

Tales of

Edited by
Alice Clark-Platts
S. Mickey Lin
Edmund Price
Harmony Sin

Hong Kong

Two

Singapore

Cities

'There's no greater entry point to these two cities, rivals but often kindred, than the stories excellently put together in this collection. They depict the obsessions that drive people in Hong Kong and Singapore but also their commonality. A good read!'

—Felix Cheong, Young Artist of the Year (Literature) 2000

'By collecting stories about the respective cities, The Hong Kong Writers Circle and The Singapore Writers' Group have come together to create *Tales of Two Cities* for the Asian Century. The result is a collection of terrific fiction that reminds us that despite financial competition and social and political differences, much more connects Asia's two world cities, its two city states, than separates them.

Whether you have never set foot in Hong Kong or Singapore or whether you have ridden the MTR and MRT a thousand times, pick up *Tales of Two Cities*. It provides a fascinating portrayal of the transformations, histories and mythologies of these two great metropolises.'

—Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, founding co-editor, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*

'An intelligent and important collection of stories that takes you into the minds of outsiders and outliers in Hong Kong and Singapore. Immensely astute observations about the evils of society and the dangers of being complacent in a materialistic world.'

—PP Wong, author of *The Life of a Banana*

'A tour-de-force of variety with cuttingly ironic views of foreigners seen from the viewpoints of cleverly appropriated local characters; pitch-perfect renditions of Hongkong and Singaporean billionaires, gangsters, property managers, taxi-drivers and reluctant grave-digging progeny; and touchingly straightforward stories of the expatriate's need to fit and find a home in these two supposed global cities.'

—Audrey Chin, author of *As The Heart Bones Break*, shortlisted for the Singapore Literature Prize 2014

Tales of Two Cities

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【SWG】



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Introduction

In the classic *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens wrote about changes and transformation happening in the two leading cities of his time—London and Paris. The Hong Kong Writers Circle and The Singapore Writers' Group, inspired by this concept, collaborated on this unique anthology to write English-language short stories capturing the essence of our two Asian cities, in our time.

While Hong Kong and Singapore share geographical and developmental similarities, the two cities retain their distinctive culture and identity. *Tales of Two Cities* is a collection of 23 stories that presents myriad voices within these two cities. Writers were encouraged to explore an aspect of their home city to best capture its spirit.

A city shelters a multitude of connections and possibilities. Four faces of the two cities emerge through the stories: the changing city—its sea of change that sweeps away once-familiar settings; the historic city—its past and present as remembered by the residents; the mystical city—its magical and redemptive properties; and the capricious city—its unexpected capacity to harbour and unravel surprises.

What draws all of the stories together is their focus on our experience of the city, whatever our race, religion, education, gender or sexual preference. The stories reveal this in their examination of star-crossed love, religious enlightenment, greed, criminality, jealousy, wealth, poverty, power, and the search for a sense of belonging. We hope you enjoy it.

The Editors, *Tales of Two Cities*

The Beekeeper of Hong Kong

Elizabeth Solomon

口蜜腹劍

Honey in Mouth, Sword in Stomach



George Evans-Chan inched forward on the rooftop of his Yau Ma Tei high-rise. Shiny pearls of sweat lined his furrowed forehead. He ran his hands over his gaunt face. Sharp cheekbones rose above his amber eyes. His face was a map not unlike the city—a hodgepodge of mixed ancestry, Chinese and Western features blended together in chaotic fashion to create new Eurasian terrain. Looking down, he contemplated the swarms of people scurrying on Hong Kong's grimy streets, so intent on achieving their mundane missions that they never raised their heads to the skies. *Worker bees, all of them*, he thought. He peered into the tightly packed hive-like towers that rose around him. Too many people crammed into too many apartments that cost too much to rent. Those lucky enough to have balconies tended to inundate them with the spillover materials of life—mismatched collections of faded shoeboxes, their contents long forgotten; mops and brooms; drying underwear; half-used tins of congealed paint. Amongst the hoarders, the optimists were easy to spot. They were the ones who bothered with the planters—their flowers and leaves waving like Tibetan prayer flags in the light monsoon breeze. Some bore fruit; others hung heavy with lush vegetables, an organic yet futile rebellion against the harsh lines of the city.

