

# **Evanescent Isles**

**from my city-village**

**Xu Xi**



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Visitors in my city hear this announcement: "Please mind the gap between the train and the platform." The tone is feminine and formal; the accent surfs the waves of English that is the Queen's, American-global and Canto-local. It cautions riders of the MTR — the people's name for the Mass Transit Railway, our metro, subway, tube, underground — as you pull into each station. What fewer visitors comprehend is the preceding Cantonese announcement: 請小心列車與月台間之空隙 "Please have a little heart for the crack in space from the train to the platform," which is a creative, but not entirely unrecognizable, translation.

Hong Kong occupies a tiny crack in the space of world history. We were that "barren isle," sacrificed by China and disdained by England, but we flourished, like some unstoppable weed in our "borrowed" space and time. In 1939, the poet W.H. Auden observed of the city: *Here in the East the bankers have erected / A worthy temple to the Comic Muse*. Now that his century is past, it is perhaps time to reflect on the worth of that temple, this place I'll call home for as long as it makes me laugh and sing and feel.

We have become a cosmopolitan people, though still undeniably a brand of Chinese, who trade in the languages and commodities of the world. To be a "Hong Kong citizen" allows you to absorb the best of east and more east, and to know the nuance of west vs. east if you choose. Do the twain really meet? Occasionally yes, but perhaps more often, no. Our children marry across races and produce offspring of multiple hues who are not "lost in translation," unlike cosmopolitans from the West. Yet you will find Chinese traditions and attitudes, dating back hundreds of years, nascent in this post-post-modern space. Our public holidays and festivals cling to old myths and superstitions long abandoned in modern China. We like to insist our contemporary culture is less global-Western-ized, democratic, and confused than it really is.

In 1997, Hong Kong was returned to the People's Republic. It was our great historical moment of controversy. The moment was dubbed the handover, or takeover — some might say the homecoming — and rattled no one who truly knew the city. The international media took a different view, sounding warning bells over the arrival of the PLA (People's Liberation Army). Like all newsworthy moments, this historical hump over which we flew was quickly forgotten as the Asian economic crisis took hold, followed by bird flu, S.A.R.S., and saber-rattling by Beijing over Taiwan, that other Chinese political anomaly. We blip across the news, as protestors march for democracy backed by international political support. The support is, however, neither resounding nor heeded by Beijing. At this moment, we are pushing limits on "universal suffrage" in this non-nation state that has never been a democracy. In the



game of diplomatic relations, you've got to, as the song goes *win a little, lose a little / yes, and always have the blues a little* and, at least in our times, trust that the glory of capital markets, like love, will prevail. "The Glory of Love" (1939) was used as the theme song of a 1967 film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, once controversial for its interracial subject matter. Controversy is like that, good for the moment. We pretend lessons are learned, but then move on, soldier on we might say, while few things change to still our little hearts.

So *siu sam*, or have a "little heart," which is to say, be wary of that crack in space. It might trip you up with its transformation now that we are once again more or less on our own, the way we were when a handful of fisher folk and farmers roamed these shores, more or less governed by China. We never were "British" just as most of us are not "Chinese" the way they are on the Mainland. But just as we once became, if not a little more British then at least a little more international, we can now become a little more Chinese the way they are up north. We are a gambling culture after all. *Crack or platform, platform or crack*. Like the Macau casino "Big-Small" game that pays two to one, a fifty-fifty chance might be the odds on our space in eternity.

While reflecting on the "crack," I began wandering through my life in this, my birth city. It seemed at first an aimless journey through memory, supplemented by present-day conversations about Hong Kong, provoked by the stimuli offered in the city's writing, art, performances, photography, films, as well as by the minutiae of day-to-day living. During the decade since the handover, I have flitted in and out of this place, sometimes alighting for six weeks or longer, at other times zipping through for a fortnight or less on my way elsewhere. As of mid 2006, I have returned for family reasons to live on a more-or-less temporary, medium-term basis, a state of being which might speak to the true nature of this place.

Yet what began to emerge, as I poked my way through remembrances, was a narrative thread — a Jamesian *ficelle* — that pulled me along actual streets and districts on long, uncertain walks, and rides on public transport, at all hours of the night and day. Sometimes, these journeys had a destination: to see a forgotten locale, to discover a new and unknown area, to visit a friend, to go to a club or restaurant, to swim or run, to research a detail for fiction. More often than not, I perched in tea shops, restaurants, bars, or cafés that I stumbled upon, trying to come to grips with what was happening to my city, measuring my life here in numerous bowls of noodles and congee, cups of coffee and tea, glasses of wine and other spirits, knowing that T.S. Eliot's coffee spoons could not, would not, should not suffice. Similarly, I obsessively eavesdropped conversations on board buses, trams, minibuses, and in the carriages of the MTR and KCR (the Kowloon Canton Railway). *Where have you come*

*from, where are you going to*, I wanted to ask strangers, as if their answers could reveal the meaning of these isles — located in the Landrone chain of the South China Seas — as well as the identity of a people who are not easily classified as "Chinese," despite the ethnicity of the overwhelming majority.

To write of this city is to be thwarted at every turn. My stories needed to tell more than show — a deadly problem for fiction as any storyteller knows — and words tumbled out in a new and different form, in essays rather than fiction, to tell, tell, tell of the *crisis of calm* that holds my city in thrall. But at heart I am neither a critic nor journalist nor academic — even though to earn a living I have occasionally pretended to be all three — and cannot write of life primarily by those terms of engagement. I am a writer of fiction, and it became my challenge to find a creative voice in non-fiction to articulate the intersection of memory and moment as it worried the imagination.

It has not been easy coming to terms with being a writer from these shores. As a child, I awoke at four one morning and began to write after gazing at the Hong Kong harbor. Then, scribbling in a notebook was simply another life activity, not unlike sleeping or playing or going to school, except that it proved more fun. Yet now when my identity is inextricably tied to "being a writer," I question the scribbling of personal narratives and essays of this place and people, even though I count myself a Hong Kong person. The density is daunting. There are too many lives, loves, sorrows, celebrations, emotions, experiences. Too many stories. As fast as I tell one, the next awaits, demanding its turn. The spatial challenge is, at times, unbearable. The shifting shapes of buildings and boundaries are like the vanishings in a ghostly flick, designed to frighten and thrill. The lights go on, though, at the end of a film, and you file out of the cinema, impressed, disappointed or merely indifferent. In the real world, the map is less certain. Finding your way can be a stumble down a blind alley, the pursuit of an unfinished path or arrival at, as the old song goes, *number 54 / the house with a bamboo door / bamboo roof and bamboo walls / it's even got a bamboo floor*, where, if you surrender to the controlled chaos within, you'll find out "why there's a lot to do" in this strange and sometimes unreal space.

As a fiction writer, I am generally discomfited by memoir, because few lives strike me as necessary to record in this form, least of all mine. The "I" must mean more than merely "me, me, me," otherwise such words deserve less attention than the millionth of a second reality TV deserves. In trying to shape this book, it was not an "I" but a "we" that emerged, because the life of my city mattered more than my own. Was Hong Kong itself asking for attention? It appeared so, because the city that once seemed solid and real was dissolving, transforming (some would say disappearing) but nonetheless surviving (many



would say thriving), stoic and undeterred, while doggedly ignoring the protests, complaints and demands of voices who sense a threat to their survival or who deem survival alone insufficient.

We are a peace-loving, law-abiding, hard-working, generally apolitical people, more given to shopping than shouting, more consumed by frenzy than reflection. Why then a *crisis* of calm, this apparent oxymoron? A climactic calm is characterized by an absence of wind and freedom from storms, high winds or rough activity. Our city's storms, whether economic, viral or social, have hit squally seas slightly larger than teacups, quickly followed by periods of calm. The etymology of calm is curiously contradictory, because its Greek and Latin roots are heat, burning heat, and even, to burn.

Is it a crisis, then, this stillness that burns the heart? Crisis is a turning point — its linguistic root being to separate — as well as an unstable state, usually political, economic or psychological. If Webster's is to be trusted, then to define such instability is especially true for “a social condition requiring the transformation of existing cultural patterns and values.” Hence this crisis of calm, as we watch the changeover from extant to new that is different, perhaps, but not entirely unrecognizable.

