

English creative writing in an English-as-a-second-language city: Talk by Dr Gillian Bickley

The 8th Hong Kong Literature Festival, 24 June to 11 July 2010.

Theme: "Footprints along the Way"

Dialogue with Creators:

English Creative Writing in an English-as-a-second-language City (conducted in English)  
10 July (Saturday). 5.00pm-6.30pm. Lecture Theatre, Hong Kong Central Library.  
Dr Gillian Bickley and Dr Verner Bickley, MBE with Dr Stuart Christie

In a cross-cultural international metropolis like Hong Kong, speaking English is a major priority and thus students in Hong Kong start learning English as their second language at a very young age. Creative writing in English is also very much encouraged with school writing contests and open literary competitions. Our speakers will review the local English literary scene with their experiences in teaching English literature in universities and from the perspectives of publisher and English programme organizer.

The above text is derived from the programme distributed by the Organisers. Their website is: [www.hkpl.gov.hk/8hklf](http://www.hkpl.gov.hk/8hklf)

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TALK BY DR GILLIAN BICKLEY

#### SYNOPSIS

Teaching English literature / Literature in English in universities  
English Creative Writing in an English-as-a-second-language City  
GB's own creative writing.  
GB's students' creative writing.  
GB's authors' creative writing.  
ESU Programmes: Say Your Piece!

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Teaching English literature / Literature in English in universities

Experience in: Lagos, Hong Kong, Auckland, Hong Kong

In general, the degree of interest in English Literature that students demonstrate is related to several factors. These include:

- 1) The level of their own English Language skills;
- 2) The degree to which they perceive the study of English literature as useful to them (whether because of its content or because they believe it will help them improve their English Language skills — which they believe will be useful to them).
- 3) The extent to which they are anxious to integrate into a culture. (This may be English culture OR English literary culture OR any "writing in English culture" in their own country / city.)
- 4) Their level of confidence as to their ability to integrate into any of these cultures.

My experience in each of Lagos, Hong Kong and Auckland is that, in general: there are not many students who are very confident about their ability in studying English literature or Literature in English. Not many students are confident about their future in the context of their study of English literature or Literature in English. There is however a small proportion who are enthusiastic, eager and confident in their effort to improve and to reach a goal. I have taught in two Universities in Hong Kong, for a total of 25 years. I can remember, say, up to a maximum of five such students (confident about their future in the context of their study of English literature or Literature in English) among those I personally have taught. I taught in Lagos and Auckland for two and three years respectively. I do not remember any such students from the time I spent in Lagos and Auckland, although I had colleagues who were distinguished literary scholars and productive creative writers in each place. (Of course, I also had such colleagues in Hong Kong.)

The study of English literature and Literature in English, I conclude, is not an activity that everyone is interested in. (I think we could probably say this of literature in any language.) It is in fact rather difficult, and also, literary criticism is often conducted in rather an abstract way and using difficult words. It is not surprising that not many students are very eager to follow this study and it is also not surprising that not many excellent students follow this path.

Reading books is not such a difficult activity and it is obviously more popular. Watching films based on books is particularly popular. The increasing number of films based on books and books based on films seems to have increased the popularity of book-reading among the general public. In an English-as-a-second-language-city, films in English (whether or not with sub-titles in the local language) help to make a later reading of the related book easier — or at least more possible— and hence also, more popular.

Having begun to venture out from the ivory tower of the University several years ago, to introduce my own work outside the University, I have been increasingly surprised at the interest in books that there is, fuelled to some extent by initiatives such as this Hong Kong Literature Festival, as well as by other book-related activities in Hong Kong. Other contributing factors doubtless include increasing leisure for some, an aging population and increasing book-related facilities. There are also more cultural activities in general and this also must have an impact. As for the increasing interest in English-language books in particular, commentators have seen an influence from the many Hong Kong people who have returned and continue to return from years spent in English-speaking countries like Canada and Australia. I also have noticed that students from the Mainland (of whom there are an increasing number) are eager to read and discuss books in English.

As a particular example of Hong Kong local interest in reading English language books, I may mention the English-Speaking Union Programme, Say Your Piece!, where people are invited to introduce, read from or ask questions about a book they have read or are reading. This monthly event can be quite a lively small group of mainly local people, led by myself or by another English-Speaking Union Member. It is true that sometimes, few

come; but I think this is because we do not have a budget to publicise our events effectively enough. Also we do need to request a small donation to set against administrative costs as well as advance registration: both of these factors may create small barriers or at least hurdles for those who would like to attend and participate. The books participants have brought to discuss are wide-ranging in nature and subject-matter. The interventions of participants are of a high order and those attending show and express explicitly that they are very pleased by their experience.

As for writing creatively (as opposed to reading), this seems to be increasingly popular.

