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Language Policy, 'Asia's World City' and Anglophone Hong Kong Writing

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Asia
Hong Kong
language and literacy
literature
transnationalism

Hong Kong's official language policy of 'biliteracy' (Chinese and English) and 'trilingualism' (Cantonese, Putonghua, English), announced after the reversion to China in 1997, claims to address actualities of language use in the territory, remove inequities between English and Chinese, and consolidate the linguistic platform to launch Hong Kong as 'Asia's World City'. Public discussion of and controversy over this policy immediately followed, and have continued in the past decade. But they have tended to focus on the implementation of the policy in education, specifically the medium of instruction in schools, to the exclusion of most other areas of language use. Drawing on recent examples of translanguaging practice in literary writing, this essay argues first that such actually existing practices are far more verbally nuanced, self-knowing and self-reflexive than the official policy would allow, and second, that they instantiate Hong Kong's identity as 'Asian', which challenges both the official and public focus on Chinese and English. The 'world' and 'world city' that emerge from such writing are historically located in the transition before and after 1997, when the writers acquired their languages in schools. They are also provisional, generated by a poesis of experimentation that attends to cultural change as language change in and as everyday life.

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25 Hong Kong's postcolonial language policy of 'biliteracy' (Chinese and
English) and 'trilingualism' (Cantonese, Putonghua, English) was announced
by the Special Administrative Region's first chief executive in 1999, two
years after the return of the former British colony to Chinese sovereignty.
30 The 1999 policy address sought to establish and legitimate retrospectively
the wider social objectives of the measures concerning medium of instruction
in secondary schools already implemented the year before. In the heat of
national reunion, the 1997 'Medium of Instruction Guidance' issued by the
education department stated that a secondary school should use 'mother
35 tongue' (meaning Cantonese) as the medium of instruction, unless it could
demonstrate that its teachers and students were proficient to teach and learn
in English.

Language policy issues were by no means straightforward before 1997,
and the passion they can arouse in the public domain was repeatedly attested
to in the years since the handover. Following the 1997 directive, only 112
40 secondary schools in Hong Kong out of a total of 411 were designated
English medium. There was immediate outcry and protests from schools that
were excluded, pupils and parents, and their pressure on the government
never slackened. After a series of consultations, the government decided to
adopt in 2009 what is called 'fine-tuning' (*weitia*), allowing schools to
45 choose which medium of instruction to use and in which subject within the
reiterated 1999 policy objective 'to uphold mother-tongue teaching and
enhance English proficiency concurrently'. As of early 2010, 16 schools
which were Chinese medium will switch to teaching entirely in English; 80
schools will adopt a mixed approach, teaching science subjects in English
50 and humanities subjects in Chinese, while 7 former English-medium schools
will no longer be allowed to teach entirely in English. This means from
September 2010 nearly half of the 402 secondary schools in Hong Kong will
teach fully or partly in English. In reality, then, 'fine-tuning' means the
abandonment of the 1997 policy and a return to the largely unregulated
55 chaotic to some, colonial to others pre-1997 situation.

The decade-long contest that ended with the government's retreat at
least for the time being from 'mother-tongue' teaching does not mean that
the controversy has in any way ended. As a study of Hong Kong bilingualism
stated, 'There is general consensus regarding the significance of Chinese and
60 English for the future of Hong Kong. More controversial is the way in which
the goals of biliteracy and trilingualism can most effectively be achieved' (Li
and Lee 2005: 756). This 'significance' is largely defined in pragmatic terms.
Students are perceived to learn better in their mother tongue (largely
Cantonese), while a premium is put on English as the lingua franca of
65 international trade and commerce within the wider framework of economic
globalization (see Hong Kong Legislative Council 2009). Also widely
perceived by Hong Kong people but of course unacknowledged by the

government is that English proficiency is a crucial point of distinction between Hong Kong as ‘world city’ and other indigenous-language urban zones on the Chinese mainland.

