

## Canto-culture – Loving a Floating City

By Fred Armentrout

*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.*

From *Marvels of a Floating City and Other Stories*, by Xi Xi  
(translated by Eva Hung), Renditions Paperbacks, 1997

Allegory and fable meet the surrealism of the Belgian artist Rene Magritte in this remarkable suite of thirteen word sketches about Hong Kong, each accompanied by a matching reproduction from Magritte's work. This diary of her city's state of mind in the tense 1980s and 1990s represents an exercise in creative discourse between art forms.

In trying to depict this singular state of mind, she is not alone. Xi Xi is a leading member of a group of modern Hong Kong fiction writers, all of whom portray their city, its society and aspirations, as something apart from the rest of China just across the mainland border. They are not antagonistic toward it, in fact are clearly Chinese themselves, but they are struggling to describe a place and a populace that often has different dreams. In brief, they try to define a Hong Kong identity that goes beyond the mere political, and at times reflects the fact that their thinking and writing is shaped by Cantonese, or even English, as well as by the mainland's official Mandarin.

**Xi Xi (b. 1938, family name: Zhang Yan)** is the foremost contemporary Hong Kong Chinese creative writer. She is proof that there exists a rich, intellectually vigorous and imaginative 'Hong Kong Literature,' albeit precious little of it in English translation. Writing since the early 1960s, Xi Xi and her circle of writers is clearly influenced by South America's school of 'Magical Realism,' led by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. North America's 'Imagists,' like Ezra Pound, and the Beats writers—Gary Snyder, Frank O'Hara, Alan Ginsberg—also resonate in its poetry.

Xi Xi invents a floating city that resembles Magritte's *Castle in the Pyrenees*, with its floating people:

*There is just one thing somewhat special about the typhoon season, and that has to do with the dreams of its citizens. With the arrival of May, people in the floating city start dreaming the same dream In this dream everyone is floating in mid air; they neither rise up to the heavens, nor do they drop down to earth – everyone is just like a small floating city. The floating humans do not have wings, which means they cannot fly. All they do is stay afloat in the air, silently, solemnly, with no means of communication between them.*

*The city sky is afloat with people like raindrops in an April shower... Why should everyone in the city share the same dream of being afloat in the air? One school of psychologists has drawn this conclusion: this is a collective manifestation of the Third-Side-of-the-Straits Complex.*

The allusion is to the Taiwan Straits, and Hong Kong's being the third leg of the Beijing policy formulation of "One Country, Two Systems" that saw the city as a model for eventual reunification with Taiwan.

The sketch, entitled "Sudden Showers," perfectly complements and is complemented by the disturbing surrealist vision of Magritte's *Golconda*, wherein the sky is raining men in bowler hats—or has the earth released them from its gravity and suspended them forever?

The final sketch in this allegorical *tour de force* of a writer at her peak, moving easily between Cantonese and Mandarin worlds and between Chinese and Western sensibilities, is entitled "Window". It summarizes in fable just what is "Hong Kong's problem" and that most dwelled upon by its best writers:

*As for those who haven't come, it's not that they are not curious about the city; no, many of them are actually quite concerned about it. And so they stand outside and look into the city through an open window. Their hands hang by their sides, making it obvious that they cannot offer any practical assistance. But to observe is a kind of participation, too, for to observe is to monitor...*

Xi Xi's translator is Eva Hung, who formerly ran the Research Centre for Translation at Chinese University and edited their semi-annual journal, *Renditions*, (<http://www.renditions.org>) for over 20 years. She has translated the book discussed here, plus *A Girl Like Me and Other Stories* and *My City*, as Renditions paperbacks. Her own comments offer clues to the origins of today's self-consciously Hong Kong Chinese writers, at once proudly local in their habitation and assertively Cantonese. As she wrote some years ago:

*...while identity is usually defined by "sameness", it is thrown into much sharper focus when confronted with "difference", and Hong Kong's proximity to China means that its citizens have always been keenly aware of the differences which exist between the two places. The articles written in the 1960s by a group of young men and women on Hong Kong's identity are but some of the more explicit manifestations of the deliberations which have been going on for decades.*

*Moments of crisis tend to make people explore and confront their sense of identity and allegiance with greater urgency, and Hong Kong has experienced many such moments in the few decades following World War II: the flood of refugees who arrived in the early 1950s; the riots of 1967 to 1968 which took place as a result of the Cultural Revolution in China, and the resultant wave of emigration; the Protect Diaoyu Island Movement and the fight for official recognition of the Chinese language in the early 1970s; China's Open Door policy of the late 1970s and its impact on Hong Kong's social and economic*

*structure...The imminent change of sovereignty is but the latest – though the most prolonged – crisis Hong Kong has faced in its recent history. Such experience and trials have been the proving ground out of which shared values and a common identity have emerged...Xi Xi is in many ways representative of this generation of creative writers.*

**Eileen Chang (1920-1995, Chinese name: Zhang Ailing)**, is Hong Kong literature's foremost intellectual heroine and widely considered the finest modern mainland Chinese writer, based on work she wrote within a three-year period during World War Two. *Love in a Fallen City*, set in war-torn Hong Kong, is her most renowned novelette and was made into a popular film in Taiwan. This year it was re-issued in the U.S. by the New York Review of Books, and once again earned much praise.

