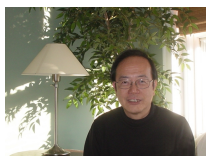


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Asies réelles



Hong Kong, metaphor of the contemporary world

Interview with Leung
Ping-kwan

Régis Poulet, Leung Ping-kwan
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RP: « In France you are known as a Hong Kong writer and, actually, the city seems to have a tremendous importance in your work. In western minds, Hong Kong appears to be a successful hybrid of East and West, as if Asia was one and the West monolithic. In a 1994 short story called "Boundaries", you say that its nothing but 'romantic' being hongkongese. Could you give us your vision of Hong Kong toward the clichés of kung fu, tycoon or triads ? Are Wong Kar wai's movies slightly responsible for a mis-perception of Hong Kong ?

LPK: It's interesting that you should talk about East and West. Actually I have a book of poems by the name of "dong xi", and you know, in Chinese "dong" means "east" and "xi" means "west", but the two character together could mean 'things', 'objects', 'matters'. This time in France my poems in the exhibition and printed in the small book are poems from this collection, and Annie has translated the title as "De ci de la des choses" which i think is very interesting. In the afterwords of the original Chinese book I had said, "traveling between cultures made me understood that there's not just one East, nor just one "west", but there are many many 'dongxi" , many things, and my poems have dealt with these many different matters. So like you, i don't believe that East or west should be monolithic. Even when we talk about hybrid, there are many kinds of hybridities as well. Different kinds of cultural encounters. Generalization is no fun for me. For artworks we appreciate those that are vivid and colourful, but at the same time could bring out different layers of association and meanings, like food! I have said HK is anything but romantic, I have said that in HK you couldn't afford to be romantic. But Wong Kar-wai 's films are romantic at times, and I quite like his films. When everybody is cynical and commercial, a modern kind of romantic depiction could be refreshing too. But I appreciate Wong Kar-wai in his being able to present a new perspective in looking at HK city. 2046 has a futuristic aspect, but it's also a romantic way to look at HK of the 1960s. Not many people looks at Hk that way. Even when he uses clichés of gangster, kung fu, dandy, triad or romance, Wong Kar Wai's movies have always been able to renew these clichés as well. A young critic once compared my early novella "Paper Cut-outs"(1977) with Wong Kar-wai's « Chungking Express » in their depiction of the city. I think growing up in Hong Kong we all found that the city has for a long time been represented by all kinds of political and cultural clichés that you have no ways to escape from, you could only face them, ponder on them, renew them for your own use. I have a recent short story called 'Bruce Lee and me', in which i juxtaposed some fragments of his life story and screen episodes with episodes from the life of somebody very different from him. We do have Bruce Lee, but in reality we know all our friends live life very different from Bruce Lee or Jacky Chan. The co-existences of all these worlds are what made Hk interesting for me.

RP: Even if the globalization process began much earlier than we use to think - in the 16th and 17th centuries at least, we usually agree that during the 1990s the different parts of the world were more tied to each other than during the 1970th. In other words, it means that boundaries are weaker or vanishing. You but say in the same short story « Boundaries » that 1970s' world had no boundaries. Was it just an illusion or was it the feeling that differences were diminishing by entropy, preparing this « indescribable taste » you evoke in this poem entitled « Tea-coffee » : « Pour the tea / into a cup of coffee, will the aroma of one / interfere with, wash out the other ? Or will the other / keep its flavour » ?

