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English Writing as Neo-colonial Resistance: An Exchange of English Poetry in Hong Kong

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Abstract

After its handover in 1997, Hong Kong has arguably moved to a neo-colonial situation, where many of its native inhabitants are facing threats from China in their daily lives and material conditions. This has given rise to a movement of resistance against the hegemony of China. Most English writing in Hong Kong have yet to pick up this recent socio-political tension, but in 2012, an English poem written by a mainland Chinese student studying in Hong Kong came under fire for its superficial criticism of Hong Kong from a mainland Chinese persona. The poem drew angry responses from Hong Kong netizens, who then created parodies of the poem to mock China. In this article, I consider this poetic exchange one of the few instances where mainstream social sentiments in Hong Kong intersect with the much neglected English writing of the city. This poetic exchange – the original poem and the various imitations – delineates the social, cultural and political fault lines between China and Hong Kong. The literary value, I argue, lies not in the individual poems, but in how this action-reaction communication alerts us, via poetry and English writing, to be sensitive to the neo-colonial situation of Hong Kong.

Keywords

Neo-colonisation, Neo-colonial resistance, Hong Kong English writing, parody, secondary creation, China-Hong Kong relations

Introduction

17 years after the handover in 1997, heightening conflict between Hong Kong and China has of late captured international media attention. Whereas in the past Hong Kong was said to be a northbound coloniser with a capitalist desire to take advantage of China's potential market while introducing the seemingly superior Hong Kong lifestyle and Western modes of livelihood (H. Hung, "Chutan"), the situation after 1997 has been flipped over to one that sees Hong Kong as the colonised in a form of neo-colonisation. Following the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98 and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)

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outbreak in 2003, policies were implemented in Hong Kong to attract people from China in order to boost low figures of visitors. Hong Kong's demographic and social terrain has since then been reconfigured by three main factors: (1) mainland tourists coming from designated cities under the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS), (2) permanent resettlement of mainland residents in Hong Kong through a daily family reunion quota of 150 one-way permits (OWPs) and (3) relocation of mainland residents for employment or study in Hong Kong, as enabled by the Admission Scheme for Mainland Talents and Professionals (ASMTP), the Capital Investment Entrant Scheme (CIES), the admission of mainland students in Hong Kong universities (all of the above since 2003), as well as the Immigration Arrangements for Non-local Graduates (IANG) since 2008. All these brought a considerable presence of mainlanders in Hong Kong: by the end of 2012, about 762,000 mainland residents have gained OWPs to stay in Hong Kong, 57,000 of which came through ASMTP, 18,600 via CIES and 22,000 by IANG (although for the latter two not all of them were mainland Chinese), on top of the 23.1 million IVS visitors and 8,600 mainland university students admitted in 2012 alone ("Hong Kong: The Facts"; "LCQ2"; Bok and Kao, "Inbetweeners"; "Tourism in Performance"). Many Hongkongers feel the competition for social resources in their daily material lives with these visitors and new immigrants, which has then given rise to critical currents to rethink what a "Hong Kong identity" means for Hongkongers, and to movements of resistance against the demographic convergence of Hong Kong and mainland China.

This article assesses the extent to which Hong Kong's English writing has captured this "neo-colonial" situation. Although critic Agnes Lam writes that

English writing in Hong Kong by ethnic Chinese writers... is likely to be viewed as postcolonial literature, commonwealth literature, or part of what is termed world literature written in English ("Poetry in Hong Kong")

Hong Kong and its literature remain largely ignored in postcolonial (literary) studies. The English writing scene in Hong Kong can be described as "up and coming." Before the 1990s, there were only sporadic publications, and the period could be compared to seed-sowing. The 1990s saw the first buds of the seeds, with publications by such writers as Louise Ho, David T.K. Wong, Xu Xi and Agnes Lam. But it was not until the 2000s – and ironically after Hong Kong's handover to China – that English writing began to flourish with the emergence of new writing avenues and writers. Literary activities have proliferated, from university anthologies such as *Yuan Yang*, publishing houses like Haven Books, to festivals exemplified by the Hong Kong International Literary Festival, and online journals like *Cha*.

Despite this proliferation, English writing remains a largely segregated culture in the “unconscious” of the general public. Likewise, most of the English writing in Hong Kong has yet to pick up the recent socio-political tension between China and Hong Kong. This article aims to bridge this gap by examining a “poetic exchange” – a rare instance where mainstream social sentiments in Hong Kong intersect with the much neglected English writing of the city. An English poem written by a mainland Chinese student studying in Hong Kong was under fire after it was posted on a weblog in 2012. The poem criticised Hong Kong from a mainland Chinese perspective, and drew angry responses from Hong Kong netizens, who then created imitations of the poem to mock China. I consider this poetic exchange an example of resistance demonstrated by some Hong Kong netizens. In the following sections, I will first introduce the incident and relevant materials for analysis, then give a thematic discussion on the poems before turning to inspect their formal and generic features.

