

Monika Gaenssbauer | Nicholas Olczak (Eds.)

Of forests and humans

Hong Kong contemporary short fiction



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Series editors:
Monika Gaenssbauer and Isabel Friemann

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Nicholas Olczak (Eds.)

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISSN 0946-2325

ISBN 978-3-89733-506-6 (printed version)

ISBN 978-3-89733-587-5 (E-Book)

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www.projektverlag.de

Acknowledgements

We are most grateful to the Hong Kong writers who generously consented to have their short stories translated into English and published within this book.

The project “Literature as a Leading Research Area at Stockholm University” kindly granted financial support for Monika Gaenssbauer to make a research trip to Hong Kong in 2018.

During the work on this book Tang Wei M. A. offered invaluable advice about the translation of difficult passages in the Chinese texts.

We are also very grateful to Professor Terry Siu-han Yip, Professor Stefan Helgesson, senior teacher Klaus Schmutzler, and Isabel Friemann M. A. for reviewing our manuscript before publication.

Professor Yip was kind enough to contribute a foreword to our book.

Our heartfelt thanks also go to the following people, who offered inspiration and support during the work on this book:

Professor Irmy Schweiger, Professor Marja Kaikkonen, Professor Jenny White, Senior teacher Katharina Gaenssbauer, Dr. Barbara Frank, and Fred Pusch PhD.

Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak

Contents

Terry Siu-han YIP Foreword. Of forests and humans	9
Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak Of forests and humans – Hong Kong contemporary short fiction. An Introduction	11
Sharon CHUNG Not a clear day	21
<i>Translated by Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak</i>	
Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak Sharon Chung’s ‘Not a clear day’ – a close reading	39
XI Xi Elzéard Bouffier’s Forest	47
<i>Translated by Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak</i>	
Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak Xi Xi’s ‘Elzéard Bouffier’s Forest’ – a close reading	53
HON Lai-Chu Water Pipe Forest	61
<i>Translated by Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak</i>	
Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak Hon Lai-Chu’s ‘Water Pipe Forest’ – a close reading.....	71
CHAN Lai Kuen E6880**(2) from Block 6, building 20, wing E	79
<i>Translated by Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak</i>	
Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak Chan Lai Kuen’s ‘E6880**(2) from Block 6, building 20, wing E – a close reading.....	85
WANG Pu Greek sandals	93
<i>Translated by Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak</i>	

Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak Wang Pu's 'The Greek Sandals' – a contextualizing essay.....	99
Jessie CHU Wonderland.....	107
<i>Translated by Nicholas Olczak and Monika Gaenssbauer</i>	
Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak Jessie Chu's 'Wonderland' – a close reading.....	113
Bibliography.....	119

Terry Siu-han YIP

Foreword. Of forests and humans

Of Forests and Humans is a volume of English translations of six contemporary Hong Kong short stories written originally in Chinese. It represents the concerted efforts of two diligent scholars who carefully selected and translated the texts, and provided a critical reading to each of them. Being one of the privileged few to have the opportunity to preview this meaningful project conducted by Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak, I must admit that they have greatly impressed me by their efforts to enrich the corpus of world literature by introducing Hong Kong women writers through English translation. Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" flashed up in my mind when I first read the manuscript of this volume not so much for the common reference to the forest as metaphor and/or setting as for Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak's endeavour to take "a road less travelled by." They have not only taken up a challenging task of translating six short stories written by contemporary Hong Kong women writers, namely, Sharon Chung (Zhong Xiaoyang), Xi Xi (Zhang Yan), Hon Lai-Chu (Han Lizhu), Chan Lai Kuen (Chen Lijuan), Wang Pu and Jessie Chu (Zhu Yanhong), but they have also included an illuminating reading of each of the texts—an effort that makes the entire project more meaningful and its work more demanding and rewarding. This product of their joint venture has made a significant "difference" to the landscape of world literature for some of these works are definitely lesser known, if not completely unknown, to most readers and scholars in the English-speaking world.

When there are hundreds and thousands of contemporary Chinese writers from Mainland China and Taiwan whose works one can select for translation and analysis, Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak have deliberately chosen to work on the lesser studied works from Hong Kong. By doing so, they have done a great service to the international circulation and appreciation of contemporary Hong Kong literature. This volume has undoubtedly expanded and enriched the corpus of world literature by introducing a façade of contemporary Hong Kong short fiction that deals with the forever-changing relations between self, identity and place on the one hand, and the incessant quest for "home" by Hong Kongers on the other. This desire to find an anchor in life characterized by a constant state of flux and fluidity is manifested not

only in the characters created but also in their creators at times, thus allowing the reader to get a glimpse of their sense of alienation, anxiety, confusion, despair, frustration, insecurity and loss caused by the changing social, political and economic circumstances in Hong Kong.

In a thoroughly professional, serious and critical way, Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak also take their readers into an interesting and exciting territory—or forests, to use their metaphor—where many seemingly familiar issues are explored. They further show their readers how similar issues are approached or addressed in quite different ways by each of the writers. While readers grope their way through the literary “forests,” encountering the various “paths” along the way and experiencing the complexity and intricacies involved, the close readings of the texts serve as a beacon or welcoming signage, steering readers through a literary landscape quite unknown and unfamiliar to many. By taking a socio-historical and philological approach, the close readings in this volume offer insightful observations and interpretations to the individual texts.

By embarking on such a meaningful and challenging project, Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak have consciously chosen to take “a road less travelled by” and with the publication of this volume, they are inviting everyone to take part in this exciting and rewarding “adventure,” that is, to launch a literary journey to Hong Kong in the 1990s to the 2010s and to learn more about this metropolis and its “travelling” residents there. By combining a translation project with a critical companion to the translated literary texts, Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak offer a useful study tool and a handy reference guide for students and general readers interested in contemporary Hong Kong short fiction.

November 2019, Hong Kong

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Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak

Of forests and humans – Hong Kong contemporary short fiction. An Introduction

This volume aims to present Hong Kong contemporary short fiction as “literature in the world”¹. Hong Kong literature has been subjected to dual marginalization, both in relation to Western literature and to Chinese literature.² However, rather than applying a single-system world literature theory or an understanding of world literary space as a space united through aesthetic rivalry, we agree with the scholar of literature Stefan Helgesson that literature is shaped by many “overlapping, intersecting, and contradictory forces”.³ As the British geographer Doreen Massey has argued against describing the identity of one place only by its differences from other places:

The particularity of any place is ... constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter-position to the other which lies beyond, but ... (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that ‘beyond’. Places viewed this way are open and porous.⁴

The identity of a place is formed both by its difference from other places as well as its links with them. Such an ‘open and porous’ view of the identity of Hong Kong and its expression in the region’s literature has been developed by scholars of literary studies in Hong Kong. The literary critic Chen Guoqiu 陳國球 has described how the editing committee of *Xianggang Wenxue Daxi 1919-1949* 香港文學大系一九一九 - 一九四九 (*The Compendium of Hong Kong literature 1919-1949*) identified Hong Kong literature as being:

- Works by authors who have lived in Hong Kong for some time, as well as works that have been published in Hong Kong;

¹ Helgesson, Stefan: ‘Tayeb Salih, Sol Plaatje, and the Trajectories of World Literature’, in: Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, Sep. 2015, pp.253-286.

² Helgesson has observed that the Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih also suffered such a dual marginalization in relation to Western literature and to Arabic literature. Ibid., p.255.

For more on literature from Hong Kong see: Gaenssbauer, Monika ed.: Hong Kong Literature. Special Issue, Orientaliska Studier, No. 158, 2019.

³ Helgesson, Stefan: ‘Tayeb Salih, Sol Plaatje, and the Trajectories of World Literature’, in: Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, Sep. 2015, pp.253-286, 253.

⁴ Massey, Doreen: Space, Place and Gender, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, p.5.

- Works by authors who have previously lived in Hong Kong, but whose works have been published outside of Hong Kong;
- Works for which the main audience and readership is in Hong Kong, as well as works that have influenced the development of Hong Kong literature.⁵

The editing committee of the Compendium also stated that Hong Kong literature is literature that relates to the cultural space of Hong Kong.⁶

In this sense, all of the short stories in this collection can be defined as Hong Kong literature. However, at the same time we consider these stories to be part of ‘literature in the world’.⁷

All of the stories in this collection focus on topics which can be found in metropolitan literature. There is the alienation of the city and of living a life amongst millions of others, as well as the loneliness of leading a nomadic life in the globalized world. Then there are the effects of modernity and technology on human beings, the tension between utopian and dystopian elements, and the unsustainability of human actions.⁸ All of these things can equally be found in fiction describing life in big cities in the US, in Europe, or in other parts of Asia. However, one can see that the Hong Kong writers have their own unique approaches to these topics.

The late Hong Kong writer Leung Ping-Kwan 梁秉鈞 (1949-2013) argued that Hong Kong authors are sceptical about the use of great and national narratives to describe their region.⁹ Leung’s own writing was clearly committed to

⁵ Chen, Guoqiu 陳國球: ‘Zongxu’ 總序 (General preface), in: Huang, Nianxin 黃念欣 ed.: Xianggang Wenxue Daxi 1919-1949 香港文學大系一九一九-一九四九 (Compendium of Hong Kong Literature 1919-1949. Fiction), 小說, 卷二, Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 2015, pp.1-39, 23.

⁶ Ibid., p.24.

⁷ Since around 2001, the Hong Kong government has been trying to capitalize on this global nature of the region in its official branding of the SAR as ‘Asia’s world city’.

⁸ The literary scholar Xu Zidong has described the state that characterizes many works of Hong Kong writers as the in-between, the crevice between “floating in a foreign country” (流落異國 liuluo yiguo) and “feeling alienated in one’s own place” (此地他鄉 cidi taxiang). See: Xu, Zidong 許子東: ‘Xu’ 序 (Introduction), in: Xu, Zidong 許子東 ed.: Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 1994-1995 香港短篇小說選 1994-1995 (Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 1994-1995), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2000, pp.1-10, 4.

⁹ Leung, Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞: ‘Xianggang gushi – weishenme zheme nanshuo’ 香港故事 -- 为什么这么难说 (Hong Kong’s stories – why are they so hard to tell?) in: Leung,

the de-exoticization of Hong Kong and to the description of those everyday scenes, characters, sights, and sounds, that constituted the richness of Hong Kong's identity.¹⁰

The scholar of Chinese literature David Wang Der-wei 王德威, who was born in Taiwan but is now based at Harvard University in the US, also describes Hong Kong literature as being characterised by this kind of description:

Hong Kong writers don't belong to the school of formalism (xing-shizhuyi 形式主義)¹¹ and they do not act grandly. The city they construct in their literature appears gloomy, colourful, or blurred. Their writing is about the sadness of a floating world, the heaving of a cosmopolitan city, hope and despair, temptation and wounding.¹²

Wang also suggests that Hong Kong writers understood early on that written words were ever-changing signs. They learnt about the fluidity of language and the way it can be used playfully and expressively to bring out the local textures of a place. This can sometimes present a challenge to translators seeking to capture this playful, idiomatic use of Chinese. However, in our translations of these stories we have striven to capture the distinctive local flavour of the authors writing.

Why does our collection focus on short fiction? One reason is because of this form of fiction's relative importance in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, the market for novels has been quite limited. As a result, many Hong Kong writers have traditionally had their shorter works published in Hong Kong's literary journals and magazines. Short stories often appear in literary supplements of

Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞: *Xianggang Wenhua Shi Lun 香港文化十论 (10 Essays on the Culture of Hong Kong)*, Hangzhou: Zhejiang Univ. Press, 2012, pp.2-31.

¹⁰ See: Abbas, Ackbar: *Hongkong: Kultur und die Politik des Verschwindens*, Vienna: Löcker, 2013, p.232.

¹¹ The term 'formalism' was coined by Mao Zedong in 1942 when he criticized aesthetic ornamentation as empty rhetorical abstraction in Party discourse. See: Chan, Roy: 'Formalism', in: Sorace, Christian et al. eds.: *Afterlives of Chinese Communism*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2019, pp.77-80.

¹² Wang, David Der-Wei 王德威: 'Chengshi de wuli, bingli yu lunli – Xianggang xiaoshuo de shiji yinyuan' 城市的物理,病理与倫理-香港小說的世紀因緣 (Materiality, pathology and ethics of the city – opportunities of the century in Hong Kong stories), in: *Xianggang Wenxue 香港文學 (Hong Kong Literature)*, July 2007, pp.6-9.

newspapers or in the feuilleton of non-literary journals.¹³ A considerable part of Hong Kong literature is characterized by the ‘small literary form,’ which has been described by the scholar of English literature Clare Hanson in the following way:

[The small literary form is a] vehicle for various kinds of knowledge ... knowledge which may be at odds with the ‘story’ of dominant culture. The formal properties of the short story – disjunction, inconclusiveness, obliquity are, however, connected with the function of the short story form, which is often a powerful vehicle in expressing something suppressed or repressed in mainstream literature.¹⁴

The brevity of the short story is intimately connected to the way in which it typically features techniques of narrative compression, intensity, and tension.¹⁵

As the scholar of comparative literature Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, the literary miniature “in all its incredible variety represents the microscopic condensation of a metropolitan imaginary that never gets into or even aims at some encyclopedic totality”.¹⁶ The metropolitan miniature seeks to “capture the fleeting and fragmentary experiences of metropolitan life, emphasizing both their transitory variety and their simultaneous ossification”.¹⁷ When Huyssen was making these arguments, he was speaking primarily about European writers such as Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin. However, what he is arguing here about the nature of the literary miniature interestingly seems to apply to contemporary Hong Kong writers, too:

¹³ Leung, Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞: ‘Xianggang dushi wenhua yu wenhua pinglun’ 香港都市文化与文化评论 (Hong Kong’s metropolitan culture and cultural critique), in: Leung, Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞: Xianggang De Liuxing Wenhua 香港的流行文化 (Hong Kong’s popular culture), Taipeh: Shulin, 1993, pp.5-28, 18; see also: Song, Yirui 宋詒瑞: ‘Xu yi’ 序— (First preface), in: Pan, Buzhao 潘步釗 ed.: Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 2006-2007 香港短篇小說選 2006-2007 (Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 2006-2007), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2013, pp.i-iii.

¹⁴ Hanson, Clare: *Re-reading the Short Story*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989, p.6.

¹⁵ See: Hones, Sheila: ‘Literary geography and the short story: setting and narrative style’, in: *Cultural Geographies*, no.4, 2010, pp.473-485, 474.

¹⁶ Huyssen, Andreas: ‘Introduction’, in: Huyssen, Andreas: *Miniature Metropolis. Literature in an Age of Photography and Film*, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015, pp.1-22, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.3.

All of these writers share the obsession with sensual experience, including sound and tactility besides vision; the feeling of terror and/or exhilaration emanating from space; the loss of boundaries between private and public space, interior living space, and street space ... the pervasive presence of dream images pointing to an urban unconscious that is fed by film's impact on perceptions of urban space.¹⁸

This collection presents translations of six short stories written by contemporary Hong Kong writers. Why did we choose these specific stories? The main reason for our selection was that we wanted to showcase the variety and richness of Hong Kong contemporary literature. While the short stories are incredibly varied, they also contain some interesting common themes. Above all, these stories all, in different ways, explore what it means to live in a multi-dimensional cityscape.¹⁹ Whilst we hope this collection offers a good representation of contemporary Hong Kong Literature, at the same time we also hope that it will be followed by further collections focusing on other aspects of Hong Kong's diverse modern writing.²⁰

Each short story is accompanied by some information about its author as well as a 'close reading' which offers an interpretation of the story. The scholar of intellectual history Sheldon Pollock says of the act of 'close reading' that "‘Closeness’ refers to continuous reflection on the process of understanding while reading."²¹ When performing the close readings of each story in the collection, we have tried to carefully consider how we as individuals are understanding each text. The translation of the stories and their 'close reading' can be seen to complement each other. The Swedish writer and philosopher Arne Melberg has pointed out that every reading can be seen as a translation.²² The analysis of the meaning in texts applies equally to the fields of philology

¹⁸ Ibid., p.7.

¹⁹ This project was partly inspired by: Sielke, Sabine ed., in collaboration with Björn Bosserhoff: New York, New York! Urban Spaces, Dreamscapes, Contested Territories, Frankfurt a.M. et al.: Peter Lang, 2016.

²⁰ Li Haihua also points out the rich variety of Hong Kong literature. See: Li, Haihua 黎海華: 'Xu' 序 (Introduction), in: Li, Haihua 黎海華 ed.: Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 1990-1993 香港短篇小說選 1990-1993 (Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 1990-1993), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 1994, pp.1-11.

²¹ Pollock, Sheldon: 'Introduction', in: Pollock, Sheldon ed.: World Philology, Harvard: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015, pp.1-24, 5.

²² Melberg, Arne: Läsa långsamt: essäer om litteratur och läsning, Stockholm: Brutus Öatlings Bokförlag, 1999.

and to translation studies.²³ We are aware of the fact that, to cite Hong Kong writer Xi Xi 西西, “words have seven types of ambiguity”.²⁴ As such, our interpretation of each story in the close reading represents just one of many possible interpretations. It is a strength of many of the stories in this collection that they might draw very different responses and interpretations from different kinds of readers. We would be glad to see further analyses in the future, possibly in classrooms as part of courses on world literature or Chinese studies.

Our interpretations combine a range of methodologies, one of them being a philological approach. The philological approach combines interests in literary and cultural phenomena in words and text.²⁵ However, text and context are by no means mutually exclusive. This means that “close reading is a critically necessary strategy if one is to engage with both of these fundamental dimensions of literature.”²⁶ It is necessary to study the stories carefully to relate some of the things described in the text to a specific Hong Kong context in which the stories are all set. To give an example, the title of Chan Lai Kuen’s story ‘E6880** (2)’ becomes much more meaningful if one considers it in relation to the system of identification numbers used in Hong Kong. In this way, both context, as well as history, play an important role in the interpretations that are offered in many of our ‘close readings’.

Our interpretations are also informed by an intertextual approach and by studies on place.²⁷ In our interpretations, we emphasize the human, subjective aspects of place. In this, we follow philosopher Edward S. Casey who has

²³ Lönnroth, Harry and Siponkoski, Nestori: ‘The Philology of Translation’, in: Lönnroth, Harry ed.: *Philology Matters! Essays on the Art of Reading Slowly*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2017, pp.136-163, 149.

²⁴ Xi, Xi: ‘What I’m Thinking of Is Not Written Words’, in: Xi, Xi: *Not Written Words*, trans. Feeley, Jennifer, Hong Kong: Zephyr Press, 2016, p.33.

²⁵ Pollock, Sheldon: ‘Introduction’, in: Pollock, Sheldon ed.: *World Philology*, Harvard: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015, pp.1-24.

²⁶ De Lange, Attie et al.: ‘Introduction’, in: De Lange, Attie et al. eds: *Literary Landscapes from Modernism to Postcolonialism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp.xi-xxv, xiii.

²⁷ For concepts of place that ground our interpretations see: Prieto, Eric: ‘Geocriticism, Geopoetics, Geophilosophy, and Beyond’, in: Tally Jr., Robert T. ed.: *Geocritical Explorations*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, pp.13-27.

outlined a notion of place as being something which is “at work, part of something ongoing and dynamic”.²⁸ For him, and for us, what constitutes a ‘place’ is its interactions with the people who inhabit it, who live or act within it. This is exhibited, for example, in Hon Lai-Chu’s story ‘Water Pipe Forest’, where the protagonist forms a close connection with the water pipes running between the apartments around her.

For the title of this collection we have opted to condense this notion of ‘place at work’ and to evoke it with the words: “Of Forests and Humans”. We feel this title captures the way in which many of the stories in this collection express the links between humans and the places and objects around them. Sharon Chung 鍾曉陽 writes about “the mysterious possibilities between men and women” and about chrysanthemums. Xi Xi describes a young person’s experience of the utopian ‘forest of Elzéard Bouffier’ and her winding journey to reach this place. The story by Hon Lai-Chu 韓麗珠 describes the previously mentioned ‘water pipe forest’. Given that he does not even have a name, we might question whether the protagonist of Chan Lai Kuen’s 陳麗娟 story can be really described as a human. Rather than a connection to the world, this story is more about a disconnection from it, a sense of dystopian alienation.²⁹ Wang Pu’s 王璞 short story, on the other hand, is about both connection and disconnection and the tensions between them. In it, we read about a man who struck the protagonist’s life like lightning, leaving behind only two words stuck in her mind: “Greek sandals”. The sixth text, by Jessie Chu 朱艷紅, is an open-ended mystery story about the death of a young woman. The author leaves it to the reader to solve this case.

The order of the short stories is based on their date of publication. The texts were published between 1992-2011, which is a period of roughly 20 years around that epochal moment in Hong Kong’s history, the 1997 handover of the territory to China. In the run up to the handover, Hong Kong literature was marked by anxiety and it made many references to the changing values in the

²⁸ Casey, Edward S.: ‘Giving a Face to Place in the Present’, in: Casey, Edward S.: *The Fate of a Place. A Philosophical History*, Berkeley et al.: Univ. of California Press, 1998, pp.285-330, 286.

²⁹ As the philosopher Rosi Braidotti has emphasized, “technology is at the heart of the process that recombines all these categories [the human/the non-human, the born/the manufactured] into a powerful post-human mix transforming what we used to call ‘the living being’.” See: Braidotti, Rosi: ‘Meta(l)morphoses’, in: Braidotti, Rosi: *Nomadic Theory*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, pp.55-80, 56.

city. Literature from this period expressed a sense of loss, uncertainty, physical displacement, and distress. The years around the handover also saw the emergence of literary works that discussed the ‘disappearing Hong Kong’.

After 1997, the inter-relationship between place and identity discussed in Hong Kong literature gets increasingly complicated. Many writers in this period expressed a sense of wonder, or curiosity, as well as describing quests in search of ‘home’. Other writers from this period explored the possibility of flight and identity change. In general, Hong Kong literature often oscillates between transnationalism and regionalism. Hong Kong literature during the 2000s is also characterized by the immigration issue. The literature in this period also often expresses the feelings of insecurity of Hong Kong residents, particular that which they have felt during periods of social or political unrest throughout history.³⁰

During and after the 2014 Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong saw what Michael Tsang has described as a proliferation of poetry.³¹ Much of this poetry expresses a sense of searching – searching for a place, searching for a home. In 2017, Jeffrey Mather and Florian Stadler wrote: “The idea of home is an on-going preoccupation in Hong Kong literature.”³²

In the summer and autumn of 2019, Hong Kong has seen a series of almost continuous, large scale public demonstrations and protest marches. These events began with demonstrations against the Hong Kong government’s plans for an extradition bill that would allow people to be sent to mainland China to face justice for criminal charges. After the initial demonstrations, the number of protestors swelled to see hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong residents take to the streets on repeated occasions to demonstrate against

³⁰ For a more detailed overview of Hong Kong contemporary literature see: Gaenssbauer, Monika and Yip, Terry Siu-han: ‘Place and Identity: Selected Stories of Hong Kong since the 1960s’, in: *Orientaliska Studier*, no.152, 2017, pp.88-124; Tam, Kwok-kan: ‘Voices of Missing Identity: A Study of Contemporary Hong Kong Literary Writings’, in: Shi-xu, Kienpointner, Manfred and Servas, Jan eds.: *Read the Cultural Other: Forms of Otherness in the Discourses of Hong Kong’s Decolonization*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005, pp.165-176; Lo, Kwai-Cheung: ‘Hong Kong Literature and its City’, in: Leung, Ping-kwan, Hsu, Amanda and Lee, Hoi Lam eds.: *Hong Kong Urban Culture & Urban Literature*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Story Association, 2009 pp.134-151.

