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Hong Kong as a Test Case for World Literature

Michael Tsang

World Literature as an Academic Field

World literature has arisen in the last two decades as a promising branch of literary studies, having descended mostly from postcolonial studies and comparative literature but seeking to rectify problems of parochiality in these two fields. A few strands have begun to manifest themselves in world literature. Franco Moretti, in “Conjectures on World Literature”, is one of the first critics to revive interest in Goethe’s term *Weltliteratur*. He sees world literature as the literature of the capitalist world-system under Immanuel Wallerstein’s tripartite theory of the core, the semi-periphery and the periphery, and puts forward “distant reading” as a methodological concept, through which unifying trends and phenomena across literary publications under the force of cultural markets are understood via the study of literary form, the use of quantitative methods, and the engagement with network theory. The Warwick Research Collective (WReC) agrees with Moretti that world-literature registers the capitalist system as being “one, and unequal”, and reintroduces Trotsky’s theory of combined and uneven development to study (semi-)peripheral modernisms and their asymmetrical relationships in the capitalist world-system. Following Fredric Jameson, WReC’s position, as Neil Lazarus has summarised succinctly in his review of Vivek Chibber’s *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013), emphasises both the singularity of capitalist modernity in its far-reaching impact on all socio-political regimes, countries and cultures on the one hand; and on the other, the simultaneity or systematic co-existence of uneven modes, levels, and manifestations of such modernity across any given place and time (100). Moving on from postcolonial literature, WReC highlights that world-literature is a hyphenated term denoting the relation between literature, especially literary forms, and the (capitalist) world-system. The comparatist David Damrosch’s *What is World Literature?* advocates a comparative reading of literary works and their translations, as well as the reception of these works in new local, sociocultural contexts (Damrosch 24). Pascale Casanova, inspired by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, proposes a spectrum of hierarchical, unequal “world literary space” (“Literature” 72), in which literary resources are unequally distributed across different but relational positions in this world structure. Domination in this asymmetric world literary space can be witnessed in a number of ways, from the transnational prestige of literary awards (74), to the devising of strategies for peripheral writers to establish themselves and conform “with the prestige-bestowing centre” (89). Finally, in *What is a World?* (2016), Pheng Cheah has a different take on world literature, treating the word “world” as “worlding”, thus turning it into a temporal rather than a spatial concept. He specifically recognises the potential of literature from the postcolonial South in illuminating non-

Western hetero-temporalities as a force of resistance against the homogenising world-making process and the logic of rational calculation in capitalist globalisation.

As can be seen, the transition from postcolonial to world literature has enabled some new theoretical perspectives to blossom, but this transition is not complete (and perhaps never will be). Already there are critiques on how the Damroschian and Casanovian approaches have sidelined issues advocated by postcolonial scholars in the past three decades—explicit and implicit forms of imperialist violence;¹ the figure of the subaltern and other underprivileged castes or classes; the politics of anticolonial resistance; the mediation of form in the portrayal of the lived materialities and lingering effects of colonialism; and so on. In recent years, the field of postcolonial studies itself has seen a wave of publications exploring the future of postcolonial theory. This ranges from a series of articles in 2012 on “The State of Postcolonial Studies” in *New Literary History*, or the article “Marxism and Postcolonial Theory: What’s Left of the Debate?” (2015) by Subir Sinha and Rashmi Varma in *Critical Sociology*. Many of these works point out how postcolonial studies has become too focused on a culturalist understanding of colonialism and has forsaken the tradition of anticolonial and Marxist analysis found in Fanon, Gramsci and Said. This overlaps with some of WReC’s arguments, and indeed, it seems that the same debate between dialectical Marxism and culturalist poststructuralism within postcolonial studies in the 1990s is also being revived in world literature. Coming from a different sub-disciplinary background, Damrosch’s brand of comparative circulation/translation studies seems most disparate to WReC’s advocacy of Trotskyist combined and uneven development. The two sides have been openly critical of each other, as seen in their recent debate in a special section of *Comparative Literary Studies* (see WReC, “First Responses”), or in Damrosch’s criticism of WReC during his keynote at the 2016 Institution of World Literature (IWL) summer school. In these critiques, Damrosch’s repeated attack on WReC’s use of translated English versions of novels reveals his tendency to constantly return to his forte in cross-cultural, cross-linguistic comparison. But looking past the issue of the breadth of linguistic knowledge, WReC argues that world-literature is not a matter of quantifiable object, but a problem that requires a new critical mode of reading (“WReC’s Reply” 537). They attempt to expose Damrosch’s ideological position, who sees capitalism “as a diffusionist process that hybridises [...] all cultures” but that “tends to obscure the contradictions and inequalities that are the very matter of literary exchanges (*ibid.* 537). Consider, then, Sinha and Varma’s warning against the “dangerous slippage” of Marxists “throwing out culture altogether as a site of radical transformation and revolutionary potential” (7). While this warning is well-intentioned and timely, the problem is arguably whether the cultural turn has allowed culturalists and poststructuralists to realise such potential, or whether the said turn only makes critics feel complacent in their privileged, hybrid “Third Space” bubble and shun more radical or combative ideas of resistance against social-economic-political injustice. In light of WReC’s comment on capitalism’s close-knitted relationship with cultural appreciation and cultural capital, one

