



A Companion to *Where Else*, Hong Kong Literature's newest addition; interviews with contributors

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ABSTRACT

Given the growing interest in Hong Kong and the region's literature which provides insight into the experiences of one of Britain's last colonies, Ms Elizabeth E. Chung interviewed editors for and contributors to the new *Where Else: An International Hong Kong Poetry Anthology* in the summer of 2023. In total, ten interviews took place in-person, online, or via email, covering a range of topics including the creative and critical contexts of the anthology and the creative methods employed by poets and artists, as well as the future expectations from this publication. The ensuing interviews (of which the contributor interviews are included here) result in a companion to the anthology: a revelatory insight into the transnational attention to Hong Kong, its history, and its future.

KEYWORDS: Hong Kong Literature, Poetry, Anthology, History, Language, Interview, Transnational

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1. Introduction

Hong Kong Literature as a field rarely receives significant acknowledgment. While some might trace it back to the film adaptations of Richard Mason's *The World of Suzie Wong* and Han Suyin's *A Many-Splendoured Thing* in the 1950-1960s, others will mark its beginnings with the poetry and works in translation around the Handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China in 1997. Following the past decade of social upheaval and rise in migration, there is growing attention towards the flourishing of poetry collections and prose works by individual Hong Kong authors as well as Hong Kong-focused zines.

Published in May 2023 by Verve Poetry Press, a Birmingham-based publisher which focuses on poetry from new and diverse voices, *Where Else: An International Hong Kong Poetry Anthology* is the most recent addition to Hong Kong's collection of literary anthologies. Interestingly, Verve Poetry Press has published three other literary works by or featuring Hong Kong writers: *People, Pandemic & ##### – The KongPoWriMo 2020 Anthology* a couple of years ago, Sean Wai Keung's *sikfan glaschu* in 2021, and the debut pamphlet *Tapping at Glass* by Tim Tim Cheng (a co-editor of *Where Else*) earlier this year. *Where Else* builds on the pre-existing canon of Hong Kong Literature by including both new and established voices from across the globe, thus appealing to scholars, students, and educators interested in the field and the literary works produced in this region. Beyond poetry, each editor penned an introductory section elucidating their take on the field and the anthology, reminding us of the diversity within Hong Kong and the constant emergence of voices. Moreover, there are several artistic illustrations inspired by Hong Kong, which readers can consider in tandem with the texts. The works are divided into seven untitled sections, showing a mix of poets and their experience, gender, age, and thematic concerns, allowing readers to rediscover Hong Kong Literature across different dimensions.

As a contributor to and a researcher of this field myself, I was keen to find out more about the text as a whole and its constituent parts. How can this text be significant to more than Hong Kong Literature – to World or Global Literature, or Cultural Studies, for example? What does the publishing of this book mean to a community, and which community is that? I invited a selection of the anthology's contributors to discuss their submitted works. All but one of these interviews took place online or in-person, each being rather fluid, informal, and lasting anything from 20 minutes to over an hour. These conversations have been edited for clarity and coherence with consent from each individual interviewee. In each case, I offered questions to the contributors as prompts, allowing and encouraging interviewees to elaborate on their interests, literary influences, and rationales.

2. Selected Contributors

To get an understanding of the work that went into the creative pieces within the anthology, I interviewed several poets and artists included in the anthology. Our discussions ranged from their source materials to inspirational forms, and how their piece represents various aspects of their 'Hong Kong'.

2.1 Lian-Hee Wee

Lian-Hee Wee is a Hong Konger, Singaporean, phonologist, and musician. His poetry can also be found via *Kongpowrimo* and in *Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*, where he shows us what is important about art: social justice. We met to discuss his poem, and how we can (and should) appreciate diversity in language.

[Reading of 'A Pigeon to Deliver a Creole' by Lian-Hee Wee](#) (with permission from the author)

Elizabeth E. Chung: Part of what you're doing is a visual representation of the accent; it's one thing to write it down in 'your' English, which will probably be recognisable English words and letters – but using an accent system, as you've used the acute and the grave accents, is an extra layer on top of that. I recently attended an event where you read this poem and provided a handout with explanatory footnotes on the accent usage – footnotes which aren't included in the anthology. Can you talk about your use or non-use of footnotes?

Lian-Hee Wee: In a reading I use footnotes because people get bored hearing you read through each word that they can also read on the page, and their eyes and ears are processing faster than you're articulating. Footnotes give them something to be distracted with without being too far away. So, I might use footnotes like that. In print, I prefer not to because it seems to be explaining the poem – if so, then I have failed the poem, it is not self-contained.

However, I do make an exception. Many years ago, I experimented with writing footnote poetry. I would write a poem that is very, very short and the words are footnoted, and each word that is footnoted has to be explained through another poem that is in a footnote. And the footnotes don't necessarily follow the order of the words that they appear; maybe the first word that I footnote goes with footnote three, this may have footnote one, and then you have to read the footnotes in a different order of their appearance. I thought that was fun.

EEC: That sounds very playful. So, in different contexts, you do/don't prefer the use of footnotes. In the context of a poetry reading, giving the footnotes is saying that it's a different context because if you're reading a book, the assumption is that you are alone, you have time to process by yourself – whereas at a poetry reading, you're in a social space where you don't necessarily get that time or mental space to analyse and take away an understanding. Even so, your footnotes were not extensive at all, they just gave an idea of the high and low tones, and pauses. Well, when you were talking about high and low tones, I was thinking of it as a musical analogy, and you know the musical symbol that indicates a pause on the note, to hold it, to extend it? It's as if you provide that help to the reader in that social space where they can't think about it.

LHW: You're very kind to think that I was helping.

EEC: How do you go about choosing symbols and physical/visual representations of the accent or the ideas that you're trying to show, other than literal letter changes, like 'lot low'? Is there a way that you found helpful? Was there anything that you built on from others or yourself previously?

LHW: It has always been very difficult. Many, many years ago, a person asked me when I spell T-E-A-R in a poem, how do they know if it's teer or tare? I need to get sounds. So, the premise has always been 'I want sounds in my poetry'. The reader has to hear it in her head and the person hearing it has to see things – I would like that. I've experimented with various things. The Pigeon-Creole thing [in Where Else] was accent marks, others I tried to do with rhyme. So, if you cleverly indicate that things are supposed to rhyme, then the reader distorts it. You can also try misspellings – misspellings can also change tones.

