



Floating Borders within a Text – Hong Kong Literature in English

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Abstract

Hong Kong is an ambivalent city. Coined by its postcolonial past, it tried to develop independently after the handover to the People's Republic of China in 1997. National classification for Hong Kong seems to be difficult – people see themselves usually neither as British nor as Chinese. They developed their own identity; they are Hong Kongers. This essay grasps this unique feeling of 'Hong Kong' identity by analysing literary works by different authors who 'decided' to write in English about Hong Kong. However, these authors are not only writing *about* Hong Kong, in fact they are reflecting and recreating the city in their fiction, capturing it in one of the city's predominant languages.

Contributor Note

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Home to Hong Kong

*A Chinese
Invited an Irishman
To a Japanese meal
By the Spanish Steps
In the middle of Rome
Having come from Boston
On the way home*

(Louise Ho [1994] 2003)

For colonial powers (national) borders never seemed to be worth acknowledging: empires, like the British Empire, had the urge to extend and settle down at various points in history in different areas across the globe. Even though colonial forces trespassed national boundaries, they were eager to construct new frontiers, between coloniser and colonised, between 'us' and 'them'.¹

Due to the fact that Hong Kong (HK) had been a British Crown Colony for more than 150 years (1841-1997), it is undeniable that such a long period of foreign occupation leaves traceable marks not just socially and economically but also culturally. After HK became part of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 July 1997 as a Special Administrative Region (SAR), Elaine Ho (2010: 438) argues that HK 'finds itself politically, linguistically and culturally integrated into a powerful nation and yet somehow remains separate from it'. Based on The Joint Declaration of 1984, which guarantees HK inhabitants the freedom to travel, there is still a border between the PRC and HK, not only a real but also an imagined one. I argue that such boundaries are unveiled, expressed and rearranged in literary works, as for

¹ For the image of the 'Other' see Edward Said's theory of orientalism, which I will elaborate on later in this article.

example in Louise Ho's poem cited above: the traveller, a Chinese, passes several national and cultural borders on his way home to HK – there seem to be no actual frontiers between the countries/cultures, but at the same time they are emphasised, e.g. when a meal is designated as 'Japanese' – everything, in fact, acquires a national connotation. Is it possible to ascribe this to the author – a person, who grew up with colonisation, probably in a colonised society, a society, where nationality really matters? The poem is however not only about national belonging: the circular structure 'On his way home to Hong Kong' stresses the thought of returning, of coming back to a place called home. The implicit lyrical I reveals that this home is Hong Kong.

However, is this a criteria for HK Literature – the city being presented as home? How can HK Literature in English be defined? In this paper I would like to show that writing has indeed something to do with a writer's nationality or – to be more specific – with his/her ethnic and cultural background. That is why I chose five, at first glance, very different authors with different viewpoints: Louise Ho,² as the probably most fixed HK based writer, but who nevertheless questions her position as an HK representative; Xu Xi, who uses the city to illustrate differences and to examine her identity; Jim Wong-Chu, who moreover feels torn between China and HK and writes about this ambivalence from a 'third space' (Canada); Timothy Mo, who seems to be rather critical about HK, but nevertheless concentrates in his earlier works on his place of birth, and Martin Booth, who developed a lifelong bond with the city

² Louise Ho was born and mostly brought up in Hong Kong. When she was seven, she moved with her parents to Mauritius, but she returned to HK, where she graduated from the University of Hong Kong.

he grew up in and who therefore started to question his belonging. All of them crossed) the borders between England and HK on a geographical level, as well as on a cultural one. This border crossing finds expression in their literary works through the characters as they migrate from one place to the other – like the ‘Chinese’ in ‘Home to Hong Kong’. HK itself is a diverse and ambivalent city that struggles to answer the question of belonging just as much as the authors presented here do. In this regard, what significance does HK’s colonial past and postcolonial present have on the literature?

