

## *Non-Centricity and Apathy: An Introduction to Hong Kong Literature*

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**Abstract.** Hong Kong literature, with particular historical and social factors, can be regarded as a non-centric literary form. While the majority of Hong Kong people speaks Cantonese as their mother tongue, they are required to write in Mandarin. Additionally, Hong Kong literature struggles to attract attention from an apathetic audience, to produce local writers, and to resonate with foreign readers. As serious literature continues to lose its purchase, more and more writers attempt to break out from this predicament and inject new blood into this fading industry. Efforts include circumventing traditional constraints and incorporating more colloquial Cantonese into various publications, as well as a mushrooming of internet novels. Unfortunately, Chinese education remains rigid and inflexible, hindering students' ability to use writing as a creative outlet. Literature is also heavily commodified. In light of this, I suggest that reading be encouraged and literature be de-commodified. Hong Kong literature, with its distinctive features and strengths, have the potential to thrive. All it needs is sufficient support from the government, the private sector and the general public.

**Keywords:** non-centricity; Hong Kong; Cantonese; internet novels

### Introduction

For many years, Chinese literature has had instrumental influences on Eastern Asian culture – the propagation of Chinese characters, the spread of Confucianism etc. Hong Kong, a Special Administrative Region of China, however has not inherited that legacy. It has frequently been ridiculed as a cultural desert, a city devoid of a soul.

Certainly, Hong Kong has not produced many big names recognisable nationally. Lacking in contemporary poets, novelists and playwrights, Hong Kong lagged behind other Chinese regions in terms of literary developments. Aside from the fact that historically, Hong Kong is made up of immigrants from different parts of China who fled to Hong Kong in search of a better life, who thus did not have the energy to bother with literature; one reason for this underdevelopment may have to do with the language divide. While most people

speaking Cantonese in Hong Kong, people are expected to write in Mandarin. This thus makes translating thoughts into traditionally acceptable publications fairly difficult.

A non-centric literary trend that has gained traction in recent years concerns internet novels. Authors publish their novels on platforms such as Facebook as well as in physical copies. Since these novels are published primarily online, the pressure on them to be formal and follow the traditional way of writing in Mandarin is minimised. Authors write in Cantonese, mix English into their content (in line with the locals' vernacular habit), and utilise many local elements. These novels are particularly popular among the younger generation, and have reached populations as far as Malaysia and Singapore.

In this essay, I will first compare Cantonese, the predominant language spoken in Hong Kong, and Mandarin, the national language of China, to highlight the non-centricity of Hong Kong literature. I will then attempt to discuss the history and development of Hong Kong literature of the past century. Moving on, I will introduce some internet novelists who are being increasingly favoured. To conclude, I will discuss Hong Kong's literary education, and its potential future directions.

## Non-Centricity of Hong Kong Literature

China is a huge and diverse country, home to 56 ethnic groups and 297 languages (Sawe 2018). Unlike the mainland, whose population mostly speaks Mandarin, Hong Kong's official languages are Cantonese and English. Hong Kong people also utilise traditional Chinese, unlike people from the mainland who utilise simplified Chinese in their writing.

Cantonese is known to have a more complicated phonetic system than Mandarin (Lai 2010). Both Mandarin and Cantonese are tonal languages, meaning that the same syllable, if pronounced with different tones, can mean different things. In Cantonese, 米 *mai5*, (high flat tone), means rice; while 迷 *mai4* (low, falling tone), means lost. Even though both Mandarin and Cantonese are tonal languages, the former has 4 tones, while the latter has 6 to 9 tones.

Additionally, traditional characters are still in use in Hong Kong, as opposed to simplified characters in the mainland. Simplified characters were adopted in the 1950s to facilitate literacy of the general population, thus are much less complex than traditional characters. Take the example of the character dragon, the simplified version 龙 has only 5 strokes, while the traditional version 龍 has 16 strokes.

Even though Cantonese users dwarf in light of their Mandarin counterparts in China (Cantonese is only the *lingua franca* in the Southern part of China, and with more people emigrating into the Guangdong and Guangzhou provinces from other cities, Cantonese influence is increasingly diluted), it has a long and remarkable history. As the linguist Jiang Wenxian has said, “Cantonese is closer to classical Chinese in its pronunciation and some grammar” (*South China Morning Post* 2009). Many ancient poems rhyme better when read in Cantonese as well. The Canton region was also the main exporter of Chinese diaspora, as the coastal provinces often traded with foreigners. To illustrate this, Hong Kong sent the most immigrants to Canada from 1991 to 1996 (Chan 2017), and till now Cantonese is still Canada’s fourth most commonly spoken language (*Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages* 2018), proving how influential Cantonese is worldwide.

