

Mapping Poetic Pathways: A Phenomenological Psychological Study of Writing Hong Kong New Poetry

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Abstract: New Poetry, a genre of modern Chinese poetry, is characterized by its free form and the absence of fixed rules regarding tone, rhyme, and structure. Adopting a psychological phenomenological approach, this study uses Hong Kong New Poetry as a case study to explore the mental processes involved in writing Chinese poetry. Eight Hong Kong poets were invited to complete a poetry writing task while being observed by researchers, followed by in-depth interviews about their creative experiences. We propose a Dual-Pathway model that reflects two general processes of poetry writing. The *Natural Pathway* represents an optimal state of creativity within Chinese poetics. It manifests as an undisrupted subconscious flow of creative ideas directed by the poet's mastery, emotions, and creative intent, with the rational mind operating beneath metacognitive awareness. The *Effortful Pathway* unfolds in four recursive stages: (1) *Develop Candidate Ideas*, (2) *Evaluation and Selection of Candidate Ideas*, (3) *Connect Selected Ideas and Structure Poem*, and (4) *Continuous Evaluation and Editing*. In this pathway, poets strategically loosen cognitive control to generate candidate ideas before gradually reintroducing executive processes to evaluate, develop lines, and structure the poem in alignment with their conscious creative goals.

Keywords: New poetry, Hong Kong poetry, phenomenological psychology, writing process



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1. Introduction

The concept of New Poetry (新詩)¹ was developed by intellectuals such as Hu Shih as part of the Vernacular Literary Movement during the May Fourth period (late 1910s to early 1920s) in China. Influenced by Western free verse, it is a liberating form of poetry written in vernacular Chinese that breaks away from the restrictions of classical *Shi* (詩) poetry, such as rigid tone patterns, antithesis, and rhyme. This concept was subsequently introduced to Hong Kong (HK), where New Poetry and its commentary began appearing in local newspapers and magazines in the mid-1920s. As a global city with a British colonial past and a cosmopolitan present as a Chinese Special Administrative Region since its 1997 handover, HK occupies a unique position within Greater China (Lee, 2021), contributing to a distinct local identity for its New Poetry that straddles Chinese and Western influences.

Existing literature on HK New Poetry mostly focuses on textual analysis and critical theory, yet rarely addresses the creative process behind the poetic text. While published interviews with poets occasionally offer glimpses into their psychological state while writing, these accounts rarely help us trace the trajectory of the entire writing process. For instance, the HK poet Liu Wai-tong noted in an interview: “In my work, I’m not the only one speaking. Instead, many ‘ghosts’ borrow my ‘voice.’ I cannot write poetry solely based on my own feelings. I must unsheath my pen and let them speak” (Lee, 2023). Such an account invites further questions: Do these “ghosts” represent his subconsciousness, while the “I” refers to his conscious self? If so, how do the poet’s emotions, subconsciousness, and conscious mind interact during the writing process? These mental activities are what we seek to explore in depth.

In Western contexts, psychological studies of poetic creativity have identified generalizable structures in the writing process (e.g., Hanauer, 2011; Peskin & Ellenbogen, 2019). Although HK New Poetry resembles Western free verse in form, its distinct linguistic and cultural context creates considerable differences in expression. Nonetheless, there remains a lack of empirical research on the psychology of writing Chinese poetry. By using HK New Poetry—a localized expression of Chinese poetry—as a case study, this research invites broader discussions about creativity in the Chinese language. Adopting a phenomenological psychological approach based on observational and interview data with eight HK poets, we ask whether a general psychological structure of poetry writing is shared among these poets, and the extent to which this structure aligns with established Western models.

2. Literature Review

2.1 HK New Poetry

HK New Poetry is a branch of Chinese New Poetry, yet it has developed a distinctive expression under HK’s unique historical and geopolitical conditions. As Chan (2004; 2008) argues, the colonial history of HK distanced it from the Chinese cultural and political center, producing a geographic and discursive marginality in HK New Poetry’s local development. This fostered a

poetics that resists fixed classification, often responding to or challenging dominant literary paradigms. As Leung (1996) argues, HK poets, who are familiar with classical Chinese literature, the New Poetry of the May Fourth tradition, and Western high modernism, do not fully embrace any single tradition, but instead engage in a complex process of “negotiation of cultures” as they challenge a monolithic culture.

The most significant movement in HK poetry was the rise of the *true-to-life* style in the 1970s. As Hongkongers sought a local consciousness beyond their colonial or Chinese identities, HK poets such as Leung Ping-kwan pursued a stylistic identity for HK poetry that is distinct from Mainland Chinese realism, Western modernism, and Taiwanese neoclassicism (Wong, 2016). This movement emphasized plain, everyday language and depictions of local, cosmopolitan life, as Leung Ping-kwan stated in an interview:

“A poet in HK is by the very nature of things distanced from all that grandiose and heroic voice. He is writing like... someone speaking directly to the inner life, or intimately to his friends.” (Cheung, 2012, p. 225)

While the *true-to-life* trope remains one of the most enduring influences on HK New Poetry, the meaning of “life” has continued to evolve along with the city’s sociopolitical development. In 2019, the proposal of the Extradition Law Amendment Bill—which would have allowed criminal suspects to be extradited from HK to the Chinese Mainland—sparked widespread protests in HK. The protests were followed by mass arrests and the implementation of the National Security Law, which has significantly restricted freedom of political expression and sparked one of the largest waves of emigration in HK’s history. Recent HK New Poetry is fundamentally shaped by the aftermath of these events. Disillusionment towards politics and shrinking space for overt political critique have driven a turn towards the personal sphere, or social critique grounded in the affects and minutiae of everyday life (Song, 2023).

2.2 The Psychology of Poetry Writing

In Chinese scholarship, Zhu Guangqian (1936), a key figure in introducing Western literary psychology to Chinese academia, discussed Théodule-Armand Ribot’s tripartite theory of creativity, which consists of the *Rational*, *Emotional*, and *Subconscious*. The *Rational* involves the dissociative process of selecting artistic elements and developing associations to integrate them. The *Emotional*, aligning with psychoanalytic theories of catharsis and libidinal sublimation, refers to the drive to express and release affect. Meanwhile, the *Subconscious* highlights the spontaneous, involuntary nature of inspiration that facilitates the creative process. More recently, Sundararajan (2015) proposed a culturally grounded psychological model centered on the ideal of genuine spontaneity in Chinese poetics. It arises from automatic, associative processes, with deliberative, rule-based cognition intentionally curtailed through metacognitive regulation. Central to her theory is the Chinese Stimulus-Response Arc (感應), which describes an affective resonance between the poet and environment, governed by the principle of *Lei* (parity; 類).

While these theories provide conceptual insights into the psychology of poetic creativity, a major limitation is their lack of empirical support. In Western contexts, empirical studies have addressed this gap and have contributed to the development of cognitive models of the writing process. The foundational Hayes-Flower (1980) model suggests that the writing process, shaped by the writer's long-term memory and the task environment, consists of three main processes: *planning*, *translating*, and *reviewing*. Hayes continued to revise this framework, and his 1996 model reconceptualizes the components as the task environment and the individual, framing the writing process as an interplay of cognition, memory, motivation, and affect. In his 2012 publication, Hayes further explored the roles of transcription and technology in the writing process. However, these models are designed to account for the general processes of writing rather than those of crafting specific genres. Even within the domain of creative writing, the nature, style, and language of poetry are distinct from those of other genres (Toolan, 2005).

Focusing specifically on poetry writing, Hanauer (2010) proposed a four-stage model based on a qualitative study of three female master's students. First, a poet is triggered by an experiential or associative prompt in the *Activation* stage. During the recursive *Discovery* and *Permutation* stages, meaning, subject, and direction—and eventually a conceptual or aesthetic framework—emerge as the poet engages in iterative rewriting. *Finalization* ultimately marks the point at which the poet considers the poem complete. However, the study's small, homogeneous sample raises concerns about representativeness, and recruitment through the master's program's chair introduces potential hierarchical bias that may affect the study's validity.

Liu et al.'s (2015) experimental study examined brain activity during poetry composition. The study assumes that creativity consists of two principal components: *Generation* (when novel materials are spontaneously produced) and *Revision* (when previously generated materials are evaluated and modified). fMRI results suggest that *Generation* is characterized by self-initiated behaviors unfolding in the relative absence of top-down cognitive control, and that *Revision* is characterized by re-engagement with executive processes. However, such studies cannot replicate the naturalistic setting of poetry writing. Meanwhile, whether there are other characteristic sub-stages within the "generation stage," and how poets themselves perceive and conceptualize that process, remains to be explored in depth.

