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The English of My Story

It began with a coin. The year was either 1960 or '61 and I was a primary two or three student in a Hong Kong public school run by American Catholic nuns. The class was English composition. Once a week, we were asked to write approximately a page and a half in class. I would often write three pages, and by the time the bell rang, could easily have kept going. Most of the time, we wrote essays. That day, however, I wrote the story of a journey. A coin was my protagonist. It fell out of someone's purse and rolled into the gutter. Someone else picked it up. From there it traveled from person to person. I do not recall what its ultimate fate was, or if there was a climax or denouement. It was neither a tragedy nor a comedy, but it was the first piece of fiction, in English, that I remember writing.

In the '80's when I was a MFA student in the U.S., and could not, or would not, only write fiction *à la* Freitag, I would think about this coin and its journey. Traditional Chinese novels were often episodic and did not fit Shakespeare's dramatic structures of tragedy and comedy. Was that because, I wondered, we Chinese simply experienced life differently? Yet how Chinese (or Asian, since I am part Indonesian) am I as a writer if my literary language is and always will be only English?

When I stumbled onto the linguistic discipline of World Englishes in the mid-90's, I had returned to Hong Kong to work, and my first books had been published. My writer's life, post MFA, was to continue writing alongside my corporate marketing career, and I had virtually no connection to academic life. My initial reaction to the idea of this discipline was that it seemed rather quaint. In university, I had avoided linguistics. At the English department in my undergraduate American *alma mater*, there had only been one course, and this was rumored to be a grammarian's masturbatory heaven. That definitely *had* to be avoided. Upon entering the workforce in 1974 Hong Kong, armed with my BA in English, I turned down the one academic job offered me by what was then Baptist College (now Baptist University). The American professor who wanted to hire me for what was more or less a graduate teaching assistant position was impressed by my native English language fluency and literature education. His Hong Kong Chinese boss, in a subsequent interview, expressed skepticism that I, a Hong Kong-born, more-or-less Chinese girl, could really be a native speaker of English. He clearly wasn't, and spoke what some in World Englishes describe as "Hong Kong English." But I was an arrogant young fiction writer in English

(never mind World or Hong Kong English) who hated having to go home after three, gloriously liberating, American collegiate years. His skepticism felt like unfair, and more significantly, ignorant criticism of my very existence. Why, I wondered, should I *kowtow* to a boss whose English was “lesser” than mine in what was supposedly an English medium academic institution? Besides, did I *really* want to have to spend half my time correcting second language errors? There was nothing offered that remotely resembled the creative writing workshops I had taken in the U.S., which boded ill for the teaching assignments available. When I declined the job offer, it was my fuck-you to Hong Kong academia in favor of the international English language world where I would take my chances as a writer.

The rest, you might say, is my kind of mongrel history because I did become a Hong Kong writer in English. At least, that is one of the identities I am willing to own today, alongside my mixed-race Asian, American, Asian-American, Global writer identities. In what Aristotle might consider a reversal of fortune, I have ended up at the academy I once eschewed, back “home” again in Hong Kong as of 2010. In fact, City University is just up the road from Baptist University and my mission, since I chose to accept it, was to try to position City University on some kind of literary map. Which is how an “Asian MFA in English creative writing,” as the program I founded and direct is sometimes referred to, came into being.

Yet when I’m asked to describe myself, the default answer is: *I’m a writer. I happen to write in English.*

What does it really mean to be a writer in English today, especially in the literary sphere, if Asia and Hong Kong color almost all your work and life? Despite the quaintness I once ascribed to World Englishes, the notion of English as a plural forced me to consider my life’s work in a new light.

As a child, I despaired at my linguistic fate of being born in Hong Kong to *wah kin* Indonesian parents who made English our (the children’s) mother tongue. On the one hand, this early, near-native English fluency assisted an entrée to the elite world of our British colony. It also eased my passage into a later American life, allowing me to abandon an Indonesian nationality that seemed at odds with who I was (my parents purposely did not teach us Indonesian, believing that English and Cantonese were more than enough). On the other hand, despite a near-native Cantonese fluency, I am only semi-literate in Chinese, and, more significantly, only semi-aculturated into local Hong Kong culture. I never watched Cantonese television or movies as a child, did not have much of an extended family with whom to celebrate major Chinese holidays, seldom even ate Cantonese food until I was an adult, and, by primary five, had flunked out of Chinese. It was hellish sitting in Chinese class and only half understanding what the teacher said. My parents were not fluent in Cantonese (my mother is virtually illiterate in Chinese and while my father was very literate, his dialect was Mandarin, which he preferred over Cantonese), but my classmates were mostly native Cantonese speakers and we were taught Chinese based on that assumption and reality. Meanwhile, I aced English, while many of my classmates struggled, but was studying it as a second language. I had more in common with and mostly befriended the other “foreign” locals – the Portuguese, Indian, Eurasian or odd British, American or European girl who ended up at my school. They all spoke English, or some version of it. It