In Hong Kong, studies on bilingual Chinese Cantonese and English usage focus mainly on code switching and code mixing, which is also widely practised in different forms across different social classes, and in different media, including the print media (Li 1996, Lin 1996, Chan 1998, Pennington 1998, Chen 2008). A main thrust of the official policy is, however, directed precisely against the use of code switching and code mixing in education. The attempt to institutionalize clear boundaries between the two languages may or may not have proceeded from ideologies of language purity. But it clearly represents an attempt to engineer an artificial linguistic ecology where students will learn and recognize Chinese and English as distinct, self-contained systems prior to the mixed code that for many is the vernacular.¹

The 1999 policy address and its aftermath might have been the occasion for a comprehensive discussion of what ‘biliteracy’ or ‘trilingualism’ entails, its practicability, its implications. Unfortunately, both official and public attention remained in the grip of the medium of instruction controversy. This controversy important though it undoubtedly is has telescoped Hong Kong’s complex linguistic geography so that it has become largely visible as a single issue. It creates a situation where public debate over language use has become excessively focused on oral performance and classroom and pedagogical competency at the expense of other aspects and contexts of language use that ‘biliteracy’ and ‘trilingualism’ involve. Because biliteracy concerns reading and writing rather than speech, it is even more overshadowed, so much so that conceptual discussion of what constitutes biliteracy that can draw upon actual language use beyond the classroom rarely merits attention.

Another issue is that a bilingualism which overwhelmingly emphasizes English and Chinese renders invisible the number of ethnic minority language users in Hong Kong. These include speakers of different Chinese dialects who may be able to find accommodation in Putonghua classes offered in some schools and specifically those of South Asian ancestries who have resided in Hong Kong for several generations, who may be speakers of Cantonese but may not be Chinese-literate. Nor can it be assumed that they can adapt to classroom English like other South Asian national or diasporic subjects (see Pannu 1998, Lo 2008). A considerable irony becomes visible if we relate this situation to Hong Kong’s self-branding as ‘Asia’s World City’ announced in the same 1999 policy address which launched the official language policy. ‘Asia’, for ‘Asia’s World City’, clearly does not refer to the mix of intra-Asian ethnicities within the dominant population profile. The visual image of ‘a stylized dragon’ that accompanies

1 In their response to the government’s discussion paper on fine-tuning, the Association of English Medium Secondary Schools writes: ‘We agree that mixed-code teaching, e.g. the use of English textbooks with classroom instruction in Chinese, should not be allowed, as this will seriously compromise the students’ ability to speak and write well in English. While some Chinese terms may be used in an initial bridging programme in Secondary I, this should not last for more than three months’ (www.legco.gov.hk, accessed 7 June 2009). Interestingly, code mixing here does not refer to hybridization in the spoken language, which of course raises the question of whether it is implicitly acknowledged as a classroom medium.

the Hong Kong brandline makes this abundantly clear. Nor does it articulate some notional position within inter-Asian relations or culture. Instead, the central platform of the branding programme, according to the government website, is to promote Hong Kong as the place 'where opportunity, creativity and entrepreneurship converge ... a dynamic physical and cultural hub with world-class infrastructure, Asia's most strategic location, and a global network of people with an impressive record of success that can support achievement of your goals and objectives' (www.info.gov.hk).²

2 Accessed 11 June 2009.

To summarize: a language controversy that puts a premium on speech and language in education; widespread code mixing in everyday language use that finds itself at odds with medium of instruction policies that segregate English and Chinese language systems; and a self-branding as 'Asia's world city' where Asia doesn't seem to count for much else except as an accident of geographical location. Against this triangulation of contemporary issues, I would like to look at Arthur Leung Sai-cheung's prize-winning poem 'What the Pig Mama Says' which has attracted attention from an unforeseen, and perhaps unprecedented, combination of language and culture pundits, the government and creative writers:

The pupoh stopped to cheer. Leklek
was took away. He was mine biggest boy.
A good heart. Saved the best for Yenyen
and Hokhok. His self eating leftovers.
I cried I cried. Not knew the bastang
took him where. Gokgou told me was hell.

We ate much as we liked. The white fence
put us safe safe. Always we talked, cheered.
The pupoh liked to play with Hokhok.
Mine little boy talked to them sweet. He
knew how make make community. But
Hokhok too was took away by same

same bastang they took Leklek before.
Mine only girl Yenyen too sad to see
her little brother went. She kept quiet
everydays think think. I begged the bastang
not took mine boy. They not understood.
Heard only something like 'pok is good'.

