

WANDERING HONG KONG WITH SPIRITS

和幽靈一起的香港漫遊

*Selected Poetry of* Liu Waitong

廖偉棠 詩選

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## Preface

“I’m a 49-year-old pier shaking my head in the cold,  
shaking my head I touch the wound between my ribs, I watch  
government bastards rub their hands,  
shaking my head as the screaming gulls count my bones”

—*Ballad of the Central Star Ferry Pier, Liu Waitong*

Hong Kong has long existed in some unknown future tense. Its history—from at least the mid-1800s until today—is a complex narrative of emigration and trade, which has resulted in a society now scrambling to make sense of perpetual waves of dislocation. This is an isolated rootlessness that ends primarily not in a nostalgic form of roots seeking, but in a practical search for employment, personal meaning and private space among the shifting urban corridors.

The 2006 demolition of the Star Ferry clock tower, followed by the 2008 destruction of Queen’s Pier, launched Hong Kong’s modern heritage movement. The erasure of Queen’s Pier literally no longer stands as testament to the decades of ceremonial arrivals and departures from Victoria Harbor. Dismantled by the government in the name of land reclamation, the high-level ceremonies surrounding the pier (named for Queen Victoria) resonated with a strong colonial component, which was likely a much greater factor in its destruction than any practical need to redevelop the pier. Historical memory becomes considerably simpler to efface when a landscape is inexorably changed.

Some of the most compelling of Hong Kong’s contemporary writers actively engage with these foundational issues of urbanization and heritage loss, as well as with the inherent bizarreness of daily life that is created in the process. The poet and photographer Liu Waitong 廖偉棠 deals precisely with these and related issues of critical impact on today’s

Hong Kong and mainland China, while referencing and elegizing a host of cultural influences. One of the more celebrated of Hong Kong poets of his and earlier generations, Liu Waitong has received numerous literary awards in Hong Kong and Taiwan, including the Hong Kong Chinese Literature Award, the China Times Literature Award and the United Daily News Literature Award. The author of more than eight poetry collections, he is also an established photographer who has shown internationally.

Liu Waitong was born in Guangdong in 1975 and emigrated to Hong Kong in 1997. In the early 2000s, he then moved to Beijing for several years before returning to Hong Kong. Within these peripatetic movements he has simultaneously become “of Hong Kong,” while maintaining a vestige of “the other.” One ear is always pressed back to the Mainland, considering and commenting on Hong Kong’s rapid transformation:

5,000 years from now the water line  
will rise to Des Voeux and Johnston Roads,  
sea otters and rats will make hundreds of holes in the frame of  
the half-flooded new wing of the HKCEC, more than a thousand holes  
in the IFC. The rain will be constant.

An umbrella will be unearthed in the rubble of the Legislative Council

—*The Future History of Hong Kong Island*

Written well before Hong Kong’s 2014 Occupy Movement, the unearthed umbrella becomes hauntingly prescient. At least 25% of Hong Kong’s developed area exists on reclaimed land and, as Victoria Harbor continues to shrink, generations from now either will be able to stroll a short bridge from Hong Kong Island to Kowloon, or else the shifting climate will have taken back the land, so that the umbrella will join a flotilla of survivors heading back up the Pearl River Delta searching for fresh water and land to develop. What was lost on many Western commentators in 2014, is that the vague concept of “Democracy” was less important than the protestors’ real concerns with housing, loss of heritage and language, and some semblance of control over their city’s evolution.

In late 2014, China's State Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television ordered Chinese media outlets to crack down on the use of puns and "irregular" Chinese in programming—stating that the practice of tweaking idioms within the "pure" Chinese language would lead to cultural and linguistic chaos. Within this newish world order, Liu Waitong's writing and photography are fluid artifacts that gain a sense of precision through their liminal space, situated somewhere between Hong Kong and the Mainland. His vessels become dance partners in the shrinking Victoria harbor, and there is an ever present—but never all-consuming—sense of estrangement, fueled by the split between his dueling identities. Liu Waitong is often viewed within the tradition of those Mainland writers who variously fled, or wandered, across the border beginning in the 1920s and '30s, and his regular movement back and forth has assisted in him becoming an acute observer of society on both sides of the barbed wire.

