

THE DEVELOPMENT OF POETIC IDENTITIES: CHINESE VOICES IN ENGLISH FROM HONG KONG

AGNES S. L. LAM AND MARK E. MALBY

1. Introduction

As the learning of English becomes more widespread in various countries, it has also been more adopted as a language for literary expression. Literatures in English have emerged in several Asian locations to different degrees and have attracted a certain readership both in Asia and in other parts of the world. However, while the readership for Asian writing in English has been growing, there has been relatively little research on how Asian learners of English become published writers of literature in English. This is unfortunate because the developmental issues faced by these writers may have implications for the cultivation of literary appreciation and expression in the English language classroom in the Asian region as well as more general studies of intercultural concerns in bilingual or multilingual development.

In an attempt to address this research gap, Lam outlined a 5-stage model based on her own writing experience (“Writing” 354-9). But her model needs to be tested against the developmental experience of more writers in Asia. Malby subsequently applied Lam’s model to an analysis of the writing experience of eight Hong Kong writers: four Chinese poets writing in English and four other poets with English as their native language but now residing in Hong Kong (16-43). This chapter is an attempt to report on how Lam’s model can be applied to understand the developmental experience of the four Chinese poets in Malby’s study, which was itself designed to be a first study within a possibly larger project aimed at understanding the development of poets from different Asian countries. The main issue in Malby’s study as well as in the larger project as conceived is how the development of the poetic use of language

relates to learners' general growth in competence in English. Specifically, the question is whether Asian poets writing in English go through common stages of development and whether the stages they undergo cohere into a universal model that can be readily applied to the understanding of the development of poets in different bilingual or multilingual settings. Such research is relevant for enhancing our understanding of the development of the creative functions in language and the development of literary communities and can be usefully applied to the teaching of literature and of creative writing in Asian contexts.

The present chapter proceeds as follows: it first reviews briefly creative writing in bilingual or multilingual contexts (Section 2) and the use of biographical studies as a research method (Section 3) before presenting Lam's 5-stage model (Section 4); it then goes on to provide brief profiles of the four poets analyzed in this chapter (Section 5). The focus is on how Lam's model applies to the experience of the four poets (Section 6). The chapter ends with outlining the directions for further research in this area (Section 7).

2. Creative Writing in Bilingual or Multilingual Contexts

This research is situated in the interdisciplinary area of linguistic studies and literary criticism. It attempts to connect studies of bilingualism or multilingualism with the analysis of Asian writing in English, specifically Asian poetry, within the context of Asian Englishes (Kachru 9-28; Kachru and Nelson 137-49). Previous research has tended to treat these two areas of study—the linguistic development of learners of English and the critical analysis of English literary works produced by writers in post-colonial contexts (Patke 55-79; Ramazani 72-102), a number of whom might have learnt English as an additional language—largely separately. (Note, however, Lam, "Language Education" 77; Lam, "Poetry in Hong Kong" 55; Lam, "Defining Hong Kong Poetry" 393-4.) This is unfortunate, particularly in the light of the work of researchers who have found it fruitful to approach literary language as an extension of the use of metaphor in everyday language (Gibbs 120; Carter 207). The present study recognizes the indivisible relationship between literary language and the general communicative use of language. Hence, the emergence of the creative use of language as in writing poetry in bilingual or multilingual learners can be approached as an integral, though often neglected, aspect of language development.

Bilingualism or multilingualism being such a common phenomenon, it is to be expected that writers who know more than one language may choose one or more of their languages for literary expression (Lam, "Multi-Agent Model" 72). John Milton of 17th century England, for example, knew ten languages: "English, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Italian, French, Spanish, Dutch" (Hale 8) and wrote different types of writing at different times in his life in various languages; his poetry was composed in four languages: Latin, Greek, Italian, and his mother tongue, English (Hale 1). According to Hale, why Milton chose one language rather than another for composing a piece of writing is not entirely explicit. Perhaps his choice arose out of the complex interactions of the several languages in his memory, giving rise to new phrasings and rhythms. "Should we speak, not of Milton choosing a language, but rather of a language choosing him?" (Hale 66) Another writer from India, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), hated English lessons growing up as a Bengali boy (Chaudhuri 104) but transcended such dislike of English sufficiently to "recapture" (rather than translate) (Chaudhuri 106) some of his poems originally written in Bengali into English. Examples of writers producing literary output in a language not native to them abound in world literature, particularly in countries formerly colonized by people of another tongue. Nor is it a phenomenon occurring only in recent times. Elad-Bouskila refers to such considerations in literary writing in the Arab world even in the Middle Ages (33). Coulmas also provides examples of other writers writing in a language not native to them (32-3). The study of how learners of an additional language develop into writers in that language should prove interesting, both to literary scholars and to linguists. However, while interviews of writers have been published (Klein 17-380; Lindfors 1-408), there has been little concerted effort to collect and analyze such data from more than one Asian literary community at a particular point in time. No theoretical model of the development of poets, at least not one that is widely known, has yet been constructed from a broad database of the experiential stories of a number of poets from different locations with bilingual or multilingual backgrounds. The present study is designed to do so, if but as a first step.

