

Surfaces



Colonialism, the Cold War Era, and Marginal Space The Existential Conditions of Four Decades of Hong Kong Literature

William Tay

Volume 5, 1995

DEUXIÈME CONGRÈS INTERNATIONAL SUR LE DISCOURS
HUMANISTE (1995)
SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HUMANISTIC
DISCOURSE (1995)

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1064998ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064998ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

1188-2492 (print)

1200-5320 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Tay, W. (1995). Colonialism, the Cold War Era, and Marginal Space: The Existential Conditions of Four Decades of Hong Kong Literature. *Surfaces*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064998ar>

Article abstract

Besides proposing various possible reasons for the non-existence of a literature in English from the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong, this paper tries to explain how the Cold War and the ideological struggles between the Nationalists and the Communists allowed and promoted the growth of literary writings in Chinese. But very often these works tended to speak to the centers (China or Taiwan) from the marginal space of Hong Kong.

Copyright © William Tay, 1995



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Logo Surfaces

Colonialism, the Cold War Era, and Marginal Space

The Existential Conditions of Four Decades of Hong Kong Literature*

William Tay
Humanities, HKUST
Clear Water Bay
Hong Kong

Surfaces Vol.V.205 (v.1.0A - 15/11/1995)

Copyright for texts published in SURFACES remains the property of authors. However, any further publication should be accompanied by an acknowledgement of SURFACES as the place of initial publication.

ISSN: 1188-2492

ABSTRACT

Besides proposing various possible reasons for the non-existence of a literature in English from the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong, this paper tries to explain how the Cold War and the ideological struggles between the Nationalists and the Communists allowed and promoted the growth of literary writings in Chinese. But very often these works tended to speak to the centers (China or Taiwan) from the marginal space of Hong Kong.

RÉSUMÉ

Tout en proposant plusieurs raisons à la non existence de la littérature de langue anglaise dans la colonie britannique de Hong Kong, cet essai tente d'expliquer comment la Guerre froide et les luttes idéologiques contre les nationalistes et les communistes ont permis et encouragé la croissance de la littérature en Chinois. Mais la ces oeuvres tendent le plus souvent à parler aux centres (Chine ou Taiwan) à partir de l'espace marginale qu'est Hong Kong.

Viewed in the context of Britain's long history of global colonization, the development of Hong Kong literature is arguably unique. Although ruled by

the British for one and a half centuries, Hong Kong differs from such places as Africa, India, and the Caribbean in that it does not have a tradition of literary writing in English. Further, in the long process of colonial rule the British government in Hong Kong has adopted a rather passive, even indifferent attitude (policy?) toward the literary, artistic, and cultural spheres. Except for Governor Cecil Clementi's brief promotion of traditional Chinese culture in the early days, the indifference of the British regime allows the cultural sphere to be occupied by the Chinese language and Chinese literary writings, continued in a relatively free environment in which they are left on their own. In contrast to the control by the two regimes on both sides of the Taiwan Strait in the three or more decades after 1949, this free space constitutes a distinct characteristic of Hong Kong literature. If the "value" placed on literature on both sides of the Taiwan Strait has provided much material support, literature has paid a considerable price for it.

Why did the British colonial government not actively and wholeheartedly fight for and occupy this important public as well as private space of the superstructure? Given limited access to internal and public information from the Hong Kong-British government, I would submit the following assumptions about the external conditions. First, Chinese literature and culture enjoys a long, unbroken tradition; to counter it would be extremely difficult. Hence, Hong Kong presents a different case from those areas that do not have written languages or an established literary tradition of their own. (Certain progressive British scholars have offered explanations for India.)

Second, China has never ceased to exist as a political entity. Hong Kong maintains various close ties with the mother country, particularly the Canton region. Geographical proximity facilitates significant influences from China./ pp. 5-6/

Third, different from Africa, the Caribbean, and even India, Hong Kong was ceded to Britain, not a political entity "invented" or "constructed" by the British Empire out of nothing. Therefore, for Hong Kong Chinese over a long period of time, there is no loss of national identity or cultural identity, nor is there a quest for "independence" based on nationalism.