LPK: Well, is it an illusion? I think it's more like a 'feeling' about the 1970s. That it seemed to us then "that the world was without boundaries". People who had passed through late 1960s and 1970s did find a different atmosphere then. The alternative cultures did bring changes to people's values judgement, and their attitudes in life. That was the time I began to write, and the more open atmosphere of the time encouraged me to explore different cultures, even less prominent ones. It is easy to talk about border-crossing. But actually, when you cross the border you are no longer in

secure places, you are at the risk of being ridiculous, out of place. You are no longer the center, in control, you'll be venturing into places unknown of before. "Tea-coffee" was from a series of poems called "Foodscape" in which I explored various sentiments and ideas using the topic of food. Cultural encounters could be very rewarding, but sometimes the encounters could also be mixed with political or economical forces, and sometimes the two cultures do not encounter on equal footing. People could enrich oneself through cultural excounters, but sometimes they worried of losing themselves, and justifiable to think so too. In reality, tea-coffee is a very popular drink for the common people, and it came out of course from Hk's specific history. Later I had a series of poems about cultural crossovers : e.g.: A giraffe going from Egypt to Paris, A tapestry sent by the Portugese King to the Chinese emperor, The silk road, The British Painter George Chinnery who came to Macau and painted a Macanese Boat Girl in Western style, while almost at the same time, the Chinese painter Wu Li who came to Macau to study religion and became catholic and his painting also received influences from Western paintings. I think all these characters really fascinating !

RP: You said that Hong Kong offers coexistence of different worlds ; could we say that Hong Kong is a kind of metaphor for the contemporary situation : a splited center (Kowloon and Hong Kong Island) overestimating its own importance and hundred of islands like Ping Chau or Nam Chung where the meaning of (sedimentary) layers and the meaning of a stream are not forgotten ? In other words, isn't Hk a forgetful city in its centre and a grounded, close to the thickness of time and space city at its periphery ?

LPK: Yes, I think you said it nicely in your language. I have tried to explore the different layers in my story "The Islands and the Continents". Yet in recent years I have wanted not to concentrate too much just on HK, but would like to examine it in relation to other cultures : with eastern european cities, with other asian cities. I would like to venture in relation to other historical and geopolitical sites to see the formation or the problems (or the marvels) of the co-existences.

RP: Could you explain the kind of relationships Hk has with other cities ? On what ground are they settled and for what purpose ?

LPK: I think in order to talk about the relationships HK has with other cities, we could approach the issues in two directions. One is the real relationship that we could trace if we look back at history carefully. In 1949, after the establishment of People's Republic of China, there were more than one million people moved from China to HK. They were mostly people who disagreed with the communist ideology, among them there were many philosophers, film people, as well as literary and media people. Their move to HK enriched the culture of HK, and made HK an illegitimate successor of chinese culture, and in reality developed an alternative kind of Chinese culture. The people from Mainland came from different provinces, and in particular the literary figure from Shanghai and Kwongzhou were most prominent, and HK always has very close links with these two cities. During the Korean War in the fifties, partly due to the cold war situation, China under embargo (and later because of ideological reason and because the Cultural Revolution) was cut off with the outside world, while HK has further developed trade and cultural relationships with other Asian countries. HK's film industry exported well to Singaport, Malaysia as well as south Korea and Taipei, and had close cultural relationship for many years. And in the 1960s there were also co-productions with film studios from Japan and with other talents in different fields from Asia, to seek further development in Asian collaboration. As in the recent decade, since the 1990s there were more and more trans-national co-production, we see that they actually had problems and merits, as shown in recent trends of co-production between HK and Mainland China, but we also see these in Peter Chan's recent efforts in Pan-Asian co-production such as "Perhaps, Love". But when I talked about HK's relationships with other cities, i also envision an imaginary relations. I tried to develop in my works

