<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Hong Kong’s “local” identity: Chinese or English poetry?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Fung, Man Lai (馮文麗)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citation</strong></td>
<td>Fung, M. L. (2015). Hong Kong’s “local” identity: Chinese or English poetry? (Outstanding Academic Papers by Students (OAPS)). Retrieved from City University of Hong Kong, CityU Institutional Repository.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issue Date</strong></td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>URL</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2031/8319">http://hdl.handle.net/2031/8319</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rights</strong></td>
<td>This work is protected by copyright. Reproduction or distribution of the work in any format is prohibited without written permission of the copyright owner. Access is unrestricted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HONG KONG’s “LOCAL” IDENTITY: CHINESE OR ENGLISH POETRY?

by

Fung, Man Lai

Department of English
City University of Hong Kong
2015
Abstract

What is “local” for Hong Kong poetry and who gets to determine it has become a topic increasingly significant to date with respect to Hong Kong’s retrogression to China in 1997 and the protests against China’s dominance since then. This is also related to the fact that Hong Kong used to be a place under British colonial rule and writing in English was common practice -- despite most of the residents here also speak and write in fluent Chinese. To explore this issue of local or “native consciousness” for Hong Kong poetry, I compare the works of two poets: Louise S.W. Ho, an ethnic Chinese poet who writes in English, and Yip Fai, a native Hong Kong resident who writes modern Chinese poetry, to see how they render their works with “local qualities”. By examining their use of language and manipulation of the cultural and physical “space” of the city, I try to show how these poets strive to describe contemporary Hong Kong life in their works. The poetry of Liu Waitong referencing to the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement and the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre are also discussed. It is noted that there is no specific conclusion on whether modern Chinese poetry being more “local” for Hong Kong than the English poetry, or vice versa.
Introduction

Growing up in Hong Kong, I have an experience of being taught that only weak students would have to study Chinese language and literature, and Chinese history was generally ignored in high school. With its control in the education system, British colonial rule in Hong Kong before 1997 more or less affected the development of both the English poetry and modern Chinese poetry in Hong Kong. The observation of scholar Carolyn Cartier (2009) that the system mainly discouraged students from studying Chinese literature and the pursuance of local history and identity (232-233) may have echoed my experience.

In the past, only the elites of the Chinese residents in Hong Kong could have the chance to study English literature at a very early age. Furthermore, as early as in 1974, the Hong Kong Arts Centre has arranged for English poetry readings in Hong Kong. However, poets of modern Chinese poetry did not have many resources before the 1980s.

The Chinese Movement in the 1970s, which was generally regarded as the main source of Hong Kong’s modern Chinese poetry, was initiated by Hong Kong students who were dissatisfied with the unfair treatment of the government in preference of using English despite over 95 percent of residents in Hong Kong were Chinese. Some people maintain that an awareness of indigenous culture among the new generation of youngsters born in Hong Kong in the 1950s and the 1960s prompted the occurrence of the so-called Hong Kong Students’ Movement and subsequently this Chinese Movement (Fung 297-298).

Modern Chinese poetry in Hong Kong is thus imbued with an atmosphere of opposing British colonial rule and creating new identifications. This seems to be illustrated by their enthusiasm in mentioning in their works Hong Kong local politics, 1989 June Fourth massacre in Beijing, as well as the recent Umbrella Movement in 2014.

Cartier (2009) maintains that “local qualities” of a place are essential to know the literature and the arts of a place. What is “local” is therefore an important concept in
studying the poetry in Hong Kong (Cartier 232). On the other hand, the study of Hong Kong’s poetry may deepen our understanding of this place. If the above-mentioned background of Chinese Movement and modern Chinese poetry can define what is “local” for Hong Kong, the issue might seem easy to resolve.

Nonetheless, one must admit that it is difficult to give an absolute meaning for “local” or “native consciousness” for a locality because there are too many factors affecting the mass recollection of a certain place and the creative process of the writers /poets. In her thesis, Zou Zhiyin (2005) asserts that the assumption of the origin of the “native consciousness” of a place is usually a constructed illusion: not only because it cannot be easily proven, but also it is usually imbued with the author’s subjective projection. In fact, it is difficult to precisely define how “local” are the “Hongkongers”, let alone to say which poems are more effective in reflecting how “local” they are. It is always too easy for the critic to co-relate social issues and literature. Accordingly, Zou suggests employing a method of comparing the works of different poets instead of studying which poet can reflect better the “local qualities” of a place. This method may help us to extend our knowledge about the different types of Hong Kong literatures even though the study is conducted under the condition of our general ignorance about the precise meaning of what is local or the so-called “native consciousness”.