3. (Auto)biographical Studies

One way to examine the phenomenon of writers producing literary writing in bilingual or multilingual contexts is to adopt the biographical

or autobiographical method, which has attracted much attention in recent years in the social sciences and related disciplines. The biographical turn in research methodology has occurred partly because it has been observed that much of the social constructionist type of research has departed too much from “lived realities” (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf 1). “By the 1990s, ... biographical approaches had become widely accepted, even sought out, by policy makers as ‘useful’” (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf 2).

Biographical or autobiographical research or the study of life stories could be linked more generally to the ethnographic tradition in social sciences research or the use of oral history (Roberts 1-17). The techniques normally used to arrive at life stories vary with whether the accounts are autobiographical or biographical. In second language learning, autobiographical accounts of developmental experience refer to accounts from learners themselves, either in the form of keeping a diary or journal (Oxford, Lavine and Felkins 19-34; Schumann 103-72; Bell 9-28) on their experience or in the form of oral or written recollections of their experience produced at a later date (Oxford et al. 19-34). Biographical accounts refer to accounts produced by writers other than the originators of the life stories themselves. Accounts elicited by interviews and then written up by researchers fall somewhere in between, depending on how much subjectivity researchers introduce into the selection or editing of interview excerpts for the reconstruction of the stories. (See Benson 4-21 for more discussion of this method in relation to learner diversity.)

4. Lam's 5-stage Model

Lam's article entitled “Writing from a Chinese centre: From a learner to a poet” is an attempt to construct a developmental model based on her recollection of her own development from a learner of English to a poet publishing in English (354-9). Her model has five stages (Malby 16):

Stage 1 – Emergence of English literacy

Stage 2 – Secretive writing or apprenticeship

Stage 3 – Publishing as initiation into a community of writers and readers

Stage 4 – Becoming aware of one's identity as a writer and one's voice

Stage 5 – Mentoring other writers

Stage 1: Emergence of English literacy

Stage 1 describes the individual's metalinguistic awareness of the English language through word play and exposure to English, written and spoken (Lam 354-5). Essentially, poets-to-be begin using English to articulate their thoughts to themselves as they gain competence in English. At this stage, the poets are probably indistinguishable from other users of the language and are probably identifiable only in hindsight (Malby 31).

Stage 2: Secretive writing or apprenticeship

Lam's second stage, "secretive writing" (355), can also be looked upon as a stage of apprenticeship, albeit one in which a master is lacking, except perhaps in books. In Stage 2, novice poets write mainly for themselves, either in journal form or by recording thoughts in a notebook or perhaps even structuring words to mimic specific genres or writers. In this experimental stage, young writers begin to gain some measure of control over written language. It is not uncommon for a poet at this stage to write with a specific reader in mind, such as a friend, but the sharing of these early attempts is either nonexistent or stays within an exclusive audience. However, it is this initial sharing that prepares the writer for the next stage of formal publishing (Malby 34-5).

Stage 3: Publishing as initiation into a community of writers and readers

After the secretive writing stage comes a transitional period in which the poets seek a more public audience. Lam calls this "initiation into a community of writers and readers through publishing" (355-6). Participation in a literary community probably proceeds as a series of several events: a "catalyst," which could be an individual or a circumstance that motivates the writer toward publishing, the nascent published work, the validation that accompanies its publication, and, subsequent to that, a stage in which the intended readership becomes more defined and the poet feels motivated to plan a first collection (Malby 38).

