利茲大學當代華語文學研究中心
Writing Chinese
A Journal of Contemporary Sinophone Literature

https://doi.org//10.22599/wcj.46
Vol 2 (Issue 1)

An Untranslatable Hong Kong story: Wong Bik-wan's "Nausea"

Yee Kwan Vanessa Wong[1]

[1] East Asian Studies, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, United States of America
Email: yeekw@uci.edu

ABSTRACT

In this article, I address Leung Ping-kwan's oft-cited question "Why is the story of Hong Kong so difficult to tell?" from the angle of language. Owing to its cultural plurality and changing historical circumstances, Hong Kong is constantly searching for words to express its identities. This is encapsulated in "untranslatability", the idea that new meanings are generated in the interminable exchanges between propositions, which is exemplified in Wong Bik-wan 黃碧雲's "Nausea" ("*Au Tou* 嘔吐") (1994). An homage to Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938), this short story demonstrates Hong Kong's multilingualism, as it features characters from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Interweaving the foreign and local, "Nausea" foregrounds the conflicts between these characters, which are mediated through linguistic and cultural translations. Moreover, through the interpersonal translation of "vomiting", dialogic sympathy across differences becomes possible. Lastly, set in 1984, the year when the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed, "Nausea" portrays Hong Kong in a state of political precarity and translates its citizens' profound identity confusion into an existential crisis. As such, "Nausea" re-interprets Sartre's existentialist literature through a (post)colonial, gendered perspective, and compels its readers to reflect on Hong Kong's identity after British colonialism. Ultimately, (un)translation not only animates the ever-evolving meanings in a literary text, but also has ramifications on the city's present and future: it shows that "Hong Kong" is still formulating a language for its self-expression in an ongoing process of storytelling.

KEYWORDS: Untranslatability, Wong Bik-wan, colonialism in Hong Kong, postcolonialism, Existentialism

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Wong, Yee Kwan, 2023. An Untranslatable Hong Kong story: Wong Bik-wan's "Nausea". *Writing Chinese: A Journal of Contemporary Sinophone Literature*, 2 (1), pp.106–122.
DOI: http://doi.org/10.22599/wcj.46

1. Introduction

In his oft-cited article, "The Story of Hong Kong," Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞 outlines a series of stereotypical "stories" told about the city by people who embrace different cultural and political identities.[1] Subsequently, the question "Why is the story of Hong Kong so difficult to tell (香港的故事為什麼那麼難說)?" has drawn enormous attention to the complexity of Hong Kong's contemporary culture. After nearly three decades, I want to re-visit Leung's question from another angle. By shifting attention from the object, "the story", to the verb, *syut* (說), I explore how language shapes the mode of Hong Kong's self expression.[2] *Syut* means *to tell/ narrate* (a story)*, to talk,* as well as *to speak* (a language). *Shuo* points to two separate but interrelated aspects of Hong Kong: the narratives surrounding it and its linguistic reality. Their relationships involve the following: Cantonese is an important component in Hong Kong's identity; similarly, bilingualism (enforced by the official status of English) and multilingualism (of the various ethnic minorities living in Hong Kong) foster a pluralistic culture. Therefore, language and cultural productions inter-penetrate one another and simultaneously influence Hong Kong's cultural identity.

A paradigm shift from the object of *syut* (i.e., the story of Hong Kong) to the process of *syut* bears a theoretical significance. Simply put, any attempts to pin down, to locate, or to define Hong Kong culture runs the risk of turning it into a reified and stabilised object. "Hong Kong" might mean a million things to different people (descendants of South Asian immigrants, Tanka fisherman, walled villagers, and so on); defining Hong Kong culture would inevitably invite the question, "whose Hong Kong?" In contrast, *syut* is a discursive process, which is open to re-formulation and re-interpretation, and can be undertaken by any subject. It creates an open, continual, and contingent relationship between the speaker and the story, rather than a possessive one. If the "Hong Kong identity" is still being articulated, then it is and will remain a construction in process, fashioned by its interlocuters.

If the construction of the "story of Hong Kong" is framed as an issue of language, Leung's question "Why is it so difficult to tell/say?" can be recast as a question of translating the unassimilable differences between diverse identities. But there is yet another difficulty: it is that of conceptualisation, that which lies in the gap between language and reality. Sometimes, there simply are no words for what one envisions. New words are thus invented to describe the unprecedented, and this is evident in Hong Kong's *Basic Law*: "One Country, Two Systems", "Special Administrative Region (SAR)", its leader as a "Chief Executive", and the rhetoric of Hong Kong's handover as "returning to the mother-country (*wuigwai* 回歸)." In short, the reason why "Hong Kong" is difficult to talk about is two-fold: on one hand,

[1] Leung, Ping-kwan, "The Story of Hong Kong", p. 15.

[2] Throughout the article, my transliteration of Chinese words follows Jyutping (The Linguistics Society of Hong Kong Cantonese Romanization Scheme).

we have far too many languages and voices to tell a simple, coherent story; on the other hand, we sometimes lack the vocabularies to describe the story's outlook.

In this article, I elaborate on this two-fold "difficulty" using Barbara Cassin's notion of the *intraduisibles*. *Intraduisible* itself is difficult to translate: it means "un-translated-able," or "unable to be finished being translated." In English, it is usually provisionally rendered as "untranslatable" or "untranslated." The notion of the "untranslatable" was inspired by the Sophist texts, where interlocuters' propositions are constantly negotiated and re-interpreted to generate new meanings to advance philosophical arguments.[3] What is being negated in *intraduisibles/ untranslatable* is the sense of the *end* of translation, not translation itself. "Untranslatability" does not reject translation as futile based on semantic inequivalence. Rather, it points to the interminability of translation, defined as an unstable, dynamic process of sense making.