was a relief to abandon Chinese in primary five and join the non-Chinese “study group” for advanced English classes and later, in secondary school, to take French as our second language. Yet when I finally arrived in the U.S. as an undergraduate, I realized I knew less English than I thought I did, and did not fully appreciate the distinction between British and American English or literatures (or grammar, spelling and syntax for that matter).

For years, I believed that the only way I could be a writer successfully was to remain in the U.S., and specifically, New York City to which I moved in 1986 and where I felt, and still feel, very much at home. By then, I had obtained an MFA from a good program, mastered or at least was sufficiently conversant in American English—its literature, grammar, syntax and punctuation as well as American slang, baseball English, copyediting and publishing conventions—had published a few short stories, and landed a literary agent on Fifth Avenue. Asian-American fiction was making its way into mainstream literature and my prospects looked good. Besides, New York felt like *the* city to live in as a writer of mongrel origins.

I had even studied Mandarin-Putonghua in recognition of China’s growing importance, and improved my Chinese literacy enough to read contemporary Chinese fiction and newspapers slowly, with a dictionary close by. It was a no-brainer doing this in the U.S.—all the other students were English native speakers, in contrast to my Chinese education as a child. I had found a way to flip around my linguistic dilemma: no longer was I surrounded by non-English speakers and I could now learn Chinese, angst-free. This was as close to Paradise as it got. The problem with Eden, however, if you are in the West, is that you’re predestined to lose it. Had Milton been Chinese, *Paradise Regained* might have been hailed as the masterpiece instead of his other book, but that’s a different tragi-comedy. Mine was economic. In the early 90’s, New York was crashing while Asia was rising. A writer still must eat until her royalties catch up with her life, and the jobs to be had were more lucrative in Hong Kong. So I ended up, once again, back “home” and became that “Hong Kong English writer.”

This created new complications. Even though I drew upon my Hong Kong and Asian world for my fiction, when I lived in America, distance allowed a perspective that disappeared as soon as I returned. Now, I was no longer reliant on memory, or primarily inclined to an investigation of the past. Instead, I was thrust back into a present tense mode of observation, most of all, linguistically. When I returned to Hong Kong in ’92, I had lived away for eleven years and had only visited briefly twice, mainly to see my parents. Yet my Cantonese returned with a vengeance, in part because my corporate marketing job required constant use, and also because it is a close second as my “mother tongue.” Eventually it eclipsed my Putonghua entirely, and the more-or-less “correct” accent my Beijing language instructor once praised gave way to one that immediately identifies me as Hong Kong the moment I open my mouth on the Mainland (Taiwan is a tad more forgiving). Yet what I was prized for, as a U.S. multinational corporate employee, was my fluency in American English. It didn’t hurt that I also understood and liked baseball.

When my first book was published in 1994, it was reasonably well reviewed and sold out quickly, mostly because, I suspect, it was a curiosity in Asia—this Hong Kong family story that was not just another pot-boiler thriller by an expatriate writer—and because of its controversial sexual content, about an incest between a brother and sister. There were no

Hong Kong writers in English who could claim (or wanted to claim) to be local; admittedly even I did not always call myself a local writer. The few other Chinese-English writers I met whose experience somewhat paralleled mine were all poets, most notably Louise Ho and Agnes Lam. The fiction writers were mostly expatriates, albeit some long time ones, but many spoke little or virtually no Cantonese although some were fluent in Mandarin. The identity conferred upon me as a “Hong Kong Chinese writer” felt odd at first, because it did not seem real. This was further complicated by my English byline and name, which, at the time, was my married surname Chako, a made-up name my ex and I legally adopted by combining the first syllables of both our last names. In the U.S., I had used it as a byline for all my published work and it never once raised an eyebrow. In Hong Kong, more than eyebrows were raised. Blood pressures soared over this “Indian” author who had the temerity to write a Chinese story, the subtext being “What gives *her* that right?” There is a Keralan surname that is similar, which I’ve seen rendered as Chakho or Chako. I even received fan mail from Keralans wondering if I were a distant relative.