Fourth, traditionally Chinese people make a clear distinction between Chinese and "barbarians." China, too, has an ancient history of racial, even cultural, discrimination. In an area so close to the mother country, using brute force to suppress the native language may not necessarily benefit the ruling regime.

Fifth, in contrast with a divided India where Britain defeated the parts individually before it colonized the whole, China was a big country, however tenuous its unity might be, and would have been hard to take over. Therefore, the British policy toward China was one of reaping economic benefits through so-called "tree trade." Hong Kong Island and the New Territories "on lease" were viewed as economic and trade stepping-stones. There was no need to strive for linguistic colonization as the foundation for long-term rule and expansion. This is also the historical cause behind the

1997 return of Hong Kong to China as the larger area of the New Territories was only "leased" for ninety-nine years.

To sum up, the British-Hong Kong government seemed to be satisfied with the role of benign dictator, generally adopting an attitude of laissez-faire and non-interference. However, in the 1950s, because of the continuing expansion of the administrative structure, the government began to promote teaching of the English language and used the generous compensations of the civil servant system to attract local people to study English, hence directly or indirectly impacting the growth of Chinese schools.

By the 1990s, schools that nominally adopt Chinese as the language of instruction have shrunk to a few that are either "pro-Taiwan" or "pro-China." The truth, however, is that most of the middle schools today are faced with the serious problem of decline in English; therefore, the previous distinction between Chinese and English schools is blurred.

In 1970, confronted with the movement demanding the legalization of Chinese as an official language enjoying the same status as English, widely supported by students and citizens, the government conceded on the surface and legalized Chinese in 1972.

Having progressed from industrialization to multifaceted economy in the 1970s, and from multifaceted economy to infrastructural transformation (i.e. globalization and mass relocation of the manufacturing industry to the Pearl River Delta) in the 1980s, Hong Kong has enjoyed escalating prosperity. In addition, from 1971, when he assumed governorship to 1982, when he left the post and returned to Britain, Governor Murray MacLehose changed the traditional attitude of non-interference and the policy of officials in alliance with businesses, took an active role in the area of social welfare (particularly public housing, medical care, education, and protection of working classes), and step by step improved the living of Hong Kong residents. The MacLehose administration accorded with Hong Kong's economic takeoff, laid a solid foundation for the society, and instilled a sense of identity in Hong Kong residents. The burgeoning sense of identity and self-awareness might not have been apparent at the time, but in retrospect, I would argue that it would not have come about, and the transformation of Hong Kong and its success would have been partial, without MacLehose's "enlightened form" of colonial administration.

- From a dialectical point of view, MacLehose's active involvement—including his establishing the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) to ensure rule by law, even indictments of British officials—and self-initiated moves toward social welfare were effective and timely responses to social and popular turmoil: the riot against fare increases for the Star Ferry in 1966, the leftist anti-British strikes and demonstrations in 1967, the student movement launched by Hong Kong University students in 1968-69, the legalization of the Chinese language movement in 1970, and demonstrations in Queen Victoria Park in defense of Chinese sovereignty over the Diaoyutai Archipelago in 1971. MacLehose's responses and actions protected British interests and stabilized British rule in Hong Kong.

Inadvertently "paving the way" for MacLehose's administration was American involvement in the Vietnam War. The war led to the bankruptcy of Johnson's "Great Society" project. However, it brought many fringe benefits for Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. Hong Kong also reaped some economic benefits from provisions, supplies, and exports. MacLehose became the governor at the end of Hong Kong's tumultuous phase, but the fringe benefits from the Vietnam War gave an unexpected boost, which stabilized Hong Kong's economy at the beginning of MacLehose's rule. Following the economic takeoff in the 1970s, education spread, quotas for tertiary educational institutions increased (in 1969 the Chinese University of Hong Kong moved to Shatin as the second officially recognized public university; in 1970 the government agreed to convert the former Hung Hom Industrial College into Hong Kong Polytechnic), and the literacy rate and level of education of the population rose. In addition, in the 1970s, with increasing numbers of television sets, TVB (an operation begun in 1967) exerted a strong influence on the people and improved information communication. In the early 1970s remnants of Manchu laws were officially abolished.