may also note Damrosch's entrepreneurial role in propagating the field of world literature. The impressive human, institutional and financial capital he secured through Harvard has enabled the IWL to offer junior academics and research students a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn from experts in literatures of different periods, genres, languages, and theories. It is as if a whole network of literary scholars around the world (except the Marxists) have sought to establish a prevailing research direction for the field of world literature led by Damrosch and others, via monographs, edited collections, anthologies, journals (including special issues), and educational institutions. While in reality, Marxist critics have been championing a materialist critique in literary studies for decades, it seems that a *déjà vu* kind of struggle that Marxist postcolonialists faced in the 1990s trying to claim a space for Marxist postcolonial research is in place again in world literature. Like how WReC's members have yet to adequately consider politics of linguistic translation, Damrosch has never meaningfully engaged with WReC's Marxist theory. Both sides, then, risk rehearsing their disparate research interests to each other without expecting either to back down. Would it not be more productive, then, to see both sides (and, for that matter, together with Casanova, Moretti, and other theorists) as constituting the many necessary facets of world literary studies?

Systems and Postcoloniality: The Case of Hong Kong

This is especially a worthy question to ask when one considers the peripheral status of Hong Kong and its literature within postcolonial studies and world literature. If one is ambitious enough to place Hong Kong on these academic terrains, one must be prepared to demonstrate how Hong Kong (plus its literature) speaks to and challenges the merits and demerits of all current approaches in these fields. This shall be the intention of this article, which highlights several areas in which dialogue may be possible.

As has been pointed out by many, despite a promising nomenclature, postcolonial studies has only focused on several countries or regions that were formerly subject to European territorial colonialism, and has ignored other former colonies or other forms of colonialism. Hong Kong is a clear victim here. Take John McLeod's introduction to the two editions of *Beginning Postcolonialism* for instance, where he quotes A. L. McLeod's 1961 observation that "the larger British colonies such as Fiji, Hong Kong and Malta, where there are relatively large English-speaking populations, have produced no literature, even in the broadest sense of the term" (qtd in J. McLeod 15). This is of course untrue, as Elaine Ho has pointed out with her research on 1950s English-language poetry by (elite) ethnic Chinese living in Hong Kong (Ho, "Connecting Cultures"). What is interesting is that the latter McLeod has no intention to update a statement made four decades ago. Thus, the very act of quoting the earlier McLeod's sentence is itself Orientalist in the sense that it deterministically ossifies the development of Hong Kong literature.