The idea of "(un)translation" seems particularly pertinent to Hong Kong's cultural identity. Since the late colonial period, linguistic and cultural translations have been a day-to-day reality for many Hong Kong Chinese, who speak different Chinese languages, work and live in a bilingual environment, whose lifestyle, food culture, entertainment, and so on, all exhibit a mixture of global (not only Western) influences and local characteristics. As Ackbar Abbas puts it, in Hong Kong, "the local is already a translation, so that the question of the local cannot be separated from the question of cultural translation itself."[4] Moreover, Hong Kong is also a metaphor of "untranslation", in that these cultural translations between the foreign and the local are interminable and dynamic. The Chinese-ness of the majority of Hong Kong people, the city's colonial history (which distanced it from China's internal turmoil in the 20th century), and its internationalism, all contribute to the city's unassimilability to either China, Britain, or other former (British) colonies. In this sense, the story of Hong Kong is constituted by its many "(un)translatable" identities.

Second, "untranslation" characterises Hong Kong's search for a new political vocabulary. In its original context of a "Dictionary of Western Philosophies," the idea of *intraduisibles/ untranslatable "*has always been linked with political ideas, with the crossing between philosophy and politics, from the beginning…". [5] Similarly, there was a crossing between language and politics in Hong Kong's decolonization process, which induced a linguistic and conceptual aphasia (loss for word) among its people. When our existing vocabulary reaches its limit, new languages emerge out of "untranslation": by which one translates unforeseen visions into articulable words. Like the construction of the Hongkonger identity, the collective memory of "becoming HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region)" is an ongoing process of sense-making. In both cases, language and reality inter-penetrate, and are *coming to terms* with one another. In the following analysis of "Nausea", I will show how these

[3] Barbara Cassin, "Introduction", in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon,* p. iv, xix.
[4] Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, p. 12.
[5] Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "An Interview with Barbara Cassin", p. 311.

"(un)translatable" identities and new political realities are represented in the translations within literature.

2. Linguistic and cultural translations in "Nausea"

"Nausea (*Au Tou* 嘔吐)" demonstrates colonial Hong Kong's multilingualism by foregrounding elite Hong Kong Chinese's globalism and the city's ethnic diversity. These two aspects are embodied by the two main protagonists respectively: a Hong Kong native, Jim Hak Ming (詹克明) (also the narrator), and a half-Chinese, half-black woman, Yip Sai Sai (葉細細). During the 1970s, Hak Ming was studying in Berkeley, California, where he participated in the Anti-Vietnam War. One summer in Hong Kong, when he returned home after an injury, he met Sai Sai, an orphan who was adopted to his family. Sai Sai had developed a disease of uncontrollable vomiting after witnessing her mother's rape and murder. Hak Ming thus became Sai Sai's foster-brother and caretaker, and eventually developed an affair with her.

In juxtaposing these two narratives about Hak Ming (an international student in the U.S.) and Sai Sai (an American/black orphan in Hong Kong), "Nausea" interweaves the foreign and the local.[6] It problematises what a "Hong Kong" story should look like by simultaneously hybridising its native protagonist (Hak Ming), displacing him in a foreign land, and placing a multiracial, ethnically alien character (Sai Sai) in Hong Kong. Sai Sai's biraciality embodies Hong Kong's ethnic diversity and its history of interracial marriage. Hak Ming's overseas experience and the addition of Sai Sai as a family member makes the Jim family global and multiracial. If the Jim family is a microcosm of Hong Kong in the late stage of British colonialism, then it also reflects the multilingual, multicultural characteristics of Hong Kong and its people.

The historical setting of "Nausea" foregrounds the issue of identity confusion, as an imminent existential crisis was befalling the protagonist. The present moment of the story is set in 1984, the pivotal year when the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed, which scheduled Hong Kong's handover to the People's Republic of China on July 1st, 1997. However, the narration frequently switches back to Hak Ming's student years in Berkeley, during the 1970's, in the form of flashbacks, reminiscence, and lamentation. This is shown in the text's opening passage:

> 在一個病人和另一個病人之間，我有極小極小的思索空間。此刻我突然想起柏克萊校園電報大道的落葉，以及加州無盡的陽光。是否因為香港的秋天脆薄如紙，而加州在我略感疲憊，以及年紀的負擔的一刻，記憶竟像舊病一樣，一陣一陣的向我侵襲過來。

[6] This is true of the award-winning story collection, *Tenderness and Violence* 溫柔與暴烈 (1994), where "Nausea" is a part of. The other stories in this collection are set in the Vietnam War, Bangladesh Liberation War, and China's Cultural Revolution, featuring various non-Chinese characters. For more on its emphasis on international historical events in *Tenderness and Violence* in Wong, Nim Yan. *The Art of Polyphony: A Study of Fiction by Wong Bik Wan (1961–)*.p. 157-165.

