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Between Language and Silence: Self-Writing Diasporic Identity in Sarah Howe's Loop of Jade

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Abstract

A Hong Kong-born biracial poet based in the United Kingdom since childhood, Sarah Howe explores in her debut collection, *Loop of Jade* (2015), the complexities of Hong Kong through the lens of diaspora. This article examines Howe's representations of language and silence in relation to writing Hong Kong as a third space between dominant cultural forces. I will explore self-writing as a mode of cultural production that, through the process of hybridization, frequently challenges the boundaries of hierarchical binaries. Writing in English, Howe employs her limited knowledge of the Chinese language to weave a diasporic family narrative that is defined through its fragmentation and ambiguity. Framing her mother's childhood stories as a vehicle for understanding her family history in Hong Kong, Howe establishes a connection between her mother's reticent storytelling and her loss of access to her "mother tongue," her mother's native language. Adjacent to her exploration of language, her visualization of silences through poetic form underscores the marginality of self-writing in diaspora while also questioning the assumed truthfulness of family history and, by extension, the history of "home." With a focus on the dynamics between motherhood and mother tongue, as well as language and silence, in *Loop of Jade*'s family narratives, I will argue for a reading of Howe's poetry as the formation of a Hong Kong diasporic identity that draws on hybridity and marginality. Howe's experimentation with language, genre, and poetic form articulates a Hong Kong identity that is not "pure" but rather rooted in the incommensurability of differences.

Introduction

Occupying a marginal position in both Hong Kong culture and the field of world literature, anglophone Hong Kong poetry is reified through its hybridization of cultural and linguistic signifiers. This destabilization of a cohesive identity is exemplified in Sarah Howe's debut poetry collection, *Loop of Jade* (*LJ*; 2015), which explores the poet's relationship with Hong Kong from a diasporic perspective. This article aims to examine *Loop of Jade* as an English-language text positioned between the genres of poetry and diasporic life-writing. Envisioning Hong Kong as a marginal third space between dominant cultures, I will read the self-writing of Hong Kong as a mode of cultural production that problematizes the binary between East and West. I will also analyze hybridity as a discourse that brings together, but does not resolve, conflicting elements between the dichotomies of center and periphery, homeland, and diaspora. Howe's self-representation in *Loop of Jade* not only problematizes her relationship with Hong Kong, the lost homeland, but also plays into Hong Kong's literary ethos by highlighting the city's precarious status and the incommensurability of its various cultural signifiers. Writing in English, Howe employs her limited knowledge of the Chinese language to weave a diasporic family narrative defined by fragmentation and ambiguity, while depicting silences in her poetry to explore the inevitable gaps in history. Focusing on the narratives in Howe's poems, I will analyze the poet's use of language and silence in *Loop of Jade* as forms of hybridization that unsettle categorizations of identity while articulating an understanding of a "Hong Kong ethos" (T. L.-M. Ho, "Writing" 180). Through experimentation with language, genre, and poetic form, Howe's fractured yet cyclical narratives of displacement and return configure Hong Kong identity as a constant negotiation of personal, political, and cultural tensions.

From the Periphery of the Periphery: Contextualizing Sarah Howe as a Hong Kong Poet

To write as a Hong Kong poet in English is to write in a genre that can be elusive to the point of being, in the words of Tammy Ho Lai-ming, "almost an abstraction at the margins" ("Writing" 180). In Hong Kong, the English language experiences the paradox of being elite, globalized, and commercially valued, yet at the same time limited in accessibility and outreach on a local scale (Y.-L. Ho 429). To write literature, already an "alienated language" from what is practiced in everyday life, in the city's secondary language, constitutes a dual marginalization (L. Ho, "Hong

Kong" 174). Distanced from mainstream discourses of what is considered "local," i.e., Cantonese-speaking and commercially oriented, anglophone poetry in Hong Kong was, until recent years, considered a tentative genre. Partly due to its comparatively small literary community and body of work, the genre was underrecognized in both its home city and the wider field of world literature in English (Ingham, "Writing" 2). Only 20 years ago, in the foreword to *City Voices*, Hong Kong's first anthology of creative writing in English, poet Louise Ho lamented the feeling of "functioning in a void" ("Foreword" xiv).

