

West Coast
WEST • COAST • LINE



Transporting the Emporium
HONG KONG ART & WRITING THROUGH
THE ENDS OF TIME

A JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY
WRITING AND CRITICISM

West Coast

WEST • COAST • LINE

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The Object of Leung Ping-Kwan's Poetry: An Interview by Fred Wah

Wah: Do you write in Chinese?

Leung: Yes, I've always written in Chinese. I've only just begun trying to write in English recently, hoping to address a broader audience and to find new means and venues to express myself. Writing in English, I see the difference and I feel a lot more comfortable with Chinese. On the one hand, Chinese is my language. I started using it early in life so I feel very comfortable with it. With Chinese I can take many risks because I know the language so well and I'm not afraid of making mistakes. On the other hand, because I've grown up in a colony, English represents something different. For a long time I resisted speaking or writing in English, because psychologically . . .

Wah: A sense of colonization?

Leung: Yes. I refused to speak or write in English for much of my past even though I studied foreign literature. I chose to do this because in our society, English represented a certain status. Everybody wanted to go into the English department so that after they graduated they could get a better job with the government. English speakers came to represent an elite class in society that would look down upon people who could not speak the language. I resisted that attitude by not using English.

Wah: Was this primarily a class thing then?

Leung: Sort of. Eventually, speaking English did become a class thing but I think its role in Hong Kong was determined by the educational and social organization within the colony. For a lot of university students, if you studied Chinese language and literature you wouldn't get as good a job as you would if you had graduated

from the English department. As well, Hong Kong is a commercial society, so you need English. At an early age, English represented for me either a commercial language or an official language, because that's what you needed to fill out all sorts of forms. Subsequently it represented the attitude of a higher class of people who occupied certain privileged positions. However, by reading creative works—including underground writings—I was able to see other usages of English.

Wah: But hasn't the language of commerce infiltrated Chinese as well?

Leung: That's true. From the mainland perspective, the language used in Hong Kong is not pure Chinese; it is contaminated with commercialism. But, writing creatively in Chinese is a resistance to it; and the use of more colloquial Chinese is a type of resistance against the more formal uses of Chinese in mainland China.

Wah: The criticism I heard in mainland China was not so much that Hong Kong Chinese was filled with commercial discourse but that it was archaic.

Leung: I can understand that too. Do you know why? Because after '49, and especially during the cultural revolution (1966-76), Chinese classics were criticized on the mainland but continued to be studied in Hong Kong. Historically speaking, since the period after the May Fourth Movement (1919), and in response to the New Literature Movement (1917), and so on, there has been a lot of criticism of classical literature.

Wah: The switch to the vernacular?

Leung: Yes, at that point the criticism of the classics was from a cultural perspective and there was a demand for new literature to reach out to the general public. But after 1949, and especially during the cultural revolution, literary criticism became linked with the desire for particular political ends. For example, the criticism of the Chou dynasty was actually aimed at Chou En Lai. Therefore, critics used cultural critiques of classical literary texts as a means to attack

rival political figures. In fact the contemporary criticism of Confucianism was a criticism of more traditional, conservative, political forces. So the whole attack on the classics was not actually conducted in an academic or scholarly way, but rather as a political campaign. From '49 until the beginning of the 80s, the classics were not really accessible to mainland people. Ironically, Hong Kong and Taiwan were the only places that could continue the study of classical Chinese culture.

Wah: I see. So there would be a greater influence of classical Chinese on Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Leung: Yes, in spite of the misconception that Hong Kong is a cultural desert. That's why it's so difficult to understand Hong Kong. I can understand perfectly the criticism coming from the mainland perspective because our cultural formations and literary production have been so different.

Wah: So their view of your poetry, although I don't know if they've even read it, would be that it is not very "modern?"

Leung: Not exactly in my case. The overall trend in Hong Kong has been that we have had more opportunity to be in contact with classical Chinese literature. At the same time, on the mainland, the use of the Chinese language has, in a very strange way, been influenced by, for example, the literal and stiff translation of Marxist texts. In my poetry, however, I dialogue with classical Chinese culture but I also escape from the limits of an archaic sense of culture by focusing on modern subjects.