EEC: How do you feel, as a phonologist and working with sounds, what do you think of – I'm going to call it 'accent writing' and/or performance poetry?

LHW: I think our poetry needs to be performed. Whether it is sung or recited, or whether it accompanies other media, whether or not it should be or whether or not people should always write poetry to perform, that is always a matter of freedom, you're free to write anything you want. But I would like, at least, for the default position to realise that performance is part of poetry.

As for accent, the way you phrase the question, or the fact that the question arises, seems to implicitly assume that there is 'accent-less', or there is a standard – and I think that is wrong. Ethically wrong, factually, and just plain wrong because it's not fun.

EEC: You're right, I phrased it badly. I want to say that there is clearly an 'intended' accent for this piece to be performed with, right? So, when it is performed as written, as you have performed it with a Hong Kong accent.

LHW: So, what if someone reads the poem in a Malay accent, for example?

EEC: Yes, or if someone from South Africa reads it with a Northern European-influenced voice; it will have a very different intention and reception. What do you think there is in the power or representation of poetry that has a specific performance style, or giving/imbuing the poem with that cultural or contextual meaning?

LHW: This is such a fantastic question. A great question to think about. It's an excellent point to raise. So, in response, if I recast the question so that we have an algebraic formula, then your question looks like this: 'If a poem is written in this form, do you allow variation of that form? And what does it mean? And if you apply the variable to words – if I wrote 'the', and you read 'that'; if I wrote 'bee', and you said '蜜蜂 [mat6 fung1]' – are you still representing, or re-presenting, or presenting the work as it was intended?' That seems to be the thrust of your question. When we put it this way, certain positions become clear. Would I mind if someone takes this poem and reads it in a Malaysian accent or South African accent or whatever? In a way, I would say I mind it as much as if someone took this poem and translated it – which is to say, I don't mind at all, just give me some money!

But, at the same time, I would hope that the person who does this – every time you perform a work of art whether or not you simply read it in class, or you read it on stage, or you perform it in one way or another – every time you recreate it from the source that you have. There is interpretation, there is reinvention, and as long as you have had an imaginary conversation with the author, I would appreciate that already so much. And it doesn't matter if that was not what I had in mind, mostly you will come up with something better

2.2 Louise Leung Fung Yee

Louise Leung Fung Yee is published internationally, including the zine *CantoCutie* and *Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*, where their focus tends to lie in postcolonialism, language-play, family, and culture. Leung and I met up for Hong Kong-style afternoon tea to discuss their poem's localist Konglish voice.

Elizabeth E. Chung: ‘Brew Sky’ is a poem that deals with your family. As I understand, your mother does not speak English, but you and your siblings do. Is there anything else you want to mention to contextualise your poem?

Louise Leung Fung Yee: The only English my mum knows is ‘Hello,’ ‘Thank you,’ ‘I’m fine. How are you?’ She actually, I think, dropped out in second grade, because back in the 60s most schools were on rooftops, and she studied in one of those very, very old schools. She was the eldest of the siblings, back in the days when Asian families pushed all the responsibilities to the eldest child – they have to take care of the younger siblings, earn money for them to go to school – like their second mother, which I think is not cool. She has always been telling me since I was kid that if she got to continue to study, she would have become a doctor. She wanted to become a vet.

As for the story behind this poem of why this is about my mum: I have a complex relationship with her, but I come back to visit her from time to time – we’re pretty good now. I was just chilling on the sofa, and she’s like, ‘Ai, daughter, come, come, look at this company’s *local*,’ I’m like, ‘Mum, what local? Local is an adjective, what?’ She’s like, ‘No, this picture. It’s called a *local*, right?’ I’m like, ‘Mum, that’s a *logo*.’ And she’s like, ‘Oh, my English is bad. I didn’t know.’ And it was funny, and then I’m like, ‘Mum, let me ask you a few questions as a quiz. What is the English word for 藍色 [laam4 sik1]?’ And then she said, ‘*Brew!*’ and I’m like, ‘Mum, can you say that again?’ She said ‘*brew*’ again very clearly, and we just laughed together because we both knew it was wrong, but it’s no biggie because it’s just a funny thing we did. That’s why I came with the name ‘Brew Sky’ because I feel like, in her world, a perfect blue sky would be the same as cooking a meal and taking care of her family, because that’s what she has been doing for her entire life.

EEC: In ‘Brew Sky’ you use Cantonese with English, so there’s a visual element to the code-switching but it’s also interesting aurally. I’ve seen you at poetry events before, so I know that you have this performative power when you’re reading, and you’ve mentioned ‘family’ as a key theme in your poetry. I wonder how you may have come up with this way to communicate in poetry; how do you find, or how have you found, a poetic structure that complements the code switching?

LLFY: It’s mostly a sound thing. When you read a line, does Cantonese enhance the vibe you’re looking for, or stop you from achieving what you want? And do you actually want to achieve that? Because sometimes you may want to achieve something but, in a way, not achieving that and giving the audience a shock maybe even better. So, I have to evaluate those things. But I mostly go for the sound like this line ‘Standard English meets 老一輩 [lou5 yat1 bui3] when | inflexible tongues pronounce 雞腸 [gai3 coeng2] in 錯 [co3] geh 讀音 [duk6 jam1].’ I keep using so many Cantonese because the entire point of the line is to show how difficult English is to the older generation of people who find it difficult to pronounce. By adding a lot of Cantonese words that don’t really rhyme, it shows my point. It is this hard when a Cantonese speaker who has never spoken English tries to speak English.

EEC: So, you’re aiming for a disjuncture?

LLFY: Yes. There are also key terms that I like to keep in Cantonese. So, let’s say ‘There is no “r” in 廣東話 [gwong2 dung1 waa2]’ sounds way better than ‘There’s no “r” in Cantonese’, although they’re both three syllables, 廣東話

is more distinct than Can-to-nese. There are also key terms that only make sense when they are in Cantonese. So, let's say '豬肉佬 [zyu1 juk6 lou5] and 菜檔姨姨 [coi3 dong2 ji4 ji4]' – 豬肉佬 is the butcher at the pork store.

It's not only a visual memory you have in your mind of that person, but also their voice because they speak in such a specific way. Like someone's shouting 十蚊三份埋嚟睇揀 [sap6 man1 saam1 fan6 maa6 lai4 maa6 tai2 gaan2] in that kind of voice. I just feel like using Cantonese in an English form can really bring out the ambience of the place you're trying to create in your head.