Of course, the nomenclature of Hong Kong literature invites fierce debates, and Hong Kong literature has only enjoyed a smoother development until fairly recently. For a place where a distinctive Hong Kong identity only began to emerge in the 1970s (Fong 18)—130 years after its first colonisation—the earliest literatures written in or concerning Hong Kong were penned by expatriates, sojourners, and tourists (from WH Auden, W. Somerset Maugham, to Lu Xun, Natsume Sōseki, and Fukuzawa Yukichi). But Chinese-language writing developed after the Second World War, and there is a mini-canon of key Hong Kong literary texts by writers such as Xi Xi or Leung Ping Kwan (Ye Si) that are known to Chinese-speaking natives of Hong Kong. Thanks to translation journals such as *Renditions*, some of these works have been translated for international readership. In terms of English-language writing, there were sporadic writing efforts from expatriates and some Hong Kong-born Chinese since the late 1970s. Intriguingly, Hong Kong English writing grew *after*, not before, the 1997 handover to China. While the 1990s saw the further rise of individual writers writing in English—such as the novelist Xu Xi and the poet Agnes Lam—it was in 1999 when Malaysian-American poet Shirley Geok-lin Lim, then teaching at the School of English at the University of Hong Kong, started a creative writing class, that a new generation of English-language writers were cultivated. Lim’s vision resulted in the publication of the literary journal *Yuan Yang*, which for a long time was supportive of the works of local writers. Other universities followed suit and had their own publications, and publishing avenues, both online and in print, burgeoned. As a result of such collective effort, several Hong Kong English-language writers have come to be the pillars of a developing literary scene, such as Nicholas Wong, Tammy Ho, Jennifer Wong, and Kit Fan. All of the above show that Hong Kong literature exists, even if it is still growing and developing into a mature literary community itself. What needs to be considered, then, is whether Hong Kong literature remains unseen because it has yet to gain enough reputation for international scholars to notice. On this Benita Parry makes the profound comment that “works written in the local languages of Asia and Africa” are often deemed “‘uncongenial’ to metropolitan taste” and are thus “seldom translated and largely overlooked within the academies” (Parry 73). Parry was speaking from postcolonial studies, but the same warning is relevant to world literature: Karen Laura Thornber, in her contribution in *World Literature in Theory*, urges world literature to pay adequate attention to areas that did not get enough attention before, such as East Asia (460-61).

Thus, the Bourdieusian twist of world literature from Casanova and Sarah Brouillette, studying the politics of literary spaces/awards and academic fields or the privileged circulation of cultural capital, helps clarify how Hong Kong literature is underprivileged in its competition with other literatures in the scramble for recognition in the commercial and academic marketplace of world literature. Hong Kong’s invisibility in postcolonial studies may easily be translated to a similar neglect in world literature, unless world literature makes an effort to live up to the ideal in its name.

But as WReC has warned, world(-)literature is not just about reading more, but about how to read, especially how to read inequalities in literature. Hong Kong can make a potentially resourceful contribution here—unlike its literature, Hong Kong’s politics has successfully aroused overseas interest. In a nutshell, Hong Kong’s *sui generis* postcoloniality can be summarised as follows: Hong Kong has money but no independence; it has “neither a precolonial past, [nor] a postcolonial future” (Tam 165). “Postcolonial” here suggests post-independence, but Hong Kong is one of the few places that was handed over from one superpower coloniser, Britain, to another superpower that is increasingly considered a coloniser, China. Thus, clashes arise when Hongkongers want a larger say in the state of affairs of their home, while China wants to tighten its grip. Brian Fong narrates how Beijing changed its earlier laissez-faire policy and tightened its political-economic control on Hong Kong in the last decade or so, using incorporation strategies to encroach Hong Kong’s autonomy and democratic development (7). In response to this, the younger generation has mobilised a rising wave of social movements, which culminated into the 79-day Umbrella Movement in 2014 (where protesters occupied three main streets in Hong Kong’s central business districts in protest of China’s rejection of universal suffrage for Hong Kong’s Legislative Council in 2016 and for the Chief Executive in 2017). Fong dramatises this in the theory of centre-periphery relation²: China’s incorporation strategies are deemed “assimilationist state-building nationalism”, while response from Hong Kong activists are seen as “reactive peripheral nationalism” (3).

