

From Singapore to Canada, from Psychology to Writing, and from Poetry to Fiction: Conversations with Lydia Kwa

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ABSTRACT

While a visiting scholar at the University of British Columbia, the interviewer chanced to meet a young talented emerging writer Lydia Kwa residing in Vancouver, Canada and discussed at length with her various issues centering on her virgin novel entitled *This Place Called Absence*. The following interview is a result of the exchanges between Lydia and the interviewer.

KEY WORDS

Lydia Kwa
novel writing

Lee Wu Lan

Mahmee

Buddhism

Wu Chieh-tien

This Place Called Absence

ah ku

Chow Chat Mui

Yen

Sigmund Freud

T'ang Dynasty



Lydia Kwa

The interviewer came across Lydia Kwa's writings at the University of British Columbia bookstore and was spellbound by the design on the cover of a vacant chair of *This Place Called Absence: A Novel* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Turnstone P, 2000). Her name re-surfaced in the Asian Heritage Month (May-June 2002 held in Vancouver) when she was scheduled

to give a reading. Through Rita Wong, I was able to connect with Lydia who kindly agreed to converse with me on her writings. Short-haired, medium height, dressed casually, extremely friendly, and softly spoken with a Singaporean accent, she met me at 4 p.m., May 29, 2002, Room 404, Buchanan Tower, UBC. During an hour exchange, she eloquently unveiled the process of writing and clarified some of the important issues in her first novel.

Lydia Kwa, born in Singapore and arrived in Canada in 1980, received her undergraduate education with a major in Psychology at the University of Toronto. She continued her graduate studies in Clinical Psychology at Queen's University, Kingston and got her MA and Ph.D. before moving to Calgary, and then Vancouver. A clinical psychologist in private practice, she has since 1986 engaged in writing more seriously, producing a volume of poetry, *The Colours of Heroines* (Canada: Women's P, 1994) and capturing public attention with her novel entitled *This Place Called Absence* in 2000. Her poetry and short story have

appeared in journals and anthologies.

Leung Yiu-nam: When and how did you become interested in writing poetry and fiction?

Lydia Kwa: It is hard for me to pinpoint a particular time when I became interested in writing poetry and fiction. While in Secondary One (seventh grade) in Singapore, my English Literature teacher asked me if I could lend her my composition book containing the fiction I wrote in class. That was in 1973. No one else made any comments—positive or negative—about my writing during childhood and adolescence. I became more serious about my writing starting in 1986. I was a graduate student in clinical psychology at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. I joined a writers' group at that time, an informal workshop that met Monday evenings. I was writing poetry and short stories at that time. If you had asked me then, I would never have imagined that I would eventually write a novel.

Leung: With a MA and Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, in what way and to what extent did you find this training to be helpful in your creative writing? Is there any influence on your portrayal of characters?

Kwa: I can remember that even as a child, I was very attuned to the feelings of others. As a young adult in Singapore, I was planning to go into medical school, but my interest and fascination in the human psyche steered me into psychology. Going into Clinical Psychology seemed a natural progression from that early curiosity. In my writing, I find myself wanting to explore complexities of the human mind, and how rationalities and irrationalities motivate people.

Leung: In your course description on creative writing at Simon Fraser University, you indicated that "technique" and "process" are important. As a writer, what comes first—technique or process—in your writing? How would you overcome blocks to writing?

Kwa: As a writer, I pay a lot of attention to the writing process. It is not because I don't value the importance of technique, however. It just happened that I returned to writing in adulthood very much in a context of experiencing the value of process primarily through that group in Kingston. The workshop was focused on technique, but I learned a lot from the sharing we did about the writing process. I gradu-