EEC: I get that, especially with fruit words. If I hear '山竹 [saan1zuk1]' I think of walking outside To Kwa Wan [土瓜灣, tou2 gwaa1 waan4] wet market, I think of slipping and nearly falling on the floor. It's quite a visceral memory that you get. It seems like your form is not complementing for flow, like old, classical, traditional, English poetry, you're going for a new, dissonant, but incredibly evocative style.

LLFY: Yeah, I'm trying to construct that dissonant place in your mind because Hong Kong in itself is also pretty dissonant.

EEC: How do you feel the linguistic properties of your poetry may or may not reflect an aspect of Hong Kong?

LLFY: I'll say the poem has some limitations. Hong Kongers love speaking in Konglish; we mix Cantonese with English and sometimes we make new English words. Like 'scratch JJ'. '揸 [ngaau1] JJ' is the best example here because in Cantonese we say that kind of thing. And switching r into 'Scratch' is switching it in a way. We don't say 'know your alphabet', we say 'know your ABC'. I would also say in my poem, to construct a cultural space, it shows a bit of arrogance in Hong Kongers' perspective, because when we want a specific group of people to hear our message, we keep it in a certain language. If we are in a place where nobody speaks Cantonese and we want to keep the message within Cantonese people, we speak in Cantonese, but if we want it to be out in the world, we switch to the global language. There's almost one full line in Cantonese, and it says, '媽咪食鹽多過我食米 [maa1 mi4 sik6 jim4 do1 gwo3 ngo5 sik6 mai5],' not only is it like a slang in Hong Kong like '食鹽多過你食米' is 'I have suffered more than you have lived'. The literal translation is 'I have eaten more salt than you have eaten rice'. I feel like if you change the Cantonese slang into English, we lose the vibe, the quirkiness because I think the arrogance in Hong Kong learners come from the quirkiness, they are proud of something that they shouldn't be proud of, for example, how much they have suffered.

EEC: As we're talking about these last two lines and we talked about your family and your mother, do you think this poem connects you with your mother differently?

LLFY: I feel like every time I write a poem about my mum, it's trauma dumping, or it's me trying to reconcile with my mum, I am always close with her. Not only do I acknowledge her past, her education, her lack of privilege, I am also acknowledging our differences – and our differences doesn't set us apart. We may be on the two sides of the educational spectrum, but that doesn't mean that I love her less. I still love her. And while she lacked the privilege to study English, I am looking out for her. Yeah, she may have more experience than I have ever lived, I have more

experience in the English language than her so that I can also mother her in the English world, just as she has mothered me in the living world.

EEC: Finally, how does this poem show Hong Kong as a cultural place?

LLFY: I want to use the line ‘scratch away r-less accent to get 5** in DSE oral’ to show this. When I performed this poem, I went from a Hong Kong accent to a British accent, I read that line as ‘scratch away *r-less accent to get 5*** in DSE oral’, so that's a big change.

EEC: The Hong Kong accent disappears into English Received Pronunciation and then it comes back almost stronger.

LLFY: I did that on purpose, because in Hong Kong there's a thing called 崇洋 [sung4 joeng4] where you worship whatever Western culture is in Hong Kong. Speaking in a British or American accent is something that is so heavily biased in Hong Kong. If you apply as an English teacher and you have the same degree as a competitor, but they speak in a British accent, then they have a higher chance of getting hired than you.

I was specific about punctuation in this poem, because if you read the poem on paper, you will see that I use Chinese punctuation after the Chinese characters, but if the line ends on an English word, I use the English one. If you read it on paper, things as small as a full stop can help you create a sense of the language because we grew up reading two languages. At first when I learned English, I'm like, ‘Why can't I just write a circle opposed to a dot? It's so tiny, I can't see it.’ I asked the teacher and she's like, ‘That's how English is.’

EEC: It's like you get a sense of cohesion from a lack of cohesion. It's a cohesion of what Hong Kong is-slash-can be.

LLFY: It's organised chaos, you mesh a lot of things that when standing alone they're perfectly normal, but when you put them together, it's chaotic. This is Hong Kong.

2.3 Carmen (Kaman) Yiu

Carmen (Kaman) Yiu is an illustrator and writer from Hong Kong. She is currently based in London to complete her MA at Kingston School of Art, where she enjoys exploring the use of linguistic elements in visual art, an interest gained from her studies of Chinese Language and Literature and work as an art and culture reporter. Her 2022 art book, *Cocoon*, is available by contacting her directly and can be seen on [YouTube](#).



'Lion Rock' by Carmen (Kaman) Yiu

Fig 1. 'Lion Rock' by Carmen (Kaman) Yiu. Permission from the artist.

Elizabeth E. Chung: The title of your piece, 'Lion Rock', is exactly what's visually missing, and that's emphasised by this stark white background, like the opposite of a silhouette. The other thing that seems to be missing is the sun or moon. Why do you play with visibility or invisibility in this way?

Carmen (Kaman) Yiu: That drawing is from a book that I self-published last year from my final year work, Cocoon – the Chinese word for that is '繭' [gaan2] and refers to that animal going from caterpillar to butterfly, but it can also refer to the callouses that we grow on skin if you walk too much. The book title is describing some powerlessness that I left in Hong Kong. So, I used this as a title and the art taken from the page of this book [as used in Where Else] is describing the feeling that I felt in Hong Kong recently. [Showing me the pages] The whole visual of this book is mainly black and white, the red colour is there for images that refer to the cocoon. Also, there are some works where I tried to collect quotes from different historical events or movies such as Wong Kar-Wai's movies, their dialogue, and I try to mix them together – mixing different quotes or sentences together – to become a new story and make this book. So 'Lion Rock', for the anthology, it's one of the pages from this book.

EEC: I'm noticing that in the version in your book, the globe in the sky is red, which is not the same as the black and white version in the book. Can you talk a bit about that use of colour?

CY: The feeling that I want to have for this book is more 'sad'. So, I'm trying to use red and white to create that atmosphere and I feel like black is a colour that makes people think of danger.

EEC: It's quite intense, isn't it?

CY: Yeah. So, I use these two colours to pop out from the black and I like the visual impact that it gives from this colour combination.

EEC: Can I ask what the quote is on that page?

