Poems by Leung Ping-kwan

edited and introduced by Esther M. K. Cheung

City at the End of Time

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Edited and introduced by Esther M. K. Cheung Poems translated by Gordon T. Osing and Leung Ping-kwan

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This publication has been generously supported by the Department of Comparative Literature, the University of Hong Kong, which published these poems originally in 1992.

Hong Kong University Press 14/F Hing Wai Centre 7 Tin Wan Praya Road Aberdeen Hong Kong www.hkupress.org

© Hong Kong University Press 2012

ISBN 978-988-8139-35-4 (Hardback) ISBN 978-988-8139-36-1 (Paperback)

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound by Liang Yu Printing Factory Ltd., Hong Kong, China

city at the e n t i m e 形象香港

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Introduction to the New Edition

New Ends in a City of Transition

Esther M. K. Cheung

Calendar time advances in a linear, progressive manner, whereas poetic time moves in somewhat circular patterns. An ending spawns another beginning. An old epoch comes to an end but that old epoch has not ceased to exist. A new era has begun but the new is still struggling to forget the old.¹

Old Ends, New Ends

In naming his volume of poetry City at the End of Time when it was first published in 1992, Leung Ping-kwan, more often known as Ye Si in Chinese literary circles, was subtly suggesting that his own poetic contemplations had emerged from a perpetual state of transition, one in which it was impossible to clearly demarcate temporality. In the 1990s, readers, who were by then anticipating the approach of the 1997 handover, greeted this timely book with great interest. It raised a series of questions about history, language, identity, and cultural translation, questions which were pertinent to Hong Kong at that critical moment of political transition. 1997 became, in fact, the prism through which these poems were read. Somehow that moment had itself become "the End of Time." This volume was in that sense a "document" of a momentous passage through time. In fact, some poems in this collection were written before the 1980s, before the handover discussions had even started.

This new introduction looks back at that "End." At the poet's invitation, I will consider the meaning of the collection in the new circumstances of our contemporary world, both within and beyond the local context. This volume originally came out of the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong at a time when

the idea of Hong Kong Cultural Studies was still embryonic.³ Almost two decades later, the poetry in this collection takes on a new significance. It sheds light on how poetry about common culture has contributed to a "felt change of consciousness."⁴

A Poetics of the Everyday

Leung's poems, with their casual and often humorous tone, capture the space of everyday life in Hong Kong. Their very ordinariness and lack of grandiloquence unveil the city's hidden contradictions. From local mundane streets to ordinary objects and everyday life in China, Europe, and the Unites States, the poet reflects upon problems of cultural identity and postcoloniality, musing on the passing of time and addressing broad political and cultural issues. He crosses geographical borders just as he traverses spaces between literary and cultural genres. His poetic imagination, which is meditative and inconclusive, explores the relationship between poetry and other genres and media: prose, film, and painting.

This ensemble of forty poems demonstrates a unique "poetics of quotidianism," of the everyday. It raises questions as to how we should consider the uniqueness of singular objects, situations, and people. It achieves this through the exploration of an ordinary world, using an uncontrived and unsensational language. Owen Barfield in his discussion of the "felt change of consciousness" emphasizes the strangeness in poetry. Leung, however, depends less on surprising shocks and techniques of defamiliarization and more on his own intimate interaction with ordinary objects, people, and places. His poetics constitutes itself through the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of the city, engaging in a process of self-invention through an ongoing interaction with them. He grapples with threat and disintegration in the here and now, thereby confirming the power and synthesizing capacity of poetry in a society that constantly diminishes poetry's significance. In so doing, Leung has gained for poetry an indispensable role in Hong Kong's public culture.

What should one write about? What are the emergent problems of his time? Can someone trained to read both classical Chinese poetry and Western modernist literature succeed in inventing a poetic language with which to renew, if not critique, tradition? These questions, and others, were the great challenge for Leung when he was a young poet in the 1970s, as he searched for a language to depict the here and now in Hong Kong. Which would be more effective—metaphor or synecdoche? Modernist symbolism or realist revolutionary poetics? Did this kind of self-invention enable one to have a dialogue with other cultures? How should one write about one's locality in the midst of momentous changes caused by events such as the Tiananmen Incident of 1989 and the 1997 handover? How should one respond to cultural representations, for example those imposed from the outside? How best to challenge stock images and stereotypes? How best to reflect upon one's own culture when away from home? These were the questions that confronted the poet as he explored issues of cultural identity in the 1980s and 90s, as he was weaving his way between Hong Kong, other cities in Greater China, and cities across the world, developing his poetic visions.

