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# Hong Kong Writing Today: Cantonese, Polyglossia and the Postcolonial Condition

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## Preamble

It is difficult to locate precisely what constitutes Hong Kong writing today. For what is “today” when we speak of writing? Indeed, when was yesterday? While the “now” of Hong Kong writing might reasonably be seen as what has been created over the past decade, the political “now” is much closer to us. Politics and creativity exist in different temporalities; they may overlap but they are not coextensive. Indeed, imagining such a short moment as the past decade of Hong Kong writing may seem like a lengthy luxury compared to the condensed harsh realities of the past two or three years. So, how do Hong Kong writers, who are increasingly diasporic, respond if not by bringing their own stories, their own grains of salt to the table? And how at this moment in time can we describe the past and the tomorrow of Hong Kong’s writing and writers?

Historically, Hong Kong writing is a thoroughfare that has sprouted many spatial and linguistic byways out of the territory that once nurtured it.<sup>1</sup> Its provisional terminus is a nebulous, but increasingly populated creative diaspora. How then should we approach the prospect of such a post 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests creators’ diaspora? Should our discursive tone be hagiographic, heroic, or realistic? Is there a real prospect of a durable creative exile community taking hold? The writing that emerged after the 1989 protests in Beijing may or may not be applicable, although the circumstances are similar: numerous intellectuals and creators seeking refuge abroad pursued by the same authoritarian structure. In the case of the post-Tiananmen exiled writers over the past three decades, we have witnessed a gradual drift back to China, and that “drift” is almost complete with the return of Bei Dao to the mainland arts scene.<sup>2</sup> Apart from a few individual isolated voices such as the poet Yang Lian, or Gao Xingjian 高行健 who in any case left China of his own volition before 1989, there are currently few reminders that the prospect of post-Tiananmen extensive exile literature was seriously mooted 35 years ago.<sup>3</sup> But, for those writers and artists who decided to “go back” to China, at least they had a China to go back to. Is there or will there be a Hong Kong, as we have understood it, for Hong Kong creators to go back to? For those who have left in order to exercise the freedom to create, immediate prospects of an early return of freedoms to Hong Kong are dim, bleak even. Just recently, Andrew Chan, founder and convenor of *Societas Linguistica Hongkongensis* (SLHK) also known as 港語學 gong<sup>2</sup>jyu<sup>5</sup>hok<sup>6</sup> [Hong Kong language

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<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive attempt so far to describe Hong Kong’s literary creation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is Chi-tak Chan/Chen Zhide 陳智德, *Genzhe wo cheng : zhanhou zhi 2000 niandai de Xianggang wenxue* 《根著我城—戰後至 2000 年代的香港文學》 Rooted in My City: Hong Kong Literature from the Postwar Years to the 2000s, 新北市 Xinbei shi, Taiwan: Lianjing chuban 聯經出版, 2019. The book starts with a discussion of literary production at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s. His discussion constitutes a meticulous literary archaeology of the immediate post-war period, its importance lying in what it portended for the future. Two central parts of the book 「我城」的呈現與解體 (The appearance and dissolution of ‘My City’) and 解殖與回歸 (Decolonisation and return) tackle the literary corpus of Hong Kong from the 1970s up to the twenty-first century.

<sup>2</sup> In June 2023, Bei Dao participated in the 2023 Aranya Drama Festival 阿那亚戏剧节 in Beidaihe, Hebei Province. <http://www.cnarts.net/cweb/news/read.asp?id=485846&kind=%E8%89%BA%E6%9C%AF> (Consulted 15 August 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Yang Lian’s most recent collection is *A Tower Built Downwards* by Yang Lian, translated by Brian Holton, Heham, Bloodaxe, 2023.

study], was required by the National Security Department of the Hong Kong police to take down from a website “a work of fiction from a writing competition hosted by SLHK” three years previously; “Chan was told the piece of writing in question had violated national security law”.<sup>4</sup> The story in question, “Ngo<sup>5</sup> mun<sup>4</sup> dik<sup>1</sup> si<sup>4</sup> doi<sup>6</sup>” “我們的時代” [Our times] by Siu<sup>2</sup> Gaa<sup>1</sup> 小霞 is written in Cantonese. Chan commented: “I think promoting local culture in Hong Kong is indeed rather dangerous, because even Gongjyuhok is being accused of being pro-Hong Kong independence and anti-China.”<sup>5</sup> After the police visited his family home, Chan immediately wound up his advocacy group.<sup>6</sup>