Despite the fact that Hong Kong people speak and write differently from the mainland, for formal compositions, such as government documents and textbooks, Hong Kong people are still required to read and write in Mandarin. This means that instead of writing in Cantonese with its own idioms, filler words and expressions, Hong Kong people translate their thoughts into Mandarin – the only form of Chinese writing that is considered proper and formal.

### Development of Hong Kong Literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The non-centricity of Hong Kong literature is no doubt one of the reasons why it is not often under the spotlight, but there are other contributing factors. To understand the development of Hong Kong literature, an introduction to the socio-political history of Hong Kong in the past century is in order, as history played a huge part in shaping the city’s literary growth. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, China underwent a series of political turmoil, and these crises changed the face of Chinese literature. The May Fourth Movement of 1919, which began as students protested against increasing foreign imperialistic threats, led to greater admiration for science and democracy (Spence 1981: 117–123). Literature, in turn, moved from Confucian educational pieces to more realistic compositions (Yu and Chan 2015: 4–18). The New Culture Movement, which began in the 1910s, popularised writing in the vernacular, as opposed to writing in archaic Chinese. With the aid of writers such as Lu Xun and Xu Dishan, these new styles of writing were brought to Hong Kong in the 1920s. An influx of literary titans such as Guo Moruo and Xia Yan who arrived in Hong Kong in the 1930s and 1940s also nurtured a new generation of literary

talents in the city, who excelled in depicting post-World War II social changes (Yu and Chan 2015: 4–18).

As the Communist Party took over in 1949, Hong Kong literature gradually diverged from mainstream Chinese literature. As Chinese literature turned increasingly socialist, Hong Kong remained under British colonization (Yu and Chan 2015: 4–18). In the 1950s and 60s, poverty and natural disasters were prevalent in Hong Kong. The British administration did not think it worthwhile to invest in Hong Kong's social and welfare infrastructure. Compounded with the 1967 riots by leftist sympathisers, Hong Kong's social, economic and political ecosystems were stretched thin. The US, under pressure to combat communist influences in the Cold War era, injected over 6 million US dollars into Hong Kong's literary scene to sponsor anti-communist publications (Chiu 2006: 88). The literary scene of the 1950s thus thrived despite the chaos and mayhem in society. Two schools of literature emerged, one under American influence which criticised the communist regime (such as Eileen Chang's *The Rice Sprout Song*), and one defending it (such as Cao Juren *Jiudian*) (Yu and Chan 2015: 6).

In the 1970s, the British Governor MacLehose launched a series of social, educational and infrastructural reforms to quell society's unrest over Hong Kong's imminent return to China. After over a century's occupation by British forces, capitalists in the city were concerned about their fate if they had to live under communist rule. These reforms were hugely effective and the standard of living improved, but at the same time the gap between the rich and the poor also widened. Hong Kong's industry took off, and television channels and broadcasting agencies mushroomed. Information was spread more efficiently. Literature of the time reflected such societal changes: authors wrote of uncertainty about Hong Kong's future and reflected on the increasing distance between people, which was seen as a natural development with Hong Kong's economic take-off (Yu and Chan 2015: 4–18).

In the 1980s and 90s, cross-border interactions between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong people increased, as more people emigrated from the mainland and those who had immigrated to Hong Kong long ago returned to their birth places to visit their Chinese relatives. Resentment stemmed from more interactions between the two places, which have grown to be very different since the 1950s. Hong Kong has been under Western influences for over a century and a half, while the Chinese regime changed from the Qing Dynasty to the Nationalist Party to the Communist Party. Friction inevitably rose between those who have grown accustomed to Hong Kong and those perceived 'outsiders' from the mainland. People began to question the necessity of Hong Kong's handover back to China, which was set to be in 1997. Literature that

emerged in such an atmosphere often reflected the changes society was going through (Yu and Chan 2015: 4–18).

