One City One Book Hong Kong 2025/26 edition

THE UNEVEN TREETOPS [EXCERPT]

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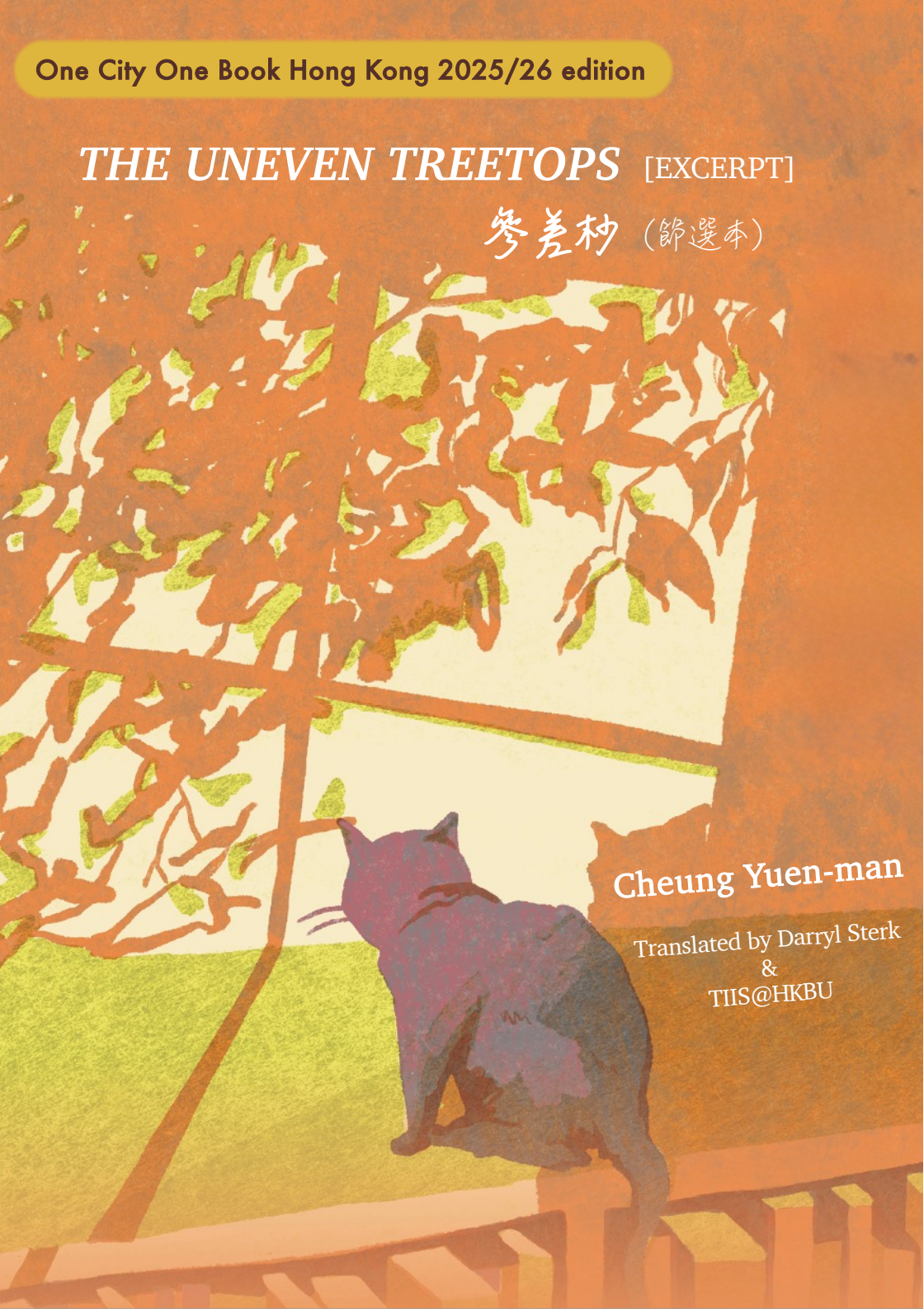

Cheung Yuen-man

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The Uneven Treetops [excerpt]
One City One Book Hong Kong 2025/26 edition

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我城我書 One City One Book Hong Kong

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Preface

One City One Book Hong Kong is a community reading programme. Each year, we encourage as many people as possible to read and discuss a single book. By planning and hosting activities related to the year's book, and by collaborating with other organizations, we aim to promote literature, reading, and civic engagement.