The pupoh talked little little. Yenyen
stopped to eat. She said, 'No Hokhok play
wis me!' I sorry sorry for her. The bastang
came to take Yenyen. I saw her away.

I not cried. Maybe it better for Yenyen.
She will stop to think. No more think.

No more think think. Maybe I say
too much. Who is listening to my story?

155 Very obviously noticeable are the many instances of redoubling in the poem
‘I cried I cried’, ‘safe safe’, ‘make make’, ‘think think’ (twice), ‘little little’,
‘sorry sorry’ a feature more associated with Malay than Cantonese,
Putonghua or English. The proper nouns pupoh and bastang resonate of
160 Thai, maybe Tagalog; so do the names ‘Leklek’, ‘Hokhok’ and ‘Gokgou’,
perhaps also with other southern Chinese dialects. On a syntactical level,
‘Not knew the bastang took him where’ mimics Cantonese syntax (‘m ji
bastang dai kui hui jor bin dou’); so does ‘his self’ (‘kui ji gei’), ‘not took my
boy’ (‘m ho law ngor gor jai’), ‘Mine only girl Yenyen too sad to see/her little
brother went’ (‘ngo gor duk lui Yenyen ho m hoi sum kin dou kui sai lo jou’),
165 ‘They not understood’ (‘kui dei m ming’) and ‘I saw her away./I not cried’
(‘Ngor tai ju kui jou/I mo harm’). Code mixing and code switching are the
poem’s dominant modus operandi, and what represents it as multilingual.
English enables the interlingual weave, but it is an English already hybridized
at source amid a vernacular Cantonese linguistic ecology. The poem’s
170 interlinguality exceeds Cantonese, Putonghua and English to gesture, in one
direction, toward Asian, particularly Southeast Asian languages, and in
another, toward sub-Cantonese dialects.³ In these gestures it invents itself as
‘Asian’ and narrates an Asia that converses through the medium of English
and poetry.

3 I use ‘sub-dialect’
here in
acknowledgement of
the fact that
Cantonese (gong fu
wa) is the dominant
dialect form in Hong
Kong.

In view of the poem’s unique anglophonism, and ‘Asian’ signification and
referentiality, its official reception in Hong Kong is saturated with
unintended irony. ‘What the Pig Mama Says’ was awarded third prize in
the Edwin Morgan International Poetry Competition at the Edinburgh Book
Festival in Scotland (August 2008). The public first heard news of the award
through a press release issued by the Home Affairs Bureau on 4 September
that was widely disseminated in the media. The HAB message is mostly
180 factual except for the following self-congratulatory comment:

The award not only represents success for a Hong Kong Chinese poet writing in
English in international literary circles, but also showcases to the world the cluster
of top talent in the cosmopolitan world city of Hong Kong. (www.hab.gov.hk)⁴

4 Accessed 11 June
2009.

185 There is no mention at all of the poem’s content, its use of English, and
‘Asian’ references as if no other elaboration of its merit, apart from the fact
of the award itself, was deemed necessary. Indeed, it may well be that no
official elaboration is actually possible, given the current language predica-
190 ment in ‘Asia’s world city’.

It was left largely to the poet himself to provide an account of the poem that may mediate between official self-congratulation and silence. In the weeks that followed, Leung was featured in many media interviews. His comments on how inflationary pork prices inspired him to imagine the world as seen from the perspective of a sow whose offspring are taken away for slaughter helped to generate an affect of everyday life that confirmed poet and poem as 'local'. But despite being bruited as a 'Hong Kong Chinese poet writing in English', when it came to language, Leung took the initiative to problematize his 'local' credentials. Asked about his idiosyncratic language, Leung denied he was writing 'Hong Kong English':

'When I read the poem in Edinburgh, a Nigerian remarked it was "like African English"', he said. Leung's justification of his poem's anglophonism is aesthetic and anthropocentric rather than local and nativist. 'The poem is experimental', he says, 'to show that pigs have their own culture, language and society ... The language of the poem is unique to the pig mama ... There are repeated sounds, special rhythms, adding "not" in front of verbs, using past tense instead of the passive, all these are put together and are not Hong Kong English. It's more like Malaysian English, Indonesian English, for example, writing "walk walk" instead of "walking".' (www.friendearth.com/blogsearch/view_87411.html)⁵