Peskin and Ellenbogen (2019) examined the cognitive processes involved in poetry writing among expert and novice poets. They found that expert poets engage in a recursive process that balances spontaneous, associative, and free-flowing engagement with deliberate editing and revision, integrating intuitive idea generation with conscious attention to poetic form and meaning. Methodologically, participants were introduced to a box of sensory objects and instructed to write a poem beginning with one of the objects while thinking aloud. Although the think-aloud protocol has been widely used in writing research (e.g., Hayes & Flower, 1980), it increases the cognitive load of the writing process, potentially affecting writing performance negatively (Kellogg, 1999). Moreover, this method is limited in its ability to capture automatic

cognitive processes (Branch, 2000) and inevitably intrudes the writing process by rendering it more explicit than it would otherwise be (Baaijen & Galbraith, 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

To address the limitations of the above scholarship, we adopt a psychological phenomenological approach, combining observations made during a poetry writing task with in-depth interviews conducted after the task. Drawing on poets' intersubjective experience, we explore the inner essence of poets' cognitive processing of affective, emotional, and intense experiences of poetry writing (Merriam, 2009).

Psychological processes in artistic creativity have been examined through phenomenological research, though poetry is rarely examined. These include Reinders's (1991) and Nelson and Rawlings's (2007) phenomenological studies of artists from various disciplines, as well as Banfield and Burgess's (2013) descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis of 2D and 3D artists' optimal artistic experience. While these studies identified general structures of artistic creativity, the process of writing poetry may not share an underlying unity with other artistic practices (Baer, 2012). A phenomenological study on poets is thus necessary to capture the domain-specific experience of poetic creativity.

3.2 Participants

Upon receiving ethical approval from the University of HK, we employed a snowball sampling strategy to recruit published poets based in HK. We first recruited one student poet for a pilot session to identify potential challenges, thereby improving the overall quality of the research setup. Given that the first author writes poetry and actively participates in HK's poetry societies, we then approached acquainted poets and identified cases interested in our study, who helped us further connect with other willing participants. Ultimately, we recruited seven poets for the substantive study. Including the participant from the pilot session, the final sample consists of five male poets and three female poets aged 19 to 28 ($M=24$) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Profile of participating poets

Pseudonym	Sex (Age)	Profile
Anson	M (19)	Anson is an award-winning student poet mentored by an established poet. He has been writing poetry for two years.
Ben	M (24)	Ben is an award-winning poet who works as a secondary school teacher. He has been writing poetry for five years, after being inspired by a poetry talk.
Chloe	F (23)	Chloe is a fine arts student who has been writing poetry for over a year as a way to channel her emotions. She has also self-published a poetry collection.
David	M (25)	David is a data analyst who has been writing for four years after being inspired by a HK poet. He is also a member of a poetry society.
Emily	F (27)	Emily is an award-winning poet who works as a graphic designer. She has been writing poetry for five years after being inspired by the work of a HK poet. She is also a member of a poetry society.
Felix	M (28)	Felix is an award-winning poet who works in the education sector. He has been writing poetry for seven years after studying a poetry course at university.
George	M (25)	George is an award-winning poet who works as a creative writing tutor. He has been writing poetry for five years after taking a poetry course at university. He is also a member of a poetry society.
Helen	F (24)	Helen is a freelancer who has been writing poetry for six years since she transferred to a Creative and Professional Writing Programme.

3.3 Data Collection

Existing phenomenological studies of poetic creativity primarily rely on interviews and the analysis of written text to validate their findings. However, such retrospective accounts are susceptible to abstraction and romanticization, as it is unlikely for writers to recall the precise details of their writing processes (Hanauer, 2011). To address this limitation, our data collection included a poetry writing task in addition to qualitative interviews. During the recorded writing task, poets were given freedom to select their topics and their writing tools (i.e., paper and pen, laptop, or smartphone), as well as unlimited time to complete the task. However, in cases where the writing process was too short for in-depth analysis, poets were asked to write an additional poem (see Table 2). To minimize contextual variation (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003), participants were asked to complete the writing task in a designated setting. During the pilot session, the poet was initially assigned to complete the task in an outdoor area to facilitate interaction with the surroundings. However, as the discomfort caused by

summer heat potentially inhibits creativity (Alencar & Bruno-Faria, 1997), subsequent data collection was conducted in a designated air-conditioned room equipped with a mobile whiteboard, a piano, and decorated with potted plants. The furniture in the room is movable, allowing the seating to be arranged according to each poet's preference. Poems written during the task and their English translations are included in Appendix B. Throughout the writing task, we documented observational notes of participants' behavior and writing speed. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted (see Appendix A) to contextualize, apprehend, and clarify the phenomenon of writing poetry (Bevan, 2014), in which we actively prompted participants to recall and reflect on specific time slices of their experiences (Crotty, 1998). Audio recordings of the interviews were then transcribed word-for-word in Chinese.

Table 2. Details of Participants' Poetry Writing Tasks

Pseudonym	Time taken to write each poem	Tools used	Task environment part of topic?
Anson	Around 120 min (Continued recording after completion)	Pen, Paper Notebook, Smartphone	No
Ben	40 min	Laptop, Google Docs	No
Chloe	54 min	Pen, Blank Sheets of Paper	No
David	Poem 1: 12 min Poem 2: 20 min	Smartphone, Text-Writing Application	Poem 1: Yes Poem 2: Yes
Emily	34 min	Pen, Blank Sheets of Paper	No
Felix	58 min	Pen, Blank Sheets of Paper, Smartphone	Yes
George	74 min	Laptop, Microsoft Word	No
Helen	93 min (Did not complete a poem)	Laptop, Microsoft Word	No

3.4 Data Analysis

In our data analysis, we adopted the descriptive phenomenological psychological method to derive descriptions of the structure of the experience as provided by the poets (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi et al., 2017). First, we reviewed all video recordings, written manuscripts, and interview transcripts with a phenomenological attitude, consciously setting aside personal biases and preconceptions. After gaining an initial sense of the "whole" experience, the data were then divided into meaning units— smaller, manageable parts for researchers to focus on. Each unit was transformed into psychologically sensitive statements written from a third-person perspective. Table 3 provides an example of a meaning unit identified from the interview transcript with Ben (translated from the original Chinese) and its corresponding psychological description. This stage involved moving beyond raw data to identify essential elements through imaginative variation. In this process, we imaginatively altered the conditions of the experience; if the structure of the writing process was found to

be impossible without a particular constituent part, that part was deemed an essential constituent. These elements represent the invariant meanings of the experience and form each participant's general psychological structure. Finally, by comparing the general structures across individual accounts, we developed a Dual-Pathway model that explains the intersubjective experience of writing HK New Poetry.

Table 3. Example of a meaning unit and its corresponding phenomenological description

Meaning unit extracted from a word-by-word transcript (translated)	Phenomenological description of psychological meaning
But sometimes maybe I really just don't revise it. Directly submitting it is also fine. So, but the interesting thing is, maybe other people will also feel that your poem is actually written quite well, you know, right. So different people have different views, but I, I am—I also am not very used to it; that is, I do not very often revise my own poems. Right, mostly, most of the time, after writing my first version, I then submit it. Because I, I feel that after finishing writing, in that moment I have actually already pulled myself out of that memory or imagination. Because I have already once invested myself in writing this poem, and then I have pulled myself out, so if I have to jump back into it again, then it is really too exhausting, right. So I do not often revise my own poetry, right.	Even if he is dissatisfied with his poems, he seldom makes revisions. Revising a poem means that he has to repeat the whole imaginative and emotional process, which is considered too mentally exhausting.

Note. The bold text in the phenomenological description is considered the essential components of the writing process.

4. Findings

4.1 The Essence of New Poetry

In our interviews, participants described New Poetry as a genre that artfully combines playful forms, complex language, and rhythmicity. Their conceptualization of poetry is not only rooted in the Chinese or HK context but also points to it as a cross-cultural phenomenon. Breaking away from the traditional, rigid restrictions on tonal patterns and poetic forms (Yeh, 1990), New Poetry embraces stylistic diversity, enabling poets to create layers of meaning using a wide range of literary devices and imagery. Despite the lack of tonal and structural rules, poets must ensure their work maintains a coherent and rhythmic flow when read aloud. This sense of rhythm is non-metrical, achieved through the repetition of linguistic elements, including words, phrases, sentence structures, and imagery, as well as through topographic arrangements such as line breaks, stanza breaks, and spaces (Li, 2012). According to Emily and Helen, the unity of technique and rhythmicity creates aesthetic depth, which is central to the poetic form. Many participants contrasted poetry with prose to emphasize the unique

aesthetic qualities that define the genre. Unlike the sequential and episodic nature of prose, poetry employs concentrated metaphor, deliberate lineation, line breaks, white space, and rhythmic variation to shape tone and meaning (Wilson & Dymoke, 2017).

