The Trope of Life in Hong Kong Poetry: Realism, Survival, and Shenghuohua

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the differing manifestations of “life” through the debate over various forms of realism in modern Chinese and Hong Kong poetics since the 1920s. It examines how the trope of life was configured over time in Hong Kong’s realist, romantic, and modernist poetics. This article analyzes the working of the trope of life in different historical moments of modern Chinese and Hong Kong poetry and how it has been embedded in the debate over different forms of realism and under various signifiers. This article also argues that the trope of life was represented as shenghuohua (can. sangˈwut⁶faa³) and used to build a stylistic identity of Hong Kong poetry in the 1970s and hence has remained the strongest and most long-lasting influence on the writing of Sinophone poetry in Hong Kong.

KEYWORDS: Hong Kong poetry, Sinophone poetry, life, realism, survival, shenghuohua

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Introduction

"Life" is a pivotal trope in Hong Kong poetry, not only because many generations of Hong Kong poets devoted themselves to depicting their immediate realities in different times and in different ways, but also because of its important role in shaping a stylistic identity of Hong Kong poetry since the 1950s. The concept of life is sometimes represented by Chinese compounds such as shenghuo 生活 (Can. sang¹ wūt⁶; life), shenghuohua 生活化 (Can. sang¹ wūt⁶ fā¹; lit. true-to-life), and richang 日常 (Can. jat⁶ soeng⁴; lit. everydayness), and at other times implied within discussions of xianshi zhuyi 現實主義 (Can. jīn⁶ sāt⁶ zyù¹ ji¹; lit. realism) or xieshi zhuyi 寫實主義 (Can. sē² sāt⁶ zyù¹ ji¹; lit. realism) in local debates informed by Western literary thought and extended from different interpretations in twentieth-century China. Over time, the trope of life has been interpreted by Hong Kong poets and critics with disparate cultural, historical, and ideological agendas.

Despite revealing contextual nuances, these terms have been normalized and used uncritically in the discourse of Hong Kong poetry. Stephen Soong 宋淇, Ronald P. Mar 馬朗, and critics associated with the legendary modernist magazine Wenyi xinchao 文藝新潮 (Can. Man⁴ ngai⁶ san¹ ciu⁴; Literary Currents) repeatedly lamented what they perceived as the culturally suffocating life in Hong Kong’s socio-political milieu in the 1950s. Since the early 1970s, the poets of the shenghuohua school led by Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞 used plain language to depict local life with the goal of establishing a stylistic identity for Hong Kong poetry. There has also been a longstanding institutionalized discourse advocating for a xianshi zhuyi shige 現實主義詩歌 (Can. jīn⁶ sāt⁶ zyù¹ ji¹ sī¹ gō¹; realist poetry) to reflect the life of the working class and emphasize anti-colonial struggle. This genre was imported from CCP-led literary groups’ leftist realist poetics before 1949 and followed the orthodox socialist realism common in Mainland China after that date.

Leung and his shenghuohua fellows successfully defended their style against Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese influences from the 1970s to well beyond the publication of the monumental anthology of Hong Kong shenghuohua poetry Shiren shixuan 十人詩選 (Can. Sap⁴ jan¹ sī² syun²; Poems of Ten Poets) in 1998, the year after the handover of sovereignty from the British Crown to the People’s Republic of China. From the 2000s to early 2010s, Hong Kong’s literary output was characterized by poetry depicting the minutia of the everyday. This output, embodied in the work of Natalia Chan 洛楓, Chan Chi-tak 陳滅, and Derek Chung 鍾國強, and many others, resisted the Mainland Chinese unitary narrative and the forces of urban globalization. This body of work can also be seen as an extension of Leung’s influential concept of shenghuohua poetry. However, after the failure of the Umbrella Movement in 2014, younger Hong Kong poets voiced their dissatisfaction with shenghuohua poets’

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1 Qian Yating 錢雅婷, ed., Shiren shixuan 十人詩選 [Selected Poems of Ten Poets] (Hong Kong: Qingwen shuwu, 1998).
politic subtlety. They introduced a new poetic style that contrasted political outrage and internalized surrealistic images. The standoff between the younger surrealists and the older shenghuohua poets continued until the enactment of the National Security Law, which ended the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019–2020, and made the production of political poetry expressly against official ideology impossible in the city.