The marginalization of Hong Kong poetry reflects the cultural marginalization of Hong Kong itself. As a British colony returned to Chinese rule in 1997, Hong Kong holds an uneasy relationship with mainland China, being culturally and linguistically distinctive yet politically subordinate to its "motherland" under the "One Country, Two Systems" policy. Defining "self-writing" as a form of empowerment through which a colonized culture reclaims its agency, Rey Chow argues that Hong Kong's integration into the Chinese nation-state is a part of China's postcolonial self-writing rather than Hong Kong's ("Between Colonizers" 154). Instead, Hong Kong's postcolonial presence is bounded by a "double impossibility": on the one hand, pushed to the periphery of a totalizing "Chineseness" rooted in visions of ethnic and cultural authenticity, and on the other, eclipsed by the legacy of British colonialism in the form of global capitalism (153–56). In their introduction to *Wasafiri*'s Hong Kong issue in 2017, Jeffrey Mather and Florian Stadtler note that mainstream discourses represent Hong Kong as a postcolonial tragedy, abandoned by the British Empire while struggling against the ever-expanding control of the Chinese Communist Party. While poets of Hong Kong heritage have been gaining recognition in the British and international literary scene since the mid-2010s, this "Hong Kong moment" in contemporary poetry, as labeled by Antony Huen, coincides with growing global interest in the city's political situation, shaped by the mass pro-democracy protests of 2014 and 2019. Emerging in the wake of social unrest, the new "Hong Kong School of Poets," of which Sarah Howe is considered a pioneering figure, is often interpreted as writing in response to the political context of the city (Huen, "Hong Kong Moment" 59).

If Hong Kong poetry is to be read as a form of self-writing, perhaps it is best defined by what Tammy Ho describes as a "Hong Kong ethos." In the face of disempowerment, the self-writing of Hong Kong becomes an ongoing negotiation that exceeds national and racial boundaries (Chow, "Between Colonizers" 157). In her attempt to locate a Hong Kong ethos in

English poetry, Tammy Ho focuses on selected poems while rejecting the label of a representative canon, with the purpose of "offer[ing] a sequence of snapshots, of fragments, from the periphery of the peripheral" ("Writing" 180). Articulated through an engagement with local politics, community, and culture, the Hong Kong ethos finds agency in layering the Chinese and Western signifiers that "[reflect] the admixed nature of the formation of Hong Kong culture" (180). Furthermore, the act of writing in English is itself a "mode of expression [that] reflects a certain autonomy," rejecting singular narratives of colonial or Chinese identity in its chosen marginality (180). Marginality, or the positioning of oneself on the margins, allows Hong Kong writers to reclaim an identity outside of the passive victimhood of marginalization. Louise Ho also describes Hong Kong writing in English as a translation of "Hong Kong sensibilities" into "English sensibilities," positioning Hong Kong's "local ethos" and the English literary language as separate concepts that are incongruously merged through literature to create a third space that is neither fully Chinese nor English ("Hong Kong" 176). Similarly, Mather and Stadtler recognize "identity" as a central theme in anglophone Hong Kong writing that is constantly discussed and challenged, resulting not in the iteration of "Hong Kong's voice in the singular" but a multifaceted focus on the "problems around inclusion, exclusion, belonging and displacement" that shape the genre. If the third space is, as articulated by Homi Bhabha, a liminal space that opens up "a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (Rutherford 211), the self-writing of Hong Kong in English claims agency by creating a marginal third space between the dominant cultural forces of China and the West, from which it actively engages with cultural multiplicity (Chow, "Between Colonizers" 158).

It is within the framework of "self-writing a Hong Kong ethos" that I hope to examine Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade* as a Hong Kong diasporic text. Born to an English father and Chinese mother in Hong Kong, Howe has lived in England since the age of seven. Both of her poetry collections were written in English and published in the United Kingdom to critical acclaim: her pamphlet *A Certain Chinese Encyclopedia* (2009) won an Eric Gregory Award, while *Loop of Jade* established Howe as the youngest ever recipient of the Thomas Stearns Eliot Prize. While credited as an important new voice in contemporary British Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) poetry, Howe also stood out as a diasporic poet of Hong Kong heritage. Contemplating both her distance from and connection to Hong Kong as "home," *Loop of Jade* poses the question of Howe's identity as a Hong Kong poet. Following Stuart Hall's definition of cultural

identities as "unstable points of identification" that must be "positioned" within cultural discourses, one can read *Loop of Jade* as Howe's effort to position herself within the discourse of Hong Kong poetry (225–26). Howe's relationship to Hong Kong is a distinctive theme underlying her poetry that connects her to discourses on Hong Kong literature. In interviews with Tammy Ho and Jennifer Wong, Howe commented on the label of "Hong Kong poet" as one that she is cautiously learning to embrace, "if only because Hong Kong's own identity is so cosmopolitan, so bound up with migration, departure and return" (Wong 260). Hong Kong's uneasy identity corresponds to the self-conflict of diasporic identity, with the subject perpetually torn between identification with the host and home nation (Safran 83). In my interview with her, Howe noted her identity is difficult to categorize: even "British-Chinese," a term often used to describe Howe in interviews and reviews, assumes a mutual exclusivity of the two identities while conflating nationality with race ("Personal Interview"). Though she approaches all labels with caution, she affirmed that "diasporic" is one that she applies to her work.