³¹ Tsang, Michael: ‘Hong Kong as a Test Case for World Literature’, in: *Sanglap*, Sep. 2017, pp.9-23, 20.

³² Mather, Jeffrey and Stadler, Florian: ‘Editorial’, in: *Writing Hong Kong*. Special Issue, *Wasafiri*, vol. 32, no. 3, autumn 2017, p.1.

what they perceive to be the erosion of their freedom and autonomy under Chinese rule.

As we write this introduction, the protests are still ongoing. We do not yet know what implications these popular protests will have for Hong Kong and the residents of this city. In June 2019, the mainland Chinese editor and writer Shen Haobo 沈浩波 said that Chinese people consider Hong Kong to be the foremost city on earth (duiyu huaren lai shuo, diqiu shang jin ci yi cheng 对于华人来说,地球上仅此一城).

It is not only the Chinese people who consider it as such.

Stockholm, November 2019

Sharon CHUNG
Not a clear day

They had talked to each other on the phone twice, once in the morning and once in the evening, after six. Both times he had called from the new apartment.

The ringing sound had woken her from a dream in which she had searched everywhere for chrysanthemums. She had to find many, many citron-yellow chrysanthemums. She had spotted all sorts of exotic flowers in lots of different flower shops. Finally, in a shop run by a hippie, her search had been successful. The chrysanthemums were red and they were already wilting, but she nevertheless bought a long stem. She had not been able to remember quite why she had wanted to buy the chrysanthemums. It had seemed that someone had died.

Moaning and groaning, she told him that her neck hurt a lot. Maybe she had strained it during her sleep.

“You should see my knee, it is completely purple!” He had been supervising the decorating project in the new apartment the previous day. Not being careful, he had stumbled and fallen.

No matter what it was – his experience always had to be more dramatic than hers. Suddenly she felt glad that it would be Bao Meichun and not her who would move to the new apartment with Jianan³³, even though she had done the apartment’s interior design. She was an interior designer.

“Will Meichun come to the apartment today?” She asked. “Otherwise I’ll go there and have a look around.” She knew that Meichun did not like to see her.

“She only comes when accompanied by me. Not on her own,” he said. “I think there are no big problems. No need to drop by. ”

“Did you have the chance to take a closer look at the dining table that I mentioned?”

All annotations are those of the translators.

³³ The characters of the name are as follows: 家楠.

“Yes. The table is really nice. I like it. Meichun hasn’t seen it yet. She doesn’t seem to be particularly fond of oval shapes.”

“On the other hand, I like oval shapes a lot. They look generous and show a clear line in all simplicity,” she said. “But don’t let her know that I was the one who said that.”

“I have confidence in your judgment.”

Both of them quietly reflected on the meaning of these words.

“What are your plans for today?” He asked.

“I’ve got no plans. I’ll do the laundry. Dirty clothes have been piling up ...”

“You still do laundry even when it’s raining?”

“Yeah. Otherwise I have no time for it.”

She crawled onto the bed and pulled the telephone line to the window, looking out and inspecting the sky. “Maybe tomorrow will be a clear day,” she said. “If I do laundry today, the clothes will get dry tomorrow. Doesn’t this sound reasonable?”

“You should get a washing machine,” he said. “But I guess, you didn’t want to marry me either. If you had, then you’d already own a washing machine.”

She broke into laughter. “Don’t say any more ... I’m almost beginning to feel remorse.” She knew it was one hundred percent safe to say that now.

“What a pity that only brides have bridesmaids,” he said. “Otherwise I would really like to make you my bridesmaid.”

She agreed. It really was not easy, as a man to have a woman as a best friend.

It had started to rain the previous day in the afternoon. It was neither heavy rain nor a light drizzle. The rain descended slowly and steadily, from afternoon to dusk, from dusk to night, from night through to the morning. She had not done the laundry, only wiped the glass vase on the windowsill thoroughly. Then she had gone out and bought a bunch of chrysanthemums to put in the vase.

She and Jianan had known each other for more than ten years. She knew roughly what he thought about her. He certainly saw in her many good qualities: she appeared to be smart, confident, had a sense of art, seemed cultivated and rational. She sensed that all this was not true. She could not express how exactly Jianan's perception of her differed from the truth, but at least it was not like that. Did he know what kind of image she had of him? In large parts, this image was also one-sided. Imagining there still was a real, complex version of him out there made her sigh.

Ten years ago, Jianan and her older sister Shengfang had been short-time lovers. After Shengfang went overseas, she and Jianan became good friends, sometimes so good that they courted each other in a half-true and half-joking manner. Yet, it was not so much a matter of love's flames. Instead, she believed, this was a sort of confusion that arises when a man and a woman become too intimately familiar with one another. She felt she saw this more clearly than Jianan. In the past, Jianan had been quite confused about their relationship, so much so that he had been under the impression that he loved her. Even the people around them thought they were made for each other, as if it went against the will of God if they did not marry. Under this kind of deceptive assumption, they had slept together once.

After that, there was a silent agreement between the two of them not to even bring up the experience, let alone to repeat it.

What was she waiting for? Sometimes she asked herself that question too. And now Jianan was soon going to get married with Meichun.

One day, about two years ago, Jianan told her that he would like to introduce her to someone. She was used to a joking tone between them. Rarely was he so serious.

"How long have you known each other?" She asked.

"Two, maybe three months."

"Two months or three months?"

"I have to calculate."

He was confused about the time, so probably this time it was serious.

They arranged to meet for afternoon tea at a teahouse. When she got there, she right away laid eyes on Jianan who was waiting in the outer hall to be taken to the table. She found it strange that he was dressed in a navy blue hooded jacket. He had never worn anything like that before. Beside him stood a young woman dressed in a long black raincoat.

Only then did she realize that they had changed clothes. The young woman was wearing Jianan's coat, and he was wearing hers.

He introduced them to each other: "Bao Meichun, Xu Shenghui." Then he tapped his stomach and added: "Xie Jianan."

It was somewhat discomfoting to see his raincoat on Meichun, but it was roughly her size. Clearly she and Jianan at least fit well together in stature. Under the coat, she was dressed like a student in a shirt and jeans. The trouser legs were rolled up.

She was wearing floral-patterned stockings and reddish-brown, laced leather shoes with square gold buckles. Shenghui suddenly felt that she looked old in her suit and that she was dressed in a way that was too revealing of her age. A single glance would reveal that she was five or six years older than Meichun.

Meichun had got a master's degree in nutrition science in Indiana. Now she was back in Hong Kong and looking for a job.

"I guess it's not easy to find a job in that area," said Shenghui. "It seems to be an unpopular subject."

"That also has its advantages," Meichun responded. "Also, many hospitals attach great importance to nutritional education. The key question is whether there are job vacancies."

But Meichun herself didn't pay attention to what she ate.

"I don't care about that," she said. "I just think that you have to control your cholesterol level, even at a young age. I often scold Jianan because he loves fatty pork so much."

There was hardly a sentence in which Jianan did not appear. She kept putting small portions of food on his plate.

“I can help myself,” Jianan protested. “You don’t have to wait on me.” At the same time, he gave Shenghui a suspicious look, as if she were involved.

“You are not dressed warmly enough today”, he observed, looking at her. “I can see that you’re feeling a little cold.”

“Yes, the air condition in here is set quite high.”

“That’s why I take my coat everywhere”, said Meichun who was still wrapped in Jianan’s raincoat.

Jianan turned to Shenghui. “I saw someone asking the waiter for a scarf,” he said. “I’ll do that for you too.”

“She could borrow my coat”, Meichun suggested.

“We’ll try getting a scarf,” Jianan said. “It even seems they’re quite pretty.”

So Jianan asked for a scarf for Shenghui.

Shenghui put on the jujube-red shawl.

When Meichun discovered that Shenghui lived alone, she immediately became interested in her eating habits.

“What do your meals look like?” She asked. “Do you cook for yourself?”

“Often I eat out,” Shenghui answered. “I’m so busy with my job that I don’t have time to cook, and the less cooking I do, the more strange it becomes for me. I think it’s a bit of a hassle, so when I eat at home I normally just throw some instant noodles and sesame, Demae Itcho, into the pot. That’s all.”

“Well, that’s not good,” Meichun said. “That way your diet will quickly become unbalanced.”

At this point Jianan intervened. “Exactly. You could create a balanced meal for her.”

“You look as if you have low blood pressure,” Meichun said. “You should eat more fish and things. There is no use in focusing too excessively on vegetarian food. Yes, fish would be best ...”

She sounded quite like the expert.

“I don’t have low blood pressure,” Shenghui replied.

“How can that be ...?”

Jianan was about to say something, but Shenghui winked at him and he fell silent again.

“I’ll teach you how to prepare Mushroom-Steamed Chicken,” Meichun said. “That is quite easy. It’s quick to prepare and tastes good. Jianan likes it very much.”

Meichun began to describe in detail the ingredients and the process of cooking. First the mushrooms had to be turned in oil and corn flour. The chicken had to be dry before being marinated.

At first Shenghui only listened inattentively, but then she found herself listening with growing interest because Meichun’s descriptions became increasingly lively. It was as if she were telling an exciting story.

When Meichun went to the bathroom, Jianan asked her a question. “Why did you stop me earlier when I was about to say something?”

“I despise eating nutritionally balanced meals!”

“Oh,” Jianan said. “But really, she could help you put together a meal. That would be a good way to change from a situation where two out of three of your meals aren’t decent ... She even won a prize at her school for a meal she created.”

“What’s the matter?” She asked, looking at him and laughing. “Has she converted you so quickly into a disciple of nutritional science?”

Jianan grimaced, looking somewhat embarrassed.

“What do you think of her?” He asked.

Shenghui didn’t know what to say. “She seems to be quite lively.”

“Yes, she’s like a child. Quite innocent.”

He waited a while and saw that she had no further comments.

“And what else?” He asked.

Quite obviously he wanted to hear words of praise about his girlfriend.

“She has a master’s degree. Doesn’t that put you under pressure?”

“I didn’t even think about that,” he replied. “Fortunately, it’s just in nutritional science.”

Shenghui chuckled. “You’d better not let her hear that.”

She used the opportunity to avoid having to talk further. Jianan had already asked twice. It would have been embarrassing if he needed to ask a third time for her impressions of Meichun. So he was also quiet for a moment. The two sat in silence, opposite each other, waiting for Meichun to return.

Then he smiled at her and said unexpectedly: “I like the scarf on you. It’s your colour. I wanted to tell you earlier, but it would not have felt right to say it in her presence.”

Now they shared a secret.

At lunchtime her sister Shengfang called from California to ask about whether a Mr. Liang had been to see her.

“Who is Mr Liang?” Shenghui replied.

“So he hasn’t come to see you yet,” her sister said. “He arrived in Hong Kong yesterday. I think he’ll call you today or tomorrow.”

“A Chinese expat again?”

Shenghui’s sister Shengfang could not remain idle. She felt that her help was needed to end her younger sister’s single life, since her sister was of an appropriate age to get married. Every time a friend who was single and suitable went to Hong Kong, she arranged for this candidate to visit Shenghui. She had already done this twice.

“He hasn’t been to Hong Kong for many years,” she said. “You can do some sightseeing with him.”

“Sis, how many times have I already told you ...?”

“You are free to complain about me,” Shengfang responded. “But if you see him, you will consider him a good candidate. This is in the nature of women. No matter how free and at ease you seem to be, it is just not real. Do you want to bet?”

Shenghui couldn't help burst out laughing.

"How come you are still able to enjoy life being single?" Shengfang asked. "Who are you waiting for? Richard Gere?"

"He's got a girlfriend already ... Anyway, I don't want to be the wife of an American-Tibetan Buddhist," she said.

"And now even Jianan has been snatched away by someone else," her sister went on. Even today, her tone of voice changed when she mentioned Jianan.

"Right," Shenghui said. "You have all got a washing machine, and soon Bao Meichun is going to join the club, too. Only I am left without a washing machine."

"Be honest with me," her sister said. "What is not perfect about him? He is tall, capable, has a friendly character ... Mom is right, your demands are too high."

"I'll say nothing more," Shenghui said. "Everything I say might look like self-defense. This is boring."

"What kind of person is his fiancée?"

Shenghui thought for a moment and then answered. "She will make a good wife. She's the sort of woman who is only nice to her husband. She considers other women either as competitors or as shit ..."

"How could Jianan like such a person?" Shengfang asked curiously.

Shenghui felt she needed to revise what she had just said. "Don't take me too seriously," she said. "I have only seen her a few times. We have hardly ever exchanged more than a few words. I was just talking away to you."

Normally her sister hated people who mouthed off in an irresponsible way.

Shengfang was silent for a while.

"I always thought maybe you and Jianan ..." She mused.

"Sis, I know you live peacefully and happily now. But isn't there a thought, even in your happiest moments, that what you have is by no means perfect? As if you know there is something better out there, but you are condemned to miss it, never to reach it in life, because you have made your choice? ... I don't know if I've expressed myself clearly. I can't stand this feeling. Jianan

is perfect in many ways. But I know that if I were with him I would definitely have that feeling. I do not really love him.”

Shenghui was surprised that she had so honestly poured out her feelings. But Shengfang just laughed: “Even if it’s not true love, it still comes close to it. You are just greedy.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Let me ask you something, as you sound so pompous. Have you ever really loved someone?”

Shenghui answered: “If so, I can’t remember it anymore.”

“Just be friendly to Mr. Liang. This is as real as it gets.”

“At least tell me what kind of person he is.”

“I’ll avoid telling you anything. Otherwise, what would be left to talk about when you meet?”

“We are still a British colony,” Shenghui said jokingly. “We could discuss the weather at some length.”

Had she ever really loved someone? Suddenly she remembered Mike, a young man whom she had secretly adored when she was studying in the US. She couldn’t tell how much she’d loved him. When the thing was over, she had soon forgotten him. Yet he was the one who made her aware for the first time of the mysterious possibilities between men and women.

They sat together in the classes on basic psychology. From the first day, she glanced at him secretly, until he couldn’t help but notice her too. He had blond, curly hair. Little golden strands coiled wildly around his ears and his neck. His skinny, sensitive face always had a somewhat stubborn expression. But when he broke into laughter, he looked quite boyish and a row of healthy teeth and light-pink gums appeared. His outfit was like something from the 1960s hippie period. His jeans had holes with threads stretched over them and his sweater was oversized and hung loose around his body.

On their only date, they went to the oldest cinema in the county and watched “East of Eden” with James Dean. He had recommended the film.

Before going to the cinema, he had visited her in her dorm room. He had sat for a while on her bed, an orange in his hand which he said he had snatched from the canteen at noon.

With him sitting on her bed, and her on a wooden chair in front of the bookshelf, they talked to each other, but not so successfully. She spotted a hole in his jeans that exposed his whole knee.

It made her wonder if he wouldn't freeze, since it was so cold then.

After he had dug a finger into the orange he peeled it and handed her half. She ate the orange slices without shifting her gaze from his knee.

Then they went to the cinema. At that time, she had had barely any exposure to literature and art. Her only thoughts about the movie were that James Dean was handsome, that the actress who played his mother was wicked, and that there was no justice in this world.

When they stepped out of the door, an icy wind blew through the streets.

While they were walking, Mike continuously said "It's so cold, so cold, so cold."

"Why don't you bring a coat with you?" she asked. It had been her first winter in America and she had really relied on her coat.

Mike did not stop complaining. "It's freezing, it's freezing."

They entered a cafe and sat on high bar stools beside french windows. They drank their coffee from large white porcelain mugs. The lights inside and the street lights outside superimposed each other and rays of light fell onto his face and his blond hair from all sides. She didn't know if she also looked like he did then, so young and so serious.

Mike asked her if she had read any books by Steinbeck. She said no.

"His stuff is good," he said. "It's worth reading. If you wish to understand America you ought to have a look at it." He explained that in 'East of Eden' Steinbeck was giving a new interpretation of the biblical story of the brothers Cain and Abel.

"Why is the movie called East of Eden and not West of Eden?" She asked.

A smile appeared on his face. “The title’s also a biblical allusion,” he said. “It says that God created a garden in the east of Eden.” He paused for a moment. “Do people know James Dean where you come from?”

She hadn’t known him. “Is he very famous?” She asked.

“Yes, but he is already gone. He died at the age of 24.”

“Oh,” she said. “So young.”

His silence seemed to agree with her words.

Some time later he told her that his parents were divorced and that he would spend every summer vacation with his father in Florida swimming. It was so much fun, he said. Those were his happiest days. She pictured an emerald green seabed and a series of coral reefs resembling white bones.

In the next class they had together, he gave her Steinbeck’s “Cannery Row”³⁴ to read. She quickly finished reading it. She imagined how he had searched for the book at home so that he could give it to her. That a man would think of her like this and do something just for her had been completely unthinkable for her. It really moved her.

The next time they met she returned the book to Mike because she couldn’t remember whether or not he had given it to her as a gift.

“It was actually a gift,” he said, sounding slightly disappointed, as he took back the book.

She was unable to explain to him, but she knew she couldn’t reclaim the book now.

“Did you like it?” He asked.

“I did.”

“Did you reach the chapter about the gopher? Isn’t it funny?”³⁵

³⁴ “Cannery Row” is a novel by American author John Steinbeck, published in 1945. It is set during the Great Depression in Monterey, California, on a street lined with sardine canneries that is known as Cannery Row. The story revolves around the people living there.

³⁵ The gopher in the mentioned chapter “altogether ... was a beautiful gopher and in the prime of his life.” He was quite confident, stored food and worked hard, but as time went on he “began to be a little impatient, for no female appeared.” He lost a

She smiled.

After that they weren't in contact anymore. They no longer exchanged greetings in class. It was as if they never had even known each other.

On a sunny day during the summer vacation she saw him kiss a foreign student on campus. Wasn't he supposed to be with his father in Florida, she wondered.

She bought a copy of "Cannery Row" at a bookstore and browsed through the pages of the chapter about the gopher:

"... It was beautiful in the early morning when he first poked his head out of the burrow. The mallows filtered green light down on him and the first rays of the rising sun shone into his hole and warmed it so that he lay there content and very comfortable ..." ³⁶

On her thirtieth birthday, she sighed deeply. Now, she had probably shown enough endurance and survived it – her ignorant and ridiculous youth, full of mistakes.

When Mr. Liang called in the afternoon, he woke her from her afternoon nap. This was the second time today that she was scared out of her sleep by the ringing of the phone. She cleared her throat before picking up the receiver. The caller should not know that she had just woken up.

As expected, it was Mr. Liang. His voice sounded very young and unexpectedly pleasant.

"I am already out," he said. "Would it be convenient for you if I came to visit you now?"

"The place is hard to find," she answered. "How about we meet somewhere?"

"No worries, I've got a map."

"Really, the place isn't easy to find. Even the postman often fails to deliver letters to the correct address."

fight for a female gopher, and "no female ever came." In the end the gopher had to move to a place "where they put out traps every night". See: John Steinbeck: Cannery Row, Stockholm-London 1945, pp.202-204.

³⁶ Ibid., p.203.

“Don’t worry, I’m certain I can find it,” he said firmly. “I can also ask for the way.”

“No one knows the place. They only can tell you a few main roads,” she said. Still, she described the route from the subway exit to her apartment in great detail. She made it so complicated that it seemed as if no one in this world would ever find her.

“My description is getting more and more confusing,” she said. “Let’s meet someplace else.”

“No problem. I am used to finding my way in the city. I’ve always been able to locate even more difficult addresses.”

“I really worry that you won’t be able find the place. Even the house’s number has fallen off. It’s a hidden little door that is easily missed.”

She imagined that Mr. Liang, who was quite unfamiliar with the environment, would get lost, which was completely pointless. Who would have thought that he was so stubborn? The two of them had spent a long time discussing this, yet in the end it looked like she was trying to prevent him from paying her a visit at her home. But now that she was riding the tiger, it was difficult to get off again. It was too late for explanations. In the end, they agreed to meet in half an hour at the Hang Seng Bank near the subway station.

Originally, she had thought that they could have coffee in a café nearby and talk a bit, then go for dinner together. What they would do after that could be discussed afterwards. At any rate, she had not meant to invite him home. But as it seemed now, he was really determined to visit her. She didn’t know if she had unconsciously resisted being alone with a stranger in a room, or if she had not actually thought of this alternative. To be prepared for all eventualities, she hastily cleared up a bit. She folded up the bedclothes, washed the dirty dishes, and removed the half-empty bag of potato chips from the tea table. Some of her underwear was drying in the bathroom and was still damp and could not be put away yet. Hastily she bundled it up and stuffed it into the freezer in the kitchen. On this cool day she would not need ice cubes.

These things had already taken more than a quarter of an hour. After changing her clothes she hurriedly put on a little makeup in front of the mirror and then went downstairs, heading out to her date. The sky was grey. Small, barely-visible droplets of water floated gently and slowly through the air,

dancing a waltz. She wore a black and green hooded coat and had pulled the hood over her head to keep her hair dry. When she arrived, the bank had already closed, but there were still many people lingering there. Suddenly she couldn't remember whether she had told Mr. Liang that the bank was located inside the subway station and not outside.

He had told her that he was wearing a long black coat. Only now did she discover how many people were walking around wearing black coats. Twice she almost stopped men in black coats and asked them if their name was Liang. Only her good judgement kept her from finding herself in an embarrassing situation.

How was she supposed to entertain Mr. Liang? Although she had been born in Hong Kong, her knowledge of Hong Kong was actually quite limited. Whenever guests from abroad asked where to go to eat and have fun, she didn't know how to answer. Eating had never been important to her and most of the time she didn't go anywhere special to have fun. Each year, when her company organized a spring outing, they would book a boat trip. They spent the whole day on the ship, mostly playing mahjong. When asked to tell people about Hong Kong, to this day she still relied on the texts she had read in the local history class at elementary school. She could talk about Aberdeen: "There you can still see scenes from the fishing villages of the former Hong Kong." (Thanks be to education!) Or she could describe Victoria Peak: "The view of Victoria Peak by night is very famous. This view has given Hong Kong the epithet 'Pearl of the East'."

After waiting for fifteen minutes, she knew that something had gone wrong. His journey by subway would not have taken that long. Nearby there was another subway station which also had a branch of the Hang Seng bank. Maybe he was waiting for her there? It was even darker outside now and the streetlights were all lit up. Thin strands of rain fell through the light under the street lamps diagonally, seemingly weaving the water. She crossed the sidewalk, which was mottled with rain, and headed to the other subway station. Concentrating, she stared at the men wearing black coats. None of them seemed to be looking for someone. Those people who were looking for someone were not wearing black coats. She remembered that there was another Hang Seng bank not far away. It wasn't in a subway station, but on the sidewalk. Could

he be there? She ran quickly in the other direction again. Her clothes felt like a freshly steamed mantou³⁷, from which swathes of heat were rising.

Then, anxiously, she ran back to the bank at the original meeting place. Now all the people who had been waiting there were gone too. There was no point in continuing. She had either walked to the wrong subway entrance or to the wrong bank. It was probably better to go home and wait for his call. An outstanding person would never be lost. He would know that it was now time to call her. Maybe he was already calling her from somewhere.³⁸ At this thought she felt as if she already heard the phone ring urgently in her apartment, so she hurried home.

She had just taken off her coat when the phone rang.

It was Jianan. “I am in the new apartment,” he said. “Have you ever experienced the wonderful scent of freshly cut wood? Maybe it smells even better than the living tree trunk.”

After pausing for a moment, he continued. “You seem to be out of breath.”

“Oh, yeah ... I just came running over from the kitchen.”

“Are you cooking? If you like, we could have dinner together.”

Suddenly something weighed on her heart. “I can’t today. I’ve got an appointment.”

“Didn’t you say that you had no plans for today?”