The Poetic Exchange

On 16th December 2011, the Department of English at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (“the Polytechnic” for short) held a poetry reading with Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and others. The event was subsequently reported in the Winter 2011 issue of *ENGLink*, the departmental newsletter. According to the reportage, an MA in English student at the Polytechnic called Dominique Zhang Yang read a “pleasurably ironic” poem called “Hong Kong – an Ugly City” at the event, to the “appreciation and laughter” of the audience (*ENGLink* 4). In early March 2012, after the newsletter was published, the poem was posted on *Hong Kong Golden Forum* (“*Golden Forum*” for short), a popular Chinese-language forum with a huge number of Hong Kong members. As one can tell from the poem title, the poem appears to criticise Hong Kong, thus drawing a lot of negative response from the netizens. Some wrote imitations of Zhang’s poem, several of which were posted alongside Zhang’s original on an English-language weblog, *Dictionary of Politically Incorrect Hong Kong Cantonese* (“*Badcanto*” for short), on 5th March. The original and imitations are attached in Appendix 1.

The fiasco did not stop at the netizens’ imitations. Soon after the poem was posted on *Badcanto* and *Golden Forum*, an apology allegedly written by Dominique Zhang appeared on *Badcanto*:

In the poem, I assumed the voice of a leftist “Angry youth” Mainland tourist who get lost [sic] in Hong Kong’s modernity.... However, my real intention was neither inciting hate between Hong Kongese and Mainland Chinese people nor criticizing Hong Kong for the sake of it. (I am in no place to do it; and if it was a poem full of nothing but hate speech and

personal misconception, the Department would not want to have it on the newsletter.)... My REAL idea behind the lines was an expression of my grief for mainland's backwardness, in comparison to Hong Kong, and a keen anticipation of wanting the Mainland to be as developed as Hong Kong now is. (This is reflected in the last line/ punch line of the poem.)... This is not a Anti-HK poem [sic]; it was intended as a patriotic poem for wanting Chinese's progress and development. ("A Mainland Chinese"; original capitalisation)

Unfortunately, his apology on *Badcanto* only sparked further polemic in the comment section which lasted until 10th March. Some netizens gave a reading similar to Zhang's purported intentions:

***silinz666* March 7, 2012 at 2:59 pm**

... Check on the ending, pretty strong statement. Paradoxical, the hate-and-love attitude towards Hong Kong, reflecting his the [sic] jealousy and resentment.

So this piece is a praise for Hong Kong, in disguise. A literary game or trick. ("A Mainland Chinese")

Many netizens were still not satisfied and continued their criticisms, which can be broadly categorised into two major strands. The first concerns the derogatory remarks on Hong Kong:

***Ivan* March 6, 2012 at 6:03 am** [Translated from Chinese]

... You are using the bad of Hong Kong to contrast the worse of China. Both descriptions are negative, so they are actually parallel criticisms. Where is the good wish? If you want to express wish for the improvement of a "certain" country, is all you can do to disparage other places? Nobody is interested in your concerns with that "certain" country, but it is undeniable that you are criticising Hong Kong....

***Reya Leung* March 7, 2012 at 4:41 pm** [Translated from Chinese]

... Once you use the angle of a Chinese Angry Youth to look at Hong Kong, it means [you] identify with these complaints against Hong Kong (whether or not they are true).... ("A Mainland Chinese")

The second category was about Zhang's perceived poor English skills, as shown in these comments:

***John* March 7, 2012 at 11:55 am**

dominique zhang, mind I leave a few words. Your so-called "poem" which only shows how poor your English writing skill you are [sic]....

an alumnus March 7, 2012 at 8:00 pm

... The point is that your piece of work does not match the standard of a department/university newsletter in terms of the language used even to the untrained eyes.... (“A Mainland Chinese”)

While the apology can be superficially understood as a reaction to the netizens’ anger, I believe that a more holistic reading, treating the original, the imitations, the apology and the comments as an entity, is called for to go beyond the superficial, name-calling criticisms of China and Hong Kong, and to make sense of the context in which they were written and articulated.

Neo-colonial Resistance

At first sight, the strong language makes the imitations look like mere hate speech. However, there is good reason to go beyond this superficial judgment and distil their social importance, because they represent the sociocultural tensions faced by Hong Kong after the handover. The imitations substitute the criticisms in the original poem with negative image of China, to do with the lack of democracy and civil rights (I.2),² the ban on religious and speech freedom (I.13-16), food safety issues (I.3-4) and the widening gap between the nouveau riches and the poor (I.5). This exposé corresponds to the many social problems that affected Hong Kong, such as the 2008 melamine scandal where more than 300,000 babies were sickened by contaminated milk formula (Branigan, “Chinese”). Many imitations describe China with adjectives such as “decayed” and “corrupted” (III.1, 3), even going so far as to dehumanise and curse the mainlanders (I.17-18; II.18). Surprisingly, there is little straightforward assertion of the superiority of Hong Kong, except in Imitation III which describes Hong Kong as “brightest star of East” with clean (meaning corruption-free) and well-developed social systems at its core (III.9-12).