> [The last patient had gone and the next is coming in shortly. This is the minimal time I got to think. At this moment, I suddenly recall the falling leaves on Telegraph, on the Berkeley campus, and the boundless sunshine of California. Is it because autumn in Hong Kong is always so crisp, like a piece of paper? As I am vaguely feeling my tiredness and the burden of age, my memories unexpectedly invaded on my like waves, like a relapsing disease.][7]

This passage clearly indicates the text's temporal structure, in which the past (1970's) and the present (1984) are each encoded with loaded meanings. Temporal duality overlays with seemingly arbitrary imageries, but they are not without internal logic. Light, hope, and futuristic possibilities are ironically associated with the "past"; in contrast, agony, boredom, and numbness, are associated to the 1984 present and the unknown future. This contrast reflects Hong Kong people's anxiety over the handover: from the perspective of 1984, 1997 registered not as a progression, but regression. The insertion of California's imagery into a Hong Kong story insinuates that the memory of America had been irrevocably etched into Hak Ming's psyche, who typifies Hong Kong's native elite.

A related phenomenon is the insertion of foreign objects in the narrative written in Chinese. Foreign lexicons and proper names ("Yuppie", John Lennon, Beethoven, and so on) pervade the rest of the text. Among them, "Telegraph, Berkeley (*Paak Hak Loi Haauyun Dinbou Daaidou* 柏克萊校園電報大道)" are not the only instances linguistic translation (from English to Chinese), but also cultural translation, as it is the legendary site of the protest movement against the Vietnam War, symbolising Western intellectuals' anti-imperialist ideals. Another cultural reference is John Lennon's "Imagine", the celebration of utopic freedom. Later on, this would be further *translated* into political action against British colonial rule and Japan's occupation of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, when Hak Ming returned to Hong Kong in 1973:

> 香港當時鬧反貪污、釣魚台學生運動，本著在柏克萊的信仰，我也理所當然的成了一份子：沒有什麼比自由更重要。[8]

> [Hong Kong people were taking to the street to protest government corruption and defend the Diaoyu Islands. Bolstered by the Berkeley spirit, it was only natural that I should join the movement: nothing was more important than freedom.]

Importantly, all these numerous proper names are translated, since "Nausea" is written entirely in Chinese. This is significant because these Chinese renderings precisely indicate Hong Kong people's globalised lexicon. In fact, not only proper names, but the characters' utterances might also have been

[7] Wong, Bik-wan, "Au Tou", p. 41.
[8] Ibid, p. 48-49.

translated, as one can also infer from a simple exegesis that the characters must have been using a second language during their respective sojourns. This textual "monolingualism" in "Nausea" can be seen as a variation of Derrida's "monolingualism of the other," in that multiplicity exists in what seems to be a linguistic uniformity, and that no one can claim exclusive ownership of one's language, or assign one's identity according to the language they use. [9]

How can we synthesise all these contrasts between Chinese and non-Chinese, past and present, Berkeley and Hong Kong, to inform our reading of "Nausea"? One answer is that the combination of linguistic hybridity, ethnic diversity, and temporal duality altogether signifies identity confusion, which culminated in the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. In "Nausea", flashbacks like those in the opening passage continue throughout the text, creating a sensation that reality itself is fragmentary and unrecognisable. Hak Ming's oscillation between the West and Hong Kong reflects his in-between-ness as a British colonial subject soon to be re-classified as a Chinese citizen.

To return to Leung's question, all these aspects of "Nausea" problematize the concept of "a/the Hong Kong story", since the story of "Nausea" is essentially deterritorialised (i.e., not geographically or culturally grounded anywhere). In an ethnically, culturally heterogeneous society like Hong Kong, all communications resemble linguistic and cultural translation. Moreover, as I will show in the following section, Hak Ming's in-between-ness is precisely what connects him and Sai Sai, with whom he shares very little in common, as their similar predicament of nonbelonging gives rise to a radical sympathy. Therefore, the unfolding of Hak Ming and Sai Sai's narratives is the beginning of a series of (un)translation, where the two characters seek to translate the other person's experience into one's own, while recognizing the other person's unassimilable alterity.

3. (Un)translating trauma

Wong Bik-wan's "Nausea" is an homage to Jean-Paul Sartre's novel, *La Nausée* (1938).[10] However, the Hong Kong writer made two important changes: first, the nauseated character shifts from the male narrator to the female character (Sai Sai), and second, the symptom changes from an impalpable sensation to active vomiting. Let us compare two very similar passages in the two works, when "nausea" is first introduced:

> "Now I see: I recall better what I felt the other day at the seashore when I held the pebble. It was a sort of sweetish sickness. How unpleasant it was! It came from the stone, I'm

[9] See Derrida, Jacques, *Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 25.

[10] See Wang Dewei, *Zhong sheng xuan hua yi hou: dian ping dang dai Zhong wen xiaoshuo* (Taipei: Rye Publishing, 2001), p. 308. The translated title of Sartre's novel is sometimes rendered *Ou Tu*, which is the title of Wong Bik-wan's short story.

> sure of it, it passed from the stone to my hand. Yes, that's it, that's just it – a sort of nausea in the hands." (Sartre, *Nausea*)[11]

This "nausea in the hands" re-appears in Sai Sai's introduction in Wong's short story. This time, the "nausea in the hands" is substantial: it is the actual vomit.