These travels can also lead to moments of linguistic espionage and a sense of being trapped between societies, as in his poem on watching a July 1st Hong Kong protest from the confines of Beijing—"I've been detained by another city, each day letting myself grow possessed by its sweet words." The author is torn between the boundless opportunities available in Beijing's new artistic and cultural hubs, and the memory of his own participation at recent protests back in Hong Kong. "I open the windows, and my mouth immediately fills up with debris from the new world." It's then through his writing that he is able to transform debris into stanzas that lay bare his divided self.

Much of Liu Waitong's writing is dimly lit, blurred by train lines and the elements. Within these settings, the author grasps for concepts to ground what is both fleeting and hazily drawn through various eras:

We are like a young McDull, happily cramming  
 onto a wingless tram, driving into a mountain wrapped in weeds,  
 leaves and branches not yet stretched in our sleeves  
 as the peak fog swoops, flooding across.

We are like negative equity sinking a middle-aged McDull.  
Drunken Taiping peak, 9/11 in the fog belongs  
to you—wax figures dashing under the light of a fire brigade,  
hastily delivering us contorted wine bottles, telescopes for old age.

—*Fog Taiping Shan Peak*

McDull, the hapless and beloved children's character, navigates readers through the upper reaches of Hong Kong Island, where up until 1940, native Chinese were not allowed to live without express approval from the Governor-in-Council. The opening stanza is constituted by vines and swatches of green, in place of the ubiquitous housing developments that now dot Victoria Peak. Then in the following lines, the post-post-misty mountains are replaced by the aging animated pig pondering his dwindling savings and the aftermath of the Word Trade Center attacks. The "telescopes for old age" peer back onto Kowloon, which remain solidly affixed to the Mainland, while glacially shifting northwards as part of the reunification scheme.

Within this maelstrom of socio-political movements, it is vital to note that Liu Waitong should not be branded primarily as a political poet; rather, his writing and photographs touch on any number of key issues concerning Hong Kong's landscape that are inherently political. This gray area is a key to entering his work. Liu Waitong is a careful observer. If pressed to give a single moniker to his writing, I would refer to him as a poet of longing—of past eras, former loves, lost neighborhoods and poetic mentors. Though his most recent book of poetry and photographs—*Umbrella-topia*—will likely shift the reading public's gaze back to his more politically leaning tendencies.

More so than the shifting space of national boundaries, Waitong's poetry is unsettled by eras, never wholly comfortable in the present. His is a constant struggle to remember without allowing nostalgia to enter and completely blur the lines. In his poem to the celebrated Mainland/Hong Kong writer Dai Wangshu, "Looking for Woodbrook Villa on Pokfulam Road," Waitong becomes "silent as a dog whose scent has been washed

away by the rain.” Within the poem the search for Dai Wangshu’s old residence becomes a platform for Liu Waitong to place himself within a lineage of authors who have lived a similarly hybrid existence. Along the way, any trace of an originary point has been scuttled, either by the elements or through a host of interwoven factors. The photographs scattered throughout this volume give further form to his affinity for erasure by shadow, where he is able to divine the outlines of forms against a Hong Kong backdrop of glass and metal angles. Or, more correctly, his words are reflected back to the reader in these constructed angles.

\* \* \*

As with any volume of translation, there are myriad levels of complexity to consider. This project was further complicated by the sheer volume of Liu Waitong’s writing, along with the number of translators who had been collaborating with him over the past decade. In a few cases, two or more translators were working simultaneously from “anonymous” draft English-language translations, and a considerable amount of sleuthing was employed to trace each draft back to its original translator. Thankfully, a majority of the poems in this volume were translated specifically for the book.

Enoch Yee-lok Tam, Desmond Sham and Audrey Heijns are owed a tremendous debt of gratitude for their work in helping to create and to edit this representative selection. Just like Charlie in Liu Waitong’s ode to the night market on Temple Street, their work “uncover[s] the miracle of each place.” And by following Liu Waitong down these alleys—along with his editors and translators—English-language readers now have access to the Hong Kong markets and warehouse spaces where he has been collecting his sharp fragments of words.

