The Hong Kong Generation, 1967–1984: An Interview with Professor Wong Kin-yuen

Stuart Christie, with Wong Kin-yuen

Abstract

The frame for the following interview with Professor Wong Kin-yuen (王建元) was provided by what may be called, in explicitly prescriptive terms, the "Hong Kong generation, 1967–1984"—a brief and unique pivot point attending the globalization of late-twentieth century comparative literary and cultural studies, with a Chinese focus, as it emerged in the Western (primarily American) academy. In the aftermath of Deng Xiaoping's (Second) Open Door Policy of 1978, both late-colonial Hong Kong (administered by the United Kingdom) and The People's Republic of China (PRC) were equally committed to the normalizing of relations between China and the West in the context of a broader rebalancing of the geopolitical order in Asia. Set against this historical backdrop, the purpose and aim of the present interview was to understand more effectively the personal motivations and collective capacities of this scholarly and expatriate "Hong Kong generation" as its members experienced PhD studies abroad, at the University of California at San Diego, and as recollected by one of its members.

Overview

Well prior to the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) there existed the lived experiences of the expatriate generation of Hong Kong scholars pursuing postgraduate studies in San Diego, California, on the west coast of the United States. The term "Hong Kong generation" accordingly attempts to describe the constituency and significance of this specific group of Hong Kong-born, Hong Kong-bred, or Hong Kong-based scholars—including the interviewee Professor Wong Kin-yuen, as well as Professors Yip Wai-lim (葉維廉), William S. Tay (鄭樹森), Leung Ping-kwan (梁秉鈞), and Chou Ying-hsiung (周英雄)—who left Hong Kong for the United States in order to undertake PhD studies. Thanks in no small part to the recruitment efforts of Professor Yip Wai-lim, who by 1967 was a professor at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD), members of this expatriate Hong Kong generation established intellectual networks at UCSD from which institution all eventually took their PhDs. (Via Taiwan, Yip had made the journey to the United States earlier, in 1963, and was subsequently trained at the Iowa Writer's Workshop [MFA, 1964] and Princeton [PhD, 1967] before being appointed at

UCSD.) Eventually, most among this group of UCSD alumni returned either to Hong Kong or to Taiwan to pursue their careers.

Whether willingly or by necessity, this pioneering generation of scholars departed their own colonial era's dispensation of time, language, and modernity. They did so, in the first instance, in order to seek newer and more vital outlets for the study of a truly global comparative literature, in search of study opportunities and approaches at the postgraduate level denied to them in colonial Hong Kong. Their out-migration, beyond the Asian region, exemplified an early and admittedly individualized stage—as well as a necessarily ex-colonial retour—for Hong Kong's broader and developing commitment to the globalization of Anglophone literary studies, distinguished from colonial authority and its elite constructions of "English" meaning.

Occurring in the historical context of the globalization of Anglophone letters, alongside the rise of area studies in the United States and Britain in the late 1960s, the role and emergence of this Hong Kong generation was very significant. On the one hand, it pioneered a more globally-situated, knowledgeable, and locally-informed Hong Kong Chinese response to the "high-modernist" metropolitan strain of Anglo–American criticism only very loosely comparatist in its approach. Distinct from the perhaps more informed approaches promulgated at established centers of Anglophone orientalism in New York and London, mainstream Anglo–American literary criticism remained stultified by a residual Poundian tendency—embodied in the authority and mien of Hugh Kenner—that lacked a sufficient grasp or more nuanced understanding of the Chinese language, its literatures, and history. On the other hand, the "Hong Kong generation" also mattered greatly with regard to sustaining broader Chinese engagement with Anglophone letters prior to the loosening of travel restrictions in the PRC after 1979. By contrast, this group of Hong Kong scholars was able to enter and to exit Hong Kong relatively easily during this period. And, in so doing, they were able to secure admission to elite institutions of higher learning in the United States over twenty years prior to the official decolonization of Hong Kong and well in advance of the subsequent generation of scholars from the PRC who, after 1985, belatedly acquired similar training and experience. In other words, this "Hong Kong generation" occupied and sustained a crucial pivot point in the history of Chinese scholarly engagement with English and American literature, most especially as these scholars sought to globalize Chinese comparatist and other theoretical approaches prior to the opening up of the PRC to Western ideas and theoretical movements.