In this essay, I will not strive to show whether Chinese or English poets in Hong Kong express more or less “local qualities”. Instead, I will examine the poems themselves from both languages so as to show what their works deal with. In this way, it may shed light on the nature of the variety of Hong Kong poetry.

The topic of language and cultural identity has attracted the attention of various scholars. Douglas Kerr (2010) discusses Louise S.W. Ho’s English poems and the place of English poetry in Hong Kong (75-95). However, he does not substantially discuss modern Chinese poetry in the locality. Elaine Yee Lin Ho (2010) focuses on the translation of Hong
Kong’s modern Chinese poetry, including the “bilingual” poems, which are poems with both the Chinese and English versions by the same poet, such as those of the late Hong Kong poet Leung Ping-kwan (Ye Si) (55-73). This is different from scrutinizing on the English poetry and modern Chinese poetry in Hong Kong as what I intend to do in this essay. Zou Zhiyin’s work (2005) is on the native consciousness of Hong Kong’s modern Chinese poetry. She does not mention Hong Kong’s English poetry probably because she believes that English poetry should not be categorized in Hong Kong poetry. 

I would like to fill in this gap by discussing both the English poetry and Chinese modern poetry in Hong Kong using a method of comparison. In the discussion, I will also employ Cartier’s concept of “cultural spaces” as indicators. Cartier (2009) defines cultural spaces as “those where people’s local practices work to transform an abstract space into a place of local meaning.” Cartier insists that “space” is different from a “place”, which is only “space transformed by human action and imbued with human meaning”. Contrarily, space is “abstract”: it is the “located apprehension that brackets the production of cultural meaning” and the “social processes having important spatial dimensions of flow and interrelation” (234-235).

In the discussion, I will examine two of the “cultural spaces” that Cartier has pinpointed, namely, the high-rise built environment and the venues of protests. Such cultural spaces are respectively Hong Kong’s most characteristic landscape and symbolic expressions for political identity. Meanwhile, in this respect, I will as well use some other indicators such as the street names or other daily life experiences in Hong Kong.

I choose the works of Yip Fai as he is a senior poet in Hong Kong who started writing modern Chinese poems and novels beginning in the late 1960s. He is now working in the Hong Kong Baptist University and the Lingnan University in Hong Kong. Yip is thus a
contemporary of 65-year-old Louise Ho, who is associate professor of the Department of English in the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Louise Ho, a Chinese born in Hong Kong but grew up in Europe, began writing and reciting English poetry when she was fourteen years old. Indigenous Chinese critics in Hong Kong rarely mention her, but she has been highly praised by English journals and her former professor in the University of Hong Kong, Douglas Kerr. Both Louise Ho and Yip’s poems were included in the 2011 International Poetry Nights in Hong Kong. This is a yearly event promoted by Bei Dao, the poet who was expelled from the Chinese mainland because of the June Fourth massacre in 1989. Bei Dao invites poets who claim to be able to represent their native country to recite their poems in the event.

The works of a younger Hong Kong poet, Lui Waitong, including his poems about the 2014 Umbrella Movement, will also be discussed. Liu has been awarded several literary awards in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

The “High-Rise Buildings” Environment

In Yip Fai’s “Midun Dao” (Nathan Road) ¹, the life story of a certain man living here in this road of Hong Kong, surrounded on all sides by skyscrapers, is narrated in the first person. The small space of the sky and the surrounding high-rise buildings are briefly mentioned as “tiankong xuanzhuang ru mu, ta men weirao ru qiang” (The sky spins like a tombstone and they surround him like a wall) (Yip 16). This is a life story for the common people living under the skyscraping structure of Hong Kong for decades.

It is noteworthy that Louise Ho (1997) does not narrate it in this way. In her “Living on the edge of Mai Po Nature Reserve”, she describes the high-rise buildings as the “Berlin Wall” which is “a long row of light like jewels” (18). It is not a story of someone living in it but a symbolic description denoting a certain sentimental feeling of “claustrophobia” -- as
what Douglas Kerr (2009) has mentioned. In Ho’s poem, the buildings “Marks the electrified high fence/ From one end to the other”, and this is “our Berlin Wall”. Kerr refers this to the relationship between the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong in the period with the approach of the 1997 handover to Beijing. According to Kerr, “To the left to the right/ Rise shadows of city blocks” is the pressure from Mainland China on the other side of the border in Hong Kong’s Mai Po reserve (156-157).

In my mind’s eye, it seems to be a poem beginning with scenery on a flat, peaceful wetland; suddenly, in the second stanza, skyscrapers turn out pressingly like an earthquake “in the middle of the ground” before returning to zero towards the end of the poem. On the contrary, Yip’s “Midun Dao” is primarily a story told under the structure of high-rise buildings, which are constructed in front of the flat space of a long and wide road, which is described as if it were a flowing river denoting the passage of time.

