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Agnes Lam: Poet of Asia's Lingua Franca

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If we look across Asia today, a tradition of local literature in English is evident in several countries where English is not the first language, most notably in India, the Philippines, and Singapore. Arguably, English is a kind of lingua franca in those countries, although the political and cultural influences that brought this about are quite distinct. Today, an active, English-language, literary publishing industry, exists in all three places.

Hong Kong has long produced English-language books, magazines, and newspapers, but little poetry and literary fiction. The editors of *dimsum* thought it would be interesting to compare Hong Kong with Singapore, often thought of as its rival city, from the writer's point of view. Both places are small geographically, and are former British colonies. Both have an established English-language education system for the local majority Chinese population, although unlike Hong Kong, Singapore also has sizeable local minority groups of Malays and Indians.

Dimsum spoke to poet [Agnes Lam](#), who writes in English, speaks Cantonese as a mother tongue, and can claim real roots in both cities. We asked her what it was like being a writer in each place.

Singapore, she says, was a gratifying place to be a writer. As a student at the Language and Literature Department in the National University of Singapore (NUS) during the early seventies, she was fortunate to find herself among other writers in a stimulating environment. The established authors were nurturing and encouraged Lam and her fellow aspiring writers.

She lived in Singapore from 1973 to 1990, leaving only twice to reside elsewhere. Once was for graduate studies in the U.S. for a three-year period, and another for two years in Hong Kong. In 1990, she left Singapore and returned to Hong Kong, the city where she was born and completed her secondary education, and she has lived there since. She is currently the associate director of the English Center at the University of Hong Kong (HKU).

Lam recalls the paucity of English-language literary activity during her Hong-Kong school days. "There was the *China Mail*'s contest, which I won." Other than this long-defunct afternoon news daily and her school magazine at St. Francis, she says there weren't many other outlets. By contrast, at university in Singapore, she discovered students and staff reading and writing together. The existence of a local literary scene, made up of established writers, plus a growing publishing industry contributed to this environment. Today, she does not experience that kind of creative exchange among writers in Hong Kong, although she says she is fortunate to be connected to local writers as well as academics at the various universities who offer stimulation and support.

The difference between Hong Kong and Singapore has long interested Lam. Having pursued a career in linguistics, she taught at NUS. In 1987, she authored a paper entitled "Language Education and Literary Creativity in English: A Tale of Two Cities" for the Linguistics Association of Australia. The movement of a language's functionality into literary creativity is the issue she grapples with. "Mere proficiency . . . is not enough for literary creativity to come about. The users of English must want, in fact, need to express their thoughts, feelings, and collective psyche in English. English has to be their language of integration, culturally and personally, before

literary creativity can occur."

Singapore society and recent literary history support this opinion. Singapore's multi-ethnic population uses English as a language of integration. In her paper, Lam asserts that "Hong Kong citizens . . . feel and think in . . . Cantonese." Her study includes a small survey of staff members in the English departments of the universities in both cities. When asked to place the date of emergence of a local literature in English, a clear majority of Singaporeans said *somewhere between the 1950s and early seventies*. Conversely, Hong Kong respondents overwhelmingly said either *not developed* or *not sure*. More significantly, when asked to name five English-language local writers, the vast majority of Singaporean respondents named 19 writers, while a minority of Hong-Kong respondents came up with 5, the majority being at a loss to name any. She does indicate that this would certainly not be the case for Chinese-language writing, which was and still is the dominant local literature.

Over ten years later, does the disparity still exist? Apparently, Hong Kong has begun to catch up. Singapore remains extremely active, and builds on its existing tradition. But Lam points to poetry readings in Hong Kong that draw large crowds, and not just the poets and writers. Her own work has been published in Hong Kong, most notably a well-received collection of poetry (*Woman to Woman*, Asia 2000, 1997), and she is considered a significant Hong Kong and Singapore poet. She does, however, note the difference in the audience and readership of local literature. Singapore still has a much wider audience, both in numbers and native locals, whereas in Hong Kong, those most interested in English-language literature tend to be limited to the literati, foreigners, or returnees from the West.

Lam is quick to say that her impressions are prejudiced by personal history. Her early Singapore experience was favorable in part because she was a student in the language-and-literature department, and an emerging writer. By the time she decided to reside and work in Hong Kong again, she was herself a more established writer and less in need of the nurturing environment Singapore fostered. Also, not being a member of the English department at HKU, she believes, accounts partly for her lessened exposure to the local literary scene.

So where does she prefer to write? Hong Kong, it seems, gives her more to write about. She says that could simply be age, her current involvement in China, and the greater amount of travel she does compared to her previous life in Singapore. Whatever the case, she retains a fondness for both cities and their literature.

Agnes Lam's individual history is unique, but she serves as a pioneer example of native Asia's English-language writing experience. In the last decade, Hong Kong, and Asia generally, have grown in this arena, despite the fact that English is neither a native language nor lingua franca of local literature in most Asian locales. The increase in intra-Asia and international travel and life experience among natives of the region contribute to the currency of English. Asian literature in English can and does cut across national boundaries; Asia gave birth to an Agnes Lam and will, we suspect, nurture many other writers in the years to follow.

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BY AGNES LAM
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