A preliminary small-scale enquiry into student agency in a Master of Fine Arts Programme in Hong Kong: An ecological perspective

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To cite this entry:

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ABSTRACT

As research on student agency in higher education gains popularity, a gap remains in investigating university student agency from an ecological view. In Hong Kong, despite the increasing number of Creative Writing programmes in higher education institutions, there is a lack of recent research from the students' learning experience. The present study investigates the agency of five graduate student-writers who were enrolled in a Master of Fine Arts programme in Creative Writing in English at a university in Hong Kong during the 2021-2022 academic year, with data collected one year after their graduation. Adopting an ecological framework, the study poses two research questions: How do student-writers explain their agency, and what forms of agency are emerging? A qualitative research method is used, with data obtained primarily from semi-structured interviews, supplemented by my autoethnographic experience, where I position myself as a creative writer in Hong Kong, as additional evidence. The findings reveal that student-writers become aware of the multilingual nature of their environment and act by means of this environment rather than merely within it. Past experiences play a crucial role in enabling student-writers' agency, while contextual situations—such as the multilingual environment and materials in Hong Kong—interact with students as they take actions during the learning process. Theoretically, this study demonstrates the applicability of using the ecological perspective in interpreting university students' agency. Pedagogically, it underscores the importance of a contextualised environment and materials in fostering student agency. Although the study includes only a small group of students, it holds implications for advancing the theorisation of the Creative Writing discipline and research into student agency from an ecological view in university settings. For future research, arts-based research methodologies could be adopted to shape both a critical and creative research.

KEYWORDS

Creative writing, arts education, student agency, English as a foreign language, an ecological perspective

Introduction

Creativity is increasingly recognised as a crucial skill in the 21st century. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has highlighted the pivotal role of arts and creativity in equipping students to tackle emerging challenges and unlock their full potential (2021). Responding to the global call, the University Grants Committee (UGC) in Hong Kong outlined its future directives for higher education, including a focus on whole-person development (2022). This emphasis entails the cultivation of students' comprehensive abilities, including creativity and creative thinking, rather than a sole focus on academic achievements. With the goal of motivating learners' potential to experience and express creatively (Myers, 1993), the number of Creative Writing programmes shows a notable increase in Hong Kong universities.

Creative Writing

More than just writing creatively, Creative Writing is an academic discipline that has been

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acknowledged worldwide in universities (Mayers, 2009; Donnelly, 2011), which involves not only literary studies, but also arts practice and creative aspects. There is growing evidence suggesting that the value of Creative Writing lies in socially-embedded poetics (Dawson, 2005), as a performance whereby writers represent their identities (Ryan, 2014), and as self-expression that stimulate language learning from intrinsic motivation (Wang, 2019).

Influenced by the International Writing Programme (IWP) founded at the University of Iowa in 1966, Hong Kong established its first poetry writing workshop in 1968, nurturing a sense of poetics that endures to this day (Shea, 2019). Hong Kong universities have shown a notable increase in the number of Creative Writing degrees in general and Creative Writing programmes in particular. There are six Creative Writing programmes in total, and a dozen Chinese/English Creative Writing courses have been incorporated into undergraduate syllabi.

Despite the proliferating number, there is a lack of updated research on Creative Writing programmes in Hong Kong universities. Lim (2001) underscored the sensitivity, curiosity, and exceptional expressive capabilities exhibited by university students in her Creative Writing classes in Hong Kong. Tay and Leung (2011) mapped out the Creative Writing scene from university students' experience and teacher's observation, while Shea (2021) introduced his critical investigation on pedagogical approaches in teaching poetry to student-writers in a Hong Kong university. However, those individual pieces of research are not updated and focus largely on teachers' experiences, which students' perspective are greatly lacking. Therefore, my study will address this gap by considering university students' learning experience in a Creative Writing programme in the multilingual Hong Kong.

Multilingualism in Hong Kong

Incorporating multilingualism to address the above research gap is essential for grounding students' agency in the context of Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government requires both education and public services to be trilingual in Mandarin, Cantonese, and English (Bolton, 2011). Wei (2008) defined a multilingual individual as anyone who can communicate in more than one language, whether actively through speaking and writing or passively through listening and reading. Thus, multilingualism is evident in Hong Kong and is influenced by sociopolitical factors, including the region's colonial history, its relationship with mainland China, and the marginalisation of foreign domestic workers (Albury & Diaz, 2021).