It is important to note that I will analyze the concept of hybridity as separate from what Chow criticizes as "postmodern hybridity," an idealized vision of pluralisms existing in liberal and liberated harmony (157), but rather as a potential means to unsettle and displace the dominance of colonial power (Bhabha 112). In the context of *Loop of Jade*, diaspora provides a useful lens through which to understand hybridity in Hong Kong writing. In her discussion of the pan-Chinese diaspora, Ien Ang defines hybridity as "the very condition of in-betweenness" that problematizes boundaries of nationality, race, and culture (149). Rather than a solution to conflict, hybridity is used as a device for unsettling identities and analyzing the incommensurability of differences in cultural exchanges. Ang's conceptualization of hybridity is aimed at resisting homogenous interpretations of a global Chinese diaspora but can also be applied to a diasporic reading of Hong Kong. In *Loop of Jade*, hybridity is integral to shaping not only Howe's diasporic experience, but also Hong Kong as a third space where new meanings and identities are formed and reformed in a constant process of negotiation. Drawing on a mix of childhood memories, family stories, and return visits as an adult, Howe's poetry probes the connection between writing in diaspora and writing Hong Kong, two modes of writing in the margins. Her fragmentary mode of poetic storytelling exemplifies Ang's vision of acknowledging the difficult ambivalence of hybridity as a "necessary condition for living together-in-difference" (Ang 150).

Between Motherhood and Mother Tongue

In interviews, Howe recalled how, as a child in colonial Hong Kong, she was raised to be English; both her parents framed the United Kingdom as "home" and their time in Hong Kong as temporary (Reynolds). Howe's mother, a native Cantonese speaker, did not teach the language to her daughter out of fear that bilingualism might hinder her English skills, and the young Howe felt like an outsider in the city (T. L.-M. Ho, "Something" 44; Wong 260).[1] In anticipation of the 1997 Handover, the family made a permanent move to England in 1991, where Howe spent her childhood and adolescence striving to fit into British society. By the time she wrote *Loop of Jade*, having completed a PhD in Renaissance literature at Cambridge University, she was steeped in English culture and literary tradition, but only had fragmentary connections to her heritage on her mother's side (Tyrrell-Morin; Mansfield). *Loop of Jade* sets up Howe's diasporic relationship to Hong Kong as piecemeal and conflicted, with her ethnic claim to Hong Kong all but overshadowed by her Western upbringing. In this sense, Howe differs from diasporic poets such as Jennifer Wong, who came of age in Hong Kong and now writes about her formative memories from afar (T. L.-M. Ho, "Something" 42). Instead, Howe positions her lyric speaker as a stranger seeking her heritage, and as the interloper of her mother's stories.

In *Loop of Jade*, motherhood is used to represent a lost heritage that the writer can activate only through storytelling, but the reliability of these stories is constantly questioned. Howe's mother, orphaned as an infant, was brought from mainland China to Hong Kong to be raised by a woman whom Howe calls her grandmother. The grandmother, who died when Howe was an infant, left few details about her adoptive daughter's origins. In an interview with the *Honest Ulsterman*, Howe identified three poems in the volume that offer narratives based on her mother's childhood but noted they are not meant to form a novelistic narrative (McCartney). These three poems bookend the collection: "Crossing from Guangdong" is the

1 There is an ongoing debate on the status of Cantonese as a dialect or language. While legally recognized as a dialect of the Chinese language, Cantonese functions as the *de facto* official language in Hong Kong. In recent years, Cantonese has been embraced by some Hongkongers as a language that marks Hong Kong's cultural distinction from mainland China, where Mandarin is the national spoken form. Linguists Cheng Siu-pong and Tang Sze-wing have argued that, in practice, the terms "dialect" and "language" are now more determined in popularized terms in Hong Kong (390).

second poem in the volume, "Loop of Jade" the sixth, and "Islands" the second-last. At first glance, these poems appear to play into the tradition of the anglophone Chinese diasporic memoir, a genre often focused on multi-generational family narratives from a feminine perspective (Shih 112). Yet as Jennifer Wong notes, Howe's experimentation with language and form undercut the narrative cohesion of traditional life-writing, forming instead a "complex narrative of cultural crossings where questions of personal identity, language, and history are intertwined" (258). Instead of a chronological narrative of her mother's life in Hong Kong, Howe uses poetry as a less conventional mode of life-writing, consciously holding back parts of her story. Her narratives of her mother's life, as well as her own, are intentionally fragmented, leaving much to speculation.

"Crossing from Guangdong" foregrounds the relationship between motherhood and mother tongue, a recurring theme in *Loop of Jade*. The epic poem, narrated in the first person by an adult woman assumed to be Howe, establishes a parallel between two journeys: the speaker takes a bus from Guangdong to Hong Kong, retracing the same route taken by her mother as an infant. The poem's opening line, "Something sets us looking for a place," blurs the distinction between Howe's journey in the present and her mother's in the past (*LJ* 2). Howe's limited knowledge of Cantonese likens her to a lost child as her mother had been: counting change in Cantonese "[like] a baby," Howe describes the single-digit numbers, "*Yut*, *ye*, *sam*, *sei*," (一、二、三、四) as "scraps that stay with [her]" (3). In an interview with Tammy Ho, Howe explained that these numbers represent the extent of her knowledge of the Cantonese dialect, though she studied Mandarin in adulthood due to its greater accessibility in the United Kingdom as the official Chinese *lingua franca* (T. L.-M. H., "Something" 44–45). Yet the poem privileges Cantonese, the dialect regional to Guangdong province and Hong Kong, to highlight the locality of her heritage. Thus, Howe's loss of her mother's native dialect, a "mother tongue" of sorts, not only limits her ability to engage with her surroundings, but also underscores her sense of rootlessness and isolation on "this strange pilgrimage to home" (*LJ* 3), a parallel to her mother's experience of childhood abandonment and the emotional weight of her journey.