George sighed. The hopelessness that engulfed him today was a far cry from how he had felt when he arrived. After failing to make it as a designer in London, Hong Kong was his last hope. He remembered

setting eyes on the metropolis from his plane window as it glimmered below him like Aladdin's cave, full of shiny promises. A patchwork of old and new, of east and west, crumbly and modern; the city was also neither here nor there; it was this, but also that. This was a familiar yet unknown motherland, a convoluted fatherland. Hong Kong felt like it could be home. And his excitement as he accepted his dream job in Kowloon Tong a few days later was visceral. It felt too good to be true. And it was. The job hadn't lasted long. Blame the economic downturn they said, as he cleared his desk. After that, life in Hong Kong became a series of rejections. Having tasted the city's potential, the pain of rejection was worse. Standing on that Kowloon rooftop, he felt hopeless. What was left to live for?

A light breeze lifted a tuft of hair that had become plastered to George's sweaty forehead. He licked his pale lips and looked up to the muggy skies, hoping for a sign. Pregnant clouds held the promise of acid rain, but wouldn't deliver. He tried moving closer to the edge, but his feet were rooted to the ground, like stubborn weeds seeking refuge in the city's pavement cracks, refusing to die, refusing to flourish. Maybe he could do it with his eyes shut, he thought. Yet, he knew that closing his eyes wasn't going to change anything. Nothing was going to disappear just because he couldn't see what was going on. In fact, things would only be worse when he opened them again.

Maybe the tai chi tricks George's mother had taught him would help him muster the courage he needed. The memory of her words came flooding back. *Breathing is crucial, G-boy. No breath, no life. Let your mind lead your breath, and your breath will lead your body*, she had instructed him in her singsong Cantonese accent. How hard she had tried to keep her Hong Kong alive in miserable Manchester after George's father insisted on repatriating there after the handover. He relaxed his body and closed his eyes, just like she used to do in order to transport herself back to the Kowloon waterfront of her youth. The move to England had been traumatic for her. The food never tasted quite right, the radio didn't play her songs, and she missed her mahjong buddies. Occasional

trips to London's Chinatown provided temporary relief, but it was never quite the same. But when she practised her tai chi, just for a few moments, she was home again. His mother had elevated her denial to an art form. Like her, George knew that this too was a mind game. Controlled breaths, visualisation, then, action. Checkmate. Game Over.

A voice in heavy Hong Kong English interrupted George's train of thought.

'Hello! Hey, you... boy! Come here... come here. Help me. One minute, please.'

George turned around. The man was dressed in faded blue khakis, threadbare T-shirt, and mud-caked gumboots. Nobody in the city dressed like that. He stood out like an oversized turnip in a floral garden—short, old and stumpy with a few straggly hairs struggling to cover his mostly bald and freckled scalp, with sweat dripping down his temples. He was holding a wooden box and squinting at George's silhouette against the low sun, apparently unaware of what he had interrupted. George's heart raced. He hesitated, then stepped off the ledge and walked over to him.

'I am Mr Man,' he said, pointing to his own chest. Then, he placed his palm on George's chest. 'And you?' his brow rose in questioning.

'George. I'm George.'

'George? Okay! Nice to meet you! Will you help me, George? Here, hold this.' He thrust the box into George's hands. Before he could protest, Mr Man walked away. 'I'll get another one,' he threw his words over his shoulder in explanation.