This article traces the phenomena of debates over the trope of life ghosting critical historical moments of Hong Kong poetry. In the disguise of seemingly normalized terms in these debates, including shenghuo, shenghuohua, richang, and xianshi zhuyi, the article demonstrates how a range of foreign poetic influences and local struggles for poetic identity across the history of Hong Kong poetry have clashed and negotiated under the umbrella of this trope.

Before “life” came to Hong Kong

The Chinese word shenghuo 生活 can be traced back to Mencius’ 孟子 (372–289 BCE) “Jinxin shang” 積心中 (Can. Zoen²sam¹ soeng⁶; Dedication [Part One]): 民非水火不生活 (people cannot survive without water and fire).² In Wu dai shi 五代史 (Can. Ng⁵do⁵si²; History of the Five Dynasties), compiled during the Song dynasty in 974 CE, “Zhoushi pinghua juan shang” 周史平話卷上 (Can. Zau¹si² peng⁴waa² gyun² soeng⁶; History of the Later Zhou Dynasty: Part One) mentions shenghuo as in 丈夫日勤耕稼,婦女夜事績織,廝共生活 (husbands plow the field during the day; wives weave clothes during the night; thus is their livelihood).³ Although shenghuo could also mean wupin 物品 (Can. mat⁴ban⁷; quotidian things) or gongzuo 工作 (Can. gung¹zok³; work) on rare occasions, survival (or to survive) and livelihood (or to live) have been the two major meanings of shenghuo inherited by modern Chinese language, as represented in its semantic interpretations in Congbian Guoyu cidian xiuadingben 重編國語辭典修訂本 (Can. Cung⁴pin¹ Gwok³jyu¹ ci⁴din² sau¹ding⁴bun²; Revised Mandarin Chinese Dictionary).⁴

Famous examples include two vernacular Chinese translations: “Xiandai shenghuo zhi yanjiu” 現代生活之研究 (Can. Jin⁶do⁵ sang¹wut⁶ zi¹ jin⁴gau³; Research on Modern Life)⁵ and “Ren de shenghuo” 人的生活.

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² Mencius 孟子, “Jin Xin shang” 積心中 [Dedication (part one)], Zhongguo zhexueshu dianzihua jihua 中國哲學書電子化計劃 [Chinese Philosophy Books Digitization Project] (n.d.) <https://shorturl.at/iPS7> [accessed 5 August 2023]. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.
⁴ “Shenghuo” 生活, in Congbian Guoyu cidian xiuadingben 重編國語辭典修訂本 [Revised Mandarin Chinese Dictionary] [online], <https://dict.revised.moe.edu.tw/dictView.jsp?ID=132387&q=1&word=%E7%94%9F%E6%B4%BB> [accessed 5 August 2023].
The former was published in the renowned reformist magazine *Dongfang zazhi* 東方雜誌 (Eastern Miscellany) and was translated from Japanese thinker Kazutami Ukita’s うきた かずたみ (浮田和民) 1910 article “Gendai seikatsu no kenkyū 現代生活の研究.” The latter was Liu Fu’s 劉復 (Liu Bannong 劉半農) 1910 translation of Russian writer Maxim Gorky’s short story in which the personified Life asks two men what they expect from their lives. The Chinese translation of the opening paragraph is particularly indicative of the mixture of the two major senses of *shenghuo*, survival and livelihood, in the formative period of modern Chinese language:

兩個人，同在 生活 的「公判座」前出現，各自怨恨着他們的生存。

(Original underline)

Two persons show up in front of Life’s “judge bench.” Each complains about their own survival.

This article focuses on survival and livelihood as meanings of *shenghuo*, especially how these two definitions enter the discourse of literary criticism through *shenghuo* and other translated neologisms, including *xianshi zhuyi* and *xieshi zhuyi*. Nowadays, the Chinese terms *xianshi zhuyi* and *xieshi zhuyi* can be used interchangeably to mean “realism.” Like many modern Chinese neologisms, they were coined partly through secondary translations of Japanese renditions of “realism” in the May Fourth Movement in early twentieth-century China.

