

# Hong Kong's Local Consciousness in Xi Xi's "My City"

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## Abstract:

Ellen Cheung, known by her pen name Xi Xi, is a highly esteemed writer who has held a prominent position within Hong Kong's literary and cultural landscape for several decades. Xi Xi's novel "My City" is a seminal work that explores Hong Kong's local consciousness. It primarily focuses on the people of Hong Kong in the 1970s, depicting their daily lives, such as moving houses, going on outings, and seeking jobs. Thereby, it presents an unprecedented and strong sense of local identity. The novel is imbued with warmth, optimism, and positivity, expressing the Hong Kong people's identification with their local identity and their heartfelt attachment to Hong Kong as their home through the voice of innocence. This paper examines the local consciousness in the book from two perspectives: textual analysis and the socio-historical background. The expression of Hong Kong's local consciousness by Xi Xi in "My City" is of great significance as it injects vitality into Hong Kong literature and significantly promotes the deepening and development of Hong Kong's local consciousness in its nascent stage. Thereby fostering cohesion and a sense of belonging among the people of Hong Kong and collectively striving for the city's future. This article promotes understanding the unique value of Hong Kong's cultural identity and provides references and insights for future research.

**Keywords:** Hong Kong literature, Xi Xi, My City, Local consciousness

## 1. Introduction

Hong Kong has developed a unique literature under special political, economic, and cultural backgrounds, and a distinctive local consciousness is the unique style of Hong Kong literature [1]. Hong Kong's local consciousness germinated in the mid-1970s[2]. As a classic representation of local consciousness in the history of Hong Kong literature, Xi Xi's "My City" shows the sense of identity and belonging of the people of Hong Kong to the city of Hong Kong in the 1970s.

In recent years, several scholars have conducted in-depth studies on the local consciousness of Hong Kong's "My City." Zhao Heifang analyses the relationship between "My City" and Hong Kong's local consciousness in light of the stages of Hong Kong's consciousness development [3]. Wang Qiang's new type of relationship and the construction of its modern subject point out that Xi Xi pioneered the Hong Kong literary tradition of local consciousness [4]. Liang Yanli explores the construction of a new relationship between man and city and its modern subject in "My City" from the perspective of urban writing, pointing out that Xi Xi pioneered the Hong Kong literary tradition of local consciousness.

Taking "My City" as the object of study, this paper exam-

ines the embodiment and construction of Hong Kong's local consciousness in the book through socio-historical analyses and close readings of the text, to expand the understanding of local consciousness in literary creation and enhance the perception of the uniqueness of Hong Kong literature.

## 2. Key Concepts

### 2.1 The main plot of „My City.“

Serialized in Express in 1975, "My City" depicts the daily lives of Hong Kong people in the 1970s, such as moving houses, going on excursions, and looking for jobs. The story begins with a child called A Guo moving to a new home with his family due to his father's death, leading to a series of characters who tell of their different encounters. These characters include A Guo's sister, A Fa, Aunt You You, friend Merry Mak, neighbor A Bei, and friend A You, who is faraway. They all have different stories and occupations, but their common characteristic is that they are all "small citizens" who love and hope for "our city."

### 2.2 The Concept of „Local Consciousness“

Scholar John Lim pointed out that the formation of "local consciousness" relies on the construction of the "Hong

Kong community” [5]. This concept is borrowed from the American nationalist theorist Benedict Anderson’s idea of “imagined community,” which refers to a collective forming an “essentially limited but sovereign political community” through shared imagination [6]. Within this theoretical framework, “My City” shapes an imagined “Hong Kong community” through writing Hong Kong stories, thereby constructing a sense of local identity.

