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Upstairs Downstairs

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Panel: Real Work

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Virginia Suk-yin NG

Upstairs Downstairs

Half a century ago, when I was a little girl, I had a fever one day, so my mother took me to a small community clinic. All the patients had to queue up at the reception desk for registration. When the man before me went up to tell the clerk his occupation, he raised his voice and said, “poet.” There was a moment of silence, then everyone burst into laughter. After all these years I still believe that the laughter was not directed at poetry or the man. It was rather an expression of bemused disbelief that writing poems could make ends meet in poverty-stricken Hong Kong in the 1960s. After that experience, I had very little desire to pursue a verse-writing career.

The prospect of writing prose to make a living was bleak, too. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, a massive influx of refugees from Mainland China put great strains on Hong Kong’s infrastructure, and the lack of housing was particularly acute. Crowded living conditions inspired a whole new genre of “social-realist” Cantonese black-and-white movies about crowded flats and the tenants subletting them. Interestingly, the protagonist was almost always a struggling novelist.

A typical story took place in a flat sublet to some ten families and a few single dwellers in a run-down building. Among them was always a salesman, several handicraftsmen and street performers, a “virtuous” dance-girl working in some nightclub, and a “fallen” socialite who was someone’s mistress. There was also a desperate family with too many kids whose father was unemployed and whose mother was bedridden with a chronic disease. The narrator was often a meagerly paid young man who taught by day and wrote novellas for newspapers by night to make ends meet. He inevitably fell in love with the dance-girl, and the story usually ended on the hopeful note that if the tenants supported each other, tomorrow would be better.

These movies were often written and directed by intellectuals with a Western education on the Mainland who moved to Hong Kong in the 1950s for political or other reasons. Their films were funny, critical, and poignant, and very accessible to the “masses,” who were their key audience. I grew up seeing too many of these movies, with too many struggling novelists in them, so I lost the appetite to write novels for a living too.

Yet my love of writing refused to die. From a young age I started writing stories and have always thought of myself as a writer, with the perhaps naive belief that I would stay a writer regardless of what profession I eventually took up. So why not do both? In an ideal world, as if in a metaphorical duplex, my daytime career would be my steadfast partner downstairs, and my writing a passionate lover upstairs. But as anyone who has had multiple relationships knows, the problem is not so much the quality of the relationships as it is the competition for time and energy. So for many years I led a double life, exhausted by the responsibilities both upstairs and downstairs, and not without a twinge of guilt that my greed might have kept me from becoming a better writer.

Recently a young literary editor asked me in an interview, “So, you don’t write full-time for the usual reason that you have to make a living?” I ignored the cynicism in his question; it is good that a new generation of writers and editors in my home city are much more courageous about pursuing their literary ideals. In their eyes I probably belong to a generation that bowed to the pressure of material needs, who

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dared not go all the way toward realizing their artistic potential to the full. So what is to be done? And need anything be done?

Sometimes I find comfort in the fact that many excellent Chinese classical poets and essayists also had day jobs working for the imperial court or the military. They were seldom challenged for not writing full-time. To them, creative writing was but one of many ways to express the finer human emotions, help society improve, and be at peace with Nature. Whether they wrote for eight hours a day, five days a week, was irrelevant. It is perhaps time for me too to stop worrying about not making creative writing my job.