Take another poem of Yip, “Ma Tou” (Pier) (Yip 10), as an example. In this poem, the “Tai Tung Sun Chuen” is a tall residential building with a name indicating an ideal for classical Chinese literary men; meanwhile, the “concrete-reinforced” buildings suggest a background of high-rise buildings and concrete-made urban environment. What mentioned in the last two stanzas of this poem is not anything “tall”; rather, it is a sprawling old pier that will be removed, and ships coming in and going out in the sea, indicating a “flat” and horizontal space.

In comparison, the Convention Centre in Louise Ho’s poem, the “Extension I and Extension II” (1997), as well as the Chek Lap Kok airport in her poem, the “Chek Lap Kok” (1997), are all sprawling structures instead of skyscrapers. They are not part of the distinctive and characteristic tall buildings in Hong Kong at all. Instead, they are more symbolic in a way that they remind us of the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to the Chinese
mainland because the ceremony was held in the Convention Centre while immigrants were leaving Hong Kong from the new airport in Chek Lap Kok.

From this perspective, it appears that Louise Ho’s English poems focus more on the uncertainties of Hong Kong’s retrocession to Beijing; conversely, the “cultural space” of Yip’s modern Chinese poetry emphasizes on the memories of old Hong Kong around the high-rise concrete structures downtown.

Meanwhile, the younger poet Liu Waitong does not emphasize on Hong Kong’s high-rise environment at all. In his collection of poems about the Umbrella Movement, the *Umtopia: Days and Nights of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong*[^2], Liu extends Hong Kong’s urban features from Yip’s “whirling sky and high-rise buildings” to other images, such as the rails of the tram and the neon light. Liu also offers us the names of goldsmiths, bulldozers, as well as places and streets in Hong Kong that are named after features of a once colonized place. In “There is no need for flash”, Liu writes:

> Only a background of glaring lights  
> Remained as before: those of Chou X Fuk,  
> Chou S San  
> These beasts with golden teeth have opened  
> Their mouths and are ready to devour  
> At the gluttonous banquet in Hong Kong.

In “Painting of Seclusion in Causeway Bay”, Liu mentions about the goldsmiths, the iPhones, and the trams, which are important aspects of Hong Kong life:

> The rails of trams  
> Becomes a plank again.  
> Deeply hidden in the downward  
> Gaze of goldsmiths and iPhone

> The dingdong of the tram  
> Is like a ghost rolling a boat  
> It still returns to  
> Hennessy Road in the dream.

It is in the Hennessy Road, in a place near the Victoria Park, or as in “Painting of Travelling in Mongkok”, under the neon light, in Nathan Road, that “we” staged a sit-in.
While Yip focuses on memories of old Hong Kong, Liu’s description inclines towards life in contemporary Hong Kong. This is in contrast to Louise Ho, whose main focus is on those residents who prepare to immigrate to the western countries.

Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that both Yip and Louise Ho make use of the Cantonese dialect in their works. In Yip’s “Midun Dao”, he uses the Cantonese phrase “弊傢伙”, which was translated as “Oh hell” in the English translation, to help give a more lively and localized narration of the story of the man living in Nathan Road. Louise Ho (2009) uses the Cantonese slang word “geeleegulu” (嘰喱咕嚕) in her poem “Jamming” (42-43) to express a reaction to the awkward situation of human communications.

Scholar Ackbar Abbas (2009) maintains that in using “geeleegulu”, Louise Ho aims to shrug off the demand of judging non-native speakers of English in accordance with native speaker’s conventions (168-169). Meanwhile, Kerr (2009) asserts that Louise Ho uses such Cantonese slangs to make fun of the English poetry tradition (159).

Meanwhile, Yip may have employed the Cantonese dialect to follow a tradition of the Chinese “New Literary Movement”, which was emerged from Beijing’s May Fourth Movement in 1919 promoting “writing what I am speaking”. That was also the time when “modern poetry” was born in China as some Chinese literary men appropriated the western poetry tradition and wrote in Mandarin or other local Chinese dialects they spoke. In fact, modern Chinese poetry is a movement advocating writing in dialects, and well-known Chinese poets leading that literary movement, such as Xu Zhimo, wrote some of his poems in his local northern Chinese slangs. Such poets with their origin from the Chinese mainland had come to live and work in Hong Kong during the 1950s and the 1960s. Some of such examples include Xiao Hong and Dai Wangshu. In his essay about modern Chinese poetry in Hong Kong, Yip (1997) stresses that it “absolutely has blood ties” with the modern Chinese
poetry in the Chinese mainland, even though he strives to underscore the local qualities of Hong Kong poets (Yip 148-153).