If those who wish to promote local Hong Kong writing in Cantonese are harassed by the police and their publications censured, the prospects of serious writing in Cantonese flourishing in Hong Kong seem equally remote. Indeed, it can be said with some certainty that writing in Hong Kong has never been so threatened since the War against Japan (1937-1945) when first Hong Kong’s British colonial censors diluted the ardour of anti-Japanese journalists, and the Japanese occupiers subsequently persecuted and imprisoned Chinese writers and journalists. Beyond official disdain for writing in Cantonese, Hong Kong writers are faced with a dilemma of a different order. Both those remaining in Hong Kong and those making their way abroad need a readership, and in order to maximise that readership, they are impelled to write either in English or in standard Chinese. And since, given the increased levels of censorship in Hong Kong itself, the future for Hong Kong writers seems to lie in the diaspora, the “choice” of their language of expression will remain constrained.

For some years now Hong Kong’s literary culture has no longer been limited to the former colony itself, and Hong Kong writers continue to spread out around the world. Such is the case of the poet Jennifer Wong 王詠思 who lives in England and writes in English, or Tammy Ho 何麗明 who also writes in English and has recently settled in France. Others who write in standard Chinese, known as “book-style” Chinese or syu<sup>1</sup> min<sup>6</sup> jyu<sup>5</sup> 書面語, such as Chan Ho-Kei 陳浩基, have found a readership in Taiwan.

So, if diasporic writing is the future for Hong Kong’s creators, can Hong Kong writing maintain an identity separate from “Chinese” writing, where “Chinese” is understood to mean writers emanating from mainland China? Or, is Hong Kong writing destined to be absorbed into a cloudy matrix of Chinese diasporic writing? Is it too idealistic to conceive of a diasporic, creative “third space” beyond China and beyond Hong Kong? Does it make sense to talk of a monolithic Hong Kong creative diaspora, or are there simply local manifestations of diaspora, multiple spaces both geographically and linguistically? In fact, isn’t a diaspora always fragmented as its Greek origins, *diaspeirein*, “scatter”, suggest? All of which begs the question, is there then a “Hong Kong identity”? Are there not already multiple identities?

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<sup>4</sup> Irene Chan, “Hong Kong Cantonese-language advocacy group closes after national security police raid founder’s home” <https://hongkongfp.com/2023/08/28/hong-kong-cantonese-language-advocacy-group-closes-after-national-security-police-raid-founders-home/> [Last accessed 28 August 2023].

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Mary Hui, “Hong Kong’s new public enemy: the Cantonese language”, *Quartz*, 28 August 2023 <https://qz.com/hong-kong-s-new-public-enemy-the-cantonese-language-1850780591> Consulted 29 August 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Irene Chan, “Hong Kong Cantonese-language advocacy group closes”.

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## 1. Emergence and Evolution of Hong Kong Writing

Before discussing the evolution of Hong Kong literature over the past half century, let us deal with another consequence of recent political events. The political repression in Hong Kong over the past few years has led some to regret the passing of the old regime. However much of yesterday's Hong Kong may seem preferable to today's on a number of fronts, the passing of British Hong Kong is not to be mourned. What is regrettable is the manner in which Hong Kong was abandoned with no say given to its people over its future. However, the fact that the regime that succeeded British colonialism in 1997 has since become increasingly repressive cannot be deployed to retrospectively justify Britain's nineteenth-century imperial adventures. The fact that Hong Kong was "returned" – without the Hong Kong people's agreement – to a China that until just over a century ago did not exist as a nation-state cannot be used to justify its remaining a part of Britain's crumbled empire. Britain's defeat of the Qing state in the mid-nineteenth century "opium wars" was part of the UK's worldwide imperialist expansion, and historically was in large part constitutive of the imagining and making of China the nation-state, that same nation-state that demanded and acquired the 1997 "return" of Hong Kong. Yet, the largely separate evolution of the territory of Hong Kong parallel to the march of events on mainland China after the conclusion of the first "Opium War" (1839-1842) until the handover in 1997, has produced a socio-cultural entity entirely different to that of mainland China.