Throughout the bus journey from Guangdong to Hong Kong, Howe actively imagines familial relationships with the Chinese strangers she encounters. These imagined relationships simultaneously reveal and complicate the range of possibilities for familial connections. At the immigration checkpoint, the "lichen-green uniformed official" cuts an intimidating figure; his "holstered / gun" and posture "exact as a violinist's /

wrist" borrow from Western stereotypes associated with members of Chinese Communist Party, authoritarian and mechanical (*LJ* 3–4). Howe's British passport, with its "rubbed / gold of the lion crest," emphasizes her interpellation as a subject of a Western nation (4). Yet when she hands over her passport in a "mute offering," she envisions the transfer of her identification as an intimate act: the official's eyes "flicker" with "uncertainty" as he identifies "eyes, the contour of a nose" similar to his own (4). Under the "half-recognition" of a shared ethnicity, Howe envisions the erasure of national, political, and linguistic differences between the two. Despite the passport and uniform that mark them as subjects of opposing nation-states, the similarities in their physical features momentarily soften the official's cool reserve as he and Howe identify each other in "[these] bare moments: / something like finding a family" (4).

Howe's moments of "half-recognition" are made all the more poignant by her lack of knowledge of her mother's biological family (*LJ* 4). Meeting a friendly old woman on the bus, she muses that the latter "could have been [her] unknown / grandmother, for all [she] knew or understood" (4). This imagined relationship underscores Howe's desire to trace her maternal lineage, as well as its impossibility. While Howe assumes that the old woman is "doubtless just inviting a foreigner to dinner," her lack of maternal family opens up the possibility of a direct family bond (4). Yet although the woman's act of holding Howe's hands "cupped in her earthenware / palms" suggests a form of intimacy, her speech is deconstructed into a "string / of frantic, happy syllables, in what / dialect [Howe does not] even know" (4). This fragmentation of language shows that, in spite of the woman's display of affection, her intentions and Howe's speculations remain a mystery to each other, preventing the option of any form of acquaintanceship. Thus, Howe's relationship with her mother and mother tongue presents a paradox. On the one hand, her physical characteristics allow Chinese locals to identify her as visibly Chinese like them. On the other hand, her lack of knowledge of the Chinese language emphasizes her position as a stranger. Most Hongkongers and mainland Chinese share the Han ethnicity, but the physical marker of their shared heritage is complicated by a linguistic barrier.

At once regretful and hopeful, "Crossing from Guangdong" expresses a longing for cultural recognition that will always only be partially achieved. Hong Kong, the "place" sought by Howe in the poem's first line, represents the destination of a momentous crossing, but its identity as a destination is tenuous. In the final stanza, Howe's "half-recognition" develops somewhat into a fuller sense of recognition: as the bus enters

Hong Kong, she identifies a direct relationship to the city through recalling her childhood memories rather than imagining her mother's (*LJ* 5). Yet this recognition is articulated through contrast, with Howe registering how "that once familiar scene" has changed dramatically in her absence (5). The poem closes with Howe imagining the view from her childhood home, a unit in a high-rise Mid-Levels apartment building:

> The low-slung ferry, white above green,
>
> piloting the harbour's carpet of stars,
>
> turned always home, you can no longer see. (4)

Tammy Ho argues that the diction of "always home" frames Hong Kong as a "place of constancy [and] continuity" ("Something" 45). At the same time, even as Howe reclaims Hong Kong as a space she had once inhabited, she acknowledges the city as a space of rapid change: the ferry is no longer in view from the window of her former home, obscured by "[the] rising mercury / pin-tips" of skyscrapers "[s]o much / taller now than when [she] left / fifteen years ago" (*LJ* 5). Just as the Star Ferry, an icon of colonial Hong Kong, is eclipsed by the literal rise of Hong Kong as a commercial hub, so too is Howe's reclamation of her cultural belonging intertwined with a recognition of loss and displacement. The dualism of the ferry, simultaneously seen and not seen in Howe's imagination, represents a bittersweet ambivalence: although Hong Kong may be "always home," the homeland of Howe and her mother's childhoods cannot be fully recovered from the past, the way Howe can never fully access the story of her mother's crossing. As the poem concludes with an "inheritance unfulfilled," pointing to an incomplete familial heritage, the true constancy lies in Howe's perpetual search for home rather than home itself (Tsang).