CY: 'That is a promise | and that is the unshakeable destiny' and the other page, 'We belong to Hong Kong.' The first one is from Chris Patten from a speech given in the handover ceremony.

EEC: Ah, the last governor of Hong Kong – you've taken this very significant moment in Hong Kong, from the Handover itself. I think it's a brilliant choice of quotation and image for this anthology with the whole idea of 'Where else?' and 'Where else could we be, than Hong Kong?', 'Where else could we be talking about that is so multiplicitous, with so many ideas, people, and lives?' There is nothing like it. You can go to another international city like London or New York, and it's got a different feeling, right?

CY: Yeah, I think so.

EEC: That's really interesting. I like that there are two versions of your art piece, there's the version is here that doesn't have the words – ironically in a poetry anthology! – and the version that does and plays with that in different parts of the image as well, because one is in the sky and one is within the heart of the mountain.

The brush strokes for the sky in your illustration are deceptively simple, and that deception is emphasised in the clearly specified line of the rock itself. The brush strokes make me think of a Chinese calligraphic style, because a lot of that is black and white. There are also clearly marked movements with what looks like a fine liner, emphasising some of the curves. Can you talk a bit about the artistic choices in the medium here?

CY: So, the big brushstrokes are actually watercolour. When I drew that pattern, I didn't think of using it this way at the beginning. It was like a drawing like this [showing a page of swirling black brushstrokes in her workbook]. I was thinking about a dreamy feeling when I was drawing this pattern – a lot of my work is based on some kind of feeling, like when I'm listening to some kind of voice or video, and I try to draw them with some patterns to express that feeling. And after, I feel like it can be the sky on top, because I feel like it's quite dreamy for me, like in Hong Kong. So, I use this to combine with the Lion Rock image.

Why I used the fine liner, I feel like I just want emphasis on the movement of the pattern. And [the rock] is made with papercut. I cut out the silhouette of the mountain and placed it on top.

EEC: I think there are some really interesting shapes. It's very fluid, the dark night sky is swelling around above the mountain in a constant movement. I think it's really beautiful.

Finally, since you work with visual art and words, and you have a background in literature as well as studying art, how would you describe your artistic style?

CY: I will say my work is like visual poetry, using poetry in a kind of poetic way to express that different kind of story. I'm combining my previous experiences, as a writer, as a reporter, and also as an image maker.

2. 4 Michael Tsang

Michael Tsang is a lecturer in Japanese Studies at Birkbeck, University of London, and his research interests lie in World Literature with an East Asian focus. He is a founding editor of the journal *Hong Kong Studies*. His creative works can be found in *Cha*, *Wasafiri*, *Sound and Verse*, among other places. His PhD thesis, entitled 'At Interregnum: Hong Kong and its English Writing', was a study of Hong Kong English writing. Tsang and I met to discuss his international research experiences and their influence on his poem.

Elizabeth E. Chung: My first question for you regards Hong Kong's public transport system; it's wide-reaching and affordable, includes the MTR, buses, minibuses, and trams – it's something that I've always been a big fan of. Your speaker's experience of being watched by strangers just for reading is something I resonate with due to my pale skin tone attracting attention in various 'local', less cosmopolitan areas of Hong Kong, like where my grandma lives. Do you think there's an aspect of Hong Kong (life) that is deeply interested in voyeurism? Is this something you notice about Hong Kong or international cities more broadly?

Michael Tsang: I do think that having lived in the UK for more than ten years now, I wouldn't have realised that was voyeurism until I started living in another context, place, city, or country. That's when I realised that the people around me were not doing the same things we do in Hong Kong. And so, I guess, yes; in Hong Kong there seems to be the sense that people have, in a negative way, a natural curiosity of what other people are doing. You see that in restaurants: if you like what the table next to you is ordering, you might order the same thing – that's quite common in Hong Kong. I've seen that a few times in the UK as well, but I do think that, in Hong Kong, people tend to be a bit more nosy.

You talk about public transport. Hong Kong is such a big city, and sometimes, the lack of personal space in a public transport setting is not something you do on purpose; sometimes it's actually thrown into your face! You kind of know what other people are talking about or what they're doing, because if they are looking at their mobile phone and you are taller than them, when you look down, you'll inadvertently be looking towards their screen. Some people may look on purpose, but the packed public transport settings definitely make it difficult to avoid these situations.

EEC: It's not the same as on the subway, the metro, or the tube.

MT: No. In London people do Kindles on the tube now, but I think a lot more people still read paperbacks. But the habit of reading is deteriorating around the whole world, and that's why you now have Instagram accounts for 'hot guys reading on the subway' and whatnot. That's voyeurism as well, but that voyeurism is hinged both on the 'hot guys' and on the fact that they're reading. The act of reading attracts natural voyeurism in Hong Kong.

It's a sense of curiosity based on unfamiliarity because people don't read as much, but there's not always a hostility in it. In that sense, the different characters that I described in my poem don't necessarily find my act of reading hostile, but at the same time it's enlightening to them.

EEC: Regarding the content of the poem, it's quite meta-literary to refer to other poems within a poem, and you mention Louise Ho's poems, 'Remembering June 4th, 1989', 'Hong Kong Riots II', and 'Home to Hong Kong'. Ho's poems explicitly relate to historical, political events. Do you find something interesting about the space of Hong Kong, and how, through Hong Kong, you can have the chance to speak of 'the unspeakable'? After all, the characters here are shocked that you're reading something that says 'riots' or '1989'.

MT: Ah, well, obviously the author is 'dead' but I wanted to say with the second half of the poem is that it is the speaker's interpretation that they tighten up when they see those words – that's why it reads '*Maybe* they were drawn to the words' [Tsang's verbal emphasis], and I built a bit of an uncertainty in that line. That is ultimately the speaker's interpretation, and so the poem goes, 'I *hoped* they would not forget that they had once stormed on the "rock bottom of a totalitarian state"' [Tsang's verbal emphasis]. It's written in the first person, so, the unspeakable is on the power of subjective interpretation. The speaker is reading Ho's poems, but he is also interpreting the signs around him. In that particular moment, 'the unspeakable' really is in the air. If it turned out that the speaker's interpretation was right, that the middle-aged couple standing behind him were tense because of the political content of the poems, then it probably would serve as a reminder about that history.

EEC: Visually, this piece looks like prose, but it's in a 'poetry' anthology and you refer to it as a 'poem'. Can you talk a bit about this use of form?

