

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

**Looking Back At Hong Kong**  
Edited by Nicolette Wong  
Cart Noodles Press, Department of English  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong  
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Given, 155 pages

*Review by Zvi A. Sesling*

Hong Kong's known history goes back 35,000 or more years when the first settlers arrived and by 6,000 years ago was widely settled. In 214 BCE the Qin Dynasty made Hong Kong part of China. The Portuguese arrived in the 1500s and the Opium Wars in 1840 resulted in another dynasty, the Qing, ceding the territory to the British in 1842. One hundred and fifty-five years later the British lease expired and Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China.

In *Looking Back At Hong Kong* Nicolette Wong, editor of this anthology, selected writers who lived there and subsequently relocated or returned to their homes overseas. The result is a fascinating combination of prose and poetry who, as Ms. Wong states, "are not from Hong Kong, but of Hong Kong."

One of the eighteen writers included in the anthology is Pui Ying Wong a Cambridge, MA resident having moved to the Massachusetts city with her husband poet Tim Suermond after many years in Brooklyn, NY.

Pui's opening stanza for her poem *Hotel Peninsular* is:

*I know this place since childhood,  
a baroque building with fancy boutiques  
and an elegant café*

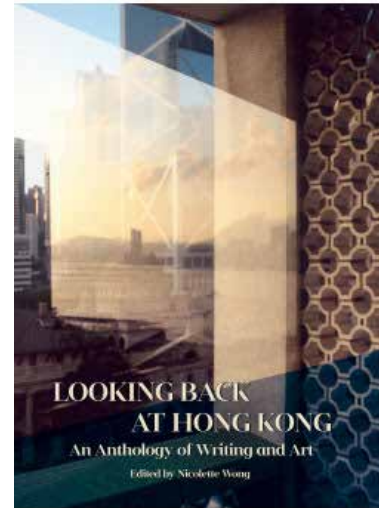
*Later in the poem she notes her current feelings:*

*I find myself here after many years,  
spotting the hotel on the ferry deck  
and know*

*I have no use for its quaintness –  
high tea and hush talks*

And then after recalling fond memories she tells of her goal to leave her native land:

*Some nights I watched ships  
leaving the harbor and the future  
grew in me like a sail.*



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Her last line in the poem explains it all:

*I go after it. The sea is open.*

Certainly Pui Ying Wong's poems tell that while the past holds its nostalgic memories Hong Kong currently holds little for her to cling to nor does it evoke desire to return permanently. For those who grew up in one place and return years later this feeling is familiar.

As Thomas Wolf said, "You can't go home again." And for most of the writers in *Looking Back At Hong Kong* it is true. The past was happy, exciting, nostalgic and a meaningful experience in their growth.. The present Hong Kong, however, is not always pretty. There are the demonstrations, the smell of tear gas and additional negative experiences.

For some the memories are not good. In a prose piece Madeline Slavick notes:

My husband grew up in this neighborhood [Block 4 of the Lei Cheng Uk public housing estate] and had felt little affinity with Hong Kong. A colonized mind like a tree with no annual ring.

He had gone to the US to study, live, choosing that country, choosing me. He had felt too confined by expectations and regulations of his Chinese upbringing – as the oldest child and the only son, there were many.

I also left my first culture easily. Born to a German mother who grew up witnessing World War II and a Memphis-born father who grew up witnessing segregation, I saw two parents who saw their native country's problems. My mother left for the US, my father for the North ...dec Yet, too, it was the first I lived overseas as an adult, and the first time being in the minority race.

Andrea Brittan writes about the difference between Hong Kong and England and finds that:

*I decided against a move to London or Edinburgh for that very reason: too many opportunities to say 'This is great, but it's not Hong Kong. Here [England] I have a slower life, a simpler life. One of milk deliveries and free-range chickens. Of farmers' markets with organic produce. Of independent cafes and artisan bakers. I don't need a flash car for this lifestyle.*

*I'll always be an incomer, even if I spend the next thirty years here. I don't have four generations buried in the local churchyard. My connection with the village doesn't stretch beyond two weeks, never mind two hundred years.*

Brittan who knows the long history of both Chinese and English families finds herself with no family and as Robert Heinlein wrote, quoting the Bible, "a stranger in a strange land." Yet she finds the British countryside slower, quieter with a more amenable lifestyle.

Shui-yin Sharon Yam, a Hong Kong native living in America, views the 2019 protests a Hong Konger living in America in the following way:

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*On the one hand, I struggled with immense survivor's guilt and imposter syndrome for not being on the streets of Hong Kong. On the other hand, surrounded by Americans who do not share the same deep tie with Hong Kong, I was unable to convey to them the heartbreak I woke up to every morning.*

The authors in this Anthology in addition to Nicolette Wong, Pui Ying Wong, Madeline Slavick, Andrea Brittan and Shui-yin Sharon Yam are John Wall Barger, Jordan Dotson, Nashua Gallagher, Louise Ho, Viki Holmes, Hung Hung, Henry Wei Leung, Ploi Pirapokin, Mani Rao, Kate Rogers, Madelein Slavick, Jennifer Wong and Xu Xi.

Each writer has a unique voice and a strong sense of what Hong Kong meant to these authors throughout their lives. They are all excellent writers whom the readers will appreciate.

Looking Back At Hong Kong is an Anthology worth owning both for its historical perspective and poignant personal recollections