Mapping Hong Kong's Atlas

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"Hong Kong has been a work of fiction from its very beginning."

—Dung Kai-cheung 董啟章 (Dung 2012, xi)

The conceit of the Hong Kong Atlas (HKAtlas) book series is to offer alternative histories to a region that has continued to exist in some unknown future tense. On the most tangible of levels, this translation project makes available, in print and digital formats, bilingual poetry collections, works of fiction and online graphic adaptations from Hong Kong-based authors writing (in Chinese) over the past four decades. Authors in the first round include a range of established and emerging voices, from classic untranslated works such as Ng Hui-bin's 吳煦斌 *The Bisons* 牛 and Leung Ping-kwan's (Ye Si) 梁秉鈞（也斯）*Paper Cut-outs* 剪紙 to a new generation of writers—Hon Lai Chu 韓麗珠, Dung Kai-cheung 董啟章, Tse Dorothy Hiu-hung 謝曉虹, and Natalia Sui-hung Chan (Lok Fung) 陳少紅（洛楓）. The artists for the graphic adaptation, Chi Hoi 智海 and Kong Kee 江記, have collaborated with Hong Kong authors over the past decade, most notably on their two-volume *Hijacking* 大騎劫 series through Joint Publishing 三聯書店.

But before further pursuing the structure of the series, I'd like to recall Gaston Bachelard's daydreaming poet so as to help ground the

curatorial focus of the HKAtlas, in order to consider the various roles of metaphor and image that exist between languages, and how they may be linked via literary translation to the representation of heritage and memory.

If "being is round" (Dung 2012, 234), in the words of Hong Kong author and critic Dung Kai-cheung, how does one circumnavigate the inherent value of a translation in relation to its represented form? A form that has been, historically, rectangular—as witnessed by the codex, the broadside and the cinematic screen. And, more broadly, how does one represent works so that they are not simply transformed, like historic castles or gardens, into what Kevin Walsh calls mere "islands of historic excellence [...] a heritage which was never really a part of anybody's history" (Walsh 2003, 178).

Within the official Hong Kong cultural scene, the emphasis has been on the presentation of "representative" works of art and literature. That is, an easily defined continuum of output from the late 1940s to the present, relying on a heavy dose of nostalgia for pre-handover Hong Kong. Tied to this is a bid to reimagine itself as a "world city"—"most prominently in the developing plans for the West Kowloon Cultural District,[1] following a somewhat belated discovery that 'world class' cities tend to have active cultural lives as well," as the Hong Kong-based artist and historian David Clarke writes (Clarke 1996, 197–98). These tacks are generally unsatisfying and simplistic, as they fabricate an unforgiving chronological line, rather than entertaining the spiraling rounds of cultural influence and tensions inherent between various literary traditions. As James Clifford writes, "the goal is not to replace the cultural figure [...] Rather the task is to focus on concrete mediations of the two, in specific cases of historical tension and relationship" (Clifford 1997, 24).

As with the "I Love HK" campaign, the movement has not been a nuanced innovation of the seminal 1970s rebranding of New York City, but rather an uncritical mimicry. There is no mediation occurring—simply wholesale adoption. What should be strived for

1 The West Kowloon Cultural District is a developing area of reclaimed land on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong harbor that will house the museum of visual culture M+, an iteration of the Palace Museum and a range of performance venues.

instead is a cooperative building environment where "'the world around us' is the interface to information and for the cooperation of people." (Steitz 2006, 41). Streitz's goal of creating "a social architectural space" could lead to a fascinating range of communicative possibilities between individuals and works in translation that extend beyond traditional book structures—beyond cultural mausoleums and yet another language- or region-specific anthology. By following the traditional line, in relation to Hong Kong literature, the end result most likely would be a single permanent room in the Hong Kong Heritage museum set aside for approved literature. Exhibits would rotate on a quarterly basis, and consist primarily of opened manuscripts displayed in rectangular glass cases, with larger than life-size photographic reproductions of the authors poised next to cultural and political dignitaries. The gift shop would offer facsimiles of the books that are no longer in print.

