

## 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 characterised 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*

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Featherston, New Zealand

## Introduction

This anthology brings together work by over twenty authors, beginning from the very first years of the newly founded colony of Hong Kong, through the 19th and 20th centuries, past the establishment of the Chinese Special Autonomous Region in 1997, right up to the troubled last days of 2019. It has only one aim: to show today's readers the enormous wealth and variety of ideas circulating, and the impressive quality of the prose written and published in and about Hong Kong over that period of nearly 180 years. I hope it will provide eloquent testimony to the dynamic spirit of freedom that has proudly animated Hong Kong from its earliest days. And readers should remember that this little book is only a fraction of the total.

The subjects covered in this miscellany include literature (fiction and poetry), local history and customs (in both the higher levels of society and the demi-monde), humour and social satire, personal reminiscences and memoirs, and lyrical meditations (some light-hearted, some sombre) on music, on the vagaries of life and the meaning of death. They come from a broad spectrum of figures, many of them Chinese, some of them expatriates of one sort or another, poets, scholars,

novelists—one Chinese, one Anglo-Chinese, missionaries, prominent public figures and journalists, pioneer critics and translators, political refugees, reformers and revolutionaries—all of them intimately connected in some way or other with the unique place that is Hong Kong, and with the worldwide Hong Kong diaspora. They reflect a wide variety of viewpoints, but none of them has suffered from the constraints of ideological pressure or censorship. They have all been free to write according to their personal convictions. This is the spirit of Hong Kong. This is the Best China.

Perhaps the anthology's title deserves a word of explanation. 'The Best China' was (and still is for some) a way of referring to a set of crockery of superior quality (Royal Doulton for example)—tea-cups and saucers, side-plates, milk jug, tea pot, etc.—reserved for special occasions, brought out of the cupboard for special visitors. Here it is used to describe a similarly special collection of prose items that demonstrate the 'best' Chinese tradition of free thinking and creative writing.

Hong Kong has functioned as a sanctuary, an enclave on the edge of China proper, taking in over many years refugees from devastating turmoil on the Mainland, protecting freedom from the threat of political strife and corruption, from invasion (with the exception of the Japanese occupation from 1941–1945), from famine, civil war, and ideological persecution. Throughout this

time, so far from being a cultural desert, Hong Kong has in fact been a veritable oasis, nurturing the delicate shoots that express the Best, the Truest, China.

But, as the greatest of all China's novelists once wrote, 'Truth is after all Fiction, and Fiction Truth.<sup>1</sup> And Life itself but a Dream.'<sup>2</sup> The symposium found in the pages of this new book is strangely foreshadowed in a manuscript recently discovered in a library of a Trappist Monastery on a remote Hong Kong island. The manuscript, which is barely legible (especially the scribbled red marginalia), contains what seems to be the opening chapter of a novel, beginning on the very first page with the title: *The Travels of the Pilgrim Widdershins, Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream, with Sundry Annotations in Red Ink by a Later Reader Named Deasil.*<sup>3</sup> This fragment of a dream-narrative is set both in the recent past and in the present, and in the Hong Kong of the late 18th century, at that time a sparsely populated string of islands far from the Imperial centre of power. It tells of an odd assortment of individuals who

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1 *The Story of the Stone*, Chapter 1.

2 *The Story of the Stone*, Chapter 120.

3 For the previous adventures of Widdershins and his old friend Deasil in the Arsyversian Mountains, the reader is referred to an earlier piece of *Nouvelle Chinoiserie*, 'In Lieu of a Preface', in *Trees on the Mountain*, edited by Stephen C. Soong and John Minford (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1984).

gathered together spontaneously one hot summer's day in the courtyard of a country inn. The story (together with its marginal commentary in red ink) begins thus:

One day a desire to savour country sights and sounds led Widdershins to take a boat away from the settlement of Hong Kong to a remote island, and as he walked along the shore with no fixed destination in mind, he presently found himself in a place ringed with hills and full of murmuring brooks and tall stands of bamboo, where a tumbledown temple stood half-hidden among the trees. But when he went inside the temple and looked around, he saw only an ancient, wizened monk cooking some gruel, who paid no attention whatsoever to his greetings and proved to be both deaf and partially blind. Widdershins lay down to rest for a while, but eventually rose from his couch with a sigh, and walked out, thinking to give a full rural flavour to his outing by climbing further up the hill and treating himself to a few cups of wine in a little country inn. So accordingly he directed his steps towards a nearby village in the foothills, from where he could just make out in the distance the twinkling lights of the settlement he had left behind. He had scarcely set foot inside the outer gate of the village inn when he saw a familiar face: one of the men drinking at a table in the inner courtyard rose up and advanced to meet him with a broad smile.