Stage 4: Becoming aware of one's identity as a writer and one's voice

As writers mature in their craft through continued publication, they are likely to become increasingly aware of their particular concerns and writing

styles, which are often referred to as a writer's "authorial voice" (Lam 356-9). In fact, it has been said that "a writer's first task is to encourage that natural voice to be heard" (Grenville 3). Such a voice is not static but might evolve over time (Malby 40) in tandem with the poet's life experiences.

Stage 5: Mentoring other writers

The final stage in Lam's model "is likely to be one in which a writer plays a mentoring role to younger writers" (361). Writers at this stage use their expertise to support others in their development as poets. This support of younger artists by more established craftsmen is a revered tradition in many fields. Mentoring is not only about providing feedback on the poetic output, but also involves advising on publication and, if the mentor is an editor, soliciting poems for publication, as well as performing other supportive acts such as writing prefaces for the younger poets' work, acting as a referee in applications for publishing grants, and so on. In this chapter, however, the focus is largely on whether the poet provides critical feedback to other poets (Malby 42).

Although Lam has identified these five stages, she recognizes that the stages may overlap in real time and hence may not be entirely chronological. She also mentions that poets "who are fortunate may move from Stage 1 directly to Stage 3 without the second stage of closet writing" (361). The implication here is that certain poets having high motivation or having received encouragement from a mentor, such as a parent, a teacher, or a friend, may be initiated into the publishing community earlier.

5. Background Profiles on Participants in the Study

In Malby's study, a first attempt to apply Lam's model to the development of other poets, the technique adopted to elicit biographical experience was the open-ended interview conducted face-to-face in English (16-43). Each interview took about one-and-a-half hours. Eight poets participated in his study: four with Chinese ethnicity and another four with English as their native language (19). This chapter reports on the developmental experience of the four Chinese poets. Table 1 presents their linguistic and residential profiles as well as their varying publishing experience. Of the four, three were born in Hong Kong; all four spoke Cantonese as a first language. All four received their secondary school education in an English-medium school in Hong

Table 1: Profiles of Four Chinese Poets Writing in English in Hong Kong

Name	Age Range	Language(s)	Place(s) of Residence	Collection(s) Published
Elbert Lee	46-59	Cantonese [†] , English, (German),* (Mandarin), (French)	Mainland China [‡] , Hong Kong (from age 2), Canada, New Zealand	—
Amy Lai	26-35	Cantonese [†] , English, (German), (French)	Hong Kong [‡] , United Kingdom	Present (2004)
Jennifer Wong	26-35	Cantonese [†] , English, (Mandarin)	Hong Kong [‡] , United Kingdom	Summer Cicadas (2006)
Louise Ho	>60	Cantonese [†] , English, French	Hong Kong [‡] , Mauritius, Australia	New Ends, Old Beginnings (1997) Local Habitation (1994)
Source: Malby 23 Key: [†] Home language at birth *(parentheses) represent a language which the poet has been exposed to or has studied but has not gained the fluency desired [‡] Place of birth				

Kong before studying overseas in an English-speaking country for at least one degree, undergraduate or post-graduate. Ages within this group ranged from late 20s to early 60s.

What follows is a biographical sketch of each poet, outlining some of the relevant biographical details (Malby 24-6).

Elbert Lee arrived in Hong Kong at the age of two from mainland China. Both his primary and secondary education took place in English-medium schools. Although Cantonese was his first language, Lee admitted: “My preferred language was English.” His mother bought him “a lot of books in English and Chinese” and encouraged him to read. Lee left Hong Kong to study at McGill University in Canada after which he returned to work at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) for several years. Then he left again for New Zealand where he completed a doctorate in psychology. By this point, his family had emigrated to Canada; Lee returned to Montreal where he worked for several years. At that time, he began to write poetry more seriously. His

subsequent return to Hong Kong came as “a bit of a culture shock.” He now lives on Peng Chau, where he designs teaching materials for primary schools in Hong Kong. Lee’s poems were recently anthologized (Ho et al. 2006) and he is working on his first collection.