MT: For me, first is the form. It has to do with how I write.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker was reading Louise Ho and 'read her for research, this poet who hesitated at being called a "Hong Kong poet"'. This referred to a moment around my PhD when I had the golden opportunity of seeing her in an event. Someone asked whether she would call herself a 'Hong Kong poet', she hesitated and wasn't sure about that term. Now, she might hesitate at being called a Hong Kong poet, but at the end of the poem, because of my own research position, I was able to say that 'Louise Ho *is* a Hong Kong poet' – and I had the italics there. There's that difference between how a poet sees themselves versus how a researcher might evaluate the whole situation. I would put forward the argument that Louise Ho is a Hong Kong poet. Again, it goes back to that matter of interpretation.

Finally, by saying the last three words: 'dào le ma?' in Mandarin, the girl is asking the boy 'Are we here?', 'Are we getting off?', or 'Have we arrived?'. The whole twist of the poem is that the speaker is reading Louise Ho and then making all those imaginations about the scene around him, but then, at the very end of the poem when the MTR arrives at Admiralty, the speaker realises that the young couple sitting are from the Mainland. The little twist is that all through the poem the speaker is trying to get the two – assumed Hong Kong – couples exposed to some

Hong Kong anglophone poems, to let Hong Kongers know a bit more about their own literature, but in the end, he might even have introduced Louise Ho to some Mandarin speakers.

I think especially in *Where Else*, there are so many creative uses of languages, especially from younger poets. It's about confidence. One of the things I have noticed for Hong Kong English writing is the confidence and maturity it has shown throughout the years. When I was doing my PhD in 2011, it was still the burgeoning days when we tried to think about Hong Kong English writing as a 'thing'. Today, the growth has been immense, and it has been fascinating to see a younger generation of writers so confident about code-switching; whereas the fact that this time I submitted a poem with pinyin shows how I wasn't yet able to jump out from the fixed idea that if it's an English poem, then write in the alphabet. If I were to do it again, I probably would go for the simplified characters.

2. 5 Tung Pang Lam

Tung Pang Lam 林東鵬 [lam4 dung1 paang4] is a creative based between North America and Hong Kong whose artistic mediums include graphic arts, performance, video, and installation. Themes of history, memory, and time are evoked via recognisable existing images, which he layers to produce collective, fleeting memories. Lam and I met to discuss his deceptively 'simple' contributions to the anthology.



(Fig 2. "Untitled", by Lam Tung Pang. Permission from the artist.)



(Fig 3. "Untitled", by Lam Tung Pang. Permission from the artist.)

Elizabeth E. Chung: Both of your pieces in the anthology are untitled. Why is that?

Tung Pang Lam: Those works came from the COVID pandemic. But at the same time, for me, those drawings go beyond that specific time of COVID, so I was thinking of trying to name them something related to the COVID experience, but for me it's better that when the audience look at the drawing, they could recall their own experience, so they could engage with the work from their own experience or understand the work from their own perspective. I'd tried to put a title, but it seemed like it doesn't mean anything, but visually it will recall some sort of experience or echo your life experience, so I just put down 'untitled'.

But actually, I created those two drawings during the pandemic, and then I think I created probably 20 or 30 drawings on the iPad. During COVID, I read all these children's books at night-time, and I recaptured those children's books, putting my own understanding on them. Since I created all these drawings in those two years, for me, that experience, it's like escaping from the pandemic, escaping from the family life, even – because in the daytime you are with your family all the time, you're trapped during lockdown. It came from a very personal experience but at the same time I think it will echo some other people's experience as well.

EEC: I love that, and I love that you mentioned looking at children's artwork because that relates to my next question! In both pieces you present the same character, or a person in the same artistic style, and both pieces have a particularly 'simplistic' background which draws a lot of attention to the humanistic figure. I find this character to be one that's quite ambiguous, as if we can insert ourselves into the image or the image can adapt to something we're familiar with, so we can relate to them and what they're doing in some way. Is that your intention? And, building on that, how, if at all, do you consider your audience when producing a piece of art?

TPL: The drawing comes from a very personal experience during COVID, but at the same time it could record some others' experience too. I'll put it in this way, when I came to Vancouver, I wrote a sentence in my diary: 'Identity could be a short cut, but it also could be a trap.' Your own personality or your own identity, sometimes it's a shortcut; you find people from your same background or similar background then you engage with that community, so that would be like a shortcut for you to get into that community. But at the same time, because you will probably be trapped in that circle, especially when I write down 'in Vancouver', I have very strong feeling about that. For the art piece is the same, you tell your personal story and for me it's like a shortcut because that's what you experienced, it's an easy way to tell the story because it's from your own experience. But you can be easily trapped in your own story; so, how could you go beyond that? That's always my question. And that question, I think, is more about the boundary of the self, how you go beyond that, and the purpose to go beyond the boundary is not.

Did I think about audience? I think, since I'm the first audience, I wanted to go beyond myself! You could interpret it as how you could engage with others, or audience, or other community, but for me, the original purpose is how you could go beyond yourself. That is how I create a piece, and I have in my mind, when I do all this work, that I want it to come from your personal experience, but how you could go beyond that and not be trapped in your own world.

But it's very difficult, sometimes – especially as a visual artist! When I have dinner with my friend or my partner, they always question me like, 'What you thinking right now? Why don't you focus on your dinner?' and you're daydreaming!

EEC: I love that quote, 'identity can be a shortcut or a trap.' That is so succinct. The idea that I think a lot of people are coming out with is that to refer purely to identity is outdated, limiting. How you define identity is also a very difficult idea to express, how you define it within yourself and then you how you apply it theoretically to something else. That's brilliant and it's visually apparent in your piece of the figure carrying a piece of land – to me, in a Hong Kong context, it looks like Lion Rock – with you talking about identity maybe being a trap, this seems like a visualisation of the burden of the diaspora. That's how I'm seeing it.