I intend to include different positions in order to draw attention to the various borders that are constructed and thus show how much influence a place can have on a literary writer. The three main points I will be concentrating on are: what does ‘home’ mean, what significance does food have, and what is the purpose of language(s). This raises the question of definition and boundary again: what kind of literature qualifies to be called ‘Hong Kong Literature in English’, and is this denotation correct, or should it rather be called ‘English Literature about Hong Kong’?³

The construction of HK in English language literature varies from text to text – that is why not only novels will be considered but also prose and poetry. I will try to demonstrate that cultural borders are crossed within the texts and at the same time emphasised or even constructed by being picked as a central theme. Crossing borders also takes place in the course of my argumentation as I

³ I dropped the expression ‘Hong Kong English Literature’ as the term Hong Kong English refers too much to linguistics, which is not the main focus in this paper. Therefore this title would have been misleading.

use texts that have been written during colonial times and after decolonisation. There are, what Mary Louise Pratt calls ‘contact zones’, which she defines as ‘spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect’ (Pratt 1992: 6f.). These will thus be an attempt to focus on the binary oppositions and the hybridity, which can be seen as ‘the consequence[s] of the intersecting and interactive experiences of the “contact zones” of globalised cities’ (Bromley 2000: 107). Therefore, first of all attention is directed to these (imagined) borders – within the literary texts and within the postcolonial discourse – to then show that the characters trespass these borders to create a contact zone.

A Sense of Home

When coming back to the poem quoted at the beginning of my analysis: ‘Home to Hong Kong’ – what is meant by ‘home’? Does referring to the country of birth necessarily create the feeling of belonging, the feeling of being at home? Or is ‘home’ in fact a construction everyone needs for the sensation of stability and security? In her foreword to *City Voices: Hong Kong Writing in English, 1945 to the Present*, Louise Ho mentions Salman Rushdie, who discussed cosmopolitanism, and a Welsh poet who compared ‘the local’ with ‘the global’:

I felt very envious of his [the Welsh poet’s] staunch avowal of his sense of belonging. Later on, I gave a mini-reading of my work and I was very conscious of speaking from Hong Kong; but, although I was sent there by the British Council as a Hong Kong delegate, I felt I could

only represent my puny self. (Ho 2003: xiii)

This statement illustrates the pendant position postcolonial writers face: they feel it is difficult to decide where they belong as they lived or grew up in a divided society (culturally) determined by two sides: English – Indian; English – African; English – Chinese. Whereas Rushdie describes this position with the rather positive term ‘cosmopolitan’, Ho expresses her insecurity about her belonging and her (national) identity. She feels unsure, whether she is able to speak for a greater whole – for HK. Her opinions on and ideas about HK are individually formed and she wishes, like all the other authors who write in the (post)colonial framework, to state her attitudes, her feelings, her experiences with the respective place.

In ‘Hong Kong, China: Learning to belong to a nation’, Mathews et al. claim that in the 1980s and 1990s people in HK did not know where to belong: ‘Every time I travel to another country, I have to write down my nationality. What should I write, ‘British’, ‘British Hong Kong’, ‘Hong Kong’, or ‘Chinese?’ (statement by a woman cited in Mathews, et al. 2008: 1f). However, nationality should not be equated with a feeling of belonging. Even though some of the authors discussed here might feel insecure about belonging to a nation, a strong and definite feeling of home is expressed in their literary works through their fictional/lyrical characters. At this point, Edward Said’s Orientalism must be included:

Built around a distinction between ‘East’ and ‘West’, Orientalism constructed ‘the Orient’, determining largely what could be said about this constructed entity and acting as a basis for European justification of imperialism. Dichotomizing the

world into East/West, We/They contrast, Orientalism then produced an essentialized, static Other. (Pennycook 1998: 163)

To further illustrate this situation, I will attempt to find answers to the above mentioned questions by taking another perspective and focusing on *Gweilo* by the British novelist Martin Booth (1944-2004). The protagonist in these memoirs is Booth as a child, who comes to HK in 1952 with his parents because his father was serving in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. The first-person narration is written from a distance as the informative statements made throughout the text indicate the experience and wisdom of an adult person.

