

The Wayback Machine - https://web.archive.org/web/20161112161038/http://www.esthercheung.hk/?p=41

Contact Webmaster

Contact Department of Comparative Literature, HKU

Dr. Esther M.K. Cheung

In Loving Memory



About

Books

Academic Papers

Essays and Poems

Book Reviews

In Memory



A Biography

📅 March 11, 2015 👤 admin 📁 [About Dr. Cheung](#)



Thomas Au
(Esther Cheung's husband)

Esther's life was intertwined with the lifeblood of her city. A coincidence; or perhaps even an ineffable bond.

Search ...



Recent Posts

- [A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema](#)
- [In Memoriam: Dr. Esther Cheung](#)
- [一輩子做了三輩子的事情](#)



Esther was born to a destitute family in 1958. In the late 1950s,

Hong Kong was not as metropolitan as it is now. Esther's family was housed in a squatter area where she lived with her parents, an elder brother, and two elder sisters. Her father was once a construction worker, but later engaged in the catering industry, targeting at the grassroots. Her mother took care of the family and the chores. Esther had a very close relationship with her elder sisters, May Fong and Mei Ching. When the squatter area was later demolished for redevelopment, most inhabitants including Esther's family were resettled into public housing in Kwun Tong. Since then, Esther became a local "KwunTonger". Esther's nieces Bonnie and Wing subsequently joined the family living in Kwun Tong. Together with her mischievous nephew Ming, the three of them were most loved by Esther. Esther remained in Kwun Tong until she got married and left the place with abundant and yet conflicting memories. In many of her works, Esther often adopted the perspective of an impoverished family to gaze into her city from and beyond the window frame.

In the 1960s, Hong Kong continued with the development and expansion of manufacturing that began in the previous decade. Light industry became prosperous. The life of Esther's family was inseparable from the industry. Esther was not particularly good at handicrafts, and so she was not impressed by such lifestyle. Instead, Esther was always keen on reading and writing. In her primary years, she often went to the library of the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong near home. Like Lu Xun's Kong Yiji, she had once "borrowed" a book home. Esther studied in Lok Sin Tong Primary School with good academic results. It was said that only a few boys academically excelled her. In particular, Esther was outstanding in English literacy. At that time, May Fong, who was a few years older than Esther, went to study in a secondary school on the Hong Kong Island, receiving more westernised education. Coming from the grassroots, Esther was inspired by her elder sister. She wanted to follow May

—向老師、學者、作家張美君博士致敬

- 從抽屜裡的記憶，尋找回歸生活的勇氣 —— 念張美君老師
- 張美君博士追思會小冊子

Creative Projects Initiated by Dr. Cheung

- [Multiple Voices](#)
- [Writing the City](#)
- [沙巴翁的城市漫遊](#)

Archives

Select Month ▼

Categories

- [About Dr. Cheung](#)
- [Academic Papers by Dr. Cheung](#)
- [Books Published by Dr. Cheung](#)
- [Essays and Poems by Dr. Cheung](#)
- [In Memory of Dr. Cheung](#)

Fong's footsteps to study on the Hong Kong Island. Esther did not want to confine herself in Kwun Tong; she aspired to learn beyond the place.

In the 1970s, Hong Kong underwent many changes that shaped its future. Economically, it reinvented itself from a manufacturing base into a financial centre, progressing rapidly into a modern city. Esther went to Ying Wa Girls' School, an eminent school in the mid-levels with an affluent neighbourhood. It took her more than an hour to reach school everyday, commuting through different modes of transport including walking, the ferry and the bus. Esther coped with the arduous journey with perseverance. The physical fatigue, however, was a challenge. Fortunately, she had a classmate, Caroline, as her good companion. Once a pair of great friends, Esther and Caroline each went on to pursue her own cause after secondary school graduation. However, they reunited when Esther fell sick. Caroline accompanied Esther in walking through the last phase of her life journey. Their friendship has transcended differences in personality and faith as well as family and education background.