### A Cultural Desert

Despite obvious improvement, literature in Hong Kong still has not gained widespread recognition, be it locally, nationally, or internationally. Locally, there is not one book on the history and development of Hong Kong literature that can be deemed representative or comprehensive enough (Yu and Chan 2015: 2). Whether Hong Kong even has a distinctive literature is up for debate (Ng 2018: iii; Lo 1998: 57), since Hong Kong, being an immigrant society, lacks a distinctive character that would establish a distinctive literature, and the arts were never fully recognised for their contribution to this predominantly commercial city. Even though researchers tend to take the affirmative side on this issue, citing positive recognition from American, Canadian and Chinese academia, it is undeniable that the majority of Hong Kong people do not care much for their literature. As Wong (1998: 19) has analysed, Hong Kong readers prefer easy, light writings, as opposed to philosophical, serious literature, which might be one of the reasons why Hong Kong is often considered a cultural desert, for culture is often synonymous with deep, thought-provoking arts. In Hong Kong, parenting guidebooks, cookbooks, tips on investment are often more popular than prose.

Nationally, some authors who have lived in Hong Kong have garnered considerable fame and reputation, such as Jin Yong, who was famous for his martial arts novels. He was awarded with prestigious statuses, such as those with the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the China Writers' Association. His reputation preceded him even internationally. He was also made a *Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des lettres* in 2004 (Xinhua 2004). Even though he still faces severe criticisms from some of his peers, who thought his writings were not sophisticated enough to be considered serious literature, his name was widely known within the country (Long 2018). Other reputable authors who lived in Hong Kong include Eileen Chang, specialising in romances; and Liu Yichang, specialising in experimental writings that combined both Chinese and Western styles of writing.

However, whether these reputable authors were actually representatives of Hong Kong literature is debatable. As Cheng (1998: 53) argued, Hong Kong literature should be defined as publications written by authors who were born or have a substantial stake in Hong Kong. Hong Kong culture should have contributed greatly towards the shaping of these authors' styles of writing.

Certainly, authors like Jin Yong, Eileen Chang and Liu Yichang are all titans who had enormous artistic influence and contributed immensely towards Hong Kong's literary scene, but it might be a stretch to say that their roots lay in Hong Kong. Jin Yong was born in Zhejiang, an Eastern province of China, and only arrived in Hong Kong when he was 24 years old, as his journalistic career took him there. Eileen Chang left for Hong Kong in 1952 at the age of 32, as her prospects as a writer dimmed in Shanghai (Huang, 2005: ix–xvi). Liu Yichang moved to Hong Kong at the age of 30 from the mainland to escape the chaos caused by the Chinese Civil War (Su 2018). Many books published by these authors were not set in Hong Kong: Jin Yong's novels mainly centred on mainland China, in the era of kings and hidden treasures. Even though Hong Kong was the centre-stage of Eileen Chang's famous *Love in a Fallen City*, Hong Kong seemed to be just a convenient backdrop – a war-torn, nonchalant city that Chang knew well.

Even for those authors who were born or bred in Hong Kong, many of their careers premiered or prospered not in Hong Kong, but in Taiwan (Cheng 1998: 53). Xi Xi, who grew up in Hong Kong, published several novels and anthologies before becoming very popular in Taiwan. Her relative success in Taiwan confused even Hong Kong officials, who mistakenly described her as a Taiwanese writer. Ye Si, another writer who grew up in Hong Kong, published his first books not in Hong Kong but in Taiwan. Even though he was much more involved in Hong Kong's literary scene in the 1980s, the fact remained that he, a local writer, first debuted in Taiwan. This might be to do with Hong Kong people's relative apathy towards literature, which had not been conducive to the nurturing of literary talents, thus in some ways hindered the development of a distinctive Hong Kong literature.

Internationally, it is difficult for niche literature written in a language other than English to gain worldwide recognition, as a lot is lost in translation. Chinese literature is not an exception. Hong Kong literature, lagging behind its Chinese counterpart, is even more under-recognised in the international arena. Even for Jin Yong, martial arts novels are difficult to translate. Mannerisms and ways of speaking are difficult to replicate across languages and cultures, and Chinese characters often have many connotations that are hard to summarise by English translations. One of Jin Yong's most famous books, *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, was translated into English in 2018, but a lot of cultural meanings could not be concisely conveyed, leading to frustration among Chinese fans. Even though Jin Yong's books are fairly popular among Chinese-speaking populations, it may still be some time before they can gain worldwide attention.