In terms of the story of Hong Kong writing, it is a comparatively short segment of Hong Kong's history since 1842 that concerns us. The story starts, and can only start, after the "Liberation" 解放 of 1949 and the exodus of much of China's creative talent in the 1950s. To that we must add the mass immigration of the 1960s and 1970s that would provide the public, the listener, the viewer, the reader and the consumer of Hong Kong's new culture, and later on its pool of home-grown creative talent.

While Hong Kong is more or less familiar to the anglophone reader, its creativity exists only in a very vague way in the popular non-sinophone imagination. While Hong Kong cinema, produced notably by Wong Kar-wai 王家衛, Tsui Hark 徐克, John Woo 吳宇森 has for several decades enjoyed a cult following by fans of 'Asian' cinema, the same cannot be said for its literature. In any case, how do we understand and define Hong Kong literature? Is it simply another form of literature written in Chinese? Yes and no, because sometimes Hong Kong writers express themselves in the language of the former colonisers, English. What's more, even when Hong Kong writers write in Chinese, it's not necessarily in standard Chinese, although that is usually the case. So, while it is true that there has been a dearth of Chinese to English translations, again not all Hong Kong literature was and is produced in Chinese.

For now, before attempting to provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of this question, we can say that Hong Kong literature is written by people who were born in Hong Kong or who have lived there for a long time, whether or not they still live there, and that often, but not exclusively, their writing deals with Hong Kong, or increasingly Hong Kong diasporic, life.

## 2. Linguistic Landscape

First, let us address the polyglossia of the landscape of Hong Kong society and its diaspora. To the non-Chinese reader, the non-speaker of Chinese languages, the linguistic topography of modern Hong

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Kong may seem complex and opaque. 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 used to distinguish the many homophones present in these languages. But, whereas modern standard Chinese has only four tones, Cantonese has six (or nine if you include 'verified syllables'). Vowels and consonants are dissimilar between different Chinese languages and lexical distinctions are significant. The syntax of Cantonese is very different from that of Mandarin. All in all, the two languages are mutually incomprehensible. Cantonese is further from Mandarin than Spanish is from Portuguese. Furthermore, in written form while the two languages share a large number of "Chinese" characters, there are characters in Cantonese that do not exist in standard written Chinese, hence the need for a Cantonese "additional character set" for printing, word processing and electronic communication.

That said, the written Chinese that is taught in schools and used in "serious" literature and journalism is based on the written form of the national language itself based on northern Mandarin, which follows the grammar and characters of mainland China and is known as "shumianyu" /syu<sup>1</sup> min<sup>6</sup> jyu<sup>5</sup> 書面語, bookish or written language. When this written language is spoken by Cantonese speakers, Cantonese values are given to the characters. There is little or no transfer from the living, everyday language of Hong Kong to this written language.

Perhaps, surprisingly, the vast majority of Cantopop lyrics are written in standard written Chinese, but pronounced in Cantonese when sung, thus constituting a hybrid language that no-one ever uses in speech. In other words, Cantopop lyrics obey the syntactic and also, by and large, the lexical norms of standard Chinese. In this way, Cantopop, which belongs to the popular domain, joins written poetry, which belongs to the scholarly domain. In Cantopop songs, it is this language that nobody speaks that has prevailed.

Once confined to the popular press and comic strips, it is only in recent years that a movement towards writing in Cantonese, using the syntax and characters specific to this language, has become more attractive. There is no doubt that the idea that Hong Kong's autonomy, and for some the dream of independence, the aspiration to nationhood with its own language –an idea rooted in the nationalisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries –has played a role in the rise of written Cantonese. However, it is one thing to indulge in the everyday subversion of authority and linguistic norms that comes from speaking a spoken colloquial language, it is much harder to work towards the establishment of a language that can challenge the dominant linguistic order in all its socio-cultural and institutional aspects. As we have already demonstrated, in the main, writers still prefer to write in English or standard Chinese. Witness a recent number of the diasporic literary zine *Canto Cutie* 藝文聚粵: *Art and Literature Zine of the Cantonese Diaspora* (Volume 5, August 2022) "curated" by Katherine Leung which aims to promote a sense of global Cantoneseness.<sup>7</sup> The zine seems to be focussed on creating a community: "Your Cantonese family can be the words on the page, from people you've never met, from countries you've never been to." The majority of contributions are in English, some in English with a standard Chinese text in parallel, but of the more than thirty writers represented only one chose to write in Cantonese.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cantocutie.com> Consulted 24 August 2023. Contributors are based predominantly in the USA and Hong Kong. The "From the Editor" blurb is given in English, followed by standard Chinese.