Amy Lai was born in Hong Kong. Her father was a prominent academic at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK); her mother was a housewife, and she has one older sister. Lai attended English-medium schools for her public education, and recalls feeling comfortable with the use of English. “It seemed so natural. It was taken for granted that everybody was doing the same.” As a child, she read mostly Chinese books at home, but had some exposure to English books at school. “We were forced to read English [books]... in Form Four... [and] most of them were not very interesting.” These negative feelings changed in later years. “When I was a teenager, I loved *Little Women*,” she reported. When she went on to undergraduate studies at CUHK, she majored in English Literature. Later, Lai won a scholarship to Cambridge to do her doctorate; it was in Cambridge that she began writing poetry. She has spent much of her working life in academic institutions, either as a lecturer or researcher. Her first collection of poetry, *Present*, was published in 2004.

Jennifer Wong was born in Hong Kong. She spoke Cantonese at home and attended a Chinese-medium primary school but switched to an English-medium secondary school. “I was asked to have this ‘English Literature’ course,” she remembered. “I’d never really taken to reading English books before.” She referred to the transition as both “a culture shock” and “a remarkable experience,” after which she “started taking a strong interest in literature in general.” She began reading feminist writers like Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf, and started to write her own poetry in senior secondary school. Wong then spent a year at the University of Hong Kong where she majored in English literature and economics, after which she earned a scholarship to Oxford where she finished her undergraduate degree. The majority of the poems in her first collection, *Summer Cicadas* (2006), were written during her time in Oxford. She now works in public relations in the Hong Kong property sector.

Louise Ho has been called the “English language poet laureate” of Hong Kong (Xu and Ingham 7). She was born to a merchant family in Hong Kong, surrounded by a “cosmopolitan” environment which regularly included foreign visitors. She spent part of her childhood in Mauritius, where her Cantonese was soon supplanted by French. “English is my third language,” she observed,

“but by default, it has become my first.” Her schooling in Hong Kong was first conducted in a Chinese-medium environment and later in an English-medium environment. As a child, she “had very little exposure to books.” Nonetheless, she published her first poem at 13 in a city-wide student paper. University came as an awakening for Ho; she spoke of a tutor who encouraged her to write. Following postgraduate work in the United Kingdom, she returned to Hong Kong and taught English literature at CUHK until her retirement. Ho has published two collections of poetry, *Local Habitation* (1994) and *New Ends, Old Beginnings* (1997), and has also published poetry in international journals and contributed academic articles about literature in Hong Kong. Currently she spends her time between Hong Kong and Australia.

6. The Experience of Four Ethnic Chinese Poets

The formative development of the four poets will now be examined more specifically, with an emphasis on the stages which writers experience as they move from early writing through to publishing and beyond. Table 2 gives an overall picture of how the stages may or may not apply to these four poets.

As is evident from Table 2, the patterns of development are largely similar, regardless of age and publishing experience. Two points are worth noting. Not all the writers seem to have undergone the second stage of secretive writing

Table 2: The Developmental Stages of Four Ethnic Chinese Poets

Poet	Stage 1 Emergence of English literacy	Stage 2 Secretive/ Practice writing	Stage 3 Publishing	Stage 4 Awareness of Literary Voice	Stage 5 Mentoring
Elbert Lee	√	√	√	√	—
Amy Lai	√	(√)	√	(√)	—
Jennifer Wong	√	√	√	√	(√)
Louise Ho	√	(√)	√	√	√
Source: Malby 30 Key: √ admission or demonstration of such a stage *(parentheses) represent tentative admission or demonstration of such a stage. —no such stage evident					

explicitly. And, with the exception of Louise Ho, who is more experienced, most appear hesitant about providing mentoring support. The rest of this section will provide more details on each of the stages.

Stage 1: Emergence of English literacy

Stage 1 marks the emergence of thinking in English.

Each of the four writers grew up speaking Cantonese—with English entering their lives at varying stages, and therefore presumably with this meta-awareness of the English language also emerging at different times. In all four cases, the writers were steeped in an English-medium academic environment. All went overseas (either to England or Canada) for undergraduate or graduate studies. Two of them (Lai and Wong) earned scholarships to prestigious Oxbridge universities. Ho was teaching at an established university in Hong Kong. It is evident that in all cases these were exceptional “learners” of English. This is not to say that academic credentials are in any way a prerequisite for being a writer—certainly there are many native English-speaking writers with little or no formal education. However, it does seem reasonable that for writers for whom English is an additional language, a broad, deep immersion in that language, through education, would be helpful.