TPL: For that particular drawing, you have the backpack, but with a mountain or an island. At that time, I feel the heaviness – if you're carrying a mountain or an island, that would be super heavy – that is somehow my experience or feeling when I travel or when I live somewhere else, that you carry your own cultures, your own stuff, and the more you carry, the less you could welcome the others, the new things. The drawing came from the great idea of escaping, but at the same time you are wondering how much you're going to carry with you. And I have to say right now, after a year, I have in a way 'escaped' from Hong Kong, and that weight behind your back, from time to time, I try to understand 'What's that weight about? How much are you carrying at the same time as welcoming the others and I become very sensitive from this?' From my experience, some artists would just give up what they had before to start a new life, or they will carry a lot of burdens with them when they move to other places. I've tried to not think in two extremes, that you either have to give up all your things or you have to carry all your identity and culture. I'm finding another way, the third path maybe, and this is what I'm right now trying to do, experiment.

In that drawing, like you say, it's a mountain, or Lion Rock, and also maybe it's an island. I wrote a remark about 'How big is an island, to be considered as a continent?' Because if we look at a continent from a distant perspective, like space, you will see that all the land is surrounded by the sea, right? It could be just an island, or a big continent. I had that remark next to that drawing. I don't know what exactly that means to my practice, but from time to time when I do a drawing, I have little remarks or a short sentence next to it.

2. 6 *Xiao Yue Shan*

Xiao Yue Shan is a multi-disciplinary creative, editor, and translator. Her poetry, prose, poem-films, and translations can be found in numerous places. Born in China, she emigrated to Canada at seven years old. For more, see shellyshan.com. Shan and I met to discuss the critical and creative process for her poem.

Elizabeth E. Chung: ‘exodus hong kong’ deals with a number of concrete locations as well as a range of times. But where the times are alluded to with references of ‘40 years’, the places are very specific, such as ‘the wutong mountains’, ‘liantang’, and ‘luofang’. Can you expand on your choices for using both specificity and ambiguity for these?

Xiao Yue Shan: Yes, but before I get into that technical component of the poem, I want to state that this poem, ‘exodus hong kong’, works in tandem with another poem called ‘exile hong kong’.

During World War II and China’s Civil War, there was a huge number of Chinese nationals who moved to or became refugees in Hong Kong because of the political, violent circumstances of the Mainland; my intention in writing these two poems, which both concern this departure, was to draw attention to the vastly disparate reasons why somebody would want to leave their homeland. ‘exodus hong kong’ is written in tribute and in honour of the people who escaped in the hopes of making an entirely new life elsewhere, whereas ‘exile hong kong’ – which isn’t in the anthology, but is very, very important and pertinent to how ‘exodus hong kong’ is meant to be read – is written in honour of people who left unwillingly, reluctantly, because they were forced to, those who left hoping for a world in which they would one day be able to return.

That being said, ‘exodus hong kong’ is for those who leave their country because they need to, because they cannot stay there any longer as it has become utterly unsustainable and so personally violent, and an untenable infrastructure in which to live a life. The reason I included so many visceral elements in this poem is because I wanted to draw attention to how, under these circumstances, leaving one place and going to another is strategic – by which I mean, as we see often in literature or witness statements written by refugees or told from a refugee’s standpoint, escape is logistical before anything else. You’re given a very specific plan: this is where you have to be at this time, you have to look for this person, etc. It’s a standardised, clinical language, but directly underneath it is a whole realm of emotion, passion, grief, and depth. So, by including those standardised components of ‘you have to go here; you have to go specifically to this place, and then you’ll have to cross at this place, and then you’ll have to wait a while before the sun sets, and only then can you venture across the inlet towards the place where you will be saved’ – by incorporating those physical markers, I was trying to draw attention to this dehumanising aspect of migration, wherein you’re reduced to a location, a geographical standard, and a place and a time where you don’t matter – because anybody could take your place. If you weren’t there, somebody else would be, and they would go instead of you, and your whole life would look different.

I think the language surrounding migration – and especially about migration under these desperate circumstances – largely fails to acknowledge the emotional impact of this journey; we lose the intimacy of what placeness really means in such contexts by delineating it only as geographical or political region. By mixing cartographical language with an abstract, emotional language, I wanted to reconcile these two lexicons in order to humanise the map towards escape, to enforce a recognition that every piece of such a map has been walked, that it has been felt. People have endured these places; though they may only be names to us, to somebody who has passed through them, it is an emblem of their strength.

EEC: Where can we find 'exile hong kong'?

XYS: I have a collection coming out in November; it's called *then telling be the antidote* and will be published by Tupelo Press. You can find both of those poems together there, in harmony.

EEC: How did you make the choices or know the physical locations to reference? I believe these are mostly along the border of Shenzhen and Hong Kong.

XYS: It was a very intensive process of research. Every place that is named is an actual location which the people of China passed through or sheltered at while trying to get to Hong Kong. I went through a lot of scholarly articles and personal statements from people who undertook those journeys to sketch out the throughline of this crossing-over, and it was then my role to translate both the formal academic jargon and the casual, colloquial testaments into a poetic language – by which I don't necessarily mean a more highbrow or literary language, but a form that aligned these ideas to flow towards the meaning of the poem. Even though I did not personally take these journeys, and I don't and cannot claim to carry their legacies, they are very much substantial and integral to the history of China and Hong Kong, and to this ancestral, passionate, and impossible relationship between these two nations who cannot consider themselves without considering the other.

I have never thought about China alone. That border between Shenzhen and Hong Kong is a film, a tissue, completely porous; for me, the integral, essential relationship of China has always been with Hong Kong, likely because for a lot of people on the Mainland, especially those of my generation and my parents' generation, Hong Kong represented something that felt impossible in China. When I read about these desperate journeys that people undertook during these periods of immense conflict and violence in the twentieth century, to me it wasn't just a political resonance of that time, it represented something profound and continually relevant about human imagination.

Hong Kong, for many, was a dream, a hope, a fantasy – essentially, it was a product of pure imagination. Which is all to say that it is a perfect platform for literature to start from, because when you find yourself trapped within the confines of your own country and you see just across this very, very thin body of water a country where you imagine everything could exist if only your own country were different, you can't help but try to think your way there. I need to retain the physicality of those specific cities, mountain ranges, and landmarks in order to have places for the mind to go.

EEC: I really love this title term that you've chosen. Your poem obviously deals with migration, 'exodus' being a particularly key term in that it can reference not only the leaving of a place, but the leaving of a hostile place, as in 'The Exodus', the story of the Israelites leaving Egypt. So, the alignment of travel with (Abrahamic) religion and subsequent effects on identity is so interestingly portrayed in 'exodus hong kong'. Do you think that there is – or there could be – a single point of connection between the members of the group moving in Hong Kong? Is it just 'Hong Kong' or something else? Is the exodus you present here aligned with religion?

