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International Dateline — A Brief Word in English

by **Jennifer Eagleton** (Department of Translation, The Chinese University of Hong Kong) <jennifereagleton@cuhk.edu.hk>

English (together with Chinese) is one of the official languages of Hong Kong, and until recently it was overwhelming used in schools and at universities. Yet despite over a century and a half of British rule and the presence of a large expatriate community which is on the whole fairly impervious to the Chinese language, English has not become a medium of cultural expression. For 98% of the population Cantonese remains the language with which they are the most comfortable. Thus publication in English holds an interesting niche.

Walk into a major chain bookshop and the English titles run like this: novels, textbooks, management and books on the economy, mostly imported and with a great markup in price. Tourist "Chinabilia" books are prominent, which reflect the still "orientalist" approach that some in the publishing world seems to have towards China—the exotic east, fengshui, tai chi and so on into inscrutability. Did you know the year of the dragon kicks off the new millennium? Food and phrase books, and glossy coffee table tomes of the sights and sounds of the region are also quite prominent. It is quite comforting really. But, if you live in but are not of this region, then the "exoticness" does wear off.

Oxford University Press (China) publishes high quality books on China and Hong Kong in addition to its educational books. Local university presses generally stick to academic and educational topics, with several of them hosting Asian studies institutes, which sees these publications travel far and wide to the international community of scholars and the dusty recesses of the library shelf. Actually many books that deal with Asia are published by international firms like **M. E. Sharpe** and other publishers with an international focus.

The English language textbook is king. Ditto dictionaries. **Addison-Wesley-Longman, Oxford** and **Macmillan** are leading this field. Recently "mother tongue" education has come into being, that is, in Chinese. Previously schools taught in English. Some still do, so this area is still important. It remains to be seen if the type of textbooks or number published will change. Whatever the case, the need to improve the English standard of local residents has been acknowledged by many local educational authorities.

Fiction? **Asia 2000** is probably the only publisher in Hong Kong to consider original English language fiction and non-fiction for publication. Expats were once the mainstay of this scene, but now they are slowly starting to publish more fiction by Hong Kong people. But it is hardly worth it. Only about 3,000-4,000 copies of a piece of fiction in English would be sold according to one publisher. There is a burgeoning literary scene for locals and foreigners, who turn up at poetry readings and book launches. Grants from the **Hong Kong Arts Development Council** help publishers like **Asia 2000** to publish non-profitable things like poetry.

Hong Kong Chinese who write in English, do so for a variety of reasons—they could be returnees from a lifetime of education abroad, where they have grown used to English as a

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Profiles Encouraged

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Current job: I now work at the Department of Translation at the **Chinese University of Hong Kong** (since September 1999) as a research assistant. There I organize our publications (of an academic nature) and edit/write other stuff that lands on my desk. I am also working on a **Chinese-English Translator's Dictionary**. Now I am at "S."

Other jobs: When I arrived in Hong Kong in October 1997 I worked at the same university as a editorial assistant at the **Research Centre for Translation**. This unit publishes a journal of Chinese literature in English. People sent in translations, then they were vetted. (Its URL is www.cuhk.edu.hk/renditions).

Education: In 1991 I decided to go to university to study Chinese (BA) at **Sydney University** (because I wanted to study something hard!) at the same time I was working from 4pm-12midnight five nights a week at a large **Sydney Hospital** as a radiographer. Actually, I worked as a radiographer for over 10 years before changing careers in Hong Kong. In September 1994 the **Chinese Education Commission** gave me a year's scholarship to study in Shanghai.

More education: I had an interesting time in Shanghai, going to Chinese opera, being interviewed on local television and radio and travelling around. I made friends with a local family and often did things with them. They taught me more than the language school that I attended! I returned to Sydney in August 1995 and in the following year started a MA in **Asian Studies** at the **University of New South Wales**. I worked parttime in medical centres while I was doing this. I found out about my first HK job after seeing a notice at my old university department.

In my spare time: I do freelance work to gain further experience. I edit stuff for a Website on Chinese history, edit a journal for the Centre of Asian Studies, the **University of Hong Kong**, write for a health Website. I have had a few articles published, including one in the **Asian Studies Association's** magazine "Education About Asia." I have started to do book reviews for one of the major English newspapers, *South China Morning Post*. I like freelance, but I also like a regular income to pay the rent. I am glad I got my start in publishing in HK—people say it is easier than their home country!

What else? I do not do so much reading now as when I worked in hospitals! I have been involved in a poetry group and I am in a walking group and usually go walking most weekends. People do not think of Hong Kong as a walking place, but there are many country parks (complete with monkeys that steal your food). Lots of hills to climb, and beautiful areas where you will not meet many people. I am vice-president of **Women in Publishing Hong Kong**. I joined this in January 1998 to meet other people and find out about publishing. We have monthly meetings with a speaker. I do voluntary editing for the charity Worldvision and organize a reading roster for a lady (a famous journalist, 87) who is losing her sight.

Other ambitions: My aim one day is to write a book! (need a good idea first!)

Piece of advice: If you want to do some esoteric subject and everyone advises you against it, do it anyway. I did my BA, primarily for interest, never imagining that it would end up in a job! 🐼