*Our mischievous author  
is here frizely embroidering  
on the second chapter of  
The Story of the Stone,  
by his old friend and  
drinking-companion  
Mr Cao.*

'Welcome my friend!' he cried. 'We are all gathered here today, from all over the island, to take refuge from the intense heat, and to enjoy a moment of pleasure together in the rural silence of these hills, a silence unbroken save by the cicadas among the olive trees. Will it please you to join us? It would surely be the height of folly on your part not to do so! Come, take your pleasure with us, share in the telling of stories, in the chanting of verses, in which the invention of one may afford solace to all the company. Let us divert ourselves as best we may.'

Walking on into the courtyard of the inn, Widdershins was warmly welcomed by the motley band of individuals, who looked up one by one in a friendly fashion from the various tables at which they were seated. It was a warm scene of easy fellowship that greeted his eyes, smiling faces, pretty girls, music and wine, men and women of all ages unwinding together in a spirit of gentle acceptance and free exchange.

Immediately facing him as he entered, seated at what seemed to be the principal table, was a very important-looking and smartly dressed Chinese man in his late seventies, who was clearly used to having a great deal of attention paid to him. An interesting-looking lady sat beside him. She had a distinguished air about her and an intelligent, alert expression on her face. She was busy questioning

*Our omnivorous author has clearly also been at work pilfering from the First Day of Boccaccio's Decameron.*

*The wealthy Martial Arts novelist and entrepreneur Louis Cha and his old colleague and sparring-partner, the leading Hong Kong barrister and democrat Margaret Ng. The word 'democracy' kept cropping up in her remarks, and this was no doubt what made Cha feel so ill at ease.*



him, quizzing him relentlessly but always politely, in the orderly and well-reasoned manner of a seasoned and civilised lawyer. Her line of thinking, however, did not seem to please him much and he smiled a little awkwardly, affecting not to have heard her properly, and mumbling something evasive in reply, in his broken Cantonese. Mostly he was absorbed in fingering his expensive fountain pen and studying the cheque-book which lay open on the table before him.

*The first was that irrepressible radical and veteran anti-Communist journalist Lee Yee, whose 'Going in Opposite Directions' delivered such a telling rebuke 'Contra Cha'. The second was Jimmy Lai, the ebullient and dynamic creator of the fashion house Giordano, founder of the newspaper Apple Daily, ardent and generous supporter of the democratic cause. Cha, the advocate of placating Peking, was outnumbered 3-1.*

*Xi Xi, the reclusive and brilliant author of 'The Dragon' and 'The Teddy Bear Chronicles.'*

Slightly to one side at the big table sat two other men of approximately the same age as the first. One of them seemed bursting with things to say, but was for the moment following the conversation in silence, with a slight frown, nodding his head vigorously from time to time in agreement with the lawyer, waiting (with some difficulty) for his turn to speak. The other man, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, just sat there with a cheeky smile on his face.

Not far away, in a secluded nook of the courtyard, a plainly-dressed woman sat quietly on her own, arranging a number of beautifully-made teddy bears with great care on the small table in front of her. She handled them tenderly, with affection, almost as if they were her children. She had an abstracted and distant air, as if her mind was elsewhere. But her face wore a kind, if slightly melancholy, smile.

In another corner of the courtyard, shaded by a tall stand of bamboos, a lively discussion was taking place, between two older, distinguished-looking Englishmen in frock coats, and a younger Chinese wearing a cloth cap.

The Chinese man was gesticulating and laughing loudly as he recited a few enigmatic lines of poetry in Cantonese:

*When we are silent, there will still be noise.*

*Each of us abides the seasons' dust.*

*We listen attentively, and as we unfurl*

*We sense the colours of distant waters.*

The two frock-coated gentlemen, who by now had downed several goblets of the excellent wine that was going round, responded in kind. One began to recite some lines from his own translation of a Chinese poem:

*Old age hastens on, as each fleet hour passes,*

*Though spring ev'ry year re-illuminates the glade;*

*So boys let's be jolly, and fill up our glasses,*

*Ah, why should we sigh for the flowers that fade!*

The other followed with a verse, this time in Cantonese, which he spoke to perfection:

*The two Sinologist-Governors of colonial Hong Kong, Sir John Francis Davis and Sir Cecil Clementi, enjoying the congenial company of Leung Ping-kwan. Poets all. Keats:*

*'Sweet are the pleasures that to verse to belong,  
And doubly sweet a brotherhood in song.'*

