

Hong Kong, the Rise of China, and Contemporary Literature
by Josiah Tsui

Locusts and dogs

In January of this year, a girl from mainland China dropped a bowl of noodles on the Hong Kong subway, and was berated by a local man – in Cantonese – for her ignorance of the subway rules.¹ When the girl's mother refused to apologize for her daughter's behavior, the man asked one of the subway staff to remove the girl and her mother from the subway. Soon, other locals began yelling at the mother, criticizing her arrogance and lack of respect. A grainy video of the incident, recorded and uploaded online, attracted millions of views and sparked an outpouring of anti-Chinese sentiment in Hong Kong. If you ask a Hong Konger to characterize the relationship between Hong Kong and China, it's not unlikely that he or she will show you this video.

Alternatively, you might hear about the tens of thousands of pregnant women from the mainland who have traveled to Hong Kong to give birth in local hospitals – a development which has strained public resources and angered many of Hong Kong's residents.² These women travel into Hong Kong illegally, but their children receive Hong Kong citizenship and access to public services. What do these incidents have in common? Why do they resurface again and again in interviews and op-eds as *representative* of the Hong Kong-China relationship? An obvious response would be to say that they illustrate the tension between Hong Kong's natives and their Chinese neighbors; the incidents underscore the importance of character, identity, and nationality in Hong Kong (three strands which are increasingly difficult to untangle in the context of the city's relationship with China). *We* follow the rules, say the Hong Kongers, while *they* flout them. *We* are compassionate, and *they* are taking advantage of it. It is a position, perhaps, of supposed cultural and moral superiority. And there are some well-reasoned points to this argument. It is true, after all, that China's government has faced criticism from international media for its lack of transparency, and that the influx of mainland mothers has created logistical problems in Hong Kong's hospitals.

Look more closely, though, and some of these claims reveal a bit of hypocrisy. In the first case, the center of the conflict is a young girl; in the second, pregnant mothers. If these are representative of the so-called “locusts” – the mainland Chinese who critics claim have “infested” the city – then the nativist response seems oversensitive, perhaps even malicious. (It should be noted, though, that one Chinese response to the first incident was to call the Hong Kongers subservient “dogs.” Clearly, the animosity can run both ways.) Perhaps the Hong Kongers have forgotten that, in the years preceding 1997, many Hong Kong parents moved abroad so that their children would have Western passports and, the reasoning went, better opportunities. The comparison is of course imperfect – that wave of migration was legal, and did not involve an abuse of other countries' public resources. The point, though, is that all parents worry about their children's futures, and that the differences between Hong Kongers and mainlanders are often more circumstantial than substantive.

Another reason that these two developments have become so important in the Hong Kong-China conversation is the simple fact that *they are stories* – stories with recognizable characters and clear, relatable narratives. The girl on the subway train, the mothers who seek a better future for their children – these are ordinary individuals whose situations have come to represent much larger tensions between a rising global power, China, and its cosmopolitan “special administrative region” – Hong

1 <http://www.economist.com/node/21546051>

2 <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2012/02/01/about-that-hong-kong-locust-ad/>

Kong.

Credible issues, issues of credibility

My research project this summer was to conduct interviews and document social protests in Hong Kong, with the final goal of writing a novella that incorporated my experiences. The project combined my two primary areas of study at the Johns Hopkins University – international politics and literature – and provided me an opportunity to explore the connections between two fields that do not always overlap. In my research proposal, I cited examples of modern authors, such as Albert Camus and Milan Kundera, who had used their novels to explore complex political issues. I also emphasized literature's “universal citizenship,” and its ability to transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. The novel, after all, has the ability to transmit ideas – whether obliquely or directly – in a way that a newspaper or textbook cannot.

