

A READER'S GUIDE

Hong Kong is unlikely to earn the title of world's most literary city but thanks to a series of book-centric initiatives and a new generation of writers, the city is reclaiming its literary heritage while keeping its eyes fixed squarely on the future

WORDS **CASSANDRA NAJI**
ILLUSTRATIONS **JONATHAN JAY LEE**



Visitors in search of the Lam Kwok Hotel are almost certain to be disappointed. The inspiration for the guesthouse in Richard Mason’s novel *The World of Suzie Wong* still stands on Hong Kong’s Gloucester Road, but instead of the louche hotel-cum-cathouse where Mason lost his innocence, literary pilgrims will find a luxury skyscraper hotel filled with smiling suit-and-tie types; a little different from Mason’s slightly dotty Cantonese concierge and welcoming working girls. The original hotel of Mason’s day was demolished and replaced in the 1980s and the only

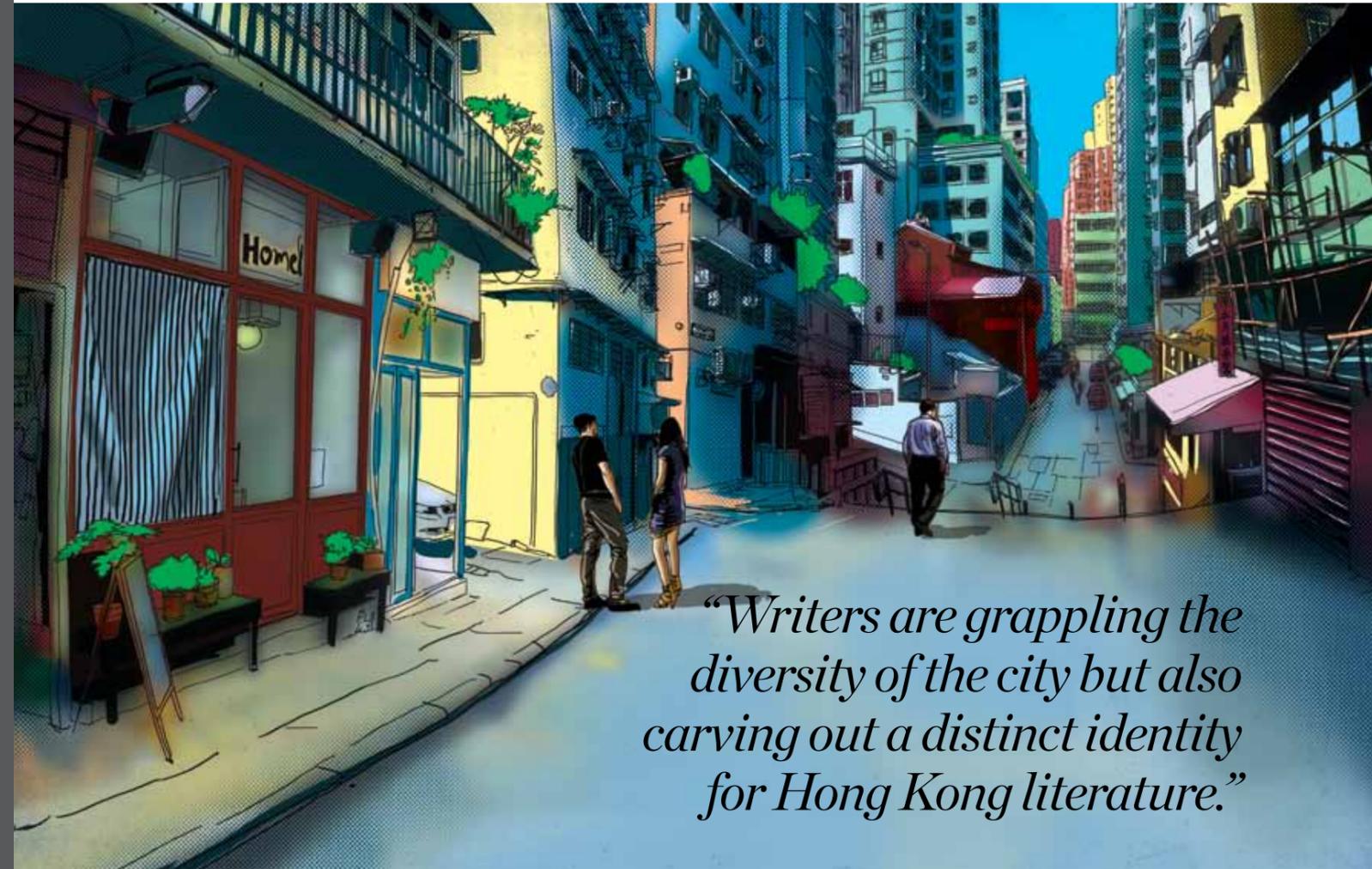
remaining relic of Suzie Wong is the name above the door. Similar stories are repeated across Hong Kong. While the city has inspired numerous writers eager to capture its cosmopolitan energy, the locations featured in many of its best-known novels have ended up as victims of the city’s relentless development. “The city is constantly eating itself,” says Daisann McLane, a Hong Kong resident of 12 years who gives cultural tours of the city. “Buildings get torn down and destroyed, new ones go up and even people in their 50s can’t take you to the places where they grew up. We live in