Following the logic of the *Canto Cutie* zine's editors, Cantonese-ness can be traced from the Cantonese language, the language spoken originally and principally in the province of Guangdong/Gwong<sup>2</sup>dong<sup>1</sup> 廣東 whose capital was and is Canton 廣州 Gwong<sup>2</sup>zau<sup>1</sup>. It was this language that was then transformed in the second half of the twentieth century into the Cantonese of Hong Kong. However, the Cantonese-ness alluded to by *Canto Cutie* is not necessarily contingent on language, it is Gwong<sup>2</sup>dung<sup>1</sup>waa<sup>6</sup> 廣東話 minus the 'waa<sup>6</sup>'話. Thus, the "Cantonese family" could be defined as those who either speak Cantonese or in the diaspora are descended from those who do/did, but who do not necessarily use the written Cantonese language to articulate their sense of identity.

The one zine contribution that is written in Cantonese is by the writer calling themselves P.asiatica who has vowed to "dedicate their life to studying and promoting Cantonese." It is a story entitled "兆萬二樓電梯對面第一間舖" [The first shop facing the lift on the second floor of the CMTA Centre (Hong Kong)]:

筆者冀望可以以此拙筆，抒發對香港時地人、聲色味嘅思念之情，將呢份難以言喻嘅鄉愁，具體咁帶到你眼前。以粵文書寫，正係為咗可以最貼地、最真實咁呈現香港嘅城市面貌、香港人嘅單戀故事、港留界香港人嘅情意結，呢個無法解開嘅情意結。呢篇離散港人嘅傷春悲秋，希望會引起到離散海外嘅粵商朋友有所共鳴，吐苦水無聊極全少可以圍下爐啊嘛。又或者想圍爐只需要分享一句廣東歌，概括一切思鄉苦戀愁緒：

「盼望你能被照顧得開心/ 遙距與我共渡餘生」

[The writer hopes that the writing can evoke a sense of place for the people in Hong Kong, as it captures nostalgia for the reader. As it was written in Cantonese, it can better reflect the outlook of the city of Hong Kong, their stories of unrequited longing, and their unreconciled emotions. This stirring piece about the diasporic Hong Kong people is set to appeal to those Cantonese-speaking community who have moved abroad. Or, one can convey that sense of community gathering and nostalgia through the lyrics of "Every Time You Left" (每[mui5]次[chi3]你[nei5]走[jau2]的[dik1]時[si4]分[fan6]), a Cantopop by my little airport: 'Hope that you'll be cared for and happy /Spending the rest of our lives together from afar.')

Through the story of an ambiguous relationship's end, 'CTMA Center' explores the connections between 'people' and 'places' in our memories. Leaving a person, leaving a place-both force us into new worlds we have to get used to, both cause a paradigm shift in the truth we know. When all your memories with someone you've said goodbye to feature the same city as its backdrop, the same language in its narration when you remember the past, what shows up most clearly in your mind's eye? Is it the main character, the people, or the city it all took place in?

The author hopes to express their nostalgia for Hong Kong, and to show this sense of longing in the most realistic, 3D way possible. It is exactly for this reason that this piece was written in Cantonese. Hopefully, this diasporic Hongkonger's yearning for the past can be relatable for Cantonese-speaking friends who, too, have left home for a new future.

Or perhaps expressing what is relatable only needs a line from a Cantopop song:

‘Hope that you’ll be cared for and happy /Spending the rest of our lives together from afar’<sup>8</sup>

Despite the determined perseverance of the writer cited, for most writers in the diaspora, the promotion of written Cantonese as a literary mode of expression is not a high priority. Indeed, what we see in the diaspora is the persistence of a linguistic mosaic in which English is prevalent, while in Hong Kong itself both English and standard written Chinese *shumianyu* (or syu1 min6 jyu5 in Cantonese 書面語) are the most privileged linguistic vehicles for creative expression. The commitment to using and promoting written Cantonese remains a minor consideration.