"Crossing from Guangdong" introduces the theme of circularity and cyclicality that looms large throughout *Loop of Jade*. In our interview, Howe explained that, since the age of seventeen, she has revisited Hong Kong every few years. Her constant returns disrupt the idea of a linear narrative of departure or return, instead construing Howe's search for home as the continuation of a cycle ("Personal Interview"). The image of a circle is evoked in the volume's title, "Loop of Jade," which refers to a jade bracelet bought for the infant Howe by her adoptive grandmother (*LJ* 18). The idea of circularity positions Howe's cultural identity is an ongoing journey without a fixed beginning or end, one that exists both within and without the framework of familial relationships. By framing her journey to Hong Kong as part of a cycle, Howe subverts the expectation that the

history of a family or a place should progress in a linear narrative. Instead, "Crossing from Guangdong" shows how Howe's diasporic relationship with Hong Kong draws from a hybrid of childhood memories and imperfect reinterpretations of her mother's stories.

The Role of Silence in Diasporic Narratives

While the focus on family history in *Loop of Jade* recalls the popular genre of Chinese diasporic memoirs, Howe uses poetic form to depart from and challenge the conventions of the genre. Howe's work follows an earlier generation of women writers, such as Jung Chang and Anchee Min, who use anglophone life-writing to reflect on the hardships they faced during the Cultural Revolution, as well as their subsequent emigration to the West. Largely teological in narrative, the Chinese diasporic memoir of the post-Mao era is traditionally styled as a definite account of the author's family history and diasporic experience (Tong and Hung 77). Howe rejects this assumption of narrative authority in *Loop of Jade*; instead, her poetry can be read as following the alternative approach offered by authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston. Kingston's debut memoir, *The Woman Warrior* (1976), is celebrated for its intentional lack of chronology and reliability in retelling the author's matrilineal family history, i.e., the experience of being Chinese women immigrants in America. While Kingston writes from the perspective of a Chinese American daughter, she refuses to name her narrator throughout the text, disliking the "fundamental immodesty" in the assumption that the narrator of a memoir is the same person as the author (Zwerdling 189). Though based on the lives of real family members, Kingston's characters are, as Alex Zwerdling describes, "as saturated in dreams, visions, fantasies, and traditional stories passed from one generation to the next as in the facts of history, place, recorded event, and individual experience" (186). The established distance between narrator and author allows Kingston to experiment freely with fictionality and myth without being burdened with the responsibility of accuracy (187).

The rejection of a linear and complete narrative challenges the assumed authority of diasporic writers as representatives of an authentic "Chineseness," an imagined identity that distinguishes China from the rest of the world through a set of essentialist traits (Chow, "Introduction" 6). Ang argues that the concept of diaspora is "fundamentally proto-nationalist," producing an imagined community demarcated by ethnic rather than territorial lines (145).

Relying on the "presumption of internal ethnic sameness and external ethnic distinctiveness" of Chinese people, diasporic nationalism reinforces Chineseness as a unified identity that exceeds the boundaries of the nation-state to articulate "pure identity politics on a global scale" (145). By emphasizing the gaps in family history, texts such as *The Woman Warrior* and *Loop of Jade* subvert the "transnational nationalism" of diaspora, instead articulating the diasporic family narrative as distinctly hybrid (145). In Howe's case, the diasporic family narrative of her poetry is tied to Hong Kong, a place whose "impure origins" challenge the myth of Chinese purity, and whose self-writing is articulated outside of national boundaries (Chow, "Between Colonizers" 157).

Like Kingston, Howe frames fictionality as an integral part of writing about her family. In our interview, she pointed out that "one of the most naïve assumptions about poetry is that the 'I' of the poem is the same of the autobiographical poet," echoing Kingston's view of the narrator as a character separate from the author (Howe, "Personal Interview"). When I asked about her thoughts on her poetry as life-writing, she answered that she had "some kind of fictive impulse to fill in the gaps". She went on to explain:

> The poems might supply a kind of certainty and concreteness that might get undermined because they are aware of the tricksiness of memory but also the fragmentedness of the records. [I am telling] a story that is being mediated at several removes—a daughter figure telling a story told by her mother, who is being told by the woman who adopted her, who is not always a reliable interlocutor.... I hope it is clear enough from the framing that one cannot take these things as gospel truth.

Through the use of poetic form, Howe sidesteps the expectation of presenting her stories as a definitive account of her family history while highlighting the reality that despite a biographer's efforts, the historicity of a person's life can never be absolute (Cline and Angier 14).