Three years on, Hong Kong has seen a radicalisation in both the activist and the discursive elements in social movements. In bloom are new political organisations and parties belonging to an umbrella political ideology broadly known as “localism”, which stand apart from the existing pro-democracy parties known as the pan-democrats. Localism is often criticised as immature, xenophobic, result-oriented, and driven by unruly emotions and impractical ideals. But in reality, localism encompasses a spectrum of positions from “self-determination”, “self-autonomy”, to “independence”, all differing in terms of radicality. Nonetheless, localism on the whole suggests putting Hong Kong at the centre of its political fate, vis-à-vis the pan-democrats who believe that the democracy of China precedes that of Hong Kong. On the level of activism, evidence for this radicalisation includes the “Fishball Revolution” during the Lunar New Year holidays in February 2016, when protesters burned rubbish bins and threw pavement bricks to defend illegal hawker stalls from being persecuted, causing the police to fire warning gunshots for the first time in decades. It is no surprise that localist thoughts and movements are severely attacked both by pan-democrats and the establishment. At the time of writing, the law court in Hong Kong has just disqualified four more elected Legislative Council (LegCo) members of their membership due to deliberate theatricality when taking their oaths of office, in addition to two localist LegCo members who had already been disqualified earlier. Out of the six, five of them were elected for the first time in the LegCo election in 2016 and received a total of about 180,000 votes, showing a certain tendency in voters to want new faces in Hong Kong’s political scene.

The disqualification shows that the legal apparatus is now used as ways to suppress even the mildest form of passive “resistance” (in the form of, say, merely speaking one’s oath very slowly, which was what one of the disqualified members did).

I will return to the radicalised Fishball Revolution later. For now, Fong’s designation of China as centre and Hong Kong as periphery merits closer examination. Although there is no evidence that Fong is evoking the Wallerstein’s world systems theory which WReC adopts, he correctly identifies centre and periphery as relational. But he only studies a “closed” system that involves China and Hong Kong, while Wallerstein takes the world as the unit of analysis and allows ethno-nations to be promoted or demoted from one category to another over time.

Many scholars, such as Jonathan Arac and the WReC group, have highlighted that core and periphery are relational terms, a point missed by Moretti’s appropriation of Wallerstein’s categories.³ To quote Arac: “the relation between core and periphery is synchronic—only its relation to the periphery allows the core to be core, and the two together define the system at a given point in time. But in Moretti’s law, the centre’s relation to the core operates by ‘influence’. That is, the centre is earlier than the core” (Arac 38). Indeed, Moretti’s temporal understanding of core-periphery cannot be applied onto Hong Kong, because if we accept that the problem between China and Hong Kong now is the result of a historical-ideological difference and not an ethno-racial one, i.e. that China became ruled by an authoritarian “communist party” while Hong Kong was influenced by “Western” “liberal” “capitalist” values, then Hong Kong cannot be a periphery to China temporally, since Hong Kong was a pure colonial invention after the 1841 Opium War, while the Chinese Communist Party (which would go on to rule China) was founded in 1921. However, if we envision Hong Kong in both a “closed system” of sovereign transfer between China and Britain, and one in a more “open system” of world economy, then WReC’s argument that the processes of becoming core or periphery “are multi-scalar, playing themselves out at multiple levels – neighbourhood, city, nation, region, macro-region” (*Combined*, 55) applies. In the closed system, as Fong has written, Hong Kong stands as the periphery both to China’s nationalism and to the transaction of sovereignty between Britain and China. But in a way, it makes no sense to try to evaluate the sub-nation of Hong Kong against the nation of mainland China, since it is unviable in the foreseeable future that Hong Kong can be an independent country. Any sub-nation, even if autonomous, stands no chance in becoming a core while its “mother” nation is still a (semi-)periphery. A sub-nation simply does not enjoy its own political sovereignty to be considered core.