*Thought-provoking lines from Leung Ping-kwan's metaphysical Lotus poem, 'Leaf Contact'.*

*Sir John Davis' elegant early Victorian version of a poem by Wang Wei.*

*Haunting lines from  
Clementi's Canton-  
ese Love Songs. The  
singsong girl is singing for  
the despondent man of  
letters. What a wonderful  
meeting of three poetic  
minds, a true brotherhood  
in song across the gulf of  
centuries and languages!*

*The Rev. James Legge  
and his 'unlikely bohemi-  
an assistant', the raffish  
scholar-raconteur from  
Shanghai Wang Tao.  
Legge did indeed keep a  
pet crocodile.*

*Reverend Nacken was  
renowned for his superb  
street-vendor imitations,  
which were much in  
demand in Hong Kong  
circles as party tricks.  
As for the man in fancy  
dress, Karl Gützlaff, that  
notoriously unscrupulous  
but undeniably gifted  
charlatan and scound-  
rel—he may have to  
pay dearly at the Pearly  
Gates for having so ut-  
terly misrepresented The  
Story of the Stone, even  
more dearly perhaps than  
he will for having handed  
out all those Chinese  
Bibles along with free  
consignments of opium!*

*I do but hope that, when I have borne  
My burden through this world,  
Then I shall obtain my heart's desire.*

Near these three, at a separate table, an elderly, kindly-looking (if a little austere) man in the garb of a Christian priest was listening with good humour as the long-haired Chinese scholar next to him told ribald stories of evenings spent in the singsong-houses of Shanghai. Occasionally, as if to provide a silent commentary on his friend's stories, the priest twirled around his head the baby crocodile he kept as a pet.

Shortly afterwards, the elderly priest left the table and walked across the courtyard to where a group of four gentlemen were sitting, similarly dressed in Victorian garb, except for one who was wearing a sort of Orientalist fancy dress. The four were exchanging nostalgic tales, clearly enjoying their memories of the old days. One was imitating—very convincingly—the cries of the local street-vendors, much to the amusement of his fellows. Another—the one in fancy dress—was summarising in garbled and scandalous fashion the salacious plot of a recent Chinese novel he had been reading.

Seated cross-legged on the ground not far away, a cultivated Chinese gentleman in Western clothes was quietly engrossed in listening to music on his

headphones, a curiously rapt smile on his face, one hand waving in the air as if he was conducting an orchestra, the other hand affectionately clasping that of the lovely lady who sat beside him. From time to time he hummed a lingering motif, a snatch of the music he was listening to.

A larger group mostly of younger men and women was meanwhile clustered around a long rattan sofa, on which sat two elderly Chinese exchanging their views on literature Chinese and Western. They had the full attention of those gathered around them, a young audience listening with fascination to the discourse of the Masters, hanging on their every word, treasuring each idea, noting them all down mentally, gems of Pure Talk from a New Bamboo Grove, to be passed on to posterity. It was a magical moment, the beginning of a new and endless chain of *kouchuan*, of oral transmission,

Tucked away beneath a wisteria arbour on one side of the courtyard, in a world of their own, oblivious to the presence of the others, two dignified elders in long grey silk gowns, and an elderly gentleman with a goatee beard, in a three-piece suit, sat poring over an ancient thread-bound book lying open on the table before them. Carefully chosen words such as 'pulchritude' and 'self-cultivation' could be heard from time to time.

*Leo Lee was almost certainly listening to his favourite recording of Mahler's Song of the Earth. How surprising that Esther wasn't doing her swing-arms yoga! Perhaps she thought this wasn't a serious enough occasion!*

*Liu Yichang and Stephen Sanyi, both of them aficionados of The Story of the Stone, 'godfathers' of the Hong Kong literary scene in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and mentors to many younger writers, were probably conversing in their usual Cantonese-inflected Shanghainese!*

*The venerable Professors in long gowns, Liu Ts'un-yan and Anthony Yu, were probably studying a rare edition of The Journey to the West, while beside them Professor Yang Tsung-han, the Mongol Prince, doubtless lost in his Bannerman Dream, interjected the occasional Latin tag ...*

*Timothy Mo is a passionate scuba-diver.*

*David Hawkes the uncrowned King of sinologists and translators, with his favourite student, the Hong Kong dandy Wong Siu-kit.*

*Sun Yat-sen did indeed give his young second wife Soong Ching-ling a revolver as a wedding present. It was no trivial trinket. No doubt he wanted her to be well prepared to join him in his future gangster escapades ...*

*Chip Tsao, deep in meditation prior to the writing of his 'Memento Mori'. He must himself have been an intriguing subject for the contemplation of his contemporaries.*

Our Pilgrim now noticed at a side-gate the athletic figure of a younger man in a stylish tracksuit, dragging along behind him elaborate scuba-diving equipment. He was being pestered with questions by two pretty young ladies, anticipating more brilliant repartee from this celebrated wit.