In 2025/26, One City One Book Hong Kong is proud to present Cheung Yuen Man's ***The Uneven Treetops*** as its selection for 2025/26. This collection includes works written over two decades, spanning two centuries, and witnessing the changing eras. The book is divided into five sections, covering reflections on youth, memories of loved ones, daily life within communities, and insights into literature—forming the author's personal perspective on life and responding to contemporary transformations. In this collection, the author explores various possibilities of essay writing, including lyrical, critical, and narrative styles—ranging from intense to subtle tones. She aims to develop a diverse and unique style of essay writing, pioneering new forms in the local literary scene. The essays vary in length, hence the title Uneven Treetops—even the smallest details are envisioned as branches extending towards the vast sky, reflecting her deep feelings of life's contradictions and reflections, rich and nuanced.

The cofounder of One City One Book Hong Kong, Dr Jeffrey Clapp, Associate Professor of LCS, said, "We live in the city, and we are jostled by facts and by faces. But the calm behind everything, the stillness which we sometimes see in the eyes of animals, is also here with us—especially when we are reading, and especially when we are reading essays like these, by Cheung Yuen Man. She wants to help us intuit that, although nothing has ever been as it should be, everything is nonetheless possible."

If you enjoy this excerpt, please purchase the book and find out the other essays in this collection. And of course, please join One City One Book Hong Kong for some of our free, public events in 2025/26!

The “Meow-ya” Civilisation

Cheung Yuen-man
Translated by Lam Man In with Darryl Sterk

Outside my window nestles a tiny jungle between the brickwork. Left unattended, it’s become a pocket of dense urban wilderness. From my vantage point, the ground is almost entirely shrouded by a tapestry of green, with occasional hints of yellow peeking through. An incongruous pastel crown has formed, as tender leaves have budded at the tops of a mixed stand of ageing trees—some leaves are orbicular, others acicular, and yet others fine as fluff—all merging into a green haze that hangs mid-air before spreading down the slope below. Branches stretch from the lush canopy, reaching vainly for the sky but always falling short. Instead of jutting jauntily out, they settle for supporting an obtuse mess of foliage.

The jungle has a distinctive demographic. Birds, dogs, even bats may visit, but stray cats dwell.

One evening, I witnessed a conference of cats. I counted thirteen! They gathered and scattered sporadically in the “clearing” beyond the jungle; they weren’t only waiting there for folks to come to feed them, but also crouching to catch a breeze. Like the jungle, the vacant lot was surrounded by residential buildings, first and ground floors within easy reach. Although an Animal Control roundup was just a phone call away, those cats weren’t afraid; they held their ground, so to speak, in their concrete demesne, with unshakable aplomb.

Untrimmed hedge beds were dotted with occasional offerings: cat treats and water in a used food container, which would often get tipped over by the evening breeze. I tried weighing it down with a rock, but it would always spill its contents overnight. The cats seemed to prefer drinking the washing-up water that was dispensed around dinner time by a pipe in a corner of the lot. They would gather by the ditch into which it flowed, to lap it up. Cats do love to drink their water running.

This cohort of cats was under the watchful eye of a friendly volunteer. Joanne would come for a visit, clean up the leftovers, and toss the container in the recycling bin. About once a month, she and her fellow volunteers would take the cats to be neutered at an animal welfare organization. Having remained silent for the entire journey, the cats would start screeching when they reached the “cat ward” at the clinic, where dozens of

other feral felines awaited the same fate; the air was thick with singular scents and palpable fear. Another volunteer smiled and patted the roof of the carrier. “Now, what’s all the fuss about?” she said. “You’re going to get your ID cards now—you should be pleased.” Each cat, whether it had been spayed or snipped, would be chipped and an eartip clipped. If it ever got caught by AC, that would be its get-out-of-the-SPCA-free card.

The next day, Joanne stood at the slope’s edge, watching the two kitties she had just released bolt away. At times, they caught queens—pregnant cats. Their kittens were born to suffer—to starve and shiver, or get harassed. Joanne carried on with cat capture, but couldn’t help self-doubt. “I’m not doing ‘the right thing,’” she would say. “I’m just trying to ‘set something straight.’” Occasional arguments flared among the volunteers; a certain “self-righteousness” was necessary to endure the relentless round of catching, feeding, losing, and mourning cats. Never arguing with anyone, Joanne always left resigned.