> 葉英死後，母親暫時照顧她的女兒，把她帶回家來，是個骯臟瘦弱的小女孩，皮膚微黑，頭髮是黑人那種蓬松，雙眼非常大，如此靜靜地看著世界，充滿了驚惶與好奇。她看見我，也不言也不語，忽然輕輕地碰一下我的手，拿著我的掌，合著，便在其中嘔吐起來。我雙手盛著又黃又綠的哆嗦物，酸臭的氣味一陣一陣的襲過來，我也不期然的作嘔。
>
> [After Yip Ying died, my mother temporarily took care of her daughter. The frail, filthy little girl was brought to our home: she had slightly dark skin, woolly hair of black folks, and her incredibly large eyes silently observed the world with fear and wonder. She saw me, and then, wordlessly and brusquely, she touched my hands, held up my palms, clapped them, and began throwing up in them. My hands were full of the yellowy, greenish vomit; it gave off whiffs of a sour, rotten smell that almost made me throw up as well.] (Wong, "Nausea")[12]

Since this "nausea" occupies a central role in both *La Nausée* and "*Au Tou*", we need to expound on what it signifies. In Sartre's novel, "nausea" is "the moment of feeling acutely that we exist."[13] In Wong Bik-wan's story, because the vomiting person is other than the narrator, the narration focuses on describing her outward appearance and strange behaviour. Therefore, I suggest that "nausea" in Wong Bik-wan's story has a distinctly communicative quality: nausea becomes a way of expression to communicate unspeakable traumatic events to others. Subsequently, it also becomes the common language between the two traumatised individuals in the story.

First of all, Sai Sai's vomiting is a substitute of speech – it comes along with her quietness (*ja bat jin ja bat jyu* 也不言也不語), which is a typical symptom of patients with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The vomited substance thus directly replaces speech as the means and the content of Sai Sai's expression. If "nausea" symbolises the feeling of existence, in the case of Sai Sai, the feeling of existence is implicated with trauma (since vomit is her body's post-traumatic response to sexual violence and life-threatening annihilation). Symbolically, vomiting, as the violent expulsion of substances from inside one's body, is an overt manifestation of Sai Sai's own *disgust* at sexual violence. Indeed, Sai Sai's vomit exemplifies Julia

[11] Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*. Translated by Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 10-11.
[12] Wong Bik-wan, "Au Tou", p. 44.
[13] Jameson, Fredric, *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 84-5.

Kristeva's notion of the "abject": the filthy, uncanny substance expulsed from the body, delineating the borders of self and non-self during the prelinguistic/pre-Oedipal stage. Since the abject is associated with femininity[14], Sai Sai's vomit self-reflexively highlights she and her mother's victimisation as women. This vomiting is subversive as it is disturbing (as suggested in Kristeva's title, *Powers of Horror*), because it challenges the social code of cleanliness, normativity, and order.

The second thing to note is that Sai Sai's vomiting remains an enigma to Hak Ming and to the readers. Its pathology is never accounted for. Yet if Sai Sai's trauma stems from the violent intrusion into the female body, her silence now is a shield that makes her *impenetrable.* Just as Kristeva locates abjection in the prelinguistic stage (prior to the entrance into the symbolic order), Sai Sai, the embodiment of the abject, also remains outside language. As such, she is not meant to be understood by way of (normal people's) language. Accordingly, the absence of speech (*ja bat jin ja bat jyu* 也不言也不語) is appropriately juxtaposed with her "horror and wonder at the world (*gingwong jyu houkei* 驚惶與好奇)," a descriptor befitting infant. We may see Sai Sai's dual symptoms of vomiting and silence as two sides of the same coin: they commonly signal defiance to society' "common language", in the Lacanian sense (refusal to the symbolic order) and in the Derridean sense (rejecting the claim to identity ownership).[15]

Therefore, Sai Sai's nausea does not signify a loss of voice and of subjectivity, but rather, it expresses her abjection, and keeps her unknowable and unrepresentable. "The human being in the novel is first, foremost, and always a speaking human being; the novel requires speaking persons bringing with them their own unique ideological discourse, their own language."[16] Likewise, Sai Sai's vomiting becomes her own discourse, though it needs to be deciphered and translated. But does Sai Sai's enigmatic language simply create an impasse of understanding, and thus remain an enigma? Alternatively, is communication possible through the (un)translation of the language of the other?

Here is where Hak Ming's narrative intersects with Sai Sai's inaudible voice. At the beginning, Hak Ming aspired to become a doctor to "cure Sai Sai's vomiting", which, of course, ended with complete failure.[17]

[14] According to Kristeva, the female body has historically been construed as the origins of filth, and the mother is associated with childhood memories of toilet training. "What we designate as "feminine," far from being a primeval essence, will be seen as an "other" without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity. Kristeva, Julia. *The Powers of horror: An Essay on Abjection*, p. 58-59.

[15] By "the Derridean sense", I refer to the relationships between language and identity that Derrida problematises, although Sai Sai's silence varies from Derrida's negation of his "ownership" of French. In saying "I only have one language; it is not mine," Derrida points out that "possessing" a language does not mean that language is exclusively owned by its native speaker (*Monolingualism of the Other,* p. 25). In Sai Sai's case, she simply chooses to forsake language and shows her non-identification with the identity given by any common language (speech).

[16] Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich, "Discourse in the Novel". In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, p. 332.

[17] In light of this, it's worth noting that Hak Ming's subsequent vocational choice is in psychiatry, a discipline closely related to Freud's "talking cure." From the perspective of society, healing involves putting to an end a disgusting and disturbing abnormality (vomiting), but from Sai Sai's perspective, it amounts to ridding her of her own disgust at the vices of human society. Hak Ming's good intention, though stemming from sympathy, is nonetheless part of civilization's systemic attempts in taming abnormality by way of language.

Most ironically, he himself contracted Sai Sai's silence and nausea; and this infection of disease, I suggest, resembles a process of (un)translation, enabling the two individuals to dialogue with one another.