George stood there, speechless. He couldn't believe the cheek of the man. Or the weight of this old box. Ridiculous. There was no privacy in this city, not even at moments as crucial as this. Typical Hong Kong. It was then that he heard it, then that he felt it. The box was alive. The buzz of hundreds of wings beating against his body was unmistakable. He sensed their liveliness against his belly, which only magnified the effect, amplifying their hum like a boom box playing out a morbid tune.

The vibrations travelled down his spine, chilling every vertebra with fear. Bees! His knuckles became white from wanting to throw the box away, but knowing that he couldn't. Such a move could cost him his life. He was allergic to bees. He stood there, frozen, holding his life in his hands.

Mr Man came back with another box. More bees. He stood there grinning from earlobe to hairy earlobe, making no attempt to mask his yellow and rotting teeth. 'You...come with me!' he grunted. George didn't move. He was trying to think of a way out, yet torn between the choice of losing this bossy old man who knew how to handle bees and being left with a box of deadly bees in his hands, he meekly followed Mr Man across the roof.

Mr Man must have seen George's fear in his bulging eyes. 'Don't worry, boy. These are Western bees. They behave. Not like rude Chinese bees. I show you.' His simple English only confounded his message. What was the old man going on about? 'But... I... I'm...' protested George weakly through dry lips. Mr Man put down the box down and pointed for George to do the same. Mr Man squeezed his hand and placed his finger on George's lips. 'Shhh...' George was not used to such a blatant invasion of his personal space. Mr Man's sandpapery touch was both startling and soothing. He tried to remember the last time he had experienced any human contact. That was more than a year ago, when his father, as cold, distant and inarticulate as ever, had awkwardly thumped his shoulder as he stood by his mother's coffin. Mr Man knew nothing of such western boundaries and George found this oddly reassuring and was actually enjoying being around this cantankerous old man. He watched, incredulous, as Mr Man whispered, 'Look, look!' and opened the box. Mr Man was going to make him face hundreds of his tiny yet potentially fatal nemeses, all at once.

George stood still, transfixed in the warm sap of his own fear.

George had seen beekeepers work the English countryside—wearing mandatory white hats with drop-down veils and sets of white coveralls and white gumboots. He remembered their ghostlike silhouettes

working in the distance, as he drove down the wet motorway to what was to be yet another failed interview in London. The keepers would approach the hives donning long white gloves, holding cans of billowing white smoke in one hand and serrated camping knives in the other. Who could blame the bees for being defensive?

None of these layers of protection were needed in Hong Kong. This was raw, ghetto style beekeeping, typical of how many things were done around here. And Mr Man's transformation once he started to handle the hive was mesmerising to watch. It was then that this cumbersome man morphed into a creature of remarkable grace. Like a diver headed for the deep sea, his breathing slowed as he concentrated on what lay in front of him. At that moment, there was nothing else in the world for him but the honey-laden hive. With fluid movements, he pried open the box to extract one of the frames.

George sucked in an audible breath and his spine stiffened.

Mr Man felt George's tension. 'These bees, they won't bite,' he said without turning around. Mr Man's focus was as impressive as his ability to read George's mind. 'These are good Western bees. Not angry Chinese bees. They have manners.' *What a theory*, George thought to himself, *what was this old man going on about?* 'But... but... all bees are dangerous.'

He watched in dread as Mr Man lifted the wood and wire frame, swarming with the fearsome creatures. Some bees flew away but most wriggled in and out of their hexagonal homes. George wasn't sure whether they were agitated or busy at work.

'If you don't hurt them, they don't hurt you,' Mr Man countered.

'But I'm... I'm... allergic.' George stammered.

'Huh?' Mr Man turned to look at him and narrowed his eyes. He had no idea what the word meant. Perhaps farmers had no time for frivolous conditions like allergies. George felt helpless but there was no point in distracting Mr Man with this foreign concept.

Fairprice Baby

Magali Finet

Sook Yin's body was pushing. There was no escaping it. She took a deep breath and blew slowly. She was about to close her eyes to force the pain away, when she caught sight of a cardboard snowman smirking at her from the ceiling.

