

Introduction

What would it mean for Hong Kong to write itself in its own language? This is the question culture critic Rey Chow asks in Jennifer Cheng's 'Umbrella Poetics'.

We are thrilled to offer this anthology to mark the twentieth anniversary of Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule. We have curated a mix of poetry, fiction, non-fiction and art by some of Hong Kong's most prominent literary and creative minds. We have also assembled young, emerging voices. We hope this collection ignites conversation about the city we share and love.

They say that literature and art come to the rescue of civilisation again and again. Now, more than ever, Hong Kong needs its writers, poets, journalists, academics and artists to articulate what it means to belong here, and to address what Hong Kong signifies as we navigate anxious years and watch China's promised 'one country, two systems' crumble before our eyes.

Who are we? What do we want? As Stephen Vines notes, these questions of identity are 'bolstered more by negatives than positives'. That is fine by us, as long as Hong Kong continues its struggle to speak its mind—and even change it.

Chip Tsao reminds us that the end of British rule in Hong Kong did not breed a Mahatma Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi or Ho Chi Minh. That's true, but we now have a fresh new generation, filled with a uniquely-Hong Kong panache and ready for change. They have shown us that Hong Kong is, above all, ever-evolving and ever-ready to reinvent itself.

Tammy Ho Lai-Ming sums it up well: Hong Kong was born many times, first as a fishing village, then as a British colony and now a Special Administrative Region. In the summer of 2014, it transformed yet again into a very special place, as hundreds of thousands of citizens took over large sprawls of the city and let umbrellas and tents bloom like flowers. What seems unthinkable and implausible today can, according to Joshua Wong, become a political reality tomorrow.

No wonder we care so deeply about this tiny speck of land, whether we are locally-bred, or of impure origins and of mixed-up backgrounds. Louise Law Lok Man observes that we work to 'build and share, receive and contain', and we long for 'fine and fair freedoms'. So Mei Chi is right to say that we see clearly when there is a 'discrepancy between the text and the visuals'. We know in our bones that 'belonging is, after all, a kind of longing'. We may not be able to explain why we have unfolded our homes on these rocks; but since we are here, we would like to state our case.

Xu Xi's fictional character Loong Hei boldly declares in his op-ed, 'what I am is a Hong Kong yan... [and] all I have to be is a writer from within, who can and must record this transit'. To use Tang Siu Wa's words, we must 'keep on telling the story and breaking through the information blockade'. Or else we just may, like the castaway in Jason Y. Ng's short story, devolve into beings who 'abandon defences... and disappear into an abyss of numbness'.

That is precisely why a group of us established PEN Hong Kong in 2016 to stand against what we see as an assault on freedom of expression in our city. PEN Hong Kong has watched and worried as the space for creativity and expression in Hong Kong continues to shrink. Our mission is to reverse this trend, to spread our love for the written word, and to work with our peers in PEN chapters around the world to protect free expression anywhere it is under threat.

The burst of voices in this anthology is a result of that goal. We hope it stops you in your tracks, as if ‘a hundred-year-old turtle had crawled out to proclaim some good news’—to use Eddie Tay’s metaphor. Some of these pieces are pessimistic, others hopeful. We aim to offer a diversity of viewpoints and interpretations of past and present—and a range of visions for the future. As in Leung Ping-Kwan’s phrase, we ‘write with a different colour for each voice’. Our anthology’s forty-one contributors include some who work in English and some who work in Chinese. We plan to translate this collection in its entirety into Chinese to echo and honour Hong Kong’s dual heritage.

This book is a celebration and also a declaration: we will fight to maintain our city’s role as a safe harbour for those who would use the written word to speak truth to power, to effect change, to spread love, or just to make the world more bearable.

In these pages, you will find us, writing ourselves.

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