Sincere thanks also are due to the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC), which is the primary funder for this and other books in the Hong Kong Atlas series. The HKADC-funded project will make available, in print and digital formats, bilingual collections of poetry, as well as

fiction and graphic adaptations of contemporary Hong Kong literature. Authors in the series include a mix of established and emerging voices, ranging from classic untranslated works such as Ng Hui-bin's *The Bisons* and Leung Ping-kwan's *Paper Cut-outs* to a new generation of writers—Hon Lai Chu, Dung Kai-cheung, Tse Dorothy Hiu-hung, and Natalia Chan. *Hong Kong Atlas*—which borrows its name from the Dung Kai-cheung novel—is an important first step in expanding the English-language canon with a range of Hong Kong voices. By drawing on literature, translation and creative culture as a way of remapping a global city, the Atlas project offers alternative histories to Hong Kong through its own literature. Hong Kong gets to speak for itself.

—*Christopher Mattison, June 2015, Hong Kong*



## 窗前樹

風過時它便翻動一身的銀和綠，  
去年如此，今年如此。  
十年前它也許更為逍遙，  
在蘇州街一些平房中間，  
那些平房裏住了一些學生  
和中關村最早的賣盜版的婦女，  
那些樸素的情侶和自得其樂的母子  
黃昏時會在樹下嬉戲。  
誰也沒多考慮未來的新世界  
將會怎樣撥弄他們的命運，  
這些人、這棵樹。

風過時它便翻動一身的銀和綠，  
去年如此，今年如此。  
前年蘇州街北口完全變成了一個工地，  
地產商帶來了建材、民工和簡易棚屋  
鏟平了舊房子和寧靜的生活。  
奇怪的是大樹還留著，  
還越來越高大、茂密，  
只是身上多了一兩根拉長的繩子  
掛著民工們的汗衣。  
前年冬天我剛搬到蘇州街，  
去年春天我才第一次留意這樹：  
民工們晚上愛在樹下喝酒、默坐，  
後來還有一些拾荒者在樹下擺攤，  
買給他們一些城市的破爛。  
到夏天，我漸漸能越過工地的噪音  
單獨聽到樹葉子的沙沙聲。

## Tree outside the Window

The wind blows, rustling through silver and green,  
last year, like this year.

A decade ago it was more free to wander  
among the houses on Suzhou Street where students lived  
and women hawked pirated discs from Zhongguancun,  
austere lovers, mothers and sons content  
to play around the tree at dusk.

No one considers how the future's new world  
will affect their fate,  
these people, this tree.

The wind blows, rustling through silver and green,  
last year, like this year.

Two years ago the north of Suzhou Street turned construction site,  
property developers hauling in materials, workers and sheds,  
shoveling away the old houses and tranquil life.

For some odd reason the enormous tree was spared,  
growing larger, bushier,  
a couple of ropes lashed to its trunk  
for hanging up workers' shirts.

Two years ago this winter I moved to Suzhou Street,  
not noticing the tree until last spring:

workers at night sat and drank silently beneath.

Later, scavengers would set up stalls  
for the city's scraps.

By summer, I learned to block out the construction noise,  
and listen all on my own to the rustling leaves.

今年那些新大廈紛紛落成，  
還記得舊時光的，只有  
這棵樹和我住的蘇州街二號樓。  
窗前的工地慢慢變成一個樓盤，  
有中產階級喜歡的珠光寶氣和升值可能。  
我也明白了地產商為何有留下此樹的仁慈——  
樹的旁邊將建成一個私有的園圃，  
為這“家園”更添一些售賣價值。  
蘇州街二號樓和我，也將被新世界拆除，  
新世界又將被更新的世界替代。  
這首詩裏最後只剩下這棵樹  
風過時它便翻動一身的銀和綠。

This year new buildings are being completed,  
I can still remember back when all that stood  
was the tree and where I lived at No. 2 Suzhou Street.  
The construction site outside my window gradually transforms into  
a housing complex,  
adorned in lavish jewels, which the middle-class adores.  
I realize now why the developers benevolently saved the tree—  
to build a private garden around,  
upping the home's value.  
No. 2 Suzhou Street and I will be discarded by a new world,  
to be replaced by a newer world.  
Only the tree in this poem will remain,  
rustling through silver and green.

