

Series Editor's Preface

From its first controversial founding as a British colony in 1842, Hong Kong has been a unique place of refuge for immigrants, protected from the turmoil of the Mainland, a haven in which this free-thinking, free-wheeling child of China's great literary culture has been able to survive and flourish, unimpeded by political struggle and the heavy hand of ideological dogma. In the tender core beneath this modern city's deceptively hard and glittering surface lies a world of fine literature, visual and performance art, music, theatre and film. It is one of the great civilised cities of the world. This new series of six books proudly presents that civilisation, giving evidence of the defiant and distinctive character of Hong Kong's imaginative literature, which marks it off from the other parts of the Chinese-speaking world. Like the better-known cinematic work of Wong Kar-wai, the literature of Hong Kong combines a timelessly Chinese palette of colours and flavours with an exciting acceptance of cosmopolitan modernity. It is as authentically Chinese as the very best Cantonese cuisine, and yet at the same time, having issued from a place which is so permeable and volatile, it is also infused with an effortless sense of fusion. It is an alchemy *of* Hong Kong, but *for* the world.

Liu Yichang, an immigrant from Shanghai in 1948, was for several decades, until his death in 2019 at the age of 99, the father figure of the modern Hong Kong literary scene. As editor of the journal *Hong Kong Literature*, he was widely respected for having nurtured younger talents such as Leung Ping-kwan and Xi Xi. His 1962 stream-of-consciousness novel *The Drunkard* vividly portrays the Hong Kong of the early 1960s, chronicling the struggle for survival in the jungle of the city of a dissolute but thoughtful and literate Chinese man of letters. It captures the quintessential spirit of Hong Kong, its magnificent, often squalid, splendour, its contradictions, its chaotic and irrepressible energy.

Leung Ping-kwan, who moved into Hong Kong with his parents from Guangdong Province as a small child in 1949, was a prolific and supremely gifted poet, critic, and writer of fiction. *Lotus Leaves* is the most complete anthology to date of translations from his poetic oeuvre, and shows the sheer range of his writing, from celebration of the everyday in Hong Kong life, to deeper meditations on the human condition, and playful pieces written for performance in the lively cultural scene in which he was so active a participant. His two tales in the companion volume *Dragons*, with their roots both in Latin-American Magical Realism and in the age-old Chinese tradition of tales of the supernatural, demonstrate his accomplishment as a storyteller.

Xi Xi also immigrated as a girl to Hong Kong from Shanghai, in 1950. Over the past five decades she has created a large and uniquely personal body of work, as a writer of both fiction and poetry. She is widely admired for her great stylistic elegance and for the poignant and haunting, almost melancholic, mood of much of her writing. *The*

Teddy Bear Chronicles is a quirky and original work, cleverly bringing together her passion for the making of teddy bears with a number of short essays about colourful figures from Chinese history. It is a charming album, both instructive and entertaining, leaving the reader with a feeling of pure delight.

The memoir *Ordinary Days* by the scholar and critic Leo Ou-fan Lee and his wife Esther brings to this series an intensely personal touch, consciously echoing that great sentimental memoir of the late 18th century, Shen Fu's *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*. With disarming candour, Leo and Esther lay bare their hearts and share with us their story of love and suffering. Set partly against the backdrop of some of Hong Kong's most turbulent years, partly in the far-flung diaspora of the Chinese intelligentsia, this is a remarkably revealing record of the inner life of a highly cultivated modern Chinese couple.

The Best China, an anthology of Hong Kong essays from the past 170 years, records the intellectual ferment that has always characterized the city, sometimes restless and questioning, sometimes meditative and lyrical, always civilised, and buoyed by an all-pervasive spirit of freedom.

To borrow from the title of one of Xi Xi's works, we could perhaps call this series *Six Chapters from a Floating City*: a tribute to the indomitable spirit of the people of the special world that is Hong Kong.

John Minford

March 5, 2020

Featherston, New Zealand

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In the autumn of 2012, a year after the 2011 Symposium at which the idea was first put forward by my friend PK, or to give him his full title, Professor Leung Ping-kwan, fifty or so graduate students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong enrolled in a semester-long course on translating Hong Kong Literature. Professor Leung came along towards the end of the semester and took part in an impromptu workshop at one of our seminars. He was already very ill, but his dedication to the cause of Hong Kong Literature always remained in the forefront of his mind, to his dying day. His talk that day inspired us all, and ultimately his passion has been the driving force behind this project.

Over the years many young translators have generously contributed their talents to the various books in the series, working from

Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States, inspired by a shared love of Hong Kong, a shared admiration for the spirit of the place, and a determination to show the world the depth and fascination of its literature and of its unique culture.

Finally, I wish to thank the enthusiastic and dedicated team at The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press. The Press Director Ms Gan Qi, and the Acquisitions Editor Ms Ye Minlei, welcomed the project with open arms, and over the past few months their editors 'on the ground', Ms Winifred Sin and Ms Rachel Pang, have toiled with enormous professionalism on some complex manuscripts. Throughout the often challenging process of bringing this project to fruition they have been a most congenial team to work with, many times expressing to me the pride they feel in helping to create this tribute to their city and its great tradition of freedom.