As I write this, when I am not yet quite 54 — the number on that bamboo door — but shall be by the time keystrokes on a screen transform into a book, tangible, which will be, if I do my job right, readable, what remains is to offer these pages to the spirit of Hong Kong. A little then of me, you, us, in these words for the city we cannot help but know, despite whatever may be its future, or as we say in Cantonese, whatever is its “yet to come.”

*Summer 2007*

from a rooftop squat in the shadow of Lion Rock

## cracks in space of an over-privileged childhood

*life in the city, the orient's pearl . . .*

### GLORIES OF THE NOUVEAU RICHE

Oh to be young again! And just foreign and *nouveau riche* enough to glory in Hong Kong of the early sixties.

Ours was a lucky family. Dad bragged to relatives about the money he earned and acquired multiple symbols of this new found wealth: an Italian chandelier, oddly bright in our tiny living room and excruciatingly difficult to clean; the custom-made, showcase, fully-stocked bar, triangular-shaped to fit under the staircase of our harbor-view, penthouse duplex; a white, handset telephone, its dial on the base with a red, circular switch in the center that clicked off and on; our own hand dryer, installed next to the handwashing basin behind the bar; the made-to-order, midnight-blue, wool carpet, buttoned around the pillar that split our living room — into not half, but an awkward two-thirds — and which covered approximately three quarters of the entire downstairs. The carpet needed to be removed each spring because of the humid, subtropical climate, and was unwieldy, but it was the closest my father could approximate wall-to-wall carpeting, that great foreign luxury.

Meanwhile, Mum was restored to her glory as favorite daughter of one of the formerly richest men in the village of Tjilatjap in Central Java. She installed three live-in servants, ordered blue, pink and yellow wooden beds plus matching wardrobes for her three girls, bribed the Catholic priests and nuns with donations to ensure all the children's attendance at the elite, English-medium "name schools," enrolled us for piano, ballet, swimming and tennis lessons (but only after we endured Chinese and math tutors), and hosted numerous parties for my father's relatives and business associates. She wore cocktail dresses tailor-made at the Old Peking Silk Store on Nathan Road, and commandeered feasts: caviar and champagne; Chinese hot-pot or *sukiyaki* with hot *sake*, replenished repeatedly by the cook; cheese fondue to accompany Japanese greenhouse strawberries that came packed in straw in small wooden crates. On the verandah overlooking a harbor where Chinese junks sailed and U.S. aircraft carriers docked, we charcoal grilled beef-chicken-pork-goat *satay*, or steaks to be served on individual wooden boards, because to eat rich is to be glorious, even before Deng Xiaoping.

In our post-handover city, my childhood is no longer as exotic as it once seemed. I recognize huge shards of that life among the globalized citizen-children whose parents pay exorbitant fees for their attendance at "international" schools, who fly business class to Switzerland or Bali or Los Angeles for Christmas break, who swarm the Sunday buffets at five-star hotels and routinely dine on oysters, sushi, *fromage*, select steaks from Argentina, Colorado or Australia, specify wines from Chile, New Zealand and of course France, gulp cognac by the thousands of gallons. Interior designers do a flourishing trade and, I daresay, a better job at glamorizing home space than my father once did.



To be rich is relative in a capitalist paradise, but the memory of that early wealth lingers when I consider my changing city. My lucky family lost that wealth by the time I was eleven, although given Chinese glue that holds “face” in place, it was difficult for outsiders to tell. But my number two sister and I, as the oldest children, were keenly aware that something was seriously awry when Mum emptied our bank accounts of our carefully hoarded *laissez* earnings, when Dad stayed home more and more often and swept the floor after the last maid was let go, when my parents stopped traveling and never went home to Indonesia, or anywhere else, to visit family.

Eventually, my mother went back to work as a pharmacist. This was the woman who once pitied the wives of friends who “had to work” since her view of a woman’s education was that it should provide earning power only until marriage, or if your husband couldn’t support you. Wealth is fickle, more so than woman; my father’s fondness for opera ensures that *La Donna è Mobile* replays in my head, an irritating soundtrack to life.

I remember falling into that crack in space. At the time, it was simply life, and frankly, did not seem all that strange or terrible. But the cracks in my parents’ lives were harder for them to bear.

My father was the eldest of three sons. Although he never finished university, he encouraged his two brothers onto their PhDs, and helped out financially where he could. When Dad was eighteen his mother passed away. Less than a year later, my grandfather married a woman some thirty years his junior and sired another five children; his wife was my mother’s age and their youngest son, my step uncle, is my age. In the sixties, their family lived in Jesselton, since renamed Kota Kinabalu. Two of my step aunts came, in succession, to live with us and attend secondary school in Hong Kong. It was assumed that my successful and wealthy father (he did brag, after all) should easily assist in supporting his step sisters. My mother, being a modern, educated woman when it suited her, was quick to protect her own children’s interests, and protested vehemently. The feuds that ensued — between my father and grandfather, my mother and my father’s family, my mother and father — on top of the strain of tight finances, became our family’s never ending thrum, like a perpetual bad disco beat. *No big deal if we had the money . . .* money became the thing that would make all pain go away.

Ah, illusions and delusions of grandeur! These wafted around my girlhood and the romance of it all was enough to make you giddy. Pretty dresses and birthday cakes and parties made my lucky family special. My childhood girlfriends still recall those parties, in the days when my mother’s greatest responsibility was to ensure that all her children gave the most lavish and memorable parties, with more food than anyone could finish and games and prizes for all. Few Chinese friends had parties at home, except for one or two who were truly rich, and not merely *nouveau*.

My father survived life in the cracks by clinging to the joy that money once bought, because he refused to surrender certain extravagances — the cost of an overseas subscription to *Kompas*, the Indonesian newspaper, for instance, probably because it was a reminder of his manganese mining business in Java that had once made him important and rich — and these became the sources of friction between my parents.

It was however harder for Mum, because women get the short end, despite the vote and other liberations. While Dad sank into a silent depression at home, too proud to see people, refusing to take “lesser” work — translations, for example, which he was capable of doing — sometimes not speaking a word for days except to shout at us for making a mess, my mother swallowed pride and borrowed money, sold her jewelry, stretched budgets, bought nothing for herself, and kept a family clad and fed to face the world as if nothing was wrong. Even the most obedient adolescents are difficult, as I was, and her rage found its outlet in recriminations against my father, and in an oftentimes irrational control over the children. If she clung to anything, it was to an inflated sense of superiority. As our family sank into the mire, she constantly judged everyone around us as lesser beings, never as good as we were, and held us up to impossibly high standards without regard for our real abilities or inclinations. It was xenophobic, her diatribes against all our friends and relatives. This vitriol was spewed at home, behind their backs, to stay within our walls. Home was the most dangerous place to be.

It was fear, colored by melodrama, because she perhaps could not see then how we would ever get out, how we would ever find a safe space for ourselves again. By keeping everything difficult, perpetually on edge, we would learn to survive. We the children were doomed to disappoint her, as we all managed to do with alarming efficiency over time.

The largest crack appeared when we moved out of our home. It was my mother’s decision, and financially and pragmatically, a sound one for the family. Our penthouse flat in Tsimshatsui was mortgage-free and a good source of rental income. Meanwhile, suburban areas were springing up in Kowloon, and cheap mortgages were available for new developments. The property solution is very Hong Kong, and over my father’s objections, my mother found a new flat, organized the purchase, and arranged to move away from the harbor and our semi-commercial building into a smaller, top-floor, residential space with roof rights on Beacon Hill Road. This was nearer to all our schools, and as far away as possible from the pride of Dad’s glory days.

The balance of power had shifted completely. It was unnerving.

This move took place during my School Certificate year which was sufficiently pressure-filled, but I was spared some of the agony because Mum sent me to live with my maiden aunts so that I could study hard, ace the exams and get a scholarship for university. Suffice to say that I eventually went to university on a wing and a loan from my schoolteacher aunt, to major in English no less. It was my truly



smart cousins who got academic scholarships to Ivy Leagues because they, unlike me, really could ace exams, while I just got by. My mother never got the doctor she wanted, as I was the only one out of all my siblings who might have done so (although by thirteen, I knew better). I barely passed biology, chemistry, physics and failed calculus miserably.

When I escaped family life at seventeen, I never wanted to go home again.

