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English-Language Creative Writing in Hong Kong: Colonial Stereotype and Process

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

With the handover of Hong Kong (now a special administrative region, or SAR) to China and under the “one country, two systems” policy, Hong Kong University is moving away from colonial education policies toward a vision of higher education as a global creative and knowledge industry. This vision draws generously on U.S. standards of excellence for research and teaching. Institutional transformation is effected in gross structural changes—for example, from yearlong lecture courses to semester credit-bearing modules—and in subtle cultural shifts, including student evaluations and research assessment based on the Carnegie Report on Higher Education.

In spite of these trends, some veteran faculty members continue to

maintain low expectations of students' abilities and achievement goals, based on biases drawn from approaches to teaching English to "nonnative" speakers. As B. B. Kachru noted in 1992 (citing Ferguson 1982: vii), "the whole mystique of native speaker and mother tongue should probably be quietly dropped from the linguists' set of professional myths about language" (5). English is highly diversified, and such diversity can signify "distance," "creativity potential," or the "Caliban syndrome" (218). Kachru theorizes three circles of English diversity: the norm-providing varieties in the inner circle (e.g., British and American Englishes); the norm-developing speech fellowships in the outer circle (e.g., Singapore or Indian English); and the norm-dependent varieties in the expanding circle (English used in Korea or Saudi Arabia). English, as the language of international entertainment, the Internet, commerce, research, and much of international higher education, has a different purchase among young Hong Kongers than it had a generation or two ago, when the gulf between colonial and colonized, local and global, appeared unbridgeable. Moreover, the movements of Hong Kong people globally, usually in circuits of English-language territories, such as Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, result in an evolving role for English in Hong Kong as a norm-developing variety, with more endocentric norms and established linguistic and cultural identity.¹

Stereotypes of the Hong Kong students' relationship to English, however, still pervade to the detriment of the teaching mission. A major stereotype is that Hong Kong students can only learn by rote because of the poor teaching and the overreliance on exams and memorization that they have suffered. Another stereotype is that students are alienated from the English language and reject the potential for cultural expression in English. Related to this is a third stereotype, that Hong Kong students view education as strictly utilitarian and English as instrumental. Even worse, some teachers negatively stereotype students the way they do all of Hong Kong society; that is, that students, like their parents, are only or chiefly interested in making money and are materialistic philistines. These prejudices are shared by many, teachers and nonacademics, expatriate Westerners and native Hong Kongers. Like all stereotypes, they are damaging, and their damage can be seen in the ways in which they curtail imaginative efforts to encourage creativity, cultural learning, and performance.

I had my first major experience with the disconnection between colonial teaching attitudes and social reality when I offered a double-semester seminar on creative writing to third-year English majors (seniors) in 1999–2000. Reading my students' first assignment, I worried over how to teach them a sense of literariness in a language plainly not their own. Their grammar was faulty, syntax clumsy, idioms awkward, and ability to produce any

quantity of writing uncertain. However, despite this alarming beginning, their poems and stories (the average of an assignment a week) have shown remarkable improvement.

Indeed, my students, stereotyped as passive, materialistic, and alienated from the English language, are as culturally alert, sensitive, curious, and capable of wonderful expressive skills as American students in elite universities. I include examples of their poems that have appeared in a new English-language literary magazine, *Yuan Yang: A Journal of Hong Kong and International Writing*, which the students produced as part of their class project.

Neighbour

Jumping and hopping on your floor,
You rock my ceiling
And shake the smell of herbs away.

Pills in bottles crowd my balcony.
Petals dropped from your potted flowers
Blanket my bald head like hair.

A ballad dances on your piano.
Breaking through the solid air,
Your music makes my bamboo sticks sway.
—Venus Tsang Chiu Ying²

When

I hopscotch
My shadow flickers on the ground
Jumping into strange silhouettes
My childhood
Like hopscotch
Shifts from one abode to another
Drifts my hordes of buddies apart

I had to
Farewell
My home
The clothesline
Passageways
Ladder streets
Slip down
To greet the
Skyscrapers
—Eliza Wong Fong Ting

Fried Chestnuts

Next to the ditch and rubbish bin,
where flies and cockroaches linger,
I meet a man
who waits for customers
from midnight film shows.

With a rusted metal spade in his hands,
he grins and says,
“Twenty-four dollars for a pound.”
He fries
the chestnuts in the wok.

Wounds
on his fingertips expose
the soft flesh under his wrinkled skin.
You had hands coarser than his,
but I like the way you patted my face.

Cracks
on the reddish-brown shells
show the golden kernel.
You bought me fried chestnuts
and the yellow mist in your eyes thickened.

Your last days in the white prison,
no snack but glucose.
I won't buy fried chestnuts again,
as soaked with tears
they are bitter.