“It was only later that I made the appointment.”

“Oh.”

He was in a strange mood today, maybe because of the rain.

“Wait a minute,” he said abruptly.

She heard him put the receiver aside and walk away. The rain outside was getting ever stronger. By chance, a particularly large raindrop struck the window and broke with a small bang, like a small egg.

³⁷ A mantou is a type of cloud-like steamed bread or bun popular in northern China.

³⁸ In 1992 when this story was written the mobile phone had just been invented but it was not in popular use. The first text message to a mobile phone was sent in December that year.

He came back and took up the receiver again. "I closed the window because it's raining so hard."

Suddenly a scene appeared to her – a perplexed and uncertain Mr. Liang rushing back and forth.

"My sister called me today," she told him.

"Ah. How is she?"

"She's fine. She thinks I should not let you be snatched away by someone else."

"Really?" he said. "I miss her too."

"Do you remember how we went to Macau together to see the fireworks? That was exactly ten years ago."

"Women are always better at remembering dates," he said casually. "Did you turn on the light in your apartment?"

She reached out and switched off the light. "No."

"Neither did I," he replied. "My knee ached all day. The color is shocking, like in a painting by Van Gogh where he's expressed his darkest mood."

She laughed: "But I assume you are sitting down now."

"Hm ... I just have to stretch out my leg."

After she had turned off the light everything seemed more intimate. Even his voice seemed to come from out of her head. She heard a vague sound from somewhere deep in his chest, a soft indefinable tone, like smoke. She pressed the receiver firmly to her ear, but still could not hear clearly.

"Today I called Meichun twice," he said when he spoke again. "Do you know why?"

I wanted to call you again, once in the morning, and once now. That's why I called her twice, in order to call it even ... This is a loyal way to calculate, right?"

"You'll have to ask her that," she replied. "She sets the standards for your loyalty."

He laughed and said her name.

“I wanted to come and visit you earlier. So I called you and kept it ringing for ages, but nobody picked up.”

“What?” she asked. “When?”

“Half an hour ago. I let it ring thirty or forty times ... I thought, maybe you're just coming in the door. So I didn't want to hang up.”

She was quiet for a long time, looking at the chrysanthemums in the glass vase on the windowsill. In this half-dark, they seemed to be nothing more than an illusion.

The silence lasted for a while, before he broke it. “I've been sitting here a long time and now I'm cold and uncomfortable. Maybe the apartment is too empty.”

She trembled involuntarily with cold.

“I have to hang up now. I am expecting a call.”

“What call?”

“From a friend.”

“Who?”

She didn't speak. He repeated the question: “Who?”

“A black coat,” she replied. “I just know that he wears a black coat.”

Translated by Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak

The Chinese text first appeared in the literary journal *Su Yeh Wenxue* 素葉文學 (Su Yeh Literature) in April 1992 in the 35th issue of that magazine (第 35 期, 復刊 10 號). It was later re-published in: Sharon Chung 鍾曉陽: *Ranshao Zhi Hou* 燃燒之後 (*After the Fire*), Hong Kong 1997, pp.140-163.

Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak
Sharon Chung's 'Not a clear day' – a close reading

Sharon Chung 鍾曉陽 was born in Guangzhou in 1962. She grew up in Hong Kong and studied in Hong Kong and America. Her writing is influenced by the works of Eileen Chang (1920-1995), who once lived in Shanghai, Hong Kong and the United States, but also by Western literature in translation, which was accessible to her from an early age. Chung's first novel, entitled *Tingche Zanjiejian* 停車暫借間 (*A short car stop*), was published in Taiwan and quickly became a bestseller. After receiving a bachelor's degree in Film and Visual Arts, Sharon Chung continued to write literary texts and worked as a translator. She has published three collections of short stories, a collection of poetry, and a second novel in 1996. In 2002, her first novel was made into a film under the title *A Pinwheel Without Wind*. Her latest novel *Repentance* (*Yihen* 遺恨) was released in 2018 in Taiwan. *Repentance* is a modified and extended version of the second novel published in 1996. Sharon Chung currently lives in the United States.

The short story 'Not A Clear Day' begins with a dream:

"The ringing sound had woken her from a dream in which she had searched everywhere for chrysanthemums. She had to find many, many citron-yellow chrysanthemums ... She had not been able to remember quite why she had wanted to buy the chrysanthemums ..."

The chrysanthemums can be seen to set the topic of the story. In Chinese culture chrysanthemums symbolize loyalty and faithfulness. Chrysanthemums bloom in the autumn and stand for an attitude of strength even in difficult environments.³⁹ Chrysanthemums also appear in the poems of Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365 -427 AD)⁴⁰ symbolizing his reclusion:

I built my cottage in a peopled place
Yet hear no sound of passing cart and horses.
Would you like to know how this can be?
If the mind's detached, the place will be remote.

³⁹ Siggstedt, Mette: 'Krysantemum', in: Siggstedt, Mette: Blomsterspråk. Växtsymbolik i kinesisk konst, Stockholm: Östasiatiska Museet, 1986, pp.67-70.

⁴⁰ The Chinese poet Tao Yuanming spent most of his life in seclusion. In many of his poems he reflects on his decision to withdraw from civil service.

Gathering chrysanthemums by the eastern fence
I catch sight of South Mountain in the distance.⁴¹

The main character in Chung's story is the woman Shenghui. She leads a quite independent and self-determined life. Issues of loyalty are an important topic in the story. How far does Shenghui's loyalty to Jianan go? And how truthful is Jianan to his fiancée Meichun, given the numerous bonds that still exist between him and Shenghui?

Sharon Chung's writing is influenced by Eileen Chang's works.⁴² Both writers combine "the detailed and the sensuous" in their works.⁴³ Both writers also call gender norms into question.⁴⁴ Whilst Eileen Chang describes the trauma of normative femininity,⁴⁵ however, Chung's female protagonist in 'Not a clear day' seems to show a more playful attitude. Yet, we still find the following unambiguous passage describing the struggles of being a woman:

On her thirtieth birthday, she sighed deeply. Now, she had probably shown enough endurance and survived it – her ignorant and ridiculous youth, full of mistakes.

In another reference to the challenges facing single people in this society, Chung also refers to the tragic gopher from John Steinbeck's novel *Cannery Row*. This gopher, despite being "a beautiful gopher and in the prime of his life", does not succeed to find a partner and has in the end to move to a place "where they put out traps every night".⁴⁶

⁴¹ Hightower, James: *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien*, Oxford: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970, p.130.

⁴² The literary scholar Xu Zidong noted that many literary texts in 1990s Hong Kong were influenced by Eileen Chang's works. See: Xu, Zidong 許子東: 'Xu' 序 (Introduction), in: Xu, Zidong 許子東 ed.: *Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 1994-1995 香港短篇小說選 1994-1995* (Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 1994-1995), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2000, pp.1-10, 9.

⁴³ For Eileen Chang see: Chow, Rey: 'Modernity and Narration – in Feminine Detail', in: Chow, Rey: *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991, pp.84-120, 85.

⁴⁴ For Eileen Chang see: Sang, Deborah Tze-lan: 'Eileen Chang and the Genius Art of Failure', in: Rojas, Carlos and Bachner, Andrea eds.: *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literature*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018, pp.766-781, 766.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See: John Steinbeck: *Cannery Row*, Stockholm-London: Zephyr, 1945, pp.202-204, 203.

Chung's and Chang's works are also clearly similar in the way that they both interrogate the mythology of heterosexual romance.⁴⁷ Moments of disillusionment become moments of illumination in the works of both.⁴⁸ In 'Not a clear day', for example, Chung describes how Shenghui muses about Jianan thinking that that "no matter what it was – his experience always had to be more dramatic than hers". Following this, she goes on to describe how "suddenly she felt glad that it would be Bao Meichun and not her who would move to the new apartment with Jianan."

In another passage, Shenghui's sister Shengfang says: "Let me ask you something, as you sound so pompous. Have you ever really loved someone?" Shenghui's answer to this turns confusion into a certain kind of understanding: "If so, I can't remember it anymore."

What the literary scholar Rey Chow has established about Eileen Chang's style also applies to that of Sharon Chung: both are characterized by an attention to detail that one might call feminine. To take an example from 'Not a clear day':

"It was somewhat discomfoting to see his raincoat on Meichun, but it was roughly her size. Clearly she and Jianan at least fit well together in stature. Under the coat, she was dressed like a student in a shirt and jeans. The trouser legs were rolled up.

She was wearing floral-patterned stockings and reddish-brown, laced leather shoes with square gold buckles. Shenghui suddenly felt that she looked old in her suit and that she was dressed in a way that was too revealing of her age."

For Chow, Eileen Chang's use of 'feminine' detail signifies an inherent resistance to the grand narratives of history, which typically revolve around the nation.⁴⁹ Some of Chang's works, such as 'Love in a Fallen City', try to capture

⁴⁷ For Eileen Chang see: Sang, Deborah Tze-lan: 'Eileen Chang and the Genius Art of Failure', in: Rojas, Carlos and Bachner, Andrea eds.: *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literature*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018, pp.766-781, 767.

⁴⁸ Chow, Rey: 'Modernity and Narration – in Feminine Detail', in: Chow, Rey: *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991, pp.84-120, 119.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.85.

the ‘fleeting moment’ that was Hong Kong in the year 1943.⁵⁰ Similarly Sharon Chung’s story, which was first published in 1992, captures those ‘fleeting moments’ just before Hong Kong’s handover to mainland China, something which took place in 1997. In Chung’s story, both the sisters, Shenghui and Shengfang, have been living abroad for some time. This is something which was quite typical during the years before the handover. In the 1980s and 1990s many Hongkongers left their city behind out of a sense of insecurity about the future.⁵¹

Whereas Eileen Chang’s female characters are subordinated to oppressive tradition and patriarchy,⁵² the main female character in Sharon Chung’s story appears quite free to choose her own life style. Eliza W.Y. Lee, a Hong Kong scholar and expert on politics, has described how studies have “found that Hong Kong people [in the 1980s and 1990s] have experienced their ‘selves’ as unencumbered... [T]heir life chances are largely determined by their own efforts, not by larger structural and institutional forces beyond their control.”⁵³ According to Lee, Hong Kong’s marginal position has offered a space for changes in the lives of women. She points to demographic signs which indicated that the traditional patriarchal family had lost its integrity.⁵⁴

Shenghui, the female protagonist of ‘Not a clear day’ seems to confirm these assumptions. She is over 30 and unmarried. She lives alone and is a successful interior designer. Poetically capturing the freedom this protagonist appears to have, the editor Li Haihua 黎海華 has written about how Shenghui “circles the boundaries of the world of love and turns around again”.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Cheung, Esther K.: ‘The Ordinary Fashion Show. Eileen Chang’s Profane Illumination and Mnemonic Art’, in: Louie, Kam ed.: Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ. Press, 2012, pp.73-90, 78.

⁵¹ See: Lee, Eliza W.Y.: ‘Introduction: Gender and Change in Hong Kong’, in: Lee, Eliza W.Y. ed.: Gender and Change in Hong Kong: Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Chinese Patriarchy, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003, pp.3-22, 18.

⁵² Cheung, Esther K.: ‘The Ordinary Fashion Show. Eileen Chang’s Profane Illumination and Mnemonic Art’, in: Louie, Kam ed.: Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ. Press, 2012, pp.73-90, 75.

⁵³ Lee, Eliza W.Y.: ‘Introduction: Gender and Change in Hong Kong’, in: Lee, Eliza W.Y. ed.: Gender and Change in Hong Kong: Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Chinese Patriarchy, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003, pp.3-22, 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁵⁵ Li, Haihua 黎海華: ‘Xu’ 序 (Introduction), in: Li, Haihua 黎海華 ed.: Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 1990-1993 香港短篇小說選 1990-1993 (Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 1990-1993), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 1994, pp.1-11, 9.

The situation in Hong Kong regarding women's freedom to choose their own way of living appears quite different from that in mainland China. According to the sociologist and scholar of China's feminism Leta Hong Fincher, in 2007 the mainland government's Ministry of Education added the term *shengnü* 剩女 (leftover women) to its official lexicon. Since then, "the Chinese state media have aggressively promoted the term through articles, surveys ... and editorials stigmatizing educated women who are still single, often referring to a 'crisis' in growing numbers of educated women who 'cannot find a husband'".⁵⁶

Of course, however, it must be recognised that Chung's short story is fiction. It might offer the reader an ideal image of Hong Kong society in this regard, rather than an accurate documentation of reality.

Let us now take a look at the spatial frame of the narrative in 'Not a clear day'. The plot of the story shuttles back and forth between Hong Kong and America. This is something which occurs in many literary works by Sharon Chung and reminds one of the Indian-American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's theory of rupture. He has explored the effect of migration "on the work of imagination."⁵⁷

In 'Not a clear day', the character Mike, who is US-American and one of several male protagonists, recommends the film 'East of Eden' and the works of John Steinbeck to Shenghui, who is from Hong Kong. When he recommends one of these books to her, he says: "If you wish to understand America you ought to have a look at it". This is interesting in view of a comment by the cultural anthropologist Keith Basso. Basso has pointed out that, whether deliberately or otherwise, people are always presenting each other with culturally mediated images of where they come from. He states that people "are forever performing acts that reproduce and express their own sense of place – and also ... their own understanding of who and what they are."⁵⁸

Mike, however, shows a lack of understanding of Hong Kong, the place where Shenghui, the girl he is dating, comes from. During a conversation between

⁵⁶ Fincher, Leta Hong: 'Introduction', in: Fincher, Leta Hong: *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, Winnipeg: Zed Books, 2014, pp.1-13, 3.

⁵⁷ See: Appadurai, Arjun: *Modernity at large. Cultural dimensions of globalization*, London et al.: Public Worlds, 1996, p.3.

⁵⁸ Basso, Keith H.: 'Wisdom Sits in Places', in: Field, Steven and Basso, Keith H. eds.: *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996, pp.53-90, 57.

them, he asks: “Do people know James Dean *where you come from* [emphasis added]?” However, the lack of understanding between woman and man presented here is not only the result of a lack of intercultural understanding. In the story, a date between Shenghui and Mr. Liang, set up by Shenghui’s sister, also fails, despite the fact that they are both Hongkongers. Mr. Liang insists on paying a visit to Shenghui at her home, something which Xu Shenghui finds quite annoying. She asks herself: “Who would have thought that he was so stubborn?” As a reader one wonders, after the conversation between them over the phone, whether she still wants to meet a person like that at all.

‘Not a clear day’ also alludes to scenes from the Bible’s garden of paradise. The novel *East of Eden* (1952), by John Steinbeck, plays a role in the story. This novel is an example of intertextuality⁵⁹ and is a retelling of the biblical account of Genesis, set by Steinbeck in the Salinas Valley of northern California. The biblical expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden which, described in Genesis and in Steinbeck’s retelling, might serve as a metaphor in ‘Not a clear day’. As the expulsion of Adam and Eve is about the failure of purity and paradise, Chung’s story focuses on the failure of real, pure love between women and men.

A close reading of any piece of Chung’s writing would be incomplete without mentioning her use of topoi from classic Chinese poetry. A passage from the first page of her book *Aishangji* 哀傷紀 (*Time of Sadness*) demonstrates this style. Here the narrator asks her friend:

Don’t you feel that your future and past are moving bit by bit into such a cold distance as the stars, every time your fishing boat goes out to sea and you look back at the row of lights on the bank?⁶⁰

The Taiwanese writer Zhang Dachun 張大春 mentioned in his foreword to one of Sharon Chung’s books that she appreciates the works of 17th-century poet

⁵⁹ Derived from the Latin *intertexto*, meaning to intermingle while weaving, intertextuality is a term first introduced by French semiotician Julia Kristeva. According to her “a text is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect.” See: Kristeva, Julia: ‘The bounded text’, in: Kristeva, Julia: *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp.36-63, 36.

⁶⁰ Chung, Sharon 鍾曉陽: *Aishangji* 哀傷紀 (*Time of Sadness*), Taipei: ThinkingDom, 2014, p.1.

Nalan Xingde 納蘭性德.⁶¹ Zhang argues that Chung is one of just a few writers who has not been worn down by what is happening in the world of ‘jianghu’ 江湖.⁶² The term ‘jianghu’, which is also employed in chivalric fiction to describe brotherhoods and outlaw societies, here seems to denote “the world where people fight – fight for fame, fight for wealth, fight for power.”⁶³

Chung’s motivation to write is closely connected to her encounters in human society. She once wrote: “It is only because I always think of people, because I am constantly reading them and painting them that I resort to the pen and start to create literature.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ Zhang, Dachun 張大春: ‘Tuijianxu’ 推薦序 (Introduction), in: Chung, Sharon 鍾曉陽: Chun Zai Lüwu Zhong 春在綠蕪中 (Spring in the Meadows), Taipeh: ThinkingDom, 2011, pp.5-10, 6. Here follows one example of Nalan Xingde’s poetic language: “Tune: ‘City by the river’

Moist clouds are pressed / Down by a few peaks. / Shadows are cold. / I cannot believe what I see, / Half vapor, half mist, / A Goddess seems coming. / If she asks me, / Is life all illusion? / Beyond this dream / I will say, / No one knows.”

See: Carpenter, Bruce: ‘Drinking Water. Lyric songs of the Seventeenth Century Manchu Poet Na-lan Hsing-te’, in: Bulletin of Tezukayama University, No. XX, 1983, pp.100-137, 120.

⁶² Zhang, Dachun 張大春: ‘Tuijianxu’ 推薦序 (Introduction), in: Chung, Sharon 鍾曉陽: Chun Zai Lüwu Zhong 春在綠蕪中 (Spring in the Meadows), Taipeh: ThinkingDom, 2011, pp.5-10, 7.

⁶³ Retrieved from: <https://forum.babelnovel.com/t/what-is-jianghu/792> (accessed July 17, 2019).

⁶⁴ Chung, Sharon 鍾曉陽: ‘Zuozhe xu’ 作者序 (Author’s preface), in: Chung, Sharon 鍾曉陽: Chun Zai Lüwu Zhong 春在綠蕪中 (Spring in the Meadows), Taipeh: ThinkingDom, 2011, pp.11-12, 11.

XI Xi

Elzéard Bouffier's Forest

So you set out on a journey to the town that your father had never tired of describing. 'On the south side of the Alps, at the foot of the mountains, lies the most wonderful place on earth, the most wonderful place which I have ever seen'. That is what he said. For many years he had summoned this place. He had even sketched it. Pointing at a simple map, he had explained to you: 'Here it is. After your arrival, you'll see fresh green fields stretching in front of your eyes and swarms of bees dancing over the vegetable gardens. The air is so clear and the water from the rivers is sweet. When the evening sun sets in the west, you will hear from afar the glissando of folk tunes being played on an accordion. The old people sit resting on a wooden bench under a linden, while the young folks sway to the sound of the music. One lively little child stamps and performs strange dance steps. The child shakes its arms before running to its mother, who picks it up and lets it swing from one shoulder to the other, so that the child flies through the air.

The child flies and shouts for joy. This is what you'll spot behind the child: white birds gliding past, little wooden huts like in a fairy tale, and a vast sea of trees. There are countless trees that extend over many kilometres. This is Elzéard Bouffier's forest, as I remember it. You have to travel there and take a look yourself, because words are insufficient to describe the real, concrete colours, the shapes, the shades of light, the scents, and the temperatures. When I first went there, I was exactly your age. I liked to go on expeditions. I would put on my backpack and head out on my own, facing the mountains.

'The mountains always spoke to me and enticed me,' he said. 'If you are heading towards the mountains, you will soon reach a vast expanse of natural scenery. The further you go, the more you leave behind densely populated human habitats.'

For you, everything corresponded exactly with your father's memories. The sky and earth showed the same colours and, on the plain, a wave-shaped chain of mountains unfolded. To your surprise you passed a plant about the size of a human being, the name of which you did not know. The plant had neither flowers, nor fruits, nor twigs. It was just a bunch of quietly burning

flames, waving in the wind. As you went onwards, every step cost you a lot of effort, because an enormous, strong, and transparent wall of wind had risen in front of you. Grains of sand hit your forehead and your ears were full of the rush of the wind. The wind, the wind, was howling, was howling incessantly.

It blew and blew howling oh howling, escorting you into a deserted village whose brick walls and clay rooms had deteriorated over time. The paint on the doors and walls was peeling and the metal was corroded. Light fell through the frames, the soul of the shredded ruins. The wind blew in and out through a window hole on the upper floor. As you raised your head, you saw two black birds beating their wings, and a blurry sun. Everything matched father's narrative. You also walked by a chapel with a crumbling steeple.

After going round a bend on the mountain path, you came across a dried-up well. Neither of you could take a rest in these ruins. The strong wind twisted your scattered hair as you struggled forward step by step and left the barren village behind.

'I had walked for five more hours in this year, and there it stood upright, in this chaos of wind and sand, a silhouette which seemed like a mirage. The nearer I came, the more clearly I heard the sound of a dog barking and some sheep bleating. Then, out of the evening mist a figure took shape. It was a lonely shepherd. Generously, he offered me water from his water gourd. He even invited me to stay overnight at his place. It was him: Elzéard

Bouffier. You know him from my stories. All by himself, with just his two hands, he has turned a barren piece of land into a vast forest.'

As soon as you got to the mountain town you saw countless innumerable number-less trees so many different varied trees crowded close and numerous trees tall giant low small strong thick slender thin trees trees trees trees. There are elms, maples - zhennan, phoebe, eucalyptus, cinnamomum camphora, zelkova serrata, chestnut. There are pine trees that lose their green colour in winter, as well as evergreen ones. And there are many plants rich with flowers, stalks, and fruits. There are even more birch trees. But most of all there are oak trees, because thirty years before Elzéard had planted one hundred thousand oak seeds.

So it will come to pass that you will set foot into Elzéard Bouffier's forested ocean. You will swim between the leaves and float on the waves of the trees, with blue butterflies flashing in front of your eyes and a graceful elk passing by. You will hear the birdsong: the calls of the cuckoo, the tapping of the woodpecker, the chirping of the oriole, and the trilling of the bluebird. You will be listening very closely. But right now the only sound you can hear is the howling of the wind. You don't get to hear birdsong or the barking of a dog or the bleating of some sheep. Oh, yes... You recall that father had told you that later on Elzéard Bouffier no longer kept a flock of sheep because the sheep had eaten the young oak shoots. Later on he kept bees in a hundred beehives. You looked around, but could see no traces of the beehives. In a place without flowers it was impossible to keep bees.

When you reached the place where the mountain town was, you thought you had lost your way and had arrived at a different small town instead. The fields, the accordion music, and the dancing which your father had spoken of – none of it existed. There were no flowerbeds and no forest in front of your eyes. You unfolded the map which your father had drawn by hand, because you firmly believed that this was the right place. After all, hadn't you already found the well which he had described? You pulled some water from the well with a bucket. The water was crystal clear and still sweet. You followed the map and soon located Elzéard Bouffier's former dwelling. The door was not locked and you tried to open it. In a mist of grey dust, the door creaked open ...

empty. The hut was furnished in a plain and simple way. Everything was orderly, but the chairs and the stove were coated with a thick layer of dust. It had already begun to get dark outside, so you had no choice but to spend the night in this room. In the candleholder there was still a small candle stump. After lighting the candle, you sat down on a chair and glided slowly into the twilight in which father and Elzéard Bouffier had faced each other ...

'Elzéard Bouffier was a man of very few words. When we came back into the house, the soup on the stove was ready to serve. Elzéard placed two bowls and spoons on the table, lifted the pot from the stove, and came slowly over to serve the soup. He ladled a portion into my bowl, then one into his bowl,

and finally one into the dog's bowl too. We ate in complete silence. After the meal I took out my pipe. Not a smoker himself, he lit my pipe using the candle. He went to a dresser and took out a small sack. He let acorns slide out of the sack and grouped them in heaps of five or ten on the table. The next day he would plant the best acorns, one by one, in the soil of the mountain slope.'