ated from Queens and left Kingston for a job in Calgary. Since then, I have participated in two writing workshops: one led by Daphne Marlatt and the other by Alice Notley, both of whom value personal process as integral to the development of technique. Overcoming blocks to writing: a big question. I suggest—somewhat in jest—that we writers replace Nike’s slogan “Just Do It” with “Do It Anyway.” What I mean is, there are lots of reasons why I may not feel like going to the computer to write today, but if I want to pass the exam, I have to study, right? Another example of what I mean: When you want to learn a new skill or improve an existing one, like T’ai Chi 太極, yoga 瑜伽, and a new language, you can’t learn it by just reading a lot of books or attending lectures. You learn through practicing. A simple notion, and nothing original in that wisdom, but not very simple in the sense that there are all kinds of internal and external resistances to “Do it Anyway.” I have a few strategies for overcoming obstacles. For example, I don’t stick to a consistent daily writing schedule. I vary my work habits. Sometimes I write rather intensively every day for weeks; then at other times, when the well of inspiration seems a little too deep to reach into, I turn to research and other pleasant distractions. I don’t give myself a hard time about that. Encountering a block might not be a bad thing since it probably signals a natural physical/mental exhaustion, or a certain point of stasis. Nothing’s moving, and maybe I have to steer away from it temporarily and look for new ideas and inspiration, nurture my imagination again. I’m not a strong believer in staring at my empty screen or page a long time for the ideas and inspiration to come. Besides, I can sometimes be a most restless person and might not endure sitting. Two minutes of restlessness can be too much. It varies. Other times, in my most intense writing episodes, I’ve sat and written or edited work for up to five or six hours at one sitting. I sometimes wonder where inspiration comes from. It’s still a mystery to me. The whole process remains intriguing and that probably is what pulls me back to the writing again and again. On the other hand, that compulsion towards writing can become a demon within oneself. It’s powerful. If you don’t know how to channel that energy, you might be overwhelmed by that demon.

Leung: You are a poet and novelist. Did you discover whether

there are any significant differences between writing poetry and novels? As some reviewers have pointed out, your novel is "lyrical" and "poetic." Perhaps, you adopted some of the techniques from writing poetry into writing a novel. Is there any difference between the use of language in poetry and novel?

Kwa: There are a lot of differences between writing poetry and writing novels. Writing a novel requires endurance and persistence. At least that has been my experience so far. *This Place Called Absence* took a lot of energy to write. It called for a different kind of engagement between the self and the work. Tremendous energy, sustained attention as well as commitment. In my case, it took me five years to finish writing it. I would suppose that the closest equivalent in poetry would be writing a very long poem, but that would not likely be more than 150 pages, and this sheer difference in terms of length itself requires a thoroughly different mindset. And different muscles! While writing my first novel, I worked with motifs and musicality of the language. In that sense, I am functioning as a poet working with narrative and the lyricism of language. For me, novel writing is primarily about the development of poetic and philosophical ideas within a narrative framework.

Leung: Can you tell us how you feel about being a writer?

Kwa: I often feel tremendous loneliness. When I commit myself to working on a particular writing project, it develops into my primary relationship. It is difficult to relate and integrate that commitment with the outside world, the daily routines of life and social relationships. While I was struggling with my first novel, I often tipped the balance towards being more intensively involved with writing than with daily life. A lonely experience yet rather intimate, definitely very compelling. I am just at the beginning stages of my second novel. I struggle with mixed feelings: Should I go through another period of isolation and loneliness? Should I let myself get drawn into that world of the imagination which is endlessly fascinating and full of wonder?

Leung: What is your reaction/response when someone labels you as a "feminist" writer due to the fact that the novel delineates women's community, lesbian love, and female bonding?

Kwa: We seem to rely a lot on labels to describe each other. Dif-

ferent people have different definitions of the word “feminist.” Lots of women—and some men—have written about the bond between women, sometimes a bond that includes a sexual element. I wouldn’t consider that all of these writers are necessarily feminist because of the subject matter they depict. I don’t set out with an agenda to have my writing meet any “feminist” standards; at the same time, I am a feminist writer in the sense that I am interested in how societal structures have effects on children, women and men. But it is not as if society were some kind of amorphous, abstract force apart and purely external to individuals. I am interested in how the person, her or his sense of herself or himself in the world, and the collective collaboration or—in the worse cases, collusions—of people, create those very systems that end up imprisoning the individual and others. I am interested in the outcast and the queer elements of society and the possible manifestations of those terms. I value the contributions of activists in the outer political sphere, but I have recognized that I am drawn mostly to speaking to issues of injustice, cruelty, suffering, compassion and liberation, through my writing. I want to do that mostly by raising questions. Instead of providing easy answers or making judgments. I work hard in my writing to stay open to the complexities of human nature, and I suppose I like readers who are also willing to take responsibility in how they choose to read and intersect with my novel.

