

Poetry, time and place: in search of sources for the poetry of Leung Ping-kwan.

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The poetry of Leung Ping-kwan (also known by his pen name 'Yesi', and to many of his friends simply as 'PK') characteristically takes as its subject matter the concrete everyday world of experience. Rather than addressing exceptional or exalted topics or occasions it frequently finds its starting point in the commonplace world, either that of his native Hong Kong or that of whatever other location this avid traveler found himself in. This intimate and tactile down-to-earthness or wariness about abstraction may be taken as having resonances with the world view of Daoist philosophy, as well as having affinities with Buddhism, particularly its desire to engage with reality in its particular 'suchness' ('tathata' in Sanskrit), without colouring our perceptions of it through the distorting emotions provoked by either aversion or desire. One consequence of this is that it can be possible in Leung's case to track down specific encounters or at least locations which have been inspirational for his work.

In the period since his untimely death in January 2013 I have naturally been thinking about some of the many occasions that I have spent with PK since I first got to know him in the second half of the 1980s when we were colleagues together in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Hong Kong. Sifting through my memories I have identified a number of occasions when I spent time with him in artistic, academic or social activities which give me insight into the sources of his works. Having taught (and, like PK, had my office) in the Main Building of the University of Hong Kong for over a quarter century, for instance, I am very familiar with the structure which inspired his poem about it, 'An old colonial building' (1986). Sharing some of the same social circle as PK I not only attended the *Clothink* event at the Visual Arts Centre on 17 January 1998 which he collaborated on with design historian Wessie Ling, but even knew personally the woman who I believe was the inspiration for a line in one of the poems he wrote in association with that fashion-focused cross-disciplinary event, 'The birth of the new aesthetics – a variation on Alice' (1998). At one point in the poem there is the line 'You wore a yellow dress, dyed a lock of hair blue', and I know PK met her at the time when she made that colouristic adjustment to her hairstyle. I've lost touch with her now, but her name was Mandy and the blue streak didn't last long as part of her look.

Some of my memories which are relevant to PK's poems would overlap with those of a great many others of the poet's readers. At least in Hong Kong itself the HKU Main Building is a well-known landmark, even if readers of 'An old colonial building' from elsewhere in the world may not have a specific or Hong Kong-related mental image which comes to mind when they read that poem. Even in Hong Kong itself, though, only a few will have been lucky enough to hear PK read his poem in the very building which inspired it, as he did on 22 April 2012. That site-specific performance allowed his audience to ponder the poem's connection to a particular place in an especially vivid way by creating a new dimension of belonging to it.

Others amongst my memories pertinent to PK's poems may be taken as more private in nature than those of HKU's Main Building. I even wonder, for instance, if anyone else in the whole world now has a visual memory of that long-disappeared blue streak which is activated when they read 'The birth of the new aesthetics – a variation on Alice'. Such private associations are perhaps not really part of a poem's 'meaning' in the normal sense, in that no reader can reasonably be expected to access them from the text itself (that whole question of what can be assumed in a reader is an interesting one), but bringing them to light can help add further dimensions to our reading of a poem, or at the very least be of help in aiding us to understand the poet's creative process if they relate to occasions which actually inspired the poem. The blue streak existed in the objective world as much as the HKU Main Building does – it just so happens less readers of the poem were able to encounter it.