John Minford

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Preface

This introduction is partly inspired by an essay written by the Hong Kong critic Stephen C. Soong, which was published in Chinese in the *Ming Pao Monthly* for November 1985, and subsequently adapted and translated into English in 1986 for the first collection of Xi Xi's stories in translation, *A Girl Like Me and Other Stories*. Stephen Soong (1919–1996) was one of the first critics to recognise the importance of Xi Xi's work, and to promote it both in Hong Kong and in Taiwan.

Xi Xi is the pen name of the writer Cheung Yin. She was born in Shanghai in 1937 and settled in Hong Kong in 1950. Her family originally came from Zhongshan, in Guangdong Province. Xi Xi attended Heep Yunn School in Hong Kong and later entered the Grantham College of Education. After graduation she taught at a government primary school, before devoting herself full-time to writing.

In 1983, her short story *A Girl Like Me* won a prestigious prize in Taiwan, and since then she has been awarded numerous literary prizes for her fiction and her poetry, culminating in the 2019 Newman Prize for Chinese Literature, from the University of Oklahoma. In September 1989, she was admitted to hospital with cancer. She recovered after treatment, though repercussions impaired the use of her right hand. In recent years, Xi Xi has used her left hand to write. She has become

very fond of doll houses and of making rag dolls and teddy bears by hand. This has served as physical therapy for her right hand.

Xi Xi, in its Chinese written form 西西, is a graphic representation, a pictograph, of a young girl in a skirt, her legs spread within a chalked frame, playing a game called 'Building a House', popular among young Chinese girls in Hong Kong. Her own account of her pen name was charmingly explained in a short essay of hers:

When I was young I used to love playing a game similar to hopscotch, which we called 'Building a House' or 'Aeroplane Hopping'. First you draw a series of squares on the ground. Then you tie a string of paper clips into a knot and toss it into one of the squares and start hopping from one square to the next until you reach the square with the knot in it. Then you pick it up and hop your way back to where you started. When I played this game with a lot of other children, I always found it exciting; sometimes I played it alone, and felt very lonely. When I was in primary school, I played it all the time. Now that I am a teacher, I still play with the children ...

From this account we can learn something of Xi Xi's attitude toward life: she is a person of childlike joy. We can also see this particular game as a metaphor. The squares represent form or convention, and Xi Xi feels no sense of such restriction; she can jump from one square to the next as she pleases. Or they may be seen to represent the squares on the manuscript paper used by Chinese authors, the rules of the writing game Xi Xi the author has learned both to respect and disobey. As she herself says, 'crawling from square to square' (a standard Chinese metaphor for the process of writing) is a more painful exercise than hopscotch.

Xi Xi is very much a writer 'made in Hong Kong'. She regards children's tales, the cinema, and European and Latin American fiction as major influences. She has read most of Andersen's and Wilde's tales, and her works are permeated with a childlike quality. Perhaps this is the product of her years of teaching in a primary school, although she has never deliberately written for children, and her expressions of childish delight are often restrained. She confesses to having been influenced by Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez, but her works are not in any sense transplants, they are thoroughly Chinese. She does not reject the Chinese tradition. She is essentially a cosmopolitan Chinese writer.

The delightful pieces in *The Teddy Bear Chronicles* belong to a long and venerable tradition in Chinese literature, of quirky memoirs and casual personal essays, sometimes lyrical, sometimes telling a story. These miniatures might record a distant memory, a fleeting dream, or some recent experience. They were often written around a theme that had exercised a particular fascination (sometimes an obsession) on their author: strange creatures, eccentric habits, unusual pastimes. This type of thing was called in Chinese the informal literature of 'jottings' (*biji wenxue*). The vast treasury of such work written in Chinese over the past two thousand years has been hugely neglected outside the Chinese world. This is because it fits so awkwardly, if at all, into any existing Western category. It is quintessentially Chinese, and for that very reason very hard to translate. Like a knick-knack from the studio of a Chinese man of letters, some exquisitely carved walnut stone, or small personal seal with a brief and tantalising inscription engraved by the owner's friend, the *biji* essay creates around itself a leisurely world of its own. It projects a view of the world in which things (sometimes

the tiniest things) are brought into sharp but effortless focus. It reflects a refined and deeply (but lightly) philosophical aesthetic, that goes back as far as the great Taoist raconteur Master Zhuang of the fourth century BC (needless to say, Xi Xi made a teddy of him!). To read his essays is to partake of the deeply illogical magic of things Chinese. It is to be both entertained and enlightened. Xi Xi's bear-essays are a superb and exquisite modern re-incarnation of this form. With their accompanying photographic illustrations, they transport us to a private universe, made the more poignant by the circumstances of its creation (in the aftermath of cancer). Her great skill as a writer, combine with her gently zany sense of humour and a touch of whimsy, to take us on a light-hearted trip through Chinese history and culture—not for some heavy educational purpose, but for pure pleasure. Fortunately for readers with no knowledge of Chinese, Xi Xi and her teddy bears have found a truly sensitive soul-mate in Christina Sanderson, a gifted young translator who has herself come to 'know their sound', and has dedicated herself to bringing these lovable creatures out into the world.

John Minford

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Featherston, New Zealand