

*Postmodernism in Bamboo Scaffolding:
Timothy Mo's "An Insular Possession"
and Xi Xi's
"My City: A Hong Kong Story"*

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WHAT STRIKES MOST visitors to Hong Kong, and continually jars many of those like myself who have lived here for many years, is the sheer contradictory nature of the city: its densely crowded urban downtown lying in the heart of sprawling mountainous parkland and bordering the South China Sea; the juxtaposition of English and Chinese on every public sign; a densely urban skyline casting long shadows over traditional outdoor food markets with cages of live chickens waiting for selection and immediate slaughter; a state-of-the-art mobile phone cupped between the shoulder and ear of a shop proprietor using his hands to manipulate an abacus; a tiny flat with doors opening onto an alleyway for ventilation filled with the ancient clatter of mahjong and the contemporary drone of CNN; the floating sensibility of transience combined with the visceral human congestion of one of the most populous cities on earth; postmodern skyscrapers wrapped in bamboo scaffolding. Two Hong Kong writers, Timothy Mo and Xi Xi, have placed Hong Kong at the centre of novels that explore this profound dissonance.

Though Mo's *An Insular Possession* and Xi Xi's *My City: A Hong Kong Story* provide very different reading experiences, both engage the contested terrain of Hong Kong by employing a variety of starkly postmodern elements that are held in tension with more traditional ideas and forms. Both Mo and Xi Xi have written novels that are and are not postmodern, and I will argue that this is a deliberate strategy to represent the complex reality of Hong Kong. Rey Chow has commented on this polyvalent aspect of Hong Kong

creativity in the 1990s. She writes, "In recent years, cultural workers in Hong Kong (writers, columnists, singers, dramatists, designers, etc.) have become more and more interested in representing the history that is unique to their experience. What is unique to Hong Kong . . . is precisely an in-betweenness and an awareness of impure origins, of origins as impure" (157). However, in Xi Xi's novel, written in the 1970s and Timothy Mo's, written in the 1980s, we see this endeavour to capture the "in-betweenness" of Hong Kong already in full swing. In Hong Kong's history, these are decades with very different sensibilities. Xi Xi is writing before it became clear that Hong Kong would revert to Chinese rule in 1997, while Mo is writing after England and China had signed the Joint Declaration which lays out a plan for the transition of power. The insularity of Xi Xi's novel stands in stark contrast to the international cast of Mo's work, suggesting the wrenching shifts in attention required of Hong Kong people during this turbulent period. Still, both novels highlight Chow's notion of "an in-betweenness and an awareness of impure origins." Akbar Abbas, in his pointed discussion of Hong Kong culture in *Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, points to the historical roots of this sense of being neither here nor there, and of being from neither here nor there:

Hong Kong has up to quite recently been a city of transients. Much of the population was made up of refugees or expatriates who thought of Hong Kong as a temporary stop, no matter how long they stayed. The sense of the temporary is very strong, even if it can be entirely counterfactual. This city is not so much a place as a space of transit. It has always been, and will perhaps always be, a port in the most literal sense — a doorway, a point in between. (4)

Both Mo and Xi Xi explore Hong Kong as "a point in between" and do so by a relentless juxtaposition of the postmodern and the traditional.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of cultural incongruity in Hong Kong is the meshing and clashing of East and West. This is a result of the British colonial legacy that began in 1843 and only formally ended in 1997. Though Hong Kong was not, in fact, the barren rock described by the British at the time of colonization, it was sparsely populated and the British were able to establish an

Asian outpost very much according to their own designs. Throughout their colonial reign, the British maintained a fairly tight grip on all governmental operations, allowing the native Chinese population little democratic voice (see Siu-Kai); however, from the beginning, a *laissez-faire* economy was allowed to flourish — an aspect of Hong Kong life that would be very appealing to the masses fleeing China and its oppressive strictures, especially in the twentieth century. This combination, stable colonial government and vibrant Chinese-driven economy, has provided the grounding for an unusual and dynamic blending of Eastern and Western traditions.