Within the ongoing discussion about Hong Kong's cultural future, working groups are considering the possible development of a Hong Kong Literature museum. But would authors and their audience ultimately benefit more from a traditional "contact zone" (Clifford 1997, 188–219) or perhaps from some other form of accessible space? As Andrea Witcomb notes in *ReImagining the Museum*, "The complexity of museums is partly a function of their relations with other sites of display" (Witcomb 2003, 26). As Hong Kong literature has long been ghettoized by powerbrokers of various national stripes, it is vital that the writing seek alternate forms of representation in translation—beyond the bound and institutional form. When considering the power relations that would be inherent in the selection process, and the insularity of the Hong Kong literary scene, it would be difficult to make a strong argument in favor of another traditionally built museum structure or "representative" anthology of a dozen or so poets in the voice of a single translator. What is now called for is a hijacking of the writing, a displacement from established structures and markets to create, as David Parry writes, the "foundations of successive explorations of art's relationship to everyday life" (Parry 2011, 25).

During a discussion with Dung Kai-cheung about his novel *Atlas: Archaeology of an Imaginary City* (pers. comm.), we touched on the relationship between his native city's history and his own

literary future:

> Hong Kong as a work of fiction doesn't deny the historical reality of the people living here from the very beginning until now. We may say that there was a point when the city was "founded"—out of a void. If the British had not chosen this barren southern island practically unknown to the Qing authorities in 1841, I am fairly certain that there would never have been a city called Hong Kong, nor a city in the likeness of the Hong Kong we have, over the past two centuries and in the centuries to come. In this sense, Hong Kong has been created out of nothing and that is what I meant by the word "fiction."

Dung's response succinctly maps out the broader research problems of representing a country or city through its literature—of how to negotiate between the past and heritage; the multiple lenses of identity and myth; and, ultimately, where to situate oneself within that process. His *Atlas* is a vital starting point for this essay, both because of how it grounds the complex maneuvering of Hong Kong's cultural space and because he generously agreed to "loan" the title to the HKAtlas book series; and his *Atlas* would have been the first book in the series, if not for the fact that Columbia University Press had already released a translation of the novel by Anders Hansson and Bonnie S. McDougall (Dung 2012).

Written in a brief and intense period around the time of the 1997 Handover of Hong Kong, it took until 2012 for this masterwork to see the light of day in English translation. In the novel, archaeologists in some future time work to reconstruct the lost city of Victoria (Hong Kong Island) through documents, anecdotes, maps and critical theory. Place and time are reimagined through an admixture of historical fact and intentional misprecisions, calling into question authenticity and memory.

Especially since the mid-1990s, Hong Kong and Taiwan have fallen under multiple attempts by critics, governmental and cultural organizations to create an imaginary cohesive global Chinese Society. Recent discussions in Sinophone studies—with Shih Shu-mei 史書美 in a central role—have cracked open new spaces for distinct Chinese cultures from around the world and allowed readers to "rethink the

relationship between roots and routes" (Shih 2007, 189), reassessing the importance of the local on national and hybrid communities.

So, one impetus for the HKAtlas quite simply was the dearth of Hong Kong writing in English translation, whose origins lie, in no small part, in the hegemonic sway of mainland-Chinese writing and officialdom, and in the insulated nature of the Hong Kong publishing scene. Based on Amanda Hsu Yuk-kwan's 許旭筠 *A Bibliography of Hong Kong Literature in Foreign Languages* 香港文學外譯書目, up until 2011 there were just under five hundred items of Hong Kong writing in English translation—including poetry, prose and plays. This includes everything from individual poems in English-language journals to full-book publications. With seventeen exceptions, all appeared from Hong Kong-based publishers, and over fifty are by Leung Ping-kwan. None of the seventeen exceptions and very few other items are complete single-author poetry collections or stand-alone novels. The majority are individual poems or short stories that appeared in anthologies or journals.

The first step in the HKAtlas project was to curate a list of authors and then to build translation teams in order to reskew the numbers. Engaging first with a panel of translators, authors and critics—in that order—on the selection of the work and the development of the archive's structure was key to constructing a layer of Hong Kong's literary map, "as a facilitator for communities who wish to learn more about the development of their place" in Walsh's words (2003, 160). This form of community engagement holds true for contemporary memory and society as well, so as to ensure that the past and the present do not conjoin into a wash of nostalgia and false constructs.

The HKAtlas series is rooted in the broader project of documenting and representing Hong Kong cultural heritage. Through the publication of these texts, the HKAtlas seeks to build a series of networks between communities of memory via the written word, and to present a variety of applied forms that can hopefully give insight into the complexities of the role of heritage in what Smith and Waterton term "the performance and negotiation of identity, values and a sense of place" (Smith and Waterton 2009, 292)—of how to curate and represent via translation the memory of what's not yet been lost, through synthesis rather than simulation.