Poets also view poetry as a medium for articulating profound experience. Felix believes that good poetry is rooted in profound personal experience— “something you’ve cared about for a long time, or something that has had a huge impact on your experience.” He highlights that poetry is more complex compared to other artistic mediums. It embraces ambiguity and contradictions, offering a broad imaginative space where seemingly unreconcilable elements can intersect. Thus, poetry is able to “rename or redefine” his reality, as well as deliver the unquantifiable and unexplainable dimensions of experience. Similarly, Chloe emphasizes poetry’s ability to express unspeakable emotions, particularly those that resonate with the female experience. For other poets, the experience captured by their poetry is rooted more in everyday life, resonating with the *true-to-life* tradition of HK poetics. For Ben, poetry is a medium for reflecting on his daily observations. Meanwhile, David and George believe that the core of poetry is to explore the overlooked poetic essence in everyday life, uncovering meaning beneath the surface to tap into deeper layers of experience.

4.2 Preconditions for Poetry Writing

Acquired Knowledge and Skills

Poetry writing is not performed in an exclusive cultural institution, nor does it require formal training or membership in a certified organization. However, a foundational knowledge of poetry is necessary. What makes a text a poem is the poet’s intention to connect (whether by making use of, transforming, or rejecting) their work to preexisting poems (Ribeiro, 2007). Significant time must be spent reading poetry and practicing with various tropes and forms, so that the poet can understand the nuances of the genre and become adept at combining various elements into a coherent and original whole (McLoughlin, 2013).

New Poetry is not part of the official Chinese Language curriculum in HK’s primary or secondary education, where it is typically limited to a minor component of school-based teaching. However, Anson benefited from the guidance of a secondary school teacher who is an established poet. At the tertiary level, Ben completed a master’s thesis on HK poetry, while Felix, George, and Helen either took creative writing courses at university or obtained bachelor’s degrees in professional and creative writing. Beyond institutional education, David, Emily, and George are members of a poetry society that organizes monthly poetry discussions. Crucially, all these poets read extensively in HK literature, as well as in classical and modern Chinese poetry and World poetry.

Optimal environments for writing

An environment that provides both stimulation and a sense of privacy is conducive to poetic creativity. In everyday settings, Anson, Ben and David find public transport an ideal writing space since it is saturated with stimuli that may become inspiration. While commuting by

train, Ben intentionally leaves one earphone out while listening to music so that he remains receptive to environmental input. While Anson enjoys writing on public transport, he immediately turns off his phone screen if he senses someone peeping at him, as he considers poetry highly personal. Poetry writing is generally a private practice that requires a comfortable, personal space. David and Felix write effectively in their own office spaces when nobody is around. Chloe prefers to write in her dorm room, whereas George prefers to write at home. Emily and Helen, comparatively, are less dependent on their surroundings and can write anywhere as long as they feel inspired.

Activators of poetry writing

Poets are motivated to write by a mix of emotions, ideas they intend to express, and/ or sparks of inspiration. Some poets are driven primarily by emotion to begin their work. David, for instance, sees poetry as a psychological necessity and an outlet for his emotions. During the writing task, the research venue evoked a sense of nostalgia and prompted him to write a poem for his girlfriend who had just graduated. In the poem, he expressed sympathy for the challenges she faced during her undergraduate years (Appendix B). Meanwhile, Chloe tends to write when she feels unhappy, using poetry to trace the roots of her pain. During the task, she initially copied an unfinished poem about an unrequited lover from her phone onto paper and planned to continue writing it. However, she felt that her emotions lacked the intensity needed to complete it. Therefore, she gave up and wrote “A Superhuman’s Dilemma” (Appendix B) to express her more intense feelings towards her parents. Similarly, Helen believes she can only write under strong negative emotions, feeling that the worse her mood, the better she writes. Introspective individuals who are prone to rumination may be more likely to channel negative emotions into creative practices to process their emotional experiences (Verhaeghen et al., 2005), and negative mood can enhance creativity by facilitating idea generation and creative fluency (e.g., Baas et al., 2008). Felix also identifies emotions, particularly anger, as the dominant force in his poetry. Experienced in moderation, anger can function as an activating emotion that enhances creativity by improving cognitive fluency and motivating the writer to critique imperfections, act spontaneously, and challenge existing norms (Yang & Hung, 2015). During the study, he wrote a poem titled “A Psychological, Phenomenological Study of Writing HK New Poetry” (Appendix B) to express his contempt for the “antipoetic idea” of studying poets scientifically.

However, intense emotions do not always facilitate poetic creation. The more intense and immediate an emotional outburst is, the less suitable it may be for artistic creation, as the artist becomes too absorbed in the emotion itself (Chao, 1983). Poets, therefore, have to maintain an emotional distance to process their experience. Emily’s poem “Rain Signal” (Appendix B) was written in response to a letter from a friend in prison. Overwhelmed by emotion upon receiving the letter, she found herself unable to write. However, by the time of the writing task, she felt she had processed those intense feelings. She therefore composed a poem about rain and communication, imagining a heavy downpour that offers consolation to her friend and other prisoners suffering in the suffocating summer heat.

Most poets begin their writing tasks with pre-existing ideas generated outside their present environment. For instance, Anson’s “Bullseye” (Appendix B) is a poem about his father that he had long attempted to write. During the task, he sought to expand upon lines he had composed earlier. Meanwhile, Ben often writes in response to calls for submissions with themes that interest him. His Poem “See you, Bryde’s Whale” (Appendix B) criticizes how people pursue profits at the expense of animal rights, in response to a poetry magazine’s special call for poems on “Whale”. Before the writing task, he had already drafted several lines. These examples demonstrate that ideas may remain dormant for extended periods before being revisited and developed into a poem.

Sudden flashes of inspiration also motivate poets to write. David can complete a poem in only a minute or two when he experiences a “light-bulb moment” that comes in the form of imagery, expressions, or lines. When inspiration strikes, Emily and George immediately record the thoughts that come to mind, many of which are vague ideas or incomplete lines that, alone, are insufficient to be developed into a full poem. In such cases, they either jot those ideas down or commit them to memory, retrieving these fragments when a suitable occasion arises.

4.3 Dual Pathways of Poetry Writing

Based on our observations and participants’ narratives, we developed a Dual-Pathway Model (Figure 1) of poetry writing, involving the *Natural Pathway* and the *Effortful Pathway*.

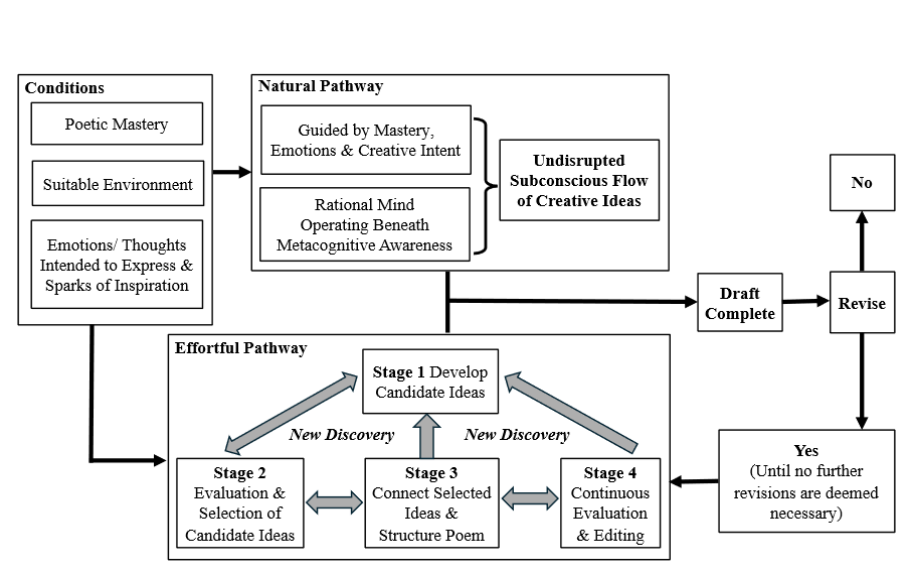


Figure 1: The Dual-Pathway Model of Poetry Writing

The Natural Pathway

The optimal process of poetry writing follows a *Natural Pathway*—a subconscious, intuitive flow guided by the poet’s poetic knowledge, emotions, and creative intent, with rational judgments operating beneath metacognitive awareness. In classical Chinese literary criticism, “Natural” (*ziran*; 自然) is both an aesthetic category and an ideal mode of poetic creation. As the classical Chinese writer Liu Xiaobiao explains, *ziran* transcends logical explanations of the phenomenal: it is when “you see the ‘so’ [ran] of a thing, and yet you do not know that which makes it so” (cited in Ye & Lian, 2025, p. 10). More explicitly, as a poetic mode, its essence lies in capturing thoughts *without deliberate calculation*, directly presenting the objects before the poet’s eyes or within their mind (Ye & Lian, 2025).