Such uncertainties are examined through a mix of formal elements that convey the inevitability of silences within diasporic narratives. By using poetry as the medium of storytelling, Howe is not obligated to create a cohesive narrative. The narratives of "Loop of Jade" and "Islands" are non-linear, weaving in and out of different anecdotes on the mother's childhood to reflect the episodic nature of her storytelling. The title piece in *Loop of Jade* is a prose poem that shifts between Howe's perspective and her mother's, interspersed with lyric verses retelling the Chinese

legend of the *Butterfly Lovers* 梁山伯與祝英台.[2] This fragmentation of narrative emphasizes the mother's marginalization both in the present and in her childhood in Hong Kong. Writing as an adult in the United Kingdom, Howe emphasizes the irregularity of her mother's monologues: the quiet mother "rarely" speaks of her childhood to her daughter, and only when, late at night, "all the downstairs lights [are] switched off but one" and "the men are asleep," a time when "she believes it's someone else's turn to listen" (*LJ* 13). The mother's secrecy frames the stories as intimate exchanges between herself and her daughter, but it also reveals her deep reserve in daily life. Subtly reinforced throughout the poem, the mother's sense of isolation encapsulates the intersection of gender, racial, and cultural marginalization: a Chinese woman in an implicitly patriarchal household, displaced from her homeland in the West, where she is silenced by linguistic barriers even among her family.[3]

Unable to fully access the "dark and unreflective well" of her mother's mind (*LJ* 13), Howe strives to bring her mother's marginality to the forefront of her poetry, using variations of poetic form to emphasize the tentative vulnerability of her mother's voice. Despite being mostly written in paragraph form, "Loop of Jade" employs variations in spacing and line breaks to represent lines of the mother's speech:

> I sometimes think she wasn't very—reliable, my—
>
> mother. What she told me, I don't know how much—I can believe. (16)

The use of enjambment between "my" and "mother" visualizes a long pause, allowing the reader to more fully comprehend the poignancy of an earlier line from Howe's perspective: "Her longest and most empty pause, I've learned, comes from the word *mother*" (*LJ* 16). In another passage, Howe reconstructs her mother's run-on monologue, but the paragraph is fragmented by blank spaces between phrases. The visualization of the

[2] While Howe has established a distance between the narrator and the author, I will continue to refer to the primary speaker of "Loop of Jade" as Howe, given the autobiographical bent of the poem. In other words, I will read "Loop of Jade," like "Crossing from Guangdong," as a piece of life-writing in poetic form, in which the lyric "I" is a persona created by Howe the poet.

[3] Throughout "Loop of Jade," the mother's passivity is contextualized within her domestic role in the family: for example, at times her late-night storytelling occurs while completing chores for the day (*LJ* 16). It is implied that the English-speaking family defers to the British father as the family's authoritative figure.

mother's hesitations emphasizes the geographical, temporal, and emotional distances between mother and daughter, speaker and reader. Howe engages with hybridity on a formal level as she integrates elements of life-writing into her poetry, while also complicating the diasporic family narrative as an act of self-writing. In fact, Howe goes on to explore the unfamiliarity of the word "motherhood" in another language:

> In her mouth that noun worried me. For I would never naturally use it myself—mother—except at an immigration office, perhaps, to total strangers, or inside the boundaries of a poem. She places it in the room's still air with a kind of resolve, and yet a sense it's not quite right—a mistranslation.... (16)

Silence signifies an absence or mistranslation of language and, by extension, the intergenerational distance within members of diasporic families. Howe describes her mother's storytelling as laced with a "pause-pocked, melodic, strangely dated hesitancy" that recalls her unfamiliarity with English in the first years of her arrival in the United Kingdom (*LJ* 15). In those early years, the mother's "subtle, near-constant nasal hum, more of a *nnnnnng*—so natural to Cantonese," is yet another form of silence that "[fills] the gaps between her otherwise fluent English like the Thereminy strings in a Mandarin film score" (15). Vividly depicted through oral imagery and simile, the mother's humming epitomizes the hybridization of languages in diaspora as her Cantonese inflections interrupt and shape her speech in English. At the same time, this hybridized mode of speech illustrates the impossibility of perfect translation as the mother struggles for words in her adopted language. Since Howe's mother did not teach Cantonese to her daughter, their conversations are conducted in English, both the colonial language of Hong Kong and the language of the diaspora.

The emphasis on silence in "Loop of Jade" sets up "Islands," the only poem in the collection written entirely in the mother's voice, as an unreliable narrative as well. As Howe chronicles her mother's return from boarding school in Macau as a child, the imagery parallels the earlier poem "Crossing from Guangdong," as if returning like dreams, with islands that "swim like mist on the horizon" in what Howe imagines must be her mother's "long anticipated sight / of home" (*LJ* 55). Described by Howe herself as a "mistranslation" of her mother's childhood days, Howe offers a mediation of her mother's experiences with the familiar themes of departure and return in her own erudite expressions (Howe and Ho). By highlighting the hesitancy of her mother's speech, Howe acknowledges that a part of her mother's storytelling is lost in translation. Once again, motherhood and mother tongue are intertwined; Howe's loss of her mother's native language limits her access to the full range of her mother's

internal thoughts and feelings, which are most natural to Cantonese expression.

To recall Louise Ho, if Hong Kong writing is the translation of Hong Kong sensibilities into English literary sensibilities, the former are inevitably "transformed as they surface through the writing" ("Hong Kong" 176). Howe's interpretation of her mother's stories, an act of writing Hong Kong from the diaspora, highlights anglophone Hong Kong poetry as fundamentally incomplete: some of the "local ethos" is transformed in the act of translation. Yet just as writing Hong Kong in English should not be read reductively as a loss of cultural authenticity, Howe does not mourn the loss of an imagined cultural or linguistic purity. Instead, the silences in her storytelling position the diasporic narrative as operating in a third space between fixed constructs of homeland and diaspora, while referencing the impurity of Hong Kong itself.