But Hong Kong exists not only in a middling position between East and West; its very “Eastness” is often described as occupying a fragile, in-between space. For if Hong Kong was ruled by the British, the presence of Mainland China, its current sovereign, has been a sometimes consoling, sometimes threatening constant. Though over 98 per cent of the population of Hong Kong are ethnically Chinese, the expression of this Chinese identity is very distinct from that of Mainland China. Hong Kong Chinese speak Cantonese, not the official Chinese dialect of Putonghua. The written Chinese of Hong Kong is a more traditional form than the simplified written language of the Mainland. And especially for those who have grown up in Hong Kong, their cultural values and expectations are very different. Ye Se comments that “compared to foreigners, Hong Kong people are by all means Chinese; but in comparison to Mainland Chinese, they seem to be Westernized” (qtd. in Lo 59).

Significantly, however, many Mainland Chinese tourists go to visit the ancient villages in the New Territories of Hong Kong for a glimpse of traditional Chinese architecture and culture. Many of the vestiges of ancient village life were obliterated by the upheavals of the Communist Revolution and the subsequent Cultural Revolution in Mainland China, but were maintained in colonial Hong Kong. The New Territories, a tract of land leased by the British in 1897 and bordering Mainland China, was governed primarily by customary law, rather than British law. Of course, some of these villages have been completely modernized, especially after Hong Kong’s rapid expansion in the 1960s. Some, however, retain their ancient flavour and have become popular tourist destinations.

The longevity of these New Territories villages exists in stark contrast with the urban centre of Hong Kong Island, aptly named Central, where the average life span of a building is only about twelve years (Mackenzie 210). In addition to the constant flux of building demolition and construction, the very geography of this area continually changes with massive land reclamation extending the natural boundaries further and further into Hong Kong's already crowded harbor. Here skyscrapers dominate and are so closely packed into the still narrow streets that they seem to vie with one another for the little airspace that exists. The styles of the buildings vary considerably. I.M. Pei's majestic and elegant Bank of China building stands awkwardly near the Lippo Centre with its playful suggestion of koala bears climbing up the side which is in the sightline of a recent building, The Centre, which boasts a postmodern mirror image of itself in the design of its windows.

These sketches of Hong Kong provide only a glimpse of the rich complexity that Hong Kong embodies and that Timothy Mo and Xi Xi enact in *An Insular Possession* and *My City: A Hong Kong Story*, respectively. Mo's novel is a story of the founding of Hong Kong as a British colony in the early 1840s — though it turns out to be a story of the founding without any foundation. With a generic intermingling of traditional narration, fabricated newspaper articles from rival newspapers, and letters between characters, Mo describes the events preceding the Opium War, the various important battles, and the precarious negotiations between the British and the Chinese which culminated in the cession of the island to the British. Xi Xi's novel was originally written in Chinese and has been translated into English. Highly experimental, it originally was serialized in the newspaper *Kwai Bao* (*The Express Daily*) and later published as a novel. In a very fragmentary fashion and with a narrative voice that is filled with humour and child-like innocence, it describes the lives and environments of several young people, though it focuses on the sometime narrator, Fruits, who has just graduated from high school and begins to work for the telephone company as a repairman.

Though both novels position Hong Kong itself as the focus of the narrative, they offer very different perspectives and wholly distinct reading encounters. Discussing them together is

somewhat awkward, a little bit like combining the sensibilities of the meditative Henry James and the fairy-tale fluency of Lewis Carroll; however, these unequivocal differences make their employment of a similar strategy in representing Hong Kong all the more interesting.

Both novels reveal a desire to explore the in-betweenness that Hong Kong embodies by paradoxically mixing distinctly postmodern elements with countervailing ideas and forms, thus enacting the kind of dislocations that Hong Kong experiences daily. Of course, postmodernism itself is a loose, baggy monster — hard to pin down and used variously depending on the discipline and the nature of the analysis. For the purposes of this article, I will rely on Fredric Jameson's reading of postmodernism, using his insightful and culturally-focused discussions of postmodern representation, fragmentation, and commercialization to underpin my own readings of *An Insular Possession* and *My City: a Hong Kong Story*.

