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Hong Kong echoes across English ghost lands: A decolonizing of English-language poetry

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on three women poets who deploy a Hong Kong Chinese imaginary, an imaginarium filled with memories, popular cultural references, fragments of Cantonese, and isolated Chinese characters. Jennifer Lee Tsai was born in the UK of Hong Kong immigrant parents, while Jennifer Wong migrated from Hong Kong to the UK first to study and then to write poetry. Tim Tim Cheng similarly migrated to the UK to study, having grown up in Hong Kong. Their English-language poems are peppered with Cantonese images and linguistic elements that challenge the reader to address the postcolonial condition of the poetry. Written in English in the UK, their poetry represents a *poiesis* of the local and the personal. While articulating a local everydayness, their work seeks out from afar and from the past, in the migrant in-betweenness of Chinese–British borderlands, poetic resolutions to the binds of their postcolonial subjecthood.

KEYWORDS

Hong Kong; Chinese British; Cantonese; Tim Tim Cheng; Jennifer Lee Tsai; Jennifer Wong

The emergence of the Chinese British poet

In recent years, several women poets with a “Hong Kong connection” have enjoyed increasing success with the poetry-reading public of the UK. Among the more prominent are Jennifer Lee Tsai and Jennifer Wong, while Hong Kong poets more recently established in the UK include Tim Tim Cheng. While they are not the first poets with a Hong Kong/Chinese background to write poetry in English in the UK, they are the first to have known success and to be accepted by the poetry-making and poetry-reading community. Previously, in the 1990s, Jennifer Lim and her London-based workshop had fostered young, ethnically Chinese writers among whom there were several poets.¹ Theirs was an immediate, raw poetry – a recounting of the experience of everyday white British racism, and the lived liminality of British, ethnically Chinese communities, as bluntly foregrounded in the poem “Colour Fixation” by the poet calling themselves Big Prawn (1992):

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You think I'm Chinese. While you think I'm English.
 But I have the upper hand.
 I know what you're both thinking
 (39)

Theirs was a poetry that in the main attempted to negotiate their experience of “looking Chinese”, of belonging to almost invisible communities scattered across the UK, communities that since the 1970s had been populated predominantly by immigrants from Hong Kong who were mainly employed in the catering trade.

These poets found themselves multiply marginalized, surviving as they did in often deprived working-class areas of the UK. In his youth, Lab Ky Mo, born and raised in Northern Ireland, who would go on to be a film-maker, found himself in a doubly colonized situation, “physically, geographically at the peripheries of two societies” (Lee 1996, 229).² The “I” of his poem speaks in a Belfast accent. His Chineseness is Cantonese and in “Chinas with Belfast accents”, Lab Ky Mo constructs an imaginary Ulster–Chinese border along which “he maps his own Chinas where his multiple identities and desires can belong” (Lee 1996, 230).

I build my Chinas in my head – I make drawings on paper.
 I make drawings on paper and they become maps.
 I am its only Civil Servant – I issue me my own passport
 in fact, I'm a citizen with full rights who doesn't even need
 a passport to travel in and out of the place.
 I am its first President – I get issued free travelcards.
 And their national vocabulary, well it's a marriage of English with a Belfast accent.
 They speak a little Hakka too, and Cantonese, only there not too good at it.
 And they all understand each other. Do you hear me?
 (Mo 1992, 18–19)

In Kim Tan's (1992) “Life as a Banana/What Does it Mean?”, a Chinese British hybrid subject details the uncomfortable in-betweenness of everyday life:

You go to John Lewis' and some woman asks you which wok to buy
 As if all Chinese people know which one is best
 “Oh, Meyer's flat bottomed 15 pounds from Argos – doesn't even rust!”
 Got that one sussed.
 It's when you learn a set menu for when you go to yam cha
 so the waiter doesn't give you a bad stare or spit in your food.
 You even tap the table with your fingers when someone pours your tea
 (48–49)

In the wake of the outbreak of COVID-19 in Britain in 2020, violent expressions of anti-Chinese hatred, ever-simmering *sub rosa*, re-emerged. These poems penned over 30 years ago now assume a refreshed immediacy, a renewed urgency. Witness the routine verbal abuse given voice in Siu Won Ng's (1992) poem “Fish and Chips”:

You want to know the way to Peking
 and your van was stuck in traffic

 Peking, you stipulated
 wanting to know from a
 bastard Chinese
 (28)

The irony of the habitual conflation of a Chinese Briton's superficial Chineseness to the white eye – “looking Chinese” – with representing a country in which they have never set foot is foregrounded here with a play on the word “bastard” – a common British swear word. The xenophobic, white British van driver cannot see the “Chinese” in question is a hybrid subject, not an “authentic” Chinese. To him they are all “Chinese”:

Was it my face that bothered you?
 that made you vomit such words,
 you eat Peking duck,
 like you do fish and chips.
 A great British meal
 covered in patriotic red sauce
 (Ng 1992, 28)

But these poets writing in the early 1990s did not attract the attention of the wider poetry-reading public. The much-vaunted multiculturalism of the 1990s did not stretch to the inclusion of Chinese British fledgling poets. Rather, attention was paid to first-generation Chinese-language poets from mainland China living in the UK in the 1990s. Doubtless they were seen as more “authentically” Chinese than “Chinese-looking” UK poets writing directly in English (Zhao and Cayley 1994, 1996). Such poetry, deserving of an English-speaking readership as it undoubtedly was, did not demand a reflection on the historical context of Britain's intellectual colonization of those who came from Hong Kong and who wrote in the colonizer's language, English. The impact of such writing is also evident in China-based, Chinese-language poets of the 1970s and 1980s, a question which in itself is of an extreme complexity and beyond the purview of the present article. Suffice it to say for our present purpose that the process of mediation and translation into English of such poetry paradoxically made it more, rather than less, assimilable into a respectable stable of world poetry than that of home-grown Chinese British poets.

In the 21st century, new Chinese British poets have taken advantage of the rise of creative writing programmes and the writerly gravitas that attaches to them, to put down their stakes into the ground of the British poetry circuit. We are in an age of professionalization, and creative writing degrees are now the minimum requirement if a poet is to be taken seriously and published. Jennifer Wong, Jennifer Lee Tsai, and Tim Tim Cheng all took the university route to becoming published poets. All three studied English literature at university, and all three have pursued postgraduate degrees in creative writing while simultaneously publishing their poems. Both Jennifer Wong and Tim Tim Cheng are bilingual and that linguistic dualism is frequently foregrounded in their work. In Cheng's (2023) verse, the presence of Chinese in the text is marked by its absence in her oral poetry readings. This is nowhere clearer than in “How Do You Spell [] in Chinese”, where Chinese characters and their elements are bracketed out, left unspoken:

At birth,
 [words 字]
 arrive like a rooftop 宀 for the child 子.
 If the sun is too bright
 [to read 看],
 you use your hand 手 to shelter your eyes 目 (32)

What is spoken and heard is: “At birth, words arrive like a rooftop for the child. If the sun is too bright to read, you use your hand to shelter your eyes” (32). To apprehend the linguistic layers of the poem you must be a reader, not just a listener, and you must be bilingually literate. Language, its difficulty, its lack, is a recurrent theme in Cheng’s work, as in the poignant prose poem “No Language”, where embarrassment and miscommunication mark the life of an old immigrant, and where Umberto Eco’s Salvatore rubs shoulders with McDonald’s staff:

Granny didn’t think it could help us settle down in Hong Kong. Had you been the mutable Pisces according to your birth date, before you were great-granny? Had your life been intelligible to yourself, a maid sold to a Fujian landlord? Learned by ears for survival, your mix of Hokkien, Mandarin, Cantonese, Indonesian and simple English was not something I was proud of . . . until I met Umberto Eco’s Salvatore, who speaks *all languages, thus no language*. I just wanted the McDonald’s staff to understand your order. (34; original emphasis)

Of the poets considered here, Cheng’s poems are the closest in time and subject matter to today’s Hong Kong. And yet this is also a liminal poetry, on the cusp of two cultures, two cities even. “Waterlogged – *from Hong Kong to Edinburgh*”, where the “I” of the poem is seated on a plane, is an epitome of this predicament:

I never knew how much rain the sky
and a person could hold. Perhaps, I never will. If I were to make this place

my home, this language I’ve lived outside but scratched at, would the news back home get old?
(34)

Home is still back there, while a new home, both place and language, form the locus and vehicle for poetic expression. The hesitancy and uncertainty conveyed by the poem are accentuated by the ambiguity engendered by run-on lines.

Jennifer Lee Tsai (2019) is a second-generation Hong Kong Chinese British poet; her parents migrated from Hong Kong to Merseyside in the north of England where she was born and raised. She was educated entirely in the UK, and while engrossed by the Chinese language she is not a Sinophone writer. In her poem, the judiciously placed Chinese characters remind us of the early authors of Chinese New Poetry 新詩 in the 1920s. Poets such as Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978) and Dai Wangshu 戴望舒 (1905–50) sprinkled French and English words into their poems to foreground modernity, which at that time was necessarily equated with the westernness of their lyrics (Lee 1989, 151). The result, however, produced a supplementary alienatory effect upon readers of old or traditional Chinese poetry even as they had to contend with the shock of the new poetry’s western style and the loss of the habitual bearings of old poetry. In Tsai’s poetry, the presence of Chinese words does not appear to be gratuitous, and relates more to a quest for wholeness than an intrusion of the alien. The desire to showcase Chinese names bears witness to a real concern with the multiple belongingness that accompanies, and derives from, translanguistic existence, as these lines from “The Age of Innocence” demonstrate:

My cousin, we share part of the same first name
a Chinese pictogram of a cloud at sunset,
burning bright orange or violet-gold;
within it the character for rain 雨.
How close we were, living almost as sisters

(Tsai 2019, 7)

Similarly, “The Meaning of Names” addresses the duality of a life that the “I” of this poem wishes to preserve in death:

I’m loath to relinquish my surname 徐,
Which tells me how I want us

To live our lives together, *slowly, gently*,
my name which came from my father

and grandfather – an immigrant who carried it
on his lengthy crossing, anglicised it

unrecognisably to what sounds like in essence,
a breath. Their marble headstones

have two sets of names, as will mine (23)

The grandfather figures in another moving, yet unsentimentally powerful poem. “Mersey River” pays tribute not only to an ancestor but to the Chinese seamen so historically ill-treated by Britain’s shipping lines and government:

Listen some shattering in the void of my form
I hear your song borne on the cry of a seagull
.....
a geography of otherness This otherness
becomes me I swim towards the coastline
clasping mementoes from my grandfather
a Chinese passport papers from the Blue Funnel Line
.....
I do not want the city to forget you
Or the other sailors of Chinatown
(Tsai 2019, 3)

Here we are in the territory of memorial, of obligations to recall and not to forget the historical injustices done to an immigrant community and souvenirs of family lore.³

Place is not just a locus, a physical space in which to locate a repository of memories, a matrix for postcolonial nostalgia. It is necessarily also where the migrant and their descendants make their home. Local British place names also serve as an anchor for the poetic voice, and to many an English-speaking reader will be just as puzzling as distant Chinese names. These local landmarks poems, like milestones, help the author weave her way through the city. Yet, behind these names, marking the streets of a once magisterial British imperial port, lurk the ghosts of an imperialist era: Princes Avenue, Huskisson Street, “the deserted Gothic church”.⁴

Jennifer Lee Tsai’s attachment to a place and its secrets is glimpsed in the main through the tales and memories of her family’s story on the other side of the world. Indeed, Hong Kong provides the place for the playing out of a more distant seam of nostalgia prompted by a quest for a past glimpsed but not lived:

From my aunt's apartment windows I see tendrils of
 mist rise from Tai Mo Shan Mountain. Mammoth
 dragonflies hover, translucent-winged, their presence
 signalling the imminent fall of rain. I look for traces
 of my grandmother
 (Tsai 2019, 4)

Here we face the coincidence of two types of nostalgia, “that which relates to the past that one has lived and that which relates to the past that one could have lived” (“celle qui porte sur le passé qu’on a vécu et celle qui porte sur le passé qu’on aurait pu vivre”) (Augé 2014, 133). Both nostalgias coalesce in our present, as a sort of constant yet “beneficial incompleteness which sustains the desire for creation, the desire for something else or somewhere else, a sign of life par excellence, where the past and the future mingle” (“un inachèvement bénéfique qui entretient le désir de création, le désir d’autre chose ou d’ailleurs, signe de vie par excellence, où se mêlent passé et avenir”) (137–138; my translations).

UK–Hong Kong borderlands

From this point the article will focus on the work of Jennifer Wong a first-generation Hong Kong Chinese British poet. She was born and raised in Hong Kong before taking up a university place at Oxford to read English. She then went on to undertake post-graduate work in creative writing. Her Hong Kong is based on lived experience, and her poetry is laced with the stuff of memories. Having been schooled in Hong Kong, Jennifer Wong is bilingual and Chinese language is wedged into much of her work. Indeed, language is always woven into her nostalgia for a Hong Kong now distant in both space and time. But that schooling went beyond language. The peculiar nature of what I have called elsewhere Hong Kong’s late colonialism was articulated in schools by the pedagogical privileging of two official cultures and languages (Lee [2002] 2021, ix; Lee and Poon 2021). Good schools taught both British English and its cultural baggage, and standard written Chinese, in which language a sanitized, Hong Kong version of mainland Chinese canonical literary culture has been conventionally taught (Lee [2002] 2021, ix; Lee and Poon 2021).