a city that’s completely plastic.” McLane hits the nail on the head when it comes to Hong Kong’s shape-shifting tendencies. The developed world’s densest urban area, Hong Kong has seen a large-scale urban regeneration in the 17 years since the handover. The city is now home to 8,000 skyscrapers, many of them built on land reclaimed from the sea. An estimated 97% of the population lives in urban areas and, with high-profile projects such as the development of the 16ha West Kowloon Cultural District under way, the regeneration shows little sign of flagging. For McLane and her tour company Little Adventures in Hong Kong, the city’s

greedy self-consumption could present a thorny problem when it comes to Literary Tours. “Here’s the thing about Hong Kong,” she says. “It’s not an obviously literary city. Hong Kong doesn’t have an iconic writer, like a Hemingway in Cuba or a Joyce in Dublin. You couldn’t pick up your guidebook and say, ‘Hey, Samuel Johnson lived here!’ because even if he had those places probably wouldn’t exist anymore.” However, according to McLane, Hong Kong’s apparent disregard for literary heritage could prove, paradoxically, a boon for the city’s contemporary literati. “I would argue that in a way this is a deeply

literary city,” she says. “It demands of the visitor a literary imagination, because if you want to understand the city you have to keep a version of it always in your head. The place where you have literature in your imagination is the space in which Hong Kong actually exists.” Xu Xi, one of the city’s foremost English-language writers, agrees that inspiration can be found amid the urban flux. “The more it changes, the more I look for the lost world underneath its veneer,” she says. “Writing is all about language and as geography changes, so does language.” Xi, who has set much for her work in Tsim Sha Tsui, an area largely reclaimed

from the sea over the years, sees the urban flux as a way to uncover fundamental truths. “What’s challenging for a writer like myself is to ponder whether or not the perpetual change can unlock something more significant to say about the human condition in the 21st century. Life is in constant flux anyway, so a city that’s a metaphor for the fast pace of change in modern existence provides a great source for a writer.” One event that embraces Hong Kong’s relentless urban and social flux is the Hong Kong International Literary Festival (HKILF). Now in its 13th year, HKILF celebrates English-language literature with a



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pan-Asian perspective, bringing together writers and academics to create a space for literary discussion in the city. The festival, which runs from 31 October to 9 November this year, is chance for visitors to see a side of Hong Kong they might otherwise have missed. “It’s a cool way to get to know the city,” says festival manager Jessie Cammack. “Even if you’re just listening to the questions people are posing, you get a sense of what’s going on in the city. We also try to tailor events to be specifically about Hong Kong and I recommend that visitors come and listen to local authors discuss their work. It’s definitely a good way to get to know the city and you’ll learn things you wouldn’t learn following the normal tourist trail.”

Details of this year’s event have yet to be finalised, but last year’s festival saw 23

international writers and 49 Hong Kong participants take part, with established names such as Germaine Greer and *Wild Swans* author John Chang rubbing shoulders with many of Hong Kong’s most notable up-and-comers. “We create this mix on purpose,” Cammack says. “The exchange of ideas is beneficial to everyone and can create some chemistry. We try to trust the diversity of the city.”

Cammack says that though the city’s literary scene can be hard to uncover for newcomers, a quiet literary renaissance is underway. “It can be difficult to connect with the city’s literary heritage and I think the literary scene is still working itself out as a defined community. But right now it’s a great city to be a writer in. There are new MFA programmes and small presses setting up, and what I think is inspiring

[for writers] is the mixture of the old and the new; this is a place with a complicated cultural and ideological identity, so writers are grappling with the city’s diversity but also carving out a distinct identity for Hong Kong literature.”

Over on the south side of Hong Kong Island, another ongoing project aims to bring Hong Kong literature out of the shadows. The recently inaugurated Southern District Literary Trail runs across the verdant southern coast, tracing the footsteps of five Chinese-language writers from the 20th century: Xiao Hong, Eileen Chang, Cai Yuanpei, Xu Dishan and Hu Shih.