In addition, whenever I gave readings in Hong Kong or elsewhere in Asia, the inevitable-to-the-point-of-*ad nauseum* question from some Chinese member of the audience always was *Why won't you write in Chinese?* The tone was accusatory, and, sometimes, quite hostile. Even when I answered, truthfully, that my Chinese was simply not good enough for me to do so, this was met with further skepticism, and, in a few extreme cases, further questioning of my origins and “right” to pen a local Hong Kong story. In the West, the same question was mostly curious, as there was already a growing Asian hyphenated literature in English by the diaspora. The answer about the “who of me” would usually satisfy the questioner, especially in the U.S., which is after all a country of immigrants.

This identity-centric audience response was what prompted my then-publisher to suggest I adopt my Chinese name as a byline, and thus, with my second book, “Xu Xi” was born (or rather, re-born), a shortened form of the Mandarin Chinese name (Xu Su Xi—許素細) conferred on me at birth by my father. It is not, however, my legal name, which creates other complications, but that problem of identity for a writer who must function in the nonliterary world is a story for another time and place.

Initially, it astonished me that name, race and language could create such an issue for me as a writer in Asia. The Hong Kong I grew up in was, admittedly, a rather parochial, insular, even Cantonese-xenophobic culture, but surely, I thought, these English speakers/readers of fiction were more cosmopolitan than that? Yet I am reminded of the Chinese-American woman I met in New York in the mid 80’s at a management training seminar. We were the only two Asians there and struck up a conversation. She was originally from Taiwan and had lived in the U.S. for over 30 years. I had recently immigrated, and spent my earlier adult life in the ’70’s living and working in Hong Kong and Asia, and had only just become a U.S. citizen. In myriad ways, I was still far more connected to Chinese Asia than she was, at least in terms of recent life experience. She spoke fluent English with what was clearly a Taiwan Chinese accent and was surprised that I spoke with such American English fluency. I spoke of my mixed background, said that I was married to a Caucasian American. Her startling conclusion, leveled at me with an unbecoming hostility:

Well you're not a real Chinese after all. Such a disturbing example of my ethnic tribe! Here was a relatively successful executive living and working in the U.S., her adopted country where she obviously “belonged,” who was no longer Taiwanese, never mind Chinese, if passport and country of residence are determiners of identity. Yet upon meeting a fellow Chinese, or at least a part-Chinese, her first instinct was to judge my Chinese-ness harshly because of my lack of racial purity and American-English language fluency. I avoided her unenlightened superiority for the rest of the two-day seminar.

What did it mean to be a “Hong Kong Chinese writer in English”? Could such a being really exist?

World Englishes, with its theory of the expanding circles of English, describes a linguistic phenomenon that is a reality today. The term *lingua franca* is applicable to English in the international business and professional world, whether you're in Asia or Europe. Even the European Union adopts English, rather than French, the former *lingua franca* of Europe, for its proceedings. And ASEAN probably couldn't function if its members couldn't default to English. Certainly, in academic disciplines, most recognized scholarship is written and published in English. In 2013 Hong Kong, Mainland Chinese sometimes resort to English to communicate with Hong Kong Chinese who are less comfortable in Putonghua than in English.

But literary work is another matter.

Wang Ping, a U.S.-based English language fiction writer who is originally from the Mainland, and who writes poetry in Chinese and English, describes the dismissive attitude of a prominent American literary critic who believed that poetry could only be written in one's mother tongue (fiction or essays apparently, could be written in “English as a second language,” or so she pronounced). In her provocative and thoughtful essay, “Writing in Two Tongues,” Wang says of writing in her adopted tongue:

I write in English, and Chinese always runs as the undercurrent in the process. The two tongues gnash and tear, often at each other's throat, but they feed on each other, expand, intensify and promote each other. They keep me on my toes, opening new doors and taking me to places I'd never have imagined otherwise . . . After twenty years in America, my English is still broken, full of holes, and I have fallen through them many times. But I've learned to fall with grace, and turned each fall into an adventure. One never knows what lies at the bottom, what world awaits us when we come through the other end. That's the beauty of language and poetry: to see the invisible, to reach the unknown through our gracious fumble and tumble.

