

Questions of the PhD

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*Think of the long trip home
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
Where should we be today?*

—Elizabeth Bishop, “Questions of Travel”

Transforming from a tourist to an expat in Brazil, the American poet Elizabeth Bishop included the lines above in the title poem of her collection *Questions of Travel*. In the summer of 2015, I was facing a dilemma of a different nature, but one that nonetheless concerns traveling and the concept of home: should I accept the offer from the University of York to study for a PhD in contemporary poetry? While there were concerns about expenses, this was largely an emotional struggle. I had spent a year studying for my Master's degree at the University of Birmingham, but three or four more years in the UK would mean a much longer time away from home. Could I concentrate on my work if I returned to thinking of home? Would I lose my sense of “home” after a longer stay in a familiar, yet foreign country, finding myself out of place between two cultures? When I finished my studies, would I end up experiencing what Bishop wrote in the poem “One Art”—“I lost two cities, lovely ones” (178), which would in my case be Hong Kong and York? After some time in limbo, I chose not to lose any more time worrying. Instead, I recalled my belief in serendipity and accepted the offer from York. Now that the historic city is my temporary home, I have been making every endeavor to make my stay here worth the high price I am paying, in both financial and emotional terms.

My PhD studies largely operate through rounds of thorough, work-based supervision meetings. To my knowledge, the Department of English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), from which I graduated with a BA, has a linear, systematic learning and research pathway for PhD students. For Master's and first-year PhD students of the Department of English and Related Literature at York, there is a graduate training program which touches on some common literary research methods, such as building a bibliography and conducting archival research. Attending the program is, however, not obligatory for PhD students. Instead, we are only required to have meetings with our supervisor at least twice a term, and two meetings with both our supervisor and thesis advisor each year. While my supervisor Professor Hugh Haughton continues to recommend essential texts in my field and offer detailed, insightful advice on developing my argument and writing

style, my PhD study has been a self-driven, self-paced, and what he once called an “on-the-job” learning process. He meant I earned my MA in creative writing, for which I wrote a half-creative, half-critical dissertation, rather than carrying out full-fledged literary research.

Indeed, I need to constantly train myself to do my “job”—research in contemporary poetry. During my first degree in English at CUHK, there was step-by-step guidance on the basics of literary and linguistic studies. Moreover, I did not choose to work on an independent research project, which has now become compulsory for all final-year students. The MA program at Birmingham was also module-based, and I completed a range which prepared me for my creative portfolio and the accompanying critical essay. In contrast, here at York, with limited independent literary research experience, I was expected to identify and navigate a wealth of primary and secondary texts since the first supervision meeting, and continue to find my way through them and gradually develop a sophisticated argument about the poets I am studying.

Acquiring literary research skills while undertaking research has been a process of “blood, sweat and tears.” The expression was used by the panel at my PhD status confirmation.¹ My project investigates contemporary poets’ sustained engagements with the visual arts. Although the chair of the panel found the project original and viable, she expressed concerns about my discussion of the historical contexts in my submitted chapter and the clarity of my writing. Having recommended a few relevant texts to me, she stressed that the process of extensive reading, re-thinking, and re-writing comes with “blood, sweat and tears.” In hindsight, this phrase, old-fashioned as it might be, sums up my current experience in undertaking independent research. A passing sense of satisfaction from being told that “I write clearly and vividly” indeed only comes after days and nights of “sweat and tears” in my room. It has been more so as I see youthful students rushing to and returning joyfully from the university campus every day.

My PhD studies has, nevertheless, been much more than a solitary experience. In the field of literature at least, there have been abundant and constant opportunities to broaden my knowledge in my research field and beyond, to get into intellectual conversation with both young and established researchers, and to learn from the top players in academia. For instance, I audited two MA poetry modules, which cover

¹ As fulfillment of requirements of PhD students, an application for confirmation of my PhD status was made by my supervisor before the end of my second year. Besides his approval, the application was supported by a synopsis of my proposed thesis, a substantial draft of work in progress, a selected bibliography, and a timetable for completing the thesis. Upon the enrolment confirmation meeting, it was confirmed that I demonstrated achievement appropriate to my stage of research, and the ability to complete the thesis by the date specified in the submitted timetable.

a wide range of writers and historical periods. In each round-table seminar, we had animated discussions led by staff members renowned for their research on the topics concerned.

In this interactive environment, there was a lower sense of teacher-student hierarchy compared to what I experienced in Hong Kong. In each seminar, we were at ease to make or refute a claim, and raise questions or propose alternative critical perspectives. This made me recall the days when the apprehension of being called upon by the teacher kept each undergraduate student, including myself, poring over the textbook or printouts of PowerPoint slides, or pretending to do so.