“It’s always been our target to promote local tourism, as well as the artistic ambience of the southern district,” says Chu Ching-Hong, chairman of the

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Best books set in Hong Kong

trail. “Hong Kong’s fast development in the past few decades erased a number of heritage footprints from the past. However, people are now more concerned about conservation and there have been quite a number of successful rejuvenation projects of heritage buildings.”

Following the trail through the lush mountains and crystal skies of the southern district, the hustle of Hong Kong Central seems a world away. The first stop is Repulse Bay, the setting for *Love in a Fallen City*, a novella by Hong Kong’s most internationally renowned writer, Eileen Chang. It’s the story of star-crossed, war-era lovers Liusu and Liuyuan. The original hotel, a low-slung, art-deco building from the colonial era, was demolished in 1982 but the new apartments that were put up in its place contain a reconstructed dining room, The Verandah, that’s a replica of the space that inspired Chang.

But the Southern District Literary Trail

is not just about revisiting the city’s past; the initiative also involves city students and youth groups, the aim being to raise awareness of Hong Kong’s literary heritage among the younger set. “After drawing up the trail, we started to think of how to add a modern touch,” Chu says. “So we decided not to develop a trail with traditional sculptures of the literati, but to collaborate with Hong Kong Polytechnic University for a modern interpretation. Through that, five creative public art pieces were selected as landmarks of the Trail.”

The five sculptures, scheduled for completion by the end of this year, were designed by the students with the help of professionals and take a fresh approach to commemorating Hong Kong’s literary past. Chang’s sculpture will take the form of three public benches representing three phases of the writer’s life: the first bench will be surrounded by shrapnel, the second by piles of sculpted books and the third by a suitcase, representing her

MARTIN BOOTH'S *GWEILO*

Booth’s memoir is not just the story of a young white boy (a ‘gweilo’) growing up in 20th-century Hong Kong, but also the story of the city itself.

JAMES CLAVELL, *NOBLE HOUSE*

Clavell’s thriller about financial corruption and greed paints Hong Kong as a playground for the rich and unscrupulous, where greed is good and anything goes. Until you get caught.

ALICE GREENWAY'S *WHITE GHOST GIRLS*

Set in Hong Kong during the Vietnam war,

Greenway’s debut novel tells the story of Kate, a young girl about to lose her innocence.

JANICE Y K LEE, *THE PIANO TEACHER*

Lee’s Hong Kong is exotic and louche, as married woman Claire Pendleton embarks on an affair in the middle of the city’s sensual, chaotic post-war period.

PAUL THEROUX, *KOWLOON TONG*

Written in Theroux’s signature journalistic style, *Kowloon Tong* captures Hong Kong just before Handover, when the city’s future is a blank page.



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flight from Hong Kong.

Chu sees this collaborative element as integral to the success of both the literary trail and Hong Kong literature generally. “Literature itself, in fact, does not need physical existence to thrive. With our continued effort to promote it through different art forms, we believe that literature will become more lively in the Southern District and in Hong Kong as a whole.”

For Chu, the ever-changing streets and the transient nature of so much of the city are what make Hong Kong literature

so vibrant. “Hong Kong is famous for its cosmopolitan glamour and multi-cultural nature. Literary heritage is so diverse here,” he says. “We have been through colonial times, which opened us to Western literature, and wartime in the mainland brought us famous Chinese literati, which greatly enriched the literary development in Hong Kong.” While more than a few of the buildings from the olden days no longer exist, efforts to preserve the city’s literary heritage persist thanks to new generation of bibliophiles and history buffs. 

Check out our destination guide on page 137 and book your flights at bangkokair.com



เมืองฮ่องกง เติบโตและเปลี่ยนแปลงไปเร็วมาก นักท่องเที่ยวที่ได้อ่านหนังสือจากนิยาย อาจต้องผิดหวังเมื่อได้มาเยือนสถานที่ที่บรรยายไว้ในหนังสือ แต่กลับพบกับตึกสูงระฟ้าแทน ว่ากันว่า คนที่อายุ 50 ปีขึ้นไป ก็ไม่สามารถหาสถานที่ที่ตัวเองเคยอยู่สมัยเด็กๆ ได้แล้ว

แต่กระนั้น ฮ่องกงก็ถือเป็นสถานที่สร้างแรงบันดาลใจในการเขียนหนังสือได้เป็นอย่างดี ด้วยความจอแจ ความหลากหลาย ความทันสมัยของเมือง ถือเป็นแหล่งข้อมูลในการเขียนชั้นดี