In 1998, my father died abruptly and unexpectedly, but peacefully, in bed one night, at the age of seventy-five, the result of an undetected abdominal aneurysm. He never again was as rich as he had been in the sixties, but he had by then semi-reconciled himself to a more modest, albeit comfortable life. The harbor-view, penthouse duplex, the home he so prized, was long sold. He and my mother had fostered a longstanding truce that, in celebratory moments, could still seem like a kind of love. My grandfather outlived him, although he no longer remembered much, and died a few years later shortly after turning one hundred. A very switched-on Hong Kong lady told me that my father gave me a “good fortune” with that death, meaning that he did not burden us with having to care for him. I was struck by her observation because I realized that despite the grief that initially overwhelmed me, it was possible to make peace with his passing.

The shock to my mother was profound, and I am not sure she will ever entirely recover. Suddenly, she had no one to complain about and, more important, she no longer had anyone to look after, because she did care for him all those years despite the fissures in their marriage. A couple of years afterwards, Mum was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, and we four siblings must deal with the difficulties of that form of aging, where memory is completely defunct at one moment about a meal eaten five minutes earlier, and startlingly exact at another about a long-forgotten hurt of the remote and distant past.

Today, as I ponder my “home” city which has seen many cycles of bust and boom, cycles that seem to be characteristic of its nature if not its soul, I wonder about the essence of my family as it once was compared to what it has become. Former residents sometimes say that they cannot recognize Hong Kong, that it has changed too dramatically. All places change, but our particular slice of paradise seems to loom unusually large for many who have once known this place as home. We seem to desire connection, the way some people do, even to their devastatingly bad families. We nurse nostalgia in our films and songs. We take such pride in our way of life even as we reconcile our existence with other ways of being. Colonial, Communist, International, Chinese. It’s all Hong Kong because we seem to know that the balance of power is always precarious, will always shift, sometimes this way, sometimes that, and survival depends on keeping our balance in that tiny crack in space.

I have spent my life building and dismantling homes, perching here, there and everywhere, returning to my city because the pull seems inescapable. My

over-privileged childhood is just as inescapable. It was this place that made such a childhood possible, that made me what I was and have become.

In my mother’s home now, as her memory and spirit fade despite a healthy constitution, Dad’s Italian chandelier still hangs, not unlike those in countless other *nouveau riche* Hong Kong homes today that lust after a past era of European elegance. My father’s *lumière* is a burst of cylindrical tubes, petals of a crystal chrysanthemum. The entire fixture must be taken down, each tube carefully cleaned by hand, if it is to sparkle brilliantly, the way it once did, illuminating our lost harbor view. My number two sister was the last person to take on this task, which she did with the kind of care and precision that would have made Dad proud, while Mum fretted, the way she would at any disturbances to our father’s treasures. The chandelier is an awkward thing, too large and grand for the modern room. My mother rarely turns it on, preferring to use a cheap, clip-on light behind her armchair.

But occasionally, one of us will flip the switch, and light floods the space. All the pragmatic, ordinary things of daily living fade out and surrender to this extravagant spotlight. Perhaps we need this glare from time to time, to remind us of what was as we wander forward, because we must, along this mysterious path of becoming.



## GODSPEED

The day our cook threatened to quit, I witnessed my first layoff.

The victim was Ah Siu. Hers was a no-name name, without clear demarcation for a family or first name. Back when my father still had money in the sixties, she was hired to look after the four children. “Nanny” would be too classy, “domestic helper” too modern and politically correct. Back then she was a “servant,” along with our cook and washerwoman.

When she first arrived, I was around nine and promptly fell in love. She was everything my mother could not be: lenient, undemanding, tolerant of my childishness. Most of all, she seemed to favor me, or so I imagined, the unworthy eldest child whose only job in the family was to serve as an “example” for the younger ones. I despised my exemplary role, even as I guarded it with fierce pride, relishing the privilege of being told that *Mummy must take care of brother because he’s sickly, or sister who’s still small, or sister who’s not as good a girl as you*. I didn’t always trust that praise, wondering if perhaps Mummy actually didn’t want to take care of me. Ah Siu gave me all her time, listening to my stories, paying me undivided attention, treating me like her own girl.

All three servants boarded with us, sharing a bedroom in the rear two-bedroom guest flat we owned, and only had one day off. They were expected to start work at sunrise and retire at night, often quite late. My parents did not like



us spending time in their quarters, but I hung out in the rear apartment, curious and lovestruck, my excuse being the piano which I practiced in that living room. I thought of the servants as part of our family because, despite everything my parents said to the contrary, I saw no difference between them and us, especially not Ah Siu.

It was a shock, then, when she told me she had a home in the New Territories and a little girl, a daughter she saw once a week, on Sundays, her day off. How could she belong to someone else? She was my Ah Siu, mine! Yet I quickly swallowed that thought, overwhelmed instead with sorrow that Ah Siu couldn't live with her family, and turned my anger towards my parents, Mum especially, that such employment injustice existed. However, this did not translate into my not having Ah Siu. I was a pragmatic, if melodramatic child.

After that, I treated Ah Siu with a little distance, except when the desire to be babied overwhelmed. If my report card was less than stellar, Ah Siu gave me a never-mind smile. If Ah Yee, the cook, yelled, as she often did, I could flee to Ah Siu's tenderness. I was not a sissy child, and in fact, resisted tears to win the "good girl" accolade from Mum. But what I recall of Ah Siu was a sweet refuge in the raucous household of my childhood, where my father was often overseas on business, my mother overwhelmed and exhausted by the household and servants, where guests needed "to be waited on hand and foot" as Mum said of our numerous Indonesian relations, especially those of my father's, because the servants and my mother had to work twice as hard for these folks, accustomed as they were to legions of servants in their large Indonesian homes, in contrast to our puny three.

Then came the big fight, the details of which I never knew, between Ah Yee and Ah Siu. Shouts and tears. Mum intervening. Loud threats by our cook that she would quit, right now, if Mum didn't fire *that woman*. Before I knew it, Mum said Ah Siu was leaving. Not a single objection I raised was heard; a good cook, however temperamental, was harder to find.

Ah Siu packed her things and prepared to leave.

I sulked. I refused to leave my bedroom. So what, I told myself, *she's only a servant*, echoing my mother's words.

At the last possible moment, I snatched my favorite thing of the time — a tiny statue of Mercury with his quicksilver wings — and ran to the front door. *Here*, I said, *this is for you*, and tried to tell her about the Greek messenger god. But I was inarticulate, unable to tell a story, unable to arrive at catharsis.

She took the statue, smiled a never-mind smile, hugged me, and we cried in each other's arms.

And now I am grown up, or at least pretend to be, and to date have not perpetuated the indentured servitude of a "domestic helper" for myself. Once, back in the eighties in New York City, I hired a part-time cleaning woman from Columbia. Watching her work, I felt slightly ashamed, because after all I should be capable

of cleaning up my own mess. Throughout my adult life in Hong Kong, I have cleaned and cooked for myself. Of course, unlike many friends and acquaintances, I do not have children as well as a career, so I don't have to balance that equation. Yet I cannot help feeling there is something wrong with the equation, that it is fundamentally unsound, even if it is the basis of the global economy of the servant class.

Why is it Hong Kong's well-being depends on perpetuating the servant class?

Today's Ah Siu's are Filipino. Her day off is usually Sunday, and in some households, she works the long, absurd hours of my family's servants back in the sixties. I know all the arguments: Hong Kong provides employment for a nation of people whose economy needs help; our city has laws and does not tolerate abuse or unfair treatment of the servant class; this is just the way of the world, isn't it, that some rule and others serve? The subtext is clear: in the end, they are "only servants," democracy be damned.

Yet what is it about our culture that this upstairs-downstairs practice thrives so long and well, this wholly intolerable thing?

This year, my sister and I became employers, for the first time in both our lives, of two domestic helpers from the Philippines. They do not clean, cook or care for either of our households, because their jobs are to live with and look after our elderly mother who has Alzheimer's, and who needs round-the-clock monitoring. One woman is a qualified nurse, the other an excellent cook. Both of them are educated and intelligent professionals, as well as wives and mothers, hardly "servants." We call them employees, and though I live at my mother's address, my space is separate and I clean it myself. The only concession is to have them do my laundry, as there is only one washing machine on location. But the ironing is my job since I am fussy about my clothes. This is not something I need to employ someone to do for me.

For my mother however, as her memory fades, she has her "girls" at home to simulate the noise and chatter of family, since none of her real family live with her. My mother, as she grows more frail slips in and out of the life she once knew, ordering the "servants" around as a salve to pride, even though they know better than to pay attention. It is unenviable, the way we age today.