In contrast to Xi Xi's naïve voice in *My City*, the narrative voice in *An Insular Possession* is imbued with a hard-wrought cynical wisdom. The very first lines of the novel set this tone as well as suggest that Hong Kong's roots in Canton are already suffused with irreconcilable contradictions. He writes:

The river succours and impedes native and foreigner alike; it limits and it enables, it isolates and it joins. It is the highway of commerce and it is a danger and a nuisance. . . . Where the river rises thousands of miles inland it seems already pregnant — with silt, with life, and with the opposite of life. (1)

It is this river that carries and facilitates the opium trade, a nefarious business that is nonetheless of vital importance to the British traders in Canton. The Americans eventually did seek their own profits in trafficking this drug, but it was relatively late in the game. The two central characters in Mo's novel, Gideon Chase and Walter Eastman, quit in protest after their employer, an American trading company, decides to enter into the depraved trade. This decision places them on the margins of the commercial interests of Canton and the expatriate community in general. In response to their estrangement and their deep moral protest, they begin a newspaper, the *Lin Tin Bulletin and River Bee*, to rival the British-influenced *Canton Monitor*.

The British paper echoes the sentiments of the British community, maintaining that the British are merely conducting a profitable business in a gentlemanly fashion; if the product happens to be harmful to the natives, then the natives should not buy it. The moral implications of creating a consumer market by selling a highly addictive drug are not of pressing concern in the *Canton Monitor*. This commercial interaction with the Chinese is considered crucial in maintaining an equitable trade balance with China. Increasingly dependent on China's tea and silk, England needs a large Chinese market to stop the huge outflow of capital from London to China. Until opium, England had been wholly unsuccessful in selling anything to China, at the time a largely self-sufficient nation. Mo writes:

For a hundred years and more, then, the balance of trade between East and West remains firmly in favour of the Orient. The East India Company simply cannot square its books in its trade to China. . . . It teeters on the verge of bankruptcy; has to be bailed out by the Home Government.

And then . . . opium.

The Chinese *will* take opium. (24)

Much of the novel consists of the differing interpretations of events between the *Lin Tin Bulletin and River Bee* and *The Canton Monitor* surrounding the opium trade and the mounting hostilities between the British and Chinese. Mo uses this technique to address one of his major concerns, the subjective nature of history. There is no master narrative that will recount the causes and consequences of the Opium War, only differing accounts that need to be evaluated. The driving force behind the opposing narratives is ideology, the viewer's "prejudices, expressed or unconscious" (Mo 589). The reader is left with a distinctly postmodern outlook on history, a perspective in which there is no possibility of moving beyond the obviously flawed constructions. Fredric Jameson's description of the postmodern historical novel is compatible with Mo's project in *An Insular Possession*. Jameson writes:

This historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past. . . . If there is any realism left here, it is a "realism" that is meant to derive from the shock of . . . slowly becoming aware of a new and

original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that History, which remains forever out of reach. (25)

What remains “forever out of reach,” then, is a narrative that can trace the founding of the colony and give it an originary moment. Instead, the reader (and presumably the Hong Kong community) is left with flux, with competing narratives that will never settle and resolve.

Mo’s very postmodern outlook on history and his metafictional experimentation are challenged, however, by the strong Victorian feel of the novel. The scope of the text, the use of nineteenth-century language and phrasing, the smug, omniscient tone of the narrator’s voice are all reminiscent of a novel of the earlier century (see Wilson and Yardley). Ian Buruma comments, “[T]he entire book — its length, its epic scenes, its social comedy, its moral sermonizing, its almost baroque intricacy — can be read as a comment on the Victorian novel, as a kind of postmodern Thackeray” (40). Mo is attempting to align metonymically two very different periods of time with different cultural assumptions. The odd mixture of Victorian narrative conventions with postmodern meditations on representation point towards the kind of disparate sensibilities that vitalize and plague Hong Kong culture.

In addition to writing a postmodern Victorian novel, Mo is also trying to write a British Chinese novel. While traditional and contemporary Western conventions and ideas clearly inform this narrative, an article in *The Lin Tin Bulletin and River Bee* comparing the Western and Chinese romance novels hints at *An Insular Possession*’s affiliation with the Eastern tradition. In this extended quote, the anonymous author of the article, presumably Gideon Chase, discusses four areas of distinction between the two literary heritages:

Examining the first proposition . . . the Western novel . . . is *linear*, of 180 degrees as the navigator might say, or a reciprocal course. . . . The native novel, by way of contrast, moves in a path which is altogether *circular*.

