



‘The City’s Charms and Challenges’ by Ye Si

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ABSTRACT

In this essay “The City’s Charms and Challenges” 城市的誘惑·城市的挑戰 by P K Leung (alias Ye Si 也斯) included in his 2013 collection *Bhabha in the Floating World* 浮世巴哈, Leung traces his own journey as he -- just like many other Chinese families -- moved with his family from Guangdong to Hong Kong in 1949, where he grew up, lived and taught, becoming one of the best-known Hong Kong writers. In the essay, he also mapped out the early beginnings of Hong Kong literature, its intrinsic roots in Chinese literature, and how it has thrived amidst the socio-cultural and historical changes in Hong Kong in the last few decades. In charting the locality of places, the difference between the urban and the rural living in Hong Kong, Leung highlights the importance to acknowledge the complex layers and dimensions of Hong Kong literature, where both Chinese and English languages and different cultures intersect.

KEYWORDS: Hong Kong literature, locality, Yesi, P K Leung, Guangdong

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I was born in the spring of 1949 in Guangdong and by the end of summer or early fall, my family had moved to Hong Kong. Later, my mother would say that I was over a year old when we arrived Hong Kong, and for a time, I thought I was born a year earlier. Only later did I understand her hometown's way of counting one's age, when once a child was born, he would already be considered one year old; no wonder I have no memories of the countryside.

When we first came to Hong Kong, over ten members of our family lived in Portland Street in Mong Kok, which was then considered a residential area near the sea, a good place, although I have no memories of it either.

My grandfather was an old-school intellectual and, having fled from turmoil, he wished to retreat to the countryside, to toil and till the southern acres. Eventually, he found over ten acres of farmland in Wong Chuk Hang Village in Aberdeen to grow vegetables, built pigsties for raising pigs, and four or five houses for living. He thought he could henceforth live quietly, plucking vegetables beside the eastern hedge, leisurely beholding the Brick Hill. My childhood was spent growing up in the countryside, familiar with the fragrance of banana, papaya, and guava trees, the scarlet-head dragonflies, butterflies, and beetles flitting among the golden fields. During festivals, we slaughtered pigs and chickens, pasted my grandfather's new auspicious couplets outside the house, and firecrackers crackled from dawn to dusk. Children's new cotton-padded jackets' pockets were filled on one side with red envelopes and candies, and on the other with loose firecrackers. Holding an incense stick, they would run through the fields, ready to play pranks.

Hong Kong underwent great changes in the fifties and sixties, transitioning gradually from agriculture to handicraft and light industrial production. Younger members of large families, like my uncles and aunts, began to look for work in the city. My mother found a teaching job in an elementary school in the city, and in fifth grade, I finally moved from the countryside to North Point to study and live.

North Point at that time still retained traces of the 1950s' "Little Shanghai," which to a child from the countryside felt especially spacious and clean. On King's Road, there were high-end "White Russian" restaurants like Windsor, with display windows filled with chocolate, freshly baked bread and pastries, Easter eggs, and Christmas cakes, celebrating festivals different from those in the countryside. The aroma of pan-fried buns from Shanghai stores at dusk attracted queues of customers. Restaurants like Mido and Mei Wah introduced different Western cuisines and dining etiquettes. Cantonese tea houses like North, Majestic, and Winner Palace offered exquisite dim sum in air-conditioned comfort and sofas, presenting a different scene from the tea houses frequented by fishermen in Aberdeen. Stands in front of the tea houses were filled with Chinese and English publications of both fine and popular tastes, sometimes including newly published literary magazines. The newspapers our family subscribed to, both morning and evening posts, in Chinese and English, left-wing and right-wing, accustomed me to understand society from a more diverse perspective and to appreciate literature from the supplements. There is no absolute truth; we learned to consider things from relative viewpoints. The old books and magazines scattered on King's Road after the shops closed sometimes also helped us to understand a bit of this city's history, to know what people had done before. The movies shown at the Metropole Theatre, like *Yojimbo*, *Sanjuro*, and *The Seven Samurai*, were entertainment for all and opened our eyes to the modern perspectives of Asian master Akira Kurosawa beyond Hong Kong.

Walking along the then-spacious King's Road, a child from the countryside would linger endlessly in front of the goldfish stalls in the narrow alleys of Ming Yuen Western Street, perusing the colourful urban periodicals at the newsstands, trying to find new names and publications. Passing by the King of Kings, which sold ice cream in summer and cured meats in winter, I attempted to understand the city dwellers' strange way of differentiating

seasons. As I walked past high-end coffee shops or fashion stores, I observed with infinite curiosity the life outside my own circle. The Johnson Tailors, Lee's Studio, Wearbest Shoes, and Wan Wah Tailor were things absent in the countryside. Years later, seeing photos of Eileen Chang taken at Lee's Studio, I learned that she and the Stephen C. Soong couple probably lived near King's Road in the fifties. Liu Yichang lived on Fortress Street, Sima Changfeng on Kai Yuen Terrace. Jin Yong and many cultural and journalistic figures lived in North Point. Past Seven Sisters Road, near the Ritz Ballroom, were the former locations of the News Building and the Ming Pao Building, and on Tong Chong Street was the English-language *South China Morning Post*. These were places where many journalists worked and lived. I myself would eventually join the work here, but that was after I finished my studies and began working in society, in the seventies of the last century.