## New Directions

As can be seen from the above, the development of Hong Kong literature is heavily interconnected with its history. The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an influx of literary talents who brought with them inspirations from the mainland, the Cold War era sparked literary developments despite poverty and political chaos in the 1950s and 60s, writers wrote of the changes that came with economic success in the 1970s, and literature reflected a growing sense of unease towards Hong Kong's future in the 1980s and 90s. However, serious literature that contemplated the nature of society, such as that pioneered by Liu Yichang, still failed to attract widespread attention. Technical guidebooks often top the charts of publishing houses, while novels and anthologies are sidelined.

A new generation of writers seems more comfortable with the idea of jumping out of traditional constraints. Poets have started incorporating Cantonese into their creations, such as Yam Gong, who incorporated a Cantonese idiom into his poem (Yam Gong 2014, cit. in Fok 2018: 68). The idiom “is there going to be such a big tiger frog jumping on the street?” (my translation) means something is too good to be true, as tiger frogs are a delicacy in Hong Kong. By incorporating this idiom, Yam Gong evoked scepticism about religion, as religion often promises believers things that are too good to be true. Cantonese idioms are usually very visually vibrant metaphors, and Cantonese's musicality stems from its many tones which encourages alliterations, rhyming and wise puns. Incorporating Cantonese into poems is in fact artistically clever and adds a local touch.

Even though these innovative poets should be applauded for their efforts, poems are still a relatively niche category that reaches only the most passionate about literature.

Internet novels, however, have grown steadily more popular, especially among the young, technological-savvy generation. In truth, many internet novels have become hugely popular, with novelists getting different awards and mentions. In general, the Internet undoubtedly led to a mushrooming of literary productions from grassroot sources, as it does not have the same requirements and restrictions as would be demanded by a publishing house (Wang 2017). As these web novels are usually fantasy fiction, the younger generation is more likely to be attracted to them. They are however also being criticised for lacking in common sense, illogical, and literally tasteless.

Compared to early literary titans, many of these internet novels are grounded firmly in elements that are distinctively Hong Kong. Many are written in Cantonese, sometimes mixed with English – a norm in line with

the locals' vernacular habits. The story setting is always distinctly Hong Kong, appealing to local readers' ingrained perceptions, stereotypes, and day-to-day witnessing: one novelist, "Echo of Heart", once wrote a story about the monsters underneath a subway station. It is particularly powerful as many readers commute daily via the subway system and a story like this appeals to the readers' wildest imagination: what happens in those dark, endless tunnels after the last train? Many readers commented that they have always felt uneasy taking the subway, sometimes feeling that a particular journey took much longer than usual as if the train was looping within invisible walls. Whether these comments are honest reflections or self-fulfilling prophecies are up to debate, but it is obvious that readers were able to relate to these stories which are distinctly Hong Kong.

Bat Waak (2018: 57–64) summarised Dr. Wong Chung Ming, a professor from Hong Kong Shue Yan University, and Dr. Chin Wan-kan, an assistant professor from Lingnan University's thoughts on the rise of internet novels. Interestingly, they pointed out a similarity between classics and internet novels: both media value interactions with their audiences. For many Chinese classics, such as *Three Kingdoms*, they were originally intended not to be read, but to be pronounced. Storytellers travelled through towns and gathered audiences' feedback, modifying their stories along the way. Internet novels also emphasise interactivity with their audiences. "Echo of Heart" once wrote a thriller through posting Instagram stories, creating polls for her audience to vote on the characters' fates.

Despite sharing similarities with time-honoured classics, these internet novels fall short of becoming timeless. Many of them only managed to become a one-off sensation. This may be to do with Hong Kong readers' impatience, who get bored easily. However, it is also paramount that internet novelists will have to go beyond simply creating fast food literature that readers consume to kill time, to creating gourmet literature that lingers in readers' minds, in order for the industry to progress. It is true that psychological thrillers, a preferred genre of these internet novelists, is a difficult genre to evoke reflections, but there are certainly ways to add depth and meaning so to make them more long-lasting. This will also add legitimacy and authority, potentially building a more contextualised, localised Hong Kong style of literature in time.



## The Past, the Present, and the Future

We have examined the historic development of Hong Kong literature and the efforts by those presently in the literary scene. What about the future? How are the next generation of potential writers being educated?