At present, both undergraduate and postgraduate Creative Writing courses in Hong Kong universities are trying to meet the needs of writers who speak multiple languages (Richards, 2021). Figure 1 illustrates an example of how the practice of two languages: Chinese and English, has been a new way of knowing in the field of Creative Writing in Hong Kong.

Figure 1
Journal of Journeying (adapted from GUILD, The University of Hong Kong, 2023)
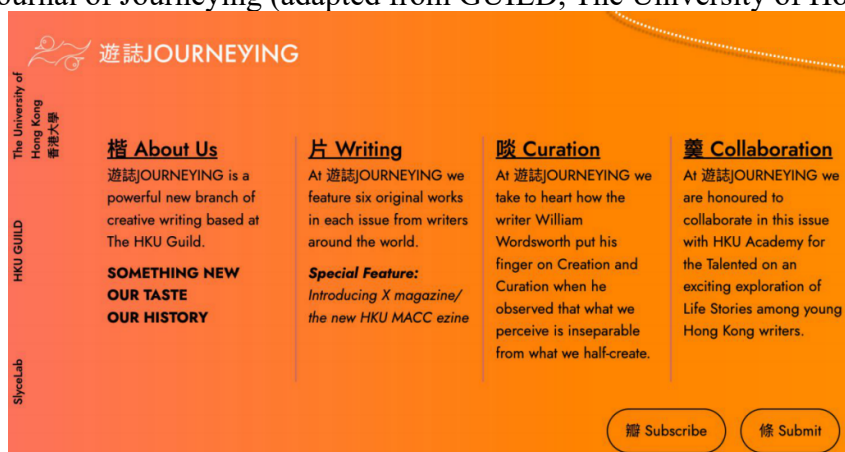
This webpage of the literary magazine *Journeying* does not rely on linguistic translation between Chinese and English but instead employs their shapes and strokes to offer a creative approach to meaning-making. Hori et al. (2024) underscored the importance of examining why and how university students use and create multiple languages as reference points to express themselves. By addressing linguistic diversity in a multilingual environment, student-writers' agency can be understood more comprehensively.

Student Agency

While agency is considered an essential 21st-century learning skill for students (OECD, 2018), less attention has been given to examining the nature of student agency in higher-education institutions (Torres Castro et al., 2023). In education, agency has been defined from various perspectives, such as student feedback agency (Harris et al., 2018; Vattøy et al., 2021), relational agency (Stenalt, 2021), and from the perspectives of international students' mobility and internationalisation (Kudo et al., 2020; Tran &Vu, 2017). Saarela and her colleagues (2021) defined agency as students' comprehensive assessment of their ability to impact their learning in instructive settings, such as their effectiveness in learning and their capability to actively leverage the resources available in their learning environment.

As the concept of student agency in higher education gains popularity, there is a growing necessity to assess it and its significance for teaching and learning (Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022). Recently, Inouye and her colleagues (2023) pointed out that the word "agency" often serves as a buzzword rather than a fully conceptualised notion, which suggests that the concept of agency requires further theorisation in the international student context.

An Ecological Perspective

An ecological perspective on agency emphasises the interrelation between an individual's capacity for agency and the relational context (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). It highlights the influence of cultural, material, and structural resources that facilitate or hinder the development and realisation of agency (Biesta et al., 2015). Viewing agency through an ecological perspective conceptualises it as an "emergent phenomenon" that takes time and context into account (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 6). Instead of simply possessing agency, students actively engage with and achieve it within specific situations (Biesta & Tedder, 2007), where learners' efforts, available resources, and the interplay of contextual and structural elements interplay (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Thus, exploring agency from an ecological framework is not about explaining how agency impacts social action but rather about comprehending agency itself, highlighting its temporal and relational features (Biesta et al., 2015).

Such an ecological approach, originating in the context of teacher agency, is also applicable to student learning. Harris et al. (2018) examined the assessment process by taking an ecological perspective, which offers a more relational and integrated discussion. He et al. (2024) discovered that, by applying an ecological approach in the context of learners' agency, students' agency in peer reviews is demonstrated through their proactive self-regulation and reciprocal interactions. Although researching students' perspective is a different position, incorporating the ecological framework of teacher agency at a meta-level in the student context could be feasible since both teachers and learners share agential aspects to some extent. Additionally, Creative Writing students might consider their writing options by drawing on past experiences (e.g. a news item I saw previously inspires me to write a story), the present (e.g. I am inspired by peer reviews in the classroom), and the future (e.g. I am writing now because I want to become a writer). Priestley et al. (2015) conceptualised the ecological framework of teacher agency as shown in Figure 2.