With the arrival in HK the first border has been crossed; the family has moved from one country to another and they find themselves in a different culture. As a reader, one soon learns that the father is not very open to this new cultural atmosphere, whereas the mother’s attitude is quite the opposite. Said’s Orientalism is exemplified in the father’s behaviour and actions: he comes with prejudices in his head and finds them confirmed in every situation he has to face. Originally, he did not want to take their son with them to HK, but the mother was totally against leaving him in a boarding school in England:

‘Well, I’m not leaving him here’, my mother pronounced obdurately. ‘He’ll wind up like some poor child in a Kipling story. Parents in Orient, boy in—’ ‘Don’t be ridiculous, Joyce! If he’s in England, he’ll be safe. The Far East isn’t Farnham. There are tropical diseases, civil unrest, and inclement climate, native—’ (Booth 2005: 22)

The father thus opposes mingling with indigenous people and always keeps a distance, because as a member of the colonial forces he feels superior. This superiority finds explicit expression when they finally move to Victoria Peak (also known as Mount Austin), which was reserved for non-Chinese residents during colonial times, which meant the colonial forces. The prominent position of living on top of a hill, overlooking the whole city, serves to underline the inferiority of the colonised.

Whereas the father always draws a definite line between him, the coloniser, and them, the colonised, the mother tries to make friends with them and thus obliterate constructed borders. At this point, it is helpful to use Juri M. Lotman's concept for analysing space in literary texts: Lotman (1922-1993) was a Russian literary scholar whose theory is based on the idea that people usually tend to visualise things and have a spatial concept in their heads, even of terms and definitions, like 'infinity' or 'property' – everything separates into two disjunctive subspaces. According to his theory, there are binary oppositions in literary texts, e.g. up – down, near – far (spatial); heaven – hell, liberal – conservative (abstract); good – bad (normative-evaluating), which are in accord with postcolonial theory. Lotman further argues that there is a border between these oppositions, which can only be crossed by flexible characters within a literary text. If a character succeeds in crossing this border, he is called a 'hero' in Lotman's sense. Therefore, the I-narrator in *Gweilo* can be called a hero, in my opinion, as he not only physically crosses the border (from England to HK) but – what is even more significant – also mentally, by feeling a part of this place, this culture (in contrast to his father, who can be seen as a static

character). The I-narrator is clearly more on the mother's side and at the end of the novel he feels more at home in HK than in his country of origin – the two disjunctive subspaces that are separated by an (in)visible border he had overcome.

Before making a connection with *Gweilo*, Lotman's concept can be further illustrated by a poem by Jim Wong-Chu,⁴ 'fourth uncle', in which the 'disjunctive subspaces' Lotman describes, are clearly visible on many levels:

fourth uncle

we met in victoria

we talked and discovered
our similar origins

you a village relative
while I a young boy
sitting quietly on the other side
of the coffee table
cups between us

we are together
for the moment
but I feel far from you

you said
you travelled and worked
up and down this land
and now you have returned
to die

to be buried
beside the others
in the old chinese cemetery
by the harbour
facing the open sea
facing home

⁴ Jim Wong-Chu was born in Guangzhou (China) and lived in HK as a child before he emigrated to Vancouver (Canada).

at the end of my life
will I too have walked a full circle

and arrive like you
an old elephant
to his grave?
(Wong-Chu [1984] 2003)

Oppositions like up and down, life and death and being home vs. not being home are explicitly mentioned. The lyrical I, the young boy, is talking to one of his uncles: they share a 'similar origin' (l. 3), but in the end the lyrical I is not sure if he will finish his life in a circle or rather break through by actually returning home instead of just lying there 'facing home' (l. 22) or by not going back even near the implied home. Once again, circularity is made explicit: as in Ho's poem, the image of 'returning home' stands out – in this case not to HK but to the PRC. The setting is indicated already in the first line: the City of Victoria, which refers to the first urban settlement in HK after the British colony was established in 1842. The strong sentiment of the Chinese origin, particularly expressed by the uncle, is obviously not shared by the lyrical I as expressions like 'on the other side' (l. 6), 'cups between us' (l. 8) and 'but I feel far from you' (l. 11) clearly indicate. Both, the young boy as well as his uncle, crossed a border by going from the PRC to HK, by leaving their place of origin for their place of residence, which – in Lotman's sense – would make both of them heroes. Nonetheless, whereas the uncle seems to be rooted in China (he wants to be buried 'beside the others in the old Chinese cemetery', l. 18-19), the lyrical I – like the I-narrator in *Gwello* – has become adapted to the place he emigrated to; he is fully assimilated in HK and does not really want to return to

his place of origin. The border crossing is finalised on a mental level, which makes them – the two young boys – double heroes: by trespassing a geographical border and a psychological one.