Evidence can be found in Yih Chiou Sheng’s 憶秋生 (Zhang Menglin 張夢麟) Chinese translation of modern Japanese critic Miyajima Shinzaburo’s みやじま しんざぶろう (宮島新三郎) book, *Oushū saikin no bungei shichō* 欧洲最近的文芸思潮 (The Latest Aspect of European Literature), in which Miyajima writes:

Realism, this noun, has many interpretations. There were various definitions, even among European and American commentators who disagreed. Therefore, at present, finding the most appropriate translation is naturally to no avail. Although it is normally translated as *xieshi zhuyi*, or *xianshi zhuyi*, strictly speaking, neither is an accurate translation. *Xieshi zhuyi*, especially, is too

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8 Liu Fu, p. 1.
10 Yih Chiou Sheng 憶秋生 (Zhang Mengling 張夢麟), ed. and trans. *Ou-zhōu zuījīn wen-yì sī-chāo* 欧洲最近文藝思潮 [The latest aspect of European literature], by Miyajima Shinzaburo みやじま しんざぶろう (宮島新三郎) (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1924).
narrow to represent the scope of the original. As there is no accurate translation at the moment, I can only use xianshi zhuyi.\textsuperscript{12}

Liu Bannong’s and Zhang Menglin’s literary paths intersected in the largest literary organization in 1920s China, Wenxue yanjiu hui (Can. Man\textsuperscript{1} hok\textsuperscript{6} jin\textsuperscript{4} gau\textsuperscript{3} wul\textsuperscript{6}; Literary Research Society). Liu was one of its prominent members in Beijing and Zhang helped found its branch in Guizhou. Zhang’s translation of Miyajima’s book was serialised in the Society’s official publication, Xiaoshuo yuebao (Can. Siu\textsuperscript{4} syut\textsuperscript{3} jyut\textsuperscript{6} bou\textsuperscript{3}; Fiction Monthly). The Society, founded in 1920, was influential, known for its loosely unified literary–realist ideology, wei rensheng er yishu (Can. wai\textsuperscript{4} jan\textsuperscript{4} sang\textsuperscript{1} ji\textsuperscript{4} nga\textsuperscript{5} seot\textsuperscript{6}; art for life’s sake), which was also described in their manifesto.\textsuperscript{13} Many of the group’s publications, such as Zhang’s translation, were produced to introduce European realism and the Society members’ realist works of poetry and fiction. This article does not cover the internal nuances among the Society members’ conceptions of realism, but recognises its relation to shenghuo in their general understanding of such poetics that Mao Dun 茅盾 once described as “reflecting social reality, representing and discussing general questions about life.”\textsuperscript{14}

In 1930, the Literary Research Society was absorbed into the League of Chinese Leftist Writers 中國左翼作家聯盟 led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As a result, realism was coupled with other literary groups’ proletariat revolutionary poetics, institutionalized as the League’s orthodox method of literary writing, and developed into its version of socialist realism informed by Soviet literature of the mid-1930s. In distinguishing the League’s focus on representing the class struggle through what they called “neo-realism,” their prime theoretician Qian Qianwu 錢謙吾 (Qian Xingcun 錢杏村) describes their goal to “critically depict the inevitable and necessary reality and complete the task of knowing the life outside the institutional life.”\textsuperscript{15} This reflects the implicit conflict between realist literature’s function of organizing the political life inside the institution and its mission of engaging censoriously with the undesired social reality outside the institution.

Clashes between realist poets and their rivals, writers influenced by European symbolism, romanticism, and modernism, continued until the second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937. The war prompted many from this latter group of poets to devote themselves to the national salvation movement across the country and, more conspicuously, abandon their previous poetic endeavors to embrace the