The very fact of this Hong Kong generation's necessary emigration beyond the British canonical orbit, alongside its efforts to attenuate the exclusivity of colonial institutional networks, augured the de-centering of globally comparative literary spaces as an outcome. Once based in

California, and when seeking to distinguish themselves from the traditions of English letters inherited from the settler-colonial tradition back home, the Hong Kong generation assimilated converging zones of intercultural and comparative literary interaction on Californian soil. Their emerging body of work coalesced around the gaps and fissures within established geopolitical boundaries of language and culture, shattered the prerogatives of metropolitan monolingualism still supporting English privilege, and dared to offer focused outlet for the globalization of the Anglophone canon as it lurched from "English" and "American" canonical literatures toward the more grounded and enunciative voicings, as expressed in local contexts, of what someday would be called "literatures in English."

Likewise, during the mid- to late 1960s, what one thinks of as the nascent formation of a truly globalized, comparative literary studies in the American academy remained hemmed in by a variety of still-hegemonic or counter-hegemonic disciplinary strains: by "New Left" Marxism, for example, broadly international in outlook yet still beset by recurring elitism and the polarities and tugs of Cold War ideology (whether American or Soviet bloc); by the still-ascendant New Criticism, the establishment offering Eliotic reassurances that text-based hermeneutics, however reactionary and anti-historicist, still constituted effectively sacred and sufficiently critical rebuttals to the upheavals of the American Civil Rights era; and, of course, by pre-Saidian comparative philology proper, also text-based and archivally rooted, whereby the increasingly marginalized study of "classical" languages (mostly Greek and Latin, and, after 1945, Japanese and Chinese) jockeyed for status and funding in competition with newer "area" studies encompassing "modern" (privileged) European languages—mainly French, German, and Spanish.

Parachuting right into the middle of this quite narrow, and certainly fractured, disciplinary space for "comparative literature" were the foreign-born members of the Hong Kong generation.

Biography

Professor Wong Kin-yuen (王建元) was born in Guilin (桂林) in Guangxi province in 1943. His biological parents fled the Japanese occupation southward, bringing him to British Hong Kong as a child where he was subsequently raised by his mother and an Irish stepfather who helped to fund his postgraduate studies. A re-entry learner, Professor Wong gave up a promising career track in the Hong Kong government civil service, as the clerk to a British judge, in order to pursue a BA in English literature at Hong Kong Baptist College where he graduated first in his class. With the encouragement of his parents, Professor Wong left Hong Kong for further studies, first taking his MA at the University of Redlands, in southern California, and then

beginning PhD studies at the University of California, Riverside. At the invitation of Professor Yip Wai-lim, Professor Wong transferred to the University of California, San Diego, taking his PhD in 1979. After teaching as an Assistant Professor for one year at UC San Diego (1979–1980) and, subsequently, at the National University of Taiwan (1980–1985) in the Department of Foreign Languages, Professor Wong returned to Hong Kong where he began a distinguished twenty-year tenure at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). In 2005, Professor Wong assumed duties as Head of the Department of English at Hong Kong Shue Yan University (HKSYU), in which role he presently serves, as well as the founding Director of the HKSYU Graduate School. In addition to pursuing an active research programme, including recent books and articles published on Deleuzian studies, science fiction, and the anthropocene, Professor Wong is the proud mentor of generations of Hong Kong students, some of whom have gone on to lead the global conversation around Chinese comparative literature and Hong Kong studies.

The Interview[1]

Stuart Christie (SC)
Am I proposing the appropriate date range for this "Hong Kong generation", i.e. 1967–1984?[2]

Wong Kin-yuen (WKY)
My first response is that we all know that making sense of any period, age, or generation is necessarily arbitrary. If you make an arbitrary "cut" like the one you're proposing, it's necessarily at the expense of something else, another frame or set of details.

SC
Fair enough. You were among this select group. Whom might you want to include or exclude from this "Hong Kong generation" and on what grounds?