In comparison, the 'Chinese' in Ho's poem can also be seen as a hero, since he/she crosses actual borders, but it appears to be fluent and never finalised, as indicated by the poem's circular structure. The only static component is returning home, home to HK.

In-between the dishes: Food as a metaphorical border

Probably one of the best-known so-called HK authors is Timothy Mo: his first novel *The Monkey King* (1978) received a lot of public attention and made him famous across the globe, mainly in the UK and the USA. Timothy Mo was born in 1950 in HK to a Welsh-Yorkshire mother and a HK Chinese father. When he was ten, he moved to Britain (Ho 2000: xi). Therefore there are controversial opinions about Mo as an HK writer, whether he can be called a representative for HK literature in English, since he has been living in England most of the time. According to Patke and Holden (2010: 98) Mo himself is uncomfortable with the label 'Hong Kong writer'. Amy Tak-yee Lai (2011: 51) states in *Asian English Writers of Chinese Origin*, that Mo sees himself as a Brit, who knows nothing about Chinese culture. Nevertheless, he writes about HK, his place of birth in two of his novels, *An Insular Possession* (1986) and *Sour Sweet* (1982), which made him famous under the label 'Hong Kong author'.

In this paragraph I would like to compare Mo's *Sour Sweet* with Booth's *Gwello* and concentrate on the significance of food

as a cultural 'ingredient': 'When authors refer to food they are usually telling the reader something important about narrative, plot, characterization, motives and so on'. (Fitzpatrick 2013: 122) In concurring with this assumption, I will extend my argumentation with a temporal perspective by including also Xu Xi, a HK born author of Chinese-Indonesian parents, who – in contradiction to Mo and Booth – focuses in her writing on the *postcolonial*.

If we refer to Lotman's theory again, the first-person narrator in Booth's novel cannot only be seen as a hero in the above mentioned sense. He also crosses a border when he goes to forbidden areas within the city, by taking sides with his mother, against his father, by adapting to the new culture when learning the language, and by trying all kinds of food:

'So long as you are in Hong Kong, whenever someone offers you something to eat, accept it. That's being polite. If you don't find it to your fancy, don't have any more. But', he looked me straight in the eye, 'always try it. No matter what. Besides', he went on, 'Hong Kong is the best place in the world to eat. Promise?' [...] I never knew the officer's name, nor ever saw him again, but I was never to break my promise. (Booth 2005: 51-2)

Food plays an important role in many stories. One reason for this is certainly that food is an important element in every culture;⁵ it is a characteristic that

⁵ Food studies in connection with literature have attracted more and more attention over the last few years, but most of the research has been done by analyzing the 'literary canon' (e.g. Shakespeare, Joyce etc.; cf. Fitzpatrick 2013).

makes every culture unique. Not only in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* (1982) but also in Xu's short story 'Famine' (2004) the connection to food is already implied in the title: In both stories the setting is not HK but England, respectively New York. Whereas in Mo's novel the protagonists emigrated from HK to England in search of economic wealth as Britain is the 'land of promise' to them, in Xu's story the I-narrator flies from HK to New York, also 'escaping' and finding herself in a luxurious world filled with food. As a reader we see territorial borders are crossed again already at the beginning, but this time in another direction: the destination is not HK but an English-speaking country, which carries hopes and dreams for the escapees. Food serves as a metaphor for wealth: 'Comfort, like food, exists, surrounds me here. The food is not enough, the food is never enough. I gaze at the platters of food, piled in this space with largesse. What does it matter if there are too many mouths to feed? A phone call is all it takes to get more food, and more'. (Xu 2004: 72), the I-narrator explains in her hotel room in Xu's short story. In *Sour Sweet* as well food is the source of 'wealth', represented in the restaurant the main male character (Chen) owns:

He worked seventy-two hours at his restaurant, slept fifty-six, spent forty hours with his wife and child (more like thirty-two minus travelling time, and, of course, Man Kee was often asleep when he was awake). This was on a rotation of six days a week at the restaurant with one off (Thursday). (Mo 1992: 1)

He and his family came to England and opened a restaurant, hoping for success, which they indeed have at the beginning, until the problems with the triads start.