In my opinion, Louise Ho’s works still have her own sense of “Chineseness”. For example, in her poem “A Veteran Talking” (2009), she commemorates a friend of hers, Iris Chang, who was the author of The Rape of Nanking (1997). Such topics about the history of what had happened in Nanking, as well as the June 4th massacre that Louise Ho discussed about in her poem “Remembering 4th June, 1989”, are all about the Chinese.

Viewed from this perspective, Louise Ho, despite writing in English, uses the Cantonese slangs as well in a way to follow the tradition of modern Chinese literature that promotes using local dialects. Kerr (2010), when discussing Louise Ho’s work “Flags and Flowers”, which employs English to plead for retaining Cantonese after Hong Kong handover, admits feeling strange for Ho’s practice and describes this as “apparent anomaly” with regard to English tradition (Kerr 83). In fact, describing her practice of using English to write as “colonial residue”, Louise Ho had emphasized that she uses English just for the sake of convenience as she was brought up and educated in western countries.

Just like Yip, Liu localizes his works about the Umbrella Movement by using Cantonese phrases. One of such examples is the use of “yu zhe”, the Cantonese version of “yu san”, for umbrella. On the contrary, using English, Ho cannot describe the local dialect in full even though her usage of the “geeleegulu” and other English language with Cantonese origin in her poem has been widely praised by western scholars.

Such being the case, it is possible that both the works of Yip and Louise Ho about the June Fourth massacre involve Hong Kong residents speaking Cantonese. However, the two poets do inherit different literary traditions. Kerr (2009) has pointed out that Louise Ho’s poems are from a tradition of English literature, as she indicates in her poem “Remembering 4th June, 1989” with Dryden, Marvell, and Yeats, who were prominent English poets.
indulging in political poems (Kerr160). Many of John Dryden’s poems were related to the contemporary British political situation during his lifetime; Irish poet W.B. Yeats paid close attention to the situation of the Protestants in Dublin. In Britain, during the 17th century, Andrew Marvell had been the assistant to John Milton, a dissident literary man who had been deeply involved in a reform of the government and became in danger of execution under the Restoration of Charles II. Marvell, as his secretary and an intellectual, helped Milton by writing down records as Milton later became blind because of illness.

Scholar Michael Hollington (1997) also notes that Louise Ho’s “Bronze Horse” reminds us of Thomas Mann (11); and, according to Abbas(1997), the “Canticle on a Drop of Water” sheds light on its ties to John Donne’s metaphysical poetry (169).

Yip follows a Chinese literary tradition as he states very clearly in the footnotes of his poem “Zhu Bang” (Pearl Oyster) (Yip 40-41) that some phrases of this poem have been adapted from the Sung poets, including Su Shi and Huang Tingjian, who are well regarded among the Chinese literary circles. These poets of classical Chinese were literary men persecuted by the bureaucracy during the Sung dynasty. They were traditionally well regarded by the Chinese as they had struggled to expose the corrupt officials in a manner that people expect what literary men should do. More importantly, Su Shi, one of the most important leaders of the Sung poets, has been regarded as the forerunner of modern Chinese poetry in the twentieth century. In fact, Su Shi was the first Chinese poet who wrote in classical Chinese the philosophical short poems, which is one of the distinctive characteristics of modern Chinese poetry (Du 224-235).

Viewed from this perspective, it appears that Louise Ho references classical English poetry while Yip and Liu allude to classical Chinese. This difference raises questions as to how to consider Hong Kong poetry in general.
In the meantime, high-rise buildings environment is not always the only unique feature to describe Hong Kong; instead, in Yip, Liu, and Louise Ho’s works, Hong Kong is often delineated as an urban area having some geographical and historical characteristics of its own. More importantly, they have also emphasized that most residents here more or less use Cantonese as the local dialect.

The Venues of Protests

In Yip’s poem about the June Fourth massacre, “Wo men Huidao Kongji de Guangchang” (We Return to the Void and Lonely Square) (1989), the protestors were in the [Tiananmen] Square. The protest has extended to the homes of Hongkongers via the television: “The Square extended from the sparkling screens to every homes here/Our living rooms are thus like the camps and tents in the Square” (zhe guangchang cong yingguang ping shenyan chulai). Yip’s place of protest is in both Beijing’s Tiananmen Square and the homes of people living in Hong Kong via the technology of television and live broadcast. It is noteworthy that the high-rise buildings environment is also mentioned here indirectly as Hong Kong is described as a highly developed place with many “sparkling screens”, living rooms, and numerous households.