Thud! Something hit the ground and a clowder of cats converged. We went over to have a look: a white plastic vest-style carrier bag lay split open, spilling fish bones and scraps of rice. “Not again!” Joanne grumbled as she shooed the cats away. “How many times do I have to tell them? Last time that retiree on the first floor complained to the AFCD, which left a cat trap here for a full month! I guess he’s got nothing better to do than lurk by his window. Whenever he spots me walking past, he runs out and threatens to report me for feeding ‘wild cats.’”

We knelt and gathered up the table scraps in paper towels and returned them to the plastic bag. I tied the handles, walked to the roadside, and threw the bundle into the bin, only to spot a familiar calico cat crossing the street for the umpteenth time. When they could find nothing to eat in the jungle, the cats were forced to venture further afield. But this particular cat had always been a little simple; the concrete barrier on the other side was a food desert, hardly worth the danger of crossing the road. I took a small paper tube of cat treats from my backpack and shook it. The kitty turned at the sound and hurried back, purring for food. I led her to a hiding place before letting her feast. Clearly famished, she just devoured them. Leaving her there, I walked back to where Joanne was standing without mentioning what had happened.

After a long day’s work, I looked up to witness a resplendent sunset. The windows reflected the dying light like stained glass, transfiguring distant hills like magic mirrors. However tall or stunted they were, the trees stood motionless, as some kind of floral perfume drifted through the air. A plump starling rasped into the great beyond

from its solitary perch high above, as a lean cat padded toward the jungle's edge, dragging a long shadow behind it. No doubt about it, the clowder was a clan. Almost every month brought new members—tiny, fluffy kittens with alternating grey and black stripes, rolling around their mothers. If the newborns were lucky enough to survive, then they would briefly thrive. They could bask in the sun and loaf in the moonlight. But on the whole it would be a life of struggle, for food, turf, and freedom. They're in a race, I thought, against complainants, volunteers, and time itself, to make what they can of an all-too-brief span. They'd certainly made the best of it. That cat colony had founded a tiny, tenacious empire, glowing in the shadows in an urban jungle in my backyard like a latter-day Maya.

(Published in 2012)

Biographies of Rats

Cheung Yuen-man
Translated by Liu Jing with Darryl Sterk

After a hamster in a pet shop tested positive for Covid, the government announced the cull of over two thousand hamsters in pet shops and warehouses across the city. Rabbits, chinchillas, guinea pigs, and lab rats were condemned to die alongside. The government also urged citizens to turn in hamsters purchased after 22 December 2021. A video circulated of a father handing his son's birthday present to an official at the AFCD. The son was bawling as he clutched the farewell note he had written to his beloved pet, an ironic commentary on what the authorities described as a "humane measure."

I cannot claim innocence. I have kept rodents as pets; I have killed them, too. Before I had cats, I raised two hamsters. A student of mine said her pet hamster had given birth and the pups had to be given away. I took two grey ones, of the kind you could buy for just a few dollars on Goldfish Street. The one, which was always running on its wheel and scurrying about, was named Ropey. The other, which loved to sleep and mostly ignored me, was called Dopey. They were my first pets.

I had just started working and was still living in my family's public housing flat. Hamsters are a popular pet in a place like that. Living in such flats means having a limited income, but an enviable freedom from rent hikes or eviction. That's why tenants willingly accept various restrictions, namely: no drying clothes in public areas, no unauthorised renovations, no unapproved changes to occupancy, and no dogs. The ban on dogs is likely due to the small living spaces and the fact that a barking dog can cause a nuisance. If that reasoning holds, then crying babies or loudmouths shouldn't live in public housing, either. Anyway, only "small household pets" are allowed, which "refer to those that are prevalent in the pet market and are generally kept in cages, display cases, aquarias, or other containers so designed." Examples include "birds (except pigeons), hamsters, chinchillas, guinea-pigs, rabbits, tortoises, aquatic life, desexed cats, etc.." So says the Housing Authority. What do these animals have in common? A small range and a quiet nature, at least by human standards.

Hamsters have big tempers for such little creatures. All they do is breed or bite, all the time, so you'd better keep them separately. Beyond that, they don't need much: store-bought food pellets, a sipper water bottle, an exercise wheel, a stone chew toy, and a cage liner.

Their needs are simple, but for a rookie pet owner like me, they embodied novelty. Watching them stuff their cheeks with sunflower seeds or sleep peacefully on the hay was a reminder that life could be so simple. Hamster baths were highlights. They take sand baths. You buy sanitized sand, spread it in a stainless-steel dish, and get your furry friend to do its thing. It'll dig and flip, splashing sand all over the floor and itself, like a child having a riot. Done playing, it shakes the sand off, and returns to its cage to run on the wheel. At least Ropey would, with gusto. I was too young then to figure out why they loved running in circles so much. I later learned that wild hamsters need to run several kilometres a day to forage enough food. Life in a cage goes against their nature, so they resort to frantic running on the wheel to work off excess energy.