Hak Ming's life in Hong Kong turned out to be one of frustration and disillusionment. His political ambition was crushed by police brutality, his conservative mother's opposition, and his allies' betrayals. He was as estranged at home as he was overseas. He settled down with an obedient wife and a stable job as a private psychiatrist, but lost interest in both. He became melancholic, and anti-social, just like Sai Sai. Indeed, Sai Sai's whole person overwhelmed Hak Ming like a contagious disease, and this contagious nature is already foreshadowed in the two characters' first encounter:

> 這個小女孩，九歲，在我手掌裏嘔吐，全身發抖。她的母親被姦殺，而她只是靜靜而驚惶好奇的目睹性與死亡，我在此刻忽然記得毆打我的黑人警察的面容，是否因為如此，我差點亦要嘔吐出來。
>
> [This nine-year-old little girl just puked in my hands; her whole body was trembling. Her mother was raped and murdered while she silently witnessed sex and death with fear and wonder. Right then and there I suddenly recalled the face of the black cop who beat me. Maybe that's what brought me nausea?][18]

In this passage, what is significant is that the focus shifts from Sai Sai's puke to the person of Sai Sai, and finally back to Hak Ming's own trauma. Therefore, Hak Ming's nausea is not biologically induced by the odor of vomit, but psychologically induced by what Sai Sai signifies to him. It is Sai Sai's experience of sexual abuse, not her puke, that reminds Hak Ming of his own injury under police brutality.

Another point to note is that "blackness" serves as the trigger of traumatic memory. Sai Sai's blackness also reminds Hak Ming of his own trauma, perhaps because he and Sai Sai's respective traumas similarly leave a trace on their wounded, violated bodies. Furthermore, Hak Ming's cultural, political in-between-ness indeed resonates with Sai Sai's ethnically ambiguous, biracial identity, which is why sympathy could arise between two individuals tormented by non-belonging and uprootedness.

Later in the story, this sympathetic connection escalated into sexual desire, as Hak Ming's desire for Sai Sai's body co-occurs with escalating nausea. At a moment of epiphany, Hak Ming suddenly "understood" – translated – Sai Sai's enigmatic language of nausea:

> 我很想進入她的身體，同時我內裏卻升起一種欲嘔吐的感覺。此刻我突然明白細細的嘔吐：感情如此強烈，無法用言語掌握，只得劇烈的嘔吐起來。

[18] Wong Bik-wan, "Nausea", p. 41.

> [I was dying to enter her body; at the same moment, a nausea rose inside of me. Then I suddenly understood Sai Sai's nausea: her emotions are stronger than words can grasp, and so she had to vomit violently.][19]

This recognition of emotions "beyond words (*moufaat yung yinjyu zoengaak* 無法用言語掌握)" is a recognition of (un)translatability: the realisation of the limit of language, and the unending pursuit of meanings. Hak Ming's epiphany, his making sense of Sai Sai's vomiting, finally enables him to respond using the same language (as he infected Sai Sai's nausea). (Un)translation thus animates an intersubjective communication of affects and emotions that are unspeakable by language. Ultimately, this intersubjectivity is consummated in sexual intercourse, the literal union of bodies of differences.

Again, we may ask how these dramatic turns of events in "Nausea" address the question of "the story of Hong Kong": why is it so difficult to tell/say? I think there are two ways in which "Nausea" addresses this question. The first pertains to the complicated nature of the characters' experiences and sensations, such as the affliction of police brutality and sexual violence, which are "difficulty to speak of (*naan syut* 難說)." The second pertains to the challenges in using an alternative language. In the text, unspeakable traumas are communicated through images, touches, silence, and disease. In order to dialogue with Sai Sai, Hak Ming had to speak the new language of nausea, but this is a difficult undertaking (i.e., "difficult to speak"). At any rate, in a diverse, politically precarious society like Hong Kong, storytelling sometimes involves (un)translating the language of the elusive and the arcane.

4. Literary (un)translation: from *La Nausée* to "*Au Tou*"

In the above, I have described how linguistic and cultural translations operate in "Nausea", and how the metalinguistic expressions of traumatised individuals are communicated through interpersonal (un)translation. Next, I will consider how Wong Bik-wan's dialogues with its literary antecedent, Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*, through (un)translating mid-20th-century French existentialist literature into the context of (post)colonial Hong Kong in the 1990's.

Since *La Nausée* is a novel written in French, there are linguistic and cultural translation involved in Wong's writing of "Nausea." Moreover, it is also a translation of philosophical thoughts. In his foreword to the English publication of *La Nausée,* Hayden Carruth remarks on the travels of French existentialist philosophy to the U.S. and the immense popularity it gained in this side of the Atlantic in the 1960's: "Existentialism is not a produce of antecedent intellectual determinations, but a free transmutation of

[19] Ibid, p. 59.

living experience, it cannot be defined."[20] Now, Wong Bik-wan's "Nausea" furthers this transmutation by appropriating French existentialist literature to the last years of British Hong Kong. In the text, it is the characters (Hak Ming and Sai Sai) who travel and are uprooted; inter-textually, it is the thoughts and pathos of French existentialism that travels to Hong Kong. Such re-writing is therefore a performance of literary (un)translation, the dialogic process of *making new senses* out of a foreign philosophy.

Hak Ming is a thinly disguised literary double of Antoine Roquentin, the narrator/protagonist in *La Nausée.* Roquentin is a frustrated writer struggling to finish a book, just as Hak Ming is a failed political activist. Roquentin constantly eavesdrops on other people's private exchanges and makes self-righteous judgement, whereas Hak Ming listens to his patients share their secrets and anguish and formulates prognoses regarding them. Similarly living in other people's lives, Roquentin and Hak Ming are two distracted heroes who vacillate between social conventions of purposefulness and melancholic decadence. Antoine's lamentation "How can I, who have not the strength to hold to my own past, hope to save the past of someone else?" is especially apropos to Hak Ming's failure to cure his sick foster sister.