For David, when inspiration strikes, his poetry comes together with minimal effortful organization. He emphasizes the importance of a state of ease and pleasure while writing, and he finds that trying to deliberately “construct” a poem rarely results in a natural or satisfactory outcome. During the task, he took longer than usual to determine the topic, since he was not motivated by a spontaneous spark of inspiration. Still, he completed one poem in 12 minutes and another in 20 minutes. Both poems draw from his immediate environment: one is set at the university where the research took place and where he attended his girlfriend’s graduation, while the other was inspired by a potted plant beside him (Appendix B). In explaining his work, David connected it to Ezra Pound’s school of Imagism, which emphasizes precision and purity of expression using exacting visual images. William Carlos Williams is an Imagist whom David references throughout the interview, noting that Williams “just takes the image and lays it out, and that’s enough.” In fact, David’s poetics emphasizes the intuitive presentation of mental images rather than the forceful generation of “ideas,” as he explains:

“[I] feel that conscious thoughts or ‘ideas’ can sometimes make a poem feel very mechanical... As for me, I don’t really have much of an ‘idea.’ I feel that it just comes out naturally.”

Still, David acknowledged making several pauses and rearranging several lines during the task. For instance, he recalled choosing between “young” (年輕), “youthful” (年青), or “youth” (青年) for the line “we’re young” in the first poem (Appendix B). However, when asked why he eventually made such choices, he emphasized that he was unaware of the specific reasons, stating, “I really don’t think that much.” His writing process, guided primarily by the subconscious, echoes Williams’ belief that “spontaneous bits of poems are written right off, quickly from the subconscious or unconscious self and it just does actually pour out without the knowledge of the man who writes it” (Wagner, 1976, p. 85). However, much like Williams, who had his own “theories” and was “able to recognize what is good and why it’s good—and how to organize it into a satisfactory poem” (Wagner, 1976, p. 85), David can clearly articulate the meaning and intent behind his work. For instance, he noted during the interview that the “foliage” wanting him to “break it” in the second poem (Appendix B) symbolizes poetry’s power to break through and transcend one’s position, like Williams who exceeds his occupation as a doctor. While David was unaware of such rational judgments during the

writing process, this does not imply a lack of poetic knowledge. Rather, it indicates a reduction of metacognitive awareness when he is deeply immersed in his writing, as evidenced by his self-report of being unaware of environmental noise throughout. In an immersive state of flow, a person is “very aware of one’s actions, but not of the awareness itself” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 138).

Other poets also mentioned the subconscious writing processes that they experience at times. Chloe likened the ideal poetic flow to a river or running tap, noting that poetic lines often come to her spontaneously while walking or showering. Similarly, Emily sometimes experiences a surge of inspiration where she can effortlessly write 20 to 30 lines “as if the pen were guiding her hand.” Felix also occasionally experiences rapid, intuitive leaps of thought. If the setting allows, he prefers to write by hand, as he finds that typing requires an additional layer of processing that interrupts his subconscious flow. In this state, he describes himself as “writing automatically.” However, this process (and that of poets who follow this *Natural Pathway*) cannot be directly compared to “automatic writing”—the involuntary production of text without conscious awareness, as advocated by Surrealists led by André Breton. Automatic poets act as “mediums rather than craftsmen,” practicing passive receptivity with no ego involved and feeling no responsibility for the output (Boice & Meyers, 1986; Suárez-Toste, 2007). In contrast, Felix describes this state as a strategic “indulgence,” where he holds the ultimate authority for his writing to go unrehearsed: “[Like a conductor,] I allow the musician to play out of tune or ignore my conducting. It is precisely through this disobedience to my command that something good emerges.” He remains under a sense of control and understands that relinquishing cognitive control allows his ideas to flow more organically. Referencing Suárez-Toste’s terminology, Felix’s experience illustrates a writing process that is “spontaneous, not automatic” (2007).

Lifetime experiences, extensive reading, and regular writing practice contribute to poets’ apparent spontaneity with which the final connections are established (Jacob, 1922). Poets who perceive poetry writing as an ideally spontaneous and natural process might not be the most experienced in poetry writing, but compared to other participants, they refer to the work of other poets and writers more frequently and extensively throughout their interviews.

The Effortful Pathway

Poets do not always write effortlessly, even if they are deeply focused and/ or emotionally immersed in their work. Except for David, other poets spent an average of 58.8 minutes on the writing task, with Helen not completing a poem after 93 minutes.

For Emily, although lines effortlessly come to mind when she experiences a spark of inspiration, she mentioned that in most cases, writing requires more effort as she must carefully compile words and imagery, refining each word slowly—sometimes even hundreds of times—to write a satisfactory poem. As she explains:

“I tend to approach everything in steps: how my idea should be ‘assembled,’ how the poem should be structured; its introduction, development, transition, and ending; and

whether I should end the poem with a clever line that leaves readers with a lingering resonance.”

Based on participants’ accounts, the *Effortful Pathway* is conceptualized to have four general stages: (1) *Develop Candidate Ideas*, (2) *Evaluation and Selection of Candidate Ideas*, (3) *Connect Selected Ideas and Structure Poem*, (4) *Continuous Evaluation and Editing*. The stages may not follow a sequential order, as the creative process is often less linear than recursive (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). For instance, after Emily drafted the second stanza in the writing task, she felt that it was lacking in imagery, complexity, and structure (Stage 4). Hence, she returned to her rough draft to reorganize her thoughts and further develop candidate ideas (Stage 1).

Moreover, the creative process does not guarantee completion. Poets encounter obstacles that sometimes prompt them to abandon their work. For example, during the task, Helen found her ideas and drafts lacking, despite investing her best efforts in organizing them. Thus, she chose to give up the task. When George finds himself stuck, he also chooses to put aside his poem, particularly when surrounded by distractions at home. Similarly, when Anson struggles with refining his poem, he sets it aside until he gains new insights. During extended task engagement, abandoning the task relieves cognitive control, refreshes the poet’s mindset, and alleviates fixation effects (Benedek & Jauk, 2019). Hence, Anson rarely completes a poem within a single day, often requiring several days or even longer, particularly for lengthier poems.

Stage 1: Develop Candidate Ideas. Poets begin their writing by developing candidate ideas, with the process characterized by spontaneous, intuitive, and associative thought patterns, as well as the retrieval of episodic memories. During this phase, poets seek inspiration from various sources (e.g., environmental cues, other poems, and artificial intelligence (AI)) to generate candidate ideas, typically in the form of words, concepts, and/or line fragments. To broaden their creative possibilities, they generally prioritize the quantity of these elements over their immediate quality.

Ben often begins with a predetermined topic and proceeds to jot down everything that spontaneously comes to his mind. For the poem he wrote for the task (Appendix B), he reported that relevant ideas surfaced spontaneously when he noticed the submission theme “Whale” from a poetry magazine. However, he mentioned being unaware of how these images surfaced or how ideas were generated, reflecting the subconscious nature of his brainstorming process.

At the beginning of the task, Emily engaged in diffuse thinking and mind-wandering, which occupied roughly one-third of her total writing time. As she allowed her mind to flow freely, she scribbled fragments of words and ideas—some related to her immediate environment (e.g., the university, tourists peeking through the window) and some unrelated (e.g., memories with a friend in prison). The resulting handwritten page was messy and barely legible, even to her, as it served primarily as a mental warm-up.

As George started the task, he quickly typed out words related to his immediate environment (e.g., noise, tourists, chair). However, as he found it difficult to develop these

ideas into a poem, he turned to a personal experience that he had long planned to write about (i.e., watching a movie with a friend) (Appendix B). In his notes, George first listed candidate titles and typed a plain description of his core idea: “Watching a movie together / Feeling bored / Changed my impression after watching the movie.” He later expanded this outline by adding layers of emotion. Furthermore, George jotted down a list of references and pasted relevant quotes into his notes after reading those sources online.

For Helen, the writing process usually begins with retrieving episodic memory, which she describes as “squeezing out every bit of her memories” for inspiration. She notes that without diving deep into personal experience, she would otherwise require extensive research. She rarely focuses on a single poem but instead works on multiple drafts simultaneously, moving between them as her focus shifts. Her drafts are typically long, each containing plentiful ideas to be elaborated for later selection.

Poets also draw from external sources to enrich their candidate ideas. While Ben occasionally uses AI to generate images related to his writing, Helen uses AI to extract keywords and imagery. Furthermore, Helen frequently searches online for stories, allusions, and others’ poetry to seek inspiration. Felix takes a different approach to inspiration. Before starting the task, he requested a stroll through the courtyards of the historical university building, during which he jotted down observations from his surroundings. After conducting further online research, he developed these observations into candidate ideas for his poem (e.g., rubber and palm trees as metaphors, and reinterpretations of historical figures related to the university).