In this theoretical model, Priestley et al. (2015) proposed three dimensions, including the iterational dimension, which incorporates values, beliefs, and experiences from the past; the practical-evaluative dimension. It highlights cultural, structural, and material features in the present, the projective dimension, involving both short-term and long-term expectations, and orientations towards the future. By taking both

time and context into account to explain the development of agency, the ecological approach serves as a nuanced way to understand how student-writers exercise their agency in different educational environments across time.

Figure 2

The Ecological Perspective of Teacher Agency (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 30)
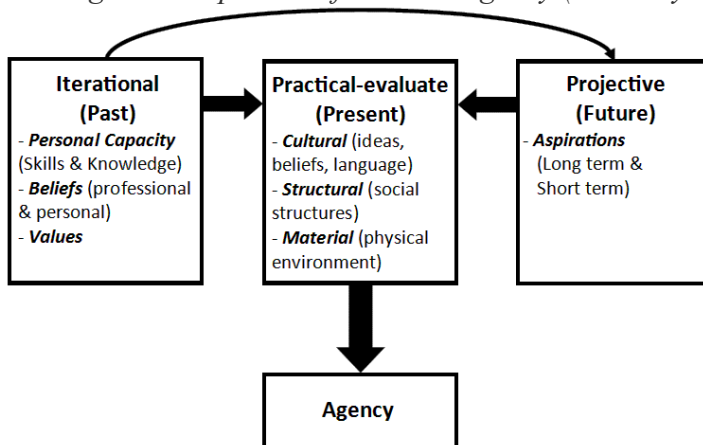
Rationale

Regarding the rationale for employing the concept of agency in the discussion of Creative Writing education, it originates from two key reasons. On the one hand, enquiries into agency adopt a multidisciplinary approach, including fields such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and education. As an academic discipline, Creative Writing involves aspects of learners' identities as student-writers and their learning processes. It includes the critical sense of the writer as a complete human being (Myers, 1993), which can be explored through the concept of agency. This exploration, in turn, contributes to the enrichment of agency theory from an ecological view by incorporating a multidisciplinary perspective.

On the other hand, although the number of English-language Creative Writing courses and programmes is expanding in universities in multilingual Asia (Whetter, 2022), there is a notable lack in both theoretical and methodological exploration concerning the teaching and learning of Creative Writing. Therefore, introducing the concept of agency into the context of Creative Writing university programmes can facilitate an understanding of student-writers as learners, who navigate various environments, reflecting on themselves, and envisioning their futures (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Purpose of the Present Study

This study is the preliminary phase of my dissertation. The purpose of the current investigation is to find out what kind of agency graduate student-writers experience, thereby enhancing the theoretical understanding of agency from an ecological perspective. It may also impact the development of teaching and learning in Creative Writing in higher education. Two sub-questions are designed as follow:

- How do student-writers explain their agency in Creative Writing studies?
- What forms of agency are emerging within the Creative Writing Programme?

The significance of my study lies primarily in its contribution to Creative Writing studies by incorporating the Hong Kong experience, both theoretically and methodologically. Although the global discussion on Creative Writing has expanded in recent years—evident in works like Darryl Whetter's edited volume *Teaching Creative Writing in Asia* (2022) and the forthcoming series *Teaching Creative Writing in*

Canada, as well as Graeme Harper's edited collection *Innovative Practices in Creative Writing Teaching* (2022)—university Creative Writing programmes, particularly from student-writers' learning perspective, remain largely underexplored. Therefore, my study aims to offer a new body of knowledge that conceptualises the theoretical foundations of learning Creative Writing and informs curriculum design and pedagogical approaches in Creative Writing education globally.

Additionally, my study will advance the understanding of student agency by incorporating the experience of the Creative Writing discipline. As student agency in higher education becomes an increasingly popular construct, this study addresses the need to assess our understanding of agency in higher education (Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022). It may also contribute to the ecological understanding of student agency, especially in Hong Kong's multilingual educational setting.