All that night you got no sleep. You could not tell if the sounds you heard were the cries of humans or wild animals, blown over from far away. Father had mentioned to you that some bitterly poor charcoal burners had once lived on these mountains. These people got into trouble over everything. The women fought with each other and the babies cried. Some of them were close to having nervous breakdowns and more than a few committed suicide. Later, when Elzéard Bouffier's forest unfolded like a flower, this green sea of trees changed the area into a paradise where people lived peacefully. Wheat fields stretched widely, and the farm gardens were rich with hyacinths, anemones, roses, and cabbages. The dried-out well also came to life again and the gurgling water of the river was as transparent as a mirror. A young girl came to the river to enjoy herself, her image in the water sometimes condensing, then being scattered again,

swaying to and fro, drifting on the surface. However, bit by bit her reflections disappeared from the surface of the water. The river gurgled less and less, and gradually it turned into a trickle. In the end the river could no longer reflect any beauty. When the last drops of water had dried up, the river changed into a clay-grey canal. You did not know what had happened in the meantime to turn the gardens into a wasteland and make Elzéard Bouffier's forest completely disappear.

When the morning came, you shook off the dust which had completely covered you and got up. The light falling through the broken bricks mottled everything and wove an all-embracing net. It was thrown over the things in the room: the stopped clock hanging on the wall, the rusty hunting rifle, the disused pot, and the silent wooden dresser in the corner. On the dresser, there were still some pictures in frames. One photograph showed a blurred image of a woman with a small child, their smiles already grey. When you opened the dresser, you found a few small sacks stacked on top of each other in the

corner of the drawer. Taking one of them out, you opened it. About ten, walnut-brown acorns slid out of the bag and rolled noisily on the dresser. A row of acorns rolled to a stop in front of a picture of the room's owner. Elzéard Bouffier looked at you calmly from the photo, with exceptionally gentle eyes.

Translated by Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak

The Chinese text “Yisha Busi de shulin” 依沙布斯的樹林 was published in: Li Haihua 黎海華 ed.: *Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 1990-1993* 香港短篇小說選 1990-1993 (*Collected Hong Kong Short Stories 1990-1993*), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 1994, pp.1-8.

Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak

Xi Xi's 'Elzéard Bouffier's Forest' – a close reading

Xi Xi 西西, pseudonym of Zhang Yan 張彥, was born in Shanghai in 1937 and moved to Hong Kong in 1950. She worked as a primary school teacher and began writing during the late 1950s. Xi Xi is the author of more than thirty books of fiction, poetry, and essays. She was named Writer of the Year at the 2011 Hong Kong Book Fair and was the recipient of Taiwan's 2014 Hsing Yun Global Chinese Literary Award. Her work has become part of Hong Kong's official high school curriculum in Chinese literature. In 2019, Xi Xi was the recipient of the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature. Her writing often depicts urban life and Hong Kong, a good example being her 1979 novel *Wo Cheng* 我城 (*My City*). Other pieces, such as the 1982 short story 'Xiang wo zheyang de yi ge nüzi' 像我这样的一个女子 (A Girl Like Me), and the 1992 novel *Aidao Rufang* 哀悼乳房 (*Elegy for a Breast*), show her concern for the situation of women in society.

Xi Xi's short story 'Yisha Busi de shulin' 依沙布斯的樹林 (Elzéard Bouffier's Forest) is characterized by its use of intertextuality. Derived from the Latin *intertexto*, meaning to intermingle while weaving, intertextuality is a term that was first introduced by the French semiotician Julia Kristeva. Kristeva argued that "a text is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect"⁶⁵. In a similar way, the scholar of literature Robert T. Tally has emphasized that all textual spaces relate to other space in literature.⁶⁶ Xi Xi's story is tightly interwoven with Jean Giono's 1954 text 'The Man who Planted Trees'.⁶⁷ Jean Giono (1895-1970) is a celebrated French writer whose works are not widely available in English. Largely self-taught, he lived most of his life in a small town in rural Provence. Giono's brutal experiences during the First World War turned

⁶⁵ Kristeva, Julia: 'The bounded text', in: Kristeva, Julia: *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp.36-63, 36.

⁶⁶ Tally Jr., Robert T.: *Spatiality*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013, p.142.

⁶⁷ Giono, Jean: *The Man Who Planted Trees*, London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2018 [1954].

him into a pacifist. He was imprisoned without charge in 1939 because his pacifism made others suspect him of collaboration.⁶⁸

One specific example of intertextuality in Xi Xi's short story is the following passage:

To your surprise you passed a plant about the size of a human being of which you did not know the name. The plant carried neither flowers nor fruits or twigs, only a bunch of quietly burning flames waving in the wind.

This passage is an allusion to the biblical story of the burning bush in Exodus 3, where the burning bush marks holy ground. Jean Giono's text also contains several allusions to biblical stories (the land of Canaan, Lazarus coming out of the tomb) although it does not allude to this particular biblical story.

'Elzéard Bouffier's Forest' can be read as a text about utopia and dystopia. According to the Renaissance philosopher and author Thomas More (1478 – 1535), utopia is a spatial concept, even if it refers to a place that does not exist.⁶⁹ The father in Xi Xi's story speaks about the "most wonderful place of humankind on earth". It is a place to which human beings return for empowerment.⁷⁰ The father sends his child on a journey to this pastoral paradise. The journey is painstaking and leads away from the city environments that Xi Xi has so often described in her works.⁷¹ After leaving the densely populated human habitat behind, the traveller has to pass mountains and to fight heavy wind and sand storms: "Now every stop cost you quite some effort."

⁶⁸ Bush, Catherine: 'The Review: Hill by Jean Giono', in: Brick, no.99, 2017, see: <https://brickmag.com/the-review-hill-by-jean-giono-translated-by-paul-eprile/> (accessed July 6, 2019).

⁶⁹ Fioretti, Daniele: *Utopia and Dystopia in Postwar Italian Literature*, London et al.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p.18. More established the basis for the steady development of a literary tradition which normally pictures the journey of a man or a woman to an unknown place. In order to create the new literary genre, More used the conventions of travel literature. See: Vieira, Fátima: 'The concept of utopia', in: Claeys, Gregory ed.: *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010, pp.3-27, 15.

⁷⁰ See: Casey, Edward S.: 'How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time', in: Field, Steven and Basso, Keith H. eds.: *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996, pp.13-52, 26.

⁷¹ Xi Xi has also travelled abroad and written about landscapes, architecture and her perception of both. See: Xi, Xi 西西: *Kan Fangzi 看房子 (Looking at Architecture)*, Taipei: Hongfan, 2008.

In the end, the character in the story finds the place that her father has described. However, the gardens have turned into a wasteland. Xi Xi gives no explanation for these changes: “You had no idea what had happened in the meantime”. Maybe the utopia, the pastoral paradise, is a dream anyway. Giono himself, when asked whether the story of Elzéard Bouffier was true, answered that Bouffier was a fictional person.⁷² However, as the philosopher Bronislaw Baczko has said, the importance of a utopian perspective is not based on the possibility of its becoming reality.⁷³

Although at the beginning of Xi Xi’s story a seemingly clear location for Elzéard Bouffier’s forest is provided, one which the father has marked in a self-drawn map, it turns out that this place belongs to the realm of the utopia, or the imaginary. In contrast with Jean Giono’s text, which ends optimistically describing a “land of Canaan” which sprang from a wasteland, Xi Xi’s story ends on a more melancholic note. In the final passages of the story she paints a dystopian⁷⁴ image of nature destroyed and deserted village buildings. The forest has completely disappeared, the river has turned into a dried out clay-gray canal, and the gardens have become a wasteland. Xi Xi seems to be aware of the fact that human intervention in nature is often unsustainable for Giono and not balanced enough.⁷⁵ As the Canadian writer Catherine Bush notes for Giono, Xi Xi’s sense of reality, too, is in accord with the “ecologically perilous” we are experiencing now.⁷⁶ However, the very last sentence prevents the story from ending in despair, instead offering hope: “Elzéard Bouffier looked at you calmly from the photo, with exceptionally gentle eyes.”

⁷² See: Nowak, Zachary: ‘The Man who Planted Trees ...’, in: *Gastronomica*, Feb. 2015, pp.73-76, 74.

⁷³ Cited in: Fioretti, Daniele: *Utopia and Dystopia in Postwar Italian Literature*, London et al.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p.40.

⁷⁴ A dystopia can be designated as negative utopia: “Dystopia rejects the idea that man can reach perfection”. See: Vieira, Fátima: ‘The concept of utopia’, in: Claeys, Gregory ed.: *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010, pp.3-27, 17.

⁷⁵ Environmental spatial thinking “implies a need to radically relativize human subjectivity by thinking to fit within the larger context of ... the ‘agency of nature’”. See: Prieto, Eric: ‘Geocriticism, Geopoetics, Geophilosophy, and Beyond’, in: Tally Jr., Robert T. ed.: *Geocritical Explorations*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, pp.13-27, 18.

⁷⁶ Bush, Catherine: ‘The Review: Hill by Jean Giono’, in: *Brick*, no.99, 2017, see: <https://brickmag.com/the-review-hill-by-jean-giono-translated-by-paul-epile/> (accessed July 6, 2019).

In this story Xi Xi creates a very poetic landscape. The forest as a place also encourages poetic creativity, as Bachelard has shown.⁷⁷ Beauty might be an aesthetic falsification of the reality that lies before our eyes, but it brings gracious comfort.⁷⁸ The utopian and the fantastic can provide a different and subversive kind of reality.⁷⁹

In Xi Xi's story non-human presences are as essential as human ones.⁸⁰ In 'Elzéard Bouffier's Forest', Xi Xi paints a picture of mountains and rivers (shanshui 山水). Mountains and rivers have often been used to signify the whole cosmos in Chinese culture.⁸¹ Francois Cheng has emphasized the notion of qing-jing 情景, a feeling-landscape, in the Chinese literary tradition. Feeling and landscape are inseparable; landscapes are endowed with feeling.⁸²

Xi Xi often makes use of a playful, childlike perception in her works. She chose her penname because the characters Xi Xi 西西 resemble a girl playing hopscotch.⁸³ Sigmund Freud once wrote that "the creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amount of emotion".⁸⁴

⁷⁷ Bachelard, Gaston: *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Jolas, Maria, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1958], p.187.

The Japanese writer Haruki Murakami once compared the writing of a novel with the planting of a forest. See: Murakami, Haruki: 'Introduction', in: Murakami, Haruki: *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*, New York: Vintage Books, 2006, pp.IX-XIII, IX.

⁷⁸ Hoffmann, Torsten: 'Naturverfälschung: Handke, Langsame Heimkehr', in: Hoffmann, Torsten: *Konfigurationen des Erhabenen*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006, pp.69-95, 93.

⁷⁹ Koenen, Anne: *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power. The Fantastic in Anglo-American Women's Literature*, Frankfurt a.M.: Vervuert, 1999, p.263.

⁸⁰ Bush has stated this for Jean Giono's story 'Hill'. See: Bush, Catherine: 'The Review: Hill by Jean Giono', in: *Brick*, no.99, 2017, <https://brickmag.com/the-review-hill-by-jean-giono-translated-by-paul-epile/> (accessed July 6, 2019).

⁸¹ See: Allan, Sarah: 'Water', in: Allan, Sarah: *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*, New York: State Univ. of New York Press, 1997, pp.29-62, 54.

⁸² Cheng, Francois: *Chinese Poetic Writing*, trans. Riggs, Donald et al., Hong Kong: The Chinese Univ. of Hong Kong Press, 2016, p.96-97.

⁸³ See: Walsh, Megan: 'A rare conversation with the cult Chinese writer Xi Xi', May 2018, <https://lithub.com/a-rare-conversation-with-the-cult-chinese-writer-xi-xi/> (accessed July 18, 2019).

⁸⁴ Cited in: Fioretti, Daniele: *Utopia and Dystopia in Postwar Italian Literature*, London et al.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p.41.

Xi Xi endeavours to express the nature of Elzéard Bouffier's forest through language. Like the father in the story, she therefore also draws a map. In this way, setting out to map the world "makes possible other worlds".⁸⁵

As the cultural ecologist and philosopher David Abram notes, Giono seems intent on celebrating oral culture. Abram says Giono wanted to present "the culture ... of spontaneous oral eloquence, of musical speech and word magic ... He wanted to replenish this more ancient, visceral layer of language that holds our ears open to the speech of rivers and woodlands and the rain".⁸⁶

In a very similar way Xi Xi gives much room to an "acoustic space" within the landscape she describes.⁸⁷ In one part of the text Xi Xi uses "onomatopoeics", creating words that phonetically imitate the sounds that are described: the calls of the cuckoo, the tapping of the woodpecker, the chirping of the oriole, and the trilling of the bluebird.⁸⁸ As the musicologist and philosopher Werner Jauk has shown, auditory knowledge results from the experience of the movements in the environment. It is intuitive and goes hand in hand with hedonic feelings.⁸⁹ Catherine Bush has described the auditory descriptions in Jean Giono's story 'Hill'.

In Xi Xi's story 'Elzéard Bouffier's Forest', everything is alive too. "The same ... energy pulses through plants, animals, hills, people, sky. There is a human drama, but really there is a human and hill and animal and plant and water drama ... Nothing is inert".⁹⁰ In a similar way, Abram highlights a description of the sensations experienced by the protagonist in 'Hill':

⁸⁵ Tally Jr., Robert T.: *Spatiality*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013, p.48.

⁸⁶ Abram, David: 'Introduction', in: Giono, Jean: *Hill*, New York: New York Review Books, 2016, pp.vii-xix, xviii.

⁸⁷ For the term acoustic space see: Field, Steven: 'Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea', in: Field, Steven and Basso, Keith H. eds.: *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996, pp.91-136, 95 and 96.

⁸⁸ This is the text passage in Chinese: "gugu de buguniao, gege de zhuomuniao, duer duer de huangying, jiji de zhigengniao" 咕咕的布穀鳥，咯咯的啄木鳥，杜爾杜爾的黃鶯，唧唧的知更鳥。

⁸⁹ Jauk, Werner: 'Basic instincts ... Kultivierung/Kulturen des auditiven Körperwissens', in: de Mori, Brabec et al. eds.: *Auditive Wissenskulturen*, Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018, pp.135-156.

⁹⁰ Bush, Catherine: 'The Review: Hill by Jean Giono', in: *Brick*, no.99, 2017, <https://brickmag.com/the-review-hill-by-jean-giono-translated-by-paul-eprile/> (accessed July 6, 2019).

Sensing for the first time the life stirring all around him in plants, in animals, he begins to wonder at the suffering that he unleashes when he ... cuts down a tree. The epiphany grows: Perhaps even the stones are alive, and the rocky ground where he stands. This earth! ... what if she really is a living being, what if she really is one body?⁹¹

In Xi Xi's text we read: "The wind the wind was howling was howling incessantly", "the child flies through the air ... The child flies and shouts for joy ...", "I heard a dog barking and sheep bleating ...", "You will be swimming between the leaves, floating on the waves of the trees, blue butterflies flashing in front of your eyes and an elk, a graceful beauty, passing by ...", "Elzéard Bouffier's forest unfolded like a flower."

Taking up the image of the burning bush once more one could say that the author depicts nature here as holy ground:

As soon as you got to the mountain town you saw countless innumerable number-less trees so many different varied trees crowded close and numerous trees tall giant low small strong thick slender thin trees trees trees trees. There are elms, maples – zhennan, phoebe, eucalyptus, cinnamomum camphora, zelkova serrata, chestnut. There are pine trees that lose their green colour in winter, as well as evergreen ones. And there are many plants rich with flowers, stalks, and fruits. Even more birch trees. But mostly oak trees ...

This long detailed enumeration is reminiscent of the way children describe things, full of wonder and admiration.

In the end Xi Xi's half-real, half-fantastic cartography weaves together a world that is on the one hand strangely familiar.⁹² And yet, on the other hand, this place, rendered by her poetic imagination, is still utterly novel. In this way she creates "a world that is also our own world."⁹³

⁹¹ Abram, David: 'Introduction', in: Giono, Jean: Hill, New York: New York Review Books, 2016, pp.vii-xix, xii.

⁹² It is a place that lies "on the south side of the Alps, at the foot of the mountains ... After your arrival, you'll see freshly green fields stretching in front of your eyes and swarms of bees dancing along the vegetable gardens. The air is so clear and the water from the rivers is sweet. When the evening sun sets in the west, you will hear the glissando of folk tunes on the accordion from afar. The old people sit on a wooden bench under a linden in repose, while the young folks are swaying to the sound of the music ..."

⁹³ Tally Jr., Robert T.: *Spatiality*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013, p.150.

The way in which the short story ends on a melancholic note but still offers hope is mirrored in a poem by Xi Xi titled 'Oasis':

I could take up
painting
send you all
exquisite scenes
of lush green trees
flocks of soaring birds
flowers on cliffs in Western frontiers
If you'd like
you can pack them in your knapsacks
take them to school
to show your students
Tell them
tell the young kids
there's no need
to be ridden with defeat about anything
for even in the Gobi's terrain
there remains a wondrous oasis⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Xi, Xi: Not Written Words, trans. Feeley, Jennifer, Hong Kong: Zephyr, 2016, p.47-48.

HON Lai-Chu

Water Pipe Forest

For me, the water pipes on the skyscraper opposite looked like a tangle of intestines that were twisted and tied together. They wind themselves around the roof of the ground floor and climb straight up to the top of the building. In between, they make their way into each apartment, passing through the kitchen windows. Normally, they passed through the kitchen window into the apartment.

Having found their way through the kitchen window, they first crossed the ceiling and then slid horizontally through the kitchen, a little above the ground. Under the sink they took their first stop. Along the walls of the living room, they reached out of the room and into a corner of the corridor, where they were no longer visible.

That was the approximate route of the water pipes.

I heard the sound of the water as it rushed through the pipes. It sped past at an astonishing speed. I knew that mother was washing the offal in the kitchen again. She did this often. Near the ceiling of the living room, the water pipe stretched out. Sometimes when mother had been cleaning the offal, I tried to put my hand to the water pipe and feel the water bursting forth.

After mother had cleaned the offal, she let them drop into the pot, where they were cooked into soup. We had to keep away from such things. This was my maternal grandmother's food. She could only eat soup and mush. She could neither eat normally nor speak nor walk. The only thing she was able to do is to lie in bed all day. It seems as if she has been as old as a withered, motionless plant from her birth. And mother, with her disheveled hair and glasses, had been hurrying around in the kitchen for a long time, washing the offal. This is like a still picture of a scene that exists in my imagination. In the background of the picture stand countless pale water pipes of different sizes.

He lived in the opposite skyscraper. That building would be demolished soon. Many residents had already moved out. Only a few had remained. Seen from a distance, the building showed countless gaping holes. Every time he repeated the act of turning the faucet on and off, it seemed to me as if I could hear the water flowing through the pipes.

He is very big. His body fat almost seems to want to penetrate through his skin. It looks as if he is not even able to turn around in the small bathroom. He turned on the faucet so that the water gurgled into the sink. He pulled out the plug. He turned the tap off, and then on again. I could not see his face clearly. Something is definitely wrong with this fatty. Then the water started rushing through the pipe, as if this person had drunk a glass of water, and as if the water were now flowing down his throat, through his esophagus, and then through his intestines.

He had left the bathroom and put out the light. It was pitch dark now. The door had closed with a clicking sound.

The door creaked open and Mother's shadow disappeared into the corridor. The corridor lay behind the living room and there were rooms on both sides of it. Grandmother's room was located at the very end of the corridor. It was dark there. Mother would slowly feed her the soup, sip by sip. Then, a little later, she would spit out the meal she had taken in, all over the floor. I would sit on the sofa in the living room and when I heard the sound of Grandmother throwing up, I felt somewhat sick myself.

Someone had turned on the water, which now roared thunderously through the pipe, as though grandmother's hair was rattling off as she was vomiting. Shortly after this, mother would feed her the mush again.

I entered Grandmother's room for the first and only time in summer. It was a strangely cool summer, and the corners of the room, into which no sun fell, appeared especially dark. The room only contained a moldy wardrobe which was pasted over and over with paper slips. In some places the slips had been torn off. Grandmother lay in bed with a blanket over her. She turned her head and looked at me with tears in her eyes. Her eyes were clouded and the whites of her eyes yellowish. Her face was yellow and streaked with brown spots, as if someone had sculpted the skin of a plucked chicken into a round form. If one wanted to gently smooth out these deep and less deep irregularities with one's hand, one would not succeed. It seemed as if all the skin on her face would fall off in one piece if one put a knife to it.

Her lips trembled, but she made no sound. I sensed the foul smell of her body filling the room and taking one's breath away. After that day, I never entered the room again. The sheer thought of that smell turned my stomach.

I had never seen the face of Fatty close up, but I was well informed about all the activities in his home. I probably knew him almost as well as myself. The window in our living room was located exactly opposite his kitchen. Whenever I approached the window, I saw him in the kitchen, turning the tap on and off, then turning it on, and then off again. He always stayed in the kitchen for a long time before disappearing.

On one day, I saw him from the window of the apartment. He was in the living room with the TV turned on. In his apartment, like in mine, there was a thick water pipe near the ceiling. He was clasping the water pipe with both hands. The whole of his body hung in the air and like a monkey in the forest he swung back and forth on a rope.

I saw the water pipe winding its way from the roof of the building into his kitchen. Each apartment formed a station on the journey that the water pipe took.

I have had this dream more than once. I stand in the demolition ready building. The outer facade of the high-rise is covered by a lot of water pipes. The pipes go straight down like white strands of hair. I try to turn on the tap, but without success. The water pipes in front of the window have been transformed into dry and cracked intestines. The cracks in them expand slowly so that the stones, sand, and other debris that are hidden in the pipes become visible. At the same time a lot of sections of the intestines explode and water fountains spurt out of them.

I knew: Grandmother's problem was with her bowels. Initially, she could still eat porridge and soup. After a while, she began to vomit after eating, and the amount of food she could take in decreased steadily until she was not able to swallow any food at all. Her digestive system had completely lost its function. I could imagine her bowel being full of yellow and green food residues. Finally, mother took her to the hospital. That day an ambulance was parked in front of the house and a couple of white-clothed people with black caps came in. They lifted Grandmother, who looked dried out, onto a stretcher and covered her with an orange blanket. In this way she left the house.

After that, I had to check on her at the hospital every day. In the beginning, I protested against this task, but mother's tone left absolutely no room for negotiation.

“She’s your grandmother after all,” she said. “Your brother is still too young and I need to cook and clean. You have to visit her.”

I remember it was in May because it rained constantly and if one went outside one had to carry an umbrella at all times. Even during the day it was dark as in the evening.

Then the water pipes burst from the heavy rain. This massive rain was like an omen, but the omen was of no use. Even if we had known that the pipes would burst, we would still have been completely out of our depth. The supply of salt water⁹⁵ and drinking water was temporarily interrupted. Since grandmother had been taken to the hospital, mother did not need to cleanse pig offal any more. Mother did not seem to have anything left to do. The days without water felt very strange because I did not hear the sound of the water flowing through the pipes.

My first visits to grandmother in the hospital were during those days when we were without a water supply. As I left the skyscraper, I saw an enormous dull gray water pipe that ran along the wall in the entrance area. From this pipe, water was constantly pouring out. A small lake had already formed. I waded in and saw myself on the surface of the lake. The lake widened constantly and became so deep that one could no longer see the ground.