Leung: You were born and grew up in Singapore and left there in 1980. What role does the memory of Singapore play in your works?

Kwa: I missed Singapore a lot when I first left. I have drawn on many of my own memories of Singapore, my life there. Memory and forgetting and shifts in memory play a significant role in my work, in both poetry and prose. In *This Place Called Absence*, I challenge readers to consider whether memory and imagination are always two different entities. For example, are the *ah kus* (sex trade workers) part of Lim Wu Lan’s (the contemporary protagonist) ancestral memory, or did she make up their lives? Is there such a thing as Carl Jung’s collective unconscious? If so, how does that work? In my current writing projects—a second novel and a suite of poems—I find myself moving into slightly different realms. For example, questioning the line be-

tween dreams and waking life; or setting my work in historical and geographical contexts that are unfamiliar to me.

Leung: Can Singapore serve as an imagined community the same way as Chinatown does in some of the writings of Chinese Canadian writers?

Kwa: In the sense that memory can sometimes be viewed as a reconstruction and reconstitution of facts into a complex or layered narrative, yes, I suppose so. But I would hesitate to say that what I have done with Singapore and the *ah kus*' world is comparable or similar to what Chinese Canadian writers have done with their Chinatown narratives.

Leung: Did you happen to have some role models in your writing career?

Kwa: Of course. I have read a lot of books that have inspired me. Even when I don't like the sounds of what I read, that can be useful. I have been inspired by many writers. When I started to take my writing more seriously in 1986, I was particularly inspired by the poems of Adrienne Rich and Bronwen Wallace. Since then, I have been influenced by a whole host of writers, too many to mention here. But two novels in the recent past which have been very important to me are Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and Kenzaburo Oe's *A Quiet Life*.

Leung: So much for background information. Let's concentrate our discussion on *This Place Called Absence*. The novel came into being after a long process of writing and re-writing—a span of five years? What kinds of difficulty did you encounter in the course of writing?

Kwa: At first I couldn't consciously admit to myself that I was writing a novel. I started out with the voices of the *ah kus*. I wrote down short lines, the writing looked like separate poems. After a few months, I had a strong urge to lengthen those lines. When I reached 80 pages, I said to myself, oh it must be a novella. Having written 110 pages, I couldn't escape the dawning realization that I was in fact writing a novel! So part of the initial struggle had to do with admission. Finally admitting to myself and my friends, that's right, it's all true, I am writ-

ing a novel. I had to come to that realization very slowly.

Leung: What is the source of inspiration in your writing of this novel?

Kwa: I actually stumbled across James Francis Warren's article on "The Ah Ku and Karayuki-San of Singapore—Their Lives: Sources, Method and a Historian's Representation" published in *South East Asian Journal of Social Science* about the *ah kus* living in Singapore at the turn of the century. I then did some more research and found the book written by the same author entitled *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San: Prostitution in Singapore 1870-1940* (Singapore: Oxford UP, 1993). Those were the written resources which inspired me, but I would say it still remains a mystery to me why I wrote what I did in response to those books.

Leung: The title *This Place Called Absence* engenders a feeling of pessimism, loneliness, isolation, and despair. Is there any symbolic significance in its naming?

Kwa: Yes, of course. There were many kinds of meaning I was playing with. The front cover of the Canadian edition has the image of an empty chair draped with a rumpled blanket. I chose the image because it evokes a sense of emptiness/absence that I wanted to convey. The novel is probably a difficult read for many people because it refers to alienation between people and alienation from oneself. Take Lim Wu Lan's father, Yen, for example. He is still locked in despair, caught up in the loss of his mother in his youth, and suffering from psychological and spiritual emptiness as a result. He has an insatiable hunger and longing to replace that emptiness ("yen" being a reference to "yearn"). Yen tries numb his pain by indulging in excessive drinking. Although the novel depicts different kinds of emptiness and loneliness, not just in Yen, but in Wu Lan, Mahmee and the two *ah kus*, I consider the novel as being driven by a spirit of hope. Absence becomes transformed into a metaphor for possibility. There are many ways of looking at an empty chair. What does a person see when she or he looks at that image? Lack or a possibility for something new?