The apparent hatred must be read alongside the direct clashes between China and Hong Kong in recent years, because it is a result of rising neo-colonisation and a consequence of various immigration incentives aforementioned. A large part of Imitation II and some parts of Imitation I are about these daily tensions, such as the circulation of photos and videos via internet portals of mainland visitors defecating on the streets of Hong Kong (“Chinese Mainlander”; I.8), and the problem of pregnant mainland mothers gate-crashing emergency rooms to give birth, so that doctors could not refuse on humanitarian grounds, resulting in their infants being granted right of abode and the Hong Kong identity card by default (II.2, 5-6). However, the fact that “most of these children will be brought back to China after birth” with no known return date (Chan, “Mainland”), with a sizeable portion of mothers

² In this paper, I number the imitations with Roman numerals, which precede line numbers in parenthetical references. Quotes from Zhang’s original poem have no Roman numerals.

evading a total of HK\$6.6 million (about US\$846,000) hospital fees in 2010 and 2011 (Siu, "Push"), has prompted the Hong Kong society to post advertisements calling for the ban of gate-crashing pregnant mothers ("Hong Kong Full Page"). Similarly, Imitation II judges harshly on the mainlanders' lack of contribution and abuse of welfare (II.7-8). The perceived impact of all these on the quality of life in Hong Kong is that living expenses have increased, welfare and social resources (such as hospital beds and university scholarships) are taken up, and the local Hong Kong culture (epitomised by spoken Cantonese, mentioned in the next sub-section) is not respected through a resistance against cultural assimilation.

A further point of contention is the last line of the imitations, which condenses these frictions into a questioning of China's rule over Hong Kong. Almost all of them univocally ask "why" China wants to "transform" (I.20) and besiege (III.14) Hong Kong. The diction establishes the distinct difference between Hong Kong and China, and challenges the sovereignty of a perceived "lesser" territory. The question word "why" particularly undercuts China's legitimacy. To ask "why," on the one hand, is to ask about the historical contexts that gave China the right to take back Hong Kong in 1997. This question demands an explanation of the present situation in relation to the history of British colonisation, the establishment of Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China respectively. The answer would perhaps call for the examination of documents as the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984. On the other hand, "why" is also a lament: what has Hong Kong done to deserve, or have to endure, being ruled, infiltrated and transformed into another part of China? This double layer of "why" expresses a resistance against the forces of assimilation from China.

This is also where the imitations divert from Dominique Zhang's poetic intent with a marked difference. For sure there are similarities: the apology communicates Zhang's denial of writing an anti-Hong Kong poem and his patriotic wish, but this turns out to create an uncanny effect, ironically (and perhaps unwittingly) presuming the inferiority of China and the superiority of Hong Kong as the imitations do. China is thus cast as a dichotomous and hierarchical opposite of Hong Kong: if China is corrupt and uncivilised, then Hong Kong is relatively clean and civilised. Hong Kong's perceived superiority will not mean anything unless there exists a "lesser" entity to which Hong Kong can be compared. This supports the critique of commenter "silinz666" that Zhang's poem is a disguised compliment to Hong Kong. However, the difference between the original and the imitations is that for Zhang, Hong Kong serves as a developed model for his patriotic call for China's advancement, while the netizens see Hong Kong's good as a source of pride of their home city without the same share of patriotic hope. It is clear, for instance, that the penultimate lines of Imitations I and II show the desire to sever ties

with China. On the contrary, it is difficult to tell from the apology whether Zhang agrees that Hong Kong is, unproblematically, part of China's territory, something which the netizens would dispute. There may be a possibility that Hong Kong – and not other developed countries like the US or Japan – is chosen by Zhang as the model for China because of the worryingly permeable China-Hong Kong borders, in which case Zhang's leftist persona, with its calling the Cantonese a mere local "dialect" (11) and its implicit assumption of China's sovereignty, may possibly not agree to the rejection of sovereignty in the imitations. Nonetheless, this ambivalence of interpretation only further exposes the impertinent truth that Hong Kong, as a Special Administrative Region, occupies an embarrassing status that is at once part of China but not China.

Language Politics and Hong Kong Identity

Language and linguistic issues are also foregrounded to such an extent that the identities of China and Hong Kong are inextricably intertwined. The linguistic practice of China differs from that of Hong Kong's in terms of both reading and speaking: China uses the simplified Chinese script and spoken Mandarin, while Hong Kong uses the traditional script and spoken Cantonese. The simplification of Chinese characters was an artificial process started in the 1930s and systematised after the Communist Party came to power in the 1950s. Proponents cite the ease of communication and the resultant boost in literacy rate as advantages, but opponents see simplification as propagandist destruction of the logic and beauty of orthodox written script.³ The promotion of Mandarin as a national language has been more controversial, since Mandarin effectively becomes a hegemonic tool, rendering regional dialects irrelevant when young ethnic minorities move from rural regions to big cities for education, employment and upward mobility (Wang and Phillion 7; Zhou 28; Zuo 84).