In the hospital, it was so dazzlingly white that you could barely open your eyes. Grandmother shared the ward with ten other patients, most of them old and frail. They tossed and turned, wailing in their beds. On the ceiling, which was quite high, several water pipes ran horizontally. It seemed impudent. She was a round brown something, curled up on the bed, like a child’s corpse withered by the sun. Two tubes were stuck into her nose, through which liquid food was sent into her body. The patient in the adjacent bed had a bandage on her throat and was constantly croaking with pain. I used to think that she had some hidden evil power, like a cursed sorceress, though I knew deep inside that it was not true. In the hospital it seemed as if Grandmother could die silently any moment. Time and again I gave in to the impulse to feel her breath with my hand. Suddenly her eyes were wide open and surprisingly enough she seemed full of strength, pulling the tubes out of her nose. In the

All annotations are those of the translators.

⁹⁵ For some while, seawater has been used in Hong Kong for toilet flushing.

countless lines of her face I saw pain. I had the impression that she was fighting against the tubes as though she was fighting against a life-threatening enemy. But there was no way out. When the tubes had finally been pulled out of her nose, the nurse tending the sick woman in the next bed spotted them and hurriedly fixed them again.

There were water pipes which were wider than any I had seen before. They spread out quite undisturbed across the ceiling, and it seemed unthinkable that these lines could be blocked or destroyed. I had not heard any water flow through the pipes at home for many days.

I was immensely relieved to leave the hospital after having endured it for half an hour. The rain had stopped and the air was cool and fresh.

I was surprised to see that, even during this short time, the water from the high-rise opposite had flooded the street. It had gradually seeped out. Unconsciously, I waded into the water until it came up to my ankles. It felt pleasantly cool.

On the fourth day without water I still heard no noise in the water pipe. I felt restless, as if a body part was missing. I could not concentrate on anything. I went to the living room window but did not see him in the kitchen. I went to the bathroom and turned on the tap, but not a single drop came out. I turned the tap off again. In the pipes there was deadly silence.

In the past, the water pipes had always been busy, even when mother was not washing pig offal. On the floors above and below us, and in the apartments either side of us, there had always been someone who turned on the faucet so that the water flowed through the pipes of our apartment to other places. It seemed to me that I could deduce from the different sounds – loud or soft, fast or slow – the activities of the other strangers in the high-rise building. Once more I turned on the tap, but still there was no water.

The majority of the residents in the high-rise building opposite had moved. Where did he live? The flats above and below were already deserted. In the beginning I had mimicked his actions for no reason. Later, it seemed to me that I could feel what he was feeling. I am not able to say more.

When the water supply was restored, the high-rise building opposite was already covered with a dirty blue and white striped cloth. A wooden shed had also been built. Because of the problems that had occurred with the drainage

system, the high-rise would be demolished earlier than planned. I had no idea when they had discovered the problems with the pipes: shortly after the construction of the high-rise? Or after the water pipes had burst? All I knew was that the unexpected bursting of the pipes had happened at just the right moment. It meant that the numerous residents' complaints could be avoided. And moreover, the residents would be most willing to move out. I no longer had the opportunity to watch him turn the faucet repeatedly on and off.

A short time later, I would no longer even be able to see the high-rise opposite because we also moved to another location. In the new apartment the furniture was still missing and the walls were not yet painted. This apartment therefore appeared more spacious. We could do as we wished about questions such as "where should we put the wardrobe?" and "where did we want to have a cabinet?" and "did we plan to install an air conditioning system?" and "where should the television go?" My little brother stood in front of the two windows and declared: "There are two rooms here, one room is for Mum and my big sister. The other one is mine." I told him that the other room was grandmother's, but then mother said quietly: "Grandmother will not come back."

When I had next visited grandmother at the hospital, I could see that she was still in a depressed mood. And she was skinny. But she could already sit up in bed and she had begun to mumble indistinctly. Looking at her, I could only think one thing: how amazing! It felt like a mummy who had been in an old grave for many years had suddenly crawled out of the deep and could now walk, move and speak. Obviously, she did not know who I was and she was also very strange to me.

Time and again she had torn the tubes out of her nostrils and gradually the nurses started to ignore her. I fed her slowly with the mush that I had brought. When this was accomplished, both of us were unusually exhausted. A little later a cleaning lady came by. Grandmother called out to the cleaning lady: "Oh sister in law, I have not had anything in my stomach for ten days, please do something good for me and give me something to eat, anything."

The cleaning lady looked at me. Then she gave grandmother some slices of bread, to which Grandmother answered with a cheerful "thank you, thank you!" "You have just had a meal, do not eat it," I said. Grandmother turned her head and answered angrily: "I have not eaten for ten days." Then she

stuffed the bread in her mouth. She had just eaten the bread and already she was frowning again. With tears in her eyes, she turned to the woman who was visiting the patient in the adjacent bed: "Oh older sister, I have not had a meal for ten days, they do not give me anything to eat. Can't you give me something?" The woman looked at me. Then she passed her two small cakes. After she had consumed the two small cakes, a boy came by and asked her: "Grandma, have you not eaten for a long time?" Grandmother made a tormented face and the wrinkles of her face formed a tangle. She replied: "That's true." Triumphant, the little boy said: "If you call me grandpa, I'll give you Chockoledd, all right?"

In the end, Grandmother begged for 12 slices of bread, two small cakes, and six pieces of chocolate from different people. When I was about to leave, I looked at her stomach, which resembled a drum, similar to the belly of a person who had drowned long ago. The belly made a very strange contrast with her skinny body.

When I left the hospital, I wondered how to tell my mother that grandmother had recovered faster than we could have imagined. At the very least, her condition, where she could not eat at all, had changed to one where she had an unbelievably big appetite. Although my brother would lose his room, I would once again be able to hear mother cleaning pig offal and the water flowing through the pipes. That was definitely exciting.

I had usually bypassed the area behind the hospital. I crossed the street and intended to find my way home through small alleys. I found myself in the back alleys of the hospital. I discovered that this area was deserted. Not a single pedestrian was visible. An alley without any pedestrians makes one suspicious, as if this is forbidden terrain. I walked for a long time, but did not reach the end of the alley. I had forgotten my wristwatch that day. When I saw the sun setting, I was still wandering in the alleys. I turned back, but did not arrive at the hospital gate. I discovered many bright white water pipes irregularly covering the walls at the back of the hospital, like branches of trees stretching in all directions. Suddenly it felt like I was in a forest of water pipes. I remembered Fatty holding on to the water pipe and swinging back and forth on a rope. I had the impulse to do the same. But I knew that on the other side of the wall there was the mortuary. I heard the sound of water flowing in different directions, which made me feel that there were some living humans

not too far away. It was completely dark, though, and I still hadn't found a way out of the alleys. I was without hope, as if trapped in a labyrinth.

On that day, I arrived home more than three hours late. The view from the living room window told me that the high-rise opposite was still covered with cloth. Although I could not see how things were inside, I still had the feeling that the water pipes had become so swollen with sand and stones and debris that they had all burst, and that now the house was completely under water.

In the evening a few days later, the hospital staff called. We were informed that grandmother had died. When we arrived at the hospital, we discovered that the bed that had originally been hers was now occupied by another patient. Mother and I entered the doctor's office and discovered that this office was no different from other ordinary offices. I had thought that mother would cry so much that her eyes would swell up. But she appeared strangely calm.

"Should an autopsy be performed?" the doctor asked. Mother shook her head.

"If no autopsy is to be performed, what should be recorded on the death certificate as cause of death? Heart attack or cirrhosis? Both are common diseases."

Mother said: "It doesn't matter."

"Then we'll write heart attack."

So heart attack was written as the cause of death on Grandmother's death certificate. But what was the real cause of her death? I still do not know.

After that, I never heard Mother clean pig offal again.

After grandmother's funeral, our new apartment was ready for us to move in. Nothing felt satisfactory in this brand new apartment. There were too many unused items and there was too little room for movement. Even more importantly, no water pipe ran across the living room. (It was only later that I found out that in most of the new buildings the water pipes are not visible any more, neither from the inside nor from the outside, which is really a sad affair.) It was not until after I had searched for a long time that I found a very hidden door in the kitchen. When I opened the door, I discovered a thick water pipe and a few thin, white ones. The water pipes were hidden in the kitchen like a secret that was not supposed to be uncovered.

Mother started going to work in an office and my brother went away to a boarding school. Most of the time nobody was in the apartment and one room stood empty all the time. Opposite the living room window was a hill. Looking out of the window, a gray wall was also visible. Sometimes I have imagined that I am in the forest of water pipes behind the hospital and that Fatty from the high-rise opposite and I are climbing the water pipes like monkeys.

Over time, I have found myself often unconsciously entering the bathroom and repeatedly turning the tap on and off several times. After turning the tap on and off, and on again, I will run into the kitchen as fast as lightning, tear open the hidden door, and put my ear to the icy water pipe. I will listen to the flow of water as it gurgles, deep and slow.

Translated by Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak

The Chinese text titled 'Shushuiguan senlin' 輸水管森林 was first published in: *Xianggang Wenxue* 香港文學 (*Hong Kong Literature*), vol. 138, June 1996.

Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak
Hon Lai-Chu's 'Water Pipe Forest' – a close reading

Born 1978 in Hong Kong, Hon Lai-Chu 韓麗珠 began writing at the age of ten. She finished her first work, 'Shuishuiguan senlin' 輸水管森林 (Water Pipe Forest), while still in middle school.⁹⁶ After graduating from university, she worked for a few years before deciding to dedicate herself completely to writing. In 2004, she won the Hong Kong Biennial Award for Chinese Fiction with her anthology of short stories *Ningjing De Shou* 寧靜的獸 (*Silent Creature*). Hon has also written several novels, including *Fengshen* 縫身 (*Body-Sewing*) in 2010 and *Konglian* 空臉 (*Blank Face*) in 2017. In 2015, her novel *Fengzheng Jiazu* 風箏家族 (*The Kite Family*) was published in English, translated by Andrea Lingenfelter. The novel won the New Writer's Novella first prize from Taiwan's Uritas Literary Association. The extended version of the novel was chosen by the Taiwanese newspaper *Zhongshi Dianzibao* 中時電子報 (*China Times*) as one of its 2008 Books of the Year.

In our close reading of 'Water Pipe Forest' we highlight the presentation of the following key concepts: house, forest, body, and water.

The **house** as space evolves in the story along the following lines: "the opposite skyscraper", "the apartment", "this building", and "the hospital".

The **hospital** is described in the story as a hostile, morbid space. The narrator says: "In the hospital it seemed as if Grandmother could die silently any moment". Then later she says: "I knew that on the other side of the wall there was the mortuary." Because of this character of the space, the narrator is therefore "immensely relieved to leave the hospital."

Medical clinics can be seen as symbolic of "the observing gaze" which, as the influential French philosopher Michel Foucault has shown, has reorganized the discourse about disease.⁹⁷ Foucault's book is "about space, about language, and about death; it is about the act of seeing, the gaze".⁹⁸ On the very first page of the book's preface Foucault cites a pathology report

⁹⁶ Shen, Xiaofeng: 'Han Lizhu (Hong Kong) – Allegories of an Unreal City', trans. Elford, Christopher, <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/a-sinophone-20-under-40-part-iiiiv/> (accessed July 16, 2019).

⁹⁷ Foucault, Michel: 'Preface', in: Foucault, Michel: *The Birth of the Clinic. An Archeology of Medical Perception*, London: Routledge, 1991 [1963], pp.ix-xix, xix.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

in which intestines are described as having “peeled off their internal tunics”.⁹⁹ Hon’s story is also characterized by the gaze of the narrator. Numerous sentences in the story show this. The narrator repeatedly says things like: “I was surprised to see ...”, and “I did not see him ...”, and “I could see that ...”

In a text about Kafka’s use of observation, the scholar of comparative literature Andreas Huyssen introduced an idea of “*Betrachtung*”, which can be translated as meditation or observation in the sense of looking attentively. Huyssen suggested that this ‘*Betrachtung*’ or attentive observation is an important dimension of the urban miniatures in Kafka’s writing: “Deceleration always seems more important in Kafka than acceleration.”¹⁰⁰

Contrasting with the morbid descriptions of the hospital, in Hon’s story **residential houses** are depicted in a more positive way. The philosopher Gaston Bachelard, who takes a phenomenological approach,¹⁰¹ expressed the emotions that descriptions of houses can convey: “All great, simple images reveal a psychic state. The house ... bespeaks intimacy ... a live house is not ... ‘motionless’”.¹⁰² A house that has been experienced is not an inert box but an inhabited space. The house is something “that ‘clings’ to its inhabitant”. The house “becomes the cell of a body with its walls close together”. It “acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body.”¹⁰³ In Hon Lai-Chu’s ‘Water Pipe Forest’ the narrator recounts how the man in the opposite skyscraper:

is clasping the water pipe with both hands. The whole guy hangs in the air and like a monkey in the forest he swings back and forth on a rope.

Bachelard speaks about “becoming aware of our room by strongly synthesizing everything that lives in it, every piece of furniture that wants to be

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Huyssen, Andreas: ‘*Kafka’s Betrachtung* in the Force Field of Photography and Film’, in: Huyssen, Andreas: *Miniature Metropolis. Literature in an Age of Photography and Film*, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015, pp.52-83, 65.

¹⁰¹ The phenomenological approach emphasizes the subjective experience of place. See: Prieto, Eric: ‘Geocriticism, Geopoetics, Geophilosophy, and Beyond’, in: Tally Jr., Robert T. ed.: *Geocritical Explorations*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, pp.13-27, 15.

¹⁰² Bachelard, Gaston: *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Jolas, Maria, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1958], p.72.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.46-47.

friends.”¹⁰⁴ The water pipes in the story, being part of the equipment present in houses, appear as an important though fragile medium that connects the narrator with the surrounding world.

The narrator in the story feels close to the man in the opposite skyscraper whom she observes. She describes how, “in the beginning I had mimicked his actions for no reason. Later, it seemed to me that I could feel what he was feeling. I am not able to say more”. The philosopher Edward S. Casey, who like Bachelard takes a phenomenological approach, has stated that:

The ‘in’ ingredient in habitation is a fluid focus, one that is in constant communication with the ‘out’: for instance by means of ... windows, whereby the outside world becomes part of the being within ...¹⁰⁵

Bachelard speaks in this case of an “osmosis between intimate and undetermined space”.¹⁰⁶

In Hon’s story the house becomes a simulacrum of the human body. For the narrator the water pipes, with their noise and the water streaming through them, symbolise life lines. They become an image for an undisturbed rhythm of life and a well-functioning **body**.¹⁰⁷ Hon writes: “On the fourth day without water I still heard no noise in the water pipe. I felt restless, as if a body part was missing.”

More broadly, we might examine how Hon describes bodies in this story.¹⁰⁸ The mother just disappears behind the routine and monotony of the household duties, although she is the one who makes the water flow through the

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.71.

¹⁰⁵ Casey, Edward S.: ‘Giving a Face to Place in the Present’, in: Casey, Edward S.: *The Fate of a Place. A Philosophical History*, Berkeley et al.: Univ. of California Press, 1998, pp.285-330, 293.

¹⁰⁶ Bachelard, Gaston: *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Jolas, Maria, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1958], p.230.

¹⁰⁷ For Xu Zidong’s interpretation of the water pipes see: Xu, Zidong 許子東: ‘Xu’ 序 (Introduction), in: Xu, Zidong 許子東 ed.: *Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 1996-1997 香港短篇小說選 1996-1997* (Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 1996-1997), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2000, pp.1-8, 5: “The water pipes form a city scene that evokes admiration and terror at the same time.”

¹⁰⁸ Bodies also play an important role in another of Hon’s stories, ‘The Kite Family’. This story is about a family whose grandmother is steadily gaining in weight. After she passes away, the autopsy finds the valuables of other family members in her stomach, including her daughter’s wedding ring. The granddaughter explains: “Chewing made it possible to digest everything that wore me down.” Her sister, on the other hand, is

pipes when washing the offal. Then there is the skinny grandmother whose “problem was with her bowels”. Her body is dysfunctional. In his work *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault quotes from a hospital record: “The human body is made up of vessels and fluids ... when the fluids have just the right consistency, when they have neither too much nor too little movement, man is in a state of health; if the movement ... is too strong, the solids harden ... if it is too weak, the fibre slackens.”¹⁰⁹

In the story, the narrator describes how, when the grandmother was brought to the hospital, she looked dried out and “liquid food was sent into her body”. The granddaughter senses the “foul smell of her body filling the room and taking one’s breath away”. There is no sign of a friendly, intimate relationship between grandmother and granddaughter. Instead, the family relationships described in the story are as dysfunctional as the body functions. The young woman even comments: “I used to think that she had some hidden evil power, like a cursed sorceress”.

Another body described in the story is that of the man in the opposite skyscraper. The narrator describes him as “very big” and says “his body fat almost seems to want to penetrate through his skin”. However, he is still able to swing back and forth on the water pipe with the “whole of his body hanging in the air”. His lively, free movements, which are related to the water pipes, clearly contrast with the cold and deadening situation of the family relations depicted in the story.¹¹⁰

so tender that she must be tied up so as not to fly out of the window like a kite. See: Hon, Lai-Chu: ‘The Kite Family’, trans. Lingenfelter, Andrea, Hong Kong: Muse, 2015, pp.33-101.

¹⁰⁹ Foucault, Michel: ‘Spaces and Classes’, in: Foucault, Michel: *The Birth of the Clinic. An Archeology of Medical Perception*, London: Routledge, 1991 [1963], pp.3-21, 14.

¹¹⁰ This contrasts, in our opinion, with Song Weijie’s analysis of Lao She’s work *Camel Xiangzi*. Song states that “Lao She demonstrates a modernist sensibility of the deadening situation of the city, which leads to the decline and destruction of the subjectivity and morality of the modern human being”.

“Ultimately, Xiangzi turns into one of the phantoms wandering in the urban wilderness.” See: Song, Weijie: ‘A Warped Hometown: Lao She and the Beijing Complex’, in: Song, Weijie: *Mapping Modern Beijing. Space, Emotion, Literary Topography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp.36-79, 46 and 48.

Cities have also been compared with **forests** by other authors.¹¹¹ Hon herself has also written another story, titled 'Forrest Woods, Chair'¹¹². In 'Water Pipe Forest' Hon's narrator says the following:

I had usually bypassed the area behind the hospital. I crossed the street and intended to find my way home through small alleys. I found myself in the back alleys of the hospital. I discovered that this area was deserted. Not a single pedestrian was visible. An alley without any pedestrians makes one suspicious, as if this is forbidden terrain. I walked for a long time, but did not reach the end of the alley ... I discovered many bright white water pipes irregularly covering the walls at the back of the hospital, like branches of trees stretching in all directions. Suddenly it felt like I was in a forest of water pipes.

As Bachelard says, "we do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of 'going deeper and deeper' into a limitless world".¹¹³ However, in the end the "water pipe forest" in Hon's story does not just serve as a disturbing space for the narrator. In her dreams the narrator imagines herself in this forest: "I am in the forest of water pipes behind the hospital and ... Fatty from the high-rise opposite and I are climbing the water pipes like monkeys."

She may have these fantasies because, to cite Bachelard once more, the forest can stand for transcendent quietude. Yet at the same time as being quiet, the forest "rustles, the 'curdled' quiet trembles and shudders, it comes to life with countless lives". In the story, this forest peace, which is also so full of life, perhaps works to calm the narrator's anxiety.¹¹⁴ The narrator's dream of "climbing the water pipes like monkeys" might also be symbolic of the desire

¹¹¹ See: Koren-Kuik, Meyrav and Maurer, Yael: 'Introduction', in: Maurer, Yael and Koren-Kuik, Meyrav eds.: *Cityscapes of the Future. Urban Spaces in Science Fiction*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2018, pp.1-9, 4.

¹¹² Hon, Lai-Chu: 'Forrest Woods, Chair', in: Hon, Lai-Chu: *The Kite Family*, trans. Lingenfelter, Andrea, Hong Kong: Muse, 2015, p.103-124. Forrest Woods, the protagonist of the story, turns from a human being into a wooden chair, in the end being sold and shipped abroad because of his outstanding qualities.

¹¹³ Bachelard, Gaston: *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Jolas, Maria, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1958], p.185.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.187.

“to experience oneself as an active agent ... in an increasingly alienating society where loneliness, anonymity and a sense of impotence vis-à-vis uncontrollable forces threaten the sense of self.”¹¹⁵

Water imagery also plays a very important role in Hon’s story. Water imagery has frequently been an important element in Chinese cultural works as a whole. It can be identified in the classical Daoist and Confucian texts. The Confucian philosophical work *Xunzi* 荀子, for example, talks about water in the following way: “Where there is a channel to direct it, its noise is like an echoing cry and its fearless advance into a hundred meter valley, like valor (勇 *yong*)”¹¹⁶. The scholar of ancient China Sarah Allan has spoken about a close connection between the concept of the “mind/heart” (*xin* 心) and water imagery when thinking and emotional states are in question.¹¹⁷ Allan emphasizes that early Chinese texts do not praise the vast “immortal sea”. The water which most interested Chinese philosophers was “the ordinary rather than the infinite, that which sustains life and is experienced by all.”¹¹⁸ The ability of water to take the shape of whatever contains it signifies flexibility and suppleness, the ability of a person to adapt their actions to circumstance.¹¹⁹ In applying these ideas to Hon’s text one might conclude that the flexibility, as well as the fearless advance of the water, both might be qualities that the narrator wishes to have herself.

In the story we encounter the case of a burst water pipe. The narrator says: “I was surprised to see that ... the water from the high-rise opposite had flooded the street. It had gradually seeped out ...” Allan has pointed out that still and clear water, which becomes reflective, also played an important role in early Chinese religious practice: “According to the [Daoist classic] *Zhuangzi* 莊子 ‘no one takes flowing water as a mirror, and yet [a person] finds his reflection in the standing water of a *jian*-mirror’. From as early as the Shang Dynasty, vessels filled with water were used as mirrors in religious rituals. These were

¹¹⁵ See: Koenen, Anne: *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power. The Fantastic in Anglo-American Women’s Literature*, Frankfurt a.M.: Vervuert, 1999, p.270.

¹¹⁶ Cited in: Allan, Sarah: ‘Introduction’, in: Allan, Sarah: *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*, New York: State Univ. of New York Press, 1997, pp.1-28, 24.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.25.

¹¹⁸ Allan, Sarah: ‘Water’, *ibid.*, pp.29-62, 31.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.49.

called *jian* 監 ... What one saw in such mirrors was more than simply a physical reflection”.¹²⁰ It is possible that the narrator in Hon’s story ‘Water Pipe Forest’ also experiences water as *jian*. She describes how: “Unconsciously, I waded into the water until it came up to my ankles. It felt pleasantly cool.” In this way, there might even be a religious layer hidden within the story, one that on first glance you would not likely be conscious of. One wonders what images the water in this scene was reflecting back to be caught by the narrator’s gaze.

¹²⁰ibid., p.51.

CHAN Lai Kuen

E6880(2) from Block 6, building 20, wing E**

When he got off the bus, his steps were still a bit shaky. He had spent an hour and a quarter on the bus, going through three tunnels, over a suspension bridge, and passing along countless streets, before finally reaching “XX Parkview” where he lived. At “XX Parkview” there was neither a park nor animals, just a few trees with trunks as thin as a person’s wrists. Instead of any park, you could find a lot of buildings, buses, and Filipino maids there.

The bus stopped in front of the main entrance to his estate. He walked directly along the shore of the artificial lake, opened a glass door, and entered the white hall of a high-rise building. On the door hung Christmas decorations which the building’s management company had attached, even though it was still a bit early for Christmas. The concierge entered an electronic secret code which opened the second glass door for him. Yet another new concierge, another new face again, he thought. He pushed open the wretchedly heavy glass door and entered the elevator lobby. He pressed the button next to the elevator on the right side.