Before concluding this cursory survey of Hong Kong language(s), a last, essential feature of Hong Kong’s linguistic topography needs addressing. While the “bookish language”, *shumianyu* (standard written Chinese), is a modern language, whether it is pronounced in Cantonese, Mandarin or another Chinese language, for well over two thousand years, the language of elite culture, of poetry, of philosophy, but also of state administration in much of the area we now call China was *wenyan* 文言. Whatever modern language a Chinese person speaks today, to access pre-modern *wenyan* texts, they have to learn it, just as an Italian has to learn Latin to access Cicero in the original. Mandarin is no closer to *wenyan* than Cantonese, in fact it is even less so. So, it is not not speaking Mandarin that excludes a someone from the pre-modern tradition. However, what does make access to the pre-modern language more difficult is the abandonment of full-form or *zhengtizi* 正體字, sometimes called *fantizi* 繁體字, or non-simplified characters in favour of the simplified *jiantizi* 簡體字 characters in use in the PRC since the 1950s. Cantonese, like modern Chinese from Taiwan, uses *zhengtizi* 正體字, non-simplified full-form or “traditional” characters. In Hong Kong today, another linguistic battle is being waged to defend the teaching of these “traditional” characters in schools.

Language and language policy are at the heart of recent and current developments. Since 1949, mainland Cantonese – long considered the standard and indeed the fount of “pure” Cantonese – and Hong Kong Cantonese have diverged considerably. Over the last 25 years, the use of Cantonese in mainland China has been increasingly restricted, and the Cantonese language has been infused, one might even say colonised, by Putonghua, the national language based on spoken Mandarin. In other words, lexically, mainland Cantonese increasingly resembles the homogeneous language promoted by the Chinese authorities on mainland China.

In Hong Kong, governmental initiatives have been launched to bring the use of the Cantonese language more into line with practices on the continent. The policy of introducing standardised simplified Chinese characters in the classroom is a first step. Once again, although teachers speak Cantonese, it is *shumianyu*, the bookish language, that is used exclusively in Hong Kong classrooms where written Cantonese is absent. The abandonment of traditional characters will have an impact on the ability to read written Cantonese and will necessarily lead to a dilution of its influence.

Cantonese is a living language and, over the years, it has incorporated many elements of the English language that dominated Hong Kong's political and financial world for so long. But, while

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<sup>8</sup> *Canto Cutie*, Vol. 5, p. 150.

mainland Chinese Cantonese and Hong Kong Cantonese have diverged considerably in terms of lexicon, and also in pronunciation, the central government views both varieties with equal suspicion, as it does the use of any non-standard language. Plurality is chaos, while a unitary entity seems more controllable.<sup>9</sup>

Since the advent of Xi Jinping's presidency in 2012, the push for cultural and linguistic homogeneity has increased considerably. This strategy is historically well known and commonly practised by authoritarian, colonialist and centralising regimes. "One people, one nation, one language" has been the clarion call of many a twentieth-century nation-building project, and the People's Republic of China is no exception.

### 3. Mapping Hong Kong Literature

In the 1950s and 1960s, the colony of Hong Kong served as a refuge for writers and other creative people from mainland China, particularly from the cultural metropolis of Shanghai. For some, Hong Kong was only a temporary refuge. The now renowned novelist Zhang Ailing 張愛玲 left Shanghai in the early 1950s and moved to Hong Kong, where she wrote two novels before leaving definitively for the United States in 1955. This world of émigré writers largely spoke Mandarin or Shanghainese, and in many respects, writing in Hong Kong was simply a continuation of a Shanghainese modernist tradition that had begun in the late 1920s. Indeed, as Chi-tak Chan 陳智德 has noted, émigré writers in the main resisted the pull of Hongkongness. For instance, the Shanghai author Xu Xu, or Hsu Yu 徐訏 (1908-1980) whose writing had long been criticized by mainland leftist critics quit China for Hong Kong in 1950; his writing in Hong Kong was marked by a refusal to be "Hongkongized" – 徐訏拒絕被「香港化」的心志 – in a vain attempt to preserve his "Shanghainess".<sup>10</sup>

In the domain of poetry, a similar attachment to the "New Poetry" or Xinshi 新詩 that had developed in different directions in pre-1949 China marked the poetry produced in 1950s Hong Kong. Pro-Communist or "leftist" poets such as Dai Wangshu 戴望舒 returned to mainland China from the Hong Kong where they had taken refuge first during the War Against Japan (1937-1945) and again during the ensuing Civil War between Communists and Nationalists. But at the same time, others unconvinced that the post-1949 Communist-ruled China held a future for them and who were labelled sometimes unjustly, "right-wing", moved to Hong Kong often as a stepping stone to "the West": "As the leftists went north, the southbound writers dominated the literary scene of 1950s Hong Kong. They had a few