Wah: But there's a very curious phenomenon going on in mainland China right now. This return to the classical in the 80s, the third generation (post-misty, post-1980) returning to not so much the classical literature, they do that too, but to the notion of the purity of the originary characters and the demand by all these young poets that, if you're going to be a poet, you have to be steeped in the basis of the Chinese language.

Leung: That, exactly, is a reaction to the earlier generation who threw away the classics. But in my personal development, I've tried different kinds of things. I have written a series of poems which are contemporary responses to classical Chinese literature and language. One of the things I'm working on now is a series of poems called, "Museum Pieces," which came out of an installation art project. From a contemporary position, I want to create dialogues with old artifacts which represent classical Chinese culture. During the 80s I wrote a book of poems entitled, "Lotus Leaves," in which the language is very condensed and complicated. That text is a kind of modern Chinese version of the classical "thing" poetry ("yongwu shi")—poems about objects. When I first started writing, I reacted against the general trend in Taiwan and Hong Kong which, for some, had become a rather slavish adherence to classical embellishment and beauty. So when I first wrote I became known for the use of conversational language because I wanted to get rid of those classical influences. I was reacting against the general mentality at the time which was not really to understand classical culture, but rather, to use it as a kind of decoration.

Wah: Do you know Yu Jian's poetry? He's another one who wants to write "thing" poetry and at the same time believes his responsibility to the Chinese written character is very important.

Leung: Yes, I met him in Belgium and we exchanged books of poetry. I feel a certain affinity to him. As a young poet emerging in the 90s, he seemed to be different from earlier poets like Yang Lian or Bei Dao. Although I started earlier (in the 70s) and in Hong Kong, I feel closer to the younger generation writing in the 80s and 90s in mainland China and in Taiwan. Now when people talk about contemporary Chinese poetry, we should take examples from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the mainland and look at examples from different periods. What has been done in Hong Kong in the 70s, Taiwan in the 80s, and the mainland in the 90s, are particular moments of particular cultural contexts or crisis which induce poets to use language to respond to certain things in certain ways. I do see a lot of affinity there but nobody has actually looked at these affinities and differences. In order to understand the richness of contemporary

Chinese poetry we should look at these different moments and different efforts from different communities.

Wah: But the mainland writers seem to have been very resistant to including Hong Kong and Taiwan in their own reckoning.

Leung: I've noticed their exclusion of us in their anthologies and discussions.

Wah: However, Yu Jian was telling me that he was very proud to have entered a poetry contest in Taiwan and won, but he doesn't particularly care for the poets in Taiwan.

Leung: What a pity!

Wah: Do you think, in Hong Kong, that your identity is such a floating signifier; you don't know what's about to happen.

Leung: That, in a way, creates anxiety, but it also makes one more fluid, more flexible in accepting others.

Wah: It is kind of curious, isn't it, that Hong Kong, being a small enclave, an island, hasn't developed a strong sense of a cultural community, as opposed to other "island" communities.

Leung: In recent years, because of the '97 issue, there seems to have developed a stronger sense of identity. But for many years, I guess because Hong Kong is such a site of migration (primarily mainland Chinese coming and then going back, or just stopping briefly on their way through) that before 1970 there wasn't really a writing community.

Wah: What happened in 1970?

Leung: The late 60s was a period of dramatic change for Hong Kong. The cultural Revolution began in China. Various ideas and cultural movements from the West were also introduced. Both these forces had a tremendous impact on Hong Kong culture, creating a transformation period in its development. Hong Kong's cultural

identity took on many affinities but also distinguished itself from both China and the West. What happened in 1967 was important. There were riots because the Star Ferry wanted to raise the fare five cents and the protests became symbolic of the general discontent of the people. There was a great gap between the few very wealthy and the multitudes of poor.

Wah: Was this class consciousness influenced by what was going on in mainland China?

Leung: Yes, in a certain manner. But it started off in the most spontaneous way—local student dissatisfaction, a strike at a factory, and so forth—these things came together in a spontaneous protest against the living conditions in Hong Kong. So the leftists in Hong Kong, very much aware of what was going on in mainland China, wanted to use the occasion to overthrow the Hong Kong government. So it turned into organized violence conducted by the leftists in Hong Kong.