He was followed, strolling at a slight distance behind him, by an elegant young Chinese aesthete-scholar in a long cotton gown, accompanied by a bearded Englishman looking for all the world like an Edwardian Oxford don—the two of them deep in conversation about the best rendering of a line from the old *Book of Odes*.

Just behind these two walked a louche and dishevelled character in a threadbare Chinese gown, glancing shiftily around the courtyard, fondling a little diamond-encrusted revolver, and offering it to the beautiful young Chinese woman walking beside him.

Just visible out on the rough grass beyond the side-gate was the solitary cross-legged figure of a man engaged in silent meditation, a skull balanced in one hand. A group of other younger men were watching him with growing interest, exchanging wry comments.

It was a wonderfully mixed and happily diverse group of individuals.

*This throng of men and women of distinction, this congregation of young old, with drinking and the chanting of verses, conversed in whole-hearted freedom, entering fully into one another's deeper feelings. Absorbed in this encounter, in this brief moment of happiness, they all forgot the approach of old age.*

*Unforgettable words these, from Wang Xizhi's famous 'Orchid Pavilion Preface'. A motto for the ages, an inspiration to us all!*

Widdershins mingled, pleasantly affected by the warm and convivial atmosphere. This was his kind of party. The company were waited on solicitously by a bevy of elegantly clad young ladies carrying tray-loads of goblets filled with wine and little dishes of crystalised fruits.

*Celestial nectar filled the crystal cups,  
And liquid gold in amber goblets glowed.*

*These were some of the delights from Jia Baoyu's dream of love and disenchantment in the fifth chapter of The Story of the Stone.*

The relaxed and harmonious gathering was as it were stitched together by the strains of a melody plucked on the seven-stringed *qin* by another of the young ladies in attendance, a most attractive sing-song-girl from 'The Budding Grove', a high-class local establishment down by the sea-shore. As the wine circulated, a slightly older and very smartly dressed lady in an embroidered cheongsam walked from table to table handing out slips of paper with instructions for the poetry-writing and drinking game that was

to follow. Then she sat down in the portico of the inn and began to play a haunting melody on the *pipa* lute. It was an old song of parting known as the *Triple Refrain from Yang Pass*. She sang as she played:

*Another poignant poem  
by Wang Wei, and a  
passing nod to 'Abschied',  
the Farewell last move-  
ment of Mahler's Song of  
the Earth.*

*Morning rain of Wei City  
Damps the dust clean.  
Fresh by the traveller's inn  
The willow's verdant green.  
Come, I bid you sir:  
Empty one more cup of wine.  
For once you're West, beyond Yang Pass,  
All your old friends will be gone.*

*The Golden Days too had  
to come to an end in The  
Story of the Stone. As  
that Dream began to fade,  
as that 'band of kindred  
spirits was being broken  
up, and everything was  
being spoiled,' Baoyu  
found himself reading  
the famous verse by the  
General Cao Cao:*

*Come drink with me and sing  
For life's a fleeting thing.  
Full many a day has fled  
Like the morning dew ...*

*Our muddle-headed au-  
thor must have somehow  
fallen asleep reading 'The  
World in a Pillow'!*

The words of her song seemed to predict the approaching moment of parting, when those gathered at the inn would also all have to go their separate ways, when this happy gathering of theirs, with all its dreams of freedom, would vanish like the morning dew.

Widdershins surveyed the scene before his eyes with a deep sigh of contentment. He was just choosing himself a pretty companion and a table to sit at, and preparing to take part in the drinking game, when he awoke with a start, to find himself still lying in the tumbledown temple. The wizened old Taoist priest was still there cooking his pot of gruel.

'Have I been dreaming all this while?' he asked  
rising to his feet.

'Life is like that,' replied the Taoist, and began  
chanting a few lines of an old song:

*Why waste this floating life in fret and toil?  
The happiest revellers must finally say goodbye.  
Today and yesterday are but one dream,  
Sorrow and joy mere shreds of vanity.*

*Wonderful, unforgettable  
lines, from an anonymous  
old Preface to The  
Story of the Stone.  
These words say it all,  
as true then on that  
remote island as they are  
today in Hong Kong,  
here in the Best China.*

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