This built-in assumption of ethno-nations in world systems theory makes it inapplicable to Hong Kong, unless one is therefore willing to consider Hong Kong as an ethno-nation. Here, it is also important to consider Wallerstein’s insistence in analysing a nation holistically, paying attention to

not only economic position, but also political system, military strength, social structure, cultural autonomy, historical development, and so on.

In fact, even though Hong Kong cannot have its own army and does not have formal diplomatic relations with other countries (since these belong to the purview of China), it still demonstrates many features of a core region in other areas. It has one of the most developed economies in the world, having become highly urbanised and industrialised in the 1960s and 1970s, and gradually turning to tertiary (e.g. tourism) and even quaternary (e.g. banking) industry in the 1990s, and now participating fervently in speculation-intensive capitalism. It also has arguably almost developed its own “national” culture—speaking a different oral language and writing in a different script from the rest of its “mother country”; practising a different ideology (i.e. “capitalism”), governmental structure, legal code, and banking system; and using its own currency, postage stamp, international dialling country code (i.e. 852), and two-letter suffix on HTML addresses (i.e. “hk”). Judging by its economic performance and historical importance to the development of East Asia and the world, Hong Kong does seem to qualify to be in the core group. Indeed, in a 2000 article by Chaser-Dunn, Kawano and Brewer in *American Sociological Review*, both Hong Kong and China are considered semiperiphery based on a longitudinal study of GDP strength. Salvatore Babones, using 28 years of income per capita data as his sole criteria, considers Hong Kong a core region and China a periphery in his 2005 article. Both articles place Britain as core. Clearly, using economic and quantitative indicators alone goes against the spirit of Wallerstein’s holistic analysis; however, one merit of Babones’ and Chaser-Dunn et al’s classification is this: It is only when these cold numbers of economic performance are used as the sole judging criteria that Hong Kong can ever stand a chance to be considered part of the “core” group. As soon as one takes into account China’s increasing political and economic influence on Hong Kong’s policies (which has already resulted in broader economic assimilation), it becomes clear that Hong Kong may not be able to stay as core or semi-periphery one day. Hong Kong’s delicate postcolonial situation, then, testifies to both postcolonialism’s continual relevance and the need to revamp itself to account for newer forms of oppression. When Hong Kong’s postcoloniality receives adequate discussion, comparative study with other cases, such as Singapore, Gibraltar, and Catalonia shall be possible.

Ultimately, to come back to literature, someone working in Hong Kong is tempted to ask: How can we explain the fact that a place core in economic strength is only periphery in world literature? If postcolonial literature is literature from the “postcolonial South” per Pheng Cheah, does Hong Kong qualify under this umbrella, even if its literature is only developing in terms of global reception and reputation? The Taiwanese-American scholar Jing Tsu writes that “a notion of world literature [...] would be meaningless without nations, [...] while] national literatures have always been inseparable from the creation of world peripheries” (158), but “world peripheries” must look beyond the national and venture into the sub-national, for nations (national governments) themselves actively

participate in creating more peripheries. Thus, sub-national literatures, one like Hong Kong's that is both a *national* and a *world* periphery, must be added to Jing Tsu's list of key topics in world literature: "the interstices of emergent, minor, oppressed, injured, and sub-global [and sub-national] narratives" (166).

Language and Genre

Continuing from this spirit of excavating peripheries, one must do the same to Hong Kong literature itself. And one is quickly bound to find that language politics comes into play. If many years ago Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o criticised Chinua Achebe for writing African literature in English, today there is little doubt that Chinese-language writing is the dominant literature in Hong Kong as opposed to Anglophone writing. The aforementioned positive development in English writing in recent years cannot yet offset decades of invisibility. When Hong Kong used to be a British colony, English mostly functioned as a high language for formal and professional purposes, while Cantonese remained the low language of daily communication. However, there is a covert kind of prestige for Cantonese, because Cantonese—coming from the word "Canton" which is the old Anglicised name for Guangdong—is the main language of the Guangdong Province of which Hong Kong was a part before British colonialism. This is partly why a concrete Hong Kong identity only started brewing from the 1970s when British colonialism had only two decades left until the return to China in 1997: For a century between Hong Kong's first colonisation in 1841 and the Second World War in the 1940s, the Hong Kong population held a strong sense of cultural and linguistic identification with southern China, even though politically and economically they might be living in a British colony with a different system.⁴ Unlike, say, in Singapore or India where English is a candidate for the common tongue, the overwhelming dominance of the Chinese language and culture in Hong Kong has edged out English from becoming a language of creativity. Yet, with the recent spike in awareness of Hong Kong identity, Hongkongers' own brand of English has also come under the spotlight.