The number on the monitor showed him that the elevator was being held up on the 34th floor. Deadly bored, E6880**(2) looked around. There were three elevators in the hall. Above the right-hand elevator was a sign saying: “Floors with even numbers” and then next to it another, bronze sign saying “This elevator stops on the ground floor and the following floors: 2,4,6,8,10,12,14,16, 34”. Over the elevator in the middle there was a sign saying “Single floors”, while above the elevator on the left was a sign which said “Floors with uneven numbers”. However, this left-most elevator didn’t have a bronze sign like the one next to the elevator on the right.

‘Isn’t that sign saying ‘even numbers’ enough?’ E6880**(2) said to himself. ‘People who didn’t know the difference between even and odd numbers, probably wouldn’t know that 1,3,5 were the opposite to 2,4,6 either’. After a long time, the elevator doors opened in front of him. He entered and pressed the “20”. When the doors opened again, his feet automatically turned to the left and he walked towards wing E.

He rang the doorbell and noticed the grey doormat in front of the door. When had it been replaced? It looked a bit dirty. He thought to himself that he preferred the former, green doormat, but it didn't matter because one could still wipe one's feet on the new doormat anyway.

Someone opened the door. Before it had fully opened, his wife had already turned around and gone back to the kitchen where food was boiling and frying furiously. She held a cooking spoon in her hand the whole time. Three children were sitting at the dining table with their heads lowered over their homework. "That child with the big head is probably a classmate of child B," E6880** (2) thought. He cast a quick glance at them before plonking himself down on the sofa and opening Daily Newspaper Z. The television was showing his wife's favourite series – "A Wealthy Tycoon".¹²¹ In between steps in the cooking, she would put down the pots and hurry over to the watch it, standing there for a while and then going back to the kitchen again.

During a long commercial break, E6880** (2) drifted off to sleep. Half asleep, he heard the indistinct sounds of the children reading English verbs, mixed with the sound of hissing oil in the wok. "Had gone, had eaten, had ..." the children said. 'They're already learning the past perfect tense ... not bad', E6880** (2) thought. When the television series' theme music played again, he woke up and continued looking through the newspaper.

"Dinner is ready," his wife shouted from the kitchen. The children packed up their books. E6880** (2) took the newspaper with him to the dining table and sat down. Not until the television had revealed the pregnancy of a young starlet who had attended a dance party with one of the members of a wealthy family did he take his first bite. "Hairy Gourd Soup and Fried Thread Brasse again!" he mumbled. His eyes were still glued to the wealthy tycoon's face, which has a lot of prominent blue veins on it. The rich tycoon's business had just taken off. He had moved from public housing to an apartment with chandeliers and he was in the process of negotiating new business plans with a comrade-in-arms. However, the son from a wealthy family, who had always

All annotations are those of the translators.

¹²¹ According to a conversation between the author and translators, the author was inspired by 1990s TV dramas such as "Liumang Daxiang" 流氓大亨 (A Rascal Tycoon) made by the Hong Kong television station TVB and starring Alex Man Tze Leung 萬梓良.

envied the tycoon, had secretly planned to hurt him and had waited for an opportunity to steal the rich tycoon's girlfriend. E6880** (2) yawned.

"I'm pretty stuffed!" He said. With that, he returned to the sofa.

E6880** (2) glanced at his watch and suddenly seemed to remember something. He stretched and strolled into the bedroom. While he was sitting on the edge of the bed, he heard the sound of washing dishes coming from the kitchen. A short time later, his wife came in with a large pile of laundry.

"Hey, you'd better hurry up," he ranted. "Come here. From tomorrow I have to go to work earlier again!"

His wife was standing with her back to him, folding one garment after another.

"Come here for what?"

"Well, you know for what. Do you need an extra invitation?" He patted the bed.

"Oh nonsense, today is only Wednesday," she said in an expressionless tone.

"Yes exactly, it's Wednesday!" E6880** (2) checked his watch to make sure that this was correct.

"It's always on Thursdays, isn't it?" She asked. She was about to straighten the leg of a pair of trousers which were stiff as a stick and crumpled. Only now did they slowly look up and look each in the eye.

"Then ... oh ... sorry, then I got it wrong!" E6880** (2) hurriedly pulled up his trousers which he had already half lowered whilst reaching for his briefcase with his other hand. Murmuring to himself, he hurried past the three elementary students to the front door. Out of the corner of his eye, he seemed to see that his "wife" was still folding the laundry in the bedroom.

When the lift reached the ground floor, he quickly left the building. He was worried that the concierge might take him for a thief. When he turned around, he saw that on the patch of lawn in front of the entrance to the high-rise, where large red flowers had been planted, there was a bronze sign with text engraved on it: "四座 Block 4".

He winced.

Then he turned around and went to another high-rise building. On the patch of lawn in front of this building's entrance, where large red flowers had been planted, there was another bronze sign with engraved text which said: “六座 Block 6”.

He pushed the glass door open. On the door hung Christmas decorations which the building's management company had attached, even though it was still a bit early for Christmas. The concierge had changed back into the familiar one who usually opened the door for him. He entered the electronic secret code to open the second glass door.

E6880** (2) pushed open the wretchedly heavy glass door and entered the elevator hall. After that he pressed the button next to the elevator on the right side. He looked at the three elevators in the hall. Above the right-hand elevator was a sign saying: “Floors with even numbers”. Next to that elevator, there was no bronze sign. Above the elevator in the middle was a sign which said “Single floors”. Meanwhile, above the elevator on the left was a sign which said: “Floors with uneven numbers”. Next to this elevator on the left there was a bronze sign saying: “This elevator stops on the ground floor and the following floors: 1,3,5,7,9,11... 35”.

Suddenly E6880** (2) felt dizzy and had to lean against the marble wall with one hand. At that moment the right hand elevator opened in front of him. He went in and pressed the “20”. When the lift doors opened again, his feet automatically turned to the left and he walked towards wing E.

The doormat in front of the entrance was green. After he had rung the doorbell, someone came to the open door. Before the door had not fully opened, his wife had already turned around and gone back to the kitchen again where food was boiling and frying furiously. She held a cooking spoon in her hand the whole time. On the television screen the wealthy tycoon had arrived just in time, just as the son from a wealthy family was about to force himself upon the tycoon's girlfriend. Two children were sitting at the dining table, their heads lowered over their homework. One of them was child B. “Go, went, gone; eat, ate, eaten...” The children said. ‘They are still not learning the past perfect tense,’ he thought. ‘Well, I don't understand it either.’

“Dinner is ready,” his wife shouted from the kitchen. The children packed up their books. E6880** (2) sat down at the dining table, but without Daily Newspaper Z. His wife brought Hairy Gourd Soup and Fried Thread Brasse out from the kitchen. Although he was already pretty stuffed, he still ate a bowl. The music for the end credits of “A Wealthy Tycoon” was followed by trailers for the next episode. The rich tycoon was facing his ruin. He stood in the rain in front of the building for the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. The camera panned around him and he had turned into a poor man.

Translated by Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak

The Chinese text was first published in: *Xianggang Wenxue* 香港文學 (*Hong Kong Literature*), no.11, 2000.

Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak
E6880(2) from Block 6, building 20, wing E – a close reading**

Chan Lai Kuen 陳麗娟 was born in 1963 in Hong Kong. She graduated from the Department of English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Later she continued her studies at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in Hong Kong, majoring in Art. Chan Lai Kuen is a local poet, translator, editor and educator. In 2009-2010, she contributed an installation to a literary-art exhibition in Kowloon Park. Her poetry collection *You Mao Zai Ge Chang* 有貓在歌唱 (*Cats that are singing*) won the 11th Hong Kong Chinese Literature Biennial Award in 2011. In 2014, her Chinese-English poetry collection *Wang Xing Zhi Cheng* 亡星之城 / *City of Dead Stars*, translated by Kit Kelen and Fang Xia, was published in Macao. Chan also contributed an essay about the Kowloon City district of Hong Kong for the collection: *Dieyin – Manbu Xianggang Wenxue Dijing* 疊印 – 漫步香港文學地景 (*Palimpsest – Literary Landscapes from Strolling in Hong Kong*), which was published in 2016.

Chan Lai Kuen's writing is closely related to the city of Hong Kong. As the cultural anthropologist Keith Basso has emphasized, relationships with places are lived whenever a place becomes the object of awareness.¹²² The setting of Chan's short story 'E6880**(2)' is "XX Parkview". In our interpretation, we see this as being based on a residential complex in Hong Kong called Hong Kong Parkview (Yangming Shanzhuang 陽明山莊). This is a luxury residential complex in Hong Kong which has 18 skyscrapers designed by the Wong Tung property company. The complex is surrounded by protected lands on all sides and after it opened it was criticised for spoiling the serenity of Tai Tam country park. The complex's 18 apartment blocks opened in 1989. Each block is 20 storeys tall. The facilities of Hong Kong Parkview include swimming pools, an indoor children's playground, a video game world and physiotherapy services. Clearly land is a factor of capitalistic enterprise at Hong Kong Parkview. The luxury apartment complex was the scene of a high-profile murder in 2003 when the 40-year-old investment banker Robert Kissel was murdered in his apartment. His wife Nancy Ann Kissel was then convicted of the murder.

¹²² Basso, Keith H.: 'Wisdom Sits in Places', in: Field, Steven and Basso, Keith H. eds.: *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996, pp.53-90, 54.

In our close reading of Chan's story we draw on the ideas of the French scholar of comparative literature and geocriticism, Bertrand Westphal. Westphal has presented a theory regarding the 'importance of possible worlds'. This theory suggests that it is in the interstices between established places that the most interesting discoveries are to be made. Fiction, according to Westphal, actualizes new virtualities that have previously remained unformulated. These new virtualities then go on to interact with the real.¹²³

Chan's short story clearly presents dystopian¹²⁴ features. The protagonist does not have a name. He is called "E6880** (2)", his identity reduced to a strange combination of letters and figures. In correspondence with the story's translators, Chan explained that E6880** (2) is a random simulation of a Hong Kong identity card number. This can be seen as a comment on the dystopian ways in which Hong Kong citizens' lives are tracked by the authorities. The Indian-American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has described the way the colonial administrative apparatus of British India led to a build-up of a 'numerological infrastructure'.¹²⁵ It is likely that this use of numbers to categorize and identify is also present in Hong Kong, another former British colony. The plan to chart cities and populations with numbers, begun during the time of British colonial rule, is still continuing today in post-colonial bureaucracies. Today's advocates of 'smart cities' promise that urban spaces are becoming visible and readable through information technologies.¹²⁶ As the British-Indian academic Ash Amin and the British geographer Nigel Thrift have pointed out: "the bureaucratic impulse consists of the obsessive multiplication of categories, sometimes amounting to a fetish for enumeration ... The desire is

¹²³ See: Prieto, Eric: 'Geocriticism, Geopoetics, Geophilosophy, and Beyond', in: Tally Jr., Robert T. ed.: *Geocritical Explorations*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, pp.13-27, 20.

¹²⁴ A dystopia can be designated as a negative utopia. The dark side of utopia is related to the turning of utopia towards the future and to the idea of technological progress. See: Vieira, Fátima: 'The concept of utopia', in: Claeys, Gregory ed.: *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010, pp.3-27, 15.

¹²⁵ Appadurai, Arjun: 'Number in the Colonial Imagination', in: Beckenridge, Carol and van der Veer, Peter eds.: *Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament*, Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, pp.314-339, 325.

¹²⁶ Eichenmüller, Christian and Michel, Boris: 'Smart Cities in India', in: Bauriedl, Sybille and Strüver, Anke eds.: *Smart City – Kritische Perspektiven auf die Digitalisierung in Städten*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2018, pp.99-108, 102.

to produce an irreducible articulation, a summation of intelligibles in a metrical order which means that *nothing is left to be said*.¹²⁷ The passages in the story about the elevator floors also point in this direction.

The ‘name’ of E6880** (2) reminds of fellow Hong Kong author Xi Xi’s 1981 short story ‘Chouti’ 抽屜 (The Drawer)¹²⁸. Here the narrator asks herself: “Who I am? I have only to open my drawer and my ID tells me who I am ... Where am I? In my drawer ...” The scholar of literary studies Terry Siu-han Yip argues that Xi Xi’s story describes the way that, in a highly commercialized society, people’s individual selves are of little interest to anyone. It is their functional selves that matter.¹²⁹ In a way similar to the description in Chan’s story, in Xi Xi’s ‘Chouti’ the main character is shown “travelling every day between her ... flat and her workplace, not knowing whether she is alive or dead”.¹³⁰

In his foreword to a collection of articles from 2019, the scholar of literary studies Kwok-kan Tam asks himself a similar question as Xi Xi’s protagonist: “Am I not what I am?” He goes on to write that, “as a person without an officially recognized nationality, I know all the complexities about identity ... I often ask myself: ‘Can’t a Chinese be Chinese without having to be recognized? Can’t a person be a person without having to be recognized?’”¹³¹ Chan’s short story ‘E6880** (2)’ arguably probes many of the same existential questions.

“XX Parkview” is an artificial, commodified, and insulated place with an overemphasis on security and ritual.¹³² E6880** (2) has to pass through security door systems in order to get to his apartment. His encounters with both the

¹²⁷ Ash, Amin and Thrift, Nigel: *Cities. Reimagining the Urban*, Cambridge et al.: Polity Press, 2008, 109.

¹²⁸ Xi, Xi: ‘The Drawer’, trans. Hui, Douglas and Minford, John, in: Tam, Kwok-kan, Yip, Terry Siu-han and Dissayanake, Wimal eds.: *A Place of One’s Own: Stories of Self in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore*, Hong Kong and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999, pp. 176-179.

¹²⁹ Yip, Terry Siu-han: ‘Geographical Space and Cultural Identity: Self in the Age of Globalization’, in: *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, Dec. 2003, pp.594-609, 598.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Tam, Kwok-kan: ‘Preface’, in: Tam, Kwok-kan: *The Englishized Subject. Postcolonial Writings in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia*, Singapore: Springer, 2019, pp.v-vii, v.

¹³² Salerno, Roger A.: ‘Introduction’, in: Salerno, Roger A.: *Landscapes of Abandonment: Capitalism, Modernity, and Estrangement*, New York: State Univ. of New York Press, 2003, pp.1-8, 2.

two families he goes to, in two separate apartments, follow almost identical routines. The story portrays the way in which technological innovations and capitalism impact the cityscape. City dwellers become alienated, objectified, and commodified, as Roger Salerno has emphasized.¹³³

The story is also about the mutation which previously authentic relationships have undergone as people become more modern. Family relationships have become an “empty construct of ... networked individuals”.¹³⁴ In the story, the wives and children function only as signifiers of their roles (housewife, sexual partner, schoolchild B, and the child’s classmate). The modern condition is presented as one where depersonalization is almost complete, and nobody has a distinct individual identity anymore.¹³⁵

The story’s scenes showing interactions between husbands and wives closely resemble those of other literary works, such as those in the novella *Mrs. Caliban*¹³⁶ by the American author Rachel Ingalls, and those in American author Kate Wilhelm’s short story ‘Mrs. Bagley Goes to Mars’.¹³⁷ In the latter work, Mr. Bagley never even glances at his wife. Meanwhile, in *Mrs. Caliban*, the husband Fred “didn’t look back” and “didn’t even look up”, talking with his wife “automatically, without ever turning his head”.¹³⁸ For Mrs. Bagley each day is “a day exactly like all others”. Similarly, the couple in ‘Mrs. Caliban’ function according to “the set words of this ritual”.¹³⁹

Chan’s story ‘E6880** (2)’ presents some very similar scenes between husbands and wives. We read how the husband “only cast a quick glance” at his

¹³³ Ibid. In Huyssen’s view, the literary miniature always implied a critical theory of bourgeois society. See: Huyssen, Andreas: ‘Introduction’, in: Huyssen, Andreas: *Miniature Metropolis. Literature in an Age of Photography and Film*, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015, pp.1-22, 3.

¹³⁴ Salerno, Roger A.: ‘Introduction’, in: Salerno, Roger A.: *Landscapes of Abandonment: Capitalism, Modernity, and Estrangement*, New York: State Univ. of New York Press, 2003, pp.1-8, 6.

¹³⁵ Robinson, Douglas: ‘Introduction’, in: Robinson, Douglas: *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008, pp.ix-xx, xi.

¹³⁶ Ingalls, Rachel: *Mrs Caliban*, Harvard: Harvard Common Press, 1982.

¹³⁷ Wilhelm, Kate: ‘Mrs. Bagley Goes to Mars’, in: Wilhelm, Kate: *Somerset Dreams and Other Fictions*, New York: Harper & Row, 1978, pp.91-100.

¹³⁸ Cited in: Koenen, Anne: *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power. The Fantastic in Anglo-American Women’s Literature*, Frankfurt a.M.: Vervuert Verlag, 1999, p.273.

¹³⁹ Cited *ibid*.

family, and how “his wife was standing with her back to him”. When the husband is eating, we are told that “his eyes were still glued to the TV screen”. Only once, at the turning point of the story, do the couple directly look at each other. Chan writes how: “Only now did they slowly look up and look [at] each other”.

In an article from 1994, the Czech writer Ivan Klima described how “from childhood on, the little human of our time ... does not learn to love, to relate ... to the people”. Klima argues that in today’s world young people encounter “more things than human beings, more images than reality ... Love and tenderness have moved from life to the screen, and the images can be switched or turned off abruptly and at any time ... A partner [can be] deprived of [their] unique personality and reduced to a mere object ... [they are] interchangeable at any time”.¹⁴⁰

E6880** (2) gets lost in “XX Parkview”. This theme of being lost (milu 迷路) was also central in Chan Lai Kuen’s installation for the art installation she created for the literary-art exhibition held in Kowloon Park in 2009 and 2010.¹⁴¹

E6880** (2) drifts within the indifferent spaces of the city (“When he got out, his step was still a bit shaky. He had spent an hour and 15 minutes on the bus, going through three tunnels, over a suspension bridge, and along countless streets”). Then later, he also drifts within the “XX Parkview” complex, which causes his head to spin: “Suddenly he felt dizzy and had to lean against the marble wall with one hand.” He is, to borrow the words of the philosopher Edward S. Casey, “afflicted with disorientation and anomie”. His state might also be interpreted, again using Casey’s phrasing, as a sign of “insidious nomadism endemic to modern times, in which the individual ... drifts within the ... spaces of housing ... and shopping centres and superhighways.”¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Klima, Ivan: ‘Liebe im 21. Jahrhundert’, in: Spiegel online, Jan. 10, 1994, see: <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13683246.html> (accessed July 5, 2019).

¹⁴¹ For an interpretation of the installation see: Lee, Tong King: ‘The Translational: Intersemioticity and Transculturality’, in: Lee, Tong King: *Experimental Chinese Literature. Translation, Technology, Poetics*, Leiden: Brill, 2015, pp.130-159.

¹⁴² Casey, Edward S.: ‘Homeward Bound’, in: Casey, Edward S.: *Getting Back Into Place. Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2009, pp.273-314, 275.

Let us now take a closer look at the television series which is mentioned in the story. This series is titled 'A wealthy tycoon'. Chan told the story's translators that this element of the story was inspired by actual 1990s Hong Kong television dramas such as "Liumang Daxiang" 流氓大亨 (A Rascal Tycoon). This was a drama made by the Hong Kong television company TVB and starring Alex Man Tze Leung 萬梓良. Popular television dramas like 'A Rascal Tycoon' reflected the social dynamics in Hong Kong at that time. In Chan's story, we learn that the television show they are watching is about a Hongkonger who unexpectedly becomes rich, but then in the end turns into a poor man again. In his analysis of the filmic depictions of Bombay in the 1990s, the cinema studies scholar Ranjani Mazumdar has argued that these films present a fantasy lifestyle. Similarly, in the popular television drama referred to in 'E6880** (2)' it appears that a fantasy of a lifestyle unblemished by chaos and poverty is displayed, representing upper-class urbanites retreating into the glossy panoramic interior of the skyscraper.¹⁴³

Chan's story can be read as a critique of capitalism. Hong Kong has been, and is still, characterized by a huge gap between rich and poor. In 2017, Hong Kong's Gini coefficient, which measures the difference between a society's rich and poor with zero indicating equality, was 0.539. This was the highest in 45 years. For comparison, at that time the United States had a Gini coefficient of 0.411 and Singapore had a coefficient of 0.4579.¹⁴⁴ In Hong Kong, rent is higher than almost anywhere else in the world. An article in CNN describes how:

As the city's population expands and developable land runs out, housing prices have skyrocketed over the last years – the median price of a home in 2018 was nearly 21 times the city's median annual household income. Hong Kong has gained a reputation for its luxury

¹⁴³ See: Herbert, Caroline: 'Owning the city: Screening postcolonial Bombay in Milan Luthria's *Taxi 9211: Nau Do Gyarah*', in: Teverson, Andrew and Upstone, Sara eds.: *Postcolonial Spaces. The politics of place in contemporary culture*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp.97-111, 98.

¹⁴⁴ See: Wong, Michelle: 'Why the wealth gap? Hong Kong's disparity between rich and poor is greatest in 45 years, so what can be done?', in: *South China Morning Post*, Sep. 27, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/2165872/why-wealth-gap-hong-kongs-disparity-between-rich-and-poor> (accessed July 20, 2019).

real estate with staggering price tags – one house on The Peak, an exclusive neighborhood, is listed for \$448 million.¹⁴⁵

Similar prices might apply for Hong Kong Parkview 陽明山莊, which we have argued is the real-world model for the “XX Parkview” apartment complex in Chan’s story.

Another problem in Hong Kong is the lack of preservation of historic neighborhoods. In her 2016 essay about the Kowloon City district of Hong Kong, Chan criticized the way that the former Kowloon City, with its small shops and narrow streets between the buildings, had been wiped away by “rulers who sing the song of ‘5000 years of culture’”. This approach to history leaves her feeling “as if history is playing a nasty trick” on people in Hong Kong.¹⁴⁶ Here the author is likely referring to the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and their dominant interpretation of Chinese history.

¹⁴⁵ See: Yeung, Jessie: ‘Hong Kong families are feuding as China extradition bill exposes generational fall in living standards’, CNN, July 10, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/09/asia/hong-kong-divide-intl-hnk/index.html> (accessed July 20, 2019).

¹⁴⁶ Chan, Lai Kuen 陳麗娟: ‘Jiulongcheng bu huaigu’ 九龍城不懷古 (No reminiscences to Kowloon City), in: Fan, Shanbiao 樊善標 et al. eds.: Dieyin – Manbu Xianggang Wenxue Dijing 疊印 – 漫步香港文學地景 (Palimpsest – Literary Landscapes from Strolling in Hong Kong), Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 2016, pp. 172-186, 182.

WANG Pu

Greek sandals

I once thought ‘Greek sandals’ was a spell. I didn’t expect that Greek sandals actually existed. But on that particular day, I spotted them in the shop window.

I happened to pass this shop by accident. I had wanted to take bus no. 98, which goes to Junk Bay. Maybe the bus stop had been moved or I had been waiting in the wrong place. In any case, only after I got on the bus did I discover that it was going in the wrong direction. The bus did not take Lai Chi Kok road, but crept up a hill. Then, with seemingly great pleasure, it turned down a winding road. Luckily, I had nothing pressing to do. So I sat quietly on the bus and looked out of the window at the route we were taking. After about twenty minutes, the bus unexpectedly plunged into a dark tunnel and made me hold my breath. It was a long, long tunnel, pointlessly long, so long that I wondered whether the bus would drive me to the other side of the globe. At the first stop after the tunnel, I hurriedly got off. That was where I discovered them: a pair of beautiful sandals! Next to them stood a conspicuous sign, which read: Greek sandals.

