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Hong Kong Literature in Translation since the 2000s

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# Hong Kong Literature in Translation since the 2000s

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## Introduction

The debut of the first Hong Kong literary periodical *Companion* in 1928 marked the beginning of Hong Kong literature. Continually thriving over decades, the literature attracted greater attention only in the recent 30 years in the local and Sinophone literary world. Globally, this young literature is still remaining in a peripheral position in the constellation of world literary works.

This paper briefly introduces the development of Hong Kong literature. An analytical exploration of the translations of Hong Kong literature since the 2000s is offered, examining the source texts' authors and genres, the target texts' languages, and the mediums of publishing. By such analysis, it attempts to understand the challenges and opportunities for translating and publishing those literary works. As a conclusion, this paper tries to propose ways for Hong Kong literature to forge towards the world.

## **Brief Profile of Hong Kong Literature**

### 1. Definition

A very fundamental question on studying Hong Kong literature, as a branch of literary studies, is: How to define it? Scholars had proposed different definitions to it. An author or a work can be included under one definition while being excluded under another. One debatable example would be Yu Kwang-chung, who was born in Nanji, had spent 11 years in Hong Kong lecturing and writing, but was better known for his achievement in Taiwanese literary field. The complexity in defining Hong Kong literature gives a hint on the plurality and hybridity of it. In this paper, a rather inclusive definition by Wong Wai-leung (1987: 1), 'a body of literature written in Chinese and by Chinese authors in Hong Kong', is adopted when selecting data.

### 2. Development

The evolution of Hong Kong literature can be roughly divided into four stages, namely, emerging (1920s – 1950s), transitional (1950s – 1960s), flourishing of popular literature (1960s – 1990s) and shaped up (1990s – now). In the emerging phase, the literary field of Hong Kong was dominantly constituted by authors from the mainland of China and Taiwan. 'In the 1920s, authors like Lu Xun and Xu Dishan brought Hong Kong with seeds of new literature. In the succeeding 1930s and 1940s, literary magnates like Guo Moruo, Mao Dun and Xia Yan came southwards to Hong Kong,' (Ceng, 1999: 1). During the political turmoil in China towards the end of the 1940s, Chinese authors came and left Hong Kong while a number of domestic authors had sprung up, providing new blood for

Hong Kong literature (Chen, 2009:72). Since the 1950s, facilitated by the rise of modernism and the advancement of mass media, popular literature grew and flourished. Particular genres, such as wuxia novel, romantic fiction and historical fiction, had gained great popularity; columns in magazines and newspapers had provided authors with spaces of creativity, which eventually shaped a local colour that is unique to Hong Kong (Chen, 2009:72). Along with the handover to China in 1997, the society became strongly aware of its identity, and this can be reflected in literatures. The depiction of the urban environment as the theme or the story setting could be found in numerous works, such as Shi Shuqing's *Hong Kong Trilogy*, Xi xi's *My City* and Dung Kai-cheung's *The Atlas*. As Hong Kong became a controversial subject, Hong Kong literature, as a channel to study Hong Kong, had also attracted greater attention globally. Therefore, increased number of translations could be found since then.

### **Hong Kong Literature in Translation since the 2000s**

Translation of Hong Kong literature could be loosely traced back to the 1950s. However, the resource for a systematic and thorough organisation of translated Hong Kong literature has been very insufficient. A rather comprehensive one, which is the primary source of data in this paper, is *A Bibliography of Hong Kong Literature in Foreign Languages* published by the Centre for Humanities Research of Lingnan University in 2011. Given that the book was published seven years ago, to supplement the data within this interval of time, online sources, such as websites of publisher, literary magazines and government websites, are used. A total number of 528 entries of translation published since the 2000s, will be the material for analysing.

## 1. Authors and Genres of source text

The most translated authors according to the resources, include Leung Ping-kwan (or Ye Shi), Liu Yichang, Xi Xi, Louis Cha (or Jin Yong) and Huang Canran. They are recognised as the representative figures of Hong Kong literature, even for the general public who has no particular interest on literature.

Novels have made up a great proportion in all the translations. Some of the most common genres are wuxia fiction, such as Jin Yong's *The Book and the Sword* (English, Korean, Japanese) and *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (Korean, French), Liang Yusheng's *Qijian Xia Tianshan* (Japanese, Korean) and Gu Long's *Chu Liuxiang series* (Korean). Another popular genre is urban novella or prose, which depicts the city landscape and living style, e.g. Dung Kai-cheung's *The Rise and Fall of Wing Shing Street* (English), Leung Ping-kwan's *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart* (English, German) and Xi Xi's *Marvels of a Floating City* (English, Japanese, French). Besides, poetry has also taken up a large part no matter in local literature or in translations. For instance, Huang Canran's *You're Right But You're Wrong* has been translated into English, German, Spanish and Slovenian; 47 poetries were translated into Arabic, including Leung Ping-kwan and Shu Xiangcheng's works.