Method

A qualitative approach was employed for the data collection and analysis in this study. The research primarily gathers evidence through semi-structured interviews, which provide researchers with the opportunity to capture the fundamental essence of the experience (Saldaña, 2021). Moreover, autoethnographic insights serve as further evidence to explore the complexity of students' agency in Creative Writing and to mitigate potential biases arising from the interviews. Akehurst and Scott (2023) argued that autoethnography is an appropriate method for researching complex emotional experiences. By utilising my autoethnographic experience as additional data, I am able to immerse myself in this research, incorporate my own affective responses to enrich the data, and achieve the goal of listening to both what is being said and what remains unsaid.

Participants

Five graduate student-writers with a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing in English from a research-intensive university in Hong Kong SAR were recruited online in 2023 and agreed to participate in the study through semi-structured interviews. The participants were enrolled in the academic year 2021-2022 in a one-year full-time programme, and by the time of the interviews, they had graduated and continued their writing journey as a hobby, habit, work, or form of entertainment. Furthermore, almost all of them were from Mainland China, with one student-writer coming from Hong Kong. To maintain the participants' privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. An overview of the participants' profiles is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Overview of Students' Profile

Names	Gender	Ages	Years of writing	Chosen piece of work (genre)	Occupation	Interview language
Lin	Male	25	7	Screen play	Independent filmmaker	Chinese
Cathy	Female	28	11	Fiction	Writing laborer	Chinese
Sun	Female	28	5	Fiction	Journalist	Chinese
Amy	Female	25	7	Poetry	Company intern	Chinese
Ava	Female	25	3	Short story	English teacher	English

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted by me in either Chinese or English. Chinese was used more frequently because, as Welch and Piekkari (2006) suggested, a shared first language between the interviewer and the student-writers can lead to more authentic answers, revealing nuanced subtleties. However, one student-writer, who was raised in Hong Kong since birth, preferred to use English due to better fluency in

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speaking.

Each interview lasted for 50-60 minutes, conducted face-to-face, and was audio-recorded with the agreement of the student participants. The recordings were then transcribed and checked for accuracy. Student-writers were asked to bring a piece of their creative work for an in-depth discussion. The purpose of bringing a piece of their writing (which was produced during their MFA study) was to help them reflect on their study year and more clearly remember their learning experience, as Bailey and Bizzaro (2017) argued that writers' aesthetic work, reports, and responses count as evidence when researching Creative Writing. However, some students did not mention the work they brought, as they felt they were able to recall their MFA learning journey without it.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, aimed at identifying, analysing, and reporting thematic patterns within the data. I began the analysis by thoroughly reading the students' transcriptions to understand their learning experiences. Subsequently, I coded segments of the data and grouped them into broader categories/themes based on similarities and relationships. After reviewing and refining the themes, I clearly defined and named each one. Finally, I integrated the findings into a coherent narrative, interpreting the findings with relevant quotes in relation to the research question on how graduate student-writers explain their agency and what forms of agency emerge in a Creative Writing programme that contribute to student agency in higher education and Creative Writing study.

However, the rigour of this research might be affected by my positionality as both a graduate student-writer and researcher. My experience in Creative Writing enabled me to explore, reflect upon, and analyse students' agency from an insider's perspective. While this insider role facilitated empathy and trust, it also had the potential to hinder the research process and obscure evidence (Xu & Zammit, 2020). To address this, I repeatedly engaged in self-reflection, questioning and reflecting on the interplay between theories, data, and subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During the interviews, I strictly followed Galletta's three approaches for semi-structured interviews, which include engaging in "clarification, meaning generation, and critical reflection" (2013, p. 78). Additionally, I utilised autoethnographic experiences, as demonstrated in the next section, as further evidence to enhance my attentiveness to emerging themes in my thematic analysis and to minimise bias during the interviews.

A Positionality: Autoethnographic Experience in Creative Writing

I have been writing bilingual poetry and prose as a hobby for eight years. Like the student-writer participants in the five interviews, I officially began studying Creative Writing at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 2021. At that time, I attended a classroom known as Blackbox[1].

The room was large, featuring a floor screen, stage, lighting, black walls, and a set of movable chairs and sofas that divided the space into smaller areas. I observed various tools in the workshop, such as white paper and mannequins for drawing. These materials, which draw upon everyday experiences, allow me to traverse different times and spaces. They help me extend the boundaries of imagination and play with multiple languages in my writing.