The whole story is about contradiction as already indicated in the title with the opposing tastes sour and sweet. It is expressed right at the beginning of the novel in a statement about the feeling of belonging, the feeling of home: 'The Chens had been living in the UK for four years, which was long enough to have lost their place in the society from which they had emigrated but not long enough to feel comfortable in the new. They were no longer missed' (Mo 1992: 1) Elaine Ho focuses on these oppositions by analysing Lily's position:

In the novel, 'Britain' or 'London' is under-narrated; it is the imaginary other, the function of Lily's remembered and transplanted 'Chineseness', and her sense of threat and encirclement. When it does appear, 'Britain' is mediated by the alienated Chinese characters, or embodied in state functionaries – tax inspectors, welfare officers – who are stereotyped by their roles and seen through suspicious immigrant eyes. (Ho 2000: 66)

Said's Orientalism is reversed and the outcome is an inversion called Occidentalism⁶. They emigrated to Britain and experience their 'host culture' with their "Chinese" myopia and prejudices', as 'for them, the metropolis is a site of labour, not of citizenship' (Ho 2000: 66), comparable to the father in *Gweilo* – the host cultures are inverted. Lily and Husband (as she refers to him throughout the novel) seem to be captured in their in-betweenness. They try to assimilate by producing the food

the English customers like but which is far from authentic:

The food they sold, certainly wholesome, nutritious, colourful, even tasty in its way, had been researched by Chen. It bore no resemblance at all to Chinese cuisine. They served from a stereotyped menu, similar to those outside countless other establishments in the UK. [...] 'Sweet and sour pork' was their staple, naturally: batter musket balls encasing a tiny core of meat, laced with a scarlet sauce that had an interesting effect on the urine of the consumer the next day. [...] All to be packed in the rectangular silver boxes, food coffins, to be removed and consumed statutorily off-premises. The only authentic dish they served was rice, the boiled kind (Mo 1992: 105)

The in-between position, that the protagonists occupy, consists of a grey zone. They try to adjust to the Western taste by inventing new dishes that have nothing to do with the original.

Fitzpatrick (2013: 123) discusses in her essay 'Food and literature' the assumption of the symbolism of food, that 'food stands for other things'. I argue that in these cases food not only stands for wealth, but for power and desire, or maybe the desire for power. Whereas the protagonists in Xu's short story and in Mo's novel find satisfaction for their desire outside HK, the 'outsider' in *Gweilo* achieves it in HK. All three protagonists have to cross borders to find the desired 'other': only outside do they finally have the power to fulfil their dream of a better life, of experiencing something new.

⁶ The term Occidentalism was coined by James Carrier in 1995 with his book *Occidentalism: Images of the West* in opposition to Said's Orientalism.

Language as line

*A man who possesses a language
possesses as an indirect
consequence the world expressed
and implied by this language.*
(Fanon 2008 [1952]: 2)

For the postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon language is a means of power. According to this argument, what consequences does this have for a 'trilingual' place like HK? Whereas during the colonial rule English had the status of the official language, in 1995 a new language policy was announced and enacted two years later: civil service was made 'biliterate' in English and Chinese and 'trilingual' in English, Cantonese and Putonghua (Bolton 2003: 93). Nevertheless, since 2010 there is again a switch to English, predominately in schools, which leads Elaine Ho (2010: 429) to conclude: 'it means the abandonment of the 1997 policy and returning to the largely unregulated – chaotic to some, colonial to others – pre-1997 situation'.

In the following neither a discussion of the significance of English as an international language nor the linguistic features of HK English are important (cf. Bolton 2003; Kirkpatrick 2012; Pennycook 2007) Instead, the focus is on the use of language in literary works to expose real and imagined boundaries.