\textsuperscript{12} Yih Chiu Sheng, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{13} For a detailed account of the Literary Research Association’s activities, see Michel Hockx, \textit{Questions of Style: Literary Society and Literary Journals in Modern China 1911–1937} (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 33–85.
\textsuperscript{14} Mao Dun 茅盾, “Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi. Xiaoshuo yi ji daoyan”《中國新文學大系•小說一集》導言 (Introduction to the Compendium of Chinese new literature. Fiction I), in Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi daoyan ji 中國新文學大系導言集 (Introductions to the Compendium of Chinese new literature), ed. by Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, (Shanghai: Liangyou fuxing tushu gongsi, 1940), pp. 78–122 (p. 87).
\textsuperscript{15} Qian Qianwu 錢謙吾 (Qian Xingcun 錢杏村), \textit{Zenyang yanjiu xinxing wenxue} 怎樣研究新興文學 [How to Study Newly Rising Literature] (Shanghai: Nanqiang shuju, 1930), pp. 6–7.
CCP’s orthodox socialist realism, defined by Mao Zedong in his lecture on literature and art in Yan’an. In it, he asserts, “works of literature and art, as conceptualized forms on whatever level of operation, are the result of the human mind reflecting and processing popular life; revolutionary literature and art are thus a result of the revolutionary’s mind reflecting and processing popular life.” Mao’s Yan’an talk had a sweeping impact on the development of realism as the mainstream of modern Chinese literature until the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s.

Since it entered modern Chinese poetics in the early 1920s, the trope of life has disguised the nuances in the discussions of realism occurring through the Literary Research Society members’ translation and introduction, the League of Chinese Leftist Writers’ critics’ theorization, and the CCP’s institutionalization and politicization of different events. As a result, literary ideological forces, including European realism, Japanese translation, Soviet socialist realism, and the CCP’s political agenda to produce realist art and literature are thrown together to constitute, politicize, and institutionalize, Chinese realism, which is a premise of understanding how it has been inherited and debated in different historical moments of Hong Kong poetry, as I shall explain in the next two sections.

When “life” came to Hong Kong

The trope of life in modern Chinese poetics was introduced to Hong Kong in a debate between modernists and realists originating in mid-1930s Shanghai. This debate ended as the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in June 1937. The discourse of realism, propagated by CCP-led literary groups, was concerned with the urgency of national salvation during the war. Life, for the leftist poets based in Hong Kong at the time, was equal to their literary work for the purpose of supporting the spiritual resistance against the Japanese invasion.

In the mid-1930s, two opposing literary groups’ polemics on the relationship between poetry and life in Shanghai spilled over to Hong Kong, where local poets were primarily inspired by the revolutionary realism that the League of Leftist Writers advocated, and the modernist poetics promoted by the influential literary journal Xiandai 現代 (Can. Jin6doi6; Les Contemporaines). While the realists sought to politicize the depiction of class struggle, the modernists focused on their lyrical representation of the encounter between urbanites’ internal solitude and the external estranged realities of “modern life.” Xiandai’s editor-in-chief Shi Zhecun 施蟄存 thus defined their modernist poetry as “the modern emotion that modern people feel in modern life [in] the modern poetic form laid out with modern wordings.” He continues to explain, “the modern life I just said includes various unique forms: bays where large ships embark; rumbling factories; mines deep down beneath the ground; dance floors with jazz music;

department stores in skyscrapers; fighters’ battles in the air; vast racecourses... even the natural landscapes are different from what they used to be.” He argues that such visual experiences in modern life registered new emotions that differed from previous times.

The realists and the modernists both saw life as the source of poetry but interpreted the significance of life differently. If the realists’ depiction of life is politicized and institutionalized, the modernists’ representation of (primarily urban) life is noticeably apolitical and highly individualistic. The realists criticized the latter’s poetics for its ostensible lack of concern about the struggle in lower-class life, and the left-leaning poets in Hong Kong echoed such critiques. In 1936, a leftist-realist poet named Liu Huozi continued the fight against modernist poetics in Hong Kong, saying, “modern poetry is a reflection of modern life.” Still, he responded to Shi’s definition of modern life from a Marxist stance: “in such complicated life was constructed, different classes. Every class has its own consciousness.” Their observations of the objective reality (the so-called modern life) involve the working of their class consciousness.” As Liu incorporated into his argument a Marxist view of the relationship between class consciousness and literature, he criticized the modernists for cocooning in their privileged class “without seeing the authenticity of the objective reality” and “the pains of the lower class.”