For my course curriculum, I could choose to complete a "dissertation" as a type of "portfolio" in my preferred genre. Integral to this process were workshops, which served as signature pedagogies in teaching Creative Writing theories and practices through ongoing discussion (Shulman, 2005; Leahy, 2010). By the summer of 2022, I completed my portfolio by combining a short story with poems in English.

I particularly enjoyed engaging with the writing prompts assigned by teacher-writers, as they provided me with a different way of thinking. For example, we were asked to select an object for point-of-

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1 The term Blackbox serves as a metaphorical concept that refers to the mysteries of the writing process. Some university Creative Writing programmes adopt this metaphor by naming their creative writing classrooms as the Blackbox, implying that writing is generated, developed, and transformed in a space where creativity is fluid and intertwined.

view writing, and I chose to entre the world of a pillow. This experience prompted me to create a new world of pillows and reminded me of how hooks (1994) argued that teaching words is tantamount to teaching new worlds.

However, sometimes I felt quite perplexed, particularly about how to publish my work and whether I needed to become a writer. With only one year of study, I worried too much about whether I could publish a piece and neglected to enjoy the writing process itself. Meanwhile, I am unsure which magazines or platforms are suitable for submission, given that my work includes not only English but also Cantonese pinyin. For instance, I have incorporated the daily Cantonese greeting "m goi sai"[2] into my writing as a form of creative integration.

In summary, the Creative Writing journey challenged my understanding of traditional education. The creative environment in Blackbox, the workshops with peer feedback, and the diverse pedagogical approaches to writing propelled me into a new era of learning about writing.

Results
Themes

In this section, I will report the findings on how student-writers in the MFA programme explain their agency while illustrating the emerging forms of that agency. The data collected will be explored empirically in my dissertation; for now, I simply present them as possible areas for discussion. Table 2 highlights the themes that emerge when student-writers explain their agency in this Creative Writing programme in Hong Kong.

Table 2

Themes Constructed for Explaining Students' Agency in Creative Writing

Dimensions	Themes	Explanations
Iterational dimension	(1) personal memory	Students' beliefs, past experiences, and stories received from the past.
	(2) wider historical or philosophical stories	
Projective dimension	(1) expectations	Students' short-term and long-term objectives and values regarding the future:
		a) Expectations related to their future career
		b) Expectations related to the MFA programme
		c) Expectations related to Creative Writing
Practical-evaluative dimension	(1) material factor	a) the urban environment in Hong Kong
		b) the classroom setting and university environment
	(2) cultural factor	a) engagement in language translation
		b) engagement in language selection
	(3) structural factor	a) focused practice
		b) communication with the creative industries

2 "m goi sai" is a common Cantonese expression that means "thank you very much".

Iterational dimension: Influences from the past

The data show that students' past experiences, including personal memories and broader historical or philosophical narratives, serve as agents in their Creative Writing learning. This reflects what Priestley and his colleagues (2015) found: the past can facilitate students' agency by enabling them to "manoeuvre among repertoires" in addressing present challenges and future orientations (p. 24).

Personal memory as a form of agency

One student-writer expressed that she once wrote a story related to memories of the Shanghai Tower. Elements from these memories, such as the airflow, a shock absorber, and the movement of hands, allowed her to exercise her agency in creating a "dramatic magic":

> Standing in front of it (Shanghai Tower) was quite inspiring. It has a massive damper at the top, known in English as a "shock absorber." You could literally feel the airflow caused by the absorber's movement just by reaching out your hand…I feel there's a sort of dramatic magic to the Shanghai Tower's absorber that makes it unforgettable. Whenever I think of writing a story related to China, this place immediately comes to mind.

This reflects a process highlighted by Priestley et al. (2015) as a selective (re)activation by actors of past experiences, actions, and thoughts. Student-writers do not search through all their past experiences but engage in decision-making, selecting specific elements, sensations, and locations from memory. It is noteworthy that memories can become less active over time; hence, the interviewees indicated that they take various actions to (re)activate past experiences for the purpose of writing creatively. For instance, returning to the same street or visiting the same city are among the strategies mentioned.

Wider historical or philosophical stories

One type of agency arises from the interaction between student-writers and their contextualised language. One student-writer explained that Chinese idioms (成语 chengyu) can evoke a sense of storytelling:

> It feels very Chinese. Idioms can often convey more histories rather than just literal meaning, so they possess an inherent quality that is brewed over time.