It may be said that MacLehose's governorship signaled the beginning of Hong Kong's modernization (meaning a certain degree of rationalization and legitimization). From this perspective, the 50s and 60s may be considered the "pre-modern" era.

If the Vietnam War had any substantial impact on Hong Kong economy, the impact of the Korean War was even greater. U.S. embargo and blockade against China, plus the protection of Taiwan with the Seventh Fleet, made Hong Kong the window to the mainland in terms of smuggling activities, breaking through the blockade, and intelligence work in Taiwan and foreign countries. Although underground communist cadres came to Hong Kong in 1948, their ultimate mission being the recovery of Hong Kong, the eruption of the Korean War stabilized the political position of Hong Kong, i.e., the continuation of the British rule. Given the British indifference toward the superstructure of literature and art, the space became the target of competition and occupation by the two rivals, China and Taiwan, as well as foreign powers in the Cold War era.

The existence of literature in Hong Kong has always depended on newspaper literary supplements, magazines, and publishing houses. Seen in the context of the ideological battle during the Cold War years, the newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses can be subsumed under three categories: those with foreign economic (and political) background, those formed by in-house writer groups and enjoying relative independence, and commercial publishers aimed strictly at profit.

Regarding newspaper supplements, in 1952 the British government charged the three leading leftist newspapers *Wenhuibao*, *Dagongbao*, and *Xinwanbao* with publishing instigatory writings. All three newspapers had supplements and for a long time reserved a weekly section devoted to literature and art.

As to in-house writer groups, besides leftist writers (Ye Lingfeng and Cao Juren were particularly active in the early years), many contributions came

from the mainland. The major rightist newspapers were *Hong Kong Times* (*Xianggang shibao*), its peak characterized by "Repulse Bay" ("Qianshuiwan"), the literary supplement edited by Liu Yichang. At the time the contributors of "Repulse Bay" included virtually all young writers advocating modernism in Hong Kong; it also attracted many writers from Taiwan. Politically leaning toward Taiwan, but essentially commercial, were two newspapers: *Sing Tao Daily* (*Xingdao ribao*) and *Overseas Chinese Daily* (*Huaqiao ribao*); both had a supplement which intermittently included a literary supplement. Until recently the *Sing Tao Daily* still had a daily literary supplement titled "Literature and Art Forecast." The literary supplement of the *Sing Tao Evening News* (*Xingdao wanbao*) published many fine works in the early period. Liu Yichang's stream-of-consciousness fiction "Drunkard" ("Jiutu") and Aileen Chang's *Rouge of the North* (*Yuan nu*), a rewrite of "The Golden Cangue" ("Jinsuo ji") were both serialized in the *Sing Tao Daily*.

The *Express* (*Kuaibao*) once belonged to the Sing Tao group. In the 1970s, although its supplement consisted entirely of individual columns known as "Approved Area for Selling Writing," occasionally Xi Xi's short but wide-ranging personal notes, prose essays, and serialized stories were published there, later followed by Ye Si. By the time Xi Xi and Ye Si appeared in newspaper supplements, the first group of writers that came from the mainland after 1949 had been assimilated, except those who moved to Taiwan or the U.S. Thus, the 1970s can be seen as the most local period of Hong Kong literature. Founded in the 1970s and independently owned by Lin Shanmu (who is the publisher and editor-in-chief), the *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (*Xinbao*) is a financial newspaper without a literary supplement; however, its cultural section in recent years is a unique feature among the newspapers.

In terms of literary magazines, those run by writer groups in the 1950s are best represented by *Everyone's Literature* (*Renren wenxue*) and *New Waves in Literature and Art* (*Wenyi xinchao*). The latter pioneered the translation and introduction of twentieth-century Western literature, ahead of both sides of the Taiwan Strait. In the 1960s, *Cape of Good Hope* (*Haowangjiao*) and *Overseas Chinese Literature and Art* (*Huaqiao wenyi*) published contributions from Taiwan; the latter published works of Ji Xian, Lo Fu, Zheng Chouyu, etc., whereas the former distinguished itself with translations and criticism. Spanning the 1960s and 1970s is *Pan'gu Monthly* (*Pan'gu yuekan*); left-leaning in the 1970s, it featured critical writings. In the mid-70s the *Pan'gu* group also published *Literature and Art* (*Wenxue yu meishu*), which folded in 1978 under the name *Lit-Art* (*Wenmei*).

