxue* 失去洞穴 (*Losing the cave*), Hong Kong 2015, pp. 97-115.

fer's work, standing "in front of a wall," the detective feels an invisible and unbreakable wall in front of him, blocking his inner vision. He has no clues to a recent case that deals with a female suspect he has been following. He is shocked to find that she suddenly disappears from his sight after setting free all the pets from her pet shop. The story relates his recollection of his excellent work record over the past twenty years when pressed by his supervisor for the reason for his resignation. The detective is proud of his success cases, including the reshaping of the nocturnal wandering life of a young woman who later became his wife. He thought his residence was the safest "prison" for the young woman, and that she would stay there forever. However, he was later shaken by her wish to leave him, the reason being: "I can't live like I am my own master in a place like this."⁶² Another blow to his confidence is the recent pet-shop case.

Then the story is re-told from Lin Bai, the female suspect's perspective. From her narrative, the man (the detective) who frequents her pet shop is a lost soul for he does not know "what kind of pet he wants to keep." The man's visits and "indecision" lead Lin Bai to reflect on her own life and her past attempts to run away from all forms of confinement at home and at boarding school. The readers come to learn that she has been drifting from one place to another until she was given a job in the pet-shop. However, the young girl is again tired of being tied to a place, tending the caged pets every day. She decides to flee from her stifling environment. As she reflects, leaving is a happy moment for her, and she has no other alternatives but to choose this form of happiness for she sees fleeing, drifting and rootlessness as her fate. And it is the "exodus" of Lin Bai, after releasing the pets in the shop, that forces the detective to re-examine his own life, which is characterized by inevitability, unpredictability and uncertainty. This "exodus" motif reminds the readers of the immigration issue with its perpetual occurrence in Hong Kong and the sense of insecurity experienced by its residents during periods of social or political unrest throughout the history of the city.

Conclusion

As the scholar of comparative literature Timothy J. Reiss has pointed out, mapping identities means to listen to differences.⁶³ A close look at a

62 Ibid., p. 110.

63 Reiss, Timothy J.: "Mapping Identities: Literature, Nationalism, Colonialism", in: Pendergast, Christopher ed.: *Debating World Literature*, London et.al. 2004, pp. 110-147.

variety of stories written on the theme of place and identity in Hong Kong in the past half century shows the unique and diverse cosmopolitan culture of the city on the one hand, and traces the development of distinct features of Hong Kong literature on the other. By examining a number of representative – but up to now non-translated – stories that focus on the question of identity – or bundles of identity – the present study elucidates how the identity issue actually lies at the heart of many works by Hong Kong writers, who contribute in their own ways to the growth and blossoming of Hong Kong literature, facilitating its gradual move away from its earlier state of marginality to assume an increasingly prominent place in contemporary Sinophone literature. As early as 1963 Liu Yi-Chang has thematized the difficulties he faced as a writer in an increasingly commercialized city. Xi Xi draws the readers' attention to the unique state of the city that has been, and is kept, dangling in the air. The identity issue is examined from different angles by Wong Bik-Wan and Wong King-Fai, who depict the general sense of loss and alienation caused by social or spiritual dislocation, as well as people's helplessness and ineffectuality, while Dung Kai-Cheung captures the effort of some to preserve the unique part of Hong Kong's history. He shows the readers that such an attempt is close to the impossible, as history writing is always a form of re-writing and re-creation. His awareness of the diminishing old Hong Kong is conveyed through the old Cantonese opera song, which belongs to the gone-by days and seems to have little meaning in most people's present. That same note is echoed by Leung Wai-Lok, who explores the social, cultural and political implication associated with the demolition of the Queen's Pier, which is a historic site of the city.

On a different note, Dorothy Tse raises a question about self and place in the end of her story: "Perhaps I am searching for another home?" and this sense of wonder and quest for home is explored by Ng Hui-Bun in her depiction of a Hong Kong student's interaction with a Red Indian, and in Lee Bik-Wah's portrayal of the disoriented village girl from the Ming dynasty. The hollow life of well-established professionals whose inertia, contentment, complacency and passivity have prevented them from living a full and meaningful life is scrutinized in a myriad of forms too. Chung Hiu-Yeung shows a doctor's moral dilemma, wondering whether it is possible for him to start afresh in a new place, while Wu Yin-Ching describes the hollow life of a well-established professor who engages himself in a meaningless experiment. The question on identity, dislocation and alienation also forms the backbone of Wong Bik-Wan's story about a new immigrant and her professor/husband. While some

highlight the anxiety, bewilderment and frustrations involved, others reveal people's general indifference and apathy to changes. Some writers like Hon Lai-Chu also explore the possibility of flight and identity change.

It is apparent from the stories discussed in this paper that Hong Kong literature often oscillates between transnationalism and regionalism and, taking Hong Kong literature into consideration, can help to develop a more de-nationalized view of Sinophone literature. Further investigations of Hong Kong literature can contribute to a de-canonization of nationally defined literary systems, be it the literary system of the PRC, or literary canons of Sinophone works that have been established in the West. To this end, more scholarly studies on and translations of Hong Kong literature have to be undertaken to enhance the latter's visibility and accessibility, thus helping to pave its way onto the stage of world literature.

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