Furthermore, the student-writer offered an instance of the activation process in thinking about Chinese idioms in writing:

> Sometimes I imagine a story by thinking of idioms. For instance, a Chinese idiom "an old horse knows the way" (老马识途 laoma shitu) has an anecdotal and narrative quality, and it was this idiom that led me to name my story's protagonist as "old horse" (老马 lao ma).

It demonstrates that words carry their own historical or philosophical narratives, imbued with cultural meanings beyond their semantics, such as irony or the revelation of a particular historical context. Students enact their agency when engaging with these idioms, which in turn helps to enhance their storytelling quality.

Projective dimension: Orientation towards the future

The projective dimension of student-writers' agency encompasses their aspirations related to their Creative Writing learning, both in the short term and long term. In the short term, student-writers adopt a positive attitude, viewing the programme as an optimal space to exercise their agency. In the long term, students are driven by expectations strongly rooted in their beliefs, with "becoming a writer" emerging as a

salient goal from the findings. One student-writer expressed her perspective on a future as a writer:

> I've dreamed about becoming a writer one day, but I know it's just a dream.

This finding suggests that, from a projective perspective, student-writers' agency within this programme in Hong Kong is inadequate due to uncertainty about their future—whether they will become writers and whether becoming a writer is the only path to success. In the autoethnographic data, I also highlighted the "becoming-writer pressure" I encountered, where I focused on results and felt anxious and disappointed due to a lack of publications, which hindered my proactive actions.

Harper (2015) asserted that "although the end result of Creative Writing is important, creative writers spend the majority of their time engaged in the practice, not engaged with the material end result" (p. 7). This emphasis on the dangers of an outcome-oriented approach, however, remains prevalent in the Hong Kong context, as demonstrated by this study. Moreover, this "results-driven" ideology is deeply intertwined with Hong Kong's higher education system, a highly competitive and outcome-focused educational environment (Tsang & Lian, 2021).

Therefore, I argue that the primary function of Creative Writing courses at universities is to provide students with an opportunity to experience the writing process. The emphasis should be on fostering authentic and creative expression through diverse pedagogical approaches, rather than being driven by outcome-oriented aspirations, such as publications or the goal of becoming a writer.

Practical-evaluative dimension: Cultural, structural, and material engagement

The above discussion on the past and the future perspective of student-writers' agency leads naturally into the present: practical–evaluative dimension. It highlights the students' thought processes, actions, and orientation towards potentialities in concrete situations, such as accessible resources and the cultivation of perceptions (Priestley et al., 2015). In this section, I will analyse findings on three aspects: material, cultural, and structural engagement.

Materials as possibilities

The first sub-theme related to material engagement concerns the urban environment. Some student-writers argued that their writing actions interact with the materials of Hong Kong. For instance, architecture, sounds, crowds, and even odours dynamically integrate into student-writers' creative processes, enabling them to write in response to the present:

> By having close contact with Hong Kong, I can create from the perspective of geographical space. So I can write about the present, rather than the familiar from memory.

This finding is consistent with Biesta et al. (2015), who argued that agency extends beyond individual capacity and is influenced by material factors, including the physical environment and resources available in the "here-and-now" (p. 627). However, some student-writers believed that the materials in everyday life do not directly lead to new ideas; instead, they engage with memory. For instance, one student-writer described that while walking in Kennedy Town[3] in Hong Kong, her thoughts drifted to the city of Paris instead. This illustrates that urban materials contribute not only to the present but also to the past and future, either by serving as fresh, present-day enactment or by being temporally embedded with memories and imagination in the creative process. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the interaction between student-writers and the urban environment primarily occurs during their free time outside of class. Despite finding the city's environment

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3 Kennedy Town is at the western end of Hong Kong Island. There, you can see the sea, and people live leisurely. It is one of Hong Kong's attractions.

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"enjoyable" and "relaxing," they remain confined to the classroom during workshops.

The multilingual culture

The findings reveal that multilingualism is a significant cultural aspect when students explain their agency in Creative Writing in Hong Kong. The primary action that students engage in is translation. For instance, a student from mainland China, whose mother tongue is Chinese, exercises her agency by writing bilingually.

> I always translate "grandmother" into "Nainai" (奶奶). It gives my writing a feeling of my childhood when I lived with my grandparents in China, and that's a way to call my culture.