To deal with these challenges, Leung has developed a unique mode of writing about everyday objects and ordinary spaces. On the one hand, he demonstrates a remarkable ability to articulate what is most local, mundane, and familiar, in the knowledge that the very same thing may become different and unrecognizable when seen in the light of colonialism and capitalism. To this postcolonial sensibility, enhanced by a keen eye for the observation of the ordinary, must be added a cosmopolitan outlook, a constant willingness to interact and communicate with other people and other cultures.

It is interesting to note that in earlier times critics described this mode of writing very differently. In his idiosyncratic way, Ackbar Abbas saw "non-objective indices of disappearance" in Leung's poetry because the poet was dealing with the violence of coloniality and capitalist modernity in a non-aggressive, quiet but postmodern, deconstructive style. Rey Chow emphasized the quotidian aspects of Leung's poetry, and sought out within his work an alternative way of turning coloniality into a "condition of possibility." Common to both these scholars is their affirmation of the historical and evaluative quality of Leung's poetics of the everyday.

An Historical Optic

The everyday space in Leung's poetry, filled as it is with ordinary objects, familiar images and mundane urban sites, functions like an "historical optic," as Harry Harootunian puts it.9 Throughout the forty poems in the four sections of the collection, there are many examples illustrating this historical optic. Taking a walk through the streets of Hong Kong, for example, the poet allows us to grapple with and reflect upon larger social and political changes. In "At the North Point Car Ferry" and "In Ap-liu Street," he leads his readers to explore common urban problems such as congestion and consumption. "Lucky Draw" is a humorous depiction of a city's materialistic and hedonistic lifestyle. "In Fabric Alley" articulates in a provocative manner allegorical and historical meditations on Hong Kong's political identity in the wake of 1997. But these serious reflections arise out of an ordinary street, Fabric Alley. In a similar way, "Images of Hong Kong" and the Lotus Leaves Poem series inspire us to consider seriously the violence of cultural representations, the problem of center-periphery opposition, and the possibility of dialogue. The subtle references to the Tiananmen Incident of 1989 in "In the Great Square," "Broken Home," and "Refurnishing" deepen the poet's critique of this epochal event.

"Postcards from Prague," a travel poem in the collection's last section, "Journeys," is particularly interesting. The poem begins with an ordinary moment in everyday life, when the poet receives a postcard from a friend in Prague. The tone of the poetic persona is casual and friendly as if he is replying to his friend's postcard, evoking a sense of everyday familiarity. It is a banal moment, a repeatable event, like all trivial happenings in everyday life:

Your cards began arriving once again, so I see you're training around, rambling. Are you finding humor in bitterness?

Upon receiving the postcard, the poet visualizes his distant friend visiting familiar, known sites in Prague. He may be "in Chopin Park, / listening to a viola," crossing the Charles Bridge, or spending time in the famous

Wenceslaus Square. He may be "wearing surely a checkered, flannel cap made in Prague," or "silver bracelets from Warsaw." While this ordinary moment of the present repeats an earlier similar time, it is more like a "durational present" which can be freshened with new insights. ¹⁰ It opens up our visions to a wider political world, as in a kind of historical optic.

Your cards greeted my return; what a coincidence; I'd been there at almost the same time. That old world was shifting, to a market economy, to multi-party politics. People's lives were riddled with uncertainties and changes. Who knows? . . .

In this undramatic moment, the banal is repeated. And yet from 1989 onwards we witness world-wide and unprecedented changes, as communism gives way to capitalism. While the poet is focusing on the revolutionary changes in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990, he sees how destinies are joined when he subtly refers to what happened in China the year before. The coincidental encounter in Wenceslaus Square or the Charles Bridge might not have been recognized, but the sense of uncertainty experienced through these tumultuous changes is deeply shared. This does not always give rise to a harmonious consensus:

... One evening a few years ago
we argued into the night about poetry and politics,
about dignity and freedom, with similar beliefs but opposing conclusions.

This acknowledgment of differences reminds us that there is no simple solution for emergent problems. It also warns us to guard against the danger of romanticizing the sense of sharedness.