5 All blogs are my translation from the original Chinese and were accessed on 11 June 2009.

Whether one agrees with Leung about the poem's linguistic features is not the issue here. What is significant is that his comments, in mediating between official celebration of his award and silence about the poem, actually reveal the gap between them. Fetishized as a Hong Kong 'success', his poem is an impossibility within a segregationist mindset about language that the medium of instruction issue as controversy or in hiatus has drawn a veil over. Members of the public were quick to seize on the anomaly where a prize-winning poem held up as evidence of Hong Kong's success in English is actually written in a form of the language that students are told to eschew on a daily basis. A web forum participant, while praising the poem's 'refreshing' quality, captures this point succinctly: 'That "pig language", from the viewpoint of the Certificate of Examination grammar standard, may have marks deducted till it scores zero' (<http://forums.idv.hk/showthread.php?sfb4d1f240f2b3e46bd7aa458e8760273&t=5652>). Referring to the supposedly childlike quality that pundits have observed of Leung's poem, a blogger writes: 'How strange! Desperately make children learn adults' correct grammar, but when adults act like children, that is called good!' (<http://leila1301.mysinablog.com/index.php?op=ViewArticle&articleId=1340918>). Another disingenuous blogger comments: 'I admit my English is not good, and I don't know how to write poetry. So getting all the grammar wrong, can then claim it's thinking like another life-form. So when your English gets to a certain standard, you can imagine how other animals speak English! To

learn English well, it's really not simple!' ('Garfield', 'Hakuna Matata', <http://ardot1985.blogspot.com/2008/09/what-pig-mama-says.html>).

These comments and a number of others which admit to being mystified by the language mark the ambivalence of the poem as a model of Hong Kong's success with English. How is this success to be measured? The official viewpoint is actually bifurcated, focusing on 'mother tongue' education and its corollary, 'native speaker' proficiency in use of English in the education system in one direction, and in the other, implicitly endorsing mixed code by holding up Leung's poem as exemplary. And what of the poem as 'biliterate' construct, instantiated as writing rather than oral performance in the first instance? Against 'Asia' as empty signifier in 'Asia's world city', the poem's interlingual 'Asian' traffic enacts a radical departure. In the HAB press release, 'Asia' is elided in the tautological 'cosmopolitan world city': does that mean being 'Asian' and being 'cosmopolitan' are mutually replaceable, or do the two displace each other? Or are they incompatible, that is to say, Hong Kong cannot be 'Asian' and 'cosmopolitan' at the same time? These questions were not posed by the web pundits either: apart from isolated quotes from Leung about adapting Asian languages, of the thirty weblinks I accessed, none has seen fit to comment on the significance of Leung's mimicry not only for his poesis, but also for its deflection of Hong Kong from identifying English exclusively with the Anglo-American West, and from identifying anglophone globalization as an exclusionary transaction between Hong Kong and the West.

The poem is original not only in its approach to code mixing and code switching, but also for the allusiveness of the codes themselves to an 'Asia' that they trace. Leung's poem is not the only Asian or, to be more precise, inter-Asian, imaginary in anglophone Hong Kong writing. In the rest of this essay, I will discuss how 'Asia' is written into different creative writing collections of the last decade, but in order to do so, an elaboration of the contemporary context beyond language policy, bilingualism studies, and medium of instruction is necessary. Since 1997, many young writers, notably students who learnt English in local schools and returnees from an education abroad, have turned to poetry. In these respects, the spaces of anglophone poetry have become much more locally embedded, to supplement its historical accommodation of expatriates, migrants and visitors.⁶ This appears as a paradox only if one sees English-language writing as inalienable from a colonizer culture, with no possibility of moving across colonial divides. Elsewhere, I have challenged this view by pointing to the genealogical trace of such mobility in anglophone literary writing as early as the 1950s (Ho 2009a,b). In this essay, I continue to be interested in movements where embeddedness in a historically cosmopolitan 'local' is the point of departure toward multiple worlds that become knowable and imaginable through English.