'I've been told I can't possibly say anything real about Hong Kong because I write in English' (Xu 2004: 156). This quote by Xu Xi from her essay 'Rocking the Sampan' (1999) states the dilemma she finds herself in: which language to use for 'authentic' literature that reaches the readership in mind? Would it be more authentic to write in Chinese because HK is part of China and because her roots are Chinese? But for

her, language is 'merely a tool' that she uses to create 'cultural fictional realities'. (Xu 2004: 157) The chosen language only helps to articulate the ideas and perceptions to a desired readership. The main focus is on the topic of her writings: Hong Kong.

The following poem by Wong-Chu illustrates the power of the English language and supports Xu's argument of seeing language as a tool:

how feel I do?

your eyes plead approval
on each utter word

and even my warmest smile
cannot dispel the shamed muscles
from your face

let me be honest
with you

to tell you the truth
I feel very much at home
in your embarrassment

don't be afraid

like you
I too was mired in another
language
and I gladly surrender it
for english

you too
in time
will lose your mother's tongue

and speak
at least as fluent
as me
now tell me

how do you feel?

(Wong-Chu [1999] 2003)

Even though there is no direct connection with HK in the poem, it nevertheless expresses in a very strong and somewhat ironic way the loss of a language: metaphors like 'mired in another language' (l. 13) imply the inferiority of any other language besides English as the lyrical I 'gladly surrender[s] it for English' (l. 14). The very interesting aspect is, that the lyrical I does not give his/her mother tongue (or any mother tongue) a real chance as he/she predicts the loss of it in favour of English. Wong-Chu manages to express the ambivalent position English as a language is in: it seems as if one has no choice other than to accept this universality, but in the end, one will also feel comfortable with it (l. 8-10). Though, in fact the question of how the other (the lyrical you) feels, remains unanswered and therefore the reader is left with an ambiguous feeling: is English really worth losing another language, one's own mother tongue?

'Language is a powerful force in establishing, forming and preserving a person's cultural identity' (Verma et al. 1999: 75). As a consequence of the language policy in HK mentioned above, the place, its people and the culture cannot be associated with only one language. This confusion is brought up in Xu's short story 'Valediction' (1996, 2003: 126): 'What kind of *dongxi* are we? How English fails me, despite all my English language novels! And *ga je*, how the Western World fails us for our most intimate expressions, our sense of family, our understanding of love.'⁷ The I-

⁷ *Dongxi* is Chinese for 'thing, object, matter'; *ga je* is a Cantonese expression for 'elder sister', used as a form of address, e.g. as in this case, in a letter.

narrator is disappointed by the 'Western World', by the English language and at the same time challenges her own identity by mixing languages and comparing cultural values. Even the I-narrator in *Gweilo* is aware of the importance of different languages/dialects in HK: Cantonese expressions are integrated, on the one hand to give the text more authenticity, on the other hand to convey some of the culture he was living in.

The interspersion of Cantonese serves as a demonstration for the assimilation of the main character: he always functions as an interpreter between his father and the Cantonese. The boy simply understands the need to break the language barrier by acknowledging language equality: 'I was not slow in realizing that as many Chinese did not speak English, I would need a command of their language. In next to no time, I possessed a substantial vocabulary' (Booth 2004: 61) Whereas the father refuses to learn Cantonese, because in his view the coloniser's language is of course superior to that of the colonised, the young boy becomes more powerful than him by ignoring this insolent assumption:

The Chinese staff called him [his father] *mok tau* (blockhead) and worse. They often used these names to his face but as he spoke no Cantonese, they were safe. I once heard a clerk call him *gai lun jai* (chicken penis boy): the clerk must have assumed that, as I was my father's son, I spoke no Cantonese either. (Booth 2004: 213)

Again, we find Fanon's assertion that language is a means of power confirmed: the Chinese use their language to insult the father; they feel on the safe side as

they assume both of them, the little boy and his father, cannot understand them. However, the young boy can; he knows what they are calling his father and he could use this power of understanding to tell his father, which he does not. The power of language is thus exerted on both sides.