Once, Ropey somehow escaped from its cage. We searched the entire house but could find neither hide nor hair. My dad said it must be hiding behind the piano. So we turned off the lights and he shone a flashlight in the gap. "See?" My father doesn't have much formal education, much less than his three kids. That was the first time he impressed me with his practical knowledge. I asked him how he knew. "The country rats are like that, too." According to him, the rats in the countryside were much smarter than Ropey let alone Dopey: they would climb onto oil vats, dip their tails in, and haul them up for a greasy treat. They also feasted on ground coffee. In general, they have about the same taste in food as people.

To be honest, the country rats have a much better life than their city counterparts. They get to eat fresh food and drink running water. City rats mostly rummage through trash bins, eating kitchen waste and nesting in drains. When country rats get snatched by cats or black kites, they just get eaten instantly, while city rats are not so lucky: they mostly die from poisoning. The poison causes internal bleeding, leaving them extremely dehydrated, yet where can they find a clean water source? These rats practically die of thirst. My secondary school was on Kwai Shing Circuit. Students would either go up to Kwai Shing or down to Kwai Fong for lunch. Back then, Kwai Fong was just an old neighbourhood, with eateries on the main street and snack stalls selling fish ball, pork skin, and radish hodge podge in the back alley. Where there are restaurants, there are rats. One time I took a shortcut down a filthy wet alley. Suddenly, a rat darted across the way right in front of me. But that didn't scare me. Another time, on Kwai Shing Circuit, I glimpsed a rat dash past the post office. Seeing how matted its fur was, I couldn't help yelling, "Mangy rat!" In broad daylight, with people coming and going, it still wandered out and about; it was probably fleeing for dear life. It soon disappeared into the human crowd. People say that animals will find a hiding place to die in peace. I only hoped that the rat could find its own quiet grave to breathe its last.

The irony is, decades later, as the city has become more polished, the rats have also grown more fiendish. They have evolved resistance to poison, and have in general become hardier–the ultimate survival wisdom. Baited traps have become part of the decor. The area I live in now has a stubborn rat problem. One night, while running around the terrace, I heard a rustling in the bushes. Looking closer, I saw one of the shrubs shaking violently. I turned to look and lo and behold: a rat was rampaging inside. I had to change from running laps to running back and forth, to keep my distance. The neighbours put a glue trap outside the window, and soon caught a rat. But they didn't know how to handle it, so they just closed the window, leaving the corpse outside to dry. Before long rodent troops invaded. They climbed into the houses, gnawed at instant noodles, savoured lemon tea, and threw parties in the sink. The management office put glue traps by the bush beds, but all they got was a sparrow–a civilian casualty. So they planted the traps under twigs. How could the descendants of survivors of the Whitewash Brigade fail to see through these tricks? They still scurry up and down the water pipes on buildings in broad daylight, while the glue dries and hardens. An attempt to give residents the impression that the management is doing something is all it is.

My lack of fear might be because my family used to kill them. Like many kids of my generation, I lived in a piecework mill. Other mothers assembled plastic flowers or made clothes; mine sewed umbrella canopies. The living room was always piled high with canvas, providing abundant hiding places for rats. One day, the grown-ups decided to take action. My grandmother grabbed a rat by the tail from the pile, slammed it on the floor, picked it up again, and slammed it again, and again and again, until it was good and dead. My mother chased another into the bathroom. She came out later and said, "It got scared and jumped out the window." To certain death, I gathered. Yet another got caught in a rat trap and was scalded to death. I was told to sit on the sofa with my younger sister, our arms around our knees to keep our feet high—the best way to avoid a passing rat's bite.

"How cruel," my mother went on to say. Yes, those crude methods of rat control are inhumane and ineffective. In 1894, during the rat plague outbreak, the government called on Hongkongers to exterminate rats, offering three cents a tail. Some murdered rats in the most primal way, clubbing or slamming them like my granny did, causing blood to splatter and the virus to spread even further. Others smuggled rat tails in from Canton. I read a post on Facebook about someone beating a rat on the street. The rat was long dead, but the man wouldn't stop until the bone was exposed, as if to take revenge on his father's killer. The man-rat conflict is not 'personal' enmity, but a war between 'civilization' and 'savagery.' Rat ferocity seems to justify the cruellest methods,

thereby undermining the city-dweller's claim to cultivation.