Those who work in linguistics may have heard of the term "World Englishes", perhaps the closest equivalent in linguistics to "world literature." Broadly speaking, World Englishes studies different varieties of English (especially those that come from a former British colony) and the relationships among them or between them and the "native" varieties. Taking as its central tenet that English is our current *lingua franca*, it examines how local usage of English, based on interference from other local languages out of creative, colonial or other reasons, not only helps establish distinct identity markers for the local population, but also enriches the development of English and facilitates mutual influence between different uses of English in different areas. The prime models in this field are Braj Kachru's three concentric circles and Marko Modiano's framework of International English. In Kachru's model, the Inner Circle consists of native English-speaking countries such as the UK or the US; the Outer Circle includes countries where English has been a *lingua franca* due to a historical

cause, such as India and Nigeria; and the outermost Expanding Circle represents countries where English has no historical or governmental presence, but has been used as a language of international communication, such as China and Japan (94). Modiano's model improves upon Kachru's, and creates a common core of International English where all varieties of English share linguistic features that "function well in cross-cultural communication" (Modiano 25). This core is surrounded by other petals, each of which represents a distinct native or non-native variety of English. These models intend to improve the marginalisation of non-native varieties of English and "dismantle the mind-set of the mother-tongue speaker as someone who enjoys positions of privilege" (ibid). Moreover, since the 2000s, scholars have paid more attention to the hegemony of English, its influence on people's linguistic choice, and its impact on the survival of other local languages (e.g. Kobayashi, "Global English Capital"; Heller, "The Commodification of Language"). These scholarly works display a stronger sensitivity to the convoluted relationship between English-as-Foreign-Language (EFL) instruction and the permeating influence of Western capitalism.

As an academic field, World Englishes has enjoyed an earlier development among applied linguists than world literature in literary studies. To date, scholars in world literature have paid little attention to arguments and models devised in World Englishes (Damrosch's detest for Anglophone literary works from non-English-speaking areas should be obvious by now). One exception is Jonathan Arac, who faults Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature" for its "unavowed imperialism of English [and] the diminishment of language-based criticism in favour of a monolingual master scheme" (44). Arac highlights how in the "Conjectures" essay, English is the "crucial enabling medium that makes possible [Moretti's] survey of all those continents and years", but Moretti does not acknowledge, let alone problematise and challenge, the actual role of English in contemporary globalisation (40).

While this criticism stands true, we must also consider the possible contribution the English language makes in ameliorating a local identity. Traditionally, unlike Singlish or Indian English, Hong Kong English has not been widely seen as a maturely developed variety of English. However, according to Hansen Edwards, acceptance of Hong Kong English as a legitimate variety of English and as a marker of Hong Kong identity increased sharply after the 2014 Umbrella Movement (Hansen Edwards, "The Politics of Language"). A local variety of English thus has the potential of strengthening people's cultural identification in a former British colony. Already, Hong Kong writer Nury Vittachi has spoken about the reinvention of the word "chop" to mean "affix a stamp" in English writing from Hong Kong (Vittachi, "From Yinglish"). More recently, in her evaluation of instances of Hong Kong English and Cantonese words (such as *tong lau*; tenement buildings) in Hong Kong English writing, Siân de Groot writes that:

Hong Kong [Anglophone] writers do show bilingual creativity through signs of Cantonese language and glimpses of Cantonese context that emulate Hong Kong's regional and ethnic pride aired in local settings. Simultaneously though, Hong Kong portrays a worldly and practical self-image that at present, writers can only convey through Standard English. The English writing of Hong Kong [...] appears internationally intelligible but under the surface are feverously bubbling semantic alterations that mean 'Hong Kong' and the socio-political background that distinguishes it. (34)

It may only be a matter of time before we see more Anglophone writers in Hong Kong becoming more confident and favouring Hong Kong English to standard, grammatical English in their works.