Wah: Was it anti-Western?

Leung: It was mostly anti-British. Now, the general public had mixed feelings. On the one hand they were not satisfied with their lives and on the other hand they didn't identify with what was going on in mainland China at that point. They were less idealistic than French intellectuals like Sartre, who looked at Chinese communism as a utopian thing. Many Hong Kong people, however, didn't really identify with Hong Kong leftists or with mainland practices. When the leftists murdered an outspoken radio DJ a lot of people in Hong Kong were turned against extreme leftist ideology and practices. Subsequently, one of the effects of the riots was that during the 70s, in response to this rejection of British colonialism and Chinese communism, the Hong Kong government suddenly tried to do a lot of things—improve living conditions, create better access to education, social welfare, housing and so forth. An awareness of Hong Kong as different from the mainland and different from Britain emerged from this political context. In cinema and literature we can look at the 70s as a kind of formation period. So maybe the contem-

porary identity of Hong Kong, though we can't say this too clearly, was formed after 1967.

Wah: Was there a "cultural community" arising out of the 70s?

Leung: We could say so. People born in Hong Kong after '49 were grown up and started doing things, writing, doing radio or TV documentary, forming bands and writing popular songs. Prior to that, literature was primarily nostalgic memories of the mainland denigrating the present in comparison to the past. So it was our generation of the 70s that was the first to write about this city, its own formation and development.

W: Let's step back a bit to your own situation, paradoxically caught in your resistance to English and to the purity of Chinese. How has this resistance, embedded now in your own poetics, actualized itself in your work?

Leung: Well, we're talking about these things from a 1996 perspective, but at that time, in my struggles, I was not as clear as I am now. In recent years I've become more interested to discern my own positions in relation to Hong Kong and consequently I've started to write more criticism. I'm not representative, perhaps, but I want to articulate a situation about which not that many people are aware.

When I started in the late sixties, I didn't know how to write about the city. As a young kid I liked to walk around the streets. I'm not a football player or anything like that so I read a lot. My parents came from the mainland and brought with them a respect for new literature, so I read a lot of modern Chinese literature and foreign literature in translation—but I had not read anything about Hong Kong. Even when I studied Chinese texts in elementary and secondary school, they were always about Nanjing and Beijing, other places. I was not satisfied with that. Even today we rarely use texts written about Hong Kong. It was always these other places that were more important. So when I started writing I wanted to write about my situation and it was those discrepancies and differences which became the problems I was faced with. One of the solutions to my dilemma was through translation. I had studied foreign literature but what was taught was the early literature, the Victorians or the

Romantic poets. I wasn't satisfied with that. As well, I wanted something more interesting so I went to the library to read other things. For example, at Star Ferries, they have a newspaper stall where they sometimes get foreign magazines and sometimes there were these underground American magazines circulating: *Village Voice*, *Evergreen Review*, *Avant Garde*. It was a good discovery for me in the late 60s. And I found some small books of poems published by *City Lights*: Philip Lamantia, Allen Ginsberg, etc. I guess I was the only one at that time that was interested in those things. And as a kind of training, I translated some of those poems. Later, Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, and so on.

Actually, I edited some translations of this poetry and it was published in Taiwan in 1971. So I started as a poet as well as a translator. And when I introduced my translations, I would use the occasion to announce a manifesto of some sort, to argue for a new poetics. Through these translations I was able to promote conversational language, daily language and subject matters. I was able to say, "now you see there are people who write about everyday things and not about Eternity" and so on. So I started off by seeing solutions from other cultures, and that helped me, in a way, critique my own cultural community. I was able to import secretly something new from the "outside" to justify my experiments. I don't think there were other people reading books and magazines like that on the mainland or in Taiwan at that time. But I did publish some of my translations because they were more lenient on checking translations, especially since it was poetry. So the underground writing I was interested in at an early age seemed to open up new possibilities, a less arty kind of expression.