To the non-Chinese reader, to the non-speaker of Chinese languages, the linguistic topography of modern Hong Kong may seem difficult to fathom. So, it is justifiable here to dwell on the linguistic and cultural complexity of the anomalous late-20th-century colony that gave rise to modern-day Hong Kong. Cantonese as an oral language differs enormously from the national language, Hanyu 汉语 or Putonghua 普通话, often known to the outside world as Mandarin. Chinese languages are tonal, with different tones serving to distinguish between the numerous homophones present in these languages. But whereas modern standard Chinese has only four tones, Cantonese has six (or nine, taking into account “checked syllables”). The two languages’ vowels and consonants are dissimilar and there are substantial lexical distinctions. Cantonese syntax is very different to Mandarin’s. The two languages are mutually incomprehensible: Cantonese is further from Mandarin than Spanish is from Portuguese. In writing, both languages share a large number of Chinese characters, except that there are characters that exist in Cantonese

that do not exist in standard written Chinese, thus necessitating the need for a “supplementary character set” for printing, word processing, and electronic communication.

However, the written Chinese that is taught in schools and used in “serious” journalism and literature is based on the written form of the national language, and follows mainland Chinese grammar and characters. It is known as *shumianyu* 書面語 (“Classical or literary language”), or *syu1 min6 jyu5* in Cantonese, literally “book surface language”. When this written language is pronounced by Cantonese speakers, Cantonese values are given to the characters. There is little or no carry-over from living, everyday language to this written language in Hong Kong. In popular culture, especially in the domain of popular music, what may sound like Cantonese is in fact this “book surface language”, but it is pronounced in Cantonese. In other words, it obeys the syntactical and lexical norms of standard Chinese. Thus, the reality is, and was, that “Cantopop” (Cantonese popular music) has so far floated in a sort of halfway house. It is almost exclusively this language, one that no one speaks, that has been used to write and sing Cantopop songs. Only in recent years has the idea of writing in Cantonese spread beyond the popular press and comic books. The written language that is *syu1 min6 jyu5* 書面語 is a modern language, whether pronounced in Cantonese, Mandarin, or another Chinese language. For well over 2000 years, the written language of elite culture and administration in the space we now call China was *wenyanwen* 文言文 (sometimes known as “Classical or literary Chinese”). Whichever modern language a Chinese person speaks in order to access pre-modern texts, they must learn *wenyanwen*, just as a European must learn Latin to access Cicero in the original. Mandarin is no closer to *wenyan* than Cantonese, arguably less so. So, not speaking Mandarin does not cut off a Chinese person from the pre-modern tradition; it is a lack of knowledge of *wenyanwen* that does so. The citation from Confucius’s *Analects* that occurs in Jennifer Wong’s poem “Ba Jin (1904–2005)” is written in *wenyanwen*, and most Chinese speakers would have difficulty interpreting it.

Thus, Jennifer Wong masters a multilingual matrix, which, in addition to English, incorporates *putonghua* (Mandarin), written standard Chinese, spoken Cantonese, written Cantonese, and *wenyanwen*. Such is the linguistic diversity that informs her writing. Two poems in her *Letters Home* 回家 (J. Wong 2020) underscore this linguistic maze, this almost schizophrenic transmission of two non-local cultures, mainland and British, with the everyday language of Hong Kong, Cantonese, constantly bubbling away beneath the surface. The first poem occurs in section i; “The Ground Beneath Our Feet” is a title reminiscent of Salman Rushdie’s classic novel of (post)colonial in-betweenness, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, where the protagonists epitomize the rich complexity of postcolonial creativity (Rushdie 1999). Here Jennifer Wong’s ultimately acerbic “Diocesan Girls School, 1990–1997” foregrounds the painful contradictions of a colonial education:

We sing English hymns from the blue book,
As if those songs were our own:
All things bright and beautiful ...

[. .]

In Chinese history lessons, we follow roots
 Of a ginkgo tree to Spring and Autumn
 When Confucius taught his disciples *ren, yi*

[. .]

Some of us stammer in our own tongue –
 It's inferior, we know it.
 Secretly we all love to sing Cantopop
 (2020, 12)

The Cantonese language, the pupils' first language, is relegated to the schoolyard, and the singing of Cantonese lyrics. And yet this colonial education, classically described in Albert Memmi's ([1957] 1990) *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, not only inculcates official ideologies, it allows this education to be diverted to something other than its intended purpose, or what in French would be termed *détourné* (roundabout) as the students “fall in love with Plath, / her fantasies and her fury against men” (J. Wong 2020, 12). The school students' access to Chinese literature furnishes us with poems that serve as a matrix of Chinesenesses: both the pre-modern in *wenyanwen*, and the parallel – the modern Chinese culture that emerged during Hong Kong's long period of 19th-century and 20th-century colonization. Take the poem “Ba Jin (1904–2005)”, the understanding of which, for a non-Sinophone reader, is impeded by the presence of Chinese text; the poet provides notes at the end of the volume, but these cannot be consulted in real time without hampering the flow of the poem:

That home in your book 《家》 with its golden roof, was
 the first warning. A beautiful mansion in the name of
 Confucian living

.....
 非礼勿视, 非礼勿听, 非礼勿言, 非礼勿动⁵
 (J. Wong 2020, 26)

Thus, only the multilingual may be privileged readers of – or listeners to – this poem. The word *jia* 家 is not simply home or house, but also family. Ba Jin's ([1931] 1978) novel *Jia* 家 (The family) plays on that ambiguity, as does Wong's poem. Of course, while the text's/poem's global cultural significance will be difficult to apprehend, when read on the page, thanks to the poet's notes, the non-Sinophone reader can gain access to the linguistic meaning. This would be an extension of Gaston Bachelard's (1970) reading strategy of “vertical reading” where in order to seize the nuances and ambiguities of a poem the reader's eye must travel multiple times up and down the poem on the pages (225–232). However, “poetry's prosody organizes itself in sequential units of sound horizontally” (Lee 2012, 100). And therein “lies the means by which the “poetic instant” joins up with “prose”, with “social life”, and with “slipping, linear, continuous life” (Lee 2012, 100, citing Bachelard 1970, 225–232). The time spent reading the poem, and here the time spent reading the notes for a non-Sinophone reader “is a labour-invested time, a time that has been worked on, a *temps travaillé*” (Lee 2012, 100).

Witness, for instance, this recounting of the young Ba Jin's life abroad: “you boarded a ship for Paris. France! A paradise for / dreamers. In the Latin Quarter, you wrote in

the day, in / a flat that reeked of onions, and studied French at night” (J. Wong 2020, 26). It takes on additional significance, when read in the light of the final stanza:

To read 《家》 in Oxford, seventy years away from the
fresh ink of those pages. I see students cycle to their
Colleges made of dreams and sandstone, to the world they
are defiant to change, just like Jue-hui in your book. Their
strands of hair catch in the golden sun (26)

The poem’s “I”, like Ba Jin, is also distanced from home, is also a student, as was the poet. To fully grasp this commonality the reader is urged by this concluding stanza to travel back up the poem and read once again, in the light of this new knowledge, the stanza evoking the Latin Quarter. But not everything can always be supplied by the poet. Certain intertextualities – who is Jue-hui? – will oblige some readers to go beyond the poem to understand their significance: Jue-hui (or Juehui) is the youngest son and the main protagonist in Ba Jin’s novel *Family* 家.

But a number of Wong’s poems do not demand the reader to have or to acquire a literary dimension in order to establish meaning. In such poems, there are multiple intertexts that are embedded in the everyday, and thus it is a familiarity with society’s everydayness that is called upon. The title of the poem “Lost in Translation” hints at the self-referentiality of its subject matter, since it addresses the very problem of the translation of everyday, lived culture. By citing references to consumer culture in the text, impediments of language and culture are foregrounded. Here the poet provides no clues, and those who do not know the ephemeral local culture evoked in the poem can only fumble towards some modicum of meaning. From the line “Here cars heed no-one, make ruthless U-turns”, the reader who may be expecting a poem about Hong Kong is alerted to the fact that the locus of the poem lies elsewhere (J. Wong 2020, 36). The line “Nothing beats *Shunfeng Kuaidi*” (36) confirms that the poem is referring to mainland Chinese consumer society, since *Shunfeng Kuaidi* relates to the mainland delivery company SF Express 顺丰速运. And since this is 21st-century China there is necessarily the reference to e-commerce: “What can’t / be sold on *Taobao* [Chinese equivalent of eBay] – a husband, a baby” (36).

But it is only with the line “*Sheep City Evening News* wishes you good evening” that the precise location of the experience of the “I” becomes clear. Sheep City, or *Yangcheng* 羊城 in Chinese, is an alternative name for Guangzhou (or Canton) and relates to the legend of the five goats.

As in the films of Wong Kar-wai, places, languages, sounds, tastes, and people all form part of Jennifer Wong’s poetic imaginary, where place names, foods, and objects fill a space-time container that we can call a Hong Kong imaginarium. With the poem “Su Li Zhen”, the cosmopolitan and savvy reader who has watched Wong Kar-wai’s films can access the poem by deploying their acquaintance with that very imaginarium as the poet, alluding to sounds and images from the film, leads us through scenes from Wong Kar-wai’s (2000) film, *In the Mood for Love*: “The dark staircase of an old building; / Your tall-collared qipao” (J. Wong 2020, 16). The film-maker presents a simulacrum of a romantic idyll that he could only have gleaned from family lore, records, and films, for the film is set in 1960s Hong Kong. The poem’s nostalgia is for both the film which evokes the 1960s, and the post-1997 Hong Kong in which it was released: that is, a yearning for a filmed

Hong Kong that never was, and a longing for a lost Hong Kong of which the film is now emblematic. Here, once more, we see the coincidence of two kinds of nostalgia (Augé 2014, 113): “The cure for homesickness is to resist falling in love / With the city” (J. Wong 2020, 16). But those who know Hong Kong also know that resistance to its charm is impossible.