Among poetry magazines by in-house groups, in the 1970s there are *Poetry Style* (*Shifeng*) and *Compass* (*Lopan*); the former lasted longer. In the 1970s comprehensive magazines that also included a literature section were *Thumb Weekly* (*Damuzhi zhoukan*) and *The Seventies* (*Qiling niandai*), mouthpiece of Hong Kong Trotskyites, both its name and date of publication very close to the leftist-supported *Nineteen Seventies* (*Qishi niandai*), edited by Li Yi. Representative magazines in the 1980s are *Eight Directions* (*Bafang*, founded in 1979) and *Plain Leaf Literature* (*Suye wenxue*); the latter is characterized by distinct local color, while the former takes

advantage of the unique liberty in Hong Kong and published literary works by writers from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, as well as overseas.

In the 50s and 60s, both Taiwan and China had their own literary magazines in Hong Kong; *Literary Scene (Wentan)* was right and *Literary Century (Wenyi shiji)* was left. However, the real threat to the leftists came from the few comprehensive magazines published by Youlian Publishing Company, financed by the U.S. behind the scenes. *Chinese Student Weekly (Zhongguo xuesheng zhoubao)* nurtured quite a few local fiction writers, essayists, and poets; its film and translation sections introduced many avant-garde works from other countries. Before it folded in 1973 it was dominant in the literary scene of Hong Kong and exerted far-reaching influence.

Another Youlian magazine *College Life (Daxue shenghuo)*, under the leadership of Yu Yisheng, Sun Shuyu, and Hu Juren, made a greater contribution in literary criticism, although its influence could not compare with that of *Chinese Student Weekly*. As to children's magazines, Youlian's *Children's Park (Ertong leyuan)*, which also published children's literature, enjoyed great popularity. Countering these magazines, the leftists published *Youth Park (Qingnian leyuan)* and *Little Friends (Xiaopengyou)*; however, their sales were dismal. In the 1960s, in order to combat more flexibly, the left also published *Sea-Light Literature and Art (Haiguang wenyi)* and *Partners in Literature and Art (Wenyi banlu)*; both, however, soon folded. The only magazine that lasted longer was the conservative *Ocean Literature and Art (Haiyang wenyi)*, but its influence was limited. In the 1980s *Hong Kong Literature Monthly (Xianggang wenxue yuekan)* was founded with unacknowledged leftist backing.

Among products of commercial organizations, *Wenlin*, edited by Lin Yiliang and published by the Sing Tao group in the 1970s, was handsomely printed; but financial overburden led to its folding. *City Magazine (Haowai)* in the 1980s is a journal about urban culture (in the late 1970s it started out smacking of "underground" cultural magazines; however it soon changed); it cultivated some young writers (e.g. Chen Huiyang and Huang Biyun) as well as market-oriented, "middle-brow" writers. Before the Anti-Chinese policy in Southeast Asia, *Contemporary Literature and Art (Dangdai wenyi)*, edited by Xu Shu, was a popular literary magazine that was independently financed and doing well commercially; it folded when it lost the Southeast Asian market.

In view of the transformation of *City Magazine*, in the process of which it gives rise to some writers, one sees another characteristic of the conditions of existence of Hong Kong literature: it depends on a long-term basis on magazines that have little to do with literature; sometimes it even appears in totally commercial magazines. For instance, works of Zhong Lingling are published in such tabloids as *Mingbao Weekly*. Another example is that women's magazines, from *Outside the Ivory Tower (Xiangyata wai)* in the 70s to *Charm (Yan)* in the 1980s, also published major writers. In the 1970s *Mingbao Monthly* published the short stories of Chen Ruoxi (Jo-hsi Ch'en) after she left China, writings of former Red Guards who escaped to Hong Kong and overseas Hong Kong writers. Although these works tend to be used to complement the political commentaries featured in the magazine,

their literary merit is unquestionable. By the same token, *Nineteen Seventies* (now *Nineteen Nineties*) also published stories about Hong Kong by Shi Shuqing, a Taiwanese writer who settled in Hong Kong in the late 1970s.