ระหว่างวันที่ 31 ตุลาคม - 9 พฤศจิกายนนี้ เหล่านักเขียนฮ่องกงและต่างชาติ จะมารวมตัวกันในงานวรรณกรรมนานาชาติ เป็นโอกาสดีที่นักท่องเที่ยวจะได้มีโอกาสฟังแนวคิด ที่มาที่ไปของหนังสือจากตัวผู้เขียนเอง และถือเป็นโอกาสในการเรียนรู้เรื่องเมืองฮ่องกงไปในตัว เป็นประสบการณ์พิเศษที่หาที่อื่นไม่ได้

ฮ่องกงมีโด่งดังในเรื่องความหลากหลายของวัฒนธรรม ทำให้งานเขียนมีความหลากหลายตามไปด้วยผ่านยุคสมัยตั้งแต่จักรวรรดินิยมที่อิทธิพลของตะวันตกเข้ามา จนถึงยุคสงครามที่สิ้นแผ่นดินใหญ่ ที่นักเขียนชื่อดังมากมายมายังที่นี่ แม้อาคารเก่าๆ จะหาไม่ได้ที่นี่แล้ว แต่วรรณกรรมยังสามารถช่วยส่งต่อเรื่องราวให้กับคนรุ่นต่อไปได้

Hong Kong Literary Walk - Itinerary



1 FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS' CLUB:

The quintessential journalists' watering hole, the FCC has welcomed writers and correspondents from across the globe, including John le Carré, who set scenes from his spy thriller *The Honourable Schoolboy* in the gentlemen's lavatory. You'll have to find a member to sign you in if you want

to eat or drink at the FCC, but pop into the adjoining Fringe Club to soak up the atmosphere before you embark on your literary walk **FCC, 2 Lower Albert Road, Central, Hong Kong**

2 JARDINE AND MATHESON:

From the FCC, head straight down Ice House Street until you hit the imposing Jardine House, once Asia's tallest skyscraper.

Named after Jardine Matheson, the city's most famous 'hong', or trading house, the building was the main setting for James Clavell's *Noble House*, a tale of greed and corruption run amok on Hong Kong island. **Jardine House, Connaught Square, Central, Hong Kong**

3 FLOW BOOKS AND MUSIC ON HOLLYWOOD ROAD:

Head back on Hollywood Road towards Sheung Wan and drop in to Flow Books and Music, Hong Kong's oldest second-hand bookshop, for a leisurely look at their stacks of magazines and novels. **Flow Books and Music, 38 Hollywood Road, Central, Hong Kong**

4 MAN MO TEMPLE:

Further along Hollywood Road you'll find Man Mo Temple, dedicated to the gods of Literature (Man) and War (Mo). The air, heavy with incense, is full of the sound of temple bells and anxious students whispering prayers for exam success. Buy some paper 'hell banknotes' from the stalls outside and burn them in the pot-bellied stoves to placate the gods. **Man Mo Temple, 128 Hollywood Road, Central, Hong Kong**

5 POSSESSION STREET:

Undoubtedly Hong Kong's historic centre, Possession Street marks the spot where Commodore James Bremer, British naval commander, took official possession of the territory in 1841 (hence the name). The street is also the main setting for Timothy Mo's novel *The Monkey King*, which follows the adventures of luckless protagonist

Wallace Nolasco in post-War Hong Kong. **Possession Street, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong**

6 STAR FERRY:

Down towards the harbour, follow signs for the Star Ferry and make sure you get a seat on the upper deck. From here you'll be able to enjoy the one hour ride over to Kowloon-side just as Martin Booth's dissolute anti-hero

Sandringham did in *Hiroshima Joe*. Broke and washed up, Sandringham's one proud habit is to still pay full fare on the ferry for an upper deck seat with the European passengers. Thankfully such segregation is long gone, but the view of Hong Kong's glittery bay and skyline from the top deck is still as stunning as ever. **Star Ferry Pier, Central, Hong Kong**

7 CHUNGKING MANSIONS:

Once in Tsim Sha Tsui, take chaotic Nathan Road north past Chungking Mansions. Although not a literary spot, the unassuming apartment block is still a magnet for tourists thanks to its immortalisation in Wong Kar-Wai's 1994 movie of the same name. **Chungking Mansions, Nathan Road, Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong**

8 KUBRICK: Diverge left off Nathan Road to finish your literary walk at Kubrick, the bookstore coffeshop with adjacent cinema. Serving fresh lunches and imaginative coffees (cinnamon matcha latte, anyone?), the cafe is a great place to browse through some books on film and recover from your walk. **Kubrick, 3 Public Square, Yau Ma Tei, Hong Kong**