Poets move on to another stage when the subconscious processes are overruled by conscious evaluation. For Anson, this transition occurs when he believes he has “written down every thought that comes to mind.” Emily moves on when she is conscious that she has “accumulated sufficient ideas to write a 20- or 30-line poem with a concrete theme,” and when the imagery can “achieve harmony” when placed together.

Stage 2: Evaluation and Selection of Candidate Ideas. Once poets have determined a more concrete theme and a set of creative goals, they engage in a process of conscious reasoning to evaluate and select candidate ideas. During this stage, poets slow down to carefully assess and select the specific units that form the final poem, removing elements that are unsatisfactory or irrelevant to the central theme.

Chloe keeps expressions of significance while crossing out redundant parts from her draft. During the task, she initially considered ending the poem (Appendix B) with the concept of “a baby existing in her mother’s ovary before birth,” but eventually discarded it to “avoid excessive length.”

For Felix, most of the keywords jotted down in his rough draft were developed into lines within the poem composed for the task (Appendix B). When discussing the elements that were excluded, Felix mentioned that he initially considered writing about “white rats” (to draw a parallel between himself and a research subject). However, he ultimately rejected the idea as “too cliché.” This aesthetic judgment led him to replace the image with “nocturnal rodents” to represent a more nuanced metaphor for the marginalized and stigmatized.

During the task, George felt overwhelmed by intense emotions and excessive references generated in the previous stage. Consequently, he consciously narrowed his focus to the elements that most effectively conveyed his experience. His typing speed slowed significantly as he transitioned into evaluating and selecting his candidate ideas. Reflecting on the poem's title, George weighed options such as "Choices," "Aftermath," and "Return (回)." He was initially drawn to "Return" because the Chinese character invokes both "recall" (回想) and a visual metaphor of a "frame within a frame," akin to watching a movie. However, after recalling the film *To Be Continued* at a later stage and searching for its reviews, he ultimately chose the film name as the title (Appendix B). His reflections demonstrate a shift toward analytic processing during this stage. While new candidate ideas can still emerge spontaneously after the first stage, they are now subjected to further evaluation. Working on his word processor, George tends to keep all his candidate ideas rather than deleting them immediately, allowing him to revisit his thoughts and rework an earlier draft if new insights emerge later.

Stage 3: Connect Selected Ideas and Structure Poem. Poets then employ different strategies to connect and structure their selected ideas, a process characterized by a conscious awareness of a network of creative goals (e.g., the overall message, the rhythm, and the emotions they seek to convey) and the executive processes involved in achieving these goals.

After writing a line, Anson often pauses to consider how it might connect with other candidate ideas. In the task, he drew on repetitions of sentence structures (e.g., Like how he...) and developed goal-directed associations between lines, strategically combining imagery like a "dart," "ball pen," and the "Tuen Ma Line (a railway line in HK)" to outline different stages of his life (Appendix B).

For the poem written for the task, Ben structured the first stanza with three lines and planned to maintain a consistent structure throughout. However, upon reaching the second stanza, he realized he could not force the content into this fixed structure without seeming rigid. Thus, he allowed himself to follow the lines' natural development to find their own organic pauses. He maintained the creative openness of being flexible and spontaneous while being attentive to rhythm and meaning.

Having decided upon the poem title "Rain Signal" for the task (Appendix B), Emily consciously ensures that imagery related to rain and communication appears throughout the poem and that these themes are well-integrated. Meanwhile, she views the ending as critically important, as a poem cannot end abruptly and that "the final line should leave a lingering emotional impact on readers." When her writing reaches a point where a line can serve as a strong ending, she usually concludes the poem there.

Poets often describe how they jump frequently between lines/ stanzas to connect ideas they came up with earlier. Chloe compares her writing process to assembling a jigsaw puzzle, with no fixed way to solve it. At a certain point of completing the task, she had already decided that the ending line would be "The superhuman flees in panic" (Appendix B). In our observations, Ben's mouse cursor also frequently shifts between lines in his word processor while writing for the task. After drafting the first three stanzas, he struggled to continue and

wrote the ending before returning to the middle. Similarly, during the task, George set aside unsatisfactory lines for later revision. He initially drafted a line for the ending, but returned to earlier sections before reworking it, after finding it emotionally flat.

Stage 4: Continuous Evaluation and Editing. After completing the first draft, poets continuously evaluate the poem in terms of rhythm, structure, consistency, and punctuation, and, most importantly, whether it fulfills their creative goals. Driven by introspective consciousness and a heightened awareness of audience reception, poets refine the poem until it reaches a satisfactory form.

For Anson, as his poem begins to take shape, he reviews his draft to see if certain parts “feel off” and revises accordingly. During this process, new ideas may surface, and he then evaluates whether to incorporate them. This cycle usually repeats several times until he reaches a point where he feels the work has reached a state he describes as “okay” or “well-written.”

Meanwhile, Emily describes her evaluation process as a deliberate distancing from her emotions to remain objective: “What’s needed is a certain distance, so that I can write composedly while evaluating from a third-person perspective.” After completing the first draft for the task, Emily rewrote it on another sheet of paper. While the content remained mostly the same, some lines from the first draft were not copied onto the second, and some were crossed out and refined. For Emily, this rewriting was essentially a review process, during which she asks herself: “Are there parts where the rhythm feels stilted? Are there better words that could be used?” In her final draft, written on yet another page, she felt the elements were finally “assembled together” and could be read smoothly. Adopting a reader’s perspective, she critically evaluated whether the poem is rhythmic and complete, and whether it would be emotionally resonant. Notably, her handwriting became clearer in each of her drafts, indicating how her writing transitioned from spontaneous to more organized.

After completing a draft, George reads through it and evaluates whether his expressions effectively deliver his intended message. He often highlights polysemic words in his draft, reminding himself to revisit them later to fully draw on their meanings. George also annotates his work with self-evaluations, explicitly pointing out unsatisfactory lines and identifying specific areas that require further refinement.

Since poetry is fundamentally grounded in spoken language (Attridge, 1995), vocal or subvocal engagement plays a significant role in poetic revision. George reads his poetic lines aloud at home to attune to rhythm and cadence. Even in silence, poets rely on subvocalization, the internal voicing of lines with attention to implied emphases, pauses, and pitches, to guide meaning-making (Slowiaczek & Clifton, 1980). As Wirtz (2025) suggests, subvocalization aids focused cognition by enhancing attention and writers’ awareness of their readership. In our participants’ cases, Ben uses subvocalization to evaluate how rhythm affects meaning, while Chloe does so after writing each stanza to assess whether it flows smoothly.

Making Revisions

Regardless of which pathway they follow, poets may revise their previously written work until they are satisfied with it. Revision is typically initiated by the detection of an issue during evaluative reading, eventually leading poets to rationally plan a solution and translate it into new text that replaces the original (Hayes, 1996; 2012). This process can be seen as an extension of Stage 4 or, in some cases, the entire *Effortful Pathway*. As Reinders (1991) suggests, artists' perception of the artistic meanings within their work remains in flux until the moment of finalization. Poetry writing involves a cyclical process of imagination, structuring, analysis, and validation, with poets repeatedly reimagining and rewriting until they feel nothing can be done further with the piece (McLoughlin, 2013).

For David, who tends to write spontaneously and follow the *Natural Pathway*, revisions are typically minor. During our interview, he recalled a poem written the day before the task and mentioned changing the title after deeming the original unsatisfactory. However, for other poets, the revision process can be more intensive and prolonged. Felix, for example, tends to work on extensive revisions even if his poetry is initially written all in one go. To reach his poetic ideal, he typically prints his first draft from his smartphone and completes three to four rounds of revisions. Even when his poetry is ready for submission or written years earlier, he often revisits it and refines its content, rhythm, and tone. For George, poetry writing is similarly a process of "constant revision" to approach his intent. While he extensively revises his poems, he also retains copies of earlier versions, so that he can draw on previous materials if he gains new perspectives. Helen also spends a long time revising her work until she feels the associated memories have satisfactorily fulfilled their purpose. For Helen, the revision process is a way of "letting go":

"I'll revise for a very long time. I'll also revisit the poem after a while if I feel there're other areas that can be revised. Meanwhile, I usually show it to friends and make further revisions [based on their feedback]."

Helen's creative output and her sense of self are deeply intertwined, making her particularly sensitive to external judgments (Rampley et al., 2019). Consequently, she often feels embarrassed by her own writing until she receives others' validation. This anxiety appears to have been shaped by experiences of harsh criticism from her peers.