Contrarily, Louise Ho does not directly mention the Tiananmen Square. In her “Remembering 4th June, 1989”, the protest was staged exactly in “this compact commercial enclave”-- in Hong Kong. There, people protested as they “rose up as one”. What happened in the Tiananmen Square is more or less like a phantom in the memory: “Presumably, that night, or was it dawn,/The moon shone pure,/As on the ground below/Flowed the blood of men, women and children”.

Louise Ho is thus describing Hong Kong residents’ commemoration of the suppression of students’ protest in Beijing on June the Fourth in 1989. This is expressed via a
literary tradition of British poets -- Marvell, Dryden, and Yeats -- who recorded events with words and “shaped them and kept them”.

Yip’s focus is more on what had happened in the Tiananmen Square at that moment on June 4th in 1989 and what happened afterwards: students had been singing, dancing, and weeping; there were tanks, and there was the sound of gun firing. For Yip, when “we” returned to the Square three days later, everything was silent – like a protest, with the fire quenched by water and the traces of blood erased. Bullets, books and amplifiers were still on the staircases.

The “we” in Yip’s poem must be residents living in Hong Kong, as he states very clearly the screens “in our living rooms”. This “we” should be the same as the one in Louise Ho’s poem as Ho is also talking about Hong Kong residents’ reaction to the June Fourth suppression of students in Beijing. Louise Ho’s “we”, in “this commercial enclave”, was protesting and joined together in unity: “rose up as one./ Before we went our separate ways again./ We thought as one./ We spoke as one”. Ho’s “we” has been changed by this incident as well, to “become ourselves” and finally understand what really had happened in the Motherland. “Our neighbor’s blood” was the catalyst for this change.

Accordingly, probably both Louise Ho and Yip Fai are talking about the same group of people and their fate in the wake of the 1997 handover using respectively English and Chinese in their works. Kerr (2009) maintains that the “us” in Ho’s “Living on the Edge of Mai Po Nature Reserve” refers to the local residents in Hong Kong affected by the domination of China (Kerr 157), as indicated by the following lines:

The horizon closes in like two long arms.  
We are surrounded,  
China holds us in an immense embrace.  
Merely the lie of the land.

Nevertheless, in Yip’s poem, the protestors in Beijing were viewed as “brothers and sisters” instead of “neighbors”. Unlike Louise Ho’s, Yip’s “we” was closely examining what
had happened in the Tiananmen Square on that night of suppression: a man dressing in a white shirt halted a green tank; a slogan attracted our attention: “Mother, I have done nothing wrong” (mama wo meiyou cuo). I use my own English translation for Yip’s poem “我們回到空寂的廣場” (Wo Men Huida Kongji de Guangchang)(When We Return to the Void and Lonely Square), as follows:

Three days later, when we return to the void and lonely Square
The fire has been quenched by water, traces of blood has been washed and rubbed clean
Bullets, books, and amplifiers
as well as numerous memories which can neither be quenched nor be rubbed clean
are still on the staircases
On the monument, there are still traces of bullets
Which is hot when you touch it

Waiting for more than ten days and nights, this Square extends from the sparkling screens to every homes here
Our living rooms are thus like the camps and tents in the Square
We are lying on the ground, just like every student who was depressed and sad
They were looking at the bodies and shadows that come and go
and making jokes which were depressed and sad
It was written on his T-shirt:
“I’m hungry, but I can’t eat”
It was hung on her body a letter written in blood:
“Mother, I have done nothing wrong”

The light on the Square was sometimes bright and sometimes dim
just like the reflected images on the sparkling screen
that sometimes present and sometimes hidden from us
They had been singing and dancing on the Square
They had shed all their tears on the Square
and as the ambulances passed them in wails, they said to the passers-by:
“No more hope for China”

The light on the Square was sometimes bright and sometimes dim
just like the reflected images on the sparkling screen
that sometimes present and sometimes hidden from us
We have heard only the sound of shotguns firing
We have only seen tanks pass and turn over
They had hindered and stopped the vehicles of the armed forces
so as to ask the junior soldiers to slowly put down
the cold and stiff riffle
Perhaps they do not understand, that not all riffles can have a flower to plug in

The light on the Square was sometimes bright and sometimes dim
just like the reflected images on the sparkling screen
that sometimes present and sometimes hidden from us
They have disappeared in the shining flame
and become the thick, black smoke in Beijing’s sky
They have disappeared, but not completely
as we see a study guide for English on the staircase

He was a fortunately survived man dressing in a white shirt
He warded off a green tank and prevented it from departing
Was he asking the whereabouts of his relatives and friends?
And he was so quiet, that he just wanted to sacrifice himself?
The soldiers were puzzled, and they could not guest the meaning of
Not afraid to die; eventually he did not die, but perhaps he can never sleep
In the evening, the sky is so red that it seems to rain with blood