Conclusion

Island

We are a floating island
Kept afloat by our own energy
We cross date lines
National lines
Class lines
Horizons far and near

We are a floating island
We have no site
Nowhere to land
No domicile

Come July this year
We may begin to hover *in situ*
May begin to settle
May begin to touch down
We shall be
A city with a country
An international city becoming
national

(Ho [1997] 2003)

Under the principle 'one country, two systems' HK was handed over to the PRC on 1 July 1997. In this poem the lyrical I expresses ambivalent feelings about this (upcoming) transfer: on the one hand, relief, as the city can begin to settle down, on the other hand, also regret, as the 'international' turns into the 'national'. There is the faint perspective that HK can rest now, articulated with the repeatedly

used and carefully chosen modal 'may' (l. 12-14). The recurring image of a fluid state ('floating' l. 1 & 7, 'afloat' l. 2, 'hover' l. 12) is transformed into the idea of belonging to something (from 'We have no site Nowhere to land No domicile' l. 8-10 into 'A city with a country' l. 16), while at the same time being reduced from international to national (l. 17).

'Many Hong Kong people in recent decades, unlike people elsewhere in the world, have lacked any sense of national identity; they have not understood what it means to belong to a nation, or to its synonym, a country'. (Mathews, et al., 2008: 1), as indicated in Ho's poem. Nevertheless, even years after the return, feelings among 'Hongkongers' are mixed: time and again there are protests against the sinification of HK (Mathews et al. 2008: 3). Just recently a protest started due to the upcoming elections in 2017 because of the interference by the Chinese government, which indicates HK's wish to be independent. This is understandable as 'history has taught us to think in national categories: of imperialism/colonialism versus national independence and of domination/subordination versus self-determination'. (Huang, 2000: 3) As expressed in Ho's poem: HK is a 'floating island', no matter to which country it belongs. Therefore, to transcribe 'Hongkongers' and this heterogeneous identity, one best uses Ackbar Abbas' (1997: 1997) term of 'floating identity'. I would classify all the works discussed as Place Writing⁸, because they 'aim to give as rich as

⁸ Tobias Döring differentiates between Life, Place, History and Genre Writing in the postcolonial framework. Writers, whose literature can be categorised as Place Writing, 'set out to capture or create a sense of place, i.e. to give to local feelings and impressions a literary habitation and a name'. (Döring 2008: 70)

possible a description of a particular locale' (Döring 2008: 70). That is why I prefer the term Hong Kong Literature in English with the main focus on the place (Hong Kong) and on a second level with an emphasis on the language (English).

Philip Huang (2000: 17) describes HK as a place 'in which the double linguistic and cultural heritages coexist in almost equal parts'. The authors presented here represent only one part – the English language side. To do justice to the other part, naturally there is also HK literature in Chinese: e.g. the Shanghai-born Xi Xi who escaped to HK in the 1950s (Xi 1993: vii). *My City: a hongkong story* (orig. *Wo cheng*) is Xi's first novel published in 1975 with the title already indicating that the city is essential for the story. As the translator Eva Hung (Xi 1993: ix) states in the introduction to the English version: 'all the characters are prototypes representing the territory's past, present and future'. However, this must be a topic for another research project.

Furthermore, Huang (2000: 4) pleads in his article for 'bi-culturality', which 'refers to the simultaneous participation by one

person in two different cultures'. In my opinion all the literary characters introduced here are exemplifications of bi- or even multiculturalism since they combine different cultures, as expressed with food or the meaning of food, different nations, or by travelling or by reflecting about home, and by broaching the issue of language. They are connected by discussing the same place in the same language and the essence of acknowledging heterogeneity and differences, because that is what HK is: 'Asia's World City', as it was branded by the HK Tourism Board in 1999. (Ho 2010) However, this 'brand' distinguishes itself not by diversity and fusion, as proclaimed by the HK tourism board, but by hybridity in Homi Bhabha's sense (1994: 122) as a 'strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal' of the five very unequal authors compared who all emphasise their differences by (re-)constructing and (re-)arranging cultural, national and linguistic borders in their literary works and thus become evidence not only of the floating borders, but also of the floating identities on a still floating island.

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