### 3. Textual Analysis of „My City“

#### 3.1 Writing of Collective Memory

Hong Kong’s local consciousness “comes from the exact experience of living” [7]. As Xi Xi said in the preface of the single-volume edition of “My City,” she decided at the beginning of the novel to “write about the younger generation, about their lives and their city” [8]. “My City” is written as a collective memory of the common living experience of Hong Kong people at that time. For example, the daily entertainment and pastimes of the ordinary citizens, how young people dress, and many street names or things in the book reflect local life at that time. For instance, the young people in the book, such as A Guo and Merry Mak, who traveled away from the island during their holidays, are extremely consistent with Hong Kong society’s hiking and camping craze in the 1970s. It was recorded in “Hong Kong 1974” that hiking, picnicking, and camping were very popular among Hong Kong people, and it was common to see people flocking to the New Territories on weekends. As a result, the Urban Council, through its executive arm, the Urban Services Department, increased the number of parks in Hong Kong from 103 to 301 [9]. Additionally, Merry Mak, in the book, dressed in jeans, rags, and long hair, was also a common style of young people at that time, which is a true collective memory of Hong Kong people. Familiar yet unfamiliar place names such as “Fat Sha Tsui (Tsim Sha Tsui),” “Sleeping Lion Rock Tunnel” (Lion Rock Tunnel), and “Tai Moss Island” (Po Toi Island) in the book will also make Hong Kong people who were born and grew up in Hong Kong smile. These were the personal feelings of Hong Kong people towards the city at that time, and the sense of local community was deepened and sublimated through such resonance.

#### 3.2 Revealing Social Problems

Several events in ‘My City’ are taken from real Hong Kong society in the 1970s. Xi Xi has mentioned that during the creative process of ‘My City.’ However, there was a pre-set outline, the content and ideas of the novel were constantly added and adjusted according to current events and social phenomena at any time. The major

events of the time, such as the oil crisis, the population problem, environmental pollution, the water shortage in Hong Kong, and the law and order problem, were all incorporated into the story. This concern for the social problems of ‘my city’ also manifests local consciousness. The Text, ‘There is no place for me to put my feet, and the places where I can put my feet are piled up with rubbish’ [8], is an indictment of environmental hygiene in Hong Kong, which fully reflects the poor sanitary conditions in Hong Kong at that time. In the 1960s and 1970s, Hong Kong’s air-conditioning and refrigerators were not popular, and the air always smelled rotten and stuffy; there were hawker stalls and stalls everywhere, and rubbish was seriously polluted; smoking was not banned in public places, and cigarette butts could be seen everywhere [2]. In the book, the words, ‘Apple’s brand of instant novels is a great invention,’ is a satirical reference to the fast-food culture rampant in Hong Kong at that time [8], implying people’s superficial and entertaining attitude towards culture. In Hong Kong, where the pace of social development was getting faster and faster, people’s need for in-depth reading and thinking gradually diminished, and they were more in pursuit of instant entertainment and excitement. Additionally, the small living space in You You’s house reflects the common housing problem of the people of Hong Kong. ‘My City’ creatively combines a fairy-tale-rich narrative with an anxious obsession with reality in a childish yet darkly philosophical way, revealing real social problems through subtle yet humorous satire, reflecting concern for Hong Kong’s local affairs, and at the same time can inspire readers to pay attention to their local community [1].

#### 3.3 Language Style

“My City” employs an innocent and playful language style, full of childish fun, to present a group portrait depicting vivid individuals from the general populace, such as A Guo, A Fa, A Sha, A You, and Merry Mak. These young people resonate with Hong Kong, which was in its prime at that time, forming the lifeblood of this city. Xi Xi uses tender strokes to create the image of A Fa, a pure and kind-hearted little girl who loves to set alarms and make plans, writes letters to her neighbors, and dreams of “creating a beautiful new world when I grow up.” A Fa, full of vim and vigor, could be any young person in Hong Kong. They cherish and preserve the city as the subject, accompanying and promoting its development.

In the 1970s, Hong Kong, still a British colony, could not obtain a clear nationality, and its national identity was ambiguous. Facing such dual political and spiritual loss, the people of Hong Kong chose to place their suspended identity dilemma in their “city citizenship.” The younger

generation boldly and frankly shouted out, "I like the sky of this city," "I like the sea of this city," "I like the roads of this city," and "Bless my city!" Xi Xi observed with the eyes of a child and used a playful tone to show Hong Kong people's sense of identity, belonging, and local consciousness towards Hong Kong in "My City" in the 1970s. "If I wake up in the morning and see the clear weather, I am happy..." [8]. The innocent and naive statements in Xi Xi's "My City" flow naturally, and the short poems tell readers in simple and childish words that happiness is not a luxury but something that can be seen and obtained with a stretch of the hand. Life in "my city" is as comfortable and joyful as the name "You You" suggests.