Chang studied literature at University of Hong Kong before returning to her native Shanghai after the Japanese invaded Hong Kong, and so has historical resonances with the city, which she frequently uses as a literary backdrop. To understand how Hong Kong's Chinese writers see themselves, it helps to understand the influential Chang's world view. Her life's crises and her finest works came together in Hong Kong and in this she has kinship with the life and creative situation of every Hong Kong Chinese writer.

One example of her influence is *Hong Kong Collage, Contemporary Stories and Writing*, edited by Martha P.Y. Cheung—who heads the translation center of Hong Kong Baptist University—and published in 1988 by Oxford University Press. It includes work by Hong Kong's most prolific and intellectually forceful writer, **Leung Ping-kwan (b. 1948, nom de plumes P.K. Leung and Ye Si)** who heads the Chinese Literature department of Lingnan University; his poetry, plays, short stories and critical essays are widely translated and published. He is fluent in English and Chinese and quite capable of translating himself in either direction, though he rarely does. Cheung's collation -- fifteen writers' works, brought into English by ten translators -- uses as prologue excerpts from Leung's 1995 book, *Hong Kong Culture*, entitled, "The Story of Hong Kong."

Tinged with a sense of "desolation" worthy of Eileen Chang, Leung's is an eloquent and stubborn refusal of a Hong Kong writer to go gently into that good night promised by the benign but smothering embrace of mother China's cultural dominance. Leung now says there was a more intense fear for freedom of expression when he wrote this, partly due to leading Mainland literary critics having visited to see if what they consider the corrupted Chinese of the Cantonese could be rectified with Mainland writing standards. "Mainland bureaucrats want a pigeonhole. They want to tame it, make it digestible," he says.

He sees "too many stories" of Hong Kong, but none by its people:

*One prominent theme of this story is that the economic prosperity of Hong Kong rests upon her lack of democracy. A variant of this theme is that it is because of the need for democracy that the curses of colonialism have to be accepted. English, the colonial language, is promoted at the expense of Chinese, and its importance stressed at regular intervals. Even Chinese parents have protested against the policy of mother-tongue*

*education. Retired professors of English who come to Hong Kong from abroad emphasize the centrality and indispensability of the English language. Others make the same point, but their argument is based on 'the need to be useful to China' ... in each Hong Kong has been reduced to a figure of speech, a useful foil for others, it is granted only a marginal existence, and what is said about it reveals rather the story-tellers' own dubious desires and fantasies.*

*Cultural critics too, label Hong Kong culture as 'postmodern' and brush away all the messy and complicated social phenomena that make up an integral part of Hong Kong culture. They say that changes come so fast in Hong Kong there is no point capturing them in writing, no point talking about the question of representation. But this in effect is asking us to tie our hands behind our backs and not reflect on the special features of our society and our culture. Everything is leveled off, a mere look-alike of some other things. Hong Kong is London, Hong Kong is New York, they are all the same. And the emphasis is just on the glory of Hong Kong's past, the gloom and doom that awaits our future.*

He now believes that fears of Beijing have subsided somewhat because "China is changing and writers there want more dialogue. So Hong Kong writers should not just look internally. They need to be able to communicate with other writers and be part of the larger writing community, and that's not happening very well." One reason, in his view, is the Hong Kong government's limited support of the arts; thus, in its many self-consciously "international" arts festivals, almost invariably "there's no Hong Kong voice, as there are from the Mainland and Taiwan."

Nor is there any requirement to study Hong Kong literature in schools. He compares this unfavorably to Taiwan, whose government works to build an audience for fine writing and helps "sell" its distinct culture with active overseas promotion programs. This absence of official support for local culture is extremely damaging, because nearly all support for fine arts in Hong Kong comes from the public sector.