6 As a deliberate strategy, local embedding can be overplayed. A fulsome assertion of 'Hong Kong-ness' suggests a reactive mechanism to the charge that anglophone writing has had to face since colonial times that it is the writing of disengaged transients in a segregated language.



275 For a long time, anglophone Hong Kong writing has been triply margin-
 alized, labelled as elite discourse, as the specialized language of literature
 divorced from the pragmatic adoption of English by the majority of locals,
 and as written rather than spontaneous oral performance. The medium of
 instruction controversy both reflects and exacerbates this historical burden
 280 of English, a situation that many second-learners of English in Hong Kong
 schools have to negotiate on a daily basis from an early age. But despite what
 can only be described as an inhospitable linguistic ecology, an increasing
 number of these students, like Arthur Leung, have found their way toward
 creative expression in English. The editors and writers of the recent
 285 anthologies, while still privileged members of a university-educated minor-
 ity, cannot be considered social elites as their predecessors were in earlier
 colonial times. If the ability to use English at a high level of proficiency is a
 sign of elitism, then what we see in their work is precisely how English is
 delinked from high social status to allow new modalities of proficiency to
 290 emerge. Their global horizons are neither defined by the British Empire nor
 the anglophone West; the world is where English can bring them in touch,
 where English circulates, a world which can be opened up to conversations
 in the common tongues of literature. In the crossings between these worlds
 can be found the traces of 'inter-Asia' and the writers' self-consciousness as
 295 'Asian'.

To illustrate these points, I wish to look at some journal ventures since
 1997, notably Yuan Yang and Cha, both of which have a longer and more
 consistent publication track-record. Many of the writers and editors in both
 journals first contributed as creative writing students at university. One of
 300 the editors of the e-journal Cha has worked on Yuan Yang, and most of the
 young poets contribute to both. There are a number of poetry collectives in
 Hong Kong, both more established and transient, and they publish
 intermittently. Cha, however, remains the only online creative writing
 journal that claims a Hong Kong base, and in Yuan Yang one can trace a
 305 deliberate and developing editorial policy that mixes student with experi-
 enced creative writers, and presents Hong Kong as cosmopolitan in both its
 internal and external literary cultural geographies. Table 1 details the
 provenance of the contributors to Yuan Yang in the years from 2000 to
 2007: contributors fall consistently within the categories 1 to 4. Category 1
 310 shows anglophone creative writing from Hong Kong as an internally striated
 space, and the different stripes within are continuous with the dispersed
 production of such writing throughout the world in the Chinese diaspora,
 Asia and traditional western locations. A number of the subjects in category
 4 are formerly Hong Kong-based, and cross-referencing between categories 2
 and 4 shows considerable overlap. A finer-drawn table would reveal even
 315 more overlapping (e.g. between Hong Kong-based and Chinese diasporic,
 Chinese diasporic and Asian, Asian and Euro-American/Australian/New

Table1 Provenance of contributors to Yuan Yang, 2000-2007

Year	Category 1 HK/HK based	Category 2 Chinese diasporic	Category 3 Asian	Category 4 Europe/America/Australia/NZ	Total
2000	18 HK 16 HK based 2	4 (US)	1 (Singapore)	1 (France, formerly HK based) 2 (US) 1 (Canada) 1 (Zimbabwe/London)	28
2001	27 HK 21 HK based 6	4 (US)	1 (Singapore)	1 (Scotland) 5 (US) 1 (Australia, formerly in HK) 1 (NZ, formerly in HK)	40
2002	14 HK 10 HK based 4	1 (US)	1 (Singapore)	1 (US) 1 (Australia, formerly in HK) 1 (NZ, formerly in HK)	19
2003	14 HK 13 HK based 1	2 (US)	1 (Singapore) 1 (Malaysia)	1 (US) 1 (Australia, formerly in HK)	20
2004	10 HK 8 HK based 2	2 (US)	1 (Macao based) 4 (Singapore) 1 (Bangladesh)	1 (US)	19
2005	7 HK 7	1 (US)	2 (Singapore) 1 (Malaysia) 1 (India) 1 (Pakistan)	7 (US)	20
2006	7 HK 7	1 (Australia)	2 (Singapore)	7 (US) 1 (Australia)	18
2007	8 HK 6 HK based 2		1 (China based, from US) 1 (Singapore)	2 (Ireland) 1 (Canda) 3 (US)	16

Zealand). As Hong Kong and the world extend into each other, the Chinese diaspora and 'Asia' take shape as hubs of creative production and routes of circulation, alongside first-language locations. Table 1 indicates how the journal positions and construes 'Asia' from the perspective of 'Asia's world city', and in so doing, enables the empty brandline to take on meaning as a self-identifying sign, and reconnect with actual practices of culture-making and cultural exchange through English.