Liu’s leftist-realist view of the relationship between poetry and life was developed in the next decade when war was the central concern across the country. In July 1937, with the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the modernists were no longer able to pursue their poetics. Many became leftists (although not necessarily poetic realists) to form a united (literary) front against Japanese aggression. As a result, realism gained the upper hand and became the mainstream poetics during the warring period (1937–1949). Hong Kong also inherited this development as many Chinese writers fled there. The Kuomintang (KMT) and CCP relocated their newspapers and literary supplements to Hong Kong. The southbound leftist writers and their like-minded local fellows established various literary organisations, including the Hong Kong Branch of the National Resistance Association of Literary and Art Workers 中國文化協進會, to coordinate their activities and publications.
The CCP attempted to apply the literary institutionalization techniques that succeeded in China to Hong Kong, promoting their orthodox politicized realist poetics in literary magazines and supplements under their control in Hong Kong during the war. They published essays to propagate general realism, developed the disbanded League of Chinese Leftist Writers’ invention “neo-realism,” and translated Soviet and Japanese sources to introduce socialist realism. At some point, the more radical leftist writers were no longer satisfied with writing realist poetry. Still, they motivated other poets to participate in the “real-life struggle” to “procure reality” and even simplistically equated struggle with life. It is no exaggeration to say such writings about realism, where the trope of life was subjected to the purpose of national salvation, were omnipresent in literary publications in Hong Kong. Still, most of the literary output seemed more provocative than reflective and, worst of all, detached from the local context. Perhaps, Ma Yinyin’s 馬蔭隱 1941 “Jiantao yu yuanwang” 檢討與願望 (Can. Gim² tou² jyu¹ jyun⁶ mong⁴; Reviews and Wishes) was an exception. Ma stated:

Poetry cannot be independent of life; poetry has become a constituting part of life, an organic extension; poetry is not only the reflection of life but also apprehends its transformation. Because of this, in Hong Kong, just like all other places under domination, the masses need poetry (more so hundreds of thousands of refugees). The masses need poetry that excites their emotion that exposes invaders’ savageness; the masses need poetry that illuminates their thought that is related to their life. Hong Kong possesses the advantages for the poetry movement, and the poetry workers in Hong Kong are working evermore zealously.

In the mid-1930s, Hong Kong inherited the debate over the trope of life in the disguise of the poetic disputes between realists and modernists. Both camps asserted the authenticity of their own perceptions of life as if all other depictions were either superficial or false. Neither sought to represent the totality of life, so the two factions could never reach a compromise on how best to depict life; however, their agreement that poetry should reflect life became the basis for their coalition after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Hong Kong became CCP-led leftist groups’ base for resistance against Japanese aggression and the KMT during the civil war (1945–1949). Realist poetics was again politicised, institutionalised, and appropriated to support their mission of national salvation.

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25 Chan Chi-tak 陳智德, Bandang shidai de shuqing: Kangzhan shiqi de Xianggang yu wenxue 板蕩時代的抒情: 抗戰時期的香港與文學 [Lyricism in the Time of Turmoil: Hong Kong and Literature During the Anti-Japanese War Period] (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book, 2018), pp. 35–58.

26 E.g., Mao Dun 茅盾, “Xianshi zhuyi de daolú” 現實主義的道路 [The Path of Realism], Li bao 立報 [Lih Pao], 7 February 1941.

27 E.g., Zou Difan 鄒荻帆, “Xin xianshi zhuyi de shi” 新現實主義的詩 [Neo-realist Poetry], Zhongguo shitan 中國詩壇 [Chinese Poetry Circle], 3 (1949).

28 E.g., Zhou Muzhai 周木齋, “Jianshe Zhongguo shi de xianshi zhuyi lilun zhi lichen” 建設中國式的現實主義之歷程 [The Journey of Constructing the Realism with Chinese Characteristics], Xingdao ribao 星島日報 [Sing Tao Daily], 16 December 1940; Lin Huanping 林煥平, trans., Shehui zhuyi de xianshi zhuyi lun 社會主義的現實主義論 [On Socialist Realism], by Moriyama Kei 森山啟 (Hong Kong: Xiwang shudian, 1940).