Translation improves students' agential enactment by encouraging them to think about different languages both critically and creatively. Another interviewee explains how translation provides more expressive possibilities in his writing:

> I used the Chinese word for "wandering" (漫游 manyou) to find its English match and came across "Escapade." But when I looked up what "Escapade" means in Chinese, it can also mean a kind of joke or prank. I think that's really fascinating. English has an advantage in expressing more possibilities.

In addition to translation, the process of selecting a suitable language from their language databases is also a significant aspect when students explain their agency. A student-writer who has mastered three languages, including Cantonese, Japanese, and English, expresses that translation does not occur in her writing; rather, it is the act of making a decision, of choosing the proper language in a specific context, that presents a struggle.

These findings reveal that student-writers' learning involves a consideration of translation and a process of selecting one language among multiple languages. These languages provide learning opportunities for students to take action, although they can also present challenges that inhibit learners' engagement. Thus, student-writers make decisions that reflect a broader cultural understanding in accordance with their values and educational goals in a multilingual context.

Practice and industry

In the practical-evaluative dimension, two primary sub-themes are identified: practice opportunities and industry connections.

Regarding opportunities for practice, over half of the student-writers reported that completing writing prompts provided them with a focused experience of practice. For instance, writing tasks with deadlines provide students with a focal point, enabling them to undertake tasks within a specified timeframe. Moreover, months of repetitive practice allow student-writers to gain an understanding of their own writing characteristics and respond proactively.

Moreover, the disconnect between the MFA programme and industries affects the vibrancy of student agency. One student analyses this issue as follows:

> Magazines and publishing in Hong Kong are still predominantly in Chinese languages, but the resources from teachers come from the English-speaking world, leading to issues in resource integration. We study English writing in Hong Kong, yet it's challenging to find an "English corner" in the Hong Kong publishing industry.

This reflects that while such multilingual characteristics align with Hong Kong's diverse cultures, MFA students do not feel that the programme effectively connects with the local publishing or creative industries.

In my own autoethnographic experience, I have also come to realise that the MFA programme at this university in Hong Kong is cultivating multilingual writers, involving the integration of English, Mandarin, and Cantonese. Thus, I find myself walking between English, Chinese, and Cantonese: I come from mainland China, I speak Mandarin, I write in English, and I encounter Cantonese everyday. However, the question remains: in which publishing press can I place my creative work? In facing this mismatch, student-writers in this programme do not demonstrate sufficient agency. This disconnect leads to the perception that studying in the MFA programme is "a niche subject" and "not easy to find a job."

Discussion

The current study has answered two research questions, (a) How do student-writers explain their agency in Creative Writing studies? (b) What forms of agency are emerging within the Creative Writing Programme? The overall results contribute to university student agency from an ecological view, and enrich the Creative Writing studies with Hong Kong experience. It is found that values and beliefs from past experiences play a crucial role in assisting student-writers to achieve their agency, while in dialogue with the future, doubts emerge about pursuing a professional writer's career path. Moreover, with engagement in present, student-writers engage in a multilingual environment and utilise materials from Hong Kong.

Biesta and Tedder (2007) proposed that agency is not merely a possession but something that is realised through engagement with specific temporal and relational contexts for action. In this regard, the agency of student-writers is not something they have, but a synergy they create. Such synergy is unique as a phenomenon of "actor-situation transaction", which refers to how agency emerges from the dynamic interaction between individuals (actors) and their environments (situations) (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626). In my research, this transaction refers to how graduate student-writers engage with and utilise their contextualised situations. Data suggest that two primary situations arise: a multilingual learning environment and a mismatch with industries.

Contextualising the multilingual learning environment

Writing in Hong Kong, as stated by Hong Kong poet Louise Ho (2000), involves those who choose to write in English undergoing a transformation of sensibility. The research found that student-writers become aware of the multilingual nature of their environment and act by means of this environment rather than merely within it. For instance, they are not confined by the classroom; rather, they engage with the city of Hong Kong to complete writing prompts for their classes, which entails what Dawson (2005) addressed towards a sociological poetics in Creative Writing education, despite there being no such requirement in the course syllabus. This also highlights that these writers are in the process of recontextualising the field of Creative Writing around the world (Richards, 2021).

Where is "English Corner" in Hong Kong?