## 查理穿過廟街

——或：我們是不是的士司機？

在阿高家重看了三十年前的反叛電影  
《的士司機》。就著血腥和憤怒  
喝啤酒。過時的純潔使我們的欲望變得懷舊，  
查理建議我和他到廟街，撇下被愛情光顧的阿高。

這個議題其實早就是我一首詩的預備題目，  
但我想寫的是《查理穿過鴨寮街》，我想寫  
他拿起滿街的舊相機、舊唱片時的快樂，還有  
那些賣舊貨的老頭們的快樂。我想寫，我們未老先衰。

廟街也是一個好題材，那裡新東西的殘舊  
不亞於鴨寮街舊東西的新奇。  
查理，和我一樣出生於七十年代，卻鍾情於更早的  
六十年代。他甚至跟五十年代也能融為一體：

走到哪裡，他就是哪裡的奇蹟。滿街  
廉價貨湧向我們，琳琅滿目的野史、冒險紀和情慾。  
《的士司機》的饑餓得由玩具汽車和玩具槍來餵飽，  
我們穿過那些鍍金的日子，彷彿兩個視察農村的領導。

只有不歇的掌聲提醒我們注意別的演員，  
我們是在錢幣的喧嘩中謝幕的失業漢。  
他一年沒畫一幅畫，只有我還稱他為畫家，  
我指點他觀看地攤上層層疊疊的梵·高的翻版。

## Charlie on Temple Street

—or: are we the Taxi Driver?

At Ar Kao's place we watch the thirty-year-old cult classic  
*Taxi Driver*. Our blood and anger mix  
with beer. Its dated innocence turns our desire to nostalgia.  
Charlie suggests heading down to Temple Street, leaving love-struck  
Ar Kao behind.

I was considering "Charlie Walks Down Apliu Street" for a poem,  
I wanted to write about the joy of picking up old cameras, vinyl,  
aging shopkeepers selling secondhand goods,  
I wanted to write about growing old in our youth.

But Temple Street's a good subject too, the antiquated look of new things  
compared to the newness of old things on Apliu Street.  
Charlie and I were both born in the '70s, in love with the late  
'60s, occasionally communing with the '50s:

He uncovers the miracle of each place. Low-priced goods  
spill out on the street—a dazzling unofficial history, adventure story, desire.  
The Taxi Driver's hunger is fed by toy cars and guns.  
We pass through gilded days like a couple of village inspectors.

Only the nonstop applause reminds us there are other actors.  
we are shiftless, responding to curtain calls, the clamor of coins.  
He hasn't painted in a year but I still call him a painter,  
I point out the numerous van Gogh copies scattered over the ground.

“勇氣畢竟可嘉！”我如此贊歎，  
“你還要注意到它們都用了大刀闊斧的油彩。”  
其實我還是想為自己尋找安慰。一個個尼泊爾女人  
貢獻著對麻織品的崇拜；一個個算命先生詛咒我們去死！

他們溫厚的臉，他們英勇的眉毛又騙倒了  
多少沉醉於厄運的青年。啤酒的麻醉還沒消除，  
厄運又來纏繞我們的腳：你的腳，牛仔褲綻開了線頭；  
你的鞋多麼骯髒——我的血也不遑多讓。

查理的目光只為舊社會所吸引，  
但賣家們敲打瓷器或者表蓋就能聽出  
我們空蕩的回聲。我翻動一件件夏威夷襯衫和異國情侶  
——我迫不及待奔向切·格瓦拉的紅色鬍鬚！

還是《的士司機》的問題，我們疼痛的手掌  
無法把手槍抓得更緊！“你忍心向這些擁有厄運者開槍嗎？  
你忍心不和他們一起分享厄運嗎？”我的後褲兜裡  
還放著幾塊嶄新的硬幣。