XYs: Thank you. I think I have to address this again in the context of the other poem, 'exile'. I really appreciate that you framed 'exodus' in this congregated way; it's not one individual, but a huge group, and it's a contract between many people with similar ideas of what life means. I think when we say the word 'exile', it feels very individual. 'Exile' brings to mind loneliness and solitude, an individual, concentrated enigma and a very private question and pain. But 'exodus' is a flow, a tide.

I wrote these poems when the whole world was considering the great question of 'migrancy'. We were dealing, on a global level, with refugees of war and postcolonial violence, and we were constantly struggling to think: 'What does a nation mean? What does a boundary mean? What is a demarcation?' And 'exodus', as a religious term of motion, is so powerful because it insinuates that you are destined to be elsewhere. I felt that was such a powerful and useful way to think about migrancy during a time when people were trying to draw compartments between a 'foreign' population and a 'native' population.

I think we all grew up in nations where the idea of 'country' is very formalised. We have been ingrained with solid ideas of what country is and who we are by way of that country – sometimes in small, menial ways and sometimes in larger, more enveloping ways. But this traditionally religious idea that you are 'destined' to go forth, to make change by movement, and by establishing yourself somewhere else is totally contrary to that. It's interesting that most western empires essentially formed their landscapes through acts of religious order, but now any idea of 'fate' or 'faith' is anathematic to how countries are meant to manage their borders. By introducing faith in this poem, which has nothing to do with practicality, I wanted to overlay another more vivid, important map over the map that we have: a map of our desires and our convictions. I felt we were neglecting that abstract, mystical aspect in the question of migration when we look only at economic factors or at how a human life could be of use in a country – which is totally irrelevant to me. At the end of the day, a human life makes itself useful by living. Anywhere, everywhere.

EEC: In Part 7, you say, 'all this has been made by mothers into song' and the final part is 'the singing of our bodies to keep the land alive. | The singing of our bodies to keep the land alive.' A moment ago, in passing, you talked about art and creation, so: Why song? What is happening here that makes song such an important medium to mention?

XYs: When I was reading testimonies by people who have made these journeys, there was one specific anecdotal moment that had been recorded from a mother, which read something like: 'Because my child couldn't possibly understand what we were doing, I had to make our steps into a kind of music. I had to give him a rhythm and I had to sing it to him in order to get him to keep going.' It's heart-breaking, that statement, but it also encapsulates that Aristotelian concept of music being the only true art because its form is also its content. And where an individual can transform a journey into a song in order to make it passable or feasible, it speaks to something we all grapple with: 'How do we turn these abstract dreams, thoughts, connotations, and exclamations that we keep in our mind into a movement we can actually make in the world?'

And so, in this section, movement is a contemplation of how no individual note is music; music is only procession. Music is only music when it goes on, when it thinks about the ongoing, when it thinks about the future. It was really important to end on this note, not about how horrible these journeys can be or how far away they take you from who you are, but that there exists a method and a necessary 'light in the distance' for you to take even just one extra step, and that extra step is what makes our whole human concept of Earth meaningful. This fact that we can walk on it.

That's what those last two lines are saying, and that is what I want this whole poem to come down to: imagining the future is enough. It doesn't even have to come true. Just imagining it can be enough because that's what connects one moment to the very next moment – where something else can become possible.

2. 7 River 瑩瑩 Dandelion

River 瑩瑩 [jing4 jing4] Dandelion is a keeper of ancestral medicine through writing poetry, teaching, and creating ceremony. River is a Tin House Resident, Lambda Literary Fellow, and Kundiman Fellow, the author of *remembering (y)our light*, and a 2023 finalist for the Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Fellowship. For more: riverdandelion.com. River and I met to discuss the unusual form of his poem and its creative process.

Elizabeth E. Chung: I really loved 'How We Survived: 爺爺's Pantoum (II)'. Every time I re-read it, I'm entranced by how it is constructed of repeated lines in new contexts that give each line a new meaning. Can you please speak a bit about the pantoum form and why you chose it?

River 瑩瑩 Dandelion: The pantoum is a form that's rooted in Malaysian oral history. It dates back several centuries and for me, as someone who is an oral historian and gravitates towards documenting everyday stories as history, I gravitated towards the form itself. The poem is inspired by oral histories and conversations that I had with my grandfather [the eponymous 爺爺, je4 je2] about his migration journey from southern China to Hong Kong, and then to the US. This pantoum is actually in two parts and the first part has direct quotes from him and then some of these lines draw from oral history directly with him. That's one reason [for the form], because of the oral history. And then two, my grandfather had Alzheimer's before he passed, so that would lend his memory to be repetitive, or to wind around the same memory, situation, or scenario; that is an added layer to why the repetition in the pantoum also works in that way.

EEC: That's fascinating. The repeating and recycling, especially with the content of this poem – it sounds like the repetition and reliving of trauma.

RD: Yeah, that's like the third layer, or reason, too. It's moments that are so significant in one's life in the retelling – this would be a story that I heard retold over and over again in different parts of my life from early teenhood to adulthood.

EEC: Can you talk a little bit more about the process of creating the pantoum and highlighting intergenerational stories?

RD: I'm a poet and creative writer, I'm also working on a memoir. A big reason why I write is because my grandparents, who raised me, and then my family in general – especially the women – just don't see or didn't see their stories as worthy of being told. And so, they would live through major historical events, like this mass migration to Hong Kong, like the Cultural Revolution, like migration to the US, and they would not think it

significant. My job as a writer or what draws me to it is saying, 'No, these are significant stories and you can downplay it all you want, but it is part of history, and it will be recorded.'

This poem didn't start as a pantoum. This poem started because one day I was going to visit my grandparents in their house in Brooklyn in New York and for some reason my grandpa started talking about his experience swimming across the waters, and that is a question I had asked him several times in recent years – but for whatever reason, the times that I asked, he'd be like, 'Oh, there's nothing to talk about' or 'Oh, I don't want to talk about that right now.' But that day he just remembered really clearly, and he wanted to share it. He would share details, like how there were sharks in the water, and 'fishermen took pity & reeled us on gasoline tanks' – those are all actual facts. And eating 'five bowls of rice in Hong Kong' – when they landed, they were on the outskirts of the islands of Hong Kong, at the villages, it was villagers who found and fed them.

