

## **English Creative Writing in an English-as-a-Second Language City**

**Talk given on 10 July, 2010, to Hong Kong Central Library members and members of the general public attending the Hong Kong Literature Festival**

### **Verner Bickley**

First, let me say that it is an honour to have been asked to speak at this 8th Hong Kong Literature Festival. Thank you very much for your invitation. I congratulate the organizers on putting together such an interesting and varied programme which includes an exhibition; a symposium; reading sessions; poetry recitals and talks. The rapid growth and development of the Festival is an indication of the healthy state of the writing profession in Hong Kong, a profession that depends, of course, upon an ever-increasing readership and a lively publishing sector. The market for publishing in Chinese is, of course, massive and Hong Kong has the talent and the will to take advantage of it. The market for publishing in English is a different matter but, again, I believe that it is reasonable to point to rapid growth over the last few years. With your leave, I will devote the rest of my talk to the present position of English in Hong Kong, as one of the official languages.

As we are all aware, writing for reasons that include personal pleasure may take many forms and may include works of *fiction* such as novels, short stories, plays and film scripts and *non-fiction*, for example, essays, instructional books, religious tracts, biographies and memoirs. All these works need to be fuelled by some measure of creativity, defined in the Curriculum Development Council and Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority's Curriculum and Assessment Guide for the

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English Language as the ability to produce original ideas and solve problems. Omitting, for the moment, the problem-solving aspect of creativity, I think that we would all probably agree with the Guide that, *given the right circumstances*, the language arts can develop learners' language sensitivity and cultural awareness through imaginative texts. Convinced of this, the authors of the Guide require that 25% of lesson time should be taken up with modular studies in an Elective Part of the curriculum. These modules are categorized as *Language Arts* (Learning English Through Drama; Learning English Through Short Stories; Learning English Through Poems and Songs; and Learning English through Popular Culture), and *Non-Language Arts* (Learning English Through Sports Communication; Learning English Through Debating; Learning English Through Social Issues; and Learning English Through Workplace Communication). In this group of eight modules, three can be broadly categorized as relating to literature, namely, Learning English Through Drama, Learning English Through Short Stories and Learning English Through Poems and Songs.

I have qualified my reference to the Curriculum Guide with the phrase, "given the right circumstances." What should these circumstances be? To answer that question, I must refer to three sharply divergent points of view about the place of literature in foreign or second language courses. One view is (or was) that the study of literature is a luxury when only a limited amount of time can be allocated to English. This point of view seems to have been taken to heart in most Hong Kong schools since, for many years now, only a few have offered English literature or, indeed, literature in English. It seems that the primary interest has been the attainment of a functional command of the language that

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will enable the student to handle different language situations, involving the use of the four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing.

A second view is one that considers that the history of any language would be different without the contributions of its poets, essayists and novelists. It sees connections among language, literature and culture; and focuses on literary study as a contribution to tracing the development of particular languages. With these connections in mind, I believe that the relatively few schools that teach English literature and literature in English do so very well and I hope that their students may be persuaded to continue their studies at university level, and beyond.

The third view emphasizes the increasing demand for English for special purposes, that is, to meet the perceived needs of scientists, engineers, lawyers and others with special but somewhat limited linguistic requirements. I spent two years of my working life as the head of language training for a Middle Eastern airline. In addition to courses in (what we called) General English, we organized specific programmes for pilots, cabin crew, catering staff and many other different non-flying job occupations, such as ticketing clerks, security personnel and so on. We also put to good use an interesting book entitled *Understanding Technical English*, which was incidentally co-authored by two men in Hong Kong (Kenneth Methold and Dan Waters). This book was essential reading for the airline's flight and ground engineers, since all the instruction manuals for the Boeing and Airbus aircraft were in English. English is, of course, the language of the air and also the language of the sea. In the air, all communications to and from control towers are carried

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out in a restricted form of English known as *Airpeak*. At sea, all sea to shore, shore to sea and communications between ships must be conducted in English. The particular, restricted, form of English that has been adopted is known as *Seaspeak* and its use has been mandated by the International Maritime Organisation.

It is against this background of English language use that it becomes possible to assess the ways in which the language is used in Hong Kong, following the biliterate and trilingual policy adopted by the government after the handback to China in 1997. First, it is well-known that English is no longer in common use as the language of discussion among civil servants or in most business situations unless there are foreigners present who are familiar with English but not with a Chinese language or dialect. English is, to some extent, still the language of the law-courts, although its use in this capacity is diminishing; and it is often, but not always, the language of international business. The learning and teaching of English in schools varies. There are those in which the language is in play *throughout* as the medium of instruction. Other schools use English as part of a “mixed code”; mainly for study of the text-books and for examinations. Yet others teach throughout in the medium of Chinese (usually Cantonese but in some cases Putongua), but offer English as a subject.

So, at first sight, it appears that English in Hong Kong has lost some ground. Yet, paradoxically, it seems that the language is blossoming in the SAR, perhaps as never before. The statistics, however, are difficult to come by, although several bold attempts have been made. One estimate that appears to have some validity is given in a recent

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book by Professor Braj Kachru. He avers that, out of a total population of 7,303,334, 2,080,000 million persons are English users. Of this total, 125,000 persons are listed as first-language users in English and 1,860,000 persons are said to be English-as-a-second-language users. But these figures should, in my opinion, be taken with the proverbial “pinch of salt”. It would, for example, be very difficult to establish how much English is used by Hong Kong participants, even in its abbreviated form, on the huge number of social-networking websites. Do the 1,250,000 mothers and mothers-to-be who use CafeMom communicate in English? DeviantART has over nine million registered users. Do they use English? And, if so, how many Hong Kong persons have joined? Then, of course, there is Facebook and its four hundred million users. Are their exchanges conducted in English? Many surely are.

But it is not only the convoluted English of the computer that appears to be flourishing in Hong Kong. We must, of course, add literary festivals, book fairs and increased publishing in English. It is now gratifying to be able to say that the SAR is rapidly developing into a centre for creative writing in English as significant as India, Singapore and the Philippines; and we now have Chinese authors fit to compete in English with both writers of other nationalities and writers domiciled elsewhere. These writers have adopted a variety of genres: from novels to law, history, biography, autobiographies and memoirs.

In her paper, my wife refers to the encouragement she gave to her students to write autobiographical essays. I believe that this was not only an excellent way to encourage

her students to think about themselves and their families but also a way of providing them with ready-made topics. No need to worry about a theme, whether self-imposed or selected by the teacher, or taken from the Internet. We all know something about ourselves. We all have something to tell about our lives and, given this knowledge, we have the luxury of being able to focus on style and presentation, as well as on substance.

In quite a long career, I have written and published many books on many different topics ranging from “shoes-and ships-and-sealing-wax” to “cabbages and kings”. I quote from Lewis Carroll’s famous book, *Through the Looking Glass* which, I am sure, is available in this library. Of course, I haven’t really written about *shoes*. I like to travel in *ships* but I know very little about them. We don’t use *sealing-wax* today, although it looks impressive on the back of an envelope. *Cabbage* is certainly a healthy vegetable provided that it is not over-cooked and *kings* are rather out of fashion. But, whilst rather obscure, the quotation hints at variety — and variety is what I believe I have provided in my recently-published autobiography. Step by step, this recounts my life and adventures in England, India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Burma, Indonesia and Japan. The book is entitled, *Footfalls Echo in the Memory*, a line taken from a poem by the American/English poet, T.S. Eliot. This title closely resembles the theme of your Festival, *Footprints Along the Way*. A nice coincidence, I think.

Thank you very much.

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