

Identity and Ambivalence in Xu Xi's *History's Fiction*

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1997 has become a focus,
A cause, a point in space,
A date to live by,
A topic for conversation.
There's always something deadly,
About deadlines,
They haunt before they occur.

—Louise Ho, “New Year’s Eve, 1989”

Introduction

Identity is one of the most important concerns of literature (Culler 1997:110). Many writers are fascinated with depicting characters’ struggles with their identity, including national identity, sexual identity, and cultural identity. As a world-famous city once colonized by the United Kingdom and now ruled by the Republic of China, Hong Kong is characterized by its ever-changing shift of national identity. Consequently, the concept of Hong Kong’s identity has been controversial for decades. Some propose that the democracy and law-abiding culture brought by the British rule mark the spirit of Hong Kong (Horlemann 2003:12), while others contend that it is epitomized by its blend of Chinese and Western cultures (Carroll 2007:169). Despite being acclaimed as an international city in Asia, underneath Hong Kong’s cosmopolitan and multicultural surface lurk the unsettling ambiguities of identity. On

the one hand, the convergence of Eastern and Western cultures contributes to the prosperity and multiplicity found in contemporary Hong Kong. However, on the other hand, the lack of a unified identity brings about a collective sense of loss and anxiety. Such a mental disorder caused by the division of identities was manifested and aggravated further by the 1997 handover. Although the initial Chinese policy in Hong Kong, as manipulated by Deng Xiaoping, significantly engendered the economic boom and thus foreshadowed a promising future following the changeover, the fear caused by the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, the proposed implementation of “One Country, Two Systems”, and the drafting of the Basic Law triggered Hongkongers’ doubts and uncertainty in the 1990s. Resultantly, Hong Kong in the 1990s witnessed surges of uncertainty, insecurity, and crises in confidence (Segal 1993:59–63).

As a Hong Kong writer with a Chinese-Indonesian background, Xu Xi’s works often dwell on the everyday conflicts and compromises of the Hong Kong people, be they about life, love, marriage, emigration, or politics. However, it is a pity that, despite her admirable literary achievements, her works remain little researched. In this paper, I discuss the complexities and ambiguities of identity problems typical of the people of Hong Kong through a reading of three short stories collected in Xu Xi’s *History’s Fiction: Stories from the City of Hong Kong*. I argue that by uncovering the self-conflicted personal identities that trouble the main characters in these stories we can configure a larger-scale ambivalent national and cultural identity typical of the Hong Kong people around the 1997 handover and onwards.

Identity Problems in *History’s Fiction*

History’s Fiction comprises four sections: “The Nineties”, “The Eighties”, “The Seventies”, and “The Sixties”. Within the different categories, stories and history are interwoven to re-present the feelings of different ages. “The Nineties” comprises three stories that each contribute to our understanding of the collective unconscious of the Hong Kong people at the time. The first story, “Until the Next Century”, discusses the ambiguity of Hong Kong’s identity from the perspective of love and marriage, detailing the extramarital love affair between a Chinese man and his young lover, his *Quingfu* (literally meaning “love-wife”), living in Hong Kong. While the male protagonist is addicted to visiting his lover to enjoy his bodily pleasure, the female becomes tired of the illicit relationship. Most of the story takes the form of a flashback of their 30-year-long affair, while the rest focuses on the female protagonist’s family background, her struggle, and remorse as an adulteress. Ostensibly, the story presents a very personal struggle; however, metaphorically, the personal

struggle prefigures the identity problems prevalent in Hong Kong society. An interesting analogy with China and Hong Kong is apparent in the interaction between the main characters. In a sense, the male protagonist takes the lead economically and politically. He is depicted as a successful businessman, “knighted by the queen and shaken hands with Deng (Xiaoping),” the Chinese leader at that time (Xu 2005: 12). In addition, his superiority is manifested linguistically: “After all these years, her Mandarin had become proficient; her ears were attuned to his accent. However, his *Gwongdungwah* (Cantonese) never did sound quite right” (Xu 2005: 5). In other words, Mandarin is preferred in their interactions, while Cantonese is less highly regarded. In fact, more often than not, the female protagonist submits to the linguistic superiority of her lover. As the male character speaks in Mandarin, she always holds her tongue (Xu 2005: 4). This linguistic hierarchy is associated with the fact that Hong Kong is to be returned to the rule of the Chinese authorities. As the narrator remarks, the female protagonist must be accustomed to her lover’s Mandarin because “Hong Kong’s transformation was already well underway; their city would enter the new century as ‘China’” (Xu 2005: 4). This political implication is all the more intriguing when we consider that the female protagonist feels exhausted and asks her lover to return the key to her flat in 1984 (Xu 2005: 6), the crucial year in the history of Hong Kong when the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed. The fate of the female protagonist reminds us that the people of Hong Kong had no say in relation to the Sino-British negotiations (Carroll 2007:181). Her invisibility and lack of identity in the love affair generate resentment and result in her refusal to maintain a connection with her lover. To sum up, although the Joint Declaration promised the Hong Kong people unchanged capitalism and legal and social systems, as well as a high degree of autonomy (Shipp 1995: 122), the break-up of the extramarital couple metaphorically connotes the Hong Kong people’s suspicion of the promise.