29 Ma Yinyin’s 馬蔭隱, “Jiantao yu yuanwang” 檢討與願望 [Reviews and Wishes], Zhongguo shitan 中國詩壇 [Chinese Poetry Circle], 3 (1941).
in Hong Kong. The discourse of realism, despite its nuances in various leftist poets’ interpretations, weaved the semantic web of the trope of life in Hong Kong from the mid-1930s to the end of the 1940s.

**After “life” came to Hong Kong**

Even when the Chinese nation faced a real survival crisis during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the leftist poets sojourning in Hong Kong seldom used survival as a sense of *shenghuo* in their realist poetics. They did not seem concerned with the prolonged dormancy of the survival sense of *shenghuo* in realist discourse as long as their popularising, singable, and artless realism remained mainstream, especially after 1949 when socialist realism began to become the only style permitted by the CCP in the newly founded People’s Republic of China (PRC). As for Hong Kong, only after the war did the survival sense of *shenghuo* become prominent in the discourse of romantic and modernist poetics, as I shall analyze in detail in this section. The trope of life was embedded in their respective views of the relationship between poetry and survival.

In this period, while many leftist writers who had taken refuge in Hong Kong during the Chinese civil war returned to mainland China, the struggle for survival became the central concern of a new wave of southbound right-wing intellectuals in the British colony. As leftist institutions and publications grew detached from local concerns, right-wing writers began to dominate the literary scene. Many of their literary activities were funded by the Asia Foundation, established by the Central Intelligence Agency-backed United States Information Agency in Hong Kong. Their journals, *Renren wenxue* 人人文學 (Can. *Jan*’*jan*⁴ *man*¹⁺*hok*⁶; Everyman’s Literature) and *Hailan* 海瀾 (Can. *Hoi*²*laan*⁴; Highland) exemplified right-wing poetic production in early 1950s Hong Kong. Li Kuang 力匡, one of the major right-wing poets at the time, gained popularity with a series of nostalgic lyrical poems in rhymed quatrains. This poetic form was similar to the Crescent poets’ 新月派 imitation of English Romantic poetry in 1920s Shanghai. Because of this similarity, they have been labeled “romantics” in studies of Hong Kong literature.³⁰

A dispute arose among the right-wing poets over emotion in Romantic poetry and resulted in a split in their understanding of what life means in relation to their experiences as refugees. In 1953, Stephen Soong 宋淇 sharply indicted the appropriation of English romanticism by Hong Kong’s romantics: The function of emotion in poetry is esteemed as so high and important, it’s as if without emotion, you can’t have poetry, a view that follows the flourishing of Romanticism in the West in the 19th century . . . However, the poetry of the moderns is a reaction against the poetry of the 19th century . . . For most modern poets, emotion is dispensable; emotion revealed in poetry is intolerably tacky.³¹

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Chang Ting’s 長亭 response linked their preferred poetic form with their self-perception as “loyalists” 遺民: “The voice of the adherents of a lost nation is sad and thoughtful; poets in deep agony mourn their fate and reminisce about the past. This is our only hope of survival.” Eventually, Soong associated his distrust of sentimentality in Hong Kong’s romantic poetry with a pioneering call for modernist poetics. Finally, he thus alienates his poetics from politics, “anti-communism is important, of course, but we cannot give up everyday life and the factors that maintain it . . . On a spiritual level, we cannot give up literature or similar activities because they nourish us, give us faith in life, and keep us sympathetic to humanity.”

Not all right-wing writers adhered to Chang Ting’s political nostalgia that writing poetry to reminisce about the past was their “only hope of survival.” In contrast to Soong’s apolitical counterargument that everyday life is outside the political, Ronald P. Mar proposed his own poetics of life: modernism as constructed through the introduction of Western modernist poetics in his magazine Wenyi xinchao. Mar decided to open a new literary horizon by introducing Western modernism. Yau Wai-ping studied the poetry translations in Literary Current and argues that the journal’s advocacy for modernism “was neither a craze for a literary fad nor the pursuit of a new literary form but came out of the need to borrow modernism to depict the complexity and conflict of modern life.” Although Hong Kong modernists’ use of modernism to depict contemporary life echoes Shi Zhecun’s argument for modernist poetry in the 1930s, the poetics of life in Literary Currents reveals a link to a core concern of high modernism. Art Berman, high modernism was “the most notable phase of modernism.” He argues that high modernism is “not a style, a theme, a form, or a school,” but rather an expression of a predominant attitude toward the function of literature in society, writing, “the writer undertakes a mission of utmost seriousness: to increase society’s self-conscious realization of the unique dilemmas that had emerged as knowledge in every area had been called into question. Literature does not answer those questions; it provides a way of living among them.”