She should have been more ready for this. There were only a couple more weeks left before her due date, but she had yet to go to the temple to find the most auspicious date for the birth. At least her child would be born in the fortuitous Year of the Horse and not the dreaded Year of the Sheep. Ah Mah, who would buy 4D lottery tickets based on accidental car plate numbers, kept on telling her, 'Sheep no good lah! Just born for slaughter. It's bad luck!'

Sook Yin suspected it was rather inauspicious for her child to be born in a grocery store, but maybe the management would give her some special discounts for her FairPrice baby. She was quite certain that she would be in the next edition of *The Straits Times*. She could already see the headlines—*Special Delivery: Miracle baby born at FairPrice Finest of Bedok Mall*.

The cashier auntie had closed off the aisle she was in but people could still see her from the other side of the freezers. If she remembered correctly from her last shopping trip for the Christmas dinner, they were bursting with frozen fish nuggets and scallops. She sat with her back against a pillar, surrounded by chocolate bars and litres of soya milk.

She had a fleeting fear of her photo ending up on some scandal-mongering website before braving the next contraction.

'Don't push so hard! Ambulance not here yet!' said the uncle whose hand she was crushing. She knew she was causing him pain but as Jose wasn't there to face her anger, any man would do.

Jingle bells resounded through the store's PA system and her mind wandered to a T-shirt Jose used to have that said 'Is your name jingle bells? Because you look like you go all the way!' He'd been wearing it the last time she saw him at Changi Airport, Terminal Three.

They had been a few metres away from Burger King where her sister had been studying with her friends while sharing fries. Sook Yin had been sitting on the edge of the fountain watching Jose walking back and forth, all tall and lanky. He looked like his father with his almond-shaped eyes and round face. His skin colour had the darker hue of his mother, his Filipino heritage more dominant than his Chinese one. She wasn't sure who he had inherited his fierceness from.

'Sook Yin, you don't understand! My friend is going to get caned! Two strokes! For covering a wall with graffiti!'

'It's vandalism, Jose.'

He had cracked his knuckles, and shaken his head.

'That tree drawing was art, a symbol of his respect for his community. And how do they repay him? A fine, caning and two months in jail! Don't you see Sook Yin? It could have been me! I can't stay here.'

'What about your parents? They need you.'

'I don't want to sacrifice my whole life for them. It's what my father did, driving his taxi seven days a week. He is miserable, drunk most of the time because he had to be a good son, a good citizen.'

He had sat down beside her, and passed a hand over his face. 'I can't be that selfless.'

As they fell silent, the only sound between them was that of a little boy throwing a tantrum at the *Relay* store.

'What about me?' she had muttered.

'Just come with me!' He had stood up and looked down at her. 'You don't have to be a public servant scholar. Break the rice bowl and follow me.'

Sook Yin couldn't go. Her mother was bedbound after a recent hip surgery. The poor thing couldn't cook, couldn't take care of the house and most irritating of all, she couldn't send her younger daughter to her tuition lessons. Her father was taking extra shifts at the harbour to pay for the medical expenses. They needed Sook Yin and they were her duty. They had to come first. Always.

'If you don't do your National Service, you won't be able to come back. Ever.'

'So what?'

That had been the last thing she remembered him saying before he had boarded his plane. He had tried to contact her multiple times after he'd left, but she'd never replied. What would she tell him when her longing was so strong that she just wanted to scream?

The next song on the FairPrice sound system was *All I want for Christmas is you* and she wondered how long she had been sitting on display like an over-ripe watermelon. She was disconnected and lost in her thoughts while people were running around, trying to make her more comfortable before the rescue party arrived. Zhi Wen, her husband and very own Clark Kent, was also on his way. Finally, his call came through and the uncle held the phone to Sook Yin's ear. Lacking super powers, he was having bad luck hailing a cab. Anyone getting a taxi during a downpour was something of a hero. 'Just hold on. I'll be there in thirty minutes max.'