## 2. Language of target text

According to the data collected, Hong Kong literature has been translated into 15 languages over the years. Out of the 528 entries, English translations constitute over 68%

(360 entries) of all the translations. Translations in Asian languages, including Japanese (77 entries), Korean (21 entries) and Arabic (47 entries), together constitute approximately 27%. In the remaining 5%, which were all in European languages, most were in French (57 entries) and German (13 entries). Translations in Dutch (7 entries) and Italian (4 entries) could be occasionally seen. Translation in Norwegian, Spanish, Slovenian, Slovakian, Greek, has only appeared once respectively. The only Romanian translation in 1996 and one in Yugoslavian released in 1994 are not included in this analysis.

### 3. Medium of publishing

The translations of Hong Kong literature were mainly published by three types of medium, namely, academic press, literary magazine and publishing house.

Academic press is the most common platform where the translations can be published. A great number of works were published by local university presses, such as *Rendition*, Research Centre for Translation of Chinese University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong University Press. International university presses, like Oxford University Press, Columbia University Press and Cambridge University Press, have also printed a few translations of works by established authors like Liu Yichang, Leung Ping-kwan and Xi Xi. Some translations were published by institutes in university that focused on Asian language, literature or culture studies, e.g. Department of Comparative Literature of University of Hong Kong, Institute of Language and Culture in Meiji Gakuin University, Chinese Literary Society of Korea University.

Literary magazines and journals were the second common platform for people to get access to translated Hong Kong literatures. A local bilingual magazine *Muse* had published significant amount of translations of works particularly by new and indie writers, but it had unfortunately released its last issue on December 2010. Beyond Hong Kong, Taiwan-based *Asymptote*, Chinese-literature-oriented *Read Paper Republic*, America-founded *The Literary Review* and Japan's *Blue*, etc., have also made some translations available for oversea readers.

Publishing houses were another channel, albeit less commonly, that the literatures of Hong Kong in translations got published. Local publisher included MCCM Creation, which has published Xi Xi's *Not Written Words* in English and Leung Ping-kwan's *En ces Jours instables* in French, etc. Besides, there are quite a number of oversea publishers, such as Talisman House (New Jersey), Casterman (Brussels), Éditions Caractères (Paris), Tokuma Shoten (Tokyo) and Foreign Language Press (Beijing), most of which are independent publishers. A work published by big conglomerates or sold in bookstore chains is extremely rare. An exceptional one could be Dung Kai-cheung's *Cantonese Love Stories* published by Penguin Books for the 'Penguin Specials: The Hong Kong Series' in 2017.

## **Challenges and Opportunities for Translation and Publishing**

### **1. Challenges**

In the above analysis, two very prominent limitations were revealed: there has been a limited range of authors being translated, and the medium of publishing has limited the access to a rather narrow readership. The challenge here is probably about saleability, which is the problem Julia Lovell (2005:1) described, of which Chinese literature is facing as well. Hong Kong literature is a young genre that foreign readers lack points of reference from earlier history, so it has not yet developed a reputation in the Western world. 'Their capacity for understanding and appreciating more recent writing is always going to be shaky' (Lovell, 2005). Without an established or seemingly promising readership, the work is unlikely to be published by big publishing houses. Only those award-winning and representative figures are given more chances to get their works translated and published, and a vicious circle is thus resulted.

### **2. Opportunities**

The special historical, cultural, political and geographical background of Hong Kong have made Hong Kong literature distinct from the rest of the works in the Sinophone world. With this distinctiveness, Hong Kong literature has a still very hopeful prospect of gaining better recognition worldwide. Nonetheless, this can only be achieved with support from government and other local organisations. In recent years, the development of Hong Kong literature translation has been growing steadily with projects by different entities. 'Hong Kong Atlas' is a project aiming to translate Hong Kong literature into

English, which was funded by Hong Kong Arts Development Council. An exhibition of translated Hong Kong literature was held by local literary magazine *Fleurs des lettres*, displaying works of Liu Yichang, Xi Xi, Dung Kai-cheung and Chan Koon-chung, etc. (Sung, 2015)

### **Conclusion: Towards the World**

By understanding the development and the limitations, a way for Hong Kong literature towards a more promising future could be paved. With the digital advancement nowadays, readership can be possibly expanded through publishing works in online reading tools. On the other hand, a platform like Amazon Crossing can be developed to facilitate translation projects of Hong Kong literature. Lastly, one could investigate the positives pop culture can bring to literature. For example, the success of the movie *In the Mood for Love* (adapted from Liu Yichang's *Tête-bêche*) has gained great reputation for Liu Yichang and invited translations in English, French, Japanese and Italian. Apart from these, much still needs to be done by the government and the practitioners to bring Hong Kong literature towards the world.

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