Further in the same essay, she goes on to say that “a poem must tear away from the mother tongue's zealous cling,” and that “a second language gives us new eyes and tools.” She concludes with this thought: “Poetry may indeed belong to the mother tongue, but it also belongs to the heart that no logic or rules can bind, to the myth of life that sings with multiple voices.” Her belief that literary expression can and does have “multiple voices” resonates for a mongrel writer like myself, and gives credence to this very idea of “World

Englishes.” Strictly speaking, I do not write (or speak) “Hong Kong English” or even “Chinese English,” nor do I think at all in scholarly linguistic terms about the language when I write. But in trying to find the right voice for my kind of fiction, the notion that multiple Englishes exist as legitimate (or at least recognized) forms of the language is useful. Writing, after all, truly is a series of fumbles through a maze, and language the means to bumble our way through.

Some of this search for the right literary voice was informed by my peculiar auditory, rather than linguistic, sensitivity. As a rule, I do not learn foreign languages easily. I struggle with pronunciation, cannot remember enough vocabulary, hate the study of grammar and rules and have a hard time learning to hear any foreign language (this was true for Putonghua and French, my only two other languages, marginally). My two sisters, whose linguistic and Hong Kong educational backgrounds mirror mine, have a much easier time. One can learn to read almost any language with relative ease (Sanskrit, French and German are among her languages) while the other can learn to speak pretty much any language she has to (Bahasa, Putonghua, German and French are among her other languages and she can learn tourist catch phrases easily in any language). My only brother (who had the same Hong Kong upbringing) and I are the language duds, and are relieved we can handle English and just enough Cantonese. My brother is, however, a composer and professional singer and musician, and, when it comes to librettos and lyrics, he can mimic anything he must (Italian, French or German for opera or Latin for religious hymns). I am an amateur pianist and avid jazz fan. Over the years, my ear has become attuned to chord changes and I can readily hear the melody behind jazz improvisations. I also have an absurd memory recall for lyrics, especially from the American Songbook of the twenties to the sixties, far better than for poetry of the same era. Likewise, I can hear and comprehend most Englishes, regardless of the speaker’s accent, mother tongue or in whatever position it belongs on the World Englishes’ linguistic circle. In Hong Kong, this is further compounded by my knowledge of Cantonese, as I can hear Cantonese phrases in English (and oftentimes, the absurdity of a literal translation) as well as the oddly non-Chinese perspective of standard English as it functions in a predominantly Chinese society. The “code switching” that many Hong Kong Chinese engage in, with both English and Putonghua, falls into the range of my auditory sensitivity. As a result, I instinctively eavesdrop on conversations in this city that are carried on in English, Chinese and Canto-lish.

Which is a reason why, I’ve realized, dialogue in fiction was never much of a problem for me. However, what I *didn’t* realize, until an editor pointed it out, was how *much* I wrote in between the silence of communication, as, for example, when two people are speaking on the phone, or by email, or in person in terms of what they leave unsaid. Hong Kong became the petri dish for my study of the global culture that most interested me for fiction. Here was a city where two languages must co-exist, but where cultural and linguistic confluence did not necessarily occur; Hong Kong is significantly *less* bi-lingual (or trilingual) than the government pretends it is. Hence the need to tell story of the life in between, in that “crack in space,” as I have elsewhere deliberately mistranslated the “gap” of the subway announcement in Cantonese (空隙). In particular, when my characters are speaking in English but thinking in Chinese, or speaking in Chinese that I represent in English on the

page, I discovered that word choice or syntax can often embrace Chinese expressions, grammar or syntax. It was a bumbling along, fumbling through the dark at first, with few literary examples to draw upon. Maxine Hong Kingston had given us that wonderful Chinese-English term, “talk-story” (講故事), turning the noun into a complex verb form, and Timothy Mo “sour sweet” to echo the Cantonese dish, while Hong Kong offered Canto-lish words such as dimsum. Yet all this was still something of a curiosity, almost a kind of pidgin. For one thing, Kingston only speaks rudimentary Cantonese, and the Eurasian Mo hardly any Chinese at all, as is the case for many of the early Chinese hyphenated writers in the West. Even Mo, who did spend part of his childhood in Hong Kong, does not necessarily identify himself as a Hong Kong writer.