For Lee, his meta-awareness of English did not begin with the study of literature, but rather with his studies of ‘Religious Knowledge’ in English at a school run by the Irish La Salle brothers: “I think I started to be interested in knowledge and language... and I found it very interesting... the language... conveyed something mystical.” Not surprisingly, as his interest in literature developed, mysticism continued to be an attractive quality. One of the authors that he mentioned was William Butler Yeats because he said he could see “both Christianity and also the mythical figures in [his] poems.”

Similarly, Amy Lai did not begin her relationship with poetry through an affinity for English literature but entered instead through Chinese books. In fact, she mentioned specifically that she had considerable exposure to Chinese books at home. Although she reported enjoying *Little Women* as a teenager, she did not have particularly positive feelings about the study of English literature in secondary school: “We were forced to read English [books] before studying English in Form Four. ... People were not allowed to choose the type of books [and] most of them were not very interesting.”

It seems, quite reasonably, that a love of literature cannot be enforced by school policies. Likewise, Jennifer Wong was not particularly comfortable with English literature at first:

It was... after entering DGS [Diocesan Girls' School] I was asked to have this 'English Literature' course. I'd never really taken to reading English books before, so it [was] a very remarkable experience for me. And it was a bit of a cultural shock... The good thing about it was I came into contact with the whole world of English literature.

Her interest in English books, sparked by this secondary school experience, continued to grow when she went to university, so that ultimately, as with Lai, she became an English Literature major.

Louise Ho's early awareness of the language was more nebulous, partly because she felt that she did not have a lot of people to interact with in any language: "I grew up as an only child. I was not encouraged to socialize... Even as a kid... I wouldn't articulate anything until it was completely condensed." She also reported that she had always found language difficult, "largely because [she] didn't have a proper language." The cosmopolitan mix of Cantonese, French, English, and perhaps other languages in her childhood might have left Ho feeling linguistically rootless, so that her arrival at the use of English did indeed appear, as she suggested, "by default." It seems reasonable to expect that this meta-awareness of a language is likely to involve some interaction with either books or interlocutors in some way.

From these disparate accounts of childhood interactions with language and literature, it might be concluded that the circumstances underlying Stage 1 in no way predict or parallel the later development of a writer. In other words, a positive first experience with English is neither a prerequisite nor a guarantee for later writing success.

Stage 2: Secretive writing or apprenticeship

Stage 2 is the stage when the poet writes mainly in secrecy.

Of the four Chinese writers, two specifically recalled a stage in which they were basically writing for themselves and at most only showing their work to one or two other people, usually a teacher or a friend. Elbert Lee reported that his first poems were an alternative form of his letter-writing to a girlfriend. He was in New Zealand and his girlfriend was in Hong Kong then: "we were

writing to each other, and she was the one who... started writing poems, and then she sent me a poem, and she got me interested.”

Next he described later, more experimental efforts with poetry after returning to Canada: “Working in Montreal, I didn’t know a lot of people... I [had] a weekend so I started... reading poetry, playing with [words]... trying [to]... write something? I never thought of publishing them. I was just doing it for fun.” In this case, Lee does not report sharing his poetry with any particular person, but rather the effort appeared to grow out of the isolation he was experiencing.

The motivations behind this secretive writing stage can vary widely. Another poet, Jennifer Wong, started writing her own poetry in secondary school as a reflection of her studies:

Writing my own poetry... was pretty much a continuation of my English literature classes... I’d been reading Sylvia Plath and I felt that, if she can write and express... such everyday life and such domestic images, and get such a wide readership... there must certainly be some interest in poetry in general... When I first started poetry writing, ... my Eng lit. teacher, had a great influence... She encouraged me to compare different forms of expression across cultures... At Hong Kong U, my English literature tutor also encouraged me to write.

This stage of secretive writing, with its restricted readership, if any, is not a stage that all writers must necessarily go through. In fact, the other two Chinese poets in the study did not report having undergone such a stage.