As to the second proposition, regarding the different treatment of Time, the novel . . . may be said to have a clock ticking in its vitals from the moment its first sentence winds it into motion. . . . Not so the Chinese tale. . . . Chinese is uninflected; that is to say it lacks

tenses. . . . Just as they do not trouble to conform to the laws of perspective in their paintings, so they have no sense of recession or distance from the past, or superiority to it.

[O]ur third proposition . . . resides in the circumstance that fully one half of man, or rather human-kind, are disenfranchised from the readership of the Celestial novel, whereas they are, I dare to say, the staple of the audience of the foreign novelist. I mean . . . females.

[T]he final paradox, our Western novel, with its more perfect and complete audience, addresses itself rather to the individual as hero or heroine. . . .

Quite to the contrary, works in the native tradition, that is of China, are all for relating the adventures of the *group*. (318-19)

What the reader realizes at this middle point in the novel is that what has felt like the peculiar blending of a postmodern Victorian novel also conforms to the conventions of a traditional Chinese novel, at least as articulated by the Western informant Gideon Chase. The narrative of *An Insular Possession* ambles along, sometimes frustratingly, without much consideration for the continuation of a cause-and-effect sequence. It is written in the present tense throughout. While the ideal reader imagined by the author may not be strictly male, the text itself is extremely male-centered. There is only one prominent female character, and her impact is negligible before she all but disappears by the middle of the novel. Finally, there is far more emphasis on the society as a whole, in contrast to a concern with individual characters. There is almost no attention paid to the internal conflicts and vicissitudes experienced by individual characters in the midst of all the upheaval caused by the Opium War. In writing a British/Chinese novel, Mo again engages and cleverly juxtaposes dissonant perspectives in order to enact a cultural representation of Hong Kong.

One other notable contrast lays bare Mo's interest in representational oppositions. The novel explores an extended comparison between painting and photography and emerges itself as a kind of photographic painting. Walter Eastman introduces the new invention of the daguerreotype to his companions and enters into a rivalry in the representation of images with his friend Harry O'Rourke, an expatriate of Irish descent and a painter of portraits and landscapes. Their discussions elucidate how the advent of

photography incites a rupture with the traditional notion that it is possible to capture the whole of something. The defined borders of a painting present an image in its entirety and offer a sense of permanence. In contrast, the photograph suggests that it is just a fragment among other fragments, that its borders are arbitrary, and that the image reflects only a passing moment in time. O'Rourke is predictably repulsed by this new invention so trumpeted by his friend. In a letter to Walter Eastman's newspaper, he laments:

Even as you complete your heliogravure, *now* becomes *then*. When the process is "improved" to the point of the operation occupying only the space of a few seconds — then the vice of time is merely tightened. A scene of Rembrandt, of Titian, vanquishes Time. In each of their paintings is nothing but a grandeur or sublimity, however trivial or minor the subject. It is a timeless meditation. But in the Daguerreotype of today, as viewed in a hundred years' time, there shall be pathos only. A painting is immortal, the Daguerrotype is a reminder of death.

(545)

This juxtaposition of the transience of photography and the permanence of painting is yet another way that Mo explores the disjunction between different modes of representation and simultaneously points to the city at the centre of his novel. On the one hand, the framed borders of an over 600 page traditional Victorian novel gives the work an air of solidity, of immortality as O'Rourke puts it. On the other, the narration itself constantly reminds the reader of its fragmented nature, of its own fragility, of its arbitrary frame. Like Hong Kong, with its ancient temples and old street markets in the shadows of yet another construction/demolition site, the novel is both rooted in deep cultural traditions and a vibrant example of surging contemporaneity.

The meta-fictional narrative pyrotechnics of *An Insular Possession* give it a contemplative overall sensibility. Also very experimental and interested in rendering the complexities of Hong Kong through the blendings and clashings of bold incongruities, Xi Xi's novel, *My City: A Hong Kong Story*, has an entirely different approach and feel. She is more interested in the ways a culture reacts to different representations, rather than Mo's focus on the act of representation itself. In addition, her experiments are more narratively playful as one of her major modes of negotiating the difficult

terrain of Hong Kong is humour. Whereas Mo approaches these issues from the vantage point of philosophy and history, Xi Xi comes at them with imagination and pointed insight. Elaine Ho writes that “Shih Shih’s [an alternate spelling] wit and good humour, in this and her other stories, point towards a form of negotiation that challenges the alienation and breakdown of society” (“Woman In Exile” 38).