They eventually become the dust of a windy storm in China
just as those brothers suffering the same disaster in the same Square thirteen years ago
They will remember the young soldiers who walked into the city the night before
They were scattered by the crowd like white, broken pieces
Brothers and sisters in the Square are dripping blood spreading it to the civil society
The dead would regard the sadness of those fortunately survived being worthwhile
We finally know the truth knowing who we are who we are

Contrarily, Louise Ho’s “Remembering 4th June, 1989” has only two stanzas on what
had happened in the Tiananmen Square, and not in details. The image is blurred, as
expressed by those words such as “shadow” and “presumably”. Louise Ho’s “Remembering
4th June, 1989”, which is taken from pp. 38-39 from the Incense Tree (2009), is as follows:

Yes, I remember Marvell, Dryden,
Yeats, men who had taken up the pen
While others the sward
That would have vanished
Were it not for the words
That shaped them and kept them.

The shadows of June the Fourth
Are the shadows of a gesture,
They say, but how shall you and I
Name them, one by one?
There were so many,
Crushed, shot, taken, all overwhelmed,
Cut down without a finished thought or

Presumably, that night, or was it dawn,
The moon shone pure,
As on the ground below
Flowed the blood of men, women and
The stunned world responded, and
Pointing an accusing finger, felt cheated.

But think, my friend, think: China never
Promised a tea party, or cakes
For the masses. It is we,
Who, riding on the crest of a long hope,  
Became euphoric, and forgot  
The rock bottom of a totalitarian state.

Then, this compact commercial enclave,  
First time ever, rose up as one.  
Before we went our separate ways again,  
We thought as one,  
We spoke as one,  
We too have changed, if “not utterly”  
And something beautiful was born.

As we near the end of an era  
We have at last  
Become ourselves.  
The Catalyst  
Was our neighbour’s blood.

Whoever would not  
For a carefree moment  
Rejoice at a return  
To the Motherland?  
But, rather pick ears of corn  
In a foreign field  
Than plough the home ground  
Under an oppressive yoke.

Ours is a unique genius,  
Learning how to side-step all odds  
Or to survive them.  
We have lived  
By understanding  
Each in his own way  
The tautness of the rope  
Underfoot.

Meanwhile, Louise Ho draws a different conclusion for understanding the situation as she insists “China never promised a tea party, or cakes for the masses.” In addition, people would “rather pick ears of corn in a foreign field than plough the home ground under an oppressive yoke.” Conversely, Yip concludes in the last sentence: “we finally know the truth [of Beijing’s lies], knowing who we are who we are” (wo men yijing zhidaow en shi shui wo men shi shui). Yip does not suggest leaving the place; he emphasizes that “we” finally know the truth about this Motherland. This is different from Ho, who denies “the carefree moment rejoice at a return to the Motherland”.
In the meantime, Louise Ho has at least one more poem about protests in Hong Kong. “Hong Kong Riots I, 1967” has been included in her major work *Incense Tree: Collected Poems of Louise Ho* (Ho 3). The protests in 1967, which were initiated because of rising public fares and the influence of the Cultural Revolution in Mainland China, as well as the instigation of the leftists, was one of the major disturbances in Hong Kong. Some other contemporary Hong Kong poets, including Yip Fai, do not mention this event in their works in high profile. This is perhaps due to the fact that Louise Ho is several years older than Yip and most other Hong Kong contemporary poets of modern Chinese poetry. In fact, English poetry in Hong Kong has had the chance to be more fully developed earlier than modern Chinese poetry since the Chinese Movement was set off only in the early 1970s.

In Louise Ho’s “Hong Kong Riots I, 1967”, the venue where protesters stayed is not obviously stated; instead, it is replaced by a description of the “shapes” of shadows that become people in daylight to move around. The protest is denoted by keywords such as “curfew”, “yesterday’s debris”, “stones”, and “words” to give us hints on what had happened. It seems that we are given only such keywords to define the action; what happened in this place just gets blurred. Furthermore, the scene is described in the third person narrative and there is no first person pronoun, conveying an impression that the poet has been silently observing instead of giving her own opinion on the incident:

```
At five this morning
The curfew lifted.
Receding, it revealed
Shapes that became people
Moving among yesterday’s debris.
Stones, more so than words
Are meaningless,
Out of context.
```

On the contrary, for the poems in Liu Waitong’s *Utopia-Days and Nights of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong*, the venues for protestors to stage sit-in during the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement are clearly stated. For instance, in Liu’s poem, “Painting of
Travelling in Mongkok”, protestors are obviously Hong Kong citizens in the Nathan Road. This is different from Yip’s “When We Return to the Void and Lonesome Square”, where protestors were students in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square and “we” were only outsiders sympathizing with them.