In recent years, Mandarin and simplified characters are often seen as threats to the status of Cantonese and traditional characters in Hong Kong and a testimony to the growing influence of mainland China. There have been negative reactions whenever shops and companies in Hong Kong are found to be displaying simplified instead of traditional script, as in the case of a few bank service centres and chain cafes in 2012 (Berg, "We're not that simple"). There is also widespread anxiety concerning the status of Cantonese in the nearby Guangdong Province (whose old Anglicised name "Canton" forms the root of the word "Cantonese"), after the provincial government encouraged the use of Mandarin in schools and media in 2010 ("Fears of a lost dialect";

³ It is interesting to note that proposals to revive traditional Chinese characters in China have been repeatedly put forward at the National People's Congress annual meetings, but to no avail ("Song"; "Taizhi").

“Guangdong”). In Hong Kong, Mandarin has been a compulsory language subject in schools since 1998, which fuels the anxiety that Hong Kong’s linguistic policy is politically charged, with the aim of suppressing Cantonese in favour of national reunification (Bolton 235).

It is this contextualisation of language politics that underscores some of the tensions in the poems. Zhang’s third stanza (9-12) reveals how the linguistic hegemony of Mandarin is achieved through a hierarchised othering process. The “angry youth” persona borrows Chinese official discourse and uses the pronoun “we” to highlight the collective imagination of a singular national language. In the process, it belittles the language “they,” the Hongkongers, speak as “only a dialect” (11). The embrace of linguistic homogenisation highlights Mandarin as the Chinese variety that unifies an ethnically and linguistically varied nation. Speaking a dialect, especially one as prominent as Cantonese, then threatens the imagination of homogenisation and national unity for the Mandarin-speaking Chinese. At the same time, however, this linguistic superiority is already countered in line 10 of the poem by an inverted centre-margin politics, which considers the mainland persona an “outsider,” and in line 12, which registers the pride of Hong Kong people in speaking this dialect. The inability at comprehending this pride somehow paves way to the sense of inferiority apparent in the last stanza.

Interestingly, the imitations respond with a turn of linguistic hegemony. We should first take note of a slight but important disparity between the original and the imitations. While Zhang’s original focuses on spoken Chinese (as seen from “speak” and “dialect” in lines 9 and 11), Imitation I addresses both the spoken variety of Cantonese from “speak” in line 9 and “mandarin” in line 12) and the traditional Chinese script in line 11. It brings in an additional pair of tension on written Chinese, showing that some Hong Kong people are sensitive to the doubled layers of linguistic differences between Hong Kong and China.

Hongkongers’ pride in their traditional script and spoken Cantonese is directly expressed in the third stanza of Imitation I, where it is claimed that Mandarin did not exist on the Chinese soil “until four hundred years ago” (I.12). The argument is that the predecessor of modern Mandarin was based on northern dialects of the Jurchens, historically a foreign tribe that lived in the northeast Manchuria of modern-day China, who invaded the Northern Song Dynasty in 1126-27 and ruled over the northern plains of China as the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234) while the Song government moved south to become Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). Both Jin and Southern Song courts were later conquered and ruled by the Mongols, who used to reside further north, as the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). In the dynasties that followed, the language of the officials (*guanhua*) would then be formed upon the Mandarin-based Peking dialect. On the contrary, linguistic research shows that classical Chinese poetry,

written mostly in Middle Chinese in the Han (206 BC-AD 220), Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) Dynasties, rhymes more closely and reads more naturally in modern Cantonese than in Mandarin. This is because the Yue dialect group in southern China (which consists of Cantonese) has retained most features of Middle Chinese while Mandarin has deleted them, such as the word-final plosive consonants (/p/, /t/ and /k/) and the distinction of the eight tones⁴ in Middle Chinese (Norman 212, 216; Tang 30).

Recovering this trajectory of linguistic evolution, these Hong Kong netizens have used this discourse to foster their resistance against the hegemony of Mandarin. They displace Mandarin from its national legitimacy and cultural orthodoxy by claiming that Mandarin is the language of foreign invaders, while Cantonese is a descendant of Middle Chinese and is thus closer to the rich canon of classical Chinese literature and scriptures. This kind of assertion is drastically different from how some scholars in the past have understood the linguistic conundrum of Hong Kong. Rey Chow, for instance, has questioned:

What would it mean for Hong Kong to write itself in its own language? If that language is not English, it is not standard Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua) either. It would be the “vulgar” language in practical daily use—a combination of Cantonese, broken English, and written Chinese, a language that is often enunciated with jovial irony and cynicism. (Chow 154-55)