And I am merely a messenger, the fleet-of-foot god, with the story of a privileged history I cannot revise. All I can do is try to live a life that does not perpetuate the wholly intolerable, to avoid what strikes me as childish practices, the ones my city seems so unable to eliminate.



### PATRIOT'S ACT

As a kid growing up in Hong Kong of the sixties, I *desperately* wanted to be American. I begged for hamburgers and Coke, watched American movies, read



*Catcher in the Rye* and *Huckleberry Finn* with a conviction that insisted yes, I too suffered Holden Caulfield's angst or needed to escape on a raft down the Mississippi. America was the land of choice and plenty where, because I believed in comic books more than the heritage of the Middle Kingdom, I could learn to draw, become a writer, and transform myself from a ninety-pound weakling into the figure that held up the world. The harbor was my front yard (we lived on the seventeenth floor), and the docked gray battleships offloaded scores of sailors who danced in my imagination like Astaire or Kelly and stared at blushing girl-women until they fell in love. That *real* sailors scoured the waterfront clutching teenage prostitutes, retching and singing into the night, did not completely discolor the dream. I too would one day sail or fly away and outshoot all the men like Annie Oakley.

Now that I'm middle aged, and a sometimes-reluctant American (or "Asian-American" or "Immigrant"), I make my home somewhere between New York and Hong Kong. I have a yard with too much grass because I cannot afford oceanfront. I rarely eat hamburgers or drink Coke. Hollywood often offends my sensibilities. Real American literature, eclipsed by "literature" of supermodels, pop stars, the latest celebrities or "victims" of the newest self-inflicted "disease," does not sufficiently spark the soul of the nation. The shelves of supermarkets and superstores proliferate packaging and use-by waste for overfull landfills. Yet the global dominance that is American capitalism has been, is and continues to be the "shining path" for Hong Kong and much of the rest of the world.

Why didn't I pledge allegiance to Britain, or, more to the point, China, instead?

There were few Americans in my childhood. Although the girls' school I attended, Maryknoll, was run by a Catholic American order, it was a Hong Kong government-subsidized school which kept our fees relatively low. Our curriculum was colonial-British, the medium of instruction English (except for Chinese class), and the school classified "public." It therefore accepted local students, the vast majority being Chinese and not necessarily Catholic. If you were Catholic, as our family was, you might have an in, especially if the right Franciscan priest put in a good word for you, which is how I got into the school (he was a frequent dinner guest in our home). If you were deemed "foreign," as we being Indonesian citizens were, you had the right to enter the English medium schools and not be required to study Chinese unless you chose to do so, unlike the locals. If you were American, however, you enrolled at International which was the only school that taught an American curriculum.

The handful of nuns from the U.S. who were posted to Hong Kong dwindled over the years, in keeping with the general decline worldwide of Catholic novices, and in secondary school, only one or two actually taught us, although the principal back then was always an American nun. Most of our teachers were Chinese and

a few, "foreign." An Indian taught Form 5 English, a Trinidadian covered the first three years of French, and a Scotswoman drilled us in third form math and the correct curtsy to make to the Queen. So there were few Americans in my schoolgirl years, despite Maryknoll.

Yet their brand of liberal American-ness left an odd imprint here and there. We were assigned *Catcher in the Rye*, which was not on the Hong Kong public exam syllabus. Our school held a Halloween party in 1967, when Halloween was virtually unheard of in our city although it is vastly popular today, a true victory of global commerce. Some friends and I staged a *Peanuts* play; to this day, my best friend from school and I remain Charlie Brown and Snoopy to each other. And if Maryknoll girls past the age of puberty had a "reputation," it was not for our innocence or demure behavior, although, as everyone knew, it was the students at International who were truly wild.

And so the myth began, of what America was. I never knew an actual student at International back then, but I knew what an American high school ought to be like because of *Archie* and *Superboy* comic books. Perhaps if I had continued to study Chinese, which I dropped after Primary V, I might have been less subject to the influence of other "foreign" students. These were mostly Portuguese, a few Eurasians and Indians, one English and one Danish girl, a Vietnamese and the odd visiting American — she attended our school less than a year — the daughter of someone from the movie set of *The Sand Pebbles*, filmed on our shores.

Yet most of us, local or "foreign," knew little about real Americans other than what our imaginations and popular culture confirmed. My father's business associates were Japanese, English, Indonesian, Shanghainese, Portuguese and later Filipino. These visitors to our home were a great curiosity in my childhood. Their names were exotic: Takeuchi, Halim, Bolingbrook, da Motta, Grosvenor, Baltazar, Huang (with an H, not the run-of-the-mill, local-Cantonese W for Wong). Their accompanying women were equally so: from Wales, that weird and mysterious country, a former Bluebell dancer and soprano whose voice rang through our home in duets with my father; an Englishwoman who was tall and imperious, spoke with all the proper pebbles and served proper teas; the most elegant and refined lady from Tokyo who appeared in a kimono and gazed, not at cherry blossoms, but at the Hong Kong skyline from our flat; the Shanghainese wife and mother who steamed exquisite turnip cake, packed with chives, dried shrimp and sliced sausage, a gift to our family for lunar new year.

One real American did, however, find his way into our home, thanks to Dad.

It was late evening, closer to night, and probably spring or autumn, because it was neither cold enough for wool nor hot enough for air conditioning. The year might have been 1963 or '64 or '65. All I know for sure is that U.S.



battleships were a regular sight in the harbor, and along the waterfront that was part of our neighborhood, life could be rough and the sex trade proliferated.

We four children and Mum had finished dinner when Dad's key clicked in the front door. He was red-faced (*drunk!* my mother later angrily exclaimed) and not alone. With him was a Caucasian American sailor. Although I didn't know a lot about U.S. Naval rankings, I knew enough to tell from his uniform that he wasn't an officer.

"This is \_\_\_\_\_," said Dad. "He's from \_\_\_\_\_." Dad went on to say they had met at a bar.

The rest of the family gazed at this being. My father was not in the habit of bringing home complete strangers from bars, although he did occasionally do so. The one other I most recall was an Indonesian sailor who later became a regular visitor. His origins were equally as murky as those of this man who stood before us and said, in that flat, mid-Western accent which is so universally North American, "Hi."

I was astonished. Here was my first real American. He wasn't either handsome or tall, nothing like Cary Grant or Clark Gable or even Kirk Douglas. He wasn't cute, not like some of the fresh-faced sailor boys who swarmed the nights of their R & R. He didn't shake like Elvis or fly like Superman or croon like the Beach Boys. He had no talent to amuse the way Jack Benny or Phil Silvers did. And he didn't talk funny like Bugs or Daffy or Yogi or even Huckleberry Hound. Could this *really* be an American?

In fact, as I studied this person from as polite a distance as possible, who he most reminded me of was Larry from *The Three Stooges*.

The man stayed for a drink and some food, which my mother served, albeit unwillingly. He said he had children about our age and showed us some photos. This is about all I remember of him, because after that night, we never saw or heard from him again. How he piqued my curiosity! I badgered my father with questions about him, but Dad had little to add. Perhaps he had been nothing more than friendly bar chat, although why he intrigued my father enough to invite him home is something I'll never know.

Mum, on the other hand, was livid for days, months, even years afterwards. If my parents fought about this, I did not hear them do so. What I did hear was my mother's telling and re-telling of this incident out of earshot of Dad so that it grew to mythic proportions. *How dare he how could he why did he gave way soon enough to What if this man came here one day when Dad was away, then what?!* Over the years, this amalgamated into the threat of potential rape or murder, even of child prostitution (my mother was once approached by a foreign "gentleman" in our building who thought she was the madam of young girls, meaning my sister and I). Her real objection, however, was that Dad had no common sense in trusting this stranger, this American, a member of a race about which we knew nothing at all.

And yet, and yet, I wondered.

One of my mother's favorite TV program was *The Three Stooges*, a show that already bored me by the time I was eight. Its name in Chinese is "Three Stupids" and it was popular in Hong Kong with local audiences because it was broadcast on the Chinese channel. Many American shows limited broadcast to the English channels. Ask any local of my generation or even younger, and chances are, they will know these three Americans, although they might not have heard of Bob Hope. Visual humor translates the way linguistic humor does not, just as an imagined America remains desirable even when the real one offends.