Leung: Are there any particular reasons for your interest in the theme of "absence"? As a recurrent motif, "absence" represents a lot of

things: e.g. absence of parental love, affection, friendship, ties, and so forth.

Kwa: I often perceive that absence as a theme pops up again and again in human experience due to grief, loss, and suffering. I suppose I write about absence because I think it is a scary experience for most people including me and I want to examine absence, learn from it, rather than run away from its very real presence (play on words intended).

Leung: Why are “sex,” “death,” and “love” so enticing to you? What is the relationship between sex and death at the time when you were engaged in writing the novel?

Kwa: Sex, death, and love are universal themes, often linked together. I am probably one of thousands of writers and artists who are fascinated by this trio of topics. Some essential threat to the self—whether it’s psychological or physical—is inherent in sex. The sexual encounter can be used as a metaphor for the possibility of the loss of the ego’s defenses against the Other, whether it’s a lover, a part of the self, the unfamiliar, and so on. One has to surrender some part of the usual self or persona, it has to “die” if only momentarily, in order to join with that Other. I think that there is tremendous anxiety behind sexual encounters because of this. Love—or the idea of love—complicates an already complex situation. What a person calls “love” may be “sentiment” or “dependency” or something else. I think real love is very hard to practice. True love is a powerful counterforce within oneself, an antidote to fear of the Other.

Leung: Four women’s voices—Lim Wu Lan, Mahmee, Lee Ah Choi, and Chow Chat Mui—are used in the novel. How did you manage these narrative voices? Is there any structural pattern or order of organizing these four voices? What is the linkage or kindred spirit between Wu Lan and the two prostitutes?

Kwa: I think of my novel in musical terms, with the four women as the singers. The two sex trade workers—Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui—are like two non-identical twins. I mean that in a symbolic sense, not literally of course. They are two aspects of Wu Lan’s psyche: there is a self desirous of being rescued, because she is helpless and

victimized; then there is a self who finds a way to escape and does not remain a victim. Apart from being aspects of Wu Lan's psyche, Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui also exist, historically embedded in a specific time and place, within a larger cultural and political context. The voices don't have equal presences. The voice of Mahmee, for instance, often appears quite unexpectedly. It serves as a kind of disturbance, a subversive linguistic and psychological foil to Wu Lan, her daughter. Even though Mahmee is an older-generation woman, her manner and Singlish (Singaporean English) have a lack of both self-consciousness and shame that are in such contrast to Wu Lan's tendencies to intellectualize her experiences. Mahmee is rooted in her body and her experiences. That scares Wu Lan quite a bit.

After writing several monologues or fragments for each of the four voices, I sat down and started to play with the sequencing. In certain places I clustered the four voices in terms of similar themes they are addressing. There is a resonance or "harmony" at those junctures among the four voices. At other places in the novel, one or two voices might diverge into "solos" addressing something quite different, new, separated from the others. I did not plan the structure of the novel in the beginning, but I let myself discover the structure intuitively and spontaneously, based on what came out of the writing process. The emotional resonance between the *ah kus* and Wu Lan's life centers on suicide. She knows they died of suicide from this book she reads about them. Wu Lan can't figure out the reasons why her father committed suicide, so she obsesses about the *ah kus* instead, builds up a complex set of fictions about them, as a way of coping with the death of her father, and hence filling in the absence.

Leung: The time span of the novel covers the past and present (colonial Singapore of the early 1900s and contemporary Vancouver) and the setting is Singapore and Vancouver. In terms of its content, it deals with traditional and modern life. Is there any intersection or meeting point between the past and present and tradition and modernity?