Nonetheless, Ben refrains from revising his poems once he considers them complete. This does not necessarily reflect a lack of poetic knowledge (Peskin & Ellenbogen, 2019) or the private nature of one's target readership (Armstrong, 1984). Rather, this choice arises from a reluctance to re-engage with the emotional and cognitive demands of rewriting. For Ben, each revision requires re-imagining the poem in its entirety and re-activating the associated emotions—a process he feels mentally draining. Hence, he rarely revises his poetry, even when dissatisfied with it.

5. Discussion

Poetry writing does not occur in isolation. It is a social practice shaped by its digital, cultural, historical, political, and social contexts (Wilson & Dymoke, 2017). The poems written by participants for the task reflect the heterogeneity and diversity of HK literature. They respond to and complicate the local identity and *true-to-life* trope of HK poetry: while their poetry is grounded in everyday life, this does not necessarily point to their immediate reality, but also to broader social contexts that require deeper reflections before being transformed into poetry.

Tensions within the intimate sphere of personal, family, and social life are common themes in participants' poetry. Anson's poem captures the transition of his voice from adolescence into adulthood (Appendix B). He explores how his conception of adulthood is shaped by his father and seeks to break free from that influence. Chloe's poem delves into the painful emotional complexities of family life (Appendix B). George's poem centers on the experience of watching a movie with a friend, capturing the subtle moment of realization—reached only much later—that he shared his friend's feelings (Appendix B).

For other poets, their representations of local life are rooted in dialogues with broader social issues in HK. In Ben's poem "See You, Bryde's Whale" (Appendix B), he adopts an ecocritical perspective to condemn the greed of those seeking to profit from the carcass of a Bryde's whale killed by a ship strike in HK waters. The poem criticizes those "blinded by capital" who cause irreversible habitat loss for wild animals. His poetic focus and language echo the work of HK poet Chan Mit—by whom Ben is deeply influenced—who is known for his critiques of market values and local development. Meanwhile, several poets connect their poetry to HK's political circumstances. Emily's work is an intimate, poetic response to a letter from a friend imprisoned following the 2019 protests (Appendix B). Felix uses Sun Yat-sen (an alumnus of the University of HK and a revolutionary leader of the 1911 Revolution that overthrew the Qing dynasty) as a figure of parody. He ironically frames Sun as someone "unable to use the BNO (British National (Overseas)) pathway to emigrate to the UK" (the UK being a primary destination for post-2019 emigration among Hongkongers). While Sun's revolution was successful, the social movements in post-2019 HK were forcefully suppressed, creating a sense of loss over unrealized visions (Appendix B). Helen similarly seeks to explore the theme of diaspora in one of her drafts, adopting the perspective of someone remaining in HK to capture an overwhelming sense of emptiness.

Poets' works also contain a metapoetic dimension, wherein poetry becomes a medium for reflecting its own forms, language, and expressive capacities. In Felix's poem, he emphasizes the rebelliousness of HK poets shaped by the city's sociopolitical context. He writes: "Hong Kong invents an ungente part of a rubber tree / The tree sap is toxic, poets are toxic" (Appendix B). For Felix, the poet carries a disruptive force, always refusing to be neutralized or oversimplified by monolithic frameworks. Meanwhile, David's second poem compares poetry to a potted plant (Appendix B). While the plant is seemingly "ordinary," it serves as a vessel for his "loud outcry" and the "bitterness and sweetness of life." The imagery of the

plant wanting him to “break its foliage” also represents the power of poetry to break through one’s position, transforming mundane reality into aesthetic form.

In HK New Poetry, sound, rhythm, and syntax bear traces of Cantonese, a Chinese dialect that is primarily spoken in HK and a major language of literary production in the city (Tong, 2023). All poets in this study speak and write in Cantonese, with the exception of Chloe, whose mother tongue is Mandarin. Meanwhile, HK poetry focuses on the ordinariness of local life and the uniqueness of singular objects, situations, and people rather than grandiloquent narratives and histories associated with Western epic traditions (Cheung, 2012). Nonetheless, our participants’ understanding of the poetic essence shares key features with accounts by Western poets: profound experience expressed aesthetically through the combination of complex language and rhythm. The fact that the writing processes of HK poets broadly resonate with existing psychological models from Western contexts also suggests a cross-cultural generality in the fundamental cognitive structures of poetry writing.

Following the *Natural Pathway*, conceptual, formulation, and handwriting or typing processes operate concurrently, consistent with Olive’s (2014) parallel and cascading model of writing. Poets need not consciously deliberate over the selection and formation of words, as content and form emerge simultaneously (Elbow, 1989), a process Felix likens to breathing: “It is like when you breathe; you are not consciously aware that you are breathing.” He further suggests that, just as people do not consciously “focus on the forehead or chin when looking at others,” poets perceive their work as a unified whole rather than separate lines or words to be compiled. Poetry is particularly conducive to this pathway with fewer narrative constraints than prose and less binding by the logic of rationality or causality. Its greater flexibility in length also allows a flow of creative thought to sustain without conscious pauses.

Importantly, the relatively automatized nature of the pathway reduces but does not eliminate the cognitive demands of writing (Kellogg, 1999). Even when guided by the subconscious, poets maintain a close cooperation with the rational mind (Boice & Myers, 1986), which, in this state, operates beneath metacognitive awareness. Technical aspects are assumed in the artist’s practice and fade into the background of awareness, enabling poets to draw upon these technical skills without conscious effort. (Nelson & Rawlings, 2007). For instance, David may be unaware of the reason for certain word choices in the moment, yet he can later explain their effects and how his work connects to broader poetic traditions.

Following this pathway is a form of “freewriting with directives” (Boice & Meyers, 1986), in which the poet’s mastery, emotions, and creative intent guide the stream of consciousness without stifling it. This aligns with Galbraith’s (1999, 2009) theorization of “dispositional writing” as a knowledge-constituting process. Galbraith suggests that semantic content is synthesized by activating a network of interconnected subconceptual units (e.g., through inspiration or emotion), with ideas gradually constructed across a series of such syntheses. Although this process appears spontaneous, it is shaped by two sets of constraints: input constraints (e.g., topic, creative intent, and poetic knowledge) and the mutual constraints among units within the network.

On the other hand, the *Effortful Pathway* is directed by a network of conscious goals (Hayes & Flower, 1980; Flower & Hayes, 1981). During the natural evolution of the creative process, poets mobilize both their subconscious and conscious minds across four recursive stages, in which spontaneous improvisation and top-down evaluation are dynamically interwoven and alternate adaptively (Liu et al., 2015). In Stage 1, poets curb top-down cognitive control to generate as many candidate ideas as possible. These candidate ideas may appear fragmented, but as the poet identifies a theme or creative direction that connects them, they move to Stage 2: the reasoned selection of candidate ideas. As Galbraith (1999) argues, the initial spontaneous draft is responsible for the discovery of new ideas, while later stages of explicit problem-solving shape the text into a rhetorically appropriate final form. This organizational process enables writers to identify categories and develop subordinate ideas to elaborate on the topic (Hayes & Flower, 1980). It also involves eliminating less relevant ideas to maintain focus and succinctness (Gerrish, 2004). Nonetheless, some unused ideas may be incorporated later as creative goals evolve. In Stage 3, poets connect these ideas and structure the poem through goal-directed strategies characterized by analytic processing, although the subconscious mind may also contribute to the development of associations across ideas. In Hayes and Flower's (1980; 1981) terms, this stage involves translating candidate ideas into lines and stanzas based on the demands of language and poetic form. During this process, poets often generate, test, and compare alternative instantiations at multiple levels, from defining the rhetorical problem to decisions about framing, focus, and word choice (Flower & Hayes, 1984). It is characterized by non-linearity and discontinuity, as poets move between different parts of the developing text while their writing is interrupted by pauses and revisions involving cognitive activities such as planning or evaluation (Ulasik et al., 2025). More broadly, this process is captured by Chloe's analogy of writing as solving a jigsaw puzzle, which aligns with a knowledge-transforming model of writing, in which writers frequently alter the order of idea production and deliberate over how to formulate these ideas to satisfy their rhetorical goals (Baaijen & Galbraith, 2018). Finally, in Stage 4, poets direct their attention to critically evaluating and editing their output based on aesthetic and communicative considerations (Liu et al., 2015). This stage also involves a degree of detachment from the poet's subjectivity, as they adopt the perspective of the intended readership. Crucially, these stages may not happen in succession. In the Hayes-Flower model (1980), the sub-processes of revising, evaluating and generating can interrupt any other process and occur at any time in the writing process. As poets uncover new perspectives while the poem's structure evolves, they may further develop new candidate ideas and engage in additional rewriting (Hanauer, 2010).