WKY
According to the criteria we've discussed, being born, bred, and based in Hong Kong and completing their PhDs at the University of San Diego (UCSD) are distinguishing features of the group. On this basis, Yip Wai-

[1] Our interview was conducted in Professor Wong's office on the Hong Kong Shue Yan University campus.

[2] Professor Yip Wai-lim was appointed as an Assistant Professor at UCSD in 1967; the youngest member of the "Hong Kong generation," Professor Leung Ping-kwan, completed his PhD studies at UCSD in 1984. These two dates serve to bracket the present consideration of the "Hong Kong generation."

lim, William Tay, Leung Ping-kwan, and I would qualify. Still, to the extent that the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) was a nexus point for so many of us, before returning to Hong Kong to start our careers, you could also consider including our Taiwanese-born colleague, Chou Ying-hsiung (周英雄), who trained with us at UC San Diego and eventually worked at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) for nearly fifteen years. UCSD was, for us, the centering force of the group identification. We were called "the San Diego gang"!

SC
In your opinion which other criteria might we use when constituting this "Hong Kong generation" retrospectively?

WKY
I can think of two items. The first is that we developed into scholars who over time popularized the discipline we called comparative literature. The other would be that most of us came to UC San Diego and worked in the "Department of Literature" and we were known for our emphasis upon literary theories in those days. And we were a collective force in popularizing these for the emerging discipline. We experienced some controversy when developing working theoretical paradigms for comparative literature and comparative cultures at the time. As Hong Kong-based critics, we were distinguished by all having studied in undergraduate English departments without having had access to the comparative traditions operating within Chinese departments as they were then conceived. We eventually helped to popularize theories of comparative studies in literature and culture as they emerged on the English side of disciplinary formations.

SC
Why did you choose to pursue graduate studies outside of Hong Kong at that time? Which variables, personal as well as professional, factored into your decision as a young scholar?

WKY
It's about history. I was about to graduate from the English department at Hong Kong Baptist College. On campus I bumped into a professor from the University of Redlands (California) who was on sabbatical teaching at Baptist in 1972. Lacking a PhD programme, as most colleges of that era did, Baptist had no programme of its own for me to enter. This American professor accordingly invited me to come over to study with him at Redlands. Once I finished my master's degree there, I actually began my PhD studies at the University of California at Riverside, but I didn't like it at all. So, on the advice of a graduate advisor, I drove my car over to San Diego and met Yip Wai-lim in 1973. (I hadn't known him back in Hong Kong.) It was so lucky that I got

introduced to him in the first place. And it was he who first asked, "Would you want to change your PhD from English to comparative literature?" So, it was Yip who first recruited me to UCSD where I began in September of 1974. I got my identity as a scholar right then and right there. I knew who I was at that point. I knew I had a role to play.

SC
Why did many among this generation choose to pursue PhDs in the United States and not in the UK?

WKY
This had a lot to do with educational scenarios and options available to us in those days. If you went to the University of Hong Kong [HKU], it was very natural for talented graduates to take their PhDs in the UK. Things went smoothly. By contrast, for graduates from CUHK and Baptist, most were required to consider studying PhDs in the United States. This arose from discrimination against those who had not pursued BA studies at HKU. Everyone else in Hong Kong who hadn't had the privilege of attending HKU was forced to embrace global alternatives to study outside the UK.

SC
On a parallel track?

WKY
Yes, that's right. This constraint actually gave us greater opportunities, more space, to pursue curriculum not limited to the British canon and the traditional training in the UK. California was, comparatively speaking, much more open and cosmopolitan.

SC
Will—or should—history credit Professor Yip Wai-lim as a primary nexus point for "the Hong Kong generation" as it thrived at UC San Diego?

WKY
Yes, he was. Chou Ying-hsiung and William Tay went early; I was the third one. And, later on, Yip recruited Leung Ping-kwan. And, of course, Yip came back eventually to teach at CUHK for a time as well.

SC
Is it really accurate to call this group a "Hong Kong generation" as a collective, or does the premise benefit too much from historical hindsight? Was it, rather, simply a group of talented individuals from Hong Kong who happened to be in the United States by means of contingency?