As Space of Transvaluation: Dialogism and Poetic Personae

Without adhering to the expressive and mimetic functions of poetry, Leung adopts a dialogic mode to make the process of transvaluation possible. In "Postcards from Prague," the poet often speaks in a conversational tone and unrhetorical style. This is true both of his odes to objects and things, his "thing-poems," known in Chinese as yongwu shi, and of his travel poems, you shi. In poems such as "The Flame Tree"

and "Bittermelon," ordinary objects have been given life to engage in a dialogue with the poet. And yet his things remain quiet and unexaggerated. They gently invite the reader to meditate on them. Unlike certain animate objects that shock their perceivers, the bittermelon and the flame tree patiently await the reader's reading. In an object as unattractive as a bittermelon, one discovers the fundamental difference between the superficial, flamboyant heroics practiced by some writers, and Leung's low-key sustained individualism which affects the world slowly. As the poet remarks,

The loudest song's not necessarily passionate; the bitterest pain stays in the heart.

. .

In the rows of flowery, tiresome singing you persist in your own key.
You'd like to heal this bad fever of a world.

Similarly, the flame tree's commonplace quality acquires a special power, one that enchants and inspires the poet. Symbols, he remarks, have their limitations. Their meanings are predetermined by politics and culture.

Eventually I will learn your secret name, that is born every year out of the common ground.

How does something simply change colors? Must green always mean tolerance? Red revolution? No. Symbols are mostly limitations. I must avoid categorizing.

What is central to Leung's poetics is the construction of a persona willing to engage in dialogue. This persona (in both the thing-poems and the travel-poems) belongs more to the world of classical Chinese poetry. Leung himself admits that he likes the "non-aggressive" attitude of the classical Chinese poet, an attitude which "opens up space for others to come into." He urges us to look at the landscape, to go into it and enjoy being with it. He once described this as a kind of "discovery poetics." Similarly we can have a lot to do with "things" as long as we are willing

to discover their ordinary quality.¹¹ He once painted the following self-portrait in conversation with his translator Gordon T. Osing:

A poet in Hong Kong is by the very nature of things distanced from all that grandiose and heroic voice. He is writing like a clown speaking on television, like a cab driver speaking in the front seat, or someone speaking directly to the inner life, or intimately to his friends.¹²

This secularized persona can be likened to the poetic persona in Charles Baudelaire's prose poem "Loss of a Halo" (« Perte d'auréole », 1869). The comic Baudelairian poet accidentally drops his halo while crossing the busy Parisian traffic. But in the end, Leung's easygoing attitude is more analogous to the lifestyle of a classical Chinese poet such as Su Dongpo.

In this regard, it is perhaps more pertinent to situate Leung within the postcolonial landscape of Hong Kong.¹³ He shares a common impulse with other Hong Kong writers such as Xi Xi, Dung Kai-cheung, Lok Fung, Yip Fai-this is by no means an exhaustive list. All these writers are exploring a common culture for Hong Kong. Leung was a pioneer in the poetics of the ordinary, and his work has inspired many younger Hong Kong writers. More recently they have found this whole approach relevant to the way they relate to their city. In the new millennium, in the wake of the Hong Kong government's 2006-07 decisions to demolish the old Star Ferry Pier and the Queen's Pier, the younger generation, commonly known as the "post-80s," have begun asking questions. How can they hope to construct their collective memories through the preservation of such long-standing local icons and landmarks? These so-called "nativist" struggles are part of a broader movement of protest at Hong Kong's real-estate-led urban planning policy; they are part of a tidal wave of cultural criticism, of a publicly expressed discontent with the constant demolition and destruction that have degraded the city's community spirit and erased people's memories. The call for improved historical preservation has gained greater momentum. It is interesting to note the convergence of interest in Hong Kong's urban topography between creative writers on the one hand, and advocates of the new social movement on the other. New publications also include re-readings of Leung's old poems such as "At the North Point Car Ferry" and the

Tiananmen poem series, in the changing context of the city in the new millennium.¹⁴

The Singular in the Ephemeral

The "discovery poetics" found in the "thing-poems" is as prominent in the poems of travel and urban topography. In "Cloud Travel," "The Moon in La Jolla," and "Morning in a Foreign Land," there is no attempt to exoticize local or foreign places. These have instead become spaces of meditation, of conversation and discovery. In "Morning in a Foreign Land," the traveler meditates on the meaning of transition when he is on the road. The violent change in weather becomes a departure point. When away from home, he sets out to explore the challenge of encountering different cultures.