However, through important reconfigurations in her re-writing, Wong makes several qualifications on existence and its agony. The first is that in "Nausea" existence has an immediate connection to the real-life implications of politics. In general, Hak Ming's purpose in life and his identity are based on his political activism, the sweetness and bitterness of which pervaded his psyche long after his retirement from it. Sai Sai's nausea triggers in him the traumatic memory of political powerlessness. But most importantly, Hak Ming's final breakdown is directly caused by an imminent political upheaval, i.e., Hong Kong's prospect of the handover.

This is not to say that Sartre or his literary and philosophical works are apolitical; to the contrary, the writer/philosopher's activism has been well-documented. However, as Hayden Carruth points out, "Existentialism… is the philosophy of our age. No wonder the time and place of its greatest flowering has been Europe in the middle decades in our century."[21] Here, the purpose of pointing out the direct and immediate connection between personal existence and politics in "Nausea" is to highlight how it departs from the old context of mid-century Europe, and reframes "existential crisis" through a much more specific angle of political precarity from decolonisation. For example:

> 我沒開車，獨自走下山去。路上急走，只看著自己的腳步，也沒多想。到了城中心，下班的人潮已開始散去。有人在地車站口賣號外：「中英草簽號外！中英草簽！」抬頭仍然看見銀行的英國旗。主權移歸了，世界將不一樣。我走過中環的中央公園，有學生在表演街頭劇，鼓聲咚咚作響，在現代商廈之間回聲不絕，如現代蠻荒。一個戴面具的學生道：「我一覺醒來，英國變了中國.....」這世界跟我認識的世界不一樣了，不再可以決定自己的命運了，在

[20] Hayden Carruth, "Introduction", in Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*. Translated by Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964).
[21] Hayden Carruth, p. ix.

情慾還是政治層面均如此。但以前不是這樣的。在柏克萊，在 60 年代.....
以前不是這樣的。

[I didn't drive. I walked downhill by myself, staring at my own feet as I trotted, trying not to think. I reached downtown when the rush-hour crowds had dispersed. Some were vending newspaper extras at the subway entrance: "The Sino-British declaration was drafted! The Sino-British declaration was drafted!" I looked up, and the British flag stood proudly in front of the bank. Hong Kong was being handed over, and the world would never be the same. I walked past the Central Park in the district, where students were putting on a street performance; drum rolls reverberated ceaselessly between the modern business buildings, like a modern version of a barbaric celebration. A masked student claimed: "I woke up, and Britain has become China…" I didn't know this world anymore; one could no longer decide one's own fate, whether it be about desire or politics. It didn't use to be like this. In Berkeley, in the sixties… it didn't use to be like this.][22]

To Hak Ming, the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration is an earth-shattering moment ("the world would never be the same") as much as a verdict regarding his personal life ("one could no longer decide one's own fate.") The existentialist themes of absurdity, futility, and ephemerality are manifest in Hong Kong's handover, because for him, the handover deters any hope of self-determination, and indirectly speaks to his failure as an activist. The perplexing descriptor "modern version of a barbaric celebration (*jindoi maanfong* 現代蠻荒)" juxtaposes the modern and the ancient, which might insinuate colonial Hong Kong's inability to move forward (into democracy) and its forced retreat into (what is feared to be) a backward political system. Again, this echoes the temporal duality throughout the narrative and its associated meanings about the past and future. As Hak Ming's personal tragedy is placed within Hong Kong's politically precarious state, the fictional characters' existential crises also become synecdochic of the city of Hong Kong. In a sense, politics itself is existentialised: the city's own existence is at stake because its political identity is altered.[23]

The phrase "it's true about desire or politics (*cingjuk waansi zingzi cengmin gwan jyuci* 情慾還是政治層面均如此)" connects political precarity to Hak Ming's chaotic relationships, which marks the second major point of departure in Wong Bik-wan's "Nausea." In Sartre's *La Nausée,* Roquentin considers the absurdity of life largely in isolation; the agony of existence remains primarily an individual matter to

[22] Wong Bik-wan, p. 60.

[23] Wong Bik-wan's story, by virtue of being an homage to Sartre's existentialist novel, enables me to describe Hong Kong people's pre-1997 anxiety as an existential crisis. I see it as similar to Ackbar Abbas's remark on the same issue: "The anticipated end of Hong Kong as people knew it was the beginning of a profound concern with its historical and cultural specificity", which gives rise to a "culture of disappearance," whose "appearance is posited on the imminence of its disappearance (p.7)." Indeed, as I will elaborate in the following section, to speak of one's existential crisis does not mean one no longer exists, but that one is urgently called to reflect on existence itself. This, I think, is similar to the way in which "culture of disappearance" is not to be mistaken as "a disappearing culture."

confront. Roquentin is male, but gender is not underscored in his existential crisis. In contrast, in Wong's re-writing, the feeling of existence is brought about by the visceral, violent vomiting of another individual, who has a sexual, gendered body.

As quoted in the above, *La Nausée* and Nausea similarly depict the narrator "holding nausea in their hands." Roquentin is holding a "stone" in his hands. The inanimate object indicates Sartre's own preoccupation with the distinction between essence and existence, to which he answers by emphasising "existence is simply the fact that *it* is." In *Nausea* what Hak Ming's hands contain was none other than the vomit from Sai Sai, still emitting the odour and the warmth of another human being. Here, the feeling of existence is distinctly relational in nature: "the fact that the *other one* is."