Kwa: Amongst other things, I am challenging the notion that time is linear. The past exists in the present, and maybe the future already

exists in the past. Also, it is possible to travel to different times and across different spaces in one's imagination. These are not new ideas. I am questioning the separations we make between "tradition" and "modernity" and a certain definition of progress, especially since the Industrial Revolution.

Leung: Can you characterize the intricate relationship between Wu Lan and her mother (Mahmee) and her father (Yen)?

Kwa: Wu Lan has mixed feelings toward her parents. She leaves them and her younger brother to make a new life in Canada. In her own way, she needs to escape from the family's implicit status quo, which includes heterosexuality. Wu Lan talks about the origin of her name—the Wu in Wu Lan—and what it means (four different tones of the character “五” meaning different things). This is the way she connects to her personal and cultural history, while feeling alienated from her family. Her separation from the family is not just physical distance, but also psychological. She is angry with her father for killing himself. She loves him but is somewhat reluctant to admit it. She also feels disappointed by the way he deals with her brother Michael. Her father is absent even before he dies, that is, he isn't "there" for her. He vacates his daughter's life. He is so caught in unhappiness that he drinks excessively and is overwhelmed by sudden fits of grief. Wu Lan is so bound up with the loss of her father, that she suffers a nervous breakdown and has to take a leave of absence from work. A new tie between Wu Lan and her father is thus initiated because of his suicide. Mahmee serves as a foil to Wu Lan. When she phones her daughter, she always mentions how Yen comes back to haunt her. Wu Lan is uncomfortable hearing her mother talk about these incidents. She too is feeling haunted yet she is reluctant to admit it. Wu Lan and her mother are two women whose relationship is being mediated by a man, even after he died. That's serious ghosting! A parallel situation exists in the lives of the two *ah kus* who struggle with being kept apart because of the presence and domination of men.

Leung: The encounter and rescue of Chow Chat Mui by Tian Chin after killing Ah Sek toward the ending seem to be coincidental. It catches the readers by surprise. Can you explain this kind of arrange-

ment?

Kwa: It is left ambiguous whether she has killed Ah Sek or has hurt him seriously. She doesn't stay around long enough to find out. The pace of the novel picks up in the second section. Chat Mui's decision to flee to the temple has been preceded by an earlier visit to its precincts. She also knows that Ah Choi used to go into the temple for sanctuary. It's not really surprising to find the scholar there since we knew previously on that he hangs out there anyway. Despite the fact that Chat Mui presents herself as jaded and cynical, she yearns for the kind of innocence that Ah Choi had. She runs to the temple also because it is a place she associates with Ah Choi.

Leung: How did Wu Lan take her father's death at the end of the novel?

Kwa: During Wu Lan's leave of absence from her work as a psychologist, she goes through a period of soul searching. At first, she's in a lot of pain and denial, doesn't really want to deal with her grief directly, so she has casual sexual encounters with younger women. But she also does something quite difficult and creative by imagining the lives of the *ah kus*. By doing that, she is moving away from her usual self-absorption into a wilder, unknown domain. Towards the end of the novel, when she engages in that alcoholic ritual, she's mimicking her father, yet being her own self, and at the same time, exorcising him. She is letting herself imagine just how a deeply desperate person could act. This ritual allows her to take leave of her dead father's ghost.

Leung: Why is Wu Lan interested in finding out the origin of her Chinese name (巫蘭)?

Kwa: She didn't set out to uncover the origins of her name. She is shocked to see one of the Chinese characters in her name—Wu—displayed on a banner in a Buddhist temple. This, and the discovery of its true meaning, challenge her previous assumptions, based on what Mahmee had told her. Wu Lan's mother tells her that her name means One Who helps Others. She ends up working as a psychologist. How obedient of her! Ironically, she needs assistance to deal with her grief and loss.

Leung: If you were asked to give a self-assessment of the novel, what would be the things you want to try out in your future writing? What aspects of the novel (if there are any) do you feel dissatisfied with?

Kwa: I still enjoy my novel the way it is. Others might not like it as much. That's okay. Of course I can't be objective! I still like it.