"Hong Kong ruled by Hong Kong people," was the promise Beijing made when it promulgated the Basic Law and its promise of eventual universal suffrage. But even this creation of a fledgling Special Administrative Region (SAR) was done without reference to views of Hong Kong people or recognition that they have a distinct language and culture. This is a key argument in a landmark 2002 study of Cantonese artists, *Hong Kong Art, Culture and Decolonization*, by University of Hong Kong Art professor David Clarke. He gave special attention to the frequent use of wordplay in the city's visual arts:

*One factor here is the way in which the Cantonese spoken language is able to function as a marker of local Hong Kong identity more effectively than the more directly visual means available to artists. All literate Chinese speakers share the same written language (albeit that mainland China uses simplified versions of many characters), and the written script thus functions as a resource for nationalist ideologies. However, the Cantonese spoken 'dialect' and the official national spoken form (Putonghua) are more mutually unintelligible than some distinct 'languages'. One way in which spoken language can enter the silent world of the visual is by means of a visual/verbal pun, and such punning*

*is common in Cantonese (where tonal difference may be the only factor that distinguishes otherwise identical sounds of completely different meaning), for instance when fish is served at Chinese New Year because the Cantonese for fish sounds like the auspicious word meaning surplus.*

*Even though the handover has begun to recede into the past, taking the most extreme worries about life under Chinese rule with it, there is a persisting concern with the local. Certain of the strategies for evoking it, such as the use of language or the employment of already culturally coded items of material culture, have continued to be used.*

Hong Kong's government has been tripping over itself to persuade Beijing of its efforts to cultivate "patriotism" and a properly nationalist ethos within the hearts and minds of Hong Kong people. This is a response to shrill denunciations from Beijing elders and experts whenever democratic forces in Hong Kong threaten to or actually do make political points.

It may also reflect the prevailing wisdom of the leader of the city's Central Policy Unit, a think tank with one client: the Hong Kong government. Its chairman is sociologist Lau Siu-kai, who edited *Social Development and Political Change in Hong Kong*, published in 2000. Describing results of his own research in its introduction, he states:

*Drawing on survey data collected over the past decade, Lau shows that there are significant differences between 'Hongkongese' and Chinese in their socio-demographic characteristics, in their attitude towards the People's Republic of China and the Chinese government, in their understanding of the June 4 incident, and in their conception of democracy and political reform in Hong Kong.*

*Notwithstanding the pervasive anxieties engendered by the 1997 transition, the Hong Kong Chinese are apparently not suffering from a salient sense of 'identity crisis,' at least as far as the common people are concerned. However, in view of the vast differences in values between the mainland and Hong Kong, mutual adjustment will be difficult and inevitable in the future. In the process of intensified interaction between Hong Kong and the mainland, it is likely that a new identity for the Hong Kong Chinese will develop. Since it may still be different from that of the Chinese people on the mainland, the potential for conflict between the mainland and Hong Kong will still be substantial even after the return of Hong Kong to China.*

That posits Cantonese culturalism as a threat to stability and suggests a race between those who are seen to be encouraging centrifugal forces that pull Hong Kong Chinese away from being a clone of the mainland and those who are determined to create a "harmonious society," as President Hu Jintao's latest mantra puts it, at whatever cost to Hong Kong's unique identity.

Jeremy Tambling, professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong, asked "Is it Hong Kong's function to make other people feel comfortable?", in a special Hong Kong issue of the journal *Public Culture* published by the Society for

Transnational Cultural Studies in 1997. His essay deconstructed a Chris Patton speech of the time. In “The Last Governor of Hong Kong,” Tambling answers himself with the observation:

*Hong Kong is not treated seriously as an entity... it remains the Ariel to Prospero – the servant the master can be comfortable with, the subaltern.... To acknowledge a Hong Kong culture, expressed for instance in its cinema, might suggest that there is something in the place that wanted neither the old-style imperialism of the West nor the promise of a new assumption of Beijing-based power, so that the content of that culture was quite simply that it had little to do with either form of nationalism.*

According to the author P.K. Leung, the issue is this:

*The anxieties and worries of the Cantonese – who make up 98 per cent of the population –expressed in the local dialect and in writings in Chinese have been totally ignored; the focus of attention is trained on the riotous profusion that greets the tourist’s camera lens. With these images, it is hardly surprising that people will get the impression that Hong Kong is a place without history, without culture, without dissenting views, a place where all residential districts are red-light districts, and where all publications printed in a language other than English are considered mere evidence of barbarity, as if they too were made of human skin.*

His *Images of Hong Kong*, a 1992 poem in English (anthologized in *City Voices, Hong Kong Writing in English 1945 to the Present*, eds. Xu Xi and Mike Ingham, Hong Kong University Press, 2003), addresses preoccupations with Hong Kong’s “glorious” colonial past and “gloomy” future under China as a writer probing the present:

*History, too, is a montage of images, /  
of paper, collectibles, plastic, fibres, /  
laser discs, buttons. We find ourselves looking up /  
at the distant moon; tonight’s moon -- /  
Does it come at the beginning or the end of time?... /*

*All this exotic stuff, of course, is for export. /  
We need a fresh angle, /  
nothing added, nothing taken away, /  
always at the edge of things and between places.*

**Dung Kai-chung (b 1968)**, another writer competent in both vernacular Chinese and English, translated his own selection in Cheung’s anthology. His *The Atlas: Archaeology of an Imaginary City* echoes Italo Calvino’s *Imaginary Cities*, but with wry satiric sarcasm akin to Jonathan Swift, and is an ambitious collection of 51 short pieces, divided into four sections. The temporal setting for two of them, “City” and “Streets” is the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the “City of Victoria” (Hong Kong as we know it) no longer exists and narrators can only divine from old maps and atlases what it was like and how it changed during 156 years as a British colony.