That poesis is also self- and world-making is also exemplified by the e-journal *Cha*, subtitled 'An Asian Literary Journal'. Launched in November 2007, it is, as its front page announces, 'the first and currently only Hong Kong-based online literary quarterly journal ... It has a strong focus on Asian-themed creative work or work done by Asian writers and artists. It also publishes established and emerging writers/artists from around the world' (www.asiancha.com).⁷ *Cha* has a far higher proportion of Asian and Asian-based contributors than *Yuan Yang*, with occasional appearances by Asian diasporic artists in the West and also Anglo-Americans. It instantiates Hong Kong's recognition of English as an inter-Asia creative medium and Hong Kong as an Asian platform of creative interactivity in words and images.

7 Accessed 15 June 2009.

In the final section of this essay, I will offer a few select examples of how Hong Kong, 'Asia' and the world intermix, mainly from the two journals already mentioned and also the anthology *Hong Kong U Writing* (2006), which was Tammy Ho Lai-ming's first editorial effort before starting *Cha* with Jeff Zroback. Among these poems, Arthur Leung's 'Twelve Nights Selected Hong Kong Places in the Form of Haiku' (Ho 2006: 29 30) offers a classic modality of inter-Asian exchange as generic appropriation and adaptation. A thematic modality of such exchange is Agnes Chan Sun Yee's poem 'Korean Flag', which talks of another kind of appropriation: the historical incorporation of Korea into Confucian culture (Ho 2006: 51 2). Between these two modalities and partaking of both is Tammy Ho's love poem 'Early Spring', which rewrites a famous lyric by Sanmao, the late Taiwanese woman writer whose romantic travelogue of the Western Sahara was immensely popular in the 1970s (Ho 2007). Asia's exclusion haunts the Hong Kong-based Jason Lee's poem '45 Belgrave Square': a subject in exile in London from Malaysia finds himself cast adrift from his childhood and unable to find his bearings (www.asiancha.com, issue no. 6, February 2009). Equally poignant, but in a very different tone, is Eddie Tay's poem of relocation, 'One Afternoon,' in which the speaker, as he goes about the mundane task of throwing out 'potted plants/dying at the corridor', accidentally locks himself out of his flat. He is brought up short against what this ordinary day conceals: 'Realizing my ridiculous position .../ I suddenly missed home' (Yuan Yang 2004: 2).

360 In these examples, Hong Kong is the place for different experimental
 encounters with 'Asia'. To say so is to posit a radical reimagining of Hong
 Kong as transient not as the 'borrowed place, borrowed time' of late
 colonial narrative or stopover for diasporic Chinese and East West
 itinerants, but a transience as provisionality that the logic of constant
 365 experimentation with genres, themes, self-making and world-making neces-
 sarily entails. This issue of transience is an important one, for it has long
 circumscribed Hong Kong's external and self-cognition as the place on the
 way to and from elsewhere. Anglophone writing, which used to be
 dominated by short-term visitors and expatriate residents, is routinely
 370 pointed to as a sign of this transience. Transience continues to proscribe
 Hong Kong after 1997 as Special Administrative Region which finds itself
 politically, linguistically and culturally integrated into a powerful nation and
 yet somehow remains separate from it. The Basic Law guarantees that Hong
 Kong's pre-1997 way of life will remain unchanged for 50 years, at the end
 375 of which reintegration into China will be complete. That is tantamount to
 saying that the current time is itself an interim, a temporary stopgap between
 two axial points of determination. However, contemporary anglophone
 Hong Kong poetry cannot simply be regarded and disregarded as the
 cultural phenomenon of the interim. Its very emergence is historical, and not
 380 only traceable to the 1950s or as the inheritance of earlier expatriate effort.
 Most importantly, this emergence embeds three decades of rapid and
 popular expansion of English teaching and learning in secondary education
 within a sociolinguistic ecology of Cantonese and Chinese literacy.
 A doubled linguistic exposure offer cross-cultural possibilities that some
 385 have seized upon so that, for them, mobility is literal and functional and also
 metaphorical and inventive. If transience is the student and novice writers'
 historical burden, then provisionality is a condition of their contemporality
 and the standpoint from which they seek accommodation, alliance and
 friendship with their counterparts from Asia and further afield who share
 390 multiple linguistic cultural inheritances.