The final aspect in which Hong Kong can become a test case for world literature lies in the proliferation of poetry, both Sinophone and Anglophone ones. Despite some sporadic efforts in exploring how poetry may make an intervention to the study of world literature (such as a recent panel at the 2016 Modern Language Association annual convention), most of the current approaches to world literature favour the novel genre—think Moretti's network theory or core-periphery model for the “foreign plot, local characters, and [...] local *narrative voice*” in novels (Moretti 65; emphasis in the original); Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (2015); Debjani Ganguly's *The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (2016); and WReC's brave admittance of their tactical exclusion of poetry as well as their willingness to explore how other forms of cultural production speak to the logic of combined and uneven development (“WReC's Reply” 542).

Yet again, Hong Kong's intervention here is fraught with questions, especially questions that concern the relationship between poetry and society. If the length of short stories and novels allows for a more piercing observation of the materialist aspect of society, the much shorter length of poetry may not always be the most conducive to such types of observation, and may at times be more confined to spurts of personal reflection. Personal reflections can be perceptively political, but they may also be overtly depoliticised. In April 1996, the Hong Kong poet Fan Sin Bui started the Sinophone poetry journal *Breathe*. In his preface to the debut issue, he writes that “indeed we feel that in this city, it is difficult for those who like reading or writing poetry to catch their breath; hence the idea to carve a space out [for poetry]” (1).⁵ Here, the thirst for poetry is only “political” in an implicit way, because there is an insinuation that poetry is like an antidote to the hustle and bustle of a hyper-capitalised metropolis. In other words, poetry is idealised as an escapism, rather than seen as capable of interrogating how its socially produced “escapist” intention may be diagnostic of broader problems in a late capitalist society.

The recent political events may bring a breakthrough in this regard. The 2014 Umbrella Movement provided a perfect opportunity for both Sinophone and Anglophone writing to engage with

local politics and transmit voices from Hong Kong to the world. Among the blossom of Anglophone literary responses to the Movement, the Hong Kong-based online literary journal *Cha*, which has become a key promoter of Hong Kong English writing, launched a specially-curated poetry feature called “Whither Hong Kong?” (of which I was a co-editor) in its September 2014 issue. The original call for submission came out in June 2014 in response to an earlier White Paper made by China on Hong Kong, which eventually helped ignite the Umbrella Movement. However, throughout the summer response was lukewarm. When the call closed in late September, the Umbrella protest was imminent and brewing. Then, as the Movement fledged into a full-scale “Occupy” sort of activism, submissions surged despite the passing of the deadline. In a month’s time until late October when we finally ran the postponed feature, we ended up receiving the same number of submissions as we did throughout the entire summer. Clearly, the timeliness of our call allowed writers to express their immediate reflections. Many of the submissions received after the launch of the Movement were penned by English majors in local universities, showing the Movement’s inspiration in the younger generation.

Interestingly, such collective literary expression cannot be seen after the aforementioned Fishball Revolution in 2016, while special commemorative features are run on, or are timed to coincide, the Umbrella Movement’s anniversaries (see, for instance, the just published *Wasafiri* issue on Hong Kong writing, or anniversary features in *Cha*). For sure, the Fishball Revolution was a lot shorter, taking place over one night and involving much fewer people. However, it being a watershed for radical localist resistance, its symbolic significance is no less a testimony of recent Hong Kong politics than the Umbrella Movement. On the one hand, the lack of literary writing perhaps reflects a wider reluctance for the literary community to address this controversial radicalisation; and on the other, those anniversary features highlight a danger of monumentalising the earlier Movement. As I have written elsewhere, localism has been consistently misconstrued as immature, impractical, xenophobic, and result-oriented; its rich layers of internal contradictions and schisms flattened, reduced, and rendered invisible. Thus I asked:

Is the English writing community ready to capture Hong Kong's increasingly radical sentiments? Can we stage the recent Fishball Revolution in a play, write a poem that rhymes "brick-throwing" with "gun-shooting" or pen a story narrating the life and thoughts of a localist? Or are all the splits, polemics and radical thoughts too ugly and "impractical" to lend themselves into aesthetic expression? (Tsang, “Whither”)

While there may be a need to remember the spirit of the Umbrella Movement, it is equally important to bear in mind the possibility of progressive politics it taught us. When a people believes that moderate activism no longer suffices, silence is not necessarily the best response. A lot remains to be done in this respect.

To sum up, the proliferation of poetry in Hong Kong poses questions to both Marxists and culturalists. Marxist theorists of world literature need to explore how their theoretical contributions such as combined and uneven development can be used to analyse a unit of literary work as short as a few lines. If it is a few novels that WReC has assembled for examining the connectedness and unevenness of capitalist development, it may well have to be collections of poems (of various forms and lengths) by different poets (within a region or across regions) that can stand up to the same ambitious scope of examination, if one is to explore the relation between poetry and capitalism. Unevenness, then, to adopt WReC's multi-dimensional understanding of the term, is bound to be found among these different poets, different poetry collections, and different poetic forms, *at the same time as* they all constitute a combined body of work that registers and morphs the effect of capitalism. As I have discussed in this article, some Hong Kong poets see poetry as an oasis within a desert of monotonous, fatiguing city life: an opportunity for aesthetic engagement that is seemingly depoliticised. One could make the argument that the intention to seek depoliticisation itself is political, but in addition to this, recent political events also have had a bigger impact on Hong Kong poets, who are more willing to engage with major political events and produce works inspired by these events, as seen in the *Cha* special feature. On the other hand, culturalist critics will need to revise their view of poetry's function, to be more reflective on how notions of aesthetics are socially produced, be open-minded to more radical ideas which include identifying the revolutionary potential of cultural production, and be ready to address in their works the debilitating effect of capitalist and neoliberal development on Hong Kong.

Coda

Why world literature, then? For a place like Hong Kong, long forsaken by the field of postcolonial studies (but not necessarily by issues of postcoloniality), the still-developing field of world literature provides a possibility for the equally developing literary landscape of Hong Kong to make meaningful contributions with explorations of the city's postcoloniality, its problematic relationship with its sovereign China, its internal structures of injustice and unevenness, and its intricate language politics. In short, Hong Kong needs to continue to evolve, until it (realistically speaking) amasses enough reputation to be considered a (national) literature of its own with its own concerns, before researchers may recognise it as a worthwhile resource to draw from when thinking about world literature. Hence a coda, rather than, conclusion, here. This is not simply the responsibility of Hong Kong writers (producing "high-quality" work), but also that of critics and researchers trying their best to analyse Hong Kong literary works and think through the possible dialogues between them and other literatures or theoretical perspectives.

Notes

¹ I use the word “imperial” here to stress that it is not merely “colonial” but also includes newer forms of imperialism masked as cultural globalisation.

² Based on Fong’s writing, I find no evidence that the nomenclature of centre (as opposed to core) and periphery comes from Wallerstein.

³ See also WReC, “WReC’s Reply” 541.

⁴ Nor did, it must be added, the British encourage a separate Hong Kong identity at all. Unlike European colonisation in many other parts of the world, where raw commodities were produced on colonised land, Europe’s (including Britain’s) involvement in East Asia was mainly through the treaty port system for commodity trade with existing powers in the region, such as China and Japan. Britain would have had little interest in developing Hong Kong into a place with a separate identity.

⁵ Translation from the Chinese is mine. I thank Chris Song for pointing me to this quote.

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