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Writing Between Languages

What is a foreign language, and what is a native one? Are the boundaries clear?

Living in Hong Kong is an experience of living in several languages. Every road sign that appears on the street of this city is written in both Chinese and English. English was long the official language for this former British Colony. It is still a medium of instruction as well as a common language used in the commercial sector. We use the rapidly changing Cantonese to fill up the daily dialogue, yet we automatically shift into English when we reply to an email. The first language I learned from my parents and forgot gradually as I grew up is, in fact, the Chaozhou dialect. Parents who were immigrants from mainland China in the earlier days still talk to us in their specific Chinese dialect when people of my generation return home. With the handover of Hong Kong from the British to the Mainland Chinese in 1997, Mandarin has its growing importance in the commercial and political sector. Now we are trying very hard to practice a language that we are unfamiliar with. To us, hovering among languages is also hovering among different roles and identities.

So are we writing in a mother tongue when we write in Chinese? Do we feel at home? The standard written Chinese we use nowadays is a language which is developed from the “written vernacular Chinese” (白話文) introduced in the New Cultural movement to replace classical Chinese about a hundred years ago. It is a written vernacular based mainly on Mandarin. Most of the people of Hong Kong would not regard it as easier to write in Chinese than English. To us, this written Chinese is neither Mandarin nor Cantonese. It is a language that one learns directly from printed matters, a language pronounced in Cantonese yet with a very different vocabulary and grammatical rules. So when we start to write, we are already being detached from our daily life; we are already somebody else.

Using a language that is not taken for granted should be regarded as a good opportunity and not a detriment to writing. It is a language of distance and requires meditation.

In the book, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Ackbar Abbas described Hong Kong’s culture as “decadence.” He defined this term by describing an energy that gets largely channeled into one direction, the economic sphere. As Abbas said, “Historical imagination, the citizen’s belief that they might have a hand in shaping their own history, gets replaced by speculation on the property or stock markets, or by an obsession with fashion or consumerism.” It is difficult for one to explain his identity as a writer in Hong Kong. For most people in Hong Kong, local literature does not even exist. Reading “serious” literature is such an embarrassing act that a public intellectual once said he had to hide his book behind a porn magazine while reading on public transportation. Rather paradoxically in such a commercial city,

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 16, 2011:

Ajit Baral (Nepal), Alexandra Petrova (Italy),
Nell Regan (Ireland) and Dorothy Tse (Hong Kong)
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the boundary between literature and the popular culture is distinct.

In the field of literature, “written vernacular Chinese” has undergone great changes in different Chinese-speaking regions since 1949 when the communist government ruled over mainland China. For instance, contrary to the mainland literature that tried to borrow languages from the working class as well as the farmers in the 50s as a way to reach the public, Hong Kong’s literature has a tradition of resistance to the language of daily life. Its highly experimental language is a strategy to distinguish a literary work from an entertaining and commercial one. In Hong Kong, writing itself is an active rejection of utilitarian society and mundane everyday life.

Take *The Drinker*, a novel written by a Hong Kong writer Liu Yichang (劉以鬯) in the 60s, as an example. It is regarded as the first Chinese novel to adapt the technique of stream of consciousness. The first person narrator modeled on the writer was a man of high literacy who came from Shanghai during the Chino-Japanese War. He, once an editor of a literary magazine, was forced to write pornographic novels in Hong Kong in order to make a living. He could only express his view on literature when he was drunk in a fragmented yet poetic language. This experimental language is not only created to simulate the stream of consciousness of the drinker, but also to provide a space for one to escape from the reality of everyday life and the trapped self.

To escape from a commercial city under British rule does not imply the identification with a Chinese nationality or traditional Chinese culture. While there were heated debates over “motherland literature” (鄉土文學) during the 70s in Taiwan, and there was a cultural and literary movement named “root-searching” (尋根) in the 80s in mainland China, the image of land or soil seldom appears in Hong Kong’s literature. In Hong Kong, writing is never an act that naturally brings one to the theme of nationality or cultural tradition.

Instead of motherland, the “floating city” (浮城) is a widely accepted image introduced by Xi Xi (西西) in her famous short story written during the 80s, which borrows from a painting by Rene Magritte to describe Hong Kong’s situation of in-betweenness. As described in the story, it is a city that hangs in the sky between the clouds above and the sea below—that is, China and Britain, respectively.

It is the writer’s language that should be described as floating as well, a language that is in between. It is dangerous to hang in the sky, yet it is this dangerous situation that makes the miracle of a city, as well as its literature, possible.