Surely the vulgarity of Cantonese and of code-mixing commonly found in Hong Kong is now heavily contested by historical linguists and sociolinguists. Instead of pondering upon Hong Kong’s linguistic impurity, Law Wing Sang takes a different approach and points out that Hong Kong is now unwilling to submit to the hegemonic force of the Mandarin language, and is “find[ing] it difficult now not to be subdued in another potentially colonial situation wherein much of society treats *putonghua* [Mandarin] as the language of the new master...” (Law 56). As shown in the imitations, the struggle and resistance against recognising Mandarin as the new master language is carried out by dispelling the myth of Mandarin’s orthodoxy in Chinese culture. Linguistic practice – traditional characters and spoken Cantonese – becomes a key component in establishing a self-asserted and distinct Hong Kong cultural identity from China.

⁴ As a tonal language, the four basic tones in Ancient Chinese (level, rising, departing and entering) split into as many as eight tones in different varieties of Middle Chinese, which were subsequently merged into the four-tone system in the Peking dialect upon which modern Mandarin was based (Ting 151).

A Formal and Generic Critique

Having discussed the content of the parodies, this section turns to examine the formal and generic features of the poems for a different angle to this poetic exchange. In terms of form, the three imitations appended here are in two broad categories: Imitation I which imitates only on the level of content without altering the poetic form, and Imitations II and III which, in addition, employ a new poetic form. It is easy to surmise that these imitations are parodies, given that they seem to have similar appearances to the original poem. Thus, it is possible to argue that the need to resort to parody (i.e. copying) in their attack of Zhang reveals the netizens' lack of confidence at expressing their dissent in English. However, such criticism oversimplifies parody and does not take into account how imitation and parody function to convey new meanings. The genre of parody deserves attention, not least because this kind of imitation or repetition *with a marked difference from the original* is a very common and popular form of creation on social media platforms and online portals for Hong Kong netizens to engage with Hong Kong's post-handover situation. This form of parody is called "secondary creation" in Hong Kong, and it currently lacks adequate scholarly attention. As the name suggests, secondary creation challenges conventional definitions of creativity and art, because it alters the original work often in a (maliciously) humorous way, and is both a form of copying (thus "secondary") and of creativity. It is the genre of parody that I now turn to.

While there are a few useful theories on parody, in this paper, I am interested in Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody* for its complex distinction between parody, satire and irony. Simply put, parody for Hutcheon is repetition or imitation with a critical distance that marks and dramatises difference from the original (6, 31-32, 44). Satire, while similar to parody, has an "ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind, with an eye to their correction," and thus "brings the world into art" (Hutcheon 43, 54, 104). Parody and satire are different in terms of their targets, in that the former is "intramural," meaning that it aims at a dialogue with the original or with "another form of coded discourse," and the latter is "extramural" due to its social or moral aims (62). However, they are similar in their frequent use of irony as a strategy or trope to achieve their respective aims; irony here is defined as a semantic marking between literal and intended meaning, in order to pragmatically signal a pejorative evaluation (53-54). Moreover, the two genres overlap generously, thus creating the slightly different intermediate categories of satiric parody and parodic satire (62). My understanding is that these two subgenres differ on the ground of intent: parodic satire is still a satire essentially, but "employs parody as a vehicle to achieve its satiric or corrective end," whereas satiric parody has elements of social ills but basically critiques the original (62).

Hutcheon's theory is largely useful, with some exceptions, in identifying the genres of the poems concerned. Zhang's original is what can be said as parodic satire. As his apology shows, his authorial intent aims to communicate a patriotic wish for China's progress, which makes his poem a satire with a corrective intent, but the vehicle he uses is a parody of the voices of Chinese angry youths while keeping a critical distance from it. It however does not employ irony in Hutcheon's exact sense. Since Zhang's apology in effect affirms Hong Kong's superiority, the superficial criticism of Hong Kong is semantically opposite to the intent (i.e. to praise Hong Kong), but lacks the pragmatic pejoration Hutcheon insists on. Given Zhang's patriotic intent, it seems more likely the case that if the parody of angry youths is ever meant to be "pejorative," it is only because this pejoration must also form part of Zhang's patriotic wish for China's (and the Chinese people's) progress. This is not in itself humorous, but does fit Hutcheon's claim that modern parodies may be playful but may not carry negative judgment (Hutcheon 32, 44). Instead, the humour and pleasure of the poem may exist in the "suprapoetic" space, i.e. in the process of communicating this poem to an audience – exactly how the poem was deemed "pleasurably ironic" and "received with appreciation and laughter," according to *ENGLink* (4). The humour is thus heavily dependent upon the reader's knowledge of contemporary China-Hong Kong tensions, his/her ability to decipher Zhang's ultimate intent and understand the non-mocking parody of angry youths. The opposite reaction between the Hong Kong netizens and the audience at the poetry reading at the Polytechnic exposes how some of the netizens, such as the commentators "Ivan" and "Reya Leung" quoted above, fail to see the critical distance Zhang as a writer is keeping from the leftist persona of the poem. The comment left by "Reya Leung" shows no awareness of a poetic speaker or persona, and assumes that what one writes must correspond to what one thinks with no allowance of rhetorical devices. While "Ivan" provides interesting critique, it is problematic in that, on the one hand, s/he resigns to saying "[n]obody is interested in your [Zhang's] concerns with that 'certain' country" and chooses not to challenge Zhang on whether his self-proclaimed patriotic intent is actually true, but on the other hand resolutely declares it "undeniable that you [Zhang] are criticising Hong Kong" and ignores Zhang's claim that the poem is not anti-Hong Kong. This commentator favours a literal reading over a careful understanding of how irony functions, and only chooses to take Zhang's apology selectively without sound reasons.