In Tammy Ho's poem 'His T-shirts', historical change is embedded into
 the movements of ordinary family life and develops both multi-layeredness
 and everyday affect. The movements are both temporal and spatial, within
 and beyond the intimate circle of father and daughters:

395 Medium-sized T-shirts on his dark body.
 He's totally Chinese more so than me.
 But in periods when he's building bridges,
 fixing window panes or drilling roads,
 I think he's from South Africa.
 400 Yellow skin is black in the sun.
 Who said colours are God-given?

Medium-sized T-shirts he has plenty.
 Elated, in countries foreign, we do not forget
 at home he's suppressing his worried lips.
 He wants nothing from us, but
 we like the idea of giving. And so he's
 wearing T-shirts from London, Thailand,
 Auckland, Japan, Finland, India, Malaysia,
 Poland and Korea ...
 'Where are you from, father?' We are
 teasers. Names of places bold
 in English on his chest. He doesn't know.
 'China', he answers. We laugh.
 We laugh. Bad daughters.
 Medium-sized T-shirts on top of Large
 -sized ones in his drawers.
 He once stood huge
 in front of a snack bar,
 buying us coca-colas,
 and we cheered. (Ho 2006: 78)

Here is the everyday world of family life, lovingly evoked; in itself a world,
 the family draws on other times and other places for its emotional
 enrichment. Solid and silent, monoethnic and monolingual, the presence of
 the working-class Chinese father is vividly affirmed and gently discomposed.
 Around him circles his vivacious English-literate daughters who continue to
 give him a foothold in their more peregrinatory life away from home and
 ethnicity. The world is drawn into the family bond, familiarized and brought
 close to home, but the litany of foreign place-names remain as mnemonics of
 strangeness. In the alternations between these double foci, family emerges as
 emotional connection between parent and children. Family, in the final
 stanza, is also the world of collective memory, a shared remembrance of the
 first taste of modernity as an occasion for celebration and an experience of
 love.

At first sight, Tammy Ho's poem could not be more different from Arthur
 Leung's 'What the Pig Mama Says'. Ho's standard English narrative of the
 family in place contrasts sharply with Leung's code switching that renders
 the pig mama's lament for her lost children playful and poignant. Beyond the
 different style and thematics, however, both poets begin with the local as
 source of inspiration in the everyday life of family, survival, food. In an
 analogous move, the family as local elaborates itself through connections
 with the external world mediated by English, while an item of local news
 transforms into an experiment with English and otherness. Beginning from
 within Hong Kong, both poems develop an external geography that

445 cosmopolizes them. Supplementing cosmopolitanism as colonial heritage
and the condition of contemporary globalization, this embedded cosmopo-
450 litanism comes through as self-aware, inventive and articulate of Hong
Kong's promise as 'world city'.

455 In the decades before 1997, English language education expanded
throughout secondary schools so that many more students learnt English
460 as part of their core language curriculum and the medium of instruction. At
the same time, 'English' was repeatedly inscribed in instrumentalist terms as
the language of trade and commerce, or ideologically, as the medium of
colonial culture and colonized subjectivity. Despite the actual and perceived
deficiencies of English language policies in the past decades, many of the
young poets and novice writers have emerged as innovative users of the
language. Against the symbolic order of English, these new writers,
anthologists and editors assert their claims to the language and their capacity
for self-generation. Their writing reconnects English to affect and everyday
life, and argues that even in an inhospitable linguistic ecology, there will be
subjects for whom the most disadvantageous conditions are no obstacle to
poesis and inventive self- and world-making.

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situation.

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