By tracing nausea to *an other person,* Nausea de-centres the narrator/protagonist, and turns him into an observer. At the same time, "nausea" changes from an impalpable sensation in one's interior, to the violent, noticeable "vomiting." Thus, if "nausea" still symbolises the anguish in life, it no longer originates from one's self-examination, but from beholding another person's torment. Just as Sai Sai the inscrutable woman is the object of Hak Ming's narration but often eludes his understanding, likewise, the enigma of existence is no longer a solitary anguish, but rooted in the unknowability of the other, which is precisely what necessitates (un)translation. In *La Nausée,* Roquentin's own nausea is a symptom of his subjective existence; in "Nausea"*,* the hero gradually infects the disease from another suffering person as a symptom of intersubjective existence.

Furthermore, since the re-writing of nausea to "vomiting" underscores the corporeality of Sai Sai's female body, this re-writing is clearly gendered. Sai Sai's body represents fundamental alterity, an absolute "other", not only because the two characters are gendered differently, but because Sai Sai's gender, like her race, is associated to her individual victimisation as well as and the collective abjection of the groups that she represents (women, ethnic minorities, blacks, orphans). "Suffering is the origin of the consciousness", says Dostoevsky; in "Nausea", sexual violence is the origin of Sai Sai's suffering. Therefore, in her case, the consciousness that acutely feels one's existence is grounded in violated female bodies. No wonder her language is indeed difficult for Hak Ming (*naan syut*): since it is literally impossible (hence, untranslatable) for the male narrator to experience her suffering, thus her existence, and her nausea.

And somehow he did. In Wong's re-writing, this untranslatability – speaking the other person's voice despite its difficulty (*naan syut*) – is an answer to Sartre's question on existence. Because existence is relational in nature, Hak Ming's existential crisis is tethered to the difficult journey of intersubjectively experiencing the highly corporeal sensation of the abjected sexual other. This is considerably different from holding a stone in one's hands.

The last contrast lies in the respective endings of *La Nausée* and "Nausea". At the end of *La Nausée*, Roquentin fantasises about living a life untainted by self-hatred and remorse:

> when the book would be written, when it would be behind me, and I think that a little of its clarity might fall over my past. Then, perhaps, because of it, I could remember my life without repugnance. Perhaps one day, thinking precisely of this hour, in this gloomy hour I wait, stooping, for it to be time to get on the train, perhaps I shall feel my heart beat faster and say to myself: "That was the day, that was the hour, when it all started." And I might succeed -in the past, nothing but the past--in accepting myself.[24]

The ending of "Nausea" also mentions "the writing of a book", but this book is not the source of hope, but rather, a "lousy pulp fiction" stuffed with the unfathomable and laughable stories from none other than Hak Ming's own life.

> 我如此懷念６０年代，現在我的生命卻如此沈悶而退縮。香港的主權轉移，到底是為什麼。收音機此時卻播了約翰．列農的《幻想天堂》來。美麗的約翰。列農。美麗的加州柏克萊。美麗的葉細細。金黃色的過往已經離開我。我身後的車子響聲徹天。我此時感到整個世界都搖搖欲墜，難以支撐。我便下車來，在車子堵塞的紅綠燈口，想起我的前半生，我搖搖擺擺的扶著交通燈桿，這前半生就像一個無聊度日的作者寫的糟糕流行小說，煽情，造作，假浪漫，充滿突發性情節，廉價的中產階級懷舊傷感，但畢竟這就是我自己，也實在難以理解。…胃裏直打哆嗦，全身發抖，我彎下腰去，看到灰黑的瀝青馬路，我跪下，脾胃抽搐，就此強烈的嘔吐起來。
>
> [I cherish the '60s so much, and I now live a dull and timid life. And what is the purpose of the handover of Hong Kong? The radio starts playing John Lennon's 'Imagine'. The beautiful John Lennon. The beautiful Berkeley, California. The beautiful Yip Sai Sai. My golden past has left me for good. The honking from behind is deafening. Then I feel my whole world shaking, tumbling, losing its ground. I get out of the car, and right there at the crossroad crowded with cars, I recall the first half of my life. I stagger to a lamp post. My life is a lousy, vulgar fiction, sentimental, pretentious, unrealistically romantic, full of dramatic moments and cheap middle-class nostalgia, written by a bored writer to kill time. But this is who I am, after all, and it eludes me. … my stomach shivers with cold, my whole body tremulous. I bow my back and see the grey and black cement of the street. Falling on my knees, my insides twitching, I vomit violently.][25]

[24] Sartre, p. 178.
[25] Wong Bik-wan, p. 63-64.

These two endings similarly depict stooping, vertigo, and soliloquy, but differ in the heroes' relationships with the past. Roquentin's redemption lies in moving beyond the past and becoming someone new in future. In contrast, Hak Ming's tragedy is precisely the departure of his past and the dread for the unknown future. Beauty and hope only existed in the past, and therefore are lost: "the beautiful John Lennon, the beautiful Berkeley, the beautiful Yip Sai Sai." The future (for Hak Ming, and for Hong Kong) only offers confusion: "What is the purpose for Hong Kong's handover?" Because of this uncertainty, Hak Ming's narration only re-visits his golden past, but never imagines Hong Kong's future.