This analysis raises a broader problem of appreciation of English literary texts and poetic value in Hong Kong, which can also be glimpsed in the exchange between Zhang and the netizens. While commentators like "silinz666" understand the intent of the poem, some others are not able to grasp the various poetic devices employed, as can be seen in how they have

overlooked the gap between a poet and his persona. This explains Zhang's attempt to assuage the netizens by clarifying the actual intention of his poem, even to the point of mentioning the department's approval of the poem's value. But in doing so, the apology presents authorial intent as the "correct" way of interpreting the poem and urges the netizens not to misread it. Without spending too much time on the debate concerning intention and authorship, the apology does reveal the important tension between the deliberate use of poetic devices and the netizens' inability to appreciate those devices. According to the apology, the poem is in fact patriotic and not anti-Hong Kong, because in the last "punchline" of the poem (the last couplet), the persona self-identifies as "I" for the first time, and turns from a criticism of Hong Kong to a reflection on his/her own national origin. The last couplet is thus a poetic *volta* that specifically turns hatred to patriotic wish. Its position at the end also makes it function a bit like a self-addressing envoi, only that it comments on the preceding stanzas through an exclamatory lament. Some commentators on *Badcanto*, however, are not convinced by the use of these devices. The commentator "an alumnus," for instance, criticises the "language standard" of the poem and its unsuitability in the departmental newsletter. For the user "John," the word "poem" is placed in quotation marks. A further point concerns the member on *Golden Forum* who wrote Imitation III. In this member's original post on the forum, s/he writes that

[This] Chinese wants to defeat us with some specious English poem. Let [me] give you a sonnet in response. ("A Mainland Chinese," my translation)

Obviously, for these three netizens, Zhang's poem is void of poetic merit; yet, none of them has explained what poetic merit is. Important questions to do with a more fundamental debate are not properly asked: What counts as a poem? Why is Zhang's poem "specious?" What kind of English poem is not specious? In what ways is the poem not poetic? Is poetic merit a function of the poem's socio-political loyalties?

Some of these questions are extremely hard to answer even for literary scholars. However, for the *Golden Forum* member, the answer may be simple. A look at Imitation III tells us that perhaps formal regularity, such as the number of syllables and lines as in a sonnet, will be considered a key feature for a "proper" English poem. Imitations II and III are notable examples along this line of argument, since they do not seek to follow the structure of the original poem, but instead employ other forms and poetic devices. Imitation II replaces the last four-line stanza with a couplet, cutting the number of lines by two. It

also employs a partial rhyme roughly based on a pair of vowels, /e/ and /æ/.⁵ The conscious use of these features and the purposeful replacement with an ending couplet indicate minimal awareness of traditional English poetic devices and forms. It is even possible that the author of Imitation II was trying to write a sonnet but has unknowingly written an extra, fourth stanza. In comparison, Imitation III is clearly more sophisticated, despite the grammatical mistakes and contrived diction (such as “social pith,” III.12). It mostly follows the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet (except lines 5 and 7) and generally scans in iambic pentameter. The *volta* of the sonnet, however, occurs at lines 8 to 9 like the Petrarchan sestet, rather than in the final Shakespearean couplet, when it moves away from criticising China to affirming the superiority of Hong Kong. Still, the poem is in general impressively faithful to the basic formal features of a Shakespearean sonnet.