And yet, as in the case of the online video mentioned earlier, new forms of media have profound impacts on the ways in which we understand the world around us. Instant messages and microblogs, for instance, provide a constant, running account of daily life, while the ubiquity of cellphones has all but eliminated privacy in modern societies. In an age of unprecedented global accessibility, we sit hunched over, transfixed by tiny screens, aware of everything and nothing at once. And does this not change the way we interact with others? Does it not affect the way in which we create and process narratives? The philosopher Walter Benjamin once wrote:

“...there [now] emerges a form of communication which, no matter how far back its origin may lie, never before influenced the epic form in a decisive way. But now it does exert such an influence. And it turns out that it confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way, and that it also brings about a crisis in the novel. This new form of communication is information.”³

Benjamin perceived that society had begun to replace the medium of novels with a steady flow of irrelevant information and the presumption of understanding. “Every morning brings us the news of the globe,” he wrote, “and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories.” This was in 1936. Nearly 80 years later, the novel remains in a state of crisis, though it has not, thankfully, become obsolete.

The relationship between literature and new forms of media is well-documented elsewhere, though I believe that, for the purposes of this piece, it is sufficient to say that many of the recent developments are intuitive. It is not a surprise, for example, that literary forms have become more disjointed and fragmented in recent decades, just as cable television and the Internet have perfected the art of communicating in five-second bursts. Each informs the other – contemporary literature and hyperefficient media – and we run the risk of misunderstanding both if we do not consider this relationship. In Hong Kong this summer, it seemed as if every other person on the street had a phone to their ear. In the subways, people read the news on electronic tablets, listened to music on oversized headphones, and wrote Chinese messages using touchscreens. While I do not think that Hong Kong is unique in its reliance on technology, I do want to emphasize the role of instantaneous communication in shaping the city's culture.

Hong Kong is an island city of seven million people, and prides itself on producing its own films, news cycles, and pop stars. While the city is largely accessible to those who speak English or Mandarin Chinese, the Cantonese dialect is the primary language of virtually all Hong Kongers. The city's self-sufficiency makes it adaptive and dynamic, but it also means that politics tend to be insular and sensationalist. In the recent elections for Chief Executive, both candidates, Henry Tang and Leung Chun-ying, had to face incessant media questioning

3 Benjamin, Walter. *The Storyteller*, http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf.

over corruption scandals. Leung, who won the election and took office this summer, has had his political credibility undermined by revelations of illegal structural additions to his house (a development which is all the more embarrassing because he brought down his rival using similar allegations). Throughout these developments, the news media seemed to feed (and feed off of) public outrage. I mention these aspects of the city because I want to provide some basic context for my project, but also because they are examples of issues that are far too complicated to *explain* fully.

Questions of identity formation in Hong Kong, for example, might span the entire careers of psychologists and sociologists, while political scientists might look for the origins of recent conflicts through the lens of Hong Kong's Basic Law. Linguists, too, have probably already researched the speaking habits of Hong Kong's teenagers, many of whom are quite skilled at combining English and Cantonese in creative formulations. Yet while these issues might be answered satisfactorily by scholars, they are the easy ones. How might one begin to assess the respective roles of identity, technology, news media, and wealth inequality in the recent election for Chief Executive of Hong Kong? How has the legacy of British colonialism affected the current response to China's growing power? My opinion is that good *explanations* for these sorts of questions are necessarily reductive, and perhaps impossible. Stories, though, do not bear the burden of explanation – they must simply pass the test of credibility.⁴ As I began to take notes and write this summer, I did consider the fact that, in an age of online videos and instant news coverage (both of which claim to provide unbiased access to reality), authorial credibility is hard to come by.

Sensationalism in news and fiction

As I conducted research and wrote, I thought constantly about how to incorporate the daily news into my story. There were a number of true elements, in fact, which I found too strange, or too fantastic, to put in the story. One scene on the news – that of workers in hazmat suits carrying bird cages away from a public park – seemed as if it had come straight from the absurd, catastrophic world of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. Another, of parents protesting China's new education policy, seemed too convenient as a way of demonstrating Hong Kong's anxiety about its future.

I mentioned earlier that the news media in Hong Kong are quite attracted to controversies and scandals – and even more so when political figures are involved. The elections for Chief Executive this year hinged on which candidate was better prepared to smear his opponent, and, as in the United States, an endless supply of radio and television pundits lined up to provide their own take on the issues. In a crowded city, with a number of news outlets vying for attention, it is easy to see how minor issues can become distorted and exaggerated, even as more substantive issues are ignored. What I would like to focus on, though, is not the problem of sensationalism (which is, of course, not unique to Hong Kong), but the way in which my experiences with sensationalism informed my approach to the story.