So what is the 'civilized' way to kill rats? I have seen it, and carried it out, in my secondary school biology laboratory. The lab assistant would knock the white mice out with chloroform. Unconscious, the mice were distributed, one per group. My partner and I pinned the limbs down and sliced open the abdomen with a scalpel. At this point, the mouse was officially dead, so that we could learn about organ placement and blood vessel distribution in mammals. I didn't consider the difference between a white mouse and a street rat back then. I later learned that the white mouse is essentially a variant of the street rat, just that the former is mostly bred and raised for experimentation. Hence, the "lab rat." When I was in primary school, I once passed behind of a secondary school and was startled to see a cage of white mice behind a wire mesh: a big fat one with several pups nestled against it. One day, I suddenly understood where the white mice in the lab came from: the large one was the mother, a reproduction mechanism, constantly giving birth to experimental specimens. My classmates and I were at a playful age. We wielded the scalpel while chatting about romance and gossip. I remember dropping in on another class and dissecting a mouse with a friend, just to have a chat, about our schoolgirl preoccupations. Strangely, I can still remember the smell of the corpse: it wasn't just the smell of blood, but also the smell of flesh, like passing a pork stall, with red chunks of meat hanging in the air, fresh, warm, and raw; it was the same scent as that of the rat Granny slammed to death. The mama mouse in the cage stared at me with her red eyes, a hue that didn't seem to match the white of the bulky body and the wall behind it; it was like a bullet hole in a placid backdrop. I once discussed vivisection with a science teacher. He called it a necessary evil. In every dissection class, he would solemnly explain the significance, including the animal's sacrifice. If students didn't take dissection seriously, that was the teacher's failure. Make vivisection mandatory, and then send students on a guilt trip? I don't understand how the teacher's solemnity could avoid becoming hypocrisy. In fact, education authorities in Germany, Norway, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands have already prohibited animal dissection, let alone vivisection, in all primary and secondary school curricula. If Hong Kong had had such laws, would my secondary school self have chosen to refuse to dissect the mouse? Or would I have told myself that cutting it open was right and proper, even though I had no intention whatsoever of becoming a doctor or a forensic pathologist?

Lacking a human connection or relation, any life is just a tool, a number, or a phenomenon. Every year, millions of rodents are produced for use in experiments. Hamsters develop pneumonia after injection with Covid in some lab. The next thing we know, they're a vector, and the object of a cull, of over two thousand pets. From childbirth to storage,

a flight to Hong Kong, a bus ride to the pet shop, and then a final confinement in a black plastic bag, they never see the sun in their entire lives. Not once.

Now, Ropey and Dopey have found a place in the sun. They lived with my family for two years and passed away of natural causes a week apart. I wrapped their bodies in paper towel, placed them in a cardboard coffin, and buried them under an old fig tree in the courtyard of my old home. They turned into soil, nourishing the tree. The tree, in turn, produced oxygen, extended its branches—bird perches. Occasionally, when I take my son back and pass by the tree, I will point them out to him: RIP, Ropey and Dopey. Compared to their kin, who had on government 'advice' been handed over by panicked owners to the AFCD, Ropey and Dopey were lucky. The truth is, animals kept at home are effectively isolated, unlike their owners. Moreover, we had veterinarians, testing, and genetic sequencing to confirm transmission routes; a cull was not the only option. In the past, I didn't understand why Buddhists said reincarnating as a human beats an animal existence of eating, drinking, and defecating, without a care in the world. After having pets at home and observing different animals and their owners, I finally understood: a pet's well-being depends entirely on the character and knowledge of its owner. Not having control over fate is the root of their suffering. It seems like ours, too, at least during the pandemic, when resistance trumps peaceful coexistence. We humans don't seem particularly peaceful or happy these days. Perhaps we have a thing or two to learn from the humble street rat, which, with an enviable tenacity and ferocity, tests all poisons, set-ups, and malice, knowing only that that's the only way to get to the starting point of freedom.

(Published in 2022)

A Leaf Falls

Cheung Yuen-man
Translated by Zhou Zimeng with Darryl Sterk

I only heard that the Hung-Yip Bookstore chain was closing its doors after its last day. I tasted a hint of hypocrisy in my shock and grief: I hadn't been there in ages.

Even if I wasn't the killer, I'd stood by and let it happen, hadn't I?