I was more interested in common people and daily objects, the kinds of things a person growing up in the city could relate to, rather than high-sounding hollow and flowery language. I think I was the only one who subscribed to *Evergreen Review*. It was crazy. I even subscribed to *The Village Voice*. So of course I was then criticized as being too Westernized.

Wah: I experienced a very parallel situation. In Vancouver, in the early 60s, we also felt we were ignored by the centre, Toronto, New York. Our magazine, *Tish*, in fact, started partly because of a comment by someone down east that their alignment was more north-

south, to New York. Well we thought, screw you, that's how we feel too. We're more interested in what's going on in San Francisco. So we've had very similar experiences. *City Lights*, *New American Poetry* 1945-60, *Evergreen Review*.

Leung: But I was really lonely at the time. I was the only one. But since I did a lot of translation there were more people who were interested in that eventually.

...

Wah: But let's get back to the present situation, to these waters of economics that are really at the base of these movements.

Leung: Well, those strategies that I've talked about were actually about my poems in the 70s, early 80s, after that I did other things. As to the present situation, I should point to my poems in this collection (*City at the End of Time*, trans. by Gordon Osing) from the early 80s which has a section called "Images of Hong Kong." And from the late 80s I have another series of poems about Hong Kong, again, but this time I was more aware of the visual representation. There were more and more books of pictures about Hong Kong, all kinds of representations of Hong Kong.

Of course, one of the forms in which Hong Kong is represented is the world of commerce, doing business. Living in Hong Kong, writing about Hong Kong, it is easy to fall into that kind of trap. On the one hand, you can avoid that kind of world (the world of objects, commercial objects), not write about it and think that Hong Kong is a very cultural place. I don't want to take that procedure. I want to acknowledge the world of objects and commerce and to face it. But on the other hand, there could be another trap, that is you can easily glorify it: we are doing business, we are doing it very well, we can conquer China. That would be another deception I don't want to fall into.

In my latest poems I am trying to address what I was talking about earlier, these object poems. In the classical Chinese mode, it is usually about bamboo or about flowers as representative of characteristics of a person, virtue, morality, and so on. I stole from that kind of poetry and tried to make some use of it for myself in the

present situation. We are living in this world of commodities, things. How are we going to deal with that? So, to answer you, I try to make use of this formal poetry, this poetry about objects, to respond to the present situation. But in the use of language I am also looking for different ways. I do not have one method for solving these problems but I'm aware of the world I live in. My poems are not actually representing things but addressing contemporary issues, and in the process I am conscious of my language and trying to do something about it.

Wah: One of the terms, at least in the West, that already seems to have descended on Hong Kong is the word "organization." How would such a thinking impact on your writing? I mean you're going to be "organized" (by something else, yet again)?

Leung: I'm trying to resist the overall schematic sense of things. When we talk about the grand narratives of the British, of the mainland Chinese, of the business men, there are so many kinds of stereotypical idioms for Hong Kong, schemes for Hong Kong, so it's very easy when you are using language to be tempted to let those narratives organize your own poem. Also there's the language of advertising; when I write about objects I could very well use the sweet language of advertising to write about objects, which could make very cute object poems for sale. I don't want to be organized by that kind of principle.

Wah: One of the big organizers, of course, is the discourse of the nation. How is that coming up in your writing?

Leung: OK. This comes to the second thing I want to tell you. The first one is about business, the world of commerce. Then the second thing is nationalism, the nation. Political celebration is not unlike advertising. They use the same language. At this moment my series of poems about the museum pieces is my answer to that type of nationalism.

Wah: That is, to go back?