Perhaps the most complex and intricate poem in Jennifer Wong’s book of poetry 回家 *Letters Home* is the long, seven-part “Mountain City”, which takes the reader on a journey across Hong Kong through decades of Cantonese popular culture, and finally to Oxford via London’s Edgware Road. The poem, the poet tells us, is inspired by the enormously popular song sung by Roman Tam 羅文, 獅子山下 *si1 zi2 saan1 haa6* (Beneath Lion Rock), the theme tune of a 1970s television series about Hong Kong and its people. The poem’s epigraph is written in transliterated Cantonese, for which again the poet provides a note, but there are no Chinese characters. When the poem is read aloud, only those with a knowledge of Cantonese understand. The epigram relates to the closure of a much-loved Cantonese opera venue, 新光戲院 *san1 gwong1 hei3 jyun2* or Sunbeam Theatre.

“Mountain City” constitutes the entirety of the third section of Jennifer Wong’s volume, the other sections being: “i. the ground beneath our feet”, “ii. Speak, silence, speak”, “iv. Just an immigrant”, and “v. remember to forget”. The first part of the poem “Mountain City” requires an acquaintance with Hong Kong’s topography, its place names, and its traditional and modern-day wedding rituals: “On Cotton Tree Drive, a bride / Steps out of the limousine. / A bridesmaid holds the red umbrella” (J. Wong 2020, 41). No. 19 Cotton Tree Drive is home to the marriage registry and the umbrella is the colour of joy and happiness, red. But after all the spectacular and colourful imagery, the last line of part i of the poem brings the reader back down to earth with a prosaic thud: “It’s all about the mortgage” (41). But, just as abruptly, memories erupt: “I remember how it used to be” (42). And consumer items that populate Hong Kong’s daily life are recurrent, as in this stanza where a student’s habits point to the composite nature of the late-20th-century transnational society that Hong Kong has become. The student drinks a popular beverage, Vitasoy; plays with his mobile phone; reflects on a goal scored in the English Premier League: “Next year he’ll be sent away to study; / He doesn’t know what to do with his relationship” (42). And then a hiatus, an interlude, where the poem’s “I” flashes forward to the colossal ignorance of British immigration officials of the complex and creative forces that constitute the richness of Hong Kong Chinese popular literary culture, such as the historical fiction of Louis Cha’s martial arts heroes:

(A few years down the road you’ll find me
making copies of my former life
to the Border Agency. All they know
is the counterfeit of lantern streets
in Chinatown [. . .]

They are ignorant of the

[. . .] flying soldiers
Who combat amongst trees, drink sorghum wine,
Take shelter in roadside inns
And pay their fare with gold ingots)
(42)

The poem's narrator can only reveal this cultural chasm from the new-found perspective of the colonizer's metropolis once they have left Hong Kong, both spatially and temporally. The poem goes on to slip even further into a back-and-forth poetic reverie unfolding in the UK–Hong Kong borderlands of the mind, filled with diverse memories and multiple allusions, a dream of Hong Kong, dreamt in England.

This permits the omnipresence of a physically absent Hong Kong: “Was it last month, In Hong Kong / That I dared you to try the black soup / At the herbalist?” (J. Wong 2020, 43). Images from Hong Kong's cinematic representation mingle with memories, or are even the stuff of memories:

Had we arrived in 2046?
What secret had Chow Mo Wan buried
In the tree trunk? In 2046 we'll be left with

A city of capsule hotels,
And beautiful robots in tears
(43)

For the initiated and the connoisseur, these lines lucidly evoke cinematographic scenes from the films of Wong Kar-wai. Chow Mo Wan is the protagonist and narrator of Wong Kar-wai's (2004) film *2046* who is portrayed by the cinema legend Tony Leung. The secret “buried / in the tree trunk” relates to the closing scene of *In the Mood for Love* (Kar-wai Wong 2000) where the same character whispers a secret into a hollow of a tree trunk at Angkor Wat.