Furthermore, for Louise Ho’s “Remembering June Fourth, 1989”, “we” are the ones who “rose up as one” after viewing the TV and “we” protest against Beijing’s cracking down of the students’ movement in Tiananmen Square; and the protestors are “our neighbors”. It is implied that the protestors in her “Hong Kong Riots I, 1967” are from Hong Kong, who are “shapes that became people”, but they are described objectively in the third person. For Liu, the “we”, “our”, and “I” in his poems are the protestors themselves, and they had a variety of activities: dancing, sleeping on the streets, and holding out umbrellas against rainwater and pepper spray.

For instance, in “Night and Fog—A Visit to Mongkok”, Liu writes: “It likes our steps, soft, or sometimes dancing”. In stanza four of this poem, Liu mentions about how the protestors prepared to defend themselves against their enemies:

```
Night resumes as fog, tiptoeing
Another Mongkok, as unicorn prepares, quietly static
It's been long, you can still recall your whiz
It's been long, the Nathan roared as tidal wave.
```

Meanwhile, Liu’s “In Praise of Objects” mentions how the protestors were attacked by police using pepper spray:

```
Pepper is no longer used against carrot cake
But is used to burst fry our eyeballs
The spray is sprayed out, causing the city to lose its way
The road no longer bears the clockwork of the alarm clock
The flood that has been started, now it is a bed
That allows lovers night after night to sneak over
```
In Liu’s “Passed Road”, the protestors were shouting: “I left the path led to the Square./Passing the sea of shouts in those days./The invisible sea and cries/Still linger nights and days”.

Liu also mentions the umbrella and the rain, which are symbols of the Umbrella Movement. For his “In Praise of Objects”, Liu writes: “The umbrella is broken, like the rainbow is broken as well”; in “Passed Road”, he mentions the rain: “After the thunderstorm, we turn into rainwater.” In “Night and Fog—A visit to Mongkok”, he writes: “It likes our umbrellas, invisible or colorful”.

Meanwhile, Liu’s Nathan Road, in his “Painting of Travelling in Mongkok”, is in a way similar to the description of Yip’s poem, “Midun Dao” (Nathan Road), in a way that Nathan Road is referred to as a “river” which is wide and flowing flat through a plain. For Liu, Nathan Road is also a “river”, but with apes howling on both sides and people are travelling with long sails in it. However, for Liu, this is still in an urban environment, as the “river” is adorned with neon light.

The imagery of apes howling on both sides of a river is from a classical Chinese poem by a famous poet from the Tang dynasty, Du Fu. Other lines from Liu’s above-mentioned poem, such as “a white bird turning the tail feathers”, “snow is falling”, “a ranger”, “a light boat”, “sparse bamboo”, “long sails”, and “fishing alone”, echoes this or that famous classical Chinese poems of the Tang dynasty. For Liu’s another poem, “Painting of Seclusion in Causeway Bay”, the imagery of the “pine tree”, referring to protestors having a sit-in in their tents, can also be traced to a tradition of classical Chinese literature.

Both Liu and Yip have been following closely a tradition of Chinese literature in their works that Louise Ho lacks in her poems. This is probably due to the fact that Louise Ho grew up in English speaking western countries beginning from an early age and got her
education there. She may not have acquired the knowledge of classical Chinese literature as Liu and Yip do.

More importantly, Liu goes a step forward to follow the literary tradition of a localized form of Chinese literature in Hong Kong and Taiwan. As illustrated by his above-mentioned poem “Painting of Travelling in Mongkok”, Liu’s river in the poem is not only having howling apes on both sides, but it is also adorned by the neon light of a modern city. Liu’s another poem “In Praise of Objects” is obviously playing with the idea of a poem with the same title by a contemporary Hong Kong poet Leung Ping-kwan (Ye Si). As for Liu’s “Someone Asks Me about Justice and Righteousness Again”, it echoes a poem by Yang Mu, a well-known contemporary Taiwan poet, with a similar title “Someone Asks Me about Justice and Righteousness”. Both Yang Mu and Ye Si are famous for describing in their modern Chinese poetry the life of local residents in Taiwan and Hong Kong respectively.

Conclusion

Thus reviewed the features of the works of Louise Ho in the English language, as well as those of Yip Fai and Liu Waitong in the Chinese language, with English translations. It appears that there is no evidence to date that English poetry is more “local” than modern Chinese poetry to represent Hong Kong, or vice versa.