Sensationalism, to me, is represented by the qualities of haste and loudness. It obscures the truth by favoring quick answers over reasoned discourse. One of the goals of my project, then, was to create a fictional work that was slow, deliberate, and quiet. I wanted to see if it might be true, as in Aesop's fable of the wind and the sun, that gentleness and insistence are more persuasive than bluster.

One may note that many of the characters and events in my story seem to exist on the periphery of cultural and political conflict – that they are not in the center of protests. This is a valid criticism, if intended as such, but I would counter that I did not set out to write a news

⁴ Ibid.

article, nor an extended profile of a single protester, nor a piece of non-fiction. Ernest Hemingway wrote in *A Moveable Feast* that a good book should be *truer than if it actually happened*.⁵ My feeling is that this was not hyperbole, but a way of saying that the author's task is not the reproduce reality, but create a new one – one that is more convincing and more meaningful than reality itself. In order to address an event, or set of events, such as the 1997 handover in Hong Kong or the recent protests over the Chief Executive elections, the writer ought to approach the task obliquely, and to work from the margins toward the center. Anything else (a story that begins with the protests and has as its protagonists the Chief Executive and the Queen of England, for example) runs the risk of seeming affected, perhaps contrived.

Part of the writing process, too, is that of discovery. The historian Lynn Hunt has noted that writing is not simply “transcription,” but instead a “mysterious process that makes it possible think differently.”⁶ The act of writing is not simply expressing what you already know, but finding out what you think. This has certainly been true of my experience this summer. As I began to incorporate different characters and developments, to place disparate elements in the sphere of the story, I began to see each individual part more clearly. Making my observations and opinions clear to the reader, however, remains part of the challenge of revision.

My own thought experiment, though, is to consider the following assertion: a newspaper should not be read except as a novel (with a deep and willful empathy for the characters involved); a novel should not be understood as anything other than a clear and honest account of what happened yesterday, at the corner of 31st and St. Paul. What happens if we consider this inversion of roles? Do the newspaper and novel become more compelling? Do they collapse?

What I have attempted to show, in a somewhat roundabout way, is that sensationalism is another form of storytelling, albeit one that is reductive and unproductive, and contrary to what journalism should strive to do. Moreover, it is a trend that seems embedded within Hong Kong's culture and institutions. My goal has been to explore, in a fictional story, the truth that may be missing from newspapers and television reports. I have sought, in my story, to counter the distortion of the news with the truth of fiction.

Notes on various elements within the story

I decided to utilize a somewhat fractured narrative design for my project this summer, for several reasons. Here I use the word *fractured* to indicate both the story's treatment of time and the way in which there are chapters throughout the story that are more essayistic, perhaps less obviously related to the narrative. There is no doubt that part of this is imitative – more and more contemporary authors have chosen unconventional narrative designs in their novels, and I have certainly, in my own reading, grown accustomed to non-realist approaches to fiction. John Barth, who taught Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins for many years, is an example of such an author, and is well-known for pioneering post-modern approaches to fiction, which include the use of irony, self-awareness, and a fragmented style of story-telling. Another factor, though, is the scope of the issue. While I do not consider myself an expert on Hong Kong's history or politics, I did think that I would be able to more accurately portray the city by adopting a more flexible narrative framework.

While it might have seemed a bit implausible, in the past, to have a a story with friends from, say, suburban Ohio and London and Hong Kong, it is becoming more and more unusual for characters (and people) *not* to exhibit transnational ties and connections. These days, we see pictures from Egyptian protests on magazine stands and reports about the European debt crisis

5 Hemingway, Ernest. *A Moveable Feast*.

6 Hunt, Lynn. “How Writing Leads to Thinking”.

on the evening news. At an institution such as Johns Hopkins, or in a major city such as Hong Kong, global connections are even more unavoidable. A growing number of Hong Kong students, for example, go abroad for their tertiary education, and there are expatriates from nearly all of the world's countries in Hong Kong's business districts. I wanted to reflect this reality in my story by including characters and developments from different countries and backgrounds.