The year 2046 is the year Hong Kong was destined to be fully reintegrated into the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the 1984 Sino–British Joint Declaration which laid down the conditions under which sovereignty over Hong Kong was transferred from the UK to the PRC, and which stipulated that Hong Kong would enjoy “a high degree of autonomy” for 50 years from the 1997 handover, and 2046 is also the number of the hotel room where Chow and his idealized paramour, Su Li Zhen, played by Maggie Cheung, maintain their ambiguous relationship in the film *In the Mood for Love*. Room 2046 also figures as a room in the Oriental Hotel in the film's sequel, *2046*. The film is in part science fiction and projects into 2046 where “capsule hotels” and robots abound, and it is perhaps this futuristic, alienated scenario that prompts the poet to write: “I wonder why anyone / Would pine for afternoon tea / Under the colonial fans of a hotel lobby” (J. Wong 2020, 43). The lived experience of colonialism is not black and white, takes a long time to digest, and is perhaps never totally transcended. Some of its traces cannot be erased: “When it was a colony, those tycoons used to / glue plastic flowers in factories, / queued for rice rations” (44). In a hybrid present, the reality now of all hypermodern societies, is it possible to separate out the colonizing from the colonized, the “authentic” from the copy, the old from the new, the myth from the real? Must we engage in a Confucian rectification of names:

will we call things by their real names?
There's no treasure in Cheung Po Tsai's cave⁶

In Lady Market bazaar, you ask me
How do you distinguish real jade

From fake jade . . . I say, why does it matter?

The real, the fake, the old or the new
 Why, the minibus destination still reads
 Daimaru Department Store, closed down for years!
 Can't you tell that even the New Territories
 are growing old?
 (45)

In the final section of Jennifer Wong's (2020) "Mountain City", the reader is suddenly transported to London and "the colours on the Edgware road" (46).

But this is no authentic, white English metropolis; rather, the hub of a postcolonial reinvestment of the imperial metropolis by the once colonized where "Everything is halal. I order *sharwarma*". Then to Oxford:

What does it mean to have read
 Blake, Fitzgerald and Kerouac;
 The punts, the Pimms,
 The deer-spotting at Magdalen . . .
 In between all these
 Is the real thing, just a few coins
 To a busking musician
 (J. Wong 2020, 46–47)

The last stanza returns the reader to Hong Kong and the evocation of its imaginarium: "the fragments / of a changing city, fill a Tianjin pickle jar / with our memories: of peace taken for granted" (47)

In the fourth section of *Letters Home*, the "I" of these poems tells the story of the student in Hong Kong's former metropolis in Oxford and London. In "Arrival", in search of comfort, the narrator seeks out an Oxford Japanese noodle bar, "Edamame, / hidden on Holywell Street", which resembles, not Japan, but another Japanese noodle restaurant in Hong Kong, "the other ramen place in Yaumatei" (52). The *correspondences* of place through taste and fond food-memories recall the Chinese writer 周作人 Zhou Zuoren's (1885–1967) declared affinity for Tokyo on finding it redolent of his home town, Shaoxing (Daruvala 1993, 41). But the memory of food and place in "Arrival" does not reveal an affection for Oxford; rather, the university town's Japanese noodle restaurant serves to conjure up a vivid sensation of where "it felt as if me and my brother were / having noodles together". This is a regular occurrence for the Oxford Hong Kong student: "On winter days when the sun / Went missing, and I felt I was / An incomplete being, I'd visit Edamame" (J. Wong 2020, 52).

It brings to mind another exiled poet, Duoduo 多多 (1951–), whose 1990 short story "Huijia" 回家 (Going home) features a young Chinese man, Lee, living in a seaside town on the coast of northern England. There he finds a "Chinese" restaurant called the Phoenix whose proprietor cannot speak Chinese. But despite the inauthenticity of the restaurant and its owner, it has one attraction, a painting:

I sat for a moment, ordering neither food nor tea, but paying a tip for the sole purpose of looking at a painting on the wall [. . .]. I still came to see the painting as I grew old, but the

owner was no longer there; but the painting will still be there when I no longer exist. It was an oil painting: a towering Chinese palace amidst verdant hills, an arch nearby, a pagoda in the distance, and nothing else; that is, no human figures. The weather is calm and bright, and everything is in bloom; there is no sun, but its light fills the canvas; nothing but a magnificent structure with no signs of age or time, leaving the rise and fall of the dynasties imperceptible. I could never grow tired of looking at it. It was god-sent, that honesty and warmth of a continental topography, which no perpetually sea-gazing people could ever possess.

I thus always felt, upon leaving the Phoenix Restaurant, a sense of leaving a clinic, cured of all maladies of the heart. The light in the painting is extremely gentle, like a music, like Chinese speech.

(Lee [2002] 2021, 12The text of the story ‘Going Home’ used here is that published in *Jintian* (1992, No. 2) but takes into account hand-written modifications by the author, Duoduo. The translation is based on that made by Daniel Wang, John Crespi and myself during a translation seminar at the University of Chicago in 1994).