It was Mum, not Dad who really wanted all us children to further our education in the United States. In fact, a few years after this American visitor to our home, when I was around twelve or thirteen, Mum applied for and received a U.S. visa for the family on the strength of her profession as a pharmacist, one that was a high priority for the immigration lottery at the time. That immigrant visa was the highlight of my youthful sense of America. *Maybe Hawaii*, Mum whispered, and my sister and I lusted for Five-O waves, co-ed schools where no one wore uniforms and dates with boys in convertibles. America was this one gigantic space, the Pacific be damned. T-birds, Route 66, Motown, long guitar solos on *Light My Fire*, Aretha Franklin, Hearts in San Francisco, Impossible Missions, Guess Who *Is Coming to Dinner?* For the brief time I thought we really might go West, far West, farther than Chinese Monkey's trip to India, I was ecstatic.

Dad flatly refused. *What will I do in America? Clean their toilets?* And that was that.

So the Stooge look-alike, with his curly hair, squat build and laughing eyes, was the closest I got to America as a child. The real member of the three Stooges, Larry Fine (born Larry Feinberg) was from the south side of Philadelphia and, like my father, played violin. He and his wife Mabel lived in hotels, a permanently transient life which strikes me as romantic and quite un-American, and had two children and five grandchildren.

My family's Larry clone might have been from Sacramento or Dubuque or Rochester for all I know. His children might, if their father told them tales that entranced them, be somewhere in Hong Kong today. I have no idea whether or not he played violin, but if he did, that would have given him and my father something to talk about.

All we humans can do is touch each other a moment and move on, across this strange globe of ours, trusting in dreams and desire, placing faith in the fiction that shapes our lives.





*ET TU MON PÈRE?*

So there I was, fourteen, full of Shakespeare and Dickens and Keats, which was all we knew of English Literature as Form 3 came to an end, although what continued to puzzle me was the coefficient of heat, which I still hadn't conquered in Physics, or the a-b-c of Algebra, which I would not truly comprehend for at least two more years, just in time for School Certificate Math, which got me a pass in the public exam, but only just.

My girlfriends and I were addicted to "personality books," and we assiduously filled in each other's notebooks with data and secrets during, between and after classes. Mine was comprehensive, demanding information worthy of a database long before students used laptops as notebooks or cell phones as ears. Once past the more mundane details (favorite colors, flowers, movies, TV shows, actors, actresses, singers, *et al*) there followed the vital stats (first love, first boyfriend *or* girlfriend — we allowed for lesbian secrets in our all-girls school — first kiss). Vital stats were answered in code for which only your best friend had the key but which everyone else could guess at. "46," a.k.a. "T.R." was my first love, a Eurasian boy from a neighborhood boys' school I had danced with once at a party. 4 letters in his first name, 6 in his last. Such foolish things absorbed our days of hormones and innocence as summer approached, another school year ending. Vacation was time to dream, to write stories for mine eyes alone, to read the optional booklist Mrs. Liao, our English teacher, had given us. I had my public library card and was poised to start with Richardson's *Pamela*, the literary, if dreary, answer to hormones and innocence and the safeguarding of a maiden's virtue, although it was vice, not virtue, that tempted your soul, forcing new definitions of right and wrong. Pamela, I decided that summer, was a fool, and wrong, dead wrong. Her saving grace was to provide the English novel an epistolary form.

The end of Form 3, however, signaled another milestone for your future which, in my mother's eyes, was the all important, only thing that mattered. By some peculiar metaphoric assignation, we were "streamed" into Science, Arts and Domestic Science based on our grades and talents. The syllabus from then on was a tailored cram towards the nine subjects for your School Certificate public exams at the end of Form 5. This sounds democratic enough, but in the Hong Kong school system of the 1960's, and even today, we know democracy is illusory at best. The system was all about class, if not your present social class then undoubtedly your future one, unless of course your family was already rich and would continue to be, in which case, you could fail School Cert and life would still be a hotbed of roses.

If you wanted to go to university, meaning of course, if you wanted a shot at an upper class life, you *had* to get into Science or Arts. Domestic Science girls were curiously self negating: not as clever as *you*, they'd say to those of us whose marks streamed us into the A (Arts) or B (Science) classes in Form 4. In a world of equals, some will always be more equal than others, although even then, I suspected this way of looking at the world was dead wrong. The future vindicated, because plenty of the "not as clever" girls went on to universities, good careers, excellent lives. Even then I knew, life is not only about a 100 in Biology. Personality counted too.

Meanwhile, at home, Vesuvius erupted. *Ma mère* was livid. There I was, fourteen, report card in hand with an average result — great in some subjects, okay in others, not so good in Science and Math, thanks to the exigencies of the coefficient of heat and the x-y-z of Algebra. *This will not do*, she shouted. *You must take Sciences*. How could that be, I wondered, when my A's were in English, Literature, French with respectable B's in History and Religion (a subject I was later to fail). How could that be, I asked myself, when I could perform piano on stage at the Music Festivals each year and score respectable 80+'s, when I danced ballet and passed exams (albeit not well) but could at least recall choreography with ease. Of course, piano and ballet were extracurricular, mere hobbies and not to be taken seriously, I was reminded. To underline the point, ballet lessons ended, not that I minded since I already knew I was no Margaret Fonteyn or even a future *corps de ballet* candidate. But piano, I would not yet surrender my music until Form 5, even though I knew that "pianist" was not a real career option given my limited talent. Limited, yes, but good enough to know that music helped me make sense of the world, and so I hung on as long as possible. Instead I gave up the Legion of Mary which, by that summer, had begun to seem like such unattainable virtue, way beyond the reach of this vice-driven soul.

Meanwhile, Mother. *The nuns are wrong!* The nuns, in my mother's experience, were always wrong, from back in her Singapore school days at the French convent before the war, where girls learned to sew and cook and keep quiet, instead of untangling the coefficient of heat and the parentheses of Algebra, or memorizing the elements table (*hydrogen, helium, beryllium, boron* — wasn't that a petrol brand, boron moron?). My mother is a pharmacist, or was before she married my father, a career hard won in post-war Hong Kong. My mother was an ace Science student at St. Mary's Canossian, and could have gone to the University of Hong Kong to study medicine if not for a lack of funds. My sister and I have more or less confirmed this latter assertion, at least the part about acceptance into the university, in the quest for truth about our muddled family history. But the moment of eruption was not rational or calm or inquiring: there I was, report card in hand, and the future not yet a clearly lighted path. For once, I kept quiet and did not "cross mouths" with Mum, as this verbal delinquent was often wont to do.



Two years later my sister, similarly streamed into Arts, transferred herself out of Maryknoll Convent to Diocesan Girls' School, after cramming all summer to pass an exam that allowed her into Form 4 Sciences, so as not to suffer my fate.

Somewhere in the background, Dad hid. My father rarely interfered in matters of the children's education, except to nod approval when we did not fail outright. Even when we did fail, as we all eventually failed our primary school Cantonese, his response was to surrender and allow us into "study group English" with the non-Chinese crowd, and later, in secondary school, to French. *Dans la rue, il y a un réverbère*, I intoned in Form 1, entranced by the alliteration of "street" and "lamppost" in a foreign tongue, and later, when my sister also knew French, we would cross Cantonese and French with Pig Latin into a parentally undecipherable language, a necessity for teenagers in modern times.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, Dad was the trump card, the safety zone, the space I could retreat to when my mother's Science tirade was over.

Understand, of course, that Mum directed her tirade purposefully. She began, as any good Chinese woman will, with subterfuge and persuasion. Surely my teacher would understand! Mrs. Liao was not moved. My flow into the Arts stream was entirely fair, as my marks proved. The next step was bribery, a longstanding Chinese custom. Flowers for Sister Rose, the principal, and the suggestion, a generous donation to the school, perhaps? Surely this American nun, unlike those French nuns of yore, would see reason, especially since her daughter was destined for great things one day in the United States? Sister Rose was not moved either by the bribe or the force of my mother's presence, although she was willing to entertain a compromise. I had to enter 4A, but if I could catch up to the syllabus on my own in September, she might reconsider.

For my part, I hid at home, horrified.

And so began a long, humid, hellish summer of Science and Math. My bikini hung limp, the piano rarely touched. I did finish *Pamela* and much of Mrs. Liao's list, hoping that this would somehow redeem me come September.