When Hung-Yip—literally Flood-Leaf, the surnames of the proprietor and her former husband—opened, I was a budding writer. At the time, I submitted my work to a monthly called *Reader's Choice* that featured an interview with Ms. Yip every few issues. At the height of the Haruki Murakami craze, when cultured individuals (or at least the self-proclaimed ones) were all walking around with *Norwegian Wood* in hand, Ms. Yip opined, "Ryū Murakami mania is going to crash like a tsunami." I could almost see her sitting in front of me, nudging up her glasses before casting her spell, in a tone that combined prognosticator and oracle. Soon, Hung-Yip's display tables were piled high with Ryū Murakami's books. A perusal of *69* and *Almost Transparent Blue* told me that the two writers had nothing in common, apart from a surname, and literary fame. Ms. Yip's words rang true, and her prediction soon came true.

Back then, Sai Yeung Choi Street was known for upstairs bookstores-cum-literary salons with names like Hok Jeun and Greenfield. With the advent of Hung-Yip, there were also Elmbook, Dung Ngon, Man Sing, LuckWin and others.[1] There was always something going on; to use the Tourism Commission's favourite eponyms, it was "a Lan Kwai Fong for booksellers."[2] The studious flocked there to read, both books and people. For a while, I often met my fellow book lovers in Mong Kok; if we didn't want to go home early after dinner and dessert at Tai Leng Pat Kee, we'd head to Hung-Yip to hang out in the cozy window seats. On Friday nights, it stayed open until eleven; the floor-to-ceiling glass bore witness to Mong Kok at its hippest and hottest. One evening after I'd told a friend that the colour pages in a book have to come in multiples of four called "signatures," he half-squatted in front of me in mock adoration and said, "Is there anything you don't know?" I can still see him grinning up at me.

[1] The Chinese names of the bookstores are "學津" (Hok Jeun), "田園" (Greefield), "洪葉" (Hung-Yip), "榆林" (Elmbook), "東岸" (Dung Ngon), "文星" (Man Sing), "樂文" (LuckWin).
[2] Lan Kwai Fong has for instance been described as "a mecca for nightlife in central Hong Kong."

Years later, another friend told me about running into an old flame in the Causeway Bay branch. She turned around and left, only to spend the rest of the day in tears and the night weeping beside her sleeping husband. My only advice is to steer clear of old haunts, lest you fall into temptation. As for me, time has forgiven me my debts, just as I have forgiven my debtors. So it goes. Quite a few friends have mentioned seeing Ms. Yip's ex-husband helping out in the shop. The same place can bring people together and drive them apart, or the other way round.

Not long after I kept hearing the same news from different people, that money was tight, and Hung-Yip hadn't restocked for the longest time. At that I realised that I hadn't been in the longest time. "Busy" is the most plausible and intractable excuse in the world; but the lack of selection had gotten hard to ignore. One day I decided to pay a hasty visit to the Tsim Sha Tsui branch over lunch. Time had stood still on the bookshelves, I thought, as the image of Ms. Yip nudging up her glasses came to mind.

I went downstairs empty-handed.

The huge media coverage of two big chains—one from the Mainland and one from Taiwan—that parachuted in at the beginning of this year rang false: was word really spreading like wildfire among bibliophiles like me? I don't care for corporate Goliaths, and haven't visited either of them. It's the least I can do, out of respect for Hung-Yip.

Today, when I heard that Hung-Yip had closed, I was, as always, hauling a heap of unfinished work home. When the train stopped at Mong Kok Station, I had no intention of getting off to go pay my respects; as a fickle customer, I had no right. Every commuter had a heavy backpack on—a cross to bear. Each of us, I thought, is rucking down a lonely road to an unknown future; and although we only know where we've been, not where we're going, we carry on, without complaint.

(Published in 2005)

About the author

Cheung Yuen-man is a Hong Kong writer and language tutor at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She is the author of the essay collections *The Uneven Treetops* (2022) and *You Are Here – Stories of Campus Cats* (2020); and the novel collections *Farewell & together* (2025), *Those were the Cats* (2019), *Dust in the Wind* (2017) and *Sweet Honey* (2004). *Those were the Cats* and *Dust in the Wind* won the Recommendation Award of the Chinese Literature Biennial Award. She was also awarded the Jury Prize of the Times Literary Awards (2013), the First Prize of the Joint Literary New Talent Award (2012), and the Merit Award of the Hong Kong Literary Awards for Fiction (2010).

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