The fictive Phoenix restaurant with its western-style painting of an imaginary China, like the Oxford Japanese restaurant, Edamame, provides a space where reminiscence and transcendence are both possible, where “maladies” of the heart – absence, exile, nostalgia – may momentarily be assuaged.

Duo Duo’s story, just like Jennifer Wong’s poetry, obliges us to address the issue of “authenticity” and the meaning of “Chineseness”. “This city often forgets / how Chinese it is”, “Mountain City” has previously reminded us (J. Wong 2020, 4). And yet that very Chineseness, under conditions of modernity, is a result of a negotiation with western-style knowledge and practice. The fact that a modern Chinese story or poem is written in the Chinese language cannot conceal the decades of negotiation between western form and practice and the Chinese social reality that has produced it. Indeed, “questions of authenticity and cultural hybridity have haunted modern China’s culture(s) for a century at least” (Lee 1996, 17). Hong Kong – its society and culture – may be described as liminal, or in-between, but that liminality is not clear-cut; what is either side is also interleaved and multilayered. And, on a bigger canvas, the China found on the other side of a fast-disappearing threshold situates itself within a broader process of colonizing homogeneity. That process was already known and analysed over 170 years ago: “The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature” (Marx, Engels, and Isaac [1848] 2012, 77). This homogenizing, globalizing process described approvingly by Marx and Engels has indeed become a 21st-century reality. The resultant “hybridity”, a term which in itself is problematic since it is predicated upon the “authentic”, is a fact of social and material reality for most of the world, and yet the dominance and cultural imperialism inherent in it do not prevent the subversive – which may be better described as diversive, since subversion would be brought about by diverging from a dominant discourse – and progressive from being produced out of it, and through it (Lee 1996, 20).

Conclusion: A poetry conscious of the postcolonial condition

It may be impossible to undo, to de-reify, poetry written in praise of colonialism, or simply poetry which fails to reflect on colonialism. However, poetry written today can build into its fabric a consciousness of our postcolonial condition. What has often been celebrated as global literature, including world poetry, is ultimately the product of colonialism, of a lopsided world literature. But that colonial heritage – its language, its conventions, its ambitions – can be twisted and turned, its traces and reminders filtered and siphoned into a fresh and challenging poetic idiom. As a prominent theorist of postcolonialism, Albert Memmi ([1957] 1990), put it: “what does the return to the East mean, anyway. Even if the oppression has assumed the face of England or France, cultural and technical acquirements belong to all peoples” (218). Marina Tsvetaeva (1992), who dismissed all possibility of poetry assuming the mantle of nationalism, applied a similar logic when she wrote: “One becomes a poet not to be French, Russian and so on, but to be everything” (11; my translation).

The poetry of Jennifer Wong, Jennifer Lee Tsai, and Tim Tim Cheng is irreparable to any narrow notion of national belonging, for while it may eschew conventional Englishness, it also stands outside any nationalist conception of Chineseness. Indeed, in the face of received global literary culture, their achievement is to have created out of it, and to have made the particular and the personal sing above the mundanity and routine of ambient cultural homogeneity. Therein lies a significant contribution to the decolonizing of English-language poetry.

Notes

1. The work of these poets was part of a workshop project, which was a community initiative; it is available in Michelle Lacy, Lili Man, and Jessie Lim (1992).
2. After graduating from St Martins College of Art, London, Lab Ky Mo had a career writing and directing in the film, TV, advertising, and theatre industries, He now teaches film and TV at the University of Greenwich.
3. For a docufictional account of the post-war tribulations of the Chinese merchant seamen who kept open the Atlantic sea lanes for the UK and the USA during the Second World War, see Lee (2022).
4. Princes Avenue, one side of a magnificent Victorian boulevard, that leads to the imposing gates of Prince’s Park, named for Prince Edward (1841–1910), later Edward VII (1901–10), embodies the heyday of British imperialism. At the start of Princes Boulevard stands a now empty plinth which once hosted the statue commemorating William Huskisson, a pro-slave trade Member of Parliament, for whom the Georgian street in Tsai’s poem is named.
5. The poet’s note – “The line: “非礼勿视, 非礼勿听, 非礼勿言, 非礼勿动” – is a teaching from *The Analects*. Yan Yuan, Confucius’s disciple, asked about perfect virtue. Confucius said: “Look at nothing contrary to ritual, listen to nothing contrary to ritual, say nothing contrary to ritual, do nothing contrary to ritual” (J. Wong 2020, 87).
6. Cheung Po Tsai’s Cave on Hong Kong’s Cheung Chau Island is, according to legend, where Cheung Po Tsai 張保仔 (1783–1822), a Manchu naval officer and former pirate, is said to have stashed his treasure.

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