Dog days end, faster than we imagine, and before I knew it, there I was in 4A, together with the smart cousin I worshipped and other friends, with Mrs. Liao as our form mistress. I harbored a secret that no one knew: I would attempt to switch to Science. A month into Form 4, every afternoon had passed with tutors at home, struggling through the Science syllabus, while at school, I absorbed as much of Eliot and Shakespeare and Auden as I could, afraid of the moment when this might end. Science students did not take Literature or Geography to make room for Calculus, with a concession to History. The logic or illogic of our syllabus was not the issue: this was just the way it was.

My mother persisted, nagged. In the end I suspect Sister Rose surrendered, in much the way my family all did in the face of my mother's determination. One day, I walked out of 4A and into 4B, and for the rest of the year, I drew the angle of refraction around blocks of glass, thumbed the four figure table to defeat Trigonometric equations, and told myself, *this is right, this is smart, this is the thing to do* even as I stared, terrified, at the zero on Algebra and other quizzes, and the just-barely-passes in Chemistry. The terror has long been laid to rest. I did eventually conquer the coefficient of heat in Form 5, just as I finally comprehended Algebra, and in all the years to follow, Algebra proved useful (which I would have studied in Arts anyway), but I have never again solved an equation that applied the coefficient of heat, a number which I cannot for the life of me remember now.

But what I cannot expunge from memory are two moments.

The first was the moment Mrs. Liao was told. She was normally a dignified lady, very attractive and elegant in her *cheongsam*, not tall, with a sweet soprano voice. I can still hear it now as she recited Keats to us, or walked us through our Shakespeare, Dickens and Salinger. Such passion! She loved, no, *adored* literature and she made me adore it too as she took apart the words into metaphor, alliteration, simile, false and real rhymes, the form of the sonnet. As a teacher, she was fair and did not play favorites, encouraging a certain independence of spirit. In Form 3, I desperately wanted her to notice me, but in time came to realize that her notice was not what was important, but rather, that a passionately intellectual embrace of the subject was what mattered. I got my A's because I deserved them, and not because she liked me.

Her face, her habitually calm, controlled face, distorted with rage. Anger creased her forehead; bitterness twisted her lips. Then, the rage subsided. With a deep sigh of resignation, she let me go, and I cannot be sure now, but think I recall her muttering something about *Hong Kong parents think Science is everything*, and if she had, she was certainly not wrong because my mother was merely an extreme example of many Hong Kong parents. What pained me most was that she would not look at me, and after that, I rarely spoke to her again, ashamed that I, one of her star pupils, should have so disappointed her.

Her rage, though, that became my rhythm for the years. You can be grateful to rage that says *you're right, you know you're right, this is not how things should be even if you cannot do anything for the moment* because one day, when life is finally yours to shape, you will draw on her rage and make the life for which you were intended, despite the many missteps along the way. Rage, controlled, frozen, as on a Grecian urn.

There was a second moment, a quieter moment, in the still of the night when Mum was already asleep. In the interest of historical accuracy, despite the



fact that memory can never be entirely accurate, I believe it was the night after Sister Rose gave the okay to switch. All I know for certain was that it was a last ditch attempt to salvage myself out of the mess into which I'd landed. *Why had I not said no to Mum, defied her, as I later would do regularly, and often, imposing my will on hers?* Was it ego perhaps? That all the most "intelligent" girls took Sciences? Fear? That unless I acquiesced I would never be "good enough" for my mother, since clearly, I was not her pretty girl, which would have been a different kind of trump card, the way it was and wasn't for my sister, the pretty one. Doubt? That perhaps my mother was right, that I could actually become a doctor, my distaste for Biology notwithstanding. Or was it that the one talent which, as Milton tells, is "death to hide" was lodged in me "useless," this talent I had with words? By fourteen I had published stories and essays in the *South China Morning Post*, publications which only one school friend ever read and noticed. By fourteen I had co-written a serialized story about ouija boards with Annie and a third girl, whom Annie and I cannot remember, that was published in our school newspaper, something none of my classmates now recall. At fourteen, I knew I was only moderately good on the piano and that it was not my destiny, but that writing would remain with me forever. I knew all that, and also knew that the study of Literature was important for someone like me, even if I could not articulate what that "me" was, that useless part of me.

My mother does not read. In her world, tennis and medicine ranked supreme, neither of which engaged me except as mere entertainment or a tedious necessity if I was ill. Two years later, I did fall seriously ill with hepatitis, the infectious kind, and was quarantined in hospital just before I was due to take my medical exam to get a U.S. foreign student visa. My mother was furious then as well, but in retrospect I know her fury was about the weight of too many responsibilities, the lack of money in our family, a disengaged husband and father who had slid into depression. It was not the furious, blind ignorance that forced me into Sciences, into a stream of consciousness mired in quicksand and crocodiles, born of the terror of failure that loomed. My refusal to eat oranges when I was ill also infuriated my mother because she thought I did not want to get well, but my sister sat by my hospital bedside and neatly peeled me oranges once she realized I could not peel without making a mess, the only reason I did not eat the curative fruit.

My mother I have long ago forgiven. You can forgive ignorance, even though it is difficult to do, because knowledge of life is not a prerequisite to being a responsible parent.

The moment, though, that was with Dad. Mum was asleep, because tennis, and victory won by determination, will exhaust the body for slumber, whereas reading the news as my father did or writing stories as I did, only serve to agitate the mind into insomnia. My father was probably smoking a Benson & Hedges

out of that golden box with its promise of priceless pleasure. We were, as always, on the verandah, where we gazed at the Hong Kong harbor under a darkened sky, or squinted at constellations through binoculars, and spoke about things my mother did not understand, like why right and wrong were relative unless you believed in an absolute, Catholic God and all His commandments, which I suspected my father didn't, and that I too was beginning to doubt.

He knew, of course he knew, all which had come to pass.

Our conversation circled the subject before landing squarely on its core. "Do you think I should do this?" I finally asked.

He did not answer right away, nor would he look at me. I waited, agitated, frightened but hopeful. The subtext was clear to both of us. *Is she right, am I wrong, is this what life is all about? Tell me, tell me, you're my father. You should know more than me.*

My father glanced up at the sky. "Yes," he said after a few minutes. "You should listen to Mum and take Sciences."

I was fourteen. Eternity was relative. He would not get off that easily and my genes of determination did come from Mum. "Is that also what *you* think?" I demanded, the "you" unmistakably italicized in my tone.

This time, the pause was significantly longer. I could hear the excuses, the circular logic of his debating style, his roundabout prevarications when he didn't want to commit to a viewpoint, the refuge of parental solidarity when we the children were beyond the limit. In the silence of eternal moments, I heard all that he could have said to which he knew I would "cross mouths" with him. Instead, at the end of silence, he looked me in the eye, and said, "Yes, this is what I believe."

Not "we," but "I."

I stared at my father. He had told me the one lie that was unforgivable. In the moment though, you do not analyze, or reflect, or argue. In the moment you only feel the force of betrayal, its fatal wound, and surrender completely because there is no other choice.

The next day, to the astonishment of all my classmates, I walked into 4B, pretending this was all right, taking solace in the celebrity, and settled into the next two years of living, but only just.

And here I am, menopausal and middle aged, when hormones and innocence no longer rule. And I am a writer. Literature invades my waking consciousness; my life is surrounded by the Arts. In the end, two years of adolescent misery do not seem consequential, except as a way of unlocking betrayal.

Over the years I have challenged my mother who acknowledged, reluctantly, that perhaps she was wrong, but only to shut me up rather than through any real revision of belief. There is no reason why she should ever agree with me. She

wanted to be a doctor, but couldn't. She believed in the Sciences and their importance to the world. She was not wrong about the fact of science, only in its application to her two older daughters' education. By the time my youngest sister streamed into Arts, as did my brother who was not the academic sort, my mother relented to the force of reality and the limits of her children's talents. Both my younger siblings made good lives, my sister as a criminologist and my brother as a composer, even without the coefficient of heat.

I never challenged my father.

It is only now, after his death, that the ghost of his betrayal visits. It was unforgivable, that act, but he is not unforgiven, because neither he nor I is hostage to an absolute right or wrong, the way my mother tends to be. I do not believe in the forgiveness of sins, because we mortals are not gods, and only gods or the devoutly religious presume to forgive. Blame it on personality, or character that presages fate. It is what we do in Literature after all, which is where I've chosen to live.