Amy Lai, for example, began sending off her poetry for publication almost at the same time that she began writing poetry. She did not report showing her poetry to anyone or having any mentoring support at this stage. While she was ready to share her poems with strangers by submitting them for publication, she was not as ready to share her poetry with people who knew her then; “[Writing poetry] is a very private thing. I always suspect that people will laugh at me if my friends realize that I started writing [poetry] for the magazines.” Her view of poetry as a private activity nonetheless demonstrates at least partial support for the concept of a stage when poets are not yet ready to share their poetry with a wide audience or to have the outcome of their poetic efforts linked to their roles in their immediate social circles.

Louise Ho is an interesting case, because she published her first poem when she was 13. Whether she continued to write from that time until she went to university, when she published again, is not quite obvious from the data. She did confess however that while she was in first year at university, although not specializing in English initially, as she did later, she never lost sight of her desire to write: “At the back of my mind I wanted to write. I’ve always wanted to write but I didn’t say so...” She also reported that at HKU she had a tutor who was a great influence and that “he knew [her] work,” which implies that she did produce some writing, even in the intervening years.

In all four cases, the importance of a supportive peer or mentor acting as a catalyst is evident. Such peer support accelerates the poet from the stage of secretive writing to the publishing stage.

Stage 3: Publishing as initiation into a community of writers and readers

Stage 3 is concerned with the act of initiation into publishing.

Elbert Lee, for example, identified a particular person and event which initiated him into this community: “Someone told me about Outloud... I went to one of the sessions. I wasn’t thinking of publishing... and I met Louise Ho... a year later, she called me ... ‘I am interested in publishing some of your poems...’ That’s how it started.”

In contrast, Amy Lai was motivated not by a particular individual but by the existence of a community of writers beyond her immediate world: “I realized that there are a number of small magazines... just set up by one or two people, and I... wanted to give a try... because I realized there were some very outstanding scholars writing for them.”

For Jennifer Wong, her first publication was not explicitly linked to any specific motivating person or event, but it was the act of publishing itself which gave her confidence to continue. She remembered that occasion clearly: “It’s probably the first attempt to get published that always stays on your mind... Of course it served as a very good form of encouragement. When I submitted it ... I thought I didn’t have any chance to get published.”

For Louise Ho, first publication came early, and with encouragement from the HKU teaching faculty, some of her poems appeared in an international journal. So in this sense she was initiated into the community early. While commenting on the publication of her first collection, however, she did not

seem particularly elated about seeing her work in print: “I think I liked it at the time. Every time I have a book out, it’s one step ahead. In itself it’s no big deal.”

For all the four Chinese writers, the first instance of publication was well remembered and, in most cases, proved to be a catalyzing event. It appears that all the writers experienced some catalyzing individual or situation which impelled them into publishing. Sometimes, there was a deep, intrinsic drive to share their work with a wider audience; other times, it was more an accident of circumstance. But for the most part, once publication occurred, there was a positive validating effect.

Stage 4: Becoming aware of one’s identity as a writer and one’s voice

By Stage 4, a poet becomes aware of his/her identity as a poet and the nature of his/her poetic voice.

Elbert Lee recognized his voice as a kind of signature to his work:

I think I have found my voice... at a certain point you say ‘these are my poems.’ And there’s a kind of signature to it... Certain poems, I read them again and again and again, I don’t feel bored... but sometimes you might say, “Will I be restricted by my own voice? ... Is there another way that I could write?”

But he is still interested in discovering other ways of expressing himself.

Amy Lai also reported change in her voice, and felt that it was “getting more and more pessimistic... because those works are about life, and if they are not pessimistic in some way, they cannot move the editor.” Interestingly, she seemed to be ready to adjust her voice in the light of the prevailing trends.

This natural evolution in voice was also registered by Jennifer Wong who felt that the voice in her later poems was different from that in her earlier efforts, and that she was hoping to move towards achieving a voice that would connect with a wider community beyond her personal concerns:

In my earlier works, I tend to focus more on my own personal identity and also the people around me... but as I go on, ... there is a strong need to break away from that. The identity of the poet is something much more fluid. It shouldn’t be tied to any social context. I want to explore more different voices... I want to take

up a voice that will connect to more people. Not just to... any specific... community but something that will be larger.

Louise Ho spoke less about her change in voice and, of the four, was most confident that from the very beginning she had a voice. In fact she was adamant that “without a voice, [she] wouldn’t even write.”