The distinction between the two pathways is not simply a difference between low self-monitors (driven more by internal affective states and prioritizing spontaneous text production) and high self-monitors (driven more by the rhetorical context and prioritizing explicit problem-solving) (Galbraith, 2009; Baaijen & Galbraith, 2018). Rather, poets experience both processes, and the *Natural Pathway* is understood as a more optimal condition for poetic creativity than the *Effortful Pathway*. In Western writing research,

synthetic planning and spontaneous sentence production are often associated with lower text quality (Baaijen & Galbraith, 2018). However, within Chinese poetics, work produced via the *Natural Pathway* is not necessarily perceived as inferior to that produced through the *Effortful Pathway* (though further studies on reader reception are required). In classical Chinese poetics, “being natural (*ziran*)” is considered an expression of genuineness (Sundararajan, 2015) and a supreme aesthetic achievement—a state where the artist and the object of artistic contemplation merge seamlessly (Ye & Lian, 2025). In fact, David suggests that poems written too deliberately often appear overstructured and soulless.

After a satisfactory draft is completed, poets may choose to revisit their work and undertake further revision. Rather than constituting a separate process, revision is understood as one to which our writing model also applies. Upon evaluation, and depending on the extent of revision required, it may function as an extension of Stage 4 of the *Effortful Pathway*, characterized by executive processes—attention, evaluation, and error detection (Liu et al., 2015). In cases of substantial revision, however, poets may re-engage the entire *Effortful Pathway*. It is the emotional toll of doing so that makes Ben reluctant to undertake further revisions. A limitation of this study, however, is that we were unable to trace the revision process beyond the completion of the submitted draft, and our conceptualization of revision is therefore based on poets’ retrospective reflections on their usual practices.

6. Conclusion

Our research is one of the first phenomenological studies to trace the cognitive processes involved in writing Chinese poetry. We use HK New Poetry as a case study—a branch of modern Chinese poetry that emphasizes everyday language and themes and offers a personal lens through which to explore broader aspects of local life. Our findings broadly resonate with established models of creative writing developed in Western contexts, suggesting the potential cross-cultural applicability of our Dual-Pathway Model. Nonetheless, the *Natural Pathway* is grounded in a specifically Chinese conception of an optimal process of poetic creativity. Echoing the aesthetic ideal of *ziran* in classical Chinese literature, this pathway manifests as a subconscious flow of poetic lines that is guided by creative intent, emotion, and poetic knowledge beneath metacognitive awareness. In cases where a subconscious flow cannot be sustained, poets tend to follow the *Effortful Pathway*, which resembles a problem-solving account of writing (e.g., Flower & Hayes, 1980): first strategically loosening cognitive control to generate candidate ideas, before gradually introducing analytical thinking to evaluate, develop lines, and structure the poem as creative goals concretize.

Nonetheless, our results may not be generalizable to the writing processes of more experienced poets. Since we employed a snowball sampling strategy and our social networks are primarily among young poets, our sample consists of poets aged 19 to 28, who, while not necessarily novices, remain some distance from expert-level experience. Although literary expertise often overlaps with general education, its mastery typically requires around 10 years of intensive practice, amounting to thousands of hours (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). A more diverse sample is required to enhance the study’s representativeness. Furthermore, our

observations during the writing tasks may not fully reflect poets' writing processes in real-life settings. The fact that poets are partaking in a research project and being recorded and observed potentially interferes with their creative imagination, both consciously and subconsciously (Tsanoff, 1914). For instance, Ben and Felix felt slightly uneasy and nervous, believing that it may have restricted their creative performance. Chloe also felt that the researchers were peeping into her thoughts, causing her to unconsciously adjust her writing style. She thought that her poem might have been different if she had been in her most comfortable writing environment. To address this, we also took each poet's usual writing practice into account, using qualitative interviews not only to examine how they approached the assigned task but also to clarify the phenomenon of poetry writing in its habitual contexts (Bevan, 2014).

Furthermore, we observe the use of generative AI in the creative process, specifically to generate images and keywords for inspiration. However, this was only the case for two participating poets, who used AI during the stage of developing candidate ideas rather than for generating lines of their poems. Further research would be valuable to understand the role of AI in poetic creativity, particularly for writers who collaborate more closely with these tools throughout their writing process.

Notes

¹ "New Poetry" is more closely associated with the May Fourth literary traditions than the term "Modern Poetry" (現代詩). However, in most contexts, both terms refer to the same genre. Given that the use of "New Poetry" is more common in HK (i.e., from the categories of literary awards to teaching materials issued by the HK Education Bureau), this paper adopts the term New Poetry.

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The interview data collected for this study can be accessed digitally on https://osf.io/abqdi/?view_only=895f6e0e339b4011a8babcdc75e88b0fReferences

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Appendix A: Details of interview sessions

Details of interview sessions

Pseudonym	Interview duration (mins:secs)	No. of pages of transcript
Anson	36:49	8
Ben	41:38	8
Chloe	40:26	8
David	47:54	9
Emily	28:29	8
Felix	50:49	9
George	39:15	8
Helen	46:28	8

Appendix B

Poems written by poets during the poetry writing task

Anson's poem

〈標靶〉

(手指緊握標身)
 暗黑如同他的客廳
 他終究不會知道
 你的原子筆劃過了一個禮堂
 劃出了屯馬綫的方向
 在落伍的曲目和連續劇中
 在煙灰中，在泡沫裏，瞄準
 拉後，這是他如何告訴你
 如同他徐徐地示範
 如同他如何醞釀酒的濃度
 而你嘗試從中臨摹一些輪廓，在噪音中投幣（飛出去）
 你劃出了一個完美的弧形
 但你總是偏離了靶心
 而他歸因於骰子的概率（再試試看）
 你在樂隊那不熟悉的音樂中
 用著異樣的腔調
 告訴他們
 你是多麼的忤逆
 從多麼戲劇的迷霧中
 從苦澀和微笑間
 適應酒量

Ben's poem

〈再見，布氏鯨〉

只不過是一張口的冒升
 不過是日常的覓食
 你便要永遠沉默

你太年輕，嘗試練習下潛
 但無法潛得更深
 你不知道，並非每一塊海洋
 都會真誠地讓你納入他們的擁抱

人們說，生命的終結
 也是生命的開始

“Bullseye”

(Fingers gripping the dart)
 Pitch-dark as his living room
 He will never know
 Your pen left a stroke across the hall
 Mapping the direction of the Tuen Ma Line
 In outdated song lists and soap dramas
 In cigarette ashes, in the foam, aiming
 Pulling back, this is how he tells you
 Like how he slowly demonstrates
 Like how he brews over the alcohol content
 And you try to sketch some outlines from it, inserting coins
 in the noise, (fly away)
 You drew a perfect arc
 But you always miss the bullseye
 And he chalks it up to the probability of a dice (try again)
 In that unfamiliar band music
 With an unusual accent
 You tell them
 How disobedient you are
 Amidst the dramatic mist
 Between bitterness and smiles
 You got to hold your liquor

“See You, Bryde's Whale”

It's just a rising breath
 Just a daily search for food
 Then you will have to remain forever silent

You were too young, trying to practice diving
 But you can't go deeper
 You didn't know, not every sea
 Will sincerely include you in their embrace

People say, the end of life
 Is also the beginning of life

但你只能示範一次： 一些生命的終結也是 生命的終結	But you could only demonstrate it once: Some endings in life are also The end of life
很多年來，你們也有同伴 游向這沒有生命的島嶼 用龐大的軀體殉葬牠（這不是純粹 的意外）	For many years, you all had companions Swimming towards this lifeless island To bury it with their massive bodies alive (this wasn't a mere accident)
習慣超支的人工島 輕易奪去你們棲居的家園 （他們說，那就給你們補償） 炙熱的漁燈使你迷失 像他們被資本遮蔽的雙目	Artificial islands used to overspending Easily seize the homes you live in (They said, then I'll compensate you) Blinding fishing lights lead you astray Like their eyes shuttered by capital
他們喜歡上岸但不知道 上岸，是等待死去的意思	They love going ashore yet don't know Going ashore, means waiting for death
聽說他們要把你 鎖進土壤裏，差遣風暴 旁觀你的腐化 像那些無辜的孩子被長期拘禁 來日再被很多陌生的手撿拾你的骨 頭 幻想用你的標本招引更多看客 籌辦更多需要購票的展覽	Apparently they are going to Lock you in the soil, summon the storms To witness your decay Like those innocent children, long imprisoned Your bones will be picked by strangers' hands Wishing to use your specimen to attract more visitors To arrange more exhibitions they need to purchase tickets for
Chloe's poem	
〈超能力者的難題〉 今天 超能力者選擇拯救一位婦女 她觸摸母親的臥室 觸到無數次慟哭	"A Superhuman's Dilemma" Today, The superhuman chooses to rescue a woman She caresses her mother's bedroom Her fingers landing on countless cries
她的小女兒討厭她： 十八歲的脾氣 落後二十八年的思想 五十二歲才開始曖昧 還有永遠凌亂的衣櫃和異性緣	Her young daughter despises her: The temper of an 18-year-old The mindset 28 years behind She only started seeing someone at 52 With her always messy closet and romantic interests
超能力者有透視眼：	The superhuman has X-ray vision:

客廳裡的舊沙發 盤踞著陳舊的老父親 女兒的老父親： 年輕時善於遺棄道德 七十二歲善於遺忘過去：	An aged couch in the living room Occupied by the obsolete, old father The daughter's old father: Once skilled at forsaking morals At 72, skilled at forgetting the past:
可能性被封存 在二十八年前的相簿裡 超能力者摸索時間軸 這是改變命運的契機： “慟哭會被遺忘 在另一個平行宇宙裡”	Possibilities sealed away In an album 28 years ago The superhuman gropes along the timeline This is the chance to change destiny: “The cries will be forgotten in another parallel universe”
“但是我愛我的女兒 如何殺死父親卻留下女兒” 面對悖論難題 超能力者落荒而逃。	“But I love my daughter How can I kill the father and leave the daughter?” Confronted with such a dilemma The superhuman flees in despair
David's poem (poem 1)	
我們走過這走廊， 那古色古香的味道！ 我們穿起那件袍， 我和你的年月在過去。	We walked through this corridor, That nostalgic scent! We put on the gown, Our years together into the past.
你帶我到你的院校 那明亮得照耀你艱難的地方。 你有很多歷史啊，很多淚很多苦 埋在這片土地下。	You brought me to your university That bright place that put a spotlight on your struggles. You have so much history, so many tears and sorrows Buried beneath this land.
我們走過這走廊， 我說這是難得的情調！ 我們汗流浹背，我們熱得想脫去衣服； 這是我們的夏天，我們年輕。	We walked through this corridor, I said this is a rare ambiance! Soaked with sweat, we wanted to disrobe in the heat; This is our summer, we're young.
David's poem (poem 2)	
我的那棵好枝葉，現在長在我旁 這是我的聲音，這是我的大聲吶喊 生活的苦味和鮮味。	That good foliage of mine, now growing beside me, This is my voice, my loud outcry, The bitterness and sweetness of life.
它就長在我旁，多麼平凡！	It grows right beside me, how ordinary! It sits here, how much it wants me to break it!

它就坐在這裏，多麼想我把它折斷！

Emily's poem

〈雨訊〉

聽說這是史上最熱的八月
你在悶焗的倉房
說這輩子不曾這麼熱過
背上長滿熱痱 頭昏腦脹
每晚要用牙膏擦臉 沖兩次凍水涼
仍然是熱得不得不用床單包裹手
以免滴下汗水 令信紙太沉重
香港的白天過分地長 而夜虛弱地短
陽光的焦燥還未散去 又迎來另一天的陽光
只有水泥森林能在沙漠生長
而我也是一枚小石頭
從寫字的指尖開始失去稜角
成為沙的一部分
直到你的信紙堆滿簷篷
像雨般傾瀉下來
城市終於被一場大雨淹沒

"Rain Signal"

This is the hottest August in history, supposedly
You're in a stifling cell
Saying you've never been this hot in your life
With heat rashes on your back, your head dizzy and swollen
You have to wipe your face with toothpaste every night,
bathe in cold water twice
Still, it's so hot that you have to wrap your hands in
bedsheets
Lest sweat drips, making the letter paper too heavy
Hong Kong's days are excessively long, while nights are frail
and short
Before the fretting sunlight subsides, another day's sunlight
arrives
Only concrete forests can thrive in the desert
And I, too, am a small pebble
My fingertips, writing, have lost their angles
Becoming a part of the sand
Until your letter paper is stacked to the eaves
Collapsing like rain
The city is finally submerged by a downpour

Felix's poem

〈香港新詩創作心理現象學研究〉

強迫一座山的肉體
捐贈花崗岩、麻石與詩意
圓柱高尚地支撐中層的實驗
地理學的眼睛試圖偷窺
語言的幽深與無明
而沒有礦工一般的教授
比鳥類的肺部更迷路於詩的原石
因為空，因為月色在水上遊戲
或者你要比鳥更窒息於山洞深處
痛苦的街道，像一種只有回音的水
飯房
你與自己的記憶對話，對話的時候
要
——研究詞語的細胞

"A Psychological, Phenomenological Study of Writing Hong Kong New Poetry"

Forcing the body of a mountain
To donate granite, marble, and poetic essence
Columns nobly support the experiments of the middle
layers
The eyes of geography try to peek into
The abyss of language
None of the professors resemble miners
Even more lost in the raw stones of poetry than the lungs of
birds
Because of emptiness, because moonlight dances on water
Or perhaps you need to suffocate deeper in the caves than
birds
Painful streets, like a cell with only echoes

如何像黑夜的鼠族
顯微於新聞的顯微鏡頭下
報導穿上中山裝的舊生逸仙
無法持 BNO 赴英
那四分之一的太寇（又何止四分之一）
輔仁者在單人房間
只有三十分鐘把思想如風箏般放出去
時代的繩子又把他挾持回來

一場詩的實驗，光線是另一把剪刀
裁減現象，裁減裹著香港的屍布
當樹葉在高處，而鐘樓下
怪人在為一場實驗
與詩句的準時抵達協商
陸佑家鄉的樹木：糖膠樹曾是一種發明
黑板樹嘔吐白色乳汁
而我比沙特更喜愛音符
離開樂器後的死亡賦格
正如奧本海默忽略遠東之大學
香港發明一粒橡膠樹不溫柔的部分
樹汁有毒，詩人有毒
有攻擊性的頭顱：武器的武器
雙年獎給那些御用的翰林院士
研究新詩有毒呵，因我如嘔吐
幾百年土地的舊毒
因非詩的事物伏匿匿
跳飛機
拒絕如棕櫚樹移植到
不般若的般若道
拒絕移植至科學的庭園
流瀉於論文的水池
它噴出的液體
而時代之海淵在我體內沈睡
霧化如鯨骨中的血肉
不屈的標本

You converse with your memories, when conversing you
have to
—Study the cells of words
How to, like nocturnal rodents,
Appear under the microscopic lens of news
Report the alumnus Yat-sen in a Zhongshan suit
Unable to use the BNO to head to the UK
That one-fourth of a desperado (how can it just be one-
fourth)
The Fu Jen member in a single room
With only thirty minutes to let go of his thoughts like kites,
The rope of the era pulls him back again

As a poetic experiment, light beams are another pair of
scissors
Trimming phenomena, trimming the shroud enveloping
Hong Kong
When leaves are perched, under the clock tower
A strange person is, for the sake of an experiment,
Negotiating the punctual arrival of poetic verses
Trees in Loke Yew's hometown: gum trees were once an
invention
Blackboard trees vomit white sap
And I love musical notes more than Sartre
The Death Fugue after it has left the instrument
Just like Oppenheimer who disregarded Far East universities
Hong Kong invents an ungente part of a rubber tree
The tree sap is toxic, poets are toxic
An aggressive cranium: a weapon's weapon
The biennial award goes to those imperial academicians
Studying new poetry is toxic, as I vomit
Old poison of centuries-old land
Because of non-poetic matters, playing hide-and-seek
Hopscotch
Refuse to be transplanted like palm trees
to the non-Prajna Prajna Path
Refuse to be transplanted to the garden of science
Discharge into the pool of essays
The liquid it ejects
While the abyss of the era sleeps within me
Vaporizes like flesh in whale bones

 Unyielding specimens

George's poem

〈尚未完場〉
終於約成去看戲，難得
同感興趣。燈光熄滅，調好坐姿
沉默下來，讓大銀幕發亮
讓期待的呈現：

呵欠連連
聽到你鼻敏感發作了
數算打過的呵欠
坐姿不停轉換

燈亮，望向旁邊的你
竟有淺淺的淚痕
我們走出戲院，我沉默
沿路你細數命中你的時刻
說服我那段時光的美麗

才發現我們記憶的差距

分別後我想像你抹眼淚，填補
黑房中缺失的片段和情感
接通的一剎那
錯過的眼淚開始流下

Helen did not complete a poem
during the poetry writing task

"To Be Continued"

Finally we made plans to watch a movie. Rarely
our interests meet. Lights off, we adjust our posture
Settle into silence and let the big screen shine
Let the anticipated appear:

Yawns one after another,
I heard the eruption of your allergic rhinitis
I counted the yawns that were let out
Your posture switched constantly

Lights on, turning to you beside me
I noticed faint traces of tears
Walking out of the cinema, I stayed silent
While you recounted precious moments of your life
Convincing me of their beauty

Then I realized how we remember things differently.

After parting, I imagine you wiping your tears, filling in
the missing fragments and emotions in the dark room
Coming through in a split-second
Those tears unshed began to flow