## forget not

*Nay, if you read this line, remember not  
The hand that writ it; for I love you so . . .*

*from Sonnet nr. 71 "No Longer Mourn for Me When I Am Dead"*  
William Shakespeare

## FORGET "NOT-THIS"

Note: Hong Kong (now officially the S.A.R. or special administrative region of the People's Republic of China) comprises an archipelago of 235 islands around a small slice of Southern China. Most of the population lives on Hong Kong island as well as on Kowloon peninsula and the New Territories which make up that slice of the Chinese mainland. Hong Kong covers an area of over 400 square miles. The rural village districts referred to in this essay are in the New Territories.

On board minibuses, people fall in love, as they do in *Lost in Time*, a 2003 film directed by Derek Yee. Its Chinese title — literally, forget “not-this,” the latter idea has no English equivalent — could also be translated as “unforgettable.” Surprising, aren’t they, the things we cannot forget? If you’re like me, you might once have developed a mad crush on someone with whom you shared a minibus ride for a time, a man who remained a platonic friend and fellow rider . . . of course, I was barely twenty-two then, in the midst of an unhappy marriage and therefore prone to mad crushes in alternate realities.

Perhaps, then, it is *appropo* that as a Girl Guide, I belonged to the forget-me-nots patrol. My sister was an orchid, a more appropriate flower since orchids are native to our part of the world, while forget-me-nots are an imagined reality of story books from foreign lands. But there it was, that pale blue *fleur*, with its tiny petals and retiring aspect, gracing my embroidered badge. Character is fate, if we accept the Greek heroic tradition of tragedy as universal, but it seems fate determined the forget-not character that marks me, because to write of Hong Kong, my city of slow dissolve in the early twenty-first century, is a labor of forget “not-this.”

And so I remember.

What is it my city insists I not forget? My fellow minibus rider, whose name I no longer dare recall, was a *leang jai*, a Cantonese “beautiful boy” with a flirtatious smile. Our friendship began innocently enough. In Hong Kong of the mid seventies, only a local villager like him or an urban, bohemian madwoman like myself, would live beyond the village of Sai Kung and commute across the harbor to Causeway Bay, at the eastern end of Hong Kong island, each day for work. The journey took approximately two hours and fifteen minutes, one way, weather and unpredictable transportation schedules permitting. I would rise each morning at four or five and try to write, usually unsuccessfully during the months presaging the end of my first marriage. By six it was time to boil water for morning tea and a wash, although the tedium of doing so meant I often willingly elected to take a cold shower. When we first moved into our village home at Tai



Mong Tsai, before a bathroom was installed, I bathed in a nearby stream, clad in my yellow, halter-style swimsuit.

By six-thirty or so, it was out the door, down the path, across the road to where the sea beckoned, to wait on the curb for the bus. The bus was a single-decker, one of the last during Kowloon Motor Bus' metamorphosis into an all double-decker fleet, along this desolate, rural line. It ran once every half hour, more or less. There was no bus stop opposite my home, but drivers on rural routes do stop, the way minibuses also screeched to a halt for a potential passenger frantically flagging it down, with no regard for surrounding traffic. Which was why minibuses met with a legal end, and eventually embraced numbered routes, proper stops, published fares and licenses, because too many fender benders, too much fare gouging, and the rise of a civilized society no longer tolerated this maverick transport, despite the unforgettable love affairs they once ferried.

Back, though, to that original minibus. My day began with a thirty-minute bus ride, plus the wait of ten minutes if I was lucky and Godot's eternity if I was not. There were mornings the bus never appeared, or, being already overloaded, passed me by. On those mornings, I hitchhiked to Sai Kung's central terminus, or even into town if I was exceptionally lucky. The odd private car could occasionally be hospitable. When I was truly desperate, I would awaken my Scottish dog-trainer husband and beg a ride on his motorbike to Sai Kung. All roads led to that village which was where you could board the minibuses headed to Choi Hung's urban central terminus. The same minibus on board which I might, if I were truly blessed, encounter my almost-but-not-quite paramour.

What would life have been like without our crazy, pale yellow minibuses of yore? A semi-legal mode of transport then — meaning it was illegal but tolerated as many things were in our former British colony — these 14-seater vans provided a vital link for the overflow from the legal but hopelessly unreliable public transport system. Just prior to my Tai Mong Tsai life, I lived in Kak Tin Village near Shatin, which still offered a vista of rice paddies and vegetable farms. In our first home there, I washed my hair under an outdoor tap and could not get a telephone line because we were too "remote." Thirty years later, Kak Tin is a suburban enclave of high-rise developments, with flats priced out of the reach of the villagers.

On the main road up the hill from the village, the cross harbor bus number 170 made its last stop before entering Lion Rock Tunnel to Kowloon, which meant I often waited as bus after bus went by, too full to take me, the last rural passenger. There was no minibus. My preferred alternative was to walk half an hour across rice fields along narrow, concrete paths to the Shatin train station. If I was feeling unduly extravagant, \$1.40, then the approximate equivalent of one

American quarter, bought me a seat in the first class carriage (or 70 cents in third class, there was no second) of the Kowloon Canton railway to Tsimshatsui by the harbor, where the clock tower was not the lonely structure it is today, surrounded as it was then by an unforgettably romantic red-brick train station. Reminiscent of British war movies, this post-WWII building had been a gift from a colonial taipan, head of one of the "hongs" or major trading enterprises, to grace the city which made him his fortune. At the Star Ferry, I would buy my *South China Morning Post* (or sometimes, the *Hong Kong Standard*), pay my 20 cents to board the first class upper deck as Suzie Wong, that fictional prostitute, once did, sail across the harbor — for longer than the blink of an eye the ride takes today because our waterway is rapidly vanishing — and disembark in Central, the business district, where another minibus would take me to Causeway Bay.

The minibus. This was the fastest, most efficient and reliable transport because it was a profit-making, small business enterprise. Drivers needed to earn their daily rice bowl, unlike the salaried drivers of legal public transport. If one minibus was full, a second appeared quickly so that passengers wouldn't have to wait. There was something cryptically magical about its route network. To get from A to B, you asked someone who knew or hailed a passing vehicle that displayed a hand-scrawled sign with the Chinese characters for B, or somewhere that was on the way to B. There were no maps, no published schedules, no stops, no central telephone inquiry line, no pre-determined tariff, no website. English residents, most of who did not speak or read the language of 98% of the population, complained the loudest about this "dangerous" mode of transport. But the minibus was all about a human network passing the word along, and drivers charged what the market would bear. The minibus was the cheaper alternative to taxis.

The minibus, when it first appeared in the sixties, was the daring, renegade burst of speed in a city growing like Alice on mushrooms, limbs askew, shooting out of control, with insufficient space for movement. The minibus was what "responsible" grown ups like my parents told teenagers *not* to ride, but at fourteen and fifteen, my sister and I found them thrilling. Ever fearful we might have boarded the wrong one, we prayed a policeman would not be at the corner where we wanted to disembark because if so, the driver had to keep going so as not to risk a fine or arrest.

My Sai Kung minibus was the one comfortable leg of a prolonged commute. There always was a seat, unlike aboard the bus from Choi Hung to Star Ferry that followed, where "standing room only" was commonplace. My minibus did not stop at point after point, the way a bus must, prolonging an already tedious ride. The minibus started its journey with a full load, dropped off the odd passenger along the way who was invariably replaced by a new one. Most of us



traveled from terminus to terminus, generally ensuring a non-stop, forty-five-to fifty-minute ride. When Continental launched the first New York to Hong Kong direct flight, I quickly pledged allegiance, abandoning my loyalty to Northwest's Tokyo stopover flight. Old habits die hard, but memories allow us a sweeter refrain, gracing our passage towards that other eternity. The drivers on that Sai Kung route came to know you, the regular passengers, and said *jo sun* to greet the morning, making each day slightly easier to bear.

How did he and I begin our conversations? I no longer know. All I do know is that he appeared with a few other guys on several mornings, and eventually, he was the one who always sat beside me. We joked a lot about everything and nothing, and pretended we did not look into each other's eyes when we did. Our friendship extended to wild rides in overloaded, souped up cars along Sai Kung's winding, narrow, coastal road, because these guys lived on the edge, Kerouac-like, wild and untamed, the way my heart felt then. He was the one with whom I had my Hong Kong Cinematic Love Affair, full of longing looks, unspoken words and arrested desires to fuel the long, sad, summer nights. He knew my husband. That was enough for us to keep our hands to ourselves.