Now I have to state the time clearly, because very soon you will find out that time plays an important role in this story. The day I discovered the Greek sandals was a day in March this year. At that time, the words ‘Greek sandals’ had been continuously sounding in me for two or three years. I was often woken by them from my dreams at night. The words jumped up like a hidden pain in my heart, they emerged from the blur, like a sound whose colors and style are faded. So for a while I did not remember who they belonged to.

It was only at daybreak when I was almost dozing off after a night of panicked insomnia, that an image suddenly appeared. It did not slip in, but came dancing instead, unexpectedly, as if it were real. This man had struck my life like lightning and caused such enormous waves in it, and yet only a few images, sounds, and words had remained of him. ‘Greek sandals’ were two of these words.

There was only one young woman in the shop and she had a cold look on her face. She seemed to have a hard time putting on a smile. She answered my questions as follows: “These are a real Greek product which was imported

from Greece just a few days ago, and the price, which is 520 HK\$, just covers our own costs.”

“That’s too expensive!” I exclaimed, “That is the price of Italian shoes, and these are just sandals.”

“But madam, that shows you are not a specialist,” the assistant answered. “There are famous Italian shoe brands and famous Greek sandal brands. Sandals are not necessarily plain. Some of the most expensive pairs among Imelda Marcos’ collection of three thousand shoes were sandals, including some Greek sandals.”

“Sandals of this brand?”

“No, of course not! Otherwise they would cost a few thousand! Go to Landmark in Central and see for yourself. This brand is offered there for over 1000 HK\$. If that isn’t true, you will get back the 520 HK\$ from me.”

At this point, it was hard for me to say whether it was the eloquence of the young woman or the style of the sandals that convinced me. Before I bought this pair of sandals, I had in fact disapproved of those women who wore sandals. For me, a woman could be dressed ever so elegantly, but wearing sandals would ruin it all. Her status would drop rapidly. In an instant she would change from a lady into a bitch.

“But with Greek sandals it is different,” he had said during our first date in this small, out-of-the-way bar. A single woman was seated at the bar. She was as beautiful as an elf and made-up like a noble lady. But she wore sandals.

During this date, we talked a lot. We talked for the entire four hours. Then the following two days, I didn’t utter a single word. It seemed as though all the words had been used up that evening. At best there were a few left over words remaining, like those typical Chinese greetings “it’s hot today”, and “have you eaten already?”. After I had experienced such a magnificent feast of words, these phrases did not seem merely annoying but outright repulsive.

However, what surprised me the most was that when he had disappeared he had also made the words disappear. Everything became blurry and dim. I couldn’t even remember the name of the bar. Only those two words, which, if you heard them, would seem completely insignificant, came clearly to me

and lingered: “Greek sandals”. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Deep in the night, when silence had settled over everything, I was on my own, entangled with these two words. They were the secret between us that no other person in the world knew about. Everything resembled a scene after a flood had withdrawn. Even the whirlwind, which had turned my life completely upside down, was gone. Only these words had, for certain inexplicable reasons, remained behind on the beach.

I wore the sandals in the office for a whole day and nobody noticed them. Milan, who sits at the desk to my left, seemed to glance at them once, but then her eyes absent-mindedly wandered away as she began to tell me about her husband's awkward manner:

“It was brilliant last night. He probably didn’t expect me to have cracked the password of his email account. This has really broadened my horizon! The messages made me so sick!

No wonder he’s glued to the computer every night, and whenever I come in, he’s on his guard like I’m the worst enemy. Last night he had his computer on until just before two when he quietly slipped into bed. He probably thought that I was sleeping, and was surprised when he heard me quoting from his emails – ‘You are the light that shines in my dark night ...’ – Ha! He is so stupid, you should have seen his face ...”

Milan had this ability. She could tell stories about herself as if it they were somebody else’s, with great pleasure and delight. She really threw herself into her role and she watched others quite innocently as they acted. I would usually take pleasure in playing her devoted audience, but I don’t know what had got into me on that day. I interrupted her.

“Look, Milan, do you like my sandals?” I asked.

“Yes, beautiful, well ... I wonder how you can use such clichés today: you are the sky ...”

“Guess how much they cost.”

Milan glanced at my feet: “Fifty ... maybe a hundred? I wonder ...”

“One hundred! You’ve got eyes and still you don’t see mount Tai? Take a closer look, these are Greek sandals!”

My cry refocused Milan's attention on reality, and on me. This time, she fixed her eyes firmly on my feet:

“Greece, you mean the Greece of Mount Olympus? Are sandals a special product of the country? Well, they are a bit special. I like the purple. I hope the price was not something like 5,000 HK\$ though?”

“They’re not that extravagant,” I exclaimed. “They cost me one thousand ... five hundred.”

Milan raised her hands defensively and widened her eyes, adopting a look of astonishment. This expression caught the attention of Mike, who was sitting next to her. Mike was this woman’s nickname, an abbreviation of 'micro-phone'. I imagined that in less than half an hour everyone in the company would know I was wearing a pair of sandals which had cost 1,500 HK\$. Even the boss came out of his office and walked over to my seat.

“One really never stops learning,” he said, with an impertinent smile. “So far I had only heard that there are many gods in Greece, not that there are many sandals there too. Maybe even the goddess Mazu¹⁴⁷ wears such a pair of sandals?”

That's how he is. He constantly talks nonsense which he considers to be funny. Normally, of course, I would seize such an opportunity to chat with the boss. In this, I am not without talent. You exchange a few words and quite effortlessly let the fool puff up proudly. You make him feel as if he just cracked a great joke. But I don't know why, this time I could not even smile. Instead, anger welled up in me, and in order to silence him, I put on a straight face and remained silent myself. The boss left quickly, and disaster was imminent. I knew that if it came to layoffs, my name would be top of the list.

The first thing I did when I got home that night was to kick the sandals off my feet, as if I wanted to get rid of a curse.

I began to seriously think about the question of time: in which year had I seen him for the last time? Why was I still so heartbreakingly sad in the face of these events? As soon as I thought about it, everything appeared clearly in front of my inner eye:

All annotations are those of the translators.

¹⁴⁷ Mazu, also known by several other names and titles, is a Chinese sea goddess.

I tore these letters which were full of clichés into a thousand pieces. Deep in the night, I was alone and listened to the lost, bitter lamentations rising from within me. Repeatedly I opened the fridge to drink some water and stepped into the moonlit areas on the floor of the living room that resembled shrouds. Finally I started to cry. I didn't want anyone to hear me, but I was waiting for a miracle to happen: the familiar sound of the key in the lock and the turn of that key ... Heaven! Five years had passed, and I was still at the point of origin. I had not found a way down from the stage of this hoary old, emotive tragedy. This was indeed a terrifying nightmare. However hard I tried, I still could not take off the formal dress and ornaments of this character. Again and again the makeup returned to my face. Was I condemned to forever stick to my tragic role in this life?

Then it occurred to me: the Greek sandals were the main cause of my misfortune! Even though I did not see them anymore, I still could feel their presence. They resembled a hidden virus that could break out anytime. I picked them up from the corner and wrapped them first in a big paper sack and then in a plastic bag. I then tucked this bundle away at the very bottom of a storage compartment and piled a lot of things above it. Oh, but to no avail. Guess what I discerned when I went to the bathroom in the middle of the night? Shockingly, the sandals were there at the foot of the bed! They radiated the eerie light of a delirious dream.

Well, let me tell you what I did next. Yesterday, I took the day off and ordered a taxi to take me to Lantau Island. At the foot of a deserted mountain, I sent the taxi driver back. Then I climbed the mountain alone. I walked a long way before finding the right spot. It was a place where, as they say, birds would never build nests and ghosts would never set foot. At this spot I dug a very, very deep hole and buried the Greek sandals ... I guess, forever ...

June 2002, Mei Foo Sun Chuen

Translated by Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak

The text was first published in: *Xianggang Wenxue* 香港文學 (*Hong Kong Literature*), vol. 214, Oct. 2002, pp.12-13.

Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak
Wang Pu's 'The Greek Sandals' – a contextualizing essay

"I once thought 'Greek sandals' was a spell. I did not expect that Greek sandals actually existed. But on that particular day, I spotted them in the shop window."¹⁴⁸ This is how the short story by Wang Pu 王璞 begins.

In what follows we would like to place the story 'The Greek Sandals' and some of the themes and ideas it raises within the context of a number of other stories written by Wang Pu as part of her considerable oeuvre.

Wang Pu was born in 1950 in Hong Kong. She then lived in mainland China between 1951 and 1989 before returning to Hong Kong again. She studied comparative literature in Shanghai and in 2004 earned a PhD at the East China Normal University (华东师范大学). In 1980 she began writing literature. In 1988 she was assigned to an editorial office in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen. In 1989 Wang Pu settled in Hong Kong where she also was involved in editing work for several daily newspapers, including *Dongfang Ribao* 東方日報 (Oriental Daily) and *Sing Tao Daily* 星島日報. From 1993 to 2005 she taught at the Department of Chinese Language at Hong Kong's Lingnan University (嶺南大學). Wang Pu has written short stories and novels, as well as essays, and she is also a literary theorist. Today Wang Pu once again lives in mainland China.

Stories written by Wang Pu easily imprint themselves on one's memory. There is, for example, the protagonist of the short story "Giggle Bar"¹⁴⁹ who wants to free himself from the words of a line in a song. He is a shoe salesman who is always haunted by phrases that come to him as "uninvited guests". At one point in the story, for example, he is haunted by a line of Socialist verse: "the revolutionaries who stay forever young".

This phenomenon becomes a problem when he is supposed to sell Italian shoes to a customer. In order to get rid of the song line that circles in his head he has to shout it out loud in the bathroom: "It is the revolutionaries who stay

¹⁴⁸ Wang, Pu 王璞: 'Xila Tuoxie' 希臘拖鞋 (The Greek Sandals), in: Xianggang Wenxue 香港文學 (Hong Kong Literature), vol. 214, Oct. 2002, pp.12-13.

¹⁴⁹ Wang, Pu 王璞: 'Xixixi Jiuba' 嘻嘻嘻酒吧 (Giggle Bar), in: Xu, Zidong 許子東 ed.: Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 1998-1999 香港短篇小說選 1998-1999 (Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 1998-1999), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2001, pp.17-24.

forever young”. After that, he feels sick, like someone who has reacted to eating some bad food by vomiting.

His boss notices the man’s problem and takes him to the “Giggle Bar”. After three beers at the bar, they meet the boss’s psychiatrist. The psychiatrist diagnoses the shoe salesman to be suffering from an illness: the disease of not forgetting. What is it that the shoe seller cannot forget? The socialist past? A row of cruel campaigns in the People’s Republic of China? His involvement in these campaigns? And how does the psychiatrist intend to cure this disease? Not by looking into the shoe seller’s past. But by exposing the patient to a lot of fun. That night, the shoe salesman dreams of the psychiatrist and all the fun he has had in the bar. He wants to laugh. But no sound escapes him. What if all this cheerful experience has just been an illusion? Does Wang Pu hint here at Hong Kong’s image as a place of hedonism and as a ‘city of desire’ (yuwang de dushi 欲望的都市)?¹⁵⁰ The shoe seller’s sense of the city’s pleasures as being illusory suggests something that the writer Italo Calvino once wrote about how “cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears.”¹⁵¹

The female protagonist of another story by Wang Pu, with the English title of ‘The Fan Incident’, is also haunted by memory.¹⁵² During a voyage on a ship from mainland China to Hong Kong, she accidentally dropped a hand fan into the water and now continues to mourn the loss of the fan, maybe also the loss of a home country. In her life, there will always be “the fan incident” which makes her feel sad. The object symbolizes the loss of her life and the homelessness she is feeling in Hong Kong, which has remained for her a strange place. As much as she tries, the wound does not close.

We do remember, even if it hurts. Just as Wang Pu remembers her childhood in China, when she was taken by her parents to Inner Mongolia and to ‘Manchukuo’, the Japanese-occupied “puppet state”.¹⁵³ Wang Pu’s story ‘My

¹⁵⁰ The doyen of Hong Kong literature Liu Yichang (1918-2018) has described Hong Kong as a ‘City of Desire’. See: Liu, Yichang 劉以鬯: *Jiutu 酒徒 (The Alcoholic)*, Hong Kong: Haibin, 1963.

¹⁵¹ Calvino, Italo: *Invisible Cities*, London: Vintage, 1997 [1972], p.38.

¹⁵² Wang, Pu 王璞: ‘Shanzi shijian’ 扇子事件 (The fan incident), in: Liu, Yichang 劉以鬯 ed: *Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Bai Nian Jinghua 香港短篇小說百年精華 (Hong Kong short stories. The essence of 100 years)*, Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2006, pp.245-255.

¹⁵³ ‘Manchukuo’ 滿洲國 was a puppet state of the Empire of Japan in Northeast China and Inner Mongolia from 1932 until 1945. It was founded as a republic, but in 1934 it became a constitutional monarchy. It had limited international recognition.

Classmates from Koryo¹⁵⁴ describes a meeting between a young Chinese girl and some Korean teenagers who are discriminated against in the society of 'Manchukuo'. In the story, there is a performance at the school the children go to. In this performance, it is the Korean children who deserve the first prize for their dance. However, for political reasons, the prize is denied them. The Chinese girl tries again and again to make contact with the two Korean classmates who appear both strange and beautiful to her. But her attempts are in vain. The Koreans ignore her approaches. In the hierarchy of 'Manchukuo', as a Chinese person, she is placed beneath the Japanese but still ranks higher than the Koreans. This difference in status is even more pronounced because her father is a senior cadre from the capital Beijing and she herself is the teacher's darling. Then, one day, the truth comes to light: She is the child of a "Rightist", a declared dissident, who was banished to 'Manchukuo' during the 1958 Anti Rightists Campaign¹⁵⁵ for re-education through labour. The girl's Korean classmate, filled with hatred, screams these facts at the girl. After this incident, the girl becomes unhappy: "This year saw no spring, and probably no summer. Snow piled on snow."¹⁵⁶ The girl's mother asks her reproachfully why she never laughs.

We remember. And we are seduced by our memories, whatever the cost. Again it is the words, the names, that entice. In Wang Pu's story 'The Valley of the Red Plum Blossoms'¹⁵⁷ the protagonist associates the name of a place

¹⁵⁴ Wang, Pu 王璞: 'Wo de Gaoli tongxue' 我的高麗同學 (My Classmates from Koryo), in: Wang, Pu 王璞: Jianianhuahui 嘉年華會 (Carnival), Hong Kong: Tiandi, 2008, pp.93-104.

¹⁵⁵ As part of the effort to encourage the participation of intellectuals in the new regime, the Chinese Communist Party began an official effort to liberalize the political climate in mid-1956. Intellectual figures were encouraged to speak their minds on the state of CCP rule and programs. Mao Zedong personally took the lead in the movement, which was launched under the slogan "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let the hundred schools of thought contend." By mid-1957 the movement mounted, bringing criticism against the party. Embarrassed, leaders turned on the critics as "bourgeois rightists" and launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign.

¹⁵⁶ Wang, Pu 王璞: 'Wo de Gaoli tongxue' 我的高麗同學 (My Classmates from Koryo), in: Wang, Pu 王璞: Jianianhuahui 嘉年華會 (Carnival), Hong Kong: Tiandi, 2008, pp.93-104, 104.

¹⁵⁷ Wang, Pu 王璞: 'Hongmeigu' 紅梅谷 (The Valley of the Red Plum Blossoms), in: Xu, Zidong 許子東 ed.: Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 1994-1995 香港短篇小說選 1994-1995 (Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 1994-1995), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2000, pp.129-134.

in Hong Kong's New Territories with the song 'Village on the Red River'. The Red River flows in the south of mainland China, in the province with the romantic name of Yunnan or South of the Clouds. The protagonist in Wang Pu's story looks for a friend who is willing to go with him to visit the place in Hong Kong which has this mysterious, enticing name.

But in his search for a friend to accompany him on his sentimental journey, the protagonist comes close to losing almost all of his friends. One friend, who has done some research, warns him that "The valley of the red plum blossoms" stands for absolutely nothing – not a beautiful landscape, nor a special historical place. In the end, the story's protagonist defiantly sets off on the journey on his own. When travelling to the village, he meets only cold, indifferent people on the bus. Their tired, empty gazes seem to say: Even if you died on the spot, I would not care. So the protagonist does not get off the bus when he spots the sign for the village. He cuts short his journey into an idealized past.

"The valley of the red Plum blossoms is like a lover of days gone by," he tells us, and then he goes on to describe how he has now let go of this desire. "I do not even blink."¹⁵⁸

However, we do not just remember the past. We also repress memories. We bury that which has come between us and our neighbours, that which weighs on us like lead, that which can never be healed. Our guilt. One of Wang Pu's stories tells of the debts that a brother has amassed with his little sister.¹⁵⁹ The sister, who is frugal, lends him money again and again, but develops an inner grudge because he does not repay his debts in full. These are small sums, and yet ...

One day a dispute breaks out between the siblings. The little sister loses her temper and shouts at her brother, telling him that he owes her a total of "one Mao and seven". The brother is at first enraged, then cold. Her accounting makes him lose the ground beneath his feet. He cannot forgive her and never wants to see her again. Then many years later, the sister learns of his suicide. The story that her brother's friend tells awakens her buried memories. She

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p.134.

¹⁵⁹ Wang, Pu 王璞: 'Yi Mao qi' 一毛七 (One Mao and seven), in: Pan, Buzhao 潘步釗 ed.: Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 2006-2007 香港短篇小說選 2006-2007 (Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 2006-2007), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2013, pp.128-136.

remembers her brother's last words as he handed her a two-Mao note: "Keep the rest. As interest".¹⁶⁰

We look for closeness, but in vain, struggling against those memories that get in the way of our connections with others. Another of Wang Pu's stories describes a girl who falls in love with a man. This man's ex-girlfriend becomes their favourite "topic of conversation".¹⁶¹ Again and again in their conversations, the man recalls the suicide of his ex-girlfriend. Her white corpse lies on brightly reflecting train tracks. A red trace of blood runs down her breast. In the background there is the night that emanates sharp, dark rays. The death of the young woman is a mystery. But it still seems like she has a claim on the man in the present. The story's narrator says: "I was senselessly in love with *her* boyfriend"¹⁶² (our italics). Their courting is fake, an attempt to force a connection between them. Before he kisses her, the man stuffs a piece of chicken meat into her mouth. His second kiss already finds her lips numb. The smell of rotting grass makes her sick. Yet still this man asks: "Today we are happy, aren't we?"¹⁶³

Let us go back now to Wang Pu's 'The Greek Sandals'. The protagonist of this short story has taken bus No. 98, which is supposed to go to Hong Kong's Junk Bay. But the bus winds up a mountain road and through a tunnel. The protagonist cannot breathe. The journey seems endless. This recalls Friedrich Dürrenmatt's short story 'The Tunnel'¹⁶⁴ in which a passenger races through a tunnel and moves towards an abyss. The literary scholar Gelder, as well as the scholar of cultural geography Jacobs, have both described how even the most familiar places are surrounded with a web of unfamiliar ones. Even within familiar settings there lurks the possibility of an uncanny experience.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.136.

¹⁶¹ Wang, Pu 王璞: 'Huati' 話題 (Topic of Conversation), in: Xu, Zidong 許子東 ed.: *Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 1996-1997 香港短篇小說選 1996-1997* (Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 1996-1997), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2000, pp.86-94.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p.88.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.93.

¹⁶⁴ Dürrenmatt, Friedrich: 'The Tunnel', in: Dürrenmatt, Friedrich: *Selected writings*, vol. 2, fictions, trans. Agee, Joel, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006, pp.21-34.

¹⁶⁵ Gelder, Ken and Jacobs, Jane M.: *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998.

The narrator of 'The Greek Sandals' describes how she gets off at the first stop after the tunnel. In a shop she discovers a pair of beautiful Greek sandals. She tells us how she had never really liked sandals before. But then she had met a man who "struck her life like a bolt of lightning and caused wild waves in it". This man had praised the sandals on another beautiful woman. Here Wang Pu seems to be portraying the way in which we, as humans, always compare ourselves to others. Just as in her other short story 'Topic of Conversation' where the girl is forced to compete with the man's ex-girlfriend, the protagonist of 'The Greek Sandals' feels she must compete with others for the man's admiration.

The narrator describes how, when she met the man, they talked for hours. After this encounter, her supply of words seemed to have been used up so that she now only has greetings and small talk about the weather at her disposal. Wang Pu offers an intriguing conception of words and language which makes them, rather than being infinite in the way that is normally assumed, instead something finite, a resource that we might one day run out of – having no more words left to use. Opposite to the protagonist of 'Giggle Bar', who has the problem of having too many words disturbing him all the time, here the protagonist instead finds herself without words to use. For a writer, to have run out of language, must seem like a particularly worrying predicament.

As in many of her other stories, Wang Pu also touches on the nature of memory here. The protagonist in the story tells us about meeting with the man, but her memory is blurred. She no longer remembers the name of the bar where they both sat. She tells us that only two words stayed with her and in these words she is hopelessly entangled. They are "Greek sandals". The narrator suggests that these words are a secret between her and her lover.

However, when the woman wears the sandals at work they bring her bad luck. Her colleagues hardly notice her. The boss rushes by quickly. She knows, when it comes to the layoffs that will be made soon, she will be one of the first ones to be made redundant.

When she gets home that evening, she flings the sandals off her feet. She wants to get rid of a curse and feels the presence of the sandals like the presence of a disease. Might this in some ways echo the protagonist in the 'Giggle Bar', trying to get rid of the language that plagues him? She packs the sandals in a bag, then also in a box. But the sandals still create a hostile aura. She

takes the next day off. On that day she orders a taxi that drives her to a remote mountain area. From there she wanders many kilometres further into the wilderness. Then she digs a hole and buries the Greek sandals, very deep. As discussed above, we often seek to bury our memories of things in the past. We also bury feelings too, suppressing them somewhere deep in our sub-consciousness where they cannot get out to intrude on our lives. Might the protagonist of the story's burial of these 'Greek sandals' also perhaps symbolise her attempts to bury some feelings?

The *Handbook of Material Culture* describes how "the spiritual properties of cloth and clothing ... render these materials ideal media for connecting humans with the world of spirits and divinities, and with one another". In this way, perhaps different objects in our world can be enchanted.¹⁶⁶ The scholar of literature Eric Prieto has also pointed out that "human subjectivity and agency are embodied and, therefore, inextricably intertwined with the material environment from which the dualist tradition has tended to separate [them]".¹⁶⁷ Our feelings and emotions are tangled together with the objects of the world in a way which Wang Pu captures so effectively in her short story. The Greek sandals at the heart of the story function not just as a physical object or plot device, but also as an embodiment of so many things going on in the protagonist's mind – her memories, her desires, and her struggles are all expressed through the sandals.

Wang Pu tells stories about lifelong searches, about loss, abandonment and the countermeasures taken by protagonists to resist these things. The anthropologist Barbara Bender has argued for more examination of human subjectivity:

We need a more vivid understanding of how people on the move locate themselves. How do people come to terms with dislocation and relocation, with loss or re-entry? How do people who are left behind work a landscape of absence and change?¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Schneider, Jane: 'Cloth and Clothing', in: Tilley, Christopher et al. eds.: *Handbook of Material Culture*, London: Sage, 2006, pp.203-220, 204 and 205.

¹⁶⁷ Prieto, Eric: 'Geocriticism, Geopoetics, Geophilosophy, and Beyond', in: Tally Jr., Robert T. ed.: *Geocritical Explorations*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, pp.13-27, 18.