I do not want to say that any of these elements are necessary to tell a story about Hong Kong; there are plenty of examples of linear narratives and tightly focused stories that are well-crafted and emotionally profound. Instead, I want to provide a few explanations for the decisions I made in my own story, and to explain how my experiences in Hong Kong influenced the process of organizing my thoughts.

Conversations

The most insightful moments during my time in Hong Kong came when I was speaking with local citizens about their perception of the city, its politics, and its future. They came from a variety of backgrounds and expressed concerns about different issues, but the economic and political impact of China on Hong Kong's future was a concern shared by all. The problem of income inequality was a close second. As of 2011, the gap between the rich and the poor was more severe in Hong Kong than in the United States or the United Kingdom.⁷ At the same time, food and rent have continued to grow more expensive, putting a strain on Hong Kong's poor. This development has guided, and will continue to guide, most discussions on Hong Kong's public policy.

In fact, it is sometimes difficult to separate fears about China's influence from concerns about the unequal distribution of wealth in the city. The reasons for this are both real and imagined. It is true, for instance, that speculation from Chinese investors has increased property values in Hong Kong, but this should not overshadow the fact that Hong Kong's government, which has amassed a considerable surplus in recent years, has not implemented an effective poverty-relief policy. Moreover, the majority of the city's social problems are the result of internal factors, such as Hong Kong's economic structure, not external forces. Hong Kong's economy is supported by two major industries – finance and real estate. While these may provide high-paying jobs for a certain class of Hong Kongers, they provide few opportunities for the elderly, the uneducated, and the unskilled. As a result, it is unlikely that middle and lower class incomes will rise vis-à-vis upper class incomes in the near future.⁸

I encountered a range of opinions when I asked local citizens about the future of democracy in Hong Kong. Some said that they would move elsewhere if China's influence continued to increase, while others said that they would reserve judgment until 2017, when elections for the Chief Executive of Hong Kong are to be held by direct election.⁹ Nearly all agreed that Hong Kong's imperfect democracy was far better than the political situation in mainland China.

When I spoke with K, the owner of a small online business, she emphasized the role of Hong Kong's media in distracting the public from issues that mattered. She told me that this problem had existed for a long time, and cited the example of the previous Chief Executive, Donald Tsang, who faced public scrutiny for staying in extravagant hotel suites while traveling on government trips. Given the economic disparities described earlier, the public saw this behavior as particularly egregious. K disagreed. She said, “He *should* stay in luxury suites; he's

⁷ <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-06-18/hong-kong-s-wealth-gap-widens-amid-aging-population-inflation>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7163758.stm>

the Chief Executive. And it isn't as if staying at a less expensive hotel would really affect the government's budget.”

E, a security guard on Hong Kong island, told me that there weren't many career opportunities for people who couldn't speak English and didn't have the right skills. He had worked as a security guard for more than twenty years and told me, “I don't particularly like or dislike my job, but I guess I should be glad that I don't have to worry about finding one.”

One professor from the City University of Hong Kong, C, told me that, despite all the attention the protests had received in the news, most of the people he knew were not particularly interested in the election. After all, he said, most people didn't like either candidate. It was a choice between an incompetent man (Tang) and unscrupulous one (Leung). Instead, C was more interested in discussing the legacy of Donald Tsang, who had been well-liked during most of his term. C remained optimistic about the future of Hong Kong; he told me that, despite all the concerns that people had had before the 1997 handover, the last fifteen years had gone fairly smoothly. He did note that the city had undergone major changes during that period – there were more shopping malls now, for example, and it was no longer uncommon to hear people speaking Mandarin in public – but he found them acceptable. “We've already faced the hardest challenges,” he said.

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Vladimir Holan once wrote: “From the sketch to the work one travels on one's knees.”¹⁰ While I found a number of aspects of my project this summer challenging, it has certainly been the most rewarding experience of my academic career. I look forward to revising the story I wrote this summer and will seek, eventually, to publish it. I want to offer my sincere thanks to the Franklin Center for Global Exchange and the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences for providing me with this opportunity through the William F. Clinger Jr. Scholarship.

10 Kundera, Milan, *The Art of the Novel*.