WKY
If you highlight the academic reasons and trajectory we all ended up pursuing at UC San Diego, as comparatists interested in separating from the canons of our BA training in English studies in colonial Hong Kong, then I would say the premise of the "Hong Kong generation" can be sustained. When we were first applying our research, learning from Yip, of course we learned the history of Fenellosa and Pound together and acquired similar approaches, outlook, and methodologies.

SC
Would you call Yip a "peer mentor"?

WKY
Exactly. As students we always discussed our work informally and in our roles as teaching assistants and we would exchange our views and experiences. Each of us went into specific theoretical areas of focus. For example, we all know that Tay went into Marxist studies, notably Frederic Jameson. Chou went into structuralism, and I got interested in hermeneutics. Each of us was aware that he had to find a niche, a methodological paradigm so as to guide himself toward future research and study. As such, we each established our academic identity in a very clear way, which distinguished us as a theoretically-minded group of young researchers with diverse tendencies. We weren't called the "San Diego gang" for nothing! Indeed, our commitment to shared theoretical approaches created controversy for us in later years, as we encountered resistance to theory once back in Taiwan and Hong Kong. We came together and identified as a group, first, only in California and then afterwards as friends and colleagues upon our return to Hong Kong and Taiwan.

SC
How often did members of the "Hong Kong generation" meet and interact with each other in the US and under which circumstances?

WKY
We were truly very close as a group of PhD students. We met very, very often in settings distinct from our academic study. We were all so close to Yip's immediate family. He was not that much older than we were . . . we could relate to each other on many levels of interaction. As I recall, it was Tay who first recruited Leung Ping-kwan. In fact, it was I who met Leung at the airport and brought him back to the UC San Diego campus for the very first time. With his PhD training, Leung sustained a very distinguished career in creative writing which was, at a later stage, quite different from the theoretical approaches we had adopted earlier. Theory was not Leung's cup of tea. Even now, I cannot name or define

Leung's methodological emphasis apart from his distinguished status as a poet.

SC
So, clearly, there were varieties within the domains of study of the so-called "Hong Kong generation."

WKY
Yes.

SC
As members of the "Hong Kong generation," were you aware (or perhaps even nurtured by) the collective appreciation of your "home" subjectivities as Hongkongers, familiar community in the Cantonese language, and as Chinese persons living and working in a "foreign" land? Did you bond as Hongkongers in California, knowing that you were in significant ways cultural outsiders within the institution you studied in?

WKY
Of course. Even today, when conducting my academic endeavors, I still always remind myself of the politics of location. Hong Kong is our base. As a PhD student in San Diego, even otherwise very kind and knowledgeable people, would lack basic knowledge about Hong Kong, and would confuse it with Japan or whatever.

SC
Certainly, it wasn't the job of the "Hong Kong generation" to educate the ignorant—it's our job to educate ourselves as far as we can. Still, were you aware that by means of building comparative literary studies in California, with Hong Kong as its leading edge, you were creating new theoretical and disciplinary space at a global level?

WKY
Of course. That is precisely why I emphasized, at the start of this interview, that all of us had undergraduate training exclusively in English departments only to return, once our doctorates were completed, to establish the newer domain of comparative literature here. This was our mission once back in Hong Kong, from that moment of return, to forever change the way Hong Kong students interacted with Western texts. Eventually, we all became very proud of our own ability—a sense of caliber—as Hong Kong academics, because of our in-depth fluency in theoretical paradigms which our colleagues in Taiwan and elsewhere in China at that time had lacked. We were aware that we were pioneering something, both for China and, equally important, for the rest of the world in approach to China. Even now, I believe that my students' work across the generations since then has amounted to the

harvesting of those first steps we took in San Diego. This work continues to flourish today.

SC
Do you have any particularly memorable experiences about the group's experiences as recalled by its individual members, apart from yourself, that you would like to share?

WKY
We were important members of what, especially in Taiwan, they call the "golden age" of comparative literary studies. We made an "all-island tour" at one point, going around to all of the universities and spreading this message about theoretically informed and global comparative studies.

SC
What are your own personal recollections of the experience, high points or low points, which are particularly indicative of the times for Chinese scholars studying in the American academy?