The intentional employment of a sonnet form seems indicative of an overinvestment in form in English language poetry in the minds of some of the netizens. The absence of any indication of knowledge about the shifting trends of English poetry writing in the past few centuries perhaps highlights how much work remains to be done to promote literary education in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, even the use of other poetic forms is done in reaction to ridiculing Zhang’s perceived lack of poetic craft. Surely for the author of Imitation III, inasmuch as the content of the imitation ridicules China, the sonnet form also becomes part of the mockery at Zhang’s perceived lack of mastery in English literature. Hence, regardless of whether the imitations follow Zhang’s original structure, they are always caught in a dialectic need to reply to him. For this reason, contrary to my judgment of Zhang’s poem as a parodic satire, the imitations can be seen as satiric parodies. They are satiric because they mock by highlighting the social ills of China to establish and affirm Hong Kong’s cultural superiority. This kind of pleasure again does not quite fit Hutcheon’s definition of irony, since despite the pejorative criticism of China, there is no semantic contradiction in the already negative description of Chinese society. But because the form is also mocking Zhang (thus intramural but distancing from his original poem), even Imitations II and III seem to be parodies as well. Earlier I have drawn attention to how both Zhang’s apology and the imitations oddly affirm Hong Kong’s superiority while differing on patriotic hope. Here, another difference comes to light: whereas Zhang’s poem uses a satire with parodic features to bring out this effect, the imitations are parodies by nature since they are in *response* to both the content (China’s social problems) and the form of Zhang’s poem itself, thus making English-language

⁵ It has been said that Hong Kong speakers of English often fail to distinguish between the two vowels, and would substitute with /e/ due to an influence of Cantonese sounds (T. Hung 125; Stibbard 127).

poetry their target. Hutcheon writes that parodies can “transgress the limits of [certain formal] conventions... only within the controlled confines authorized by the text parodied” (75). This is pertinent to the netizens’ works in general, because they, as a collective group of poetic imitators, can only be understood in the specific sociocultural context of neo-colonial Hong Kong evoked by Zhang’s original poem. Or to put it in another way, if Zhang’s original is not recognised, the use of similar forms in all these imitations does not make any sense apart from superficial copying. But even when the imitations draw on different forms, as Imitations II and III have done with features of traditional sonnets, they cannot evade the purview of the original poem.

It must be remembered that the analysis above assumes that Zhang himself did write the apology,⁶ because his explanation of intent validates my judgment of the subgenres. To summarise this section, the use of poetic turn with the fusion of parodic elements in what is essentially a satire is part of the literary value of Zhang’s original poem, but some netizens, preoccupied with the paramount tension between China and Hong Kong, failed to detect the critical distance that Zhang tries to demonstrate between the angry youth persona and his authorial intent in the apology. As for the imitations, their parodic nature – as a pejorative mockery of Zhang’s poetic craft – and the subsequent comments uncover the gap between contemporary poetry and the netizens’ somewhat old-fashioned understanding of English-language poetry or poetic merit. What would have been a perfect opportunity to engage in a discussion on the definition of literature or poetry and on the relationship between English and Hong Kong literature is bypassed. While the exchange does succeed in drawing attention to the import of English language writing among Hong Kong netizens, this success is limited. This has implications for the development of English writing in Hong Kong: much remains to be done to explore the critical potential of Hong Kong English writing.

Conclusion

To conclude, I return to Agnes Lam’s article, “Defining Hong Kong Poetry in English,” where she asks if there is good poetry in Hong Kong. She identifies “three characteristics of good poetry”: (1) the breadth of the readership, or what she calls the “communicative success,” achieved by the poem, (2) the ability to “giv[e] pleasure,” and (3) linguistic appropriateness (187-88). Under this rubric, it seems that Dominique Zhang’s poem is indeed good poetry. The use of the poetic *volta* fulfils linguistic appropriateness. The poem attains a certain degree of “communicative success” by virtue of its being read and responded to by some of the Hong Kong netizens. It is uncertain whether it will be much read

⁶ To maintain critical distance and objectivity, I have not sought to contact Dominique Zhang, the English Department of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the blog owner of *Badcanto*, or any of the netizens involved.

outside Hong Kong, since after all, it was published in a local departmental newsletter, though it was subsequently discussed in an English-language blog. Finally, instead of pleasure, it attracted a scornful outcry from the netizens, who were empathically reminded of their daily experience with Chinese neo-colonialism. It is empathic because an eerie affirmation of Hong Kong's superiority can be sensed from both the imitations and Zhang's apology.

My argument here is that we need to go beyond the aesthetic determination of "good" versus "bad." There is a need to investigate how aesthetic expressions intersect with the socio-political currents of the society. Both the original and imitations have painted a partial picture of the society and culture of Hong Kong and China, but they show us what it means to be a subject living in contemporary China and neo-colonial Hong Kong, and what it means to lay claim to Chinese or Hong Kong identity. Just because the imitations appear to be malicious copying does not mean there is nothing valuable about them. What is "good" is not the original poem *per se*, but the way it initiates a poetic and discursive exchange involving the use of the parody genre as a mode of resistance against the neo-colonialism and cultural assimilation that is occurring in Hong Kong. This poetic exchange brings English poetry directly to the awareness of those Hong Kong people who may never be bothered to write in English, but are motivated in this particular incident to channel their dissatisfaction via parodies. What the Hong Kong people now experience on a daily basis – increased competition for social and material resources, as well as loss of public space – are often the effects of specific policies of the Hong Kong government under the influence of the Central Government. It is important to acknowledge the merit of the parody genre and to understand the emergent dissatisfaction that undergirds the imitations. The literary value, I argue, lies not in the individual poems, but in how this transactive communication alerts us, via English poetry, to be sensitive to the social, cultural and political fault lines between China and neo-colonial Hong Kong.