Like its beginning, Nausea ends with a montage of imageries from California and Hong Kong, consistent with the constant temporal shifts in the narrative. This is also true for Sai Sai's characterisation. She constantly shifts from one place to another, forever a sojourn, for which her name is a metaphor: a tiny leaf (floating in the air). As mentioned before, these geographical and temporal oscillations suggest these characters' "in-between-ness." In light of Hong Kong's own precarity in anticipation of the handover, they also suggest that Hong Kong itself is located in its dislocation.

"Dislocation" contrasts with the Chinese word for "existence/being" (*cyunzoi* 存在): *cyun* 存 connotes lastingness, and *zoi* 在 connotes geographical locatedness. Therefore, existence (*cyunzoi*) is undergirded by temporal and geographical constancy. Hak Ming and Sai Sai's stories defy both senses of constancy. Thus, their stories put themselves, and their city, into a similar existential crisis, which culminated in the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I address the question "The story of Hong Kong: why is it so difficult to tell?" by reframing it as a question of translating "untranslatable" identities. By analysing the linguistic, cultural, interpersonal, and literary translations in Wong Bik-wan's "Nausea", I have shown how literature from Hong Kong demonstrates the city's linguistic and cultural plurality. The ongoing process of (un)translation, I suggest, is what enables diverse individuals to communicate their traumatic experiences in a chaotic world. Lastly, just like its literary interlocuter (Sartre's *La Nausée*), "Nausea" is also a reflection on existence and its agony, where Hong Kong's political precarity in 1984 is translated into an unprecedented existential crisis for its citizens. This existential crisis is manifest in the instances of ephemerality and absurdity in the story, but it is most explicitly indicated in the narrator's response to Hong Kong's handover: "The world will never be the same!"

What can this past existential crisis tell us about Hong Kong's today, about its present and future? First of all, being in the midst of an "existential crisis" does not mean that one ceases to exist. To the contrary, just as the heroes in *La Nausée* and "Nausea" demonstrate, "existential crisis" is a poignant reminder of one's existence in the world. Nausea wakes us up from our numbing senses. Therefore, to speak of Hong Kong's past or present existential crises is not to say that Hong Kong no longer is; it means that the people

of Hong Kong are seeking who they are, and where they should go. Again, this is a discursive and a conceptualisation process: Hong Kong is in search for a cultural and political language to articulate its own story.

The relation between "existential crisis" and "dislocation" also illuminates the articulation of the "story of Hong Kong." If "dislocation" detaches Hong Kong from temporal and geographical constancy, then, "existential crisis" implies that narrating Hong Kong should not be anchored to a fixed and unchanging paradigm. There is indeed not one "story of Hong Kong" to tell, but many ways of telling a story. In short, we must embrace the interminability of dialog and translation: to see Hong Kong as a still developing story that we will never fully arrive at.

Hong Kong's multilingualism and plurality must also be conceptualised accordingly. Multiplicity is not so much about heterogeneity at any given point, as it is about change: Hong Kong is still multilingual because its linguistic environment is ever transforming and transformative. In the two decades after Hong Kong's handover, a most prominent linguistic change in Hong Kong is the increased use of Mandarin in commerce, education, and politics. Similarly, the current changes in Hong Kong's demographics are not minor or negligible, as tens of thousands of Hongkongers immigrated overseas in the past few years. The "Hongkonger" identity will not be limited to people who live in Hong Kong or those who speak Hong Kong Cantonese; it may include the still-growing Hong Kong diaspora, the new-comers to Hong Kong, and more. In the future, more changes like these, cultural or socio-political, might put Hong Kong into an existential crisis again. But as Wong Bik-wan's "Nausea" reminds us, the unpleasant and nauseating agony of existence is what animates us to translate who we are into words and expressions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is in part supported by the International Center for Writing & Translation Publication Support Grant. I am grateful to Jane O. Newman for introducing me to translation studies, and for organising the 2022 Translation Studies Graduate Conference at University of California, Irvine, for which a very preliminary draft of this article was written. I would like to thank Hu Ying for reading my translation of Wong Bik-wan's "Nausea" and providing valuable suggestions, and Ackbar Abbas for the many inspiring conversations that shaped this work. I am also deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback, and to the guest editor, Jennifer Wong, for her generous support. All opinions, omissions, and errors remain my own.

REFERENCES

Abbas, Ackbar, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010)

Cassin, Barbara, et al. (eds), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014)

Carruth, Hayden, "Introduction", in Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*. Translated by Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964)

Derrida, Jacques, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, translated by Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)

Jameson, Fredric, *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961)

Kristeva, Julia, *The Powers of horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

Leung Ping-kwan, "The Story of Hong Kong", translated by Martha P. Y. Cheung, in *Hong Kong Collage: Contemporary Stories and Writings*, edited by Martha P. Y. Cheung (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1998)

Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*. Translated by Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964)

Walkowitz, Rebecca L, "An Interview with Barbara Cassin", in *Think in Public: A Public Books Reader, edited by Sharon Marcus and Caitlin Zaloom*, (Columbia University Press, 2019), pp. 309–18.

Wang Dewei 王德威, *Zhongshengxuanhua yihou: dianping dangdai Zhongwen xiaoshuo* 眾聲喧嘩以後: 點評當代中文小說 [*Heteroglossia and after: A commentary on contemporary Chinese fictions*] (Taipei: Rye Publishing, 2001)

Wong Bik-wan 黃碧雲, "Nausea (*Ou Tu/Au Tou* 嘔吐)" in *Wenrou yu baolie* 溫柔與暴烈 [*Tenderness and Violence*] (Hong Kong: Cosmo Books, 1994)

Wong Nim-Yan, *The Art of Polyphony: A Study of Fiction by Wong Bik Wan (1961–).* Diss. The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong, 2004