¹⁶⁸ Bender, Barbara: 'Place and Landscape', in: Tilley, Christopher et al. eds.: *Handbook of Material Culture*, London: Sage, 2006, pp.303-314, 308.

In classical Greek mythology, a pair of Greek sandals, also called ‘winged symbols’ or *talaria*, were made for Hermes, the messenger god and crosser of boundaries, by Hephaestus, the blacksmith of the gods. They were said to be made of imperishable gold and they allowed Hermes to fly as swiftly as any bird.¹⁶⁹

The expert of Greek classical literature Anne Carson once remarked in an essay that the gods of epics “are not consistently bigger, stronger, [and] smarter” than humans, but “they do have one escapade up their sleeve – immortality”¹⁷⁰.

The protagonist of this story buries sandals which did not allow her to fly but instead became an evil spell. We are in the end humans, not gods.

¹⁶⁹ Stookey, Lorena Laura: Thematic Guide to World Mythology, London et al.: Greenwood Press, 2004, p.130.

¹⁷⁰ Carson, Anne: ‘Variations on the right to remain silent’, in: A Public Space, no. 7, 2008, pp.175-187, 176.

Jessie CHU
Wonderland

Late in the night, around half two, I planned to sleep and turned out the lights, but they turned themselves on again. How strange, this thing has never happened before.

In the gloom I heard lots of people's voices. Where was the noise coming from? Maybe it was somebody arguing in one of the surrounding apartments. Then I heard the police knocking on my neighbour's door.

"Police, open the door."

Could it be that there'd been a domestic dispute next door, and somebody had reported it to the police? Suddenly I heard the policeman knocking again, this time on my door. The door made a 'bang bang' sound. A knock on the door late at night is an allurements. It has that indescribable excitement of knowing there is a strange person coming. The banging on the door repeated several times, until I really woke up. I hurried to put on a gown and slid out of bed, shouting:

"I'm coming, who's there?"

"Police, open the door."

I opened the door, then raised the door curtain, seeing a police officer in uniform with fresh white skin standing there. His two eyes, in the depths of the night, seemed especially supernatural, giving people an indescribably good feeling about him, making them forget that they had been awoken by him so late in the night. He looked at me and pulled something from his pocket, stretching his arm out to hold it in front of me. I found myself looking at it.

It was a photograph.

That was my first impression.

It was a Polaroid.

That was the second.

In the photo there was a woman lying on the ground. Underneath her body was a pool of blood.

That was my third impression.

A polaroid. When I was studying at Hong Kong PolyU, I used to devote my diverting afternoons now and again to an absorbed play with a Polaroid camera. I used to trace the contours of each object on the photo before the image emerged intending to intensify an overall effect. However, in determining the graphic positions I was reduced to guesswork. I like Polaroid cameras, because they take photos of me that look rather beautiful, beautiful because the image that emerges is rather hazy.

I looked at the hazy image in the policeman's hand, and without thinking leaned forwards to examine it more closely. It was a woman. Her blood in the dim polaroid was a deep scarlet.

"Have you ever met this woman?" The policeman asked.

As the policeman asked me the question, it felt as if I was still being awoken and my wandering spirit pulled back to me. I lifted my head and looked up at him. To my surprise he was smiling, probably because my transition from half-asleep drowsiness to an expression of surprise amused him. I shook my head.

"I haven't ... I haven't ever met her," I said. "I've definitely never met that woman."

As I said this, I couldn't help looking down at the photograph again. It looked as if a person was hanging on the edge of a precipice, unable to help repeatedly looking into the abyss which she dreaded. The policeman deliberately pulled the photo away, maybe because I had reacted to it with such a fearful expression. I couldn't help but question him more about it:

"Has something happened?"

"Somebody has jumped from the building here."

As he said this, he still had that same smiling expression on his face. That expression made the deepest impact on me.

Lying in bed, with the noise of the police walking outside the window, I thought of that policeman and how in the dim corridor his skin was still so white. What was he smiling at? Had my frightened appearance been cute? Or funny? Oh, yeah, there was also that woman. What did she look like? It seemed like the whole time I was talking with the policeman I hadn't seen her appearance clearly. She could be anyone, and so she was nobody. So why did I say I didn't know her? Was it because if I had known her, then I should definitely have been able to recognize her?

She jumped from the building and committed suicide. Here? The tallest buildings here are only seven floors up. Why would you choose here? When you want to jump from a building, do you do it immediately, or do you cross the water and go to the IFC¹⁷¹? Her face was still intact, seeming just like it was stuck in the middle of a pool of blood, waiting for something, not blown into smithereens like you'd imagine it might be after somebody had jumped from a building. Oh, that's probably one of the benefits of choosing to jump from a seven story building – it's sufficient to kill you, but your appearance isn't ruined. Had I missed her scream as she fell, far away in my dreams? Why did she jump from the building? Maybe she was beaten up by her husband at home and was so angry and upset that she jumped out to end her life. Which floor was she from? I really haven't ever seen her around.

Outside the window the police were still moving about.

"I've already been to the third floor, the fifth floor too, but we haven't found anything. On the third floor there was a man who appeared somewhat strange when he opened the door, but glancing into his hallway, I didn't see any blood."

A man who beat up his wife? How was she beaten? Her husband was maybe one of those men whose whole body stinks of a nasty smell. Or one of those cruel, silent, little men. How could I find out? Did she have any children? Was it the child who reported what had happened to the police? The child was probably hiding, curled up in the corner of the room, anxiously watching her parents fighting, not knowing what was best. Her father suddenly wrenches her mother around, and they start hitting each other, overturning a table full of new year's food, a bowl of food knocked over and spoiled. Then she saw that a red gash had opened up in her mum's knee. As a stream of blood came out of it, this wound grows larger, the whole knee covered with a blood red rose, a frightening red rose. While she is still staring, stunned, her mother suddenly screams at her.

"Go and call the police!"

All annotations are those of the translators.

¹⁷¹ Tower two of the International Finance Centre (IFC), located near to the waterfront, in Hong Kong's Central district is the second tallest building in Hong Kong at a height of 415m. It was the tallest building until the completion of the 484 metre tall International Commerce Centre (ICC) in 2010.

She stumbled and ran downstairs. Where could she find a telephone? The congee shop downstairs had a phone she could use. The sidewalk was full of new year flower pots, with many mandarin orange trees¹⁷², and the whole street was filled with people buying things for the new year. She squeezed between the people towards the door of the congee shop with the telephone. She ran into the shop, looking in all directions to search for the phone. Mummy's blood might have flowed out to fill the floor. Doesn't this place normally have a phone? Has daddy continued to fight with her? Oh, right, the phone is in that corner over there. She went over to it, taking up the receiver, her hand shaking as she pressed the number 9 button three times. Her breathing stopped. The person on the other end picked up:

“999 emergency reporting centre.”

With her voice trembling, she said:

“My dad got into a fight with my mum.”

Hearing her own quivering voice made her start to feel grief and she couldn't help crying as she continued. “My mum has been bleeding so much. Please come quickly to rescue her.”

Some of the customers in the congee shop looked over at her, but she didn't want to deal with the feeling of shame and just continued to tell the person her address. As she was pacing back and forth in front of her apartment building, she realized she hadn't even put on a coat. She trembled but didn't have the courage to go back upstairs. She waited there until the emergency car drove up ...

Downstairs, there wasn't any noise from an ambulance. What would an ambulance do – the person had already died. A person had died. A person had died downstairs. About how large a distance was there between me and that dead person? Why was it that I was crying? Something that happened many years before, why had I thought of it again now? Probably a few days ago, she was still a happy stranger – sitting at the head of her bed carefully sorting through her New Year ‘red envelopes’ to find which ones had ten dollar and which had hundred dollar notes inside.¹⁷³

¹⁷² During Chinese new year celebrations, people often put orange or tangerine trees in their hallways (the words for orange and tangerine sound like the words for luck and wealth). Often the trees are also hung with red pockets (lai see 利事).

¹⁷³ The author uses the Cantonese nicknames for the different notes, with the 100 dollar note being called ‘wen hong shan yu’ 蚊红衫鱼 or red-shirt fish, because the red

How could anyone have known that today she would choose to die? One leap, one collision, that's all that divides being alive and being dead. Her death is only linked to me by the polaroid – only because of that do I know she is dead. It's not like those thousands and thousands of deaths that you see on the television. She is below my building. If I wanted, I could go down there, even walk right up to her, that way she wouldn't just be a photo. Now she already isn't a photo. She's something I will remember forever. Even if I forget for a period of time, whenever I see a pale skinned man then it will at once appear before my eyes. My pity for her death is pity for my own weakness.

When somebody dies, it's such a frightening thing. I will dream of her night after night, but what I see in my dreams isn't her, only her death. With death, it isn't the material thing but the abstract which makes people afraid. I want to find somebody to accompany me. If he is there, I won't need to fear that abstract idea of death anymore. But I know that I cannot successfully escape it. When, in the depths of the night, I am awoken, he will be away in his dreams, our connection broken off, so that I will still be alone and frightened.

The next morning, I sat on the sofa with my knees pulled up against my chest and waited. After the financial news, they came to the news about that woman. They only said that there were knife wounds on her body and spoke about the place where she was found dead, then they moved on to report news about the reduction of taxes.

When I left the building to go to work, the corridor was full of a crowd of people. Downstairs there was a small green tent. I knew the appearance of the woman inside it. Actually, I didn't know her appearance. I knew she was dead. But still, I didn't know why she was dead.

Translated by Nicholas Olczak and Monika Gaenssbauer

The Chinese text titled 'Yijing' 異境 was first published in a magazine in 2011 and later re-published in: Li, Haihua 黎海華 ed.: *Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 2010-2012* 香港短篇小說選 2010-2012 (*Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 2010-2012*), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2015, pp.209-212.

and white notes resemble the appearance of this fish found in the East China Sea. 10 dollar notes are called 'wen ji' 蚊鸡, mosquito eggs.

Monika Gaenssbauer and Nicholas Olczak
Jessie Chu's 'Wonderland' – a close reading

Jessie Chu, or Chu Yim Hung 朱艷紅, graduated from the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong, in 2005. In 2010, she earned a second degree from the Department of Chinese Language at Hong Kong's Lingnan University. She has worked in various media organizations, including animation firms, TV stations, and magazine publishers. Chu started writing in middle school. Her works have been published in the Hong Kong newspaper *Ming Pao* 明報, the Taiwanese *Chengshizhi* 城市誌 (Cityzine), *Xianggang Zhongxuesheng Wenyi Yuekan* 香港中學生文藝月刊 (*Hong Kong Middle School Pupils Literary Monthly*), as well as other publications.

The title of her short story 'Yijing' 異境 reminded us of Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's strange, dream-like 1995 novel *Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārando* 世界の終りとハードボイルド・ワンダーランド (*Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*). The title of the novel in Chinese translation was *Shijie Mori Yu Lengku Yijing* 世界末日與冷酷異境. In a way similar to that in the Murakami novel, the protagonist of 'Yijing' seems to be in a transient realm, somewhere between dream and reality.¹⁷⁴

The scholar of comparative literature Andreas Huyssen has described how metropolitan miniatures "offer protocols of dreams ..., oneiric effects linked to a cinematic imaginary, inner visions triggered by threatening urban perceptions."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ The translation of the Chinese title 'Yijing' 異境 as 'Wonderland' is only one possible translation. When reading an earlier draft of our manuscript Isabel Friemann drew our attention to the fact that the title of the story is a homophone of the Chinese classic *Yijing*, 易經, the *Book of Changes*, and the title may be making a reference to this as well. Other possible translations of the title would then be 'A Strange State of Mind' or 'A Strange Land'. In an email message to the translators, Isabel Friemann writes: "An oscillation between the perception of 'there and then' with 'here and now' is a typical effect of trauma. Situations that are seemingly interconnected with each other suddenly merge and lead to a re-experiencing of scenes from the past. Other scenes appear dissociated from everyday life and cannot be experienced as a unity of subject, space and time."

¹⁷⁵ Huyssen, Andreas: 'Introduction', in: Huyssen, Andreas: *Miniature Metropolis. Literature in an Age of Photography and Film*, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015, pp.1-22, 6.

‘Yijing’ is a piece of crime fiction. In China, a kind of crime fiction, or aesthetically-based descriptions of crime, was produced as early as the Wei and Jin dynasties (between 300 and 600 AD). This was the genre of *zhiguai xiaoshuo* 志怪小说 (classical tales about the strange and supernatural). Since then, fictional descriptions of crime and justice have appeared in various literary forms in Chinese literature.¹⁷⁶ The sinologist and historian Jeffrey C. Kinkley has pointed out that ghosts and anomalies even appear in modern Chinese detective stories.¹⁷⁷ Influences from this tradition of tales about the supernatural can also be found in Chu’s short story. The narrator suggests supernatural forces when describing how, “Late in the night, around half two, I planned to sleep and turned out the lights, but they turned themselves on again”. Then later, she offers a ghostly image, saying: “I opened the door ... seeing a military police officer with fresh white skin standing there. His two eyes, in the depths of the night, seemed especially supernatural ...”

Hong Kong’s cultural products are full of supernatural elements, from the abundant ghost movies, often “infused with kung fu and comedy”, to the “reincarnation stories in Cantonese opera.”¹⁷⁸ There are also many “tales of glamorous phantoms” in popular culture and folklore of Hong Kong.

Another aspect of folk tradition and popular belief, the idea of the ‘calling back of the soul’, also appears in the story. The narrator says: “As the policeman asked me the question, it felt as if I was still being awoken and my wandering soul pulled back to me.” This ‘calling back of a soul’ is a shamanistic practice that was described in ancient Chinese texts and still plays a part in traditional beliefs today. Among many people in southwestern China, for example, “it is widely believed that when a person is sick, his or her soul is wandering. A shaman is often summoned to call the soul back to the stricken person’s body.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ See: Storm, Carsten: ‘Kriminalität und Recht in der Literatur’, in: Storm, Carsten: Von Tätern und Opfern: Rechtsmentalität in chinesischen Kriminalerzählungen zwischen 1600 und 1900, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004, pp.9-41, 13.

¹⁷⁷ See: Kinkley, Jeffrey C.: Chinese Justice, the Fiction. Law and Literature in Modern China, p.114 and 115.

¹⁷⁸ See: <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201210/30/P201210300398.htm> (accessed August 18, 2019). In 2012, Hong Kong’s Lingnan University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong held a "Ghost Cultural Festival" symposium.

¹⁷⁹ See: Mair, Victor H. and Bender, Mark: ‘Folk Ritual’, in: Mair, Victor H. and Bender, Mark eds.: The Columbia Anthology of Chinese Folk & Popular Literature, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2011, pp.179-278, 190.

The short story 'Yijing' also displays the close connections between fiction and cinema. Scholars such as Louise Nilsson have pointed to the links between the two, saying that crime fiction "has a long history of entertaining readers as well as moviegoers."¹⁸⁰ The expert in English and Russian literature Barbara Wyllie has also pointed out the relevance of cinema to the fictional exploration of contemporary experience.¹⁸¹ The author of 'Yijing', Jessie Chu, has worked in various media organizations including animation companies and TV stations. Perhaps as a result of this, the story is clearly marked by cinematic description. It employs cinematic effects such as slow motion (in the description of the development of the polaroid photo), flashback (describing the protagonist's memories), as well as the use of dark, shadowy effects which are typical of the visuals in the film noir genre (when describing the photo of the dead victim for example).¹⁸²

Huyssen has argued that all of the writers of metropolitan miniatures that he has studied "share the obsession with sensual experience, including sound and tactility besides vision". These writers seek to capture "the feeling[s] of terror and/or exhilaration emanating from space; the loss of boundaries between private and public space."¹⁸³ These qualities are certainly true of the short story 'Yijing'.

The experts on justice Cavender and Jurik have argued that the presence of so many female authors and protagonists within the crime genre is one factor that can explain this genre's popularity.¹⁸⁴ Scholars have argued that there

¹⁸⁰ Nilsson, Louise et al.: 'Introduction: Crime Fiction as World Literature', in: Nilsson, Louise et al. eds.: *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, pp.1-12, 1.

¹⁸¹ Wyllie, Barbara: 'Shimmers on a Screen: Cinematic Hyperreality in Recent American Fiction and Film', in: Wyllie, Barbara: *Nabokov at the Movies. Film Perspectives in Fiction*, London et al.: McFarland & Company, 2003, pp.250-260, 251. See also: Stam, Robert: 'Sibling Disciplines: Literary Studies and Cinema Studies', in: Stam, Robert: *World Literature, Transnational Cinema, and Global Media*, New York et al.: Routledge, 2019, pp.58-63.

¹⁸² See: Wyllie, Barbara: 'Shimmers on a Screen: Cinematic Hyperreality in Recent American Fiction and Film', in: Wyllie, Barbara: *Nabokov at the Movies. Film Perspectives in Fiction*, London et al.: McFarland & Company, 2003, pp.250-260, 254.

¹⁸³ Huyssen, Andreas: 'Introduction', in: Huyssen, Andreas: *Miniature Metropolis. Literature in an Age of Photography and Film*, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015, pp.1-22, 6.

¹⁸⁴ Cavender, Gray and Jurik, Nancy: 'Appeal of the Crime Genre', in: *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2019, <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com> (accessed August 18, 2019).

is such a high number of female authors and characters in the crime genre that a subgenre has emerged. There is a ‘feminist crime genre’¹⁸⁵ with fictional works that frequently reveal “oppressive social structures ... that are reproduced in and by the criminal justice system.”¹⁸⁶ Chu’s story might well be included as a part of this subgenre.

The story in ‘Yijing’ is set in Hong Kong. What is the sense of place here? The story is characterized by different kinds of moments – moments of encounter, moments of fear, moments of irritation, of memory, and of loneliness. Most provoking, both for the protagonist and also for the reader, is the strange smile on the face of the policeman who comes to the narrator’s door to investigate the suicide or murder. The narrator describes how:

As the policeman asked me the question ... I lifted my head and looked up at him. To my surprise he was smiling, probably because my transition from half-asleep drowsiness to an expression of surprise amused him ... I couldn’t help but question him more about it:

‘Has something happened?’

‘Somebody has jumped from the building here.’

As he said this, he still had that same smiling expression on his face.

That expression made the deepest impact on me.

One possible interpretation for the policeman’s strange smile might come to mind when reading the story for the first time. Prior to Hong Kong’s handover to China in 1997, filmmakers in colonial Hong Kong had a practice of “shooting below the radar [of the authorities] via use of ‘stolen’ locations”. This mode of production has often been described by filmmakers as part of a distinctly Hong Kong cinematic aesthetic.¹⁸⁷ The shooting process proceeded as follows. First, a place was ‘scouted’. Then the film-makers planned how to “break into” this particular space. Finally they attempted “to execute the job itself with stealth and aplomb, aiming to get in and out as soon as possible”.¹⁸⁸ Julian Stringer, an expert in contemporary Asian film, has described

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Cavender, Gray and Jurik, Nancy: *Justice Provocateur: Jane Tennison and Policing in Prime Suspect*, Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2012, p.4.

¹⁸⁷ Stringer, Julian: ‘Location Filmmaking and the Hong Kong Crime Film’, in: Yau, Esther C.M. and Williams, Tony eds.: *Hong Kong Neo-Noir*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2017, pp.159-177, 163.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p.169.

how “in Hong Kong thrillers produced around 1997, the lines separating police from villain are very often blurred”.¹⁸⁹ A reader aware of this way of making films in Hong Kong might initially ask themselves: Could it perhaps be that the protagonist is involuntarily involved in a movie shoot?

However, later in the story the reader is told about the news broadcast which mentions the dead woman, and when the protagonist leaves her apartment at the end of the story, she sees a green tent downstairs. These things somewhat counter this ‘movie shoot’ theory as an explanation of the policeman’s smile.

There is also the section where we are told of about one of the protagonist’s memories, a memory which seems to suggest that she once encountered a similar situation of domestic violence and death.¹⁹⁰ This memory seems to be a record of something traumatic that has happened to her. Bessel van der Kolk describes how “traumatic experiences do leave traces ... on our minds and emotions.”¹⁹¹

In the light of this memory, the policeman’s strange smile assumes a slightly threatening, or perhaps even a sarcastic, dimension. The philosopher Edward Casey has argued that violence and crime are part of the introduction “of ‘wild being’ into the body/place matrix”. When we are witness to violence or crime, we feel this as something ‘wild’ making an appearance in the civi-

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p.172.

¹⁹⁰ In 2016 an article published in Hong Kong stated that the 3,000 to 4,000 cases reported annually in recent years represented only 2 per cent of domestic abuse cases occurring in Hong Kong: “These figures are just the tip of the iceberg.” See: Lau, Jessie, and Blundy, Rachel: ‘Is Hong Kong losing the fight against domestic violence?’, in: South China Morning Post, Nov. 26, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/2049285/hong-kong-losing-battle-against-domestic-violence> (accessed August 19, 2019).

Summers and Hoffman reported in 2002 that in the United States every day four women are murdered by a male partner. It was only as recently as the 1970s in the United States that the justice system began to view the problem seriously and consider domestic violence as a crime. See: Summers, Randal W. and Hoffman, Allan M.: ‘Introduction’, in: Summers, Randal W. and Hoffman, Allan M. eds.: *Domestic Violence. A Global View*, Westport: Greenwood, 2002, pp.xi-xvi, xi and xiii.

¹⁹¹ He describes the situation for the US as follows: “One in three couples engages in physical violence ... and one out of eight witnessed their mother being beaten.” See: van der Kolk, Bessel: *The Body Keeps the Score. Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, New York: Penguin, 2014, p.1.

lized world. This is because, in Casey's words, "even the most culturally saturated place retains a factor of wildness, that is, of the radically ... unaccounted for ... We sense this wildness explicitly in moments of absurdity."¹⁹²

Alongside the policeman's strange smile, there are many other mysteries in this atmospheric and elusive short story. Whilst seeming to be a simple tale of how a young woman is woken in the night, the story continually hints at so much more, so many other things in this woman's past, as well as in that of the woman in the Polaroid which is shown to her. Who is this other woman and what has happened to her? What happened to the story's protagonist? And why is the policeman smiling in such a strange way?

The story 'Yijing' is open-ended.¹⁹³ The riddle remains for the reader to solve.

¹⁹² Casey, Edward S.: 'How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time', in: Casey, Edward S.: *Getting Back Into Place. Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2009, pp.317-348, 337.

¹⁹³ In the introduction to the short story collection that contains 'Yijing' Li Haihua only formulates a few interrogative sentences regarding the story. The story is introduced under the sub-heading: 'Mosheng de yijing' 陌生的異境 (A strange wonderland). See: Li, Haihua 黎海華: 'Xu' 序 (Introduction), in: Li, Haihua 黎海華 ed.: *Xianggang Duanpian Xiaoshuo Xuan 2010-2012 香港短篇小說選 2010-2012* (Collection of Hong Kong Short Stories 2010-2012), Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2015, pp.i-xiv, viii.

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Begründet 1994 von Helmut Martin (†).

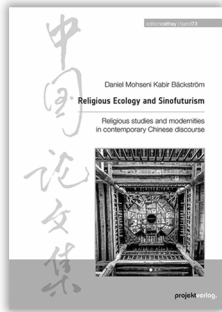
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Religious Ecology and Sinofuturism
Religious studies and modernities in
contemporary Chinese discourse
edition cathay, band 73
2019; 105 Seiten
ISSN 0946-2325
ISBN 978-3-89733-502-8

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ISBN 978-3-89733-506-6



9 783897 335066

ISSN 0946-2325

ISBN 978-3-89733-506-6 (printed version)

ISBN 978-3-89733-587-5 (E-Book)

EUR [D] 13,50