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<sup>9</sup> Moreover, since the contestation of Hong Kong's populace in 2019, Chinese central government fears that Hong Kong demands for freedoms and democracy like a 'contagion' might spread to the contiguous Province of Guangdong have made the Cantonese language even more intolerable to the authorities. See Viola Zhou, "Chinese livestreamers say [the Chinese video-sharing platform] Douyin is cutting off non-Mandarin speakers: Social media companies are under pressure to censor content in Cantonese and other regional languages", *Rest of the World: Reporting Global Tech Stories*, <https://restofworld.org/2022/douyin-cantonese-livestreamers-mandarin/>, 13 October 2022. Accessed 23 September 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Chi-tak Chan 陳智德, *Genzhe wo cheng : zhanhou zhi 2000 niandai de Xianggang wenxue* 《根著我城—戰後》 in *Canto Cutie*, <<https://www.cantocutie.com>>, p. 225.



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observable similarities: they were considered right-wing, in opposition to the communist left; they considered themselves temporary sojourners in Hong Kong....”<sup>11</sup>

What we understand by the Cantonese-speaking culture of Hong Kong today owes its existence to immigration in the 1960s and 1970s; the majority of immigrants came from the neighbouring province of Guangdong/Gwong<sup>2</sup> Dung<sup>1</sup>, where their first language was Cantonese.<sup>12</sup> As a result, even those who came from Shanghai, such as Wong Kar-wai 王家衛 and Liu Yichang 劉以鬯 (1918-2018), found themselves obliged to speak Cantonese, the dominant language of daily life.

For the majority of the writers active on the Hong Kong literary scene of the 1960s to the present day, writing in Hong Kong represented resistance against ideological straitjackets from the 1950s onwards. Writing in Chinese—in any Chinese language – also embodied resistance against the British colonial regime.

Talking about decoloniality in such circumstances is complicated. In the 1950s, in the era of global territorial decolonization, not only did Hong Kong’s governance and its institutions evolve to resemble those of a major early twentieth-century British colony rather than that of colonies being prepared for post-war independence, but Hong Kong’s population was also expanding massively due to the increasing number of political and economic refugees emanating from mainland China.<sup>13</sup> As Hong Kong entered the 1980s, the heyday of Cantonese popular culture and a collective sentiment of Hongkongness, politically the territory was not being prepared for decolonisation at all. Rather it was being readied for British withdrawal, and by 1982 it was already agreed over the heads of Hong Kong’s people that its colonial status was merely to be transferred to the People’s Republic of China in 1997.

In the cultural domain, after the 1967 anti-government riots which coincided with the beginnings of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) over the border, the UK colonial authorities not only instituted socio-economic reforms, but sought a cultural Chineseness distinguishable both from Communist China’s and that of the Nationalists on Taiwan. They found it in allowing the use of the Cantonese language for orally-conducted everyday life and entertainment, and in promoting a standard written Chinese for written communications and legislation.

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<sup>11</sup> Chris Song, “Ronald Mar and the Trope of Life: The Translation of Western Modernist Poetry in Hong Kong” in Maghiel Van Crevel and Lucas Klein (eds.), *Chinese Poetry and Translation: Rights and Wrongs* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 201), p. 251.

<sup>12</sup> Wayne C. F. Yeung in “The Concept of the Cantophone: Memorandum for a Stateless Literary History”, *Sino-Platonic Papers*, No. 334, June 2023 *passim*, makes a case for a Cantophone literature existing in the Hong Kong context as far back as the early twentieth century. However, in terms of relatively widespread production and reception, writing in Cantonese in Hong Kong only comes into its own post-1949.

<sup>13</sup> In 1946, the first post-war British governor, Sir Mark Young, promised a project of greater autonomy, the “Young Plan”. But his successor, Sir Alexander Grantham, governor from 1947 to 1957, worked in the opposite sense. Although a decolonizing “wind of change” had swept across British Asia in the aftermath of Britain’s World War Two humiliation in the “Far East”, the onset of the Cold War eased pressure from the United States for territorial decolonization. Hong Kong was seen as strategically too important to allow it to be governed locally by people who risked being Communist sympathizers.