When teaching at Hong Kong Baptist University, I did encourage my students to write creatively and in particular, once a year I asked students to write about an older-generation family member or friend — a biographical essay, in fact. Students enjoyed doing this and many produced most interesting work. At one time I also asked them to write about themselves — an autobiographical essay — and again, some of the work was most interesting. I did have to overcome the students' feeling that people they knew as well as they themselves were either not important enough to write about or too young. Given the increasing fairly recent interest in Hong Kong heritage — most noticeable perhaps among younger people — these feelings are likely to change or become less widespread.

As has been mentioned, since retiring from University teaching, I have been active, continuing my own writing, but also editing and publishing books in English from Hong Kong. (We also publish in Chinese — relying on a Hong Kong Chinese editor.)

My own writing is both in prose and in poetry. In prose, I write about 19th Hong Kong history, with a focus on education and biography. In poetry, I write about people, creatures, flowers and scenes I have seen and my thoughts about them. Since I spend most time in Hong Kong, the subjects are mainly from Hong Kong, but some are about people, creatures, flowers and scenes in Europe, on the Mainland, in Honolulu or elsewhere in the world.

Of course, the Hong Kong readership is quite small; very, very much smaller than the readership for books in Chinese. But I do give readings in public and give book talks to various groups and in different educational institutions. I know that teachers like my work. A poem or a page is occasionally used as a set piece at the Hong Kong Schools Music & Speech Association annual Speech Festival. And some parents have told me that they use the poems as bedside reading to their children, boys as well as girls.

As a publisher, I have been surprised and pleased by the work we have been offered from writers from a range of backgrounds, nationalities and ethnicities. Some live in Hong Kong, some live in America, Canada, the United Kingdom, for example. The latter approach Proverse because their subject-matter is rooted in this part of the world, because they want to reach a Chinese readership, or because they have heard about us, know us or want to be associated with us.

Hong Kong is indeed an international city and even those Hong Kong resident writers who approach us include people with international as well as local backgrounds and experiences.

We have published books by writers with names like Gerald Yeung, Patty Ho, Jennifer Ching as well as by writers with names like Gillian and Verner Bickley, Kate Rogers, Tommy Martin.

Similarly for the international prize for unpublished writing that my husband Dr Verner Bickley and myself have founded, The Proverse Prize for Literature, we have had entries from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, The Bahamas, the USA, Bangladesh and Hong Kong.

Hong Kong writers in 2009 included Rupert Chan, Akin Jeje, Rebecca Tomasis, Ronny Mintjens, Jason Polley. The variety of names indicates the variety of their backgrounds.

If a writer has skill in more than one language, what is it that influences him or her to write in one language rather than another? It could be a question of skill. — He or she may be better in one language than another. — It may be for a range of other reasons. The writer may feel one language rather than another is more appropriate for a particular piece of writing, because of its subject matter perhaps, because of his or her relationship with the subject-matter, or because of the readers he or she seeks to address.

In general, it would be rather surprising if many Hong Kong Chinese writers were to choose English rather than Chinese to write in! And as a consequence it may be that it is left to non-Chinese writers to interpret Hong Kong to the rest of the world in the language that is presently the international language, English! — I suggest that Hong Kong Chinese writers might focus on this point and consider whether they ought not to write in English as well as in Chinese! All communities need their voices to be heard in the forum that world literature creates. All communities need to be known, to be understood, even if only superficially; although to be understood deeply and thoroughly is better. All communities need at least a basis for international friendship in the community of nations. And this is what is given by a community's creative writers, when they write in a language that can be understood by the rest of the world.

When I was in my first University post, in Lagos, Nigeria, my Head of Department mentioned a person called Ulli Beier, and told me that wherever he went he founded a literature in English, deriving from that particular place where he was. (I took this statement on faith; but in order to be absolutely sure of my facts, I checked Wikipedia while writing this paper. (You may like to do so, too.) I find that Ulli Beier, now 88 year old, is given credit for fostering creative writing in Nigeria and Papua New Guinea in particular.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Ulli Beier (1922- ) is a German editor, writer and scholar, who had a pioneering role in developing literature, drama and poetry in Nigeria, as well as literature, drama and poetry in Papua New Guinea." (Wikipedia)

I would not claim to have such a large ambition. But I do hope that, through the work of Proverse in publishing books and awarding a prize to unpublished writing, I — with my husband, Verner Bickley and working through Proverse — may provide an additional possibility for a literature in English from Hong Kong, written by representatives of all the different types of people from different backgrounds who live here, to develop, become established and to flourish!

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**Further Reading:**

Gillian Bickley, "Literary Odyssey in Hong Kong: a Personal Narrative", in *For the Record and other Poems of Hong Kong*, Proverse Hong Kong, 2003, pp. 107-114.

Gillian Bickley, "Five New Scorchers Blaze a Trail", *Moving House and other Poems from Hong Kong*, Proverse Hong Kong, 2005, pp. 99 - 122.

Gillian Bickley, "Communicating Poems" in *Sightings a collection of poetry*, Proverse Hong Kong, 2007, pp. 118-133.

Jennifer Ching-Proverse Hong Kong February 2010 interview, published at [www.proversepublishing.com](http://www.proversepublishing.com)

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