It was those really momentous moments I wrote down as lines, and I think when I started writing the poem they were just in traditional stanzas, but I realized that some of the moments in the images – like with the fishermen – stood out to me so clearly, I wanted to write them again. In an early draft of the poem some of those lines repeated, and at the time I was doing a mentorship fellowship with Kundiman, which is one of few national Asian-American literary arts organisations in the US, on Turtle Island, and Ching-In Chen, my mentor was another genderqueer, trans, Chinese-American mentor who saw my poem and asked me, 'Have you heard of the pantoum?' And at the time I hadn't – I didn't have an MFA and the forms that I studied were just learned in community – but when I heard about the pantoum I realised that the form of the poem was actually asking to be that.

The way the repetition works in a pantoum is the second and fourth lines of stanza one become one and three of the next, and that just keeps going. And, when I put that into the poem, I realised that that's the form it needed, and the form worked so well for me that I wrote two pantoums. After I wrote that, I began going back in and working on the craft and the details of the poem.

EEC: You said this poem is in two parts, where can we find part one?

RD: Part one is published in an anthology called *Best New Poets 2021*. It's by the University of Virginia Press. That's just in print. The second place it's appearing is in an Asian-American Pacific Islander poetry anthology coming out from Haymarket Press. Haymarket is this super radical independent press that's pretty well known, pretty large. It's coming out in 2024.

EEC: To go back to some of the things you mentioned in terms of being an oral historian, documenting your family's experience and the broader Asian-American experience, your poem relates a lot to my interest and critical work about Hong Kong Literature being used as an archive. What does this add to the archives of Hong Kong's history? Especially because it's creative writing as archive, not just documenting facts and writing it down as prose, there's something a lot more artistic about it.

RD: Yeah, I think that the power of creative writing is to bring history to life, it can help people feel history. Oftentimes the way history is documented, objectivity and a lack of feeling is seen as standard and what we aspire towards. But poetry and creative writing is the opposite of that.

I draw a lot from Audre Lorde who said, 'I feel therefore I can be free.' I've read this poem out loud to different audiences here [in the US], and at the end of the night there have been other Chinese-American people who tell me, 'Oh, this is my father's story,' or 'Oh, this is also my grandfather's story but it hasn't been talked about as much,' or 'I didn't know the full details,' or 'I've been trying for so long to figure it out.' This is just someone I don't know, who was sitting in the crowd, and so I think poetry also brings people together.

It feels like the poem can be a historical archive itself, but then when the people who have lived a part of that life come together, it becomes an extension of the archive. People's memories continue to write archive. Even in research for this poem, there would be a specific time period when thousands of people swam, and there might be a photograph in an article – but you don't actually feel the full humanity of those people's stories. I think poetry helps do that, creative writing helps do that.

$$\frac{\text{breath} + \text{breath} \times \text{wanting}}{\text{death}} =$$

EEC: You include an equation in the poem, and you also use the statistic 'an 80% chance of making it'. I read this as a way to rationalise the painful experiences of the poem. What inspired you to write with mathematics, a somewhat logical/rational form within the somewhat illogical/irrational, creative form?

RD: So the equation piece came from talking to my grandpa, he said, 'Oh, they said we had an 80% chance of making it.' When I shared that with someone else, they were like, 'That's so improbable, how can you come up with that?' But the thing is, that's what was needed in order to think that it was rational or a good idea to swim for several miles at night, across these waters. There had to be some logic to it, or there had to be some promise to it.

And the 'breath + breath x wanting [over] death' – from my understanding, of how to make it across, it was very calculated. So, the opening of part one says, 'you had to know the currents, & the sun | stay shallow to keep warm in the waters. | you had to believe you could do it | & not be afraid to die.' Those are direct quotes, also. It was really calculated, he was like, 'Oh yeah, you would go to shallow waters which would be warmer, and the deeper ones would be colder. You could know the temperature that way.' He told my grandma, 'In order to make it, you had to believe you could do it. And you could not be afraid of dying.' I don't know if you would call that logical or illogical, but death is such an accepted part of the human experience, and so to think that you could make it and you would not die? That's its own logic. And so, math as a subject that is so considered and calculated, a lot of it has answers.

EEC: I find myself wondering if these lines are in translation. When you were speaking to your grandfather, what language were you speaking in?

RD: Our family is from Toisan, and so everything's in Toishanese. This is my translation to English.

2. 8 Sarah Howe

Sarah Howe is a poet and academic, born in Hong Kong and based in London, where she teaches poetry at King's College London. Her poetry collection *Loop of Jade* won the T.S. Eliot prize. Due to busy scheduling, this was the only interview conducted via email.

Elizabeth E. Chung: I felt the calendar in your first poem in the anthology was a great symbol of mixed cultures, since there is always a difference – but somehow aligning idea – between the Chinese Lunar calendar and Western Gregorian calendar. How did you choose that?

Sarah Howe: What a lovely observation, thank you! The calendar I describe in the poem is a real one, which came to light after two-plus decades in my parent's attic in Watford, England, in much the way I describe at the start of the poem. It's full of those glossy, clichéd 'tourist' images of Hong Kong that don't speak far beyond stereotypes, made interesting only by their distance in time from our present. I thought that might make for a poignant metaphor for the diasporic experience of a place, my mother's and my own. That leaving a place might have the effect of freezing it in time, like a picture calendar from a long-past year.

I had the experience growing up of there always being both a Gregorian calendar and a Lunar calendar on the wall. By the time we lived in England, the latter was usually a free gift picked up at the local Chinese restaurant, and only really meaningful to my Mum. She mainly used it to try to work out when her birthday would fall that year, whose date she only knew by the lunar calendar. Sometimes she would forget to tell us, which made surprising her with presents or cards quite difficult.

EEC: How do you feel your poetry has changed since *Loop of Jade*?

SH: It's still a work in progress, and I've been through various distinct phases of writing (as well as many spells of writing nothing at all, under the weight of two small children) in the eight or so years since it came out. In this latest phase, I'd say the work is... if not exactly more personal, then more unguarded, and possibly more straightforward than used to come naturally to me. I find the directness of some of these new poems quite disconcerting: I am even more preoccupied by questions of emotion, intimacy and disconnection than I used to be, and am still looking for the right shape and idiom to explore some of the questions they raise for me.

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Note: All Romanisations have been made with reference to the [CC-Canto database](#).