Worryingly, Hong Kong students' Chinese proficiency has always been a concern. In 2010, a study found that Hong Kong students' Chinese proficiency fell behind their counterparts in Shanghai and Guangxi (*Oriental Daily* 2010). Even after the Hong Kong government had revamped the public examination system in 2012, the situation did not improve. Chinese public examination papers were still one of the most difficult for students, and the Chinese Literature elective does little to remedy this worrying situation. As Fung (2018: 29) analysed, the Chinese Literature subject scope is way too wide for a 3-year high school course; students have not been trained to appreciate Chinese literature properly in middle school; and students who chose the elective are often not actually interested in the subject. As Chinese Literature is far less competitive than electives such as Economics and Physics, many students who are not confident in their ability thus choose Chinese Literature as a secondary choice. Hence, Chinese Literature students are often overwhelmed and uninterested, leading to a track record of poor subject performance.

Not only is Hong Kong students' Chinese proficiency and limited appreciation of Chinese Literature worrying, the curriculum touches little to none on Hong Kong Literature. Out of the 28 set readings for the Chinese Literature curriculum, only 1 reading can be confidently said to be by a Hong Kong-bred writer (*Education Bureau* 2015).

It is obvious that Hong Kong students face particular difficulties in learning Chinese due to a language and culture divide with the mainland. Instead of rigidly requiring students to learn Chinese from a rubric, a more effective way may be to encourage reading. As of now, students have often been very opposed to the language due to the particular difficulties they face in translating their thoughts into Mandarin. Through reading, it may be easier to cultivate in students an interest in Chinese. It will also make writing easier as they will have a repository of phrases and vocabulary to draw on. Instead of rigidly memorising sentences and ideas from textbooks, students will be able to write more creatively and flexibly if they have always had the habit of reading. This then brings us to another question: what are the books that are available to students?

One of the best occasions for Hong Kong students to buy books is the Book Fair, an annual event sponsored by the government. However, as Fong (2018: 111) wrote, the Book Fair is really just an outlet for bookstores to clear their

stocks. The same books appear from booths to booths. Bookstores all have the same events: meeting the authors, discounts for selected books, free accessories etc. The only thing keeping one from buying from this bookstore instead of that bookstore is a meagre price difference. The Book Fair could have been an artistic, cultural event, but it was organised as if it were a commercial event. Certainly, the authorities are to be blamed for the event's lack of innovation, but even for such a "boring" (Fong 2018: 112, my translation) event, it still attracted a staggering number of visitors. In 2019, around a million people went to the Fair. If readers have actively showed discontent towards the commercialisation of literature, maybe the authorities will have more incentive to innovate. Thus, in order for Hong Kong literature to progress, it will be important to de-commodify literature, and a concerted effort from all sectors is needed.

## Conclusion

Hong Kong literature, with particular historical and social factors, can be regarded as a non-centric literary form. While the majority of Hong Kong people speaks Cantonese as their mother tongue, they are required to write in Mandarin. Additionally, Hong Kong literature struggles to attract attention from an apathetic audience, to produce local writers, and to resonate with foreign readers. As serious literature continues to lose its purchase, more and more writers attempt to break out from this predicament and inject new blood into this fading industry. Efforts include circumventing traditional constraints and incorporating more colloquial Cantonese into various publications, as well as a mushrooming of internet novels. Unfortunately, Chinese education remains rigid and inflexible, hindering students' ability to use writing as a creative outlet. Literature is also heavily commodified. In light of this, I suggest that reading be encouraged and literature be de-commodified. Hong Kong literature, with its distinctive features and strengths, have the potential to thrive. All it needs is sufficient support from the government, the private sector and the general public.

To advocate for a distinctive Hong Kong literature does not mean belittling the traditional way of writing in Mandarin Chinese. As Fok (2018: 70) argues, writing in Mandarin Chinese has a direct, functional role that Cantonese writing cannot overtake. Cantonese speech's many filler words and metaphors inevitably make pure Cantonese writing clumsy and colloquial, and not many people know how to write accurate Cantonese characters, especially with respect to the filler words, since there are so many of them. However, to think that literature is only those compositions written in pure Mandarin Chinese

would miss out on the many opportunities to take advantage of Cantonese's vibrant imagery and clever humour. Cantonese should not just be a means of oral communication, and Cantonese writings should not be considered just informal or even vulgar. It is a well-developed, sophisticated, musical language form that deserves more recognition. The rise of Cantonese internet novels and their burgeoning popularity validate the immense potential Cantonese literature embodies.

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