One practical issue with the HKAtlas series is that the primary funding was received from a generous grant by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) in the form of the organization's first large-scale grant for the translation of Hong Kong literature. The deadline for submission to the fund was extremely tight, which meant that I needed to consider engaging not just with established publishing houses and translators, but with presses and translators that were familiar enough with Hong Kong literature and literature in translation to take a chance on writers who were largely unknown in the West. To reduce the amount of bureaucracy, it would have been far simpler to restrict the translations to one or two publishing partners, but I didn't want Hong Kong literature to be "owned" in that way. A crucial part of the experiment has been to link as many voices and concerns as possible in offering up the various Hong Kong voices.

At the onset of the HKAtlas series, key partners included Mary Chan at MCCM Creations, Lawrence Wong at the Research Centre for Translation at Chinese University of Hong Kong, the late Martha Cheung 張佩瑤 at Baptist University, the novelist Xu Xi, Leung Ping-kwan and Chris Song at Lingnan University and Frank Proctor at *Muse* Magazine. The translators I reached out to first were Jennifer Feeley, Andrea Lingenfelter, Nicky Harman and Yau Wai-ping. What links each of these publishing partners and translators is a constant devotion to literature in translation and engagement with the Hong Kong literary scene.

As with any number of cultural initiatives in Hong Kong, the idea for the HKAtlas project sprung from a dinner discussion with the late writer Leung Ping-kwan, a.k.a. the poet Ye Si. In 2006, Ye Si was at Harvard University for six months as a Fulbright scholar, and I was living in the Boston area working with Zephyr Press. Bei Dao 北島 also happened to be visiting at the time, and he brought us together. At that point I was really only familiar with Ye Si's poetry and the series of short fiction available from Xi Xi 西西 in English translation. During the dinner we discussed the bilingual *Jintian Literary Series* of contemporary Mainland poetry that I had been directing with Bei Dao, which led to brainstorming about how we might use this same publishing model to expand visibility for Hong Kong writers. Not much progress was made until I moved to Hong Kong in 2010. With

greater access to contemporary writers and literary scholars working at a range of Hong Kong institutions, I quickly gained a clearer—if still decidedly nascent—sense of the last few decades of Hong Kong writing.

A necessary component in any translation series is an assessment of the broader issues of cultural history and heritage. A particularly dynamic complexity emerges between the aggregate and its universals. A holistic approach is integral to avoiding the creation of un-idealized images and misrepresented pasts. As Neil Silberman dissects the issue, "Heritage is an ever-changing array of objects and symbols, a complex mosaic of artifacts that demand that we give some meaning to them [...] whereas the 'Past' is an untouchable phantom—fragments lived in retrospect" (Silberman 2006, 72).

An added layer of complexity (and personal warning) remains on view in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where the philosopher has set out to lampoon the officials of rhetoric. In the opening dialogue with Socrates, Plato raises the question of the primacy of the written (tangible) word by having Phaedrus respond to a request to repeat an earlier speech by Lysias. Phaedrus says, "I have not got the words by heart, but I will sketch the general purport of the several points [...]" Socrates then responds—"I am not altogether inclined to let you practice your oratory on me when Lysias himself is here present" (Hamilton and Cairns 1961, 477).

In fact, Phaedrus does have Lysias "here"—in the form of a scroll that contains the written argument—which, at first, may appear to be of minor consequence. This brief exchange highlights Plato's deep interest in the cohesion between the written word, memory and oral traditions, and takes us back to my conundrum of visualizing the intangible and the primacy now afforded the written word. How do we represent the memory of what's been lost through artifacts of memory? What occurs when "intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment"? (Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, Article 2, Clause 1.) What continues to occur is a self-perpetuating process that gave birth to the original tradition. Any form of documentation is complicated by the fact that the base dimension and definitions are constantly in motion, in hybrid

developments that emerge in response to immediate environments and historical codings.