As May Fong became a teacher, Esther's family managed to subsist out of poverty. Apart from financial support, May Fong also represented pillars of strength in many aspects. Esther's family was a traditional Chiu Chow family. Speaking the Chiu Chow dialect, relatives, neighbours and friends of the family were all grassroots. The local accents and customs, exacerbated by some feudal traditions, were symbols of backwardness to Esther's dislike. May Fong brought home information about western civilisation, bridging the cultural gap between home and society. May Fong was the reason why Esther could be so well brought up. In many ways, she represented a combination of the "father", "mother", and "sister" figures for Esther. Esther had a close bond with her elder sisters, May Fong and Mei Ching. They both took great care of Esther through the last phase of her life.

At around primary five, Esther became intrigued with the question of life and

◦ [Reviews of Dr. Cheung's Books](#)

death. As Hong Kong began to prosper under British colonial rule, like most young people, Esther naturally favoured Western beliefs and religions when posing questions about life. In addition, Esther studied in a Christian secondary school, where she met Rev. Lee Ching Chee, for whom she had lifetime admiration. As a Christian, not only did she attend church every Sunday, Esther also strived to search for the meaning of life through Christianity, and proactively implemented her religious beliefs into daily life. Indeed, Christianity had a great impact in shaping her personality and values during her adolescence. Although Esther had departed from her religion after university graduation, she still very much embodied the values of her faith. Some faithful friends, including her husband, came into her life at this juncture as she strived to internalise her Western beliefs. Together, they searched for ways to put their faith into actions in life. Although they parted into different paths eventually, their friendship was unfailing. One of them was Heidi, who took great care of Esther when her health was ailing.

The early 1980s marked a period of confusion for Hong Kong, as well as for Esther. Both were perplexed by their future prospects. As Hong Kong was disconcerted by the question of handover, Esther was also unclear of her own direction. Her academic results during university education were good. However, she was unsure how to further her academic pursuit. Influenced by her elder sister May Fong, and in line with her own personality traits, Esther became a teacher – what a godsend! Esther was a natural inspiration for her students. Whether in secondary school or university, in Hong Kong or the States, in literacy or literature, her teaching was extraordinarily infectious. She impressed her students with her abundant knowledge. More importantly, her passion and enthusiasm in the subjects she taught, and life in general, had won her lifetime admiration and affection from her students. In 1984, as the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong was signed between the PRC and UK governments, Esther also exchanged vows with her Big Boy,

whom she had dated for 6 years. A year later, the couple left Hong Kong to the States, not to emigrate but to explore some new possibilities.

The weather in South California was like autumn all year round. It gave Esther not only a breath of fresh air, but also new experiences and challenges. The plan to the States was to further her husband's career pursuit, as Esther was uncertain of her own. The couple supported each other in the foreign country, and led a very humble life funded by scholarships and bursaries. Esther had, in particular, made countless sacrifices. In a university environment, it became natural for her to build up on knowledge. She went to study in the library and visited varieties of classes with a sense of insecurity. At the same time, Esther embarked on her postgraduate degree. There were twists and turns in those years. She was made to return to Hong Kong for a period of time due to some life circumstances. However, Esther had experienced an inconceivable urge for knowledge with greater self-confidence, and derived pleasures from the pursuit. During her interrupted stay in the States, Esther made friends of different backgrounds and orientation, from whom she observed the complexity and contradictions of different diasporic experiences. Coupled with the experiences of her mother and mother-in-law, Esther had successfully knitted and woven an image of diaspora in many of her important works. Indeed, Esther had a very close acquaintance from the States called Tracy. Their friendship grew and became more precious for over 20 years. Tracy also cared for Esther when she was sick.