Dung's terse descriptive language and fictionalized historical references create the persona of a disinterested anthropologist dryly compiling records of street names' origins and such, typically with a concluding paragraph offering bizarre observations, such as that for "Scandal Point and the Military Cantonment," which concludes:

*Some teleological map-readers insist that the relationship between Scandal Point and the military cantonment around it was not fortuitous. The purpose of the military garrison was clearly to defend the scandals, and at the same time to imprison and contain them within the invincible walls of guns and cannons, preventing them from leaking out, and also preserving their multiplication.*

"Sycamore Street" concludes:

*Although mo fa guo does not have flowers, it bears fruits, the bauhinia has beautiful flowers, but is sterile.* [The bauhinia was designated as Hong Kong's official flower at the time of the Handover.]

In "Sugar Street", he writes:

*Lo Tung concluded his narrative enigmatically with a Cantonese colloquialism: 'as the saying goes – a mouthful of sugar, a mouthful of shit.' It remains unclear whether the saying was intended as a general observation on the ruling style of the colonial government in its exercise of political and economic power, or as a comment on the operation of divine justice.*

Dung observes that new writers in their 20s are coming up and the future of local literature is not tied to the post-war generation or even to his own. But their number is limited, as is the size of their audience, and scope for publication of their works is shrinking. "No professional writers can be supported here," he laments, "some work for universities for income," including himself. He teaches at Chinese University.

*Literary works from the mainland sell more, attract more attention than Hong Kong writers in festivals, such as the annual Hong Kong International Book Fair. Famous mainland writers are popular in Hong Kong. The response to Hong Kong writers is less enthusiastic. They are on the periphery.*

*It is difficult for Hong Kong writers to be read and understood in China. The threat of them being overwhelmed is the result of there being no proper channel of communication. For instance, Chinese scholars' access to Hong Kong Literature is usually via the Hong Kong Writers' Association, which literary writers won't join. There are two Hong Kong Literatures and theirs remains the Socialist Realist tradition. So there are more mainland writers in the group and they are closer to mainland literary circles.*

He notes that some Hong Kong Literature is published in Taiwan, which also uses traditional Chinese characters, rather than the mainland's simplified ones, and where there is more ready understanding culturally – “in terms of gender awareness, history, city life, and so on.” Xi Xi, Wong Bik Wan and Dung himself are three prominent writers who have won prizes and been published there.

**Martha P.Y. Cheung, Eva Hung and Jane C.C. Lai** have been essential to English readers' access to Hong Kong Literature for over three decades. Other interested translators have visited the literature and left, but these three Hong Kong women are the anchors.

Martha Cheung holds that Hong Kong is in no danger of losing its identity, but she does worry that people no longer read. “That is what will kill off Hong Kong Literature, the loss of book culture,” she says – that and the fact that there is no market for it in China or the West.

*The U.S. likes bold assertions and dissent became representative of Chinese literature, just as anything censored in the eighties on the mainland was immediately printed in Hong Kong.*

She sees the mid-80s as the “Golden Age in the mainland, by any standard, but there were no translations, no windows into the politics. The focus was on the ‘Wound Literature’ of the Cultural Revolution.” To large extent, it still is so. This was why Cheung “deliberately refused that line of expectation” in her *Hong Kong Collage*. Alluding to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, she saw her anthology as:

*Matches struck in the dark. That's what they are. A glimmer here, a flicker there, a flash elsewhere, lighting up, if only for a while, the faces, expressions, gestures, movements, bodies, shapes, contours, areas, and spaces all too seldom seen by the Western eye.*

What do Hong Kong writers ask of their country's keepers up north? An answer is offered by P.K. Leung, in a poem from *Traveling With a Bitter Melon, Selected Poems 1973 – 1998* (Asia 2000 Books, 2002):

*Fragments of a Northern Song Dynasty Fish-shaped Pot*

*Those empowered to write history, with a stroke of the pen, /  
incorporated the southern kilns into those of the north, producing /  
a complete history*

*The fragments say: Please carefully study our grain /  
Don't read us into /  
Your history*

How can the West assist? Buy their books, translate more of their works, keep existing anthologies in print.

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