— Michelle Fok Ka Ling

Turning Point

We share our red wine
at the Christmas party
We prepare our sandwiches
for the school picnic
We go to the fireworks
during Chinese New Year
We quit the college
before the exams
We join the gangsters
right after your birthday
We share the needles

nearly everyday
I die with you
Yesterday
—Addy Ng

Our Father

Our Father who art in office
Hallowed be thy post.
Thy income come,
Thy will be done,
At work but not at home.
Give us this day our daily cash;
And forgive us for ignoring thee,
As we also have forgiven thee for ignoring us;
And lead us not into bankruptcy,
But deliver us from poverty.
For thine is the income, the money and the salary,
For as long as thou art in the labour force —
Poor man.
—Wong Ho-yin

The thirteen students made up the editorial board of *Yuan Yang*. They were responsible for the entire production: from selecting the title (the name of a popular Hong Kong beverage composed of equal parts tea and coffee), to composing the publicity, finding donors, producing the camera-ready copy, working with the printer, and marketing and distribution. Exploiting my network, I invited submissions from international poets, but the student editors took charge of the correspondence and selected the contents. The journal, the only English-language creative-writing outlet for young Hong Kong writers today, with over a hundred pages of fiction and poetry, was launched on 2 May 2000. It has received much press notice, including interviews on “Hong Kong Today,” the flagship program of RTHK Radio 3, the only English-language radio program in Hong Kong featuring current affairs and news reports, and the *South China Morning Post*, the premier English-language newspaper in the SAR.

The journal’s success confirms the students’ rapid development as English-language creative writers. How does one account for this “transformation”? I reject the interpretation that what took place during the class was a “transformation.” According to many of the students, they had wanted to write creatively for a long time, but they never had the opportunity, con-

fidence, encouragement, community support, and material means to do so. Eliza Wong writes, “I had never thought of being a great poet or writer before though I like writing. I simply thought I was not cut out for that.”³ Michelle Fok elaborates on the intense discouragement of any kind of creative writing faced by young Hong Kong people in the public school system: “In the past, though I tried to write something creative. . . it was hard to find guidelines and encouragement from teachers. . . . Instead I was asked to write analytically which is emphasized by the educational system. Consequently, I thought creative writing was the privilege for those who are very talented. I didn’t think I had the talent. Now . . . I find that what is important [is] the patience and the desire to write.”

Misconceptions of what constitutes good writing prevented some from developing their voices. Wong Ho-yin confesses, “The most important change in my writing is . . . in my attitude towards writing. I have learnt that being a Hong Kong writer I should write about Hong Kong and not about Greco-Roman mythology, which I am fond of.” He adds, “I do not feel uncomfortable injecting elements of Hong Kong and putting Romanized forms of Cantonese or Mandarin words in my poems. Now I am proud [to] let the English-speaking world know about my home.”

The opportunity to be with a community of like-minded and motivated English-language writers was another major catalyst for their growth. Venus Tsang speaks of the value of group work, oral performance, writing to an audience, revision, and a supportive writers’ community: “After taking this course, I feel much more confidence in expressing myself and this is mostly a result of being in a group of writers. Through sharing and revising, I feel others’ support and sometimes even appreciation which greatly increase my confidence and motivation to continue writing. Opportunities to read in class and on other occasions allow me to savor the taste of being a writer.” In short, as I said to Katherine Forestier (2000: 5) for the *South China Morning Post* interview, “It is not that I have taught them anything new, but that they have begun to tap something very old in them.”

Students’ enthusiasm was perceptible and unflagging through the two-semester course. We held makeup classes even during the most important holidays—for example, during the Chinese New Year break. I set up an e-mail bulletin board, and as the journal project evolved, they exchanged long, affectionate e-mails. A community of writers, we did our fair share of pizza feasting. And, peculiar to Hong Kong, mobile telephone numbers were a central feature in setting up the separate group meetings that took place outside of class time.

In teaching creative writing to Hong Kong students, I deployed the simple strategies I had used for decades in the United States—meditation, imaging, freewriting, imitation, collaborative learning, small group work, writing as process, desktop publishing, and so forth. I have found Hong Kong students as receptive as, if not more receptive than, U.S. students. Perhaps because these classroom techniques are new to them, they find them more stimulating and engaging than many American students would. Yes, they tend to be quieter, and I have to wait longer for discussion. But they collaborate more easily and eagerly. Their writing may be more awkward, but it possesses fascinating cultural specificity and represents rich social relationships. They submit their work regularly, eagerly read my comments, and revise and rewrite faithfully. But no one has asked for an individual meeting, the way that my American students did, to look for separate approval and a unique relationship with the teacher. Instead, they come in small groups to my office. And during the break for refreshments, they chatter loudly like university students all over the United States, except in two languages.

Generalizations about Hong Kong students cannot be drawn from this small sample, except for the generalization that negative stereotypes concerning their restricted and utilitarian attitudes to the English language result from and produce constricted pedagogical missions. The pioneering editors of *Yuan Yang* share attitudes similar to those expressed by the University of California, Santa Barbara students I had taught. They are weary of lectures, dislike rote learning, love reading literature, and wish to become more expressive. And for a sizable few, as in Milton's *Lycidas*, fame is the spur to their dreams of writing English.

Notes

1. For this approach to English in Hong Kong, see Bolton 2000.
2. In the Chinese style of naming, the student's family name appears first; however, in adding a Western name, that name appears, in the English style, before the family name. Hence, the family or surname here is Tsang.
3. This and subsequent passages are taken from students' informal written responses to the request that they write something brief about their experiences in the course.