不，查理，他的台詞應該是這樣：“我要贖回  
這個世界血淋淋的象徵嗎？我要贖回  
這些面具、禮服、假皮鞋和翻唱CD嗎？”我  
把一大袋書從左手換到右手，我把思路的死胡同換來換去。

我們沿著廟街一直往前，走到盡頭折回來  
我才知道我們不是在兜圈子。也不是兜售  
自己破舊的記憶。算命先生們，祖國觀光客們  
遍地的文物應該回歸，遍地的安迪·沃霍爾應該升天！

“It’s a form of courage,” I praise,  
“See, how wildly and ferociously they paint.”  
I’d still like to find a way to comfort myself. A Nepalese woman  
worshipping linens; a fortune-teller announcing our impending dooms!

Their gentle faces display a kindness, their brave eyebrows deceive  
youth captivated by misfortune. Still numb from the beer,  
misfortune slaps us: frayed jeans on your legs;  
your worn and dirty shoes—my blood’s the same.

Charlie’s eyes are trapped in the old world,  
by tapping the porcelain and watch covers, vendors can distinguish  
our hollow echo. I come upon a Hawaiian shirt with foreign lovers  
—rush hastily to Che Guevara’s red beards!

Again, we return to the question of the Taxi Driver, our aching palms  
can’t grasp the gun tighter! “Are you cruel enough to gun down the owner  
of all these misfortunes?  
Are you heartless enough not to share their misfortunes?” A few brand-new  
coins in my back pocket.

No, Charlie, the lines should be: “Should I redeem  
the bloody signs of this world?” Should I buy back  
those masks, cocktail dresses, fake leather shoes and pirated CDs? I  
switch the bag of books to my right hand, my train of thought ending  
in one alley after the next.

We walk down Temple Street, to the end and turn back  
to make sure we’re not going in circles, not selling off  
our worn memories. Listen, fortune-tellers, visitors from the motherland,  
all these strewn antiques should be returned, Andy Warhols should ascend  
to the heavens!

唉，我重看三十年前的朋克司機才知道有一個  
妓女一家大團圓的結局。我三十年的憤怒形同虛設，  
對著滿世界心滿意足的殺手們我的血無處發洩。  
但查理表示對導演的理解：他可不是查理·卓別林。

難道我們只能思考廟街的佈景、光線？  
怎麼剪接我斷落的肋骨？你  
等待付款的青春片場？查理明天能挖到他的金礦嗎？  
我明天能發行我盜版香港的悲劇嗎？能不能

回到廟街的入口來。兩台戲此起彼伏叫囂，  
老花旦、老樂手們拉扯著六十七年前的琴弦、鼓鈸，  
把我們的記憶撕碎。最後只剩下魚蛋檔的老闆在憤怒，  
他憤怒地微笑，嘿！我們就找他來當替身。

查理，保留你的鬍子吧，它們揭示了你的真實年歲。  
最後，讓我們回到廟街的入口來，  
在血泊中把手槍藏好。在血泊中有華麗的浪潮，  
讓我們走。最後，讓我們回到廟街的入口來。

Watching the punk driver thirty years later I discover  
it all ends happily for the hooker. My thirty years of anger were in vain,  
facing a world of perfectly content killers, my blood has nowhere to go,  
but Charlie empathizes with the director: hey, at least he isn't Chaplin.

Is it impossible for us to think past the lights and setting of Temple Street?  
Edit out my broken ribs? You  
standing in line for a kid's film? Will Charlie unearth some gold tomorrow?  
Will I release my pirated Hong Kong tragedy? Will I

head back to the start of Temple Street. Two competing stages—  
old huadans, musicians plucking tunes from the '60s, strings and cymbals,  
shredding our memories, dashing from the rage of a fish-ball stand owner,  
smiling in anger! Hey, let's pull him in as an extra.

Charlie, keep your beard, it shows your true age.  
Let's go back to the start of Temple Street,  
conceal the gun in blood. A splendid wave of blood,  
come on. Let's go back to the start of Temple Street.