Leung: Are you aware of any reception of your novel in Singapore?

Kwa: I am not aware of any reviews written in Singapore. I am interested to know about the kinds of responses to my novel in South-east Asia.

Leung: I believe you must have given a number of readings after the publication of the novel in 2000. What were the questions frequently asked by the audience?

Kwa: Many questions deal with the autobiographical elements. Readers were interested in the facts. Were some of the episodes of the novel true? Did the incidents happen to you? These kinds of question reveal a fascination with the personal life of the author. And a confusion between autobiographical details and truth in fiction. Of course I incorporate some autobiographical details into the novel but as a result they have become fictions.

Leung: *Last Tango in Paris* pops up a few times in the novel. Is there any specific importance?

Kwa: *Last Tango in Paris* deals with sex, death, and annihilation of the self. I included it because I wanted to talk about those things. Sex is often relegated to the dark shadowy aspect of our lives. *Last Tango in Paris* was censored in Singapore when it first came out. The film was shocking at the time, since it not only depicted sexual behaviours explicitly but also showed the characters talking openly about those behaviours. I think it's the communicative aspects that are actually the more shocking since those aspects distinguish the movie from standard pornography. In that sense, it runs against the repressive grain in society. Porn and the sex trade rely in part on society's repression and the relegation of sex to the shadows. In the movie, the "hero" is killed by his lover in the end. Sex annihilates you. Anonymity and its necessity in

sexual encounters is a theme in the movie and that resonates with what is going on in a few of the narratives in the novel.

Leung: Is there any philosophical basis to the concept of “absence” when writing this novel?

Kwa: The psychological suffering from absence is completely different from the Buddhist concept of emptiness. When Chat Mui visits Ah Choi’s grave, she talks about how love deepens suffering. This echoes the Buddhist notion that attachment creates and deepens suffering. Spiritual emptiness—unlike the psychological desire to be relieved of absences—is a peaceful place to be in.

Leung: A few key Chinese characters—(field “田”, heart “心”, and the combination of the two characters into “思”)—exist in the novel. Can you comment on this phenomenon?

Kwa: “田” denotes a field, hard labor and the physicality of living on the land. “心” is the heart, an unseen but ever present life force. “思” is the combination of the outer labor and the inner intent. Instead of using the character to refer to its commonly understood meaning—thoughts and ideas 思想—I wanted to refer to its less used meaning: contemplation and reflection. Sometimes there is so much “thinking” that it blocks out a deeper kind of wisdom. For me, it was important that the novel had begun. With the character 思 and the two sections (“Each Time My Hand Unleashes Chance” and “As Visible as the Moon”) are marked and preceded by the Chinese characters for labor “田” and heart “心”. The novel is structured along these notions and images. I depended on poetic sense rather than on plot to drive the narrative. I am also interested in the fact that “思”—which is most often associated with the intellect—contains “心”, the character for heart, implying there is no simple distinction or separation between the head and the heart. I also think of that conventional distinction people make between the mind and the body. Yet, in some ancient wisdom practices, as in traditional Chinese Medicine, mind and body are seen as an integrated, interdependent whole. How does the mind manifest itself in the body? How does the body influence the mind?

Leung: In your novel, you once mentioned Sigmund Freud. Are there any Freudian influences on your writing?

Kwa: I am not a psychoanalyst but I do value some of the ideas put forth by Freud who has made many significant contributions with ideas such as libido, ego, superego, the role of the Unconscious self and the different defense mechanisms. He also paid a lot of attention to dream material as indications of waking life. These are ideas which have had a great deal of influence on my writing.

Leung: Can you tell us something about your next writing project?

Kwa: It is a novel called *The Walking Boy*. Set in the early 8th the T'ang Dynasty 613-907 唐朝 during the reign of Empress Wu Chieh-tien 武則天. A young novice monk Baoshi is sent on a pilgrimage by his master, and he has to leave their home on Mount Hua and go to Chang-an, the Western capital of the dynasty at that time. Wu Chieh-tien is my anti-heroine in the novel. Stay tuned.