For many speakers of Mandarin from the mainland, or native English speakers, writing in Hong Kong could be limited from a linguistic perspective due to its predominance as a Cantonese-speaking city (Abbas, 1997). Thus, choosing to write in English could be a welcome option in such a diverse place, while establishing "English corners" is a necessity. However, the data reflected that the programme is, to some extent, insufficiently connected with the publishing and creative industries especially in English-language, a situation that presents challenges for students. Since agency is motivated and sustained (Priestley et al., 2015), it places pressure on students, who feel it is difficult to continue pursuing a career path as professional writers after graduation, as they explain, due to the lack of sufficient time, the absence of deadline pressure, and the unavailability of publishing opportunities.

In transitioning from Creative Writing to creative industries, the Creative Writing programme developed in mainland China offers valuable insights. There is a preference for conducting Creative Writing in the Chinese language, which aligns with the creative industries that also operate in Chinese. This approach

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enhances the creative potential of the students' Chinese-language works written in the programme, increasing their opportunities of being published. Ge (2020) underscored a balance between "primary creativity and secondary creativity" (p. 118), indicating that keeping a balance between literature and the market facilitates the transformation space for creative writing, which, from my perspective, also expands the space for student learning.

Although this Creative Writing programme in Hong Kong fosters a multicultural environment, more extensive linkage of multicultural aspects should be connected to the literary industry and other forms of art. Therefore, for Creative Writing programmes at universities, consistency in languages and connections is essential, along with increased resources and support for the exchange, publication, and promotion of Creative Writing both in English and in other languages.

Implications for Practice
Fictioning as methodology

Time and relationality are key elements of agency from an ecological approach (Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). The data clearly reveal how the "past-present-future" synergistically stimulates students' agency. This time dynamic resonates with the concept of fictioning, a critical and imaginative process that facilitates the construction of alternative realities, narratives, and identities, as proposed by Burrows and O'Sullivan (2019). Reflecting on the implications for Creative Writing pedagogy through the lens of students' agency, I argue that fictioning, with its unique integration of time could be an appropriate pedagogical approach in both teaching and researching Creative Writing. It has the potential to transcend the existing realities of the Creative Writing scene and uncover more nuanced dimensions. For instance, it encompasses both factual writing experiences and possible imaginative alternatives that inform the future orientation of practices.

Leveraging thing-power

This research found that materials are a crucial element in stimulating students' agency. Materials from both the educational environment and the urban city of Hong Kong serve as "brick, concrete, and rock," a metaphor Bennett (2016, p. 58) employed, which often get overlooked or marginalised in signature writing workshops.

"Students as readers" is a prevalent saying in Creative Writing studies; however, from a materials perspective, I challenge this notion and raise a question in my study for future investigation: Why might we not consider Hong Kong as a reader, or the sea waves from Kennedy Town as a writer? This perspective highlights a "thing-power" (Bennett, 2010), which extends beyond traditional writer-to-writer relationships and encompasses broader material interactions. Student-writers, Hong Kong, and what we call an MFA degree are coming together, achieving what Whitehead (2010) argued that a world is a process of becoming. Thus, agency is achieved through new ways of interacting with time, environment, and context.

Conclusion

Adopting an ecological perspective, this study conducted in-depth interviews with five university graduate student-writers in a Hong Kong MFA programme to explore their agency, supplemented by my autoethnographic experiences as additional data. For now, I keep the analysis at a fairly broad, meta-level for the current study by offering tentative findings on which I will build further in my ongoing research. Theoretically, it reveals that the interplay of the urban environment, multilingual culture, and focused practice might provide a new theoretical understanding for the ecological framework. Pedagogically, it highlights the importance of materials and the lack of industry connections that might inform future curriculum design for teaching and learning of Creative Writing in higher education.

The limitation of the study lies in several aspects that are not fully addressed. Firstly, the positionality

of the researcher—myself, as both a student-writer and researcher—brings some degree of risk in the decisions I clarify and interpret over interviews that could have influenced the overall findings. Additionally, the study's preliminary nature means that the small sample size significantly limits the generalisability and depth of the results. Furthermore, the research relied solely on a qualitative methodological approach, which may restrict the scope of the insights into the forms of agency examined.

Although the present study has limitations, it holds notable implications for advancing the theorisation of the Creative Writing discipline and research into student agency in the university setting. Future research on student agency could focus on the consistency between institutional culture and students' individual understanding of this culture. Future Creative Writing research could build on student-writers' learning experiences globally and integrate arts-based and practice-led research methods.

Acknowledgments

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