different comparisons with other cities, in order to broaden the general vision, to divert Hk from a self-reflective and 'self-pity' kind of mentality, in order to understand and further examine the identity studies. I was disappointed by the failure of the student movement in the Summer of 1989 in Beijing and the final crackdown at Tienanmen in June, and therefore looked with expectation to the changes in Eastern Europe later that year, and the fall of the Berlin wall and the Socialist States. Therefore I made use of a grant to Berlin next Summer to visit East Germany and Eastern Europe. Later the stories i wrote in "Postcard from Prague" , naturally there were comparison between Eastern European cities and Chinese cities. But while putting them in relation to each other I also see the differences. With the fall of the socialist systems we also see the new kinds of problems that came with the new economic modes. When we reflected we could see that the Chinese issues could not easily be solved: while condemning the Yellow Earth Culture, it also became clear that the Blue Sea culture may work in these. Recently I was interested in Japanese popular culture and its influences on other Asian, such as HK 's, culture. I have stayed in Japan for sometime and am now working with a Japanese culture critic on a book consisted of comparison of the urban culture in HK and Tokyo. It was only through comparison we understand more about ourselves. In recent years, other than creative works such as poems and stories, i have also written different volumes of travelogues, basically essays about different cities and their cultures: about Berlin, Taiwan, Beijing, Quanming, Kyoto. I am interested in the cultures from different cities, and I wish to understand more, and i believe we would not be able to understand ourselves if we do not try to understand other cultures.

RP: You seem mainly focused on urban culture, does it mean that any renewal or solution should only come from cities ? What place do native peoples and cultures may have in the future toward prominent ones : a role like « islands » beside the « continent(s) » ?

LPK: I have written extensively on urban culture, that was because of my background of growing up in a densely populated city. But of course i have the appreciation for nature too, and i envy people who have the chances to be in touch of nature, not to say that i have great admiration for landscape poetry and painting from old China. Arriving at Saorge on the mountain of Alps refreshed my memory [1]. Actually I grew up in a village in the Southern part of HK island, with the family growing vegetables and raising chickens! It's just that I have been away from the countryside too long. I appreciated that here there's a garden, and for lunch you could pick the mints and herbs to make an *omelette*. You could look very far into the faraway mountains, and you encountered people who work with their hands. This is a rare opportunity for me to live in an environment that's very different from my regular environment in the city. My belief is that it needn't to be binary opposition. You like the city doesn't mean you hate the countryside, you write about women doesn't mean you despise men, you love to drink wine but you could also love to drink tea in the morning. I appreciate the different kinds of people, poetry and food that i encounter. I don't think only one genre, one type of space or one attitude is the answer !

RP: Chinese culture(s) has strong relations with earth and rare if not weak ones with the sea, hasn't it ? But for cities like Shanghai and almost Hong Kong, the sea seems no boundary but a threshold. Isn't it something knew ? To what extent do chinese arts and literature deals with that ?

LPK: Yes, you are basically right. Except for Zhang He in the Ming Dynasty who led the flight of ships to explore by sea the outside world, China had not been very active in going to the sea. The coastal areas such as Kwongzhou, Hong Kong, Fuzhow, Chuanzhou, Tsingtao, Shanghai, Taiwan and Macau were more exceptional in their communication with the outside world. The coastal areas are usually more open to the outside, more flexible in accepting different cultures and customs. The recent centuries also witnessed the expansion of European powers in colonization in coastal areas such as Macau, Tsingtao, Taiwan and Hong Kong. China in the beginning of 20th century felt its own

weakness and isolation, and therefore had many scholars looked or went across the ocean to the West for remedy and to contribute to China's political and social reform. The revolution to overrule the Qing dynasty in 1911 actually first started in Canton. The coastal areas are always "far from the emperor" and not so easily abided by the national doctrines. Colonialism is a complicated issue in China, while it did bring a lot of ills, it also provided alternative space for alternative forms of Chinese cultures to exist and flourish, at a time when Mainland China was fallen into corrupted rules or under extreme political fanaticism. The sea has been very much a part of the imagination in modern China. In the time after China opened up in the early 1980s, as recent as 1989 during the student movement, there was a popular TV series call "River Elegy" scripted by intellectuals, which claimed the 'culture of the Blue Sea' was against the "culture of the Yellow Earth". They are using the metaphor for the sea to advocate for openness and 'going into the world'. In my opinion, and with the hindsight of the present situation, I can see that the 'culture of the blue sea' didn't solve all the problems. China with it's present openness in traffic and trade (and the people's sudden embracement of values from the West) without more open education and publication to understand better the real significances of other cultures, created intellectual vacuum and could lead to other kinds of crisis. I am interested in theses issues and have written series of poems about Macau and Hong Kong to explore the various encounters with 'the cultures from the sea'. My poems in DongXi (East West Matters) partly translated by Annie into the new volume "De Ci ce la des choses" included poems about Chinese painters Wu Li who came to know of Catholic belief and Western paintings, while British painter George Chinnery settled in Macau to draw the streets and people of the East; there was the giraffe that traveled from Egypt to Paris, on the other hand, the Protugese Emperor sent a tapestry to the emperor in China and it took a long and strange journey to arrive. Also in the old days people from China and Rome traveled the silk road and weave their imagination of the others into colorful pictures!