All four poets appear to have become increasingly aware of their voice or voices as they publish.

Stage 5: Mentoring other writers

At Stage 5, a poet tries to help other writers, usually younger or less published, through various forms of mentoring, such as providing critical feedback.

As indicated in Table 2, Lee and Lai do not appear to be particularly active in mentoring work, probably because they participate less in public literary events. Jennifer Wong takes a positive attitude toward peer review, but seems to be just starting out in terms of providing critical comments to less published writers, and so perhaps has not quite reached an explicit stage of mentoring yet: “I do sometimes discuss or exchange work for comment with other writers... I have tried to give them comments... I think writers ... do benefit generally from having... different feedback.”

Of the four, Louise Ho seems to be most comfortable with providing such support to other poets: “I encourage, as much as I can, Hong Kong people to write in English about Hong Kong or anything for that matter. I encourage people who write well to write.” Ho’s encouraging attitude is not surprising, given her years of experience as a university faculty member and as a poet with one of the longest publishing careers in Hong Kong.

The significance of mentoring in a literary community cannot be understated. Any form of human endeavour, whether it be in the arts, sports, science, is by its nature part of a continuum and requires rejuvenation. Otherwise the art will die.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, Lam’s 5-stage model has been largely validated by the biographical experiences of the four poets as discussed. The development of

poets does seem to follow a series of similar stages from an initial awareness of the language in their earliest days, to helping to initiate others into the writing field. Some interesting observations however can be made about the stages. The first stage of the emergence of English thoughts as it relates to reading and the love of books may not always be as explicit for every poet. Some of them began with an early love of books and an inner world of thought in English along with a metalinguistic awareness of the language. Some of them had less interest or exposure to books but this did not seem to be a crucial factor in their later motivation to become writers. In terms of the second stage of secretive writing, again most of the writers showed evidence of passing through this stage, either in literary writing or other forms such as journals and letters, which by definition are private in nature. Often a sense of isolation was associated with this writing, either from being transplanted to a foreign environment or the linguistic isolation of being surrounded by a foreign language. Stage 3, the initiation of a writer into a literary community through publishing, seems to be a turning point for most writers and almost universally involves a supportive other such as a friend or a teacher who provides the impetus which launches them into publishing. The dilemma for any writer is that for the writer to be heard, the writer must have a recognizable voice of his or her own (Stage 4) and yet be able to speak to the community through this voice. Publishing heightens the awareness of that voice through feedback from the community. The concept of a community is also the basic premise of the mentoring activities at Stage 5, because mentors act as gatekeepers to this literary community and assist in the induction of new members, and thereby rejuvenate the community. Without the influx of new ideas and creative energy from younger writers, a literary community would lose its dynamism, stagnate, and perhaps ultimately dissipate.

Although Lam's model was initially proposed for writers writing in an additional language, there is indication that writers writing in their first language but in Asian settings may go through these stages similarly (Malby 53). There certainly seems to be a great possibility that the model could be usefully applied to the analysis of the development of other Asian writers in other bilingual or multilingual settings such as India, the Philippines, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Each location has yielded a corpus of poetry in English, with the size of the corpus corresponding in some way to how early writing in English first emerged (Cooke and Rustomji-Kerns; De Souza; Dharwalker and Ramanujan; Dunlop and Uppal; Abad, "Native Clearing";

Abad, “Likhaan Anthology”; Abad, “Habit of Shores”; Thumboo, Wong, Lee, bin Salikun and Arasu; Xu Xi and Ingham). In spite of the variation in corpus size, it still seems fruitful to pursue a transnational study of the development of poets to understand the processes through which poetry and poets are born in multilingual settings. Transnational analysis (for example, Lam, “Race”) can contribute to the understanding of intercultural identity towards the extension of human empathy.

The outcomes of a larger research project as envisaged above are both theoretical and practical. At the theoretical level, it can contribute to the refinement of a model for the development of poets in bilingual or multilingual contexts as well as to the understanding of Asian literary communities vis-à-vis the conceptions of Asian English speech communities. At the practical level, the findings can offer insights for the encouragement of the growth of Asian literary communities in English as well as the teaching of Asian poetry in English or the use of poetry to enhance the learning of English in Asian classrooms, all of which can only add to greater cultural understanding in the region and between the region and the rest of the world.

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