Shifting back to translation, to purport the ability to efface completely one's own voice and opinion often leads to a translator's (or curator's) fingerprints being blatantly smeared across a book or an exhibition. A translator must instead remain cognizant of her/his own voice, and triangulate the original with multiple versions to move further from individual perceptions into the drone of the original. But that drone needs to be more than an approximation of some nebulous spirit to which both translators and theorists are frequently reduced. The two profane "swords"—*smooth* and *spirit*—have become irreproachable excuses for decisions. Instead, they should remain as icons to be strived for or against.

During work on the books, the authors never translated "with" the translators, but they were all extremely helpful in answering specific queries, and all of the authors read closely the various drafts and final translations. In most cases, these discussions were handled via email or Skype—as the translators are based primarily in the US and the UK. The translators for Hon Lai-chu and Dorothy Tse, Andrea Lingenfelter and Nicky Harman, did visit Hong Kong during the translation process, and there were many long discussions around dining room tables. The selection of the translators was informed by the fact that I had worked with about half of the group on previous books, and the others are well-established translators with a strong knowledge of contemporary Hong Kong literature. Part of the community that needs to be built is a consistent group of translators who can continue to work with contemporary Hong Kong authors. The work doesn't happen without the translators.

As David Clarke has posited, "the neutrality of the museum is always fictional" (Clarke 1996, 12). This is a crucial point when assembling any series, whether of visual artists or of authors. For the HKAtlas series, it wasn't possible to be "representative" of the entire history of Hong Kong literature in a mere eight to ten books, but it *was* possible to identify key voices from the past few decades. I wanted there to be a balance of poetry and prose, and I didn't want to replicate work that had already been done. There is, for instance, no shortage of Leung Ping-kwan's poetry in English translation by at least a dozen different translators, but regrettably little of his prose

had been translated. The opposite could be said of Xi Xi—*Renditions* had put considerable energy into publishing her prose over the past, but barely any of her poetry had seen the light of day. Now we have Jennifer Feeley's award-winning translations in *Not Written Words* 不是文字, and, equally important, a strong relationship between Feeley and Xi Xi that will undoubtedly lead to more work in translation.

Simply, there needs to be a more sustainable form of representation for literature in translation, though as margins in book publishing continue to be cinched more tightly, it makes sustainability a difficult venture for presses. Generally, when publishers discuss "sustainability," they are referring to financial models and ways to avoid dipping too far into the red. The HKAtlas series could not have developed at the same rate without the generous, multi-year HKADC grant. But when it comes to an end in early 2018, it is unclear how long it will be before this level of funding might become available again. 2012 marked the first time that the Hong Kong government, through the HKDAC, funded the translation of Hong Kong literature into Englishto such an extent, and it is unclear this level of funding will exist in the future.

Translation schemes created by the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI),[2] the Romanian Cultural Institute, the Polish Cultural Institute and related government attempts to contribute to the soft power of the nations in question have proved extremely successful in bringing a greater number of voices into the consciousness of world readers. Over the last few years there has been an infusion of support (both financial and marketing) from these cultural organizations, which has meant that prose and poetry in translation from these literatures have begun to appear in the repertoires of publishing houses based elsewhere. In theory this would appear to be a good thing, though in reality what it can mean is that one Taiwanese poet ends up appearing in a catalogue next to ten regional Midwestern neo-confessional poets, to cite a North-

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2   The LTI has been in existence since 1996, but the passing of the 2005 Culture and Arts Promotion Act greatly expanded its funding and reach. 2012 marked the first time that the Hong Kong government, through its Arts and Development Council, made funding available for Hong Kong literature in English translation. It remains unclear whether this initial three-year grant cycle will be renewed.

American example. Oftentimes there is no continuity between the translated poet's work and the remainder of the list of the press in question, a couple hundred copies are sold, and then the Taiwanese author disappears deep in the back list, as the subvention received from the cultural organization was only just enough to cover the cost of printing and sometimes a small translator's fee.

As one practical example, in looking at recent titles published in a previous season by a hundred independent presses based in the US and UK, twenty-five being presses that regularly or occasionally include translation in their lines, there are only seventeen books in translation out of well over five hundred titles.[3] For Chinese literature, only one of these books is by a contemporary author and the other three are retranslations of Tang classics and a "definitive" Confucius. Within that list there are exactly zero works by Hong Kong writers, and there are no Hong Kong writers listed in the previous four seasons of catalogues.