The humour derives, in part, from Xi Xi’s use of an innocent, child-like voice in the narration. The reader recognizes there are more sinister forces at work than the narrator realizes, but, at the same time, is afforded a fresh, unjaundiced perspective. The unsophisticated narrative voice serves to open a space for reevaluation without cynicism, while the authorial voice behind that narrative voice is clearly making deeply ironic comments about contemporary life in “My City.” This subtle juxtaposition is one of many that Xi Xi uses to explore the dissonances that leave her city so unanchored.

Early in the novel, Fruits, a central character and one who sometimes speaks as first-person narrator, says, “On the travel bag there is a picture of an aeroplane flying around the globe. Just imagine, an aeroplane that will never find an airport to land in, and a world so congested that there’s no room for a runway” (8). This reaction to a visual image is typical of his responses throughout the novel, which tend to take representations very literally. For many of the other characters as well, the image is the reality. There is no distinction between the signifier and signified. This breakdown of surface and depth often incites an anxiety like the one caused by the image of the plane. Simultaneous rootlessness and congestion, seemingly contradictory states, suffuse the reactions of characters in the novel (see Chan). We see a similar confusion at the end of the novel. In this case, the paradoxical congestion/rootlessness incites a collapse in gravity which breaks down the surface and depth of the atmosphere. Fruits fantasizes:

When the earth is filled with people it will be packed full; every single centimetre will have people standing on it, and those who come late will have to stand on the heads of those already there, like building a stone wall, layer upon layer, until at last the earth will cry out: I can’t hold you anymore! whereupon the force of gravity will give up on

them, and the outermost layer of people all fall off into space, like fireworks, very nice to look at. . . . The people looking like nice fireworks will fly off to other planets; they can become Martians, Uranians, Jupiterians, and Sunians. (177)

This surfacing, identified by Jameson as a marker of the postmodern condition (9), is undercut, however, by a strong, unique authorial voice that provides the narrative with a resistant depth. Xi Xi's powerful imagination and her insistent positing of fanciful escapes outside of a depthless hall of mirrors challenge the postmodern sensibility that might otherwise overwhelm her work. Rather than the fragmented, affectless voice typical of much postmodern fiction (Jameson 132-33), Xi Xi implicitly suggests that a vibrant individual voice is still possible.

The spatial congestion suggested by the previous two scenarios is illustrated in a more extreme and fantastical vision in a different fragment of the novel. In this chapter the protagonist, "you," wakes up on a park bench to find everything wrapped as a postal parcel and all of the people of the city gone. At first "you" thinks that everything is being sent abroad on a Road Show, that the whole city will be exhibited someplace else. Then "you" speculates that it might be a strategy for coping with environmental or social problems:

Perhaps recently someone has come up with a method for environmental protection: wrap and tie up everything. In this way, noise pollution and polluted air will not be able to get through. This situation is similar to putting a fish in a cellophane bag when you bring it home. Or perhaps the wrapping means people will not come into contact with each other any more. Whether they are objects or humans, if they are wrapped in plastic, the distance between them will increase. When each is isolated from all else and becomes a subject of greater independence, the friction between them will proportionately decrease.

(99)

Clearly what "you" encounters is a desperate solution to an even more desperate situation. The deadpan tone of the narrator's voice, however, is typical of Xi Xi's characters. They often seem utterly unaware of the significance of their observations. Fredric Jameson's concern for the postmodern subject's inability to intellectually grasp his/her world is vividly illustrated in Xi Xi's novel.

The characters are merely able to make isolated observations, but are not able to attach context and meaning to their perceptions. Jameson writes:

[T]his latest mutation in space — postmodern hyperspace — has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively map its position in a mappable, external world. (44)

Eventually in this vignette, “you” meets up with a swordsman who offers the choice of a sheet of plastic or a sword. With the plastic, one can join everything else in becoming a parcel. With the sword, one can choose to cut open the parcels, but with the knowledge that they will automatically seal themselves up again. The swordsman has clearly chosen the weapon of resistance, but he knows these efforts are futile. He hopes, however, to cut into the sky and escape. The process of wrapping is inevitable, and fighting it by cutting open the plastic is ultimately hopeless, though it seems to carry the reward of personal integrity. Xi Xi’s project in writing this novel seems to be analogous to the swordsman’s battles against the wrapping. The attempt is protection against a similarly alienated fate for oneself, but is unlikely to stop the external forces bent on fracturing human engagement.