In fact, not till I began a search backwards in time, partially as research for an anthology of Hong Kong writing in English, did I begin to identify with and learn from an earlier diaspora of Chinese and Hong Kong writers in the West who consciously asserted an English-Chinese or Chinese-English language, and, more usefully, a trans-lingual or transcultural sensibility. Two of the more notable examples include Lin Yutang (*The Importance of Living*) and C.Y. Lee (*The Flower Drum Song*). While Lin remains an influential thinker today, mostly because of his scholarship, philosophical writings and work in translation as opposed to his fiction, much of Lee’s work is out of print. *The Flower Drum Song* was reissued when playwright David Henry Hwang revived the musical based on that novel, but Lee’s other novels are virtually unknown. What intrigued me about both these writers, but especially Lee, was how naturally they were able to render an entirely Chinese world in English. By contrast, Pearl Buck rendered China’s rural world in English (she knew Mandarin), but she uses a kind of formality in her English that is meant to represent Chinese speech and thought patterns. While Buck was honored, rightfully in my opinion, for opening up the then-closed world of China to the West through literature, she was also mercilessly lampooned by American critics and writers, including the Algonquin Round Table writer Robert Benchley, who began one of his satiric pieces with the line *It was the birthday of Wang the Gong*. The point is, both Lin and Lee were completely bi-lingual, and their very fluent English literary works seem linguistically and culturally prescient in retrospect. Today, Buck has benefitted from the growing interest in China as new editions of her work have appeared in recent years. Today, it is not that unusual to encounter TCK’s (third culture kids) of multiple mixtures, writing in English, thinking in Chinese (and other languages simultaneously), living between Hong Kong and everywhere else in the Anglophone, and even the non-Anglophone world. These creative writers are among my MFA students. One hails from Venezuela, and his Spanish is on par with his Cantonese and English, and another is an American in Taiwan who has learned Chinese well enough to write YA fiction in Chinese. Their accents are equally as diverse.

Which perhaps means that this “world’s English” (as opposed to World Englishes) that we writers share, might be turning into a kind of global literary language that will “feed on . . . expand and promote” a host of other languages, including Chinese. But even as recently as the mid to late ’90’s, when I was trying to find a literary language that would serve both what I could hear and observe in Hong Kong for fiction, it proved to be an isolating experience.

Hong Kong English did not really exist according to some in this discipline of World Englishes. Moreover (a word I find a curious hangover from colonial Hong Kong, articulated with a pronounced and distinctive attitude), it certainly wasn't enough of a language to justify anything that might be termed "literature." Writing out of Hong Kong in English was not comparable to India and the Philippines, nor for that matter, to Malaysia and Singapore. There simply wasn't a sufficient body of evidence, meaning published literature. Furthermore (also uttered with a distinctive, colonial-Hong Kong Chinese flair, perhaps under a horsehair wig), it was implied, how good could such writing be if it wasn't published in London or—and this somewhat grudgingly acknowledged since we were still in colonial times back then—New York? What was left unsaid in Hong Kong was just as noisy as what was suggested with a polite sneer, especially in the academy. Over the years, this made my ongoing presence as a writer around the city problematic. I could be acknowledged as a writer because I came with credentials from the U.S. and had published work abroad. My English was mother tongue enough to make me "foreign" and therefore acceptable as an English language writer. Yet here I was, wandering around the city, being this thing, a *local* writer who cared about making the languages and experiences of the world I came from and lived in an integral part of my work. I could not be accused of parachuting in for my fiction as yet another foreign writer (thereby opening my novel with that dramatic, but clichéd, landing at the old Kai Tak airport that every travel writer knows). At the same time, I had been perched at Kai Tak since I was a child, sending my father off on business trips and later, sending myself off on numerous trips to here, there and everywhere. Hence my uncertainty at believing I could possibly be, for real, a "Hong Kong writer in English." Perhaps I was a fictional character, escaping from one of my own novels, pretending to be an author. Perhaps even my royalty checks were like the fake money burnt in Hong Kong for the dead, and would disappear in smoke when my back was turned. Perhaps I was really still a writer living in New York, and my monkey avatar had journeyed to the East in search of these secular manuscripts that were being passed off as my fiction.