The novel is filled with people's love for "my city," but this does not mean that "my city" is a utopia. The writer aims to depict the real world and can choose not to highlight "negative elements," but it is necessary to be honest about them. Xi Xi does not dissipate the real problems in the process of urbanization. Instead of using brutal social reality as the critical core or adopting traditional realism techniques, she created a "fairy tale realism" approach. She made new sense through the "defamiliarization" of social reality [10]. Russian formalists Shklovsky and Mukarovsky proposed the prominence of literary language: literary language is a deliberate deviation from everyday language, and its main function is to highlight language, aiming to overcome the automated tendency of people reading texts and make readers feel the unique surprise and strangeness of literary language's expressive power [11]. Most of the text in "My City" writes about trivial and mundane life events, depicting Hong Kong people's daily lives in the 1970s, such as moving, outings, and job hunting. There are neither coherent and logical plots nor exciting and interconnected stories. The entire literary text presents a "collage"-like structure. Due to countless repetitions, actions and languages in daily life often go directly into cognition and overlook feelings [12]. If Xi Xi had written about these things that people have long overlooked in a general tone, "My City" would have become boring to some extent, and its aesthetic value and artistic quality would have been greatly discounted. The aunts are like both "lotus roots" and "lotus flowers," and the light shining through the window is like slowly cooked oatmeal... The old world is restructured through a childish perspective, and the strange and magical narrative shows the often overlooked aspects of many possibilities, thus stimulating people's enthusiasm and curiosity to further explore Hong Kong's local culture and discover more new things about "my city." The ultimate goal is to hope for beauty and brightness, as written in the novel - "to create a beautiful new world."

Xi Xi's linguistic practice of the "naughty child style" is

not simply to highlight childish fun but to bring out social issues through the perspective of a naughty child while attempting to deconstruct the crisis of life and reconstruct the issue of Hong Kong identity with the language of a naughty child [13]. The author gives the characters the right to choose, allowing them to envisage a bright blueprint for self-development and the world's future or to rebel against traditional, narrow-minded concepts. In the novel, A You likes boats, sailing, and wandering. "I must feel it myself," A You decides not to follow the traditional path of exams and promotions but to plan his life scenario. He and A Guo have had different trajectories since their school days. While A Guo is busy with campus life, A You has been working hard to become an electrician on a ship. From dismantling and reassembling his electrical appliances to enrolling in a vocational night school to study electrical engineering and working for a shipping company, A You finally became a marine electrician, fulfilling his dream of traveling worldwide. As he embarked on his journey, two young men sitting before A You complained about never wanting to return to this dirty and suffocating city. However, A You looked at the port, gradually fading away, and said, "Goodbye, my beloved city, beautiful and ugly [8]." A You, wandering in a foreign place, is like countless Hong Kong people who have their hearts tied to the city. Wherever they go, they have a strong sense of identity with Hong Kong and are full of love and nostalgia for this city. On the ship, A You encountered a carpenter who only spoke Mandarin. The divide between the mainland and Hong Kong hindered communication between the two sides due to language barriers. Nevertheless, A You was willing to learn Mandarin from the carpenter every day, and he even wrote in his letter to A Guo, "It would be great if you could also get to know my carpenter friend [8]." Does this represent the curiosity of Hong Kong's young people towards the mainland of China at that time? Idealistic and passionate people will seek back the once-existing connections between the two sides. As a city where Chinese and Western cultures collide and blend, A Guo, one of the representatives of Hong Kong's young people in the novel, said that if someone asked him whether he would prefer to be a descendant of Alexander the Great, Peter the Great, or any other emperor, he would choose to be a descendant of the Yellow Emperor [8]. Readers may glimpse the identity recognition of the younger generation of Hong Kong towards being the descendants of the Chinese nation.

Light and graceful writing does not necessarily equate to superficiality. Xi Xi's childish, bright, warm writing style is profound and intense. Through the perspective and language of a naughty child, she provides a new interpretation of Hong Kong people's sense of identity.

#### 4. „My City“ Social and Historical Background

Modern Hong Kong's new literature emerged in the 1920s and flourished in the 1940s, coinciding with a significant influx of intellectuals fleeing political unrest on the mainland to Hong Kong. The creative endeavors of these "writers from the south" were known in academic circles as "refugee literature." The exiled mainland "refugees" felt the loneliness of exile from their culture and faced the dilemma of identity in a different political environment. Although they lived in Hong Kong, their writings unconsciously rejected Hong Kong and looked back to their homeland for inspiration. The nostalgia and sense of loss among the southern writers infected the colonial youth at that time, such as Xi Xi and her literary friend Kun Nan. Xi Xi, using the pen name "Lun," published a sonnet, "On the Lake," at the age of sixteen, which ended with the lines: "The flowing water should know our shared anticipation, the year when we can return to our long-lost hometown?" The sentimental and gentle poetic style was very similar to the tone of the Southern writers. Behind their imaginary writing lay a disordered cultural politics, which, in hindsight, seems like an unbelievable karmic connection [14].