Generally speaking, the Chinese language poets mentioned in the essay seem to have an inclination to focus on the Chinese Motherland, even though they view it negatively. In Liu’s “Painting of Travelling in Mongkok”, the poet writes that in Mongkok there is “a ranger recognizing his old land anew”. Though Liu may not identify with the “old land”, he appears to have a hope for a “renewed” one. On the other hand, Louise Ho appears to be more world-inclined in her focus as she describes in many of her poems Hongkongers who were preparing to immigrate. She seems to be less interested in a reformed Mainland China.
Nevertheless, no matter the poems are in the tradition of the English language or Chinese language, they have an inclination to be indigenous. The emotions expressed via the lines are generally common to most of the residents here; the events they describe in the poems are more or less related to Hong Kong.

According to Kerr (2009), residents in Hong Kong should choose English to write poetry. One of the reasons for this is that it is easier to get works published in the wake of Beijing’s rising power and its autocratic censorship (Kerr 160).

In my opinion, such debates are more or less related to a discussion of the trend of globalization and its counter-reaction in localization in the contemporary era. In this regard, we would have to return to our old question of “what is local”. In this case, “local” probably refers to the Chinese language as English is a globalized language which is commonly used around the world. People in Hong Kong should choose the English language as the medium to write poetry if they acknowledge globalization as a better trend for development. Meanwhile, people who recognize localization as a more suitable way to facilitate development may oppose to this.

On the other hand, in this essay, there may be some limitations for the research. First, the samples for comparison is so small that it cannot really represent the general trend of contemporary Hong Kong poetry. Since only one poet from Hong Kong using the English language has been examined, contrary to two poets in the Chinese language, it is difficult to compare which one is having more “local qualities”. There should be the works of perhaps at least a dozen poets writing in English and in Chinese to be examined before one can draw a more reliable conclusion in this regard. Furthermore, we should also consider non-Chinese poets in Hong Kong, no matter they are writing in English or in Chinese, to see whether they write about the daily life and protests in Hong Kong or not.
Viewed from this perspective, this essay may only give us a glimpse of how individual poets in Hong Kong render their works with Chinese or English as the medium to write. In this way, it sheds light on the variety of Hong Kong literatures and widens our view on what Hong Kong literatures are all about.

Notes

1 For most of Yip Fai’s modern Chinese poetry in this essay, I use the English translation by Brendan O’Kane in the Nathan Road: International Poetry Night in Hong Kong 2011 edited by Gilbert C.F. Fong, Shelby K.Y. Chan, Lucas Klein, Amy Ho Kit Yin, and Bei Dao.

2 For Liu Waitong’s modern Chinese poems, I use the English translation in Umtopia—Days and Nights of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, published by the Spicy Fish Cultural Production in Hong Kong in 2015.

Works Cited


Du, Guoqing. “Sungshi yu Taiwan Xiandai Shi” (Sung Poetry and Taiwan’s Modern
Chinese Poetry) (224-235), in Taiwan Xianggang Aomen ji Haiwai

Huawen wenxue lunwen Xuan, Fuzhou: Haixia Wenyi Chuban She, 1993.

Fung, Yihong. “Xueyun de Lishi Yiyi ji Pingjia” (The Historical Significance and Evaluation of the Student Movement) (292-304), in The Students’ Association for Hong Kong Higher Learning Institutes, ed. Xiang Gang Xuesheng Yundong Huigu (A Review of Hong Kong’s Student Movement), Hong Kong: Guangjiaojing, 1983.


Ho, Louise. Incense Tree: Collected Poems of Louise Ho, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009.


Kerr, Douglas. “Louise Ho and the Local Turn: The Place of English Poetry in Hong Kong” (75-95), in Louie, Kam., ed. Hong Kong Culture: Word and Image, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

Liu, Waitong. Umtopia – Days and Nights of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, Hong Kong: Spicy Fish Cultural Production, 2015.


Yip, Fai (Ye, Hui). Nathan Road: International Poetry Nights in Hong Kong, Hong Kong:
Yip, Fai (Ye, Hui). “Xianggang Xinshi Qishi Nian” (Seventy Years of Hong Kong Modern Poetry) (148-153), in Guan, Mengnan; Yip, Fai (Ye, Hui), eds. Xianggang Xinshi Xuan Du, Xianggang: Fong Ya Chuban She, 2002.

Zou, Zhiyin. “Yuedu ‘Jia’ de Keneng Xing – Cong Xianggang Xinshi Youguan ‘Jia’ de Gainian, Tantao ‘Bentu Yishi’ de Yihan” (Possibilities of Reading ‘Home’ – Exploring the Meaning of ‘Native Consciousness’ from the ‘Home’ Related Concepts in Hong Kong’s Modern Chinese Poetry), Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, June 2005,