As to literary books, dependence on purely commercial presses does not necessarily conflict with the publication of serious literature. For example, in the 80s such presses as Boyi, Mingchuang, and Tupo all published books of literature, to the reader's surprise. Cosmos Books, transformed from Shanghai Bookstore on the periphery of the left, publishes more than a hundred popular fictional works by Yi Shu, but it also brings out serious works by Zhong Xiaoyang, Zhong Lingling, and Yan Chungou.

This kind of surprise happened in the 1950s and 1960s too. Globe Publishing Company specializing in romances focused on Zheng Hui and Yi Da; however, it also published "by accident" Xi Xi's novella using cinematic techniques, *East City Story* (*Dongcheng gushi*). However, in these two decades presses with foreign political and financial background were more active and serious. The U.S. financed *World Today Press* (*Jinri shijie*) published Aileen Chang's *Rice-Sprout Song* (*Yang ge*) and *Love of the Red Earth* (*Chidi zhi lian*). Before Zhao Zifan was forced to leave Hong Kong, the U.S. supported Asia Publishing Company published many anti-Communist works, some of which are still worth studying today, for instance, Zhao's own *The Semi-low Class Society* (*Ban xialiu shehui*). Almost all the books from Freedom Press were anti-Communist novels dealing with the themes of exile and nostalgia. In comparison, Youlian's publications were weaker, although in the early days it published fictional works by Sun Shuyu and others. The leftists did counter in the area of publishing, but it was not forceful perhaps due to lack of writers and titles. The leftist literature that attracted attention at the time were mostly collected essays and poetry. One exception was Yuan Lang's *Spring Dream of Nanking* (*Jinling chunmeng*), a popular work of fiction about Chiang Kai-shek written in the realist mode of the old school, which turned out to be popular in Hong Kong and overseas.

Geographically, Hong Kong is on the periphery in relation to both mainland China and Taiwan. However, during the Cold War era, the global competition between the two superpowers and the rivalry between the Communists and the Kuomintang on two sides of the Taiwan Strait made Hong Kong a battleground in the ideological war. The unique liberty that Hong Kong enjoyed allowed even such marginal voices as U.S.-backed "the Third Force" and the Trotskyites to be heard in the peripheral space of Hong Kong. The direct involvement of the U.S. internationalized the ideological war. From a cultural and literary point of view, in contrast to the self-legitimation of Beijing and Taipei, Hong Kong literature is by what Joseph S.M. Lau refers self-parodically to as "people outside of the civilized world," a local branch beyond the control of the center. If some writers and critics on the mainland, operating from a "dominant-cultural" mentality, dismiss as "negligible" the significant accomplishments of Taiwan literature in the past four decades, then the [marginality](#) of Hong Kong literature seems even more so to them. (However, we may say that the craze on the mainland about Hong Kong popular culture and popular fiction suggests that the margin counterattacks and occupies the center.)

In Hong Kong, literature has never been a concern of the British government. Vis-à-vis the tide of commercialized popular fiction in recent years, serious literature is inevitably more and more marginalized. On the other hand, individual writers of serious literature can, through frequent newspaper columns, allow their views to be heard by readers who do not read their literary works. This can be seen as a "broadcast" from the margin to the commercial center within the confines of Hong Kong. Hong Kong's imminent return to China—in the history of British colonization, this will be the first return of sovereignty, not a withdrawal upon a country's becoming independent—will formally subject its culture and literature to control by the center. Ironically, it is in this twilight period that the British government expresses concern for literature, as indicated by the inclusion of literature in the newly established Hong Kong Arts Development Council. What impact the new policy will have on the marginal voice of Hong Kong literature only time will tell.

[A](#)Translated by Michelle Yeh