In contrast to the use of love and marriage in dramatizing the complications of Hong Kong’s identity, the second story, “Insignificant Moments in the History of Hong Kong”, is set against the background of food and restaurants. The quote by Deng Xiaoping at the beginning and the setting being around 1 July 1997 both insinuate its strong political tone. At first glance, the phrase “insignificant moments” is rather problematic, as the 1997 changeover was never going to be insignificant. However, taken in tandem with Deng’s remark that “It doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice,” Xu Xi seems to suggest that politics is far beyond the comprehension and concern of common people in Hong Kong. Therefore, the extremely important event in its history paradoxically turns out to be something insignificant.

This story primarily focuses on Uncle Cheuk, a small restaurant owner in the New Territories, and his nephew Lam Yam Kuen, who leaves his mother behind in China at a young age and later works as a *maitre d’* at Butterfield’s Soong Club in Tai Koo Place, Hong Kong. The mixed feelings of the Hong Kong people toward the 1997 handover are alluded to in the cat in Uncle Cheuk’s restaurant, a black-and-white “fat critter” (Xu 2005: 24–25) that is scared of mice. The cat has been the laughing stock of the restaurant because of its hybrid attributes, with its timidity ascribed to it being neither black nor white, far from the cat of the “honorable Sir Deng’s” (Xu 2005: 25), which is a fine mouse-catcher. In a sense, the hybridity associated with the cat signifies the postmodern condition of contemporary Hong Kong in the 1990s, in which neither personal nor political identity is fixed and stable. This mixed identity characteristic, or the “hybrid nature of Hong Kong’s cultural identity” (Flowerdew 2012: 201) is also evidenced in the food offered in the restaurant. For example, Yam Kuen complains to his uncle that nowadays “cooks who make too much gwailo-Chinese (foreigner-Chinese) food lose their touch for the real thing” (Xu 2005: 24). Likewise, the buffet offered at Yam Kuen’s club on July 1 1997 betrays the multiplicities of food in Hong Kong, as it includes both Cantonese food, such as roast goose and suckling pig, and Western food, such as salads, lettuces, and chicory. In addition, the dishes include nearly all of the items “in an international variety of preparations—Indian and Malay curries, Thai spices, Indonesian satays—on the side, Buddhist broccoli” (Xu 2005: 28). The diversity of the food highlights the hybrid, multicultural qualities of Hong Kong in the 1990s, yet such a multiplicity contradicts the image of the Chinese regime, which is notorious for its insularity and conservatism, especially its suppression of students and democrats in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. This great discrepancy in mentality serves as the source of suspicion and anxiety for the local people in Hong Kong. In addition, Uncle Cheuk’s playing of *mahjeuk* (a game of Chinese origin usually played by four people) on the night of June 30, 1997 heralds the uncertainty and capriciousness of the political situation after the handover. It suggests that after the changeover, everything will simply depend on chance.

This comparing of life in post-1997 Hong Kong to a gamble arises again in the third story, “Blackjack”, which is dominated by the female protagonist’s interior monologue reflecting on her decision to return to Hong Kong in the 1990s. As a *wahkiu* (overseas Chinese) living in the U.S. since 1979, the narrator is torn between the excitement of returning to her hometown and the worry that life after the 1997 changeover might be a disaster. The ecstasy of being able to be back to Hong Kong is hinted at early in the story (“I’m finally going home, going back to Hong Kong”), although the question “Why did you come back?” also reverber-

ates in the narrator's mind (Xu 2005: 32). This ambivalence lingers because people around her continually question her decision to return due to the murky future looming over post-1997 Hong Kong. On the one hand, the narrator is happy about going back because, as she contends by citing Li Po's *Genitauhmohongmibngyubt*, moonlight always ignites her homesickness (Xu 2005: 33).¹ Moreover, the intimidation caused by her lay-off amid the economic recession in the 1980s prompts her to leave America. The decent job opportunity offered to the narrator in Hong Kong temporarily revives her belief in the future, yet she is hardly able to eliminate the panic associated with the 1997 handover. Her instinct tells her that the Chinese "are not my people, not Hong Kong *yan*, because they haven't been infected by our linguistic schizophrenia" (Xu 2005: 35). This linguistic mental breakdown must have been common among the people of Hong Kong before 1997, as they were aware that Cantonese could be replaced by Mandarin sometime in the near future. The narrator further describes the hysteria caused by her linguistic anxiety: "I dream in psychedelic Chinglish, with bits of Putonghua hovering, in preparation for my future masters" (Xu 2005: 34–35). It is intriguing that the narrator keeps mumbling the question "Why should I be afraid?" when reflecting on the future of Hong Kong. However, the meaningless repetition itself is meaningful because it lays bare her fear of the post-1997 future. This fear is clear when the narrator later recalls a friend who is well educated in England and returns to Hong Kong with her family. According to the narrator, her friend "stakes her and her children's future on Hong Kong, post 1997" (Xu 2005: 37; emphasis added). The word "stake" signifies the uncertainty over the future of Hong Kong after 1997, which is echoed meaningfully by the first and final scenes set in Trump's Casino in Atlantic City before the narrator's departure from America. As the concluding sentence – "Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose" (Xu 2005: 38) – specifies, the future of Hong Kong is invariably unpredictable and capricious, insomuch that the ambivalence typical of the Hong Kong people will remain an entanglement. In this sense, the setting, which connotes hap and chance, significantly helps underscore the story's theme—misgivings over the future of Hong Kong after 1997.