RP: In mainland China, literature is nothing but single ; but if we consider Hong Kong's, Taiwan's and all the chinese writers abroad sometimes writing in an european language, the chinese literature contemporary panorama gets complex. To what extent does postcolonial practice of thinking the center and the periphery can be useful to depict this situation ?

LPK: If we look at English literature now, it'd include writings by different writers from different countries and cultures using English with their own cultural flavour, which added to the richness of literature in the contemporary world. But this had not been fully accepted in the contemporary world of Chinese literature. Although journal from HK like Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese put emphasis on "Literature in Chinese", and scholar like Shi Shu-mei and David Der-wai Wang had talked about "sinophone literature", all aiming to expand further on the present narrow delineation of "Chinese Literature", yet for a lot of sinologist and for Mainland critics, they still would not like to look beyond the mainland to see the rich varieties in the use of Chinese as well as in the depiction of different life attitude, values and cultures as expressed in the other literature written in Chinese. The thinking about center and periphery could be useful as a starting point to show the unbalanced distribution of power. But perhaps we could be even more constructive to see historical links, interactions, and the various similarities and differences that construct a very complicated literary map that eventually will not just stop at binary opposition. I had written a story called "The Islands and the Continents" in the 1980s, and when i looked more carefully into their relationship, then i discover that there's not just one type of island and not just one type of continent. Also in the islands we see continents as well, and the vise versa. To describe or to understand the various relationship and the communications as well as misunderstandings that have arisen, are already writing projects that is worth to explore.

RP: In « Elephants », you talked about some peculiar streets in Central District, closer and more real

than others, streets you considered not to be dependent on the time. Does this tribute to a familiar and unchanging China mean that to you, whatever direction chinese literature may take, whatever enrichment it may get from outside, the simple and former chinese classics would prevail ?

LPK: No, actually I was showing how these streets in the older areas of Hong Kong (in the old Central and Shuang Wan area) were undergoing the impact of changes. They, like anything else, could not exist independent of time. This and more obviously in my novella "Paper Cut-outs" I was trying to depict how impact of modernity had on a relatively traditional community and the changes in values and custom, and how people adapted to it, or not being able to adapt to it; and the illusions, dreams and psychosis that came with it. As for the classics, you could say there are similarities as well. Although there seems to be more stable evaluation for the great novel "Story of the Stone" and poems by Li Po and Tu Fu, there are frequent reevaluation of literary works for every new generation. Each generation would look back at such works that were ignored in the past but would make sense to them at the present, the enthusiasm for the modern writer Eileen Zhang, would be a good example. Literary works, would have to meet the challenge of time, and stand the wear and tear in life, not unlike old buildings in the old alleys. In order for classics to live on, we need to reread and find elements that are relevant to our present life. I am not particularly nostalgic, i am more interested in the encounters of the old and the new, and the various psychological conditions that developed from these encounters.

See also, on Leung Ping-kwan, [Eloge de la rencontre](#).

Post-scriptum : LEUNG Ping-kwan was born in 1948 in Hong Kong where he teaches comparative literature at Lingnan university. He has written around thirty books, mainly poetry, but also several novels and short stories, and many essays about literature and cinema, trying to understand Hong Kong's specificity.

[1] Leung stayed two months at the Saorge monastery, near Nice (France) as [invited writer](#).