WKY
I was a very avid athlete. I learned tennis, and I was also a badminton champion on campus at the time. For me, a personal high point was when I was assigned to be the teaching assistant for an undergraduate "English Writing" composition course. There was no professor up there, and each had to teach his section independently. All of my students were American high school teachers. And here I was, a Chinese guy who had hardly passed high school English, and I was up there teaching these American adults theories of effective pedagogy. They didn't know about these, and they were so receptive. Another highlight, if I may, stands out in my mind. We, the Hong Kong teaching assistants, had a social gathering one evening after having finished our grading. And we smoked marijuana.

SC
[gasps] Am I allowed to put this down?

WKY
Of course. Why not? It's legal in America. And we were laughing and crying and talking about our students' writing!

SC
At the end of the day, how good was the training you received by American scholars lacking fluency in any Chinese language? Did these established American institutes of higher learning cater effectively to your intellectual development?

WKY
Of course they did. I still remember so clearly one morning [years later] I yelled out to my students [here in Hong Kong], telling them how much I love what I do in service to Hong Kong, and how we can give back to our own local culture through our work as comparatists on the global scene. My own experience at San Diego, I should emphasize, was very positive. And, remember, they hired me upon completion of my PhD. They offered me an assistant professorship immediately. That was the respect for my ability they showed. They didn't discriminate in any sense. Even lacking competence on the Chinese side, my colleagues were very fair and open-minded. For example, my current passion for eco-criticism was initially inspired by a conference held on the UC San Diego campus about the California conservationist, John Muir. My subsequent intellectual interests and growth in eco-criticism were nurtured in Californian soil.[3]

SC
For you personally, was the plan always to return to a career in Hong Kong? Was it a tough choice to leave the US?

WKY
My family was with me in San Diego. I was able to support my wife at the time, and a baby son, on a teaching assistant's salary with occasional help from my mother and step-father back in Hong Kong. Even so, I always planned on coming back to Hong Kong, to my culture, my friends, and my relatives here. I always waited for the chance to return to Hong Kong and, after teaching for five years at Taida [National Taiwan University], then the chance to teach at CUHK came. In 1985, in fact, I also had a personal interview with Dr Daniel Tse, then the president at Hong Kong Baptist College, my alma mater, as well as at another Taiwanese university.

SC
In recent years, revisionist critiques (notably of Yip's work) have begun to appear. How well, in retrospect, has the scholarship of the "Hong Kong generation" dated?

WKY
It's a natural process of history. I don't mind at all that the subsequent generation critiques the previous one. This is how history works, the "anxiety of influence." We have to catch up and be sensitive to the

[3] Between May 29–June 1, 2018, Professor Wong and his department colleagues at Shue Yan University subsequently organized a successful inter-institutional conference on the "The Anthropocene and Beyond."

changes around us. To keep current and enjoy the energy of new trends. It is worth reminding ourselves that an exclusive focus upon Hong Kong, at the expense of wider currents connecting us to the broader theoretical currents outside, defeats the purpose of why we are comparatists in the first place. The interaction between Hong Kong values and the outside world is at the heart of our disciplinary formation of comparative literary and cultural studies. The comparative force I am talking about in the global context can serve Hong Kong studies effectively without eroding its commitment to Hong Kong. Our trilingualism as a local culture maximizes the advantages and values Hongkongers bring to any interaction with outside. It always did.

SC
[interjects] And, by 1980, you and the rest of the "Hong Kong generation" were making these arguments a full seventeen years in advance of decolonization and localizing the curriculum in Hong Kong. Truly remarkable and organic. . . .

The final question. If, indeed, the "Hong Kong generation" is to be lauded by literary historians of the future as exemplary and noteworthy, what in your opinion were its greatest achievements? What are you, as an individual who was right in the middle of the experience, most proud of?

WKY
I would say that what we have achieved as a generation is to have opened up the door towards an alternative frame, one we think of today as both a local and a global comparative literary studies. We served as a bridge across disciplines as they were then known and understood. I am personally proud of having led a sustainable, yet still non-linear, trend toward the future, on behalf of something that is about to happen. Especially for someone my age, now at seventy-five, I'm proud still to be situated near the front.

SC
Professor Wong Kin Yuen, I am most sincerely grateful for your time.