Leung: No, it's not that simple. I started that series of poems, the museum pieces, at the end of 1995. At that particular moment, even now, nationalism is a very paradoxical thing in Hong Kong. In 1995, when I started writing that series of poems, there were long lines of people queuing up to get their British passports. So there was this general feeling of not-wanting-to-be-Chinese, of wanting to be a British subject. But at the same time, in the field of popular culture, in television, there was a revival of interest in Chinese culture. There are many classical Chinese stories being turned into various popular TV series—like "The Story of the Three Kingdoms." Even Confucius' life was made into a popular TV drama! Suddenly, symbols of Chinese nationalism are popular, the in-thing in Hong Kong. And in the discussion of political issues in the newspaper, we sense a lot of national sentiments again. Now that is really paradoxical. The same group of people trying to get their British passports are uncritically accepting a Chinese nationalism. So currently there are people emigrating while at the same time saying that no matter what, we are Chinese, we are one family, we have to stick together. Nationalism is coming back as a form of solution to all kinds of social problems. There are more and more people talking about going back to classical Chinese culture as if you will find, underneath Hong Kong identity, pure and original Chinese national characteristics. I don't believe in that; there are problems with that kind of thinking. So my museum pieces are actually a series of dialogues with classical Chinese cultural objects as a kind of re-examination of Chinese culture through these artifacts from various dynasties.

Wah: So your "Museum" series is problematizing the so-called "purity" of the origins of Chinese culture?

Leung: Yes. And I would like to see Chinese culture as more complicated and diversified. Whenever people talk about Chinese culture and nationalism, they tend to simplify everything. They want everybody to try to stick together and resist the outside. So these pieces try to problematize such ideas, looking at cultures as interacting, evolving, and always having to face new challenges.

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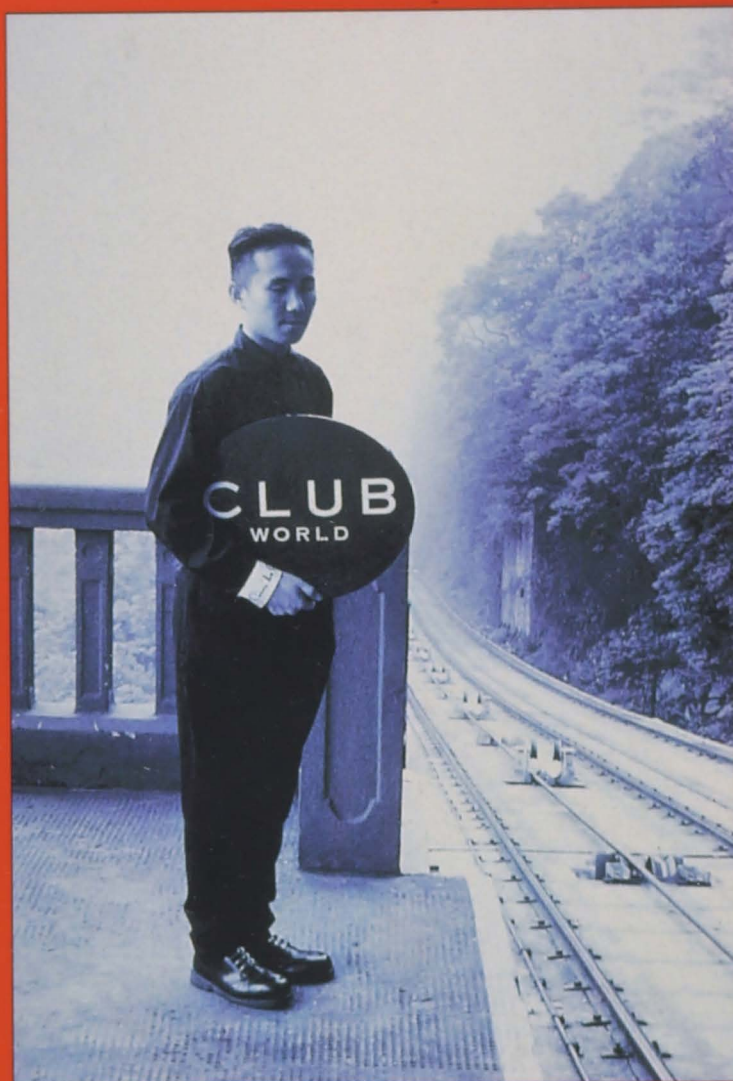
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"I come from a modern country, where we have everything that money can buy; and with all our spry young fellows painting the Old World red, and carrying off your best actors and prima-donnas, I reckon that if there were such a thing as a ghost in Europe, we'd have it at home in a very short time in one of our public museums, or on the road as a show." • OSCAR WILDE



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