The central concern in Mar and his modernist fellows’ introduction of Western modernism was a desire to spiritually survive their hardships in Hong Kong through writing, translating, and commenting on literature. The emphasis on survival is evident in their tireless expression of their aspirations for modernism. In his comment on American modernist poetry, Mar is full of praise, “after American poets turned to modernism, they unfettered themselves, widely using the living language, with fresh images and free forms . . . breaking away from tradition, and enhancing expression in poetry . . . They have used

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34 Soong, p. 3.
modern language and modern techniques to depict the most modern moods of Americans and the rhythms of modern life.\footnote{37}

In the introductory remarks to his translation of Stephen Spender’s 1952 essay “The Modernist Movement is Dead,” Yun Fu 雲夫 writes that for Spender, “art does not provide an escape for the artist or the appreciator, but contains ‘a true conflict in life.’ It dissects and dissolves all materials of life, emotions, and feelings and expresses them.”\footnote{38} Elsewhere Li Wai-ling 李維陵 postulates the “modern task” of modernism is to “encourage man to search for the meaning of his and others’ beings in the complex and rapidly changing modern life. This is to say that modern literary art should not only help modern men look courageously at modern life but also improve it with confidence.”\footnote{39} After all the undecipherable image-heavy surrealist poems written in and translated into Chinese, and after all the modernist thought pitched to the polarized ideological environment in Hong Kong, their modernist practice comes down to the will to survive.

Survival became the central concern of modern Chinese poetics in postwar Hong Kong. As the romantics and modernists in Hong Kong were conditioned by the local liberal milieu and threatened by a neighboring communist regime and global Cold War ideology, they sought to transcend their context by either reminiscing about life in the past or depicting the conflict in the life of the present. In doing so, they sought to survive the ideologically divided environment in which they lived. The trope of life was overwhelmed by the poets’ need for spiritual survival in postwar Hong Kong, which was prominently expressed in their romantic and modernist poetics, where life had been the pivotal point of both arrival and departure.

How “life” settled in Hong Kong

*Literary Currents* stopped publishing in 1958, and its founding editor Mar moved to the U.S. in the early 1960s. Still, its efforts continued in various modernist literary pursuits in 1960s Hong Kong. The generation of Hong Kong writers who joined the local literary scene in the 1970s had been nourished primarily by the modernist literature written and translated in the two postwar decades. After this short-lived revival of modernism, the trope of life once again became embedded in the debate over realism in 1970s Hong Kong, in which foreign and Chinese sources were used to support a localized and politicised “critical realism,” which was eventually overtaken by the shenghuohua poetry tradition that endeavored to champion apolitical and lyrical depictions of local everyday life.

Unlike the migrant writers in the 1950s, the postwar baby boomers were not concerned with survival in their philosophy of writing and translation. Still, they felt the urge to search for a visible


\footnote{39} Li Wai-ling 李維陵, “Xiandai ren, xiandai shenghuo, xiandai wenyi” 現代人•現代生活•現代文藝 [Modern Man, Modern Life, Modern Literature and Art], *Wenyi xinchao* 文藝新潮 [Literary Current], 7 (1956), 21–27 (p. 23).
identity in their literature. One of the key figures of this generation was Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞, who revived the Shi zhi ye 詩之頁 (Can. Si¹ zi² jip⁶; Poetry Page) of Zhongguo xuesheng zhoubao 中國學生周報 (Can. Zung¹ gwok³ hok⁷ sang¹ zau¹ bou¹; Chinese Student Weekly) in 1973 and became its last editor until 1974. Leung described the excitement he had felt when he first encountered the modernist works published in Literary Currents: “Even with Hong Kong’s reality as background, people were able to create pioneering works . . . works stimulated by Hong Kong’s unique time and space . . . This taught me, then still searching, that little North Point, where we lived, could become the subject matter of literature.”