During the Cold War isolation period in the 1950s and 1960s, Hong Kongers re-emphasized the May Fourth Movement. For Hong Kongers, the May Fourth Movement was the starting point of modern literature and the enlightenment for native literary creation [15]. After the 1970s, the evolution and agitation of Hong Kong's native consciousness indicated, to a certain extent, the inheritance and development of the May Fourth literary and artistic traditions by Hong Kong's modernist trends. The ideas of "enlightenment" and "saving the nation" were given broader and more cutting-edge meanings in the new era and environment. Hong Kong, once known as a 'cultural desert,' now exemplifies the dominant trend in Xi Xi's 'My City' as 'Heaven blesses my city,' showcasing a remarkable transformation. The increasingly powerful discourse and gradually emerging sense of mission can be traced back to the May Fourth tradition of worrying about the nation's fate and seeking a way out, which had a crucial influence on Xi Xi's creation. Xi Xi was born in the mainland but grew up in Hong Kong, where she embarked on her true creative journey. Xi Xi's works demonstrate a strong concern for reality, especially "My City," which depicts Hong Kong in the 1970s. The lively and bustling marketplaces, sincere and kind residents, and romantic and passionate youth, the author's warm brushstrokes make this modern city no longer stiff and cold. She cares about the insignificant and overlooked characters at

the bottom of society. Additionally, she pays attention to the hidden concerns behind Hong Kong's prosperity. The creation of writers like Xi Xi and their influence on Hong Kong literature has continuously strengthened the realist spirit of May Fourth's new literature, which cares about society and life. This is the most precious spiritual wealth inherited by Hong Kong literature from the motherland's literature, becoming an indispensable literary existence in Hong Kong's literary scene [16].

Xi began writing about Hong Kong's urban culture in the early 1960s [17]. In the 1970s and 1980s, Hong Kong culture, led by Cantonese pop music and Cantonese films, spread widely. Under the colonial system, Hong Kong's economy rapidly developed with the support of Western developed countries, transforming it into a prosperous metropolis. At the same time, the geographical and kinship ties of the new generation of Hong Kongers, who were born and grew up in the city, made them focus their attention on the city itself, seeking identity and belonging within Hong Kong's native culture. Xi Xi, who has witnessed the city's development in areas such as welfare systems and urban planning, enjoys the opportunities and privileges this modern city offers. Most of her series of novels take Hong Kong as the subject, narrating and examining the city. She uses the eyes of Hong Kong people to depict the city's cultural customs, historical relics, and urban landscapes; she writes about the collision between tradition and modernity, the integration of individuals and groups, and the intersection of history and the present in Hong Kong. As the initial stage of Xi Xi's construction of Hong Kong's local consciousness, "My City" focuses on young Hong Kongers who feel and explore the uniqueness of this city from a brand-new perspective. The novel is permeated with warmth and love, presenting the local complex and value beliefs of Hong Kong's young people and exploring the recognition of Hong Kong's local identity in the absence of nationality. The increasingly strong urban attributes and gradually formed urban imagination under Xi Xi's pen have awakened and even reconstructed Hong Kongers' understanding of their local identity [17], adding a strong and vivid stroke to Hong Kong literature.

#### 5. Conclusion

The complex historical and political factors have led to Hong Kong's long-term cultural disorientation and identity crisis. Hong Kong literature in the 1970s and 1980s, to a large extent, awakened Hong Kong people's urban experience and urban memory. "My City" is the mindset and belief of young Hong Kong people. As a classic representation of local consciousness in the history of Hong Kong literature, Xi Xi's "My City" explores the local identity

of Hong Kong under the condition of nationality absence. This article makes a deep study of the local consciousness of Hong Kong in Xi Xi's "My City" through social and historical analysis and text analysis. This research is of great significance for understanding and exploring the local consciousness of Hong Kong; it also provides reference and inspiration for literary studies on similar themes.

#### Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed alphabetically.

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