Ambivalence in the Post-1997 Hong Kong

As a writer, I like to believe I can and will evolve. What I published in the seventies differs from later work. However, the concerns of the past remain current, regardless of when a story is written.

– Xu Xi, *History's Fiction*

As Xu Xi contends, the concerns of the past are never gone, but rather endure. The identity problems and ambivalence reflected in the three stories have recurred in different ways at different times in the post-1997 Hong Kong

society. An example is evident in the national education controversy in 2012, in which the Hong Kong government planned to impose stricter biased patriotism education in secondary schools. However, Hong Kong government officials were forced to suspend their plan because of the strong resistance of citizens against the proposed political brainwash. In addition, the "Occupy Central" movement ("Umbrella Revolution") broke out in 2014, during which some Hong Kong people fought fiercely against the police in calling for more self-determination and self-autonomy in opposition to the political manipulation of the Chinese government. More recently, on June 18, 2015, a China-based electoral reform package, which was criticized by pro-democracy legislators and activists as undemocratic, was vetoed in Hong Kong's legislature because they strongly advocated genuine suffrage.² These events occurred because people in Hong Kong have been developing an increasingly distinctive identity, one characterized by economic prosperity, a democratic system, an emphasis on human rights, and anti-corruption. As John M. Carroll maintains, the formation of a more localized Hong Kong identity has made many Hong Kong people feel that, although they may be culturally Chinese, they are "a special, even different, kind of Chinese" (Carroll 2007: 170).

Alternatively, as Xu Xi notes based on her personal experience, the majority of Hong Kong people may prefer a Hong Kong Chinese identity rather than a pure Chinese identity (Xu 2002: 222). This tenacious local Hong Kong identity is echoed by John Flowerdew in his study of Tung Chee-hwa's (the first chief executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) reign after 1997 (Flowerdew 2012: 195–197). In addition, according to a survey conducted by the University of Hong Kong's Popular Opinion Program in June 2013, amid the rising tensions with Beijing the Hong Kong people's sense of Chinese identity had fallen to a 14-year record-low, with an 11% increase in the number of respondents calling themselves "Hongkongers" in the six months prior to the study (Cheung 2013: C3). This finding was emphasized on June 21 2013 in a poll conducted by University of Hong Kong that revealed the "One Country, Two Systems" principle equals zero trust, the lowest point since 1996 (Luk 2013: 8). It is noteworthy that as China becomes more politically powerful, economically prosperous, and internationally influential in the 21st century, fewer Hong Kong people are willing to identify with their motherland. Evidently, this contradicts with the views of optimists who asserted that the increasing economic interdependence between China and Hong Kong after 1997 would reduce the differences between the two economic systems and contribute to the integration of both (Wang 1995:204–205).³ History repeats itself, and the history embedded in the three stories to a certain degree heralds the self-contradicting identities of being Chinese and a Hongkonger at the

same time. Indeed, the image of a unified Hong Kong departs from Xu Xi's conception: "We never were 'British', just as most of us are not 'Chinese' the way they are on the Mainland" (Xu 2008: 4). In a sense, many Hong Kong people are torn between the dual identities and stuck in a kind of in-betweenness in national and cultural identities. Consequently, they feel unsettled due to the neither/nor identity problem.

Conclusion

If the personal is political as some second-wave feminists assert, the personal struggles in *History's Fiction* are rendered political in that the main characters' everyday conflicts, either over love, food, or emigration, are closely bound with the larger-scale national and cultural conflicts that arose around the 1997 handover. The complexities and ambiguities are so great that it is extremely difficult to provide a definitive answer, but Xu Xi's stories provide us with down-to-earth examples that provide scope for more contemplation on, and insight into, the long-lived mystery of the Hong Kong identity and ambivalence. These stories also provide us with a window on the political turmoil that has resurfaced in Hong Kong during the past few years.

Notes

¹"*Genitauhmohngmibngyuhl*" is the first line of Li Po's poem "Night Thoughts".

²These conflicts were forewarned by Flowerdew in his study, in which he recalled the words of Chris Patten, the last British governor before the 1997 handover, who was quoted as saying that the attempt to govern Hong Kong in a paternalistic way would result in "some friction," and that the friction would surely be more serious with the approach of debate on matters related to a directly elected chief executive (Flowerdew 2001: 54–55).

³Likewise, in his research on Hong Kong cinema and popular culture, Chu Yiu-wai found that, instead of coexisting with Chinese popular productions, Cantopop and Hong Kong local movie productions had clearly been on the decline since 1997 (Chu 2010: 131–132).

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