Reflecting on my earliest understanding of the city, it indeed carried the curious and bewildered eyes of a child from the countryside. I liked to wander in the corners of the city, always finding novelties not to be had in the countryside. As I sought out books through newspapers and libraries, learned to write and submit for publication, my questions deepened: Why does great modern literature always set cities as the backdrop, from Joyce's *Dubliners* and *Ulysses* set in Dublin, Baudelaire's *The Spleen of Paris*, T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* in London, to Kafka as the son of Prague, yet no one writes about this city of Hong Kong, not a single piece of writing about the urban life in Hong Kong?

But I gradually discovered that it wasn't true that no one had written about Hong Kong; indeed, such writings exist. Every era had its own. Since the opening of the port, various Chinese and foreign individuals had, for different reasons, come to this small island for long or short stays, each with their own impressions, each writing stories from their own stances.

However, many of the Hong Kong stories we first read were written with preconceived notions. Since the May Fourth Movement, Chinese literature has harboured a prejudice, often portraying the countryside as pure and the city as cunning, not excluding even our favourite Shen Congwen (although his meticulousness did help break some stereotypes). There are historical reasons for this, of course. China in the early twentieth century was bullied by powerful nations, forced into signing various unequal treaties, losing territory and sovereignty, naturally leading to many feelings of humiliation. The privileges of foreign merchants at trade ports, the concessions, the twisted ecology of colonial and semi-colonial territories, and the exploitation of industry and commerce naturally made many people see only the harm and not the benefits of Westernisation and modern urban development. The literary depiction of city life was limited to decadent luxury and the wicked young bullies of the Western concessions, with little consideration for the intrinsic needs of urban development and its potential for rationality and civility.

Those of us who grew up in Hong Kong after the war or after 1949, starting from the fifties, naturally also read the patriotic sentiments of the May Fourth literature of national salvation, inherited the attitude of the 1942 "Yan'an Talk on Literature and Art" to write the literature of struggle in Hong Kong, and even into the seventies, there were still publications and authors advocating hoisting the flag of critical realism, with the milder ones considering modern literature as the dregs of Westernisation, a notion that persists to this day.

But in the experience of real life, as we grew up, we also felt the convenience that city life has brought in terms of transportation, information, healthcare, and education; the necessity of order, civility, and law in all aspects; and the benefits of openness, diversity, and respect for different lifestyles.

Of course, Hong Kong started as a colonial city full of flaws, facing many injustices, with community-minded individuals starting charitable graveyards, private schools, and various welfare projects and striving for gradual improvements in education, housing, law, and anti-corruption. Some have achieved results, while others

can only establish unstable foundations. Under the policies of different eras and the manipulation of political and economic forces, there have been advances and setbacks.

I have no intention of glorifying the city, especially not the Hong Kong city in which we live. Living in it, one especially feels its deficiencies and biases. The hegemony established by real estate developers over the years has made it impossible for most citizens to live in peace. Excessive emphasis on development has caused the original fishing and farming to shrink, ecological imbalance, and severe damage to the natural environment. An unrestricted bias towards commercial development not only disregards the human spirit and cultural cultivation but has actually led to vicious competition, environmental pollution, conflicting interests, and a downward trend in the quality of life. The media, which could have exercised freedom of speech and monitored power, also have some parts that, due to group interests, fail to distinguish right from wrong, confusing the public, which is regrettable.

Living in the city, sometimes I feel its freedom and civilisation, but sometimes also the restraint that civilization brings, the self-indulgence that freedom brings. One still must constantly adjust oneself.

In terms of literary writing, growing up in Hong Kong was also a gradual process of getting to know the city, of seeking different methods to write about the city. In addition to creative writing, due to different opportunities, I have also sporadically written other texts, clarifying to myself and others the characteristics of urban literature. There have been academic discussions, dialogues, interviews, book reviews, and pieces with random thoughts, considering the relationship between the city and literature from different angles, pondering how literature can probe the urban spirit at varying depths.

Living in the city—where development has not been kind, where air is polluted and food tainted—sickness lurks ready to pounce. The city ails, and we get on with it. I have not been immune, tasting the bitter cost. How I wished for a better life of balance...

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