This pessimism, however, is mitigated by Fruits and his entourage of friends and acquaintances. Two chapters after this desolate dystopian vision, Fruits and his companions go camping on an outlying island and enjoy an easy camaraderie, a bit of fresh air, and some wonderful hiking. If the extreme alienation suggested by the parcel posts is a recurring concern of the novel, so, too, is the warmth of its main characters and their attempts to forge individual connections. Here, the significance of Fruits as telephone repairman becomes explicit. He reconnects disrupted lines of communication — to repair is to set right again, but also to supplement what is incomplete. With his quiet, innocent good will, Fruits exists both inside and outside the stark vignettes of estrangement. He is inside because it is clear that his physical and cultural landscape is filled with parcel posts; but he remains outside because he still is able to forge and sustain very human relationships, especially with his sister, Braids, and his friend, Merry Mak. This

faith in the individual will and the palpable feeling of community generated by Fruits' narration resists the postmodern despair of the landscape littered with parcel posts.

Xi Xi suggests that one of the oppressive forces working against Fruits and his friends is the utter commercialization of all social interaction. This is especially manifest in a section that describes a television series called "Super-Supermarket." The show is about a store the size of "thirty-one Olympic-size football fields" (24). In it one can find "minibanks, restaurants, cafes, swimming pool, cinema, park, train, sunshine, friends, moon, etc." (24). In one episode a woman bears a child in the store. Everyone agrees it would be best to leave the child in the care of the store, and the mother is awarded "a book of free coupons good for one century" (25). Eventually the child loses interest in getting out of bed, the show goes down in ratings, and is replaced by "a traditional family-oriented romantic musical series, called 'The Woman Warrior'" (26). Obviously critiquing the voracious appetite of the commercial world to consume all aspects of life, including the sun and moon, this vignette also cites the entertainment industry's complicity in this process. A television show about a super-supermarket is the quintessential hybrid of an utterly commodified world. As there is no distinction rendered between life inside and outside of the television show, or any distinction between inside and outside the world of the super-supermarket, the narrative describes a complete collapse into commercial simulacrum which functions, not as a reflection of life, but as life itself. Jameson comments on this aspect of the postmodern condition when he writes, "[T]he contents of the media itself have now become commodities, which are then flung out on some wider version of the market with which they become affiliated until the two things are indistinguishable" (277).

Again, however, Xi Xi juxtaposes this television show and its projection of Hong Kong society, with Fruits who is watching the program. He is singularly uninterested in money. He is happy to have a job as a telephone repairman and to be able to support himself modestly, but otherwise money and commercial products are of no interest. In explaining why he chose to apply for a position at the telephone company, he says,

I had just finished my School Certificate Exam and was looking for something interesting to do so that I could take myself to lunch every day and also take my sister Braids to lunch. I decided that I should do something interesting; no coldness of the industrial civilization for me. (28)

It is difficult to reconcile Fruits' nonchalance with the commercial and financial hegemony of the Super-supermarket. Xi Xi, in fact, asks the reader to hold both images, presented in successive chapters, simultaneously. She does not offer a logical synthesis, but leaves the contradictions to be sustained by the reader's experience and imagination. She is perhaps relying on her mainly Hong Kong audience for whom juggling such disparities would be very familiar.

Xi Xi's novel not only places Hong Kong at the unstable centre of the narrative but also engages the competing and contradictory tensions of the city. By juxtaposing postmodern narrative landscapes with her vibrant authorial voice and the naïve simplicity of her characters, she achieves a remarkable blending and clashing that provides a multivalent understanding of Hong Kong and its people. Like Timothy Mo, Xi Xi meshes postmodernism with countervailing sensibilities as a strategy for enacting in art what the city of Hong Kong offers its citizens and visitors. In spite of their profoundly different temperaments, both novels use the very contradictions of Hong Kong as a fulcrum around which to explore the city, its people and its history. Like the postmodern skyscrapers in Central wrapped in bamboo scaffolding, *An Insular Possession* and *My City: A Hong Kong Story* are and are not postmodern meditations on the vibrantly in-between city of Hong Kong.

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