Cantonese popular, mass culture starting in the 1970s created an alternative space that was and remains very clearly distinct both from communist culture written in standard Chinese and from the English-speaking culture of the colonisers. But the history of the emergence of this culture is complex, but in large part a consequence of a colonial policy from 1970-1980 which encouraged this Cantonese culture, or at least tolerated it in order to insulate the local population and to alienate them from both the mainland Chinese authorities and those on Taiwan.

In terms of the mingling between literary Cantonese and Cantonese popular cultural expression, while there has been a certain complicity between Cantonese cinema and Hong Kong novelists, beneath the surface there is a wide gulf between literature and film culture, a culture closer to Hong Kong manga steeped in street Cantonese and triad slang.<sup>14</sup> In the 1980s, gangster films such as John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* 《英雄本色》 (1986), whose box-office success resounded throughout Asia, became very popular. Gangster films provided a cathartic release from the drudgery of everyday life and like Hong Kong manga they also foregrounded and celebrated vernacular language and culture. Cantonese, recognised alongside English as the official spoken language of the British colonial administration since the late 1960s, had taken a dominant position in popular cultural expression, on radio, on television and, of course, in film; the old Mandarin-speaking Shaw Brothers cinema that had been the mainstay of Hong Kong's film industry in the 1970s started to give way to the language of the majority, Cantonese. But when it came to writing, there was, and still is, a separation between popular cultural products such as comic strips and the popular press on the one hand, and what might be considered "serious literature" of a higher linguistic register on the other. Moreover, the British colonial masters did not provide a terrain the specificity of Hong Kong's linguistic and cultural practices; no encouragement was given to the colonised's language, Cantonese, as a medium for literary and academic discourse, quite the contrary. Thus, the cultural, educational and linguistic landscape was fragmented into different linguistic registers of Cantonese, into the use of standard Chinese in schools and in official business, while English was still dominant as an elite educational and high cultural language. Such linguistic fragmentation facilitated the encroachment of Putonghua 普通話 when in 1997 sovereignty over Hong Kong was transferred to the mainland authorities. Mandarin gathered pace as did the insistence on schools teaching the simplified characters used in the People's Republic of China rather than the full-form characters used in Hong Kong and on Taiwan. Since no attempt had ever been made to promote or recognize written Cantonese as a worthy alternative to standard written Chinese or *shumianyu* 書面語, resistance to mainland linguistic reforms has been restricted to arguments over the use of simplified or full-form characters. Ultimately, the policy of the central authorities in Beijing is to harmonise the writing system and eventually replace the Cantonese spoken language with Putonghua (Mandarin). At the same time, as we have seen, the progress of those promoting the use of Cantonese as a written language has been very slow and hampered by the recent political turn. For while those seeking to maintain Hong Kong's autonomy have sought to articulate those sentiments through the promotion of written Cantonese, in "the age of the

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<sup>14</sup> The now legendary and unique example of Hong Kong filmic/literary intertextuality (the relationship between two or more texts whether literary or visual) is that of the reworking by Wong Kar-wai in his films *In the Mood for Love*/花樣年華 (2000) and *2046* (2004) and Liu Yichang's novels *對倒* *Intersection* (1993) and *酒徒* *The Drunkard* (1963) respectively.

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National Security Law prompting Hong Kong into yet another wave of emigration at the time of writing [2023]... the future(s) of the Cantophone remains an open question".<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Martinique/Hong Kong