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(Note: Chinese-language materials are romanised in their Mandarin pronunciation.)

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Appendix 1 – The Poems

Note: Names of the Hong Kong netizens are transliterated under Hong Kong Government Cantonese Romanisation.

Original

Hong Kong — an Ugly City

By Dominique Zhang

In Hong Kong, they have red devil-like taxis	1
They never have an industry	2
They import cars transported from Germany and Japan	3
They have crazy drivers on the road, racing and drifting.	4
In Hong Kong, they have stick-like high risers	5
People there say they have two thirds of their land being	6
Unexploited and forest-covered	7
They work like ants and never have a decent place to live in	8
In Hong Kong, they speak a language hardly understood	9
By outsiders, like me	10
We call the language they speak a dialect, only a dialect	11
But they are proud of it!	12
In Hong Kong, they have Falun Gong demonstrators	13
Marking on Nathan Road	14
When the National Day comes	15
Dressing like zombies and making noises everywhere.	16
Hell, they have so much ugliness and the city is still	17
A developed one, a prosperous one!	18
I do not give a damn about politics, seriously	19
But why the hell I am from a Third World country!	20

Source: “A Mainland Chinese Student from Hong Kong Polytechnic University Wrote a Poem Called ‘Ugly Hong Kong,’” *Dictionary of Politically Incorrect Hong Kong Cantonese*, 5 March 2012, Web, 16 April 2012.

Imitation I**China – an ugly country**

By “yoona ho leng nui” 允兒好靚女

In china, they have red devil like communists	1
They never have democracy	2
They export food products to the rest of the world	3
They add melamine, all kinds of crazy chemicals one cannot name	4
In china, they have nouveau riches	5
People there claim that they are highly educated,	6
Civilized and have high moral standards	7
They travel to hong kong and poop in theme parks and on the streets	8
In china, they speak the language that they claim they understood	9
For hongkongers	10
We are proud of the fact that we know traditional Chinese, not simplified	11
And mandarin never existed in “china” until four hundred years ago	12
In china, they have no demonstrators	13
Demonstrations are not allowed in china	14
When june fourth comes	15
Nobody sympathizes the students who sacrificed in the Tiananmen Square	16
Fu*k, they behave like apes and living happily in their country	17
More like a zoo I would say	18
I don’t give a crap about your values, really	19
But why you want to transform us into one of you	20

Source: “A Mainland Chinese Student from Hong Kong Polytechnic University Wrote a Poem Called ‘Ugly Hong Kong,’” *Dictionary of Politically Incorrect Hong Kong Cantonese*, 5 March 2012, Web, 16 April 2012.

Imitation II

Foreigners in the eyes of HK People

By “nei gum’yat J tso mei?” 你今日 J 左未?

They claim to love their country and its blood red flag, 1
Yet, give them a citizenship elsewhere and they flee without regret. 2
Can’t blame the contradiction for the simple fact: 3
In that country you can’t buy a clean piece of bread. 4

Send here their pregnant and they breed like cats. 5
Get their infants an ID and whatever associated with that. 6
Never contributed, whether it’s the Mom or Dad, 7
Abuse our welfare and the hell with that 8

Some got the dollars yet they don’t impress, 9
Ripping through our malls with locusts’ act. 10
Drive up the prices is what they are best. 11
Leave us an economy that is good as dead. 12

Come to our land but they don’t connect, 13
Demand us to accommodate, is what they request. 14
Take our scholarships for granted yet they give nothing back. 15
Those are the ones we most detest! 16

Such kind of foreigners are driving us mad, 17
And most of us wholeheartedly wish them dead. 18

Source: “A Mainland Chinese Student from Hong Kong Polytechnic University Wrote a Poem Called ‘Ugly Hong Kong,’” *Dictionary of Politically Incorrect Hong Kong Cantonese*, 5 March 2012, Web, 16 April 2012.

Imitation III**Untitled**

By “yau sze nan mong” 憂思難忘

Corrupted China, place of harm and sins	1
As all expected. By learning its low	2
Morality, the core's decayed since	3
Its heart is dark and wicked like a crow.	4
I see no good, nor change, nor any good	5
Potentiality within. The men	6
Whom occupy the land are not the hope	7
Of futuristic views but loss again.	8
We land of incense, brightest star of East	9
Is yet to fill the stinky China with	10
The fine aroma of our masterpiece	11
Of clean and systematic social pith.	12
With many hard works we have done to teach	13
Them good, our system is now under siege.	14

Source: “A Mainland Chinese Student from Hong Kong Polytechnic University Wrote a Poem Called ‘Ugly Hong Kong,’” *Dictionary of Politically Incorrect Hong Kong Cantonese*, 5 March 2012, Web, 16 April 2012.