The gunshots in 1989, coupled with the uncertainty of the handover in 1997, led to a wave of emigration in Hong Kong. People in Hong Kong began to migrate to other countries in large numbers. At the same time, Esther completed her postgraduate degree in Arts, and returned to Hong Kong from the States. She started to teach English literacy in the Language Centre of the Hong Kong Baptist University. Later on, she moved to teach humanities. Teaching gave her

the greatest sense of achievements. She was well respected by her colleagues and students. When her husband subsequently returned to Hong Kong, Esther saw prospects for stability. She then returned to the academia and began her doctoral degree with care and vigilance. She started off with a focus on literature, but chances and her interests led her to the terrain of cultural studies. She studied under Professor Stephen C.K. Chan. Her doctoral thesis explored the Hong Kong cultural phenomenon arising from the 1997 handover, with an analysis of the transformation of Hong Kong literature and cinema in the midst of historical tides. In 1997, when Hong Kong officially returned to her motherland, Esther gave birth to her daughter Sabrina, whom she took great pride. Sabrina not only resembles Esther in her appearance, but also inherits Esther's love and passion for arts and literature.

Esther's doctoral degree and teaching excellence did not guarantee her a smooth pathway. She left the Hong Kong Baptist University. Unexpectedly, she reached a turning point for her academic and professional pursuit. Esther secured a teaching contract at the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong. Under the nurture of the niche of cultural studies and guidance from esteemed scholars like Professor Ackbar Abbas and Professor Leo Ou-fan Lee, Esther progressively developed her unique academic standpoints. Her increasing oeuvres had invariably attracted conceivable attention in the academia.

In 2003, Esther lost her mother during the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong. Amidst numerous political, economic and social changes, the universities in Hong Kong began to re-align themselves in pursuit of new direction and excellence. The year of 2005 witnessed the restructuring of the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong and the departure of its forerunners for their own individual pursuits. As Chairperson of the department, Esther was left with a difficult situation. However, she waded through such

difficult times, and sustained the department almost entirely on her own by virtue of short-term funds and self-financed projects. She even managed to raise and enhance the profile and reputation of the department successively to become a prominent constituent of the Faculty of Arts. Esther also had on numerous occasions held forums and exchanges on academic, cultural and cinematic issues in order to foster her students' cultural insights. She pioneered the filmmaker-in-residence scheme which was later adopted by the University of Hong Kong as the University Artists Scheme hosted by the Faculty of Arts. Notwithstanding her substantial administrative duties and academic researches, Esther remained one of the most beloved and popular teachers of the department. Her courses were always oversubscribed, even with increased quotas. She introduced multi-faceted, flexible and novel methods into her teaching, and inspired her students through experiential learning. In 2011, Esther was the recipient of the Outstanding Teaching Award at the University of Hong Kong. Many of her doctorate students received awards and recognition for their dissertations, and she also supervised countless dissertations at postgraduate levels. Esther exhibited extraordinary perseverance and made unrivalled achievements during her days in the Department of Comparative Literature.

In early 2014, Hong Kong experienced torrents of evolving confrontations. At the same time, Esther exhibited ailing symptoms of her health. She endured her physical suffering and mental distress, and completed teaching of that semester. During her last class, Esther and her MALCS students found it difficult to part. It was not until after 10pm that she left the classroom, exhausted. She wished that she could walk into the classroom once again. However, the medical treatments in the ensuing few months achieved little but to devastate her willpower. Feeling despaired at times, Esther had never given up hope. By September 2014, Hong Kong was in severe ailment. Esther's disease went even worse. On 5 October 2014, Esther posted on Facebook a drawing titled "If God

would sympathise, do protect our city". That was her last public comment. It was also the very last time she was able to connect and share the pain and sufferings of her city. Thereafter, only those closest to her could accompany her, through the days of recurrent physical illness and emotional distress. Her students could but only spend everyday worrying and awaiting sporadic news of her. On 9 February 2015, a few days after lichun (the Beginning of Spring), which marked the beginning of a year in Chinese traditions, Esther sadly passed away. Her city was left to mourn, and lament the ruthlessness of life.

(Translated by Anny Leung and Jenkin Suen)

Powered by [WordPress](#) and [Smartline](#).