Hybridizing Diaspora: Self-Writing Hong Kong Identity

Writing as a Hong Kong poet in diaspora, Howe's use of hybridity in *Loop of Jade* suggests an identity constantly engaged with the complications of boundaries. Drawing on Chinese and Western signifiers in ways that do not harmoniously bridge them, *Loop of Jade* forms "a collage of texts and dialects that destabilizes meanings and definitions" (Wong 261). While *Loop of Jade* opens and closes on lyric poems about Howe's family history, laced with allusions to Chinese mythology and literature, the collection also references a vast range of Western literary influences. Allusions to the works of Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare draw from Howe's background as a Renaissance scholar, while stylistic appropriations of Modernist poets Ezra Pound and Jorge Luis Borges explore the idea of Chinoiserie mediated through the twentieth-century Western gaze (Chan 19). *Loop of Jade* also resists formal categorization; the poems "move between lyric and experimental modes" to "[dodge] the uneasy limits of poetic subjectivity" (Parmar). Mary Jean Chan writes that, by "draw[ing] inspiration from American, European and East Asian literary traditions across various schools of poetic thought and time periods," *Loop of Jade* offers "a richly complex collection which claims multiple allegiances and influences" (7). When I asked Howe whether or not there exists an overarching theme in *Loop of Jade*, she replied that the poems are "related by the fact that, at different times and ways, they shaped [her] personhood" ("Personal Interview"). Given Howe's reluctance

to comment directly on her life in her poetry, her use of intertextuality combines fictionality, personal history, literary allusion, and politics without the need to categorize her thoughts.

Howe's liminal crossing of generic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries allows her to explore contemporary socio-political issues in Hong Kong and China, from colonialism to authoritarianism, outside of a binary framework of East versus West. Although Hong Kong is identified as the sought-after homeland in *Loop of Jade*, the idea of "Chineseness" features just as prominently, if not more so, as an undeniable part of both Hong Kong's and Howe's identity. By incorporating Chinese characters and transliterations into her poetry as she learns them in real life, Howe practices a literal form of diasporic self-writing. For example, most Chinese transliterations in *Loop of Jade* are in Mandarin *pinyin*, the dialect Howe learned as an adult, rather than Cantonese Romanization. Yet aside from charting her language acquisition, the presence of Chinese words are coded with political meaning. "Having just broken the water pitcher" muses on the shared pronunciation of the terms "truth" (真相) and "Elephant of Truth" (真象), part of a lexicon created by mainland Chinese netizens to bypass censorship in present-day China (Qiang). Though unstated in the poem, the wordplay is effective only in Mandarin, a detail immediately discernible to Chinese-language readers. In an interview with the *South China Morning Post*, Howe acknowledged a subconscious analogy in her poetry about the control of speech on both personal and political levels (Tyrrell-Morin). Weaving a connection between the silences in her mother's storytelling and the silencing of political dissent in contemporary China, Howe's use of code-mixing troubles the idea of authentic Chineseness; the narratives of both diaspora and homeland are too fragmented with silences to be reliably truthful.[4]

Another notable example of hybridity at work is "Tame," which weaves together elements of Chinese patriarchal culture, Western mythology, and personal imagination to address the mass abandonment of daughters in mainland China, a phenomenon that deeply impacted her orphaned mother. In our interview, Howe described "Tame" as an "autobiographical family impulse" being "refracted through myth but not a real Chinese folk

[4] To comment more directly on China's silencing of Hong Kong, Howe has also written a sequence of erasure poetry titled "Two Systems." By removing words from the Hong Kong Basic Law, she re-shapes the document into a "self-destructing text" to emphasize Hong Kong's diminishing autonomy under China's tightening hold (Howe, "Two Systems" 249).

tale" ("Personal Interview"). "Tame" tells of a woodsman's daughter who survives attempted infanticide by her father upon her mother's intervention; the mother, beaten by her husband for disobedience, transforms into a tree. The daughter, her "life / maimed by her father's sorrow" for being a girl, grows up in lonely silence, until one day she changes into a goose and flies away (*LJ* 11–12). Howe claimed that she wanted to write about her mother's abandonment as a child, which was likely related to her being a girl. Howe described "Tame" as a "funny blend of Chinese cultural signifiers self-consciously overdone with Roman literary analogues that are lurking just behind, like [the myth of] Apollo chasing Daphne." As if responding to the mother's silence in "Loop of Jade," "Tame" allows Howe to give voice to her mother's longing for acceptance as an orphaned girl in Hong Kong. At the same time, the allusion to Roman mythology tells the reader that the text is an imagined representation; the use of Western mythological tropes positions "Tame" as a poem about a bicultural imagination rather than a clear-cut representation of Chinese gender roles. Notably, "Tame" directly precedes "Loop of Jade" in the collection. Read together, the two poems do not create a complete picture of Chineseness but offer different perspectives on the same topic of the mother's difficult childhood: one from the daughter's imagination and one from the daughter's records of her mother's words and silences.