Apart from auditing classes, I have been involving myself in interdisciplinary research activities. During my BA and MA studies, I rarely interacted with students from other humanities disciplines in an academic setting. However, I have been an active researcher at York's Humanities Research Centre (HRC), and was recently appointed as one of their doctoral fellows in recognition of my research quality and ability to communicate my research to a non-specialist audience. The HRC is a common set-up in many UK universities, providing arts and humanities researchers a space to exchange ideas and launch collaborative projects. There is a range of interdisciplinary, period-based research groups based in York's HRC, and I am affiliated with the Centre of Modern Studies. I have taken part in many conferences held at the HRC, including assisting in organizing a symposium dedicated to my supervisor's years of commitment to modern literature. I also take my participation in interdisciplinary conferences a step further by presenting my research at the annual conferences of modernist studies groups in other parts of the country.

On top of my research, I have found myself becoming what we now call a "multihyphenate." Benefiting from the vibrant scene of creative writing in the UK and the various part-time teaching opportunities at the university, I am establishing myself as not only a literary researcher but also a poet and teacher. In addition to joining poetry reading groups, I was funded by the department to attend poetry writing courses taught by the three poets whose work I investigate closely in my thesis (Pascale Petit, George Szirtes, and Tamar Yoseloff). While this informs my understanding of the cross-fertilization between their writing and teaching, I am also indebted to the three poets for their advice on my poems. For instance, I took up Szirtes' challenge to write a canzone, a medieval Italian poetic form where a group of end words are repeatedly used. I went through "sweat and tears" grappling with this intricate and demanding form, but doing so also allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my voice as a poet.

In recent years, the UK has become an extremely fertile ground for young writers to publish their work and develop their writing. I am thankful to *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* for being the first to publish my work and for repeatedly doing so, but otherwise I had never

thought of getting published internationally. As a resident of York for now, I submitted poems to Eyewear Publishing's Best New British and Irish Poets competition 2017. To my biggest surprise, one of my poems was selected and subsequently included in its accompanying publication. This led to my co-representing the book at Cúirt International Festival of Literature in Galway, where for the first time, I read my poems to an international audience, alongside much more established poets. Such recognition of my poetry has motivated me to continue to work towards a more mature poetic voice and seek similar avenues to publish my creative work. Although I did not win in another poetry competition, I was awarded a bursary for my writing as part of the Arts Council England Free Reads Scheme. The reviewer's in-depth report on my manuscript awakened me to the reason why I began to write as a poet: to challenge and transgress boundaries imposed by social and cultural norms. With this ambition in mind, I have been working towards a collection of poems about the experience of mediating psychological conflicts brought about by boundaries between cultures and beyond.

I want to end this reflection piece with some thoughts about my part-time teaching experience. For the last two years at York, I have been a part-time graduate tutor of the English department, as well as a tutor of the university's Writing Centre. Like my research, teaching in these two positions have been tremendously empowering. Using canonical texts that range from eighteenth-century novels to Victorian and modernist poems, I had to teach first-year English undergraduates various "Approaches to Literature," including close reading of the literary texts and understanding them in relation to history, theories, and literary criticism. This was both a test of my subject knowledge and a psychological barrier I needed to overcome. For a few years, I had been teaching at CUHK's English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU). It was, however, daunting to teach a group of students who speak English as their first language and have started their literary training at a young age. With careful and substantial preparation for each seminar, I managed to overcome my initial lack of self-confidence and eventually, gained positive feedback from both students and the module convenor. I had similar thoughts about being the first Asian tutor in the Writing Centre. For the last two years, I have been teaching there once to three times a week. I run hourly appointments and shorter drop-in sessions for both local and international students who are studying for different degrees, and I offer them advice on their essays and dissertations. Indeed, I would never ever have thought that I could be a teacher of both literature and academic writing at a university in the UK.

So far I have pushed the envelope on several fronts and achieved some success. With the hope to establish my career back in Hong Kong, I have chosen to write up my thesis there. The outlook for the development of arts and humanities in Hong Kong looks bright to me.

The University of Hong Kong has recently established the “Society of Fellows in the Humanities,” the first of its kind in Asia to recruit post-doctoral researchers internationally. The Hong Kong Baptist University has “creative media/practice” as one of its three strategic research clusters. *Cha* has launched its *Reading Series* and *Writing Workshop Series* which initiate exchanges between writers, scholars and the public. I am again grateful to *Cha* for having me as one of their workshop leaders. Grasping similar opportunities, I shall persist in my constant transformation as a literary researcher, teacher and poet in Hong Kong, my home city.

References

Bishop, Elizabeth. *Complete Poems*. 1983. London: Chatto & Windus, 2002. Print.