My memories of PK and of the occasions and places which may have been inspirational for his poems is aided by my personal archive of photographic images. I have been active as a photographer since the middle of the 1990s, and for the five year period around Hong Kong's mid-1997 return to Chinese sovereignty I undertook a photo diary project which involved me in committing to take at least one black and white photo every day. Although some of the images which resulted from that project aspired to be independent art works in their own right, many of them were documentary in nature, taken using a snapshot aesthetic. There are images from that archive (and images of later date in both black and white and colour) which feature PK himself, sometimes in situations where he is performing his poems. For example I have a sequence of photos from the night of 4-5 May 1996 which were taken at Visage 1, a hair salon in Central which on Saturday nights metamorphosed into an unlicensed bar and venue for various cultural events. PK was reading his poetry there with help from Huang Wen, who provided Mandarin renderings while the poet himself offered Cantonese ones. The HKU Main Building is featured in that archive, and so is Mandy, and there are various other locations which relate to PK's poems, for example the Bela Vista Hotel in Macau (a building now no longer open to the public), where we went for afternoon tea on the verandah on at least one occasion, and which is featured in PK's poem 'At Bela Vista' (1998). I also have a photo of him in the Fung Ping Shan Museum (now part of HKU's University Museum and Art Gallery) at the time when he was working on a project there which I had invited him to participate in in my role as exhibition curator. Along with visual artist Lam Kong he was invited to engage with the museum's permanent collection of Chinese art, and this was to result in the publication of a book of related poems the same year (1996), titled *Museum Pieces*. One example of the poems from that collection is 'Cauldron', which was inspired by early Chinese bronze work that he had encountered in the museum.

Working with PK on that exhibition project (titled *Engaging Tradition (II): Relocation*) was the closest artistic collaboration I had with him, but I would like to focus here on a couple of other more purely social occasions where I was in his company. I am highlighting them since they were both occasions which relate very closely to poems by PK, and I think it would be of interest to share my memories of them in order to shed light on his working process and to indicate how closely his poems relate to his lived experience.

One such occasion was a party held on the 1996-7 New Year's Eve at the Tang clan ancestral hall in Ping Shan. This event, which ushered in the year of the handover and which featured a poon choi banquet

and a variety of cultural performances, was organized by Lau Kin-wai through the courtesy of fashion designer William Tang. Talent or location scouts for Wayne Wang's handover-themed movie *Chinese Box* (1997) were mingling with the guests, who included many figures from Hong Kong's cultural field, and although I don't remember it distinctly PK must have read some poems at one point during the night. Although this specific event is not described in words by PK it seems to have fed his creative imagination since he did write a poem a few weeks later on the occasion of another poon choi banquet in the same wonderful location. Although its title 'Pun Choi on New Year's Eve' might seem to refer to the event I recalled in fact it was a response to the 1997 lunar New Year's Eve. William Tang organized poon choi banquets in his family's ancestral hall around that time on other years as well, and figures from the Hong Kong cultural world were often invited.

The second location I recorded in my photos which relates to a poem by PK is a small restaurant on the slopes of Tai Mo Shan (Duen Kee Chinese Restaurant in Chuen Lung village). The occasion I was there with PK (on 17 January 2012) is perhaps not the actual one which the poem recalls, but our experience of the place on that day matched that described in the poem 'Picking Cress', since after finishing our food we went down to purchase some of the watercress which was growing in the waters of a stream just below the village in which the simple restaurant is located. Just as in the poem itself a village woman picked the cress for us as we waited, placing it in bags. It was a fresh and beautiful morning, as in the poem, and she did indeed squat on a wooden plank to do the picking. Along with PK in the photo of the customers waiting for their cress to be gathered are (from left to right) Beijing artist Song Dong, curator Oscar Ho Hing-kay, Oscar's wife Camen and PK's wife Betty.

Clearly not all poems can be traced back to specific places and occasions, but with PK, as I hope to have demonstrated, this could often be the case. While such times and places are perhaps in most cases now lost to us, with the help of photography and its indelible indexical connection to the specific location and time when the shutter was open, a few such moments of inspiration can still be recalled for us. In a short piece of writing from 1957 titled 'The Witness', Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges mused on the way in which human experience dies in a certain sense when there are no longer people alive who participated in it directly. The desire to capture or distill something from significant lived experiences to share with those in other times and places is a strong motivation for the writing of literature, of course, but conditions for the survival of a trace of the past were also altered irrevocably in the nineteenth century with the arrival of photography, that direct eye witness to the past which can potentially outlast the intrinsic brevity of individual human life, even as it records it.

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