This is not to say that change can't be made. Over the past seventeen years at Zephyr we have published thirty-four works of contemporary Chinese poetry in English translation, with another half dozen books in the works. On top of this, we have brought into print an equal number of works from Russia, Poland, Romania, Korea and other corners of the globe, often from languages of "lesser diffusion," but certainly not of lesser significance or influence. I believe that the best translators and editors act as curators, considering both the gallery space of pre-existing lines and the shifting interests of readers. Unfortunately, it is the case that a large percentage of translators and editors have been led by finances rather than aesthetics, and that in the case of literature, since at least the late 1980s, the error has been in focusing on "dissidence" rather than dissonance.

Beyond the financial strictures, a core challenge lies in how best to curate and represent the memory of what's not been lost of a culture and its literary traditions. This requires documentation and shifting an assumed belief in the inherent aesthetic or historical value of individual literary works. For words to have significance beyond

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3   The presses referred to appear in the Consortium distribution catalogue. Consortium is one of the few remaining independent distributors based in the US.

various schools of literary museology, communities must understand the role of heritage and literature within modes of sustainable development and the evolving identity of contemporary society. The representation of both past and present must continue to be developed beyond the construct of pockets of high culture removed from the public and of normative contexts. And with Hong Kong as the primary focus, the various issues of hybridity and transmission that haunt Hong Kong must also be addressed.

"People learn not just from artifacts, but from the contexts they symbolize and create," says Braden Allenby (2012). The goal then is not simply to put literary works and their translation through models of contingent valuation or fill bookshelves with Hong Kong writing, but to curate and assemble works that can run as deeply as human consciousness. Memory is transcribed into the translations and the words are constantly in flux, so that the cultural significance and authenticity of a tradition passed down through the generations is always a negotiation. A standard rule in terms of maintaining authenticity within cultural fabrics, and a mode of thought that I generally employ within translations, is to consider "changing as much as necessary but as little as possible" (Allenby 2012).

As for what initially drew me to a number of the authors now available in the HKAtlas series, I would point to a liminal space between realism and Fauvism. Hong Kong as a place is central to their writing, and Hong Kong as a "developing" urban space moves so quickly into some (un)scripted future that reality and its doppelgangers exist together nearly seamlessly—both in writing and in daily life. As translator Nicky Harman has said about her work with Dorothy Tse, "Dorothy's stories have a strong sense of place, and yet that place does not exist. To me, both as a translator and as a reader, this was at first disconcerting, then delightfully liberating" (pers. comm.). And as Tse responded: "Even in the field of literature, there is no such tradition that we have to stick to, but rather, experimentation in form and style is one of the hallmarks of writers from Hong Kong" (pers. comm.).

A cursory look at the books published so far in the HKAtlas will show a number of links, but none perhaps as strong as this idea of a "fictional place" and an intense mourning for what has been lost from Hong Kong. In his poetry, Liu Waitong laments the demolition

of Queen's Pier, an event which has been credited with initiating the modern heritage movement in Hong Kong. Unable to exist in the contemporary swirl of Hong Kong society, one of Hon Lai-chu's characters gradually transforms himself into a chair. And figures in Dorothy Tse's short stories navigate the perennially shifting Hong Kong apartment blocks and streets:

> I cannot object to a reader trying to find some kind of Hong Kong-ness in my writing. However, once you begin to write, your identity starts to blur. Being a Hong Konger and the experiences I had growing up in Hong Kong are, of course, essential to me, but only to me, it is just one kind of reality [...] Since the handover, in order to resist the influence from mainland China, a Hong Kong "nationality" and the idea of localism has been growing. However, for a long time before that, Hong Kong people were mostly resistant to the rhetoric of national ideology. Due to different political concerns, after 1949, Hong Kong was a "heterotopia" in which forbidden ideologies of elsewhere could find a way out here. I think Hong Kong as a place which accepts conflicting views and ideas is important to me (pers. comm.).

So, what is the ultimate goal for the development of the Hong Kong Atlas? To expand the English-language canon with a sorely neglected swath of writing; to allow Hong Kong authors to converse and compete with voices written natively in, and translated into, English; and, as part of those conversations, to tackle the perennial issue of *not* branding (and limiting) an author exclusively as a "Hong Kong writer"—but rather, as someone whose writing is infused by a specific place and language. It is precisely these multiple forms of "one kind of reality" that, when considered together, give voice to the multitude of Hong Kong pasts and futures, and add needed layers to Chinese literature in translation.

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