Cantonese literature in many ways faces a similar fate to twentieth-century French Caribbean creole writing. Cantonese writing exists as a credible alternative to dominant standard Chinese, but can it touch a wide enough readership? Rafael Confiant, born in 1951, has invested tremendous energy and time in crafting his native French Caribbean Creole into a literary language. In the 1970s and 1980s, he compiled a dictionary and wrote and published his early novels in Creole thereby demonstrating the viability of Creole as a literary language. But, lacking a readership, he resorted to standard French for the remainder of his oeuvre. While the “flavour” of Martinique still infuses his work, the linguistic medium is standard French. Cantonese, on the other hand, already exists, and has the capacity to become a viable and aesthetically pleasing vehicle for literary expression. Unlike the Creole of Confiant which can at best reach a readership in the tens of thousands, Cantonese has a much larger potential readership. However, the likelihood is that serious writing in Cantonese will remain a minor element in the linguistic mosaic that is Hong Kong literature in the twenty-first century and that English and standard Chinese will continue to be the dominant languages for written creative expression both in Hong Kong and its diaspora. Thus, Hong Kong writers wherever they are—just like francophone Caribbean writers—may have to accept both being in their language, yet simultaneously beyond it, in that of the colonisers, the former or the current. Like French Caribbean novelists, poets and playwrights, exponents of Hong Kong and Hong Kong diasporic creative writing find themselves in a condition of polyglossia. Henri Meschonnic noted, alluding to Charles Bally’s *Linguistique générale et linguistique française* (1965), that we are born into and are formed by our initial language and we all “have had, and still have a childhood in that language.”<sup>16</sup> And yet the vast majority of us are obliged to co-exist beyond that language of childhood, in the languages of regnant authorities, of the elite, of the colonisers. Hong Kong writers are for now fated to be both outside the system, yet within it. Such is after all the reality of the postcolonial condition: to strive to overcome the constraints of the system you are part of, a part of you must remain within it. A choice of languages has not always been available for the Hong Kong diasporic writer, and for many that remains the case. Before the 1960s many UK Chinatown families were “mixed-race”, usually with a Chinese father and a white, often Irish, mother. The first half of the twentieth century was the heyday of the Yellow Peril discourse and most children of such families did what they could to hide their Chineseness, their hybridity; their desire was simply to integrate, to be unremarked. There was no incentive to acquire or use Chinese. That situation slowly evolved with the 1960s arrival of immigrants from Hong Kong, which led to a cultural hybridity: Chinese culture at home, British at school. Second-generation immigrant writers such as the now successful English-language poet, Jennifer Lee Tsai, were part of that generation. Their only way forward was via the English education system. A later second-generation writer is the Hong Kong Chinese Welsh Angela Hui. Of Hong Kong parents, born and brought up in the Welsh valleys, enslaved to the routine of the family-run Chinese take-away throughout her childhood, with parents who far from mastered the English language, whose lingua franca with their children was basic Cantonese, Hui in her book *Takeaway* reveals the mundanely sordid and sad under-

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<sup>15</sup> Yeung, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Henri Meschonnic, *La rime et la vie* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1989), p. 30.

belly of the life of thousands of children brought up in Hong Kong Chinese immigrant catering families. Forced, like many of her generation, to attend Chinese-language Sunday school, struggling through standard written high school Chinese examinations, and with the Welsh language humming in the background of her almost totally white village, Hui emerged to tell her story inevitably in English.<sup>17</sup> Languages we are born into, and our ability to exploit them, are not then simply a function of ethnicity, but of class. And nowhere is more class-ridden than modern Britain, with the exception, that is, of the British colony. We often forget that in Hong Kong, the writers we admire most, such as the poet Yesi 也斯 or Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞 (1949-2013), fought their way up from socially and culturally deprived circumstances, from a lowly immigrant status. Very few of that first generation of post-1949 Hong Kong writers enjoyed the luxury of a choice of languages in which to express themselves. The local schools taught them standard written Chinese 書面語 through the spoken medium of Cantonese. The teaching of the coloniser's language was scant and basic, and very few would go on to write in English. So, the attainment of writers of that period was a product of the struggle for recognition of the local colonised community and its culture. Writers both campaigned for it and represented it.

### 5. Coda: Beyond Diasporic Nostalgia

Whichever language they choose, or are obliged to use to express themselves, Hong Kong diasporic writers in these times cannot easily escape a Hong Kong that is constantly in and on their minds. Indeed, far from wishing to escape, they may find solace, a way of surviving in their imaginary proximity to their old home. Far be it from academics in their ivory towers cloaked in the mists of "objectivity" to lecture the Hong Kong writer. Yet, might not full autonomy and agency lie in getting beyond self-representation, in writing, as we must all now write in these apocalyptic times, about climate change, war, the future of our children. Hong Kong Chinese writers, and those who publish them, will have crossed a threshold when they no longer sense the need to focus on self-representation, but feel free to address issues of planetary importance. In other words, when they can do something other than they are encouraged or expected to by literary and academic establishments.

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<sup>17</sup> Angela Hui, *Takeaway: Stories from a Childhood Behind the Counter*, (London, Trapeze, 2022). It is a story fictionalized in the superficially comic, but colder and starker novel by Timothy Mo, *Sour Sweet* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1982).

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