She didn't want to hang up her phone: his steady voice was comforting.

'You aren't alone. You hear me, Sook Yin? I'm coming. I really don't want to miss this.' The call disconnected.

She looked up and saw a whole stack of Milo cartons, her favourite drink, a few feet away from her. She had drunk too many of them during her pregnancy, especially the last month. She did it in secret after Ah Mah scolded her.

'Milo makes baby skin dark! Cannot drink!'

She hoped it was true. Her baby would then have the soft brown shade of Jose's skin and not the pasty white of her husband's. Not that it would make it his child. But sometimes she liked to pretend it was, looking down at her stretched belly. It wasn't fair to Zhi Wen. Especially after all that he had done for her.

When Sook Yin had found out about her first pregnancy, she had run all the way to his HDB flat. She had been trying really hard not to feel anything, but images of a future when her mother would take her child to the playground while Sook Yin would study, the whispers of the neighbours, her father's angry eyes and tense shoulders each time she entered the living room... she couldn't live through that. She had needed her best friend.

As usual, Zhi Wen had found her at the resting area of the residents and had sat by her side, silent and strong. He hadn't said a thing. He hadn't commented on the tears running down her cheeks or her clenched hands on her lap.

'I am with child.'

He had nodded, pushing his spectacles up his nose, before taking her hand into his.

'It's Jose's. He doesn't know. I won't tell him.' Asking Jose to come back for an unwanted child when he had gotten a full scholarship to study Art & Design in the States would have been too cruel.

Zhi Wen had put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed, before saying the four words that forever meant she wasn't alone: 'It can be mine.'

**about the
publishers**

ABOUT THE SINGAPORE WRITERS' GROUP

The Singapore Writers' Group (SWG) was founded in January 2012. Its first meeting was at the Pigeon Hole café on Duxton Hill, Singapore. Since then, the café has sadly closed down, but the SWG goes from strength to strength with now over eight hundred wider members and fifty paid members.

The composition of the SWG is eclectic—Singaporeans are mixed in with British expatriates; Filipino writers jostle next to those from France, from America, from Australia, from Germany.

The SWG has a dedicated website designed to help franchise groups meet once a month to share their works in progress depending on genre. We have groups writing general fiction; short stories; young adult pieces; science and fantasy; and also non-fiction narrative works. We also run workshops and writing events, hoping to inspire the citizens of Singapore to pick up their pens and write!

In 2014, the SWG self-published its first anthology of short stories entitled *ROJAK* (a Malay word meaning eclectic mix). The anthology was launched at the Ubud Writers' and Readers' Festival as well as at The Arts House here in Singapore during the Singapore Writers Festival.

For more information on ROJAK or the SWG, please see our website at www.singaporewritersgroup.com.



The Hong Kong Writers Circle is a member organisation of writers of all levels from all genres. Founded in 1991, we are devoted to creating an environment in which writers develop their writing skills and knowledge of the publishing industry with the support of their peers. The HKWC provides its members opportunities to further their craft, network and meet industry professionals, receive feedback on their work and take part in workshops, socials and our annual anthology.

For over two decades, the HKWC has been a stalwart of Hong Kong's literary scene. We encourage writers across all genres to join our community, including short fiction writers and novelists, non-fiction writers and journalists, playwrights, screenwriters, filmmakers, poets and bloggers. Our members come from all corners of the globe and range from the published professional to the aspiring amateur.

Our regular activities include monthly newsletters, member critique groups, an annual anthology, seminars, workshops and readings and member-led workshops. Social events including our monthly social evenings, our annual Christmas party and the annual launch of our anthology, as well as opportunities to take part in other literary events around Hong Kong and the region.

Contact us at hello@hkwriterscircle.com

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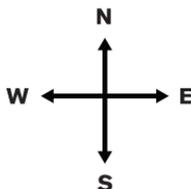
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Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, Founder/Co-editor
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