The modernism promoted in Literary Currents inspired Leung not to adopt avant-garde Western poetics—certainly not the surrealistic poetry of Mar and his fellow author–translators—but to treat the place he lived as his subject matter. This inspiration was realized in his advocacy of what he called shenghuohua poetry, which could be loosely defined as apolitical narrative poetry written in plain language with an emotionally reserved tone, most often set in Hong Kong or representing life in Hong Kong. Leung and his shenghuohua fellows utilised the trope of life to search for identity in the couleur locale of the poetry, which exudes a sense of place and belonging. By advancing the idea of shenghuohua, he resolved to distinguish the poetry of Hong Kong from the poetry of mainland China, which he critiqued as too nationalistic and sentimental, and the poetry of Taiwan, which he believed was too idiosyncratically surrealistic. These understandings may be reductive, but they allowed Leung to define Hong Kong poetry for immediate identification by local readers and the budding poets associated with the Poetry Page and the succeeding Damuzi banyuekan 大拇指半月刊 (Can. Daai⁶ mou² zi² bun³ jyut⁶ hon¹; Thumb Bimonthly).

Leung’s efforts to construct an identity for Hong Kong poetry were strengthened in the 1970s by his and other shenghuohua poets’ successful defense against the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist “critical realism” that local left-leaning, at one time even pro-PRC, poets advocated in Hong Kong (see most prominently by Wan Kin-lau 溫健騮 [1944–1976]). For example, in one of his many articles that promoted critical realism, Wan once asserted, “at present, especially in a society such as Hong Kong, we shall no longer beat about the bush in so-called symbolism, or so-called surrealism, or any creative method detached from real life, or any theme detached from the masses. Let’s hoist the great flag of critical realism.”

40 Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞, “Cong mianhuai de shengyin li zujian xiangxian le xiandai de shengyin” 從緬懷的聲音裡逐漸響現了現代的聲音 [A Modern Voice Sounding out of a Nostalgic Voice], Suye wenxue 素葉文學 [Plain Leaf Literature], 5 (1982), 26–30 (p. 27).
42 Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞, Jionyue de yexing 僧越的夜行 [Traversing the Night], ed. by Chan So-yeo 陳素怡 (Hong Kong: Wenhua gongfang, 2012), p. 51.
43 Wan Kin-lau 溫健騮, “Xianggang wenxue wenti taolun zhi er: Pipan xieshi zhuyi shi Xianggang wenxue de chulu” 香港文學問題討論之二: 批判寫實主義是香港文學的出路 [Discussion of Issues of Hong Kong Literature (2): Critical Realism is Hong Kong Literature’s Way Out], Zhongguo xuesheng zhoubao 中國學生周報 [Chinese Student Weekly], 9 September 1972.
A general preference for literature’s active intervention into Hong Kong’s socio-political reality was also felt in the *cong shenghuo chufa* 從生活出發 (Can. *cung⁴ sang⁴ wu⁵ coe² faat³*; starting from life) mission of the newly founded but influential Youth Literary Awards 青年文學獎 and the poets associated with *Pangu* 盤古 (Can. *Pun⁴ gu²*) magazine, who frequently cited Mao’s 1942 Yan’an talk to support their shift to critical realism. Wong Ka-ki argues that this iteration of critical realism primarily relied on Soviet and Maoist sources and tried to contextualise them in Hong Kong. As they could not adopt socialist realism, which dominated the PRC’s literature during the Cultural Revolution, they conceptualised critical realism as a method of reflecting the collective life experience of anti-colonialists and anti-capitalists in colonial and capitalist Hong Kong. These critical realists hardly produced anything innovative on the poetics of realism. Still, they constituted an antagonistic style of Leung’s apolitical and lyrical *shenghuohua* poetry in the 1970s episode of Hong Kong literary history.

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44 Wong, pp. 236–237.
45 Wong, pp. 238–239.


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