Perhaps even publishing under "Xu Xi" as a byline was more of a fiction than even I knew. An Hong Kong-Cantonese, Anglophone literature professor at one of the local universities asked me why I chose to use such a "strange pen name" (referring to, I suspect, its odd Cantonese sound and feeling). She was rather too startled for comfort when I told her it was my actual name. If even such an eminent intellectual was confounded by my writerly self, perhaps the problem was with that very self? Likewise, I've lost count of the number of times that Hong Kong "belongers" assume (or mis-remember) that I am from the city—*Aren't you born in Indonesia*, they ask—despite the fact that most of the publicly available biographical information about me (including the information I'm asked to supply) states this clearly (remarkably, they have no problem recalling that I attended Maryknoll Convent, an elite girl's school). This has occurred so many times, especially in the local academy when I'm introduced as a speaker, or when a bio to be printed is sent to me for a final review, or when I'm interviewed by a local Hong Kong Chinese journalist, that it can't be merely coincidence. The same error hardly ever occurs when I speak to university audiences or the media abroad. In Indonesia or Singapore, for example, my Southeast Asian family heritage is of interest to journalists but they make no mistake about my being from

Hong Kong. In fact, one scholar who has written about my work was asked not to include me in a locally published book about Chinese-Americans in Hong Kong as I was “not really Chinese,” which is emblematic of the problem of my role as a writer from these shores. It puzzles me because there are more people like me than not from Hong Kong, with passports of Western nations, lives and homes in one or more countries, with fluency in English and Chinese that is significantly more bilingual than mine. Some even have mixed Asian backgrounds. Yet in Hong Kong, despite my long association with the city, my writer’s “face” can feel more mask than real.

My novel *Hong Kong Rose* would have been quite a different book if I had remained in the U.S.. Released in 1997, it was begun in New York shortly before I moved back to Hong Kong in ’92. The story of two sisters, Rose and Regina Kho, who go to the U.S. for college is set mostly in Hong Kong with the protagonist Rose as the one who returns home to live. An earlier draft was titled *Red Glare* (echoing the lyrics of the American national anthem), and the protagonist was Regina, who remains illegally in the U.S. The published novel details Rose’s marriage to her Eurasian high school boyfriend, a marriage that gives her access to upper class Hong Kong society. It turns into a highly compromised situation, however, when she realizes her husband is gay, or at least bi-sexual, and she ends up in an affair with an American lover. Yet she chooses, in the end, to remain in this curious marriage of convenience which seems to fit Rose’s sense of who she is fated to be.

This remains my best selling and most popular book, especially in Hong Kong; certainly, it is the one that is most widely taught and written about by local scholars. Yet it is the book I identify the least with, and, despite a superficial similarity to my background (a Chinese-Indonesian family, college in the U.S., Rose working for a Hong Kong airline), it is not really autobiographical (the way most of my fiction is not). Part of my detachment from this book has to do with what I think of as a Hong Kong sensibility of compromise, one that masquerades as courage or the right way to live. When the book was first published, I described it as a novel about courage, cowardice and compromise. Yet what I suspect, rightly or wrongly, is that its popularity in Hong Kong has something to do with a local cultural desire to read compromise as a virtue, ignoring the cowardice of the protagonist’s character and choices in life.

I do not think Hong Kong is necessarily only about compromise, but it is a dominant sensibility in the way the city functions, and is a noticeable characteristic of local Cantonese social interaction, in particular the interaction with Westerners. This latter condition is often what I write about. But just as some scholars continue to insist that “Hong Kong English” does not (or perhaps they mean *should* not) exist, some of my local readers are comforted by and drawn to a protagonist fated to make a compromise that might appear untenable or even completely ridiculous and laughable from other perspectives. Like all authors, I of course have no control over how any reader responds to my work. What I do know is that the English of my story is all about *not* exerting too much control, in order that my literary language may flow naturally in and out of the worlds it must render in fiction.

Hong Kong writing in English is still only a minor literature and most probably always will be. In fact, now that we are geographically back in China again, as opposed to hovering on our precarious perch as an outpost of Britain, the probability that local literature in

English will grow significantly is unlikely. This is neither good nor bad, and falls right in the middle of answers to survey questions in the multiple choice spectrum—that too is a very Hong Kong thing and during my advertising and marketing days, we learned to force respondents out of that comfortable middle by tailoring questions to elicit either a slightly “more good” or “more bad” choice (Hong Kong English, at least in my books, for better or worse). Which is likely why the most robust and sustainable “World’s English” for literary work is one that is not necessarily rooted in any one country’s or society’s use of English, but will be drawn from the linguistic, cultural and life experience of the writer herself.

I am a writer. I happen to write in English.