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# Mai Hing's “Poetic Hong Kong”

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浪漫香江 作者：米卿

浪漫香江常罩霧 街旁計測染污隆

途人面掩揉睛痛 碳氣車排咳嗽窮

破地錘椿揚土石 興樓築市佈屏風

微塵粒子冬南下 茗具窗台白雪簷

**Poetic Hong Kong**

Poetic Hong Kong hazes over all the time,

Pollution chases roadside sensors on the climb.

With hidden cheeks, some passersby rub eyes in pain,

In smoke of wheels and pipes, they even cough again.

Here breaking ground and piling heighten mud and stones;

There building towns of towers widens windless zones.

In winter, heading south, fine dust and dirt will blow,

To turn all windowsills and teapots white as snow.

The original Chinese poem depicts Hong Kong's pollution issue in an aesthetic manner. Through the use of a classical form, the writer Mai Hing describes every detail of this modern issue in one of the most crowded cities in the world. From car emissions, to construction, to home decoration, the work strives to provide a full picture of the hustle and bustle of city life – a mixture of excitement, romance and irony. Words that describe natural and physical phenomena such as *wu* (霧) (“fog”), *tanqi* (碳氣) (“greenhouse gas”), *weichen lizi* (微塵粒子) (“dust particles”) are used to create space for the imagination. In particular, through the use of *baixue feng* (白雪篷) (“white snow covers”) to describe a place where it never snows, the writer expresses a fantasy about the “dust” in her private space. She hopes that her use of the traditional format will be well received by modern readers, as “new wine in an old bottle” (personal communication).

I aimed to reproduce the work by attending to the three areas of “semantic beauty”, “phonological beauty” and “formal beauty” proposed by the Chinese translator of poetry, Xu Yuanhong, in the 1980s. Of these three criteria, semantic beauty is the most important and I am assisted in achieving this through personal consultation with the writer, whom I know, and the fact that I also grew up in Hong Kong. One manifestation of a faithful translation is that almost all the things in the original text are reproduced. It is hoped that through mediation and adjustment of imagery, the translation can evoke the same dynamics, dilemmas and ironies of urban life expressed in the original work. To achieve formal and phonological beauty, the translation is in iambic hexameter (six metrical feet) and employs the rhyme scheme aabbccdd, in order to emulate the original seven-character, eight-line poem with its strict tonal pattern of level and oblique tones and rhyme scheme (every even line ending with a rhyme word from the class *dong*). Furthermore, rhyming and alliteration are also found within the lines such as “hazes” and “chases”, “towns of towers”, “dust and dirt” and one parallel structure is created to imitate the original. I met great challenges in rendering the Chinese seven-character form, due primarily to the brevity and telegraphic nature of the Chinese language, which allows the depiction of so many images and ambiguities. The picture provided by the original text is a rich and wide-ranging one, reflecting the high price any modern city has to pay for economic development.

I discuss below the various techniques I used in my translation.<sup>1</sup>

In the title and first line of the Chinese original, Hong Kong is literally described as *langman* (浪漫) (“romantic”), but “poetic” is used in the translation to refer to its common characterization as the “Oriental Pearl”. The city has the picturesque Victoria Harbour which, together with an array of buildings around the coastline, is covered with mist for most seasons of the year. The choice of “poetic” also compensates for the use of the commonly-known name of “Hong Kong”, *Xianggang* (香港, “fragrant port”), instead of a literal translation of the word used in the source text, namely *Xiangjiang* (香江, “Fragrant

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Dr Omid Azadibougar and Dr Simon Patton for valuable advice on the English translation.

River”), a poetic name which refers to Hong Kong’s origins as a fishing village.

To achieve an ironic contrast with the first line that lays out the “poetic” beauty of Hong Kong, the word “pollution” is placed at the beginning of the second line, launching the description of this problem in this line and in those that follow. The choice of “chase” has two implications. On the one hand, it expresses the active and aggressive nature of pollution, which not only causes the sensors to climb, but also roams the city like a predatory animal. On the other, it implies that in the busy city, people are earnestly “chasing” money and comfort, which ultimately creates environmental problems for them.

In lines three and four, some meanings are added or modified to produce a lively street scene. They are “cheeks” (vs. *mian* 面, “face”), “some” passersby (vs. *turen* 途人, “passersby”, without any quantifier), “smoke” (vs. *tanqi* 碳氣, “greenhouse gas”), “wheels and pipes” (vs. *chepai* 車排, “car emission”). Without rendering the parallel form of the original text, these two lines evoke its spirit by reconstructing a more comprehensible and vivid image with exactly the same objects.

Special efforts are made in lines five and six to reproduce the parallel structure of the original text. Both lines contain gerund structures and carry verbs with the suffix *-en*: “heighten” and “widen” respectively. The use of these two words naturally increases the space and horizon of this picture, which, along with the addition of “here” and “there” at the beginning of the respective lines, indicates that this is not a single scene but a general urban problem. Alliteration is produced in phrases such as “towns of towers” and “widens windless (zones)”.

More is done to add poetic atmosphere in the final two lines of the translation. As the writer’s place is the only private space she can enjoy in the midst of pollution, every effort is made to make it better for her. “Windowsills” is a replacement of “bay window”, which is a semi-technical term used in the building industry. “White as snow” is a lyrical phrase used in Oscar Wilde’s work *Requiescat* and “dust and dirt” is musical with alliteration – line seven refers to dust particles coming on the southerly wind from Mainland China, situated to the north of Hong Kong.

On the whole, I sought to create room for readers to imagine. They may wonder how pollution “chases” roadside sensors, what a “roadside sensor” in Hong Kong looks like, why a “windless zone” is there, and how many “towers” there are in a “town”. They may also hear the noise of “breaking ground and piling” and see the “white snow” on teapots.

## Bibliography

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