Changeable weather has cancelled the new age we all created only yesterday.

How shall we proceed with today's stories?

Nothing's the same; the center people brought from mainland has joined everything else in the periphery, some heavy luggage having become inexplicably light, that old life fragmented, mingling now with accents and dialects circling some Babel suddenly there in the mist.

This is a succinct evocation of the poet's transitional time and space. When one is away from one's own comfort zone, what was once taken for granted is challenged and transformed by the new environment. In this travel poem, the traditional symbolist poetics of classical Chinese journey poetry are absent. In place of the overwhelming sentiment of exilic melancholia is an urgency to reflect on one's relationship with others, to rethink the meaning of center and periphery.¹⁵

In "Images of Hong Kong," one of Leung's most-quoted poems, the expansive scope of this transitional time and space is ruminated upon, as the city is seen to be approaching the end of time:

I need a new angle for strictly visual matters.

. . .

History, too, is a montage of images, of paper, collectibles, plastic, fibres, laser discs, buttons. We find ourselves looking up at the distant moon; tonight's moon — does it come at the beginning or the end of time?

This transitional moment is also a movement between sites:

We need a fresh angle, nothing added, nothing taken away, always at the edge of things and between places.

In many poems in this collection, time lengthens as the old meets the new. Each situation is apprehended as a singularity. In the poem "At the North Point Car Ferry," the ferry as a means of physical transportation has vanished, but the images preserve a bygone urban landscape, as it existed before the construction of the Mass Transit Railway. They also fashion an urban topography with a unique Hong Kong collective memory associated with the harbor. The famous junk, which decoratively illuminates the tale of Hong Kong as an economic miracle, is not to be found in this harbor. What has taken center stage is the mundane challenge of living in a city of pollution and disintegration.

We came through cold daylight to get here, following a trail of broken glass.

The last roadsigns pointed to rusty drums, everything smelling of smoke and burned rubber, though we couldn't see fire anywhere.

In the narrow shelter of the flyover, cars and their people waited a turn to go over.

The final moment in the poem, noted by many readers, far from closing off time and space, gives rise to a "new end," one in which cars and people are in perpetual transition. Each new end is a singularity, a unique case to explore and ruminate upon. The materialistic abundance in an ordinary Hong Kong street—Fabric Alley, for example—is another singular case to reflect upon. History is presented as a profound set of palimpsests, composed of objects as mundane as fabrics:

All these stock images, the layers of colors superimposed to make old patterns, their many lyrics gone sour, also their erotic suggestions: can we really see ourselves remade in any of these?

On one level, fabrics inspire us to explore how personal identity is defined by materials, through self denial and obsession. On another level, the poem points to a singular case in history, that of Hong Kong searching (again) for its identity in the wake of 1997. It is now more than a decade since the handover. Does the poem's last question—"Can we really see ourselves remade in any of these?"-still pose a challenge to the people of Hong Kong?

The Challenge of the Everyday: Translation as Creative Interaction

If this collection has presented readers now and then with different challenges, different notions of reception aesthetics and poetics, what kinds of challenge has it posed to its translator? As a bilingual volume, it sheds interesting light on the intimate relationship between translation and cross-cultural communication in the global and postcolonial context. It first appeared in the early 1990s when critical reflections on postcoloniality were only just gaining momentum. If the fundamental aims of postcolonialism are to combat the residual effects of colonialism as well as to inspire us to learn to respect each other, then what role does the English language play? Outside and beyond the critique of English as a colonial and neo-colonial instrument, what other possibilities can be discovered in a project of co-translation? If postcolonialism does not merely announce "the End of Time," does the afterlife of colonialism produce new ends, in such phenomena as the practice of translation? After all, translation "issues from the original-not so much from its life as from its afterlife," as Walter Benjamin reflected more than a century ago. 16

Leung's effort to translate his own poems in collaboration with Osing, an American poet visiting the University of Hong Kong as a Fulbright Scholar, was a landmark event in the development of Comparative Literature as well as Postcolonial and Cross-cultural Studies in Hong