The poem most explicitly engaged with both Chinese and Hong Kong politics is "Innumerable," which addresses the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 through her memories of attending a supporting rally in Hong Kong. Rather than a direct retelling of the crackdown in Beijing on June 4, 1989, "Innumerable" positions the tragedy as both distanced from and connected to Howe as a Hongkonger. The poetic imagery establishes a parallel between the events at Tiananmen and Howe's experience at the rally: five-year-old Howe sits on her father's shoulders, "staring out across the jellied mass of human heads," an evocation of the violence at Tiananmen (*LJ* 34). Howe, and by extension Hong Kong, is in a state of in-betweenness: the "toy-box people" at the demonstration, though comparatively privileged in their geographical and political distance from Beijing, are limited in their autonomy, bounded by British colonialism and Hong Kong's imminent return to Chinese rule (34). Yet the political forces shaping Hong Kong also mark the city as an important space of solidarity towards the Chinese democracy movement, as evidenced by the annual June 4 vigils to which Howe alludes in her depiction of the rally. Probing the geopolitical distinction between Hong Kong and China, Howe's representation of Chineseness exceeds political boundaries to find solidarity

not in national or ethnic purity but in shared values, even as such values ultimately correspond to shared loss and trauma.

Hannah Tyrrell-Morin notes there is a particular "joy of reading *Loop of Jade* from a Hong Kong perspective," praising Howe's depictions of the political and cultural tensions surrounding the city as vividly recognizable to the Hong Kong reader. Through its representations of storytelling and silence, *Loop of Jade* articulates the formation of a diasporic identity that draws on marginality, but which also epitomizes the Hong Kong ethos through its engagement with processes of hybridity. Howe's poems weave together the diasporic family narrative and Hong Kong identity, both of which are dissected and complicated through her experimentation with language, form, and genre. Just as Howe's return journeys to Hong Kong are fragmentary and incomplete, so is Hong Kong's return to China; yet in both cases, self-writing—even from the periphery of the periphery—remains a form of agency that allows one to resist totalizing narratives.

Fortunately for Howe, she can hardly be called a "marginal" poet. Since the publication of *Loop of Jade*, she has been mostly embraced by Hong Kong poets and critics as one of their own. Peter Gordon, the Hong Kong-based editor of *Asian Review of Books*, has hailed her as the "vanguard of the city's literary movement." If *Loop of Jade* poses the question of Howe's identity as a Hong Kong poet, the Hong Kong literary community, both within and beyond the city, has largely responded with affirmation: the portrayal of a fractured, unsettled identity resonates all too well in the city today. Yet Howe's legacy exceeds her own ascension to literary prominence, spearheading the rise of a new movement of Hong Kong diasporic poets based in the United Kingdom, who have met with success in competitions and publications following the publication of *Loop of Jade*. This "Hong Kong moment" in poetry, unfolding in tandem with the socio-political changes in the city, spotlights poets born and raised in Hong Kong, such as Jennifer Wong, Mary Jean Chan, and Kit Fan, as well as second-generation diasporic poets like Sean Wai Kung and Jennifer Lee Tsai (Huen, "Hong Kong Moment" 59). Amid growing concerns about restricted freedom of speech following the establishment of new security laws in Hong Kong in 2020, poets have increasingly turned to writing in the United Kingdom, where they can give voice to political thoughts on Hong Kong from a spatial and temporal distance (Huen, "'Old Hong Kong'" 15). The incommensurable hybridity of their various perspectives, alongside the impossibility of ever reaching a clear definition of "Hong Kong," is what strengthens and expands Hong Kong poetry as a liminal third space in diaspora.

In 2022, Eric Yip, who had become the United Kingdom's youngest winner of the National Poetry Competition the year before, credited Howe as a key inspiration:

> I have a habit of reading poems for my mother, where I would recite them in English first, then haphazardly translate them to Cantonese. Reading Sarah Howe's poems from *Loop of Jade* was a moment of connection for us. For once, people like my mother could see themselves represented in "Western" literature. (Ingham, "In Conversation")

Yip's anecdote brings to full circle the unending cycle of departure and return in diasporic Hong Kong narratives: Howe's English literary sensibilities, imperfectly translated from her mother's Hong Kong sensibilities, are now translated back into Hong Kong's local language by a son for his mother. The relationship between "mother tongue" and "motherhood" may never be fully complete, but it can form bonds between generations rather than simply highlight the loss. Yip's story also shows how Howe's poetry continues to be transformed through the imperfect act of translation, opening new possibilities for anglophone Hong Kong poetry as a third space. All in all, the Hong Kong ethos has continued to grow as poets negotiate their identity in relation to a rapidly changing Hong Kong.

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