I had my affair instead with an errant *gwailo* Englishman who also knew my husband, and eventually walked out on my marriage. I moved back into the city, thus ending those minibus rides. After that, I did not see my *leang jai* again.

Forget-me-nots grow in my New Zealand garden now, hidden under the front porch, pale blue and delicate, as promised in the story books.

So what is it *really* that I am commanded not to forget?

That it is not easy to fall in love, on minibuses or anywhere, except perhaps on screen. Isn't it the same with the vanished past we profess to love, that we record in order not to forget? Why is it that the gigantic elephant and a tiny flower are our tropes of remembrance? *Remember, remember, the fifth of November*, we intoned as children, liking the rhythm of the words without attention to their meaning. It was almost Guy Fawkes Day when I called it quits on my troubled, mismatched eighteen-month first marriage. Hong Kong was not the place to be local, cross-cultural and extra marital back in the seventies, as our silver screen knows only too well. But we remain, as in Wong Kar Wai's visual feast, "in the mood for love" despite it all, transforming our lost world into art, insisting, over and over, *forget not-this, forget not-this*. So recall, recollect, remember. Minibuses, the tedium of public transport, those rural fields of leafy greens — *choi sum, tong choi, gai laan* — and rice paddies from when Hong Kong's villages still strived for self sufficiency to feed our hungry masses. At least we kept the Tsimshatsui clock tower, and the cross-harbor Star Ferry still runs, but who knows for how much longer before these too are swallowed

up by greater China and the even greater world that forgets, that so easily forgets all this?

It is late spring, and the humidity of rain clouds has already begun to creep into my sinuses. I am listening to RTHK Radio 3. "Uncle" Ray Cordeiro, that deejay of my forever who at seventy-plus still spins jazz and night time nostalgia, signed off over two hours ago. Music through the night brings me to a little past four, back to the enchanted writing hour that my body does not forget. Yesterday, I watched *Anna Magdalena*, a film of unrequited love to which scriptwriter Ivy Ho brings an exceptional poignancy. This 1998 independent film feels very Hong Kong, the way I feel my city. The protagonist transforms his longing for an upstairs neighbor — she has fallen in love with his crazy friend, a man who reads Kerouac — into a fantasy story of the land of H, where he and his fair maid become "X & O," two orphans who go on their quest for treasure that they donate to the poor in their Asian Nottingham. The story becomes his first book, and it makes possible a love that remains impossible in life.

As if to oblige the fates, the radio plays "Stop in the Name of Love," a signal, I suppose, to stop writing of my vanishing city, to let go of the past and its dissolving dance. Nostalgia does not become us, we diehard citizens of yesterlife who must live Hong Kong of today. Minibuses race all over our cityscape now, along routes to new-and-improved city-villages, to places I have yet to see, to lives and loves I have yet to know.



## AERIAL REVERIE

Airport restaurants were romantic in my childhood. We would see Dad off to Kai Tak, and in the wait time (before executive lounges were *the* place to go), the family would have a Cantonese dinner. The taste of crispy fried noodles, covered with pork and vegetables in a steaming sauce, straight from the *wok*, still tantalizes my tongue. The airport was the rare place we would eat Cantonese, as opposed to the northern cuisine my father preferred.

At the Cincinnati airport (which is actually in Kentucky, not Ohio), on a November afternoon in 2005, there are two restaurant choices that are not fast food: Wolfgang Puck's and the steakhouse. At Newark, a New York City airport which is actually in New Jersey, since renamed Liberty International in the wake of 9-11 patriotism, there is a steakhouse at the Continental Airline terminal. Everything else is inelegant, fast food, cheap. It is not that the steakhouses and



Wolfgang Puck's are elegant, but the food will at least resemble something prepared by human hands, as opposed to manufactured on an assembly line and reheated in a microwave.

And so this reverie for an era of air travel when children could wave their father off from an open-air observation deck as he walked across the tarmac to a plane in a major international city, although Hong Kong wasn't quite a "major" city then. Cathay Pacific was a medium-sized regional airline and not the behemoth of today; Pan American and B.O.A.C. (British Overseas Airways Corporation, a.k.a. "Better on a Camel") were among the major international carriers that stopped by. Kai Tak was a quiet airport, for dignified departures and arrivals. Flying was an extraordinarily civilized way to travel, just as working for an airline, in any capacity, was a privileged job for non-beleaguered professionals. Could we have imagined that a few decades of human time would transform all that, in step of course with Hong Kong's metamorphosis from a small colonial city to a large international city-village?

My first arrival into Chep Lap Kok was a strange moment of sadness and pride. The patriot (or was it the jingoist?) said, *finally, an airport that reflects the great city we've become, one we can show off to the world.* Despite operational teething problems, the new airport did live up to its promise, rivaling Singapore's super efficient hub, matching what Heathrow or Schipol or Atlanta or Detroit could offer to the airline industry and its passengers. It took Narita's expansion a few years to catch up. Beijing, of course, has the Olympics to fund the upgrade.

Why sadness for the loss of a perilously located airport? Kai Tak was famous to pilots the world over for its reclaimed runway, a perfect rectangle jutting out to sea. The airway leading towards it required a tricky navigation through building-covered hillsides and the densely populated Kowloon City district, forcing landings and takeoffs that required precision and tight turns, offering the spectacle of almost-crashes into a teeming, human anthill. Yet despite its potential for danger, Kai Tak's safety record was stellar. In the years of its existence as Hong Kong's airport, there were only a handful of fatal accidents. China Airlines once managed to skid off the runway, immersing part of the craft in the sea; it was to make a much worse landing during a typhoon later at Chep Lap Kok. Taiwan's national carrier, which China Airlines is, enjoys as hapless a fate as its foreign relations in this era of "one China."

Perhaps it is the *potential*. There is more than mere nostalgia or romance in the idea of human potential, which is what Kai Tak conjures. Messrs. Kai and Tak were risk takers, just as Messrs. Farrell and Kantzow, the American and Australian founders respectively of Cathay Pacific — the call letters CX slipping into "almost sex" — dared to imagine flying "over the hump" of Burma, turning a maverick cargo airline into an air travel dream. By the time we were ready for

an airport like Chep Lap Kok, life was mired in economic assessment, feasibility studies, vision by committee.

Perhaps such potential allows mavericks to be visionary, fostering energy and daring in people, hence creating a city. Isn't that where pride really matters? Not in the self-satisfied, smug, somewhat jingoistic bragging rights we exercise over our new international world-class airport, but in a self-pride that envisions our future and does the job well towards making it happen, by accepting the risk? Isn't that what we need to ensure our city continues to be something we build because it is *ours*, and not because we expect some greater power to take care of everything for us? Wasn't that why we no longer used the term "colony" by the eighties, even though we were to remain under British rule for almost two more decades, because even the pretence of self-determination was preferable to none at all?

I used to be an airline employee. Actually, I worked for two carriers: Federal Express which is all about cargo, and Cathay Pacific Airways, which virtually defines "airline" now. In 1976, the year I joined Cathay, there were three ways into the coveted position as a Chinese employee with potential for management, via job titles such as "officer" or "superintendent," the two ranks below an assistant manager. The stellar path was that of a management trainee, open principally to graduates of Chinese University and the University of Hong Kong; English counterparts (the "Swire princes") came from Cambridge and Oxford. The second way was up through the ranks, especially in the operational areas. These folks in customer service, sales, ground and inflight operations *et al* are really the lifeblood of any airline. The third way, which was my means of entry, was via the back door, a.k.a. timing, timing and luck. Despite a degree from an American university, I was not as lucky as those with the right pedigree who landed among the management trainees (there were a handful of Swire princes from Durham or other such "lesser" institutions at the time as well). However, I happened to meet an English personnel manager who knew of a potential opening in marketing administration where the manager might, he thought, be amenable to someone with advertising experience and good English, my two assets. The trick was "potential": an existing staff member had to be terminated for the job to be available.

Even though I was young, impetuous and poised for risk, I suspected the back door was probably not the best way to advance a career. It was however what fate presented, and who are we to argue with a higher authority? The first week in my new job as a "marketing administration officer," my English boss informed me that I was to go for orientation training, a week-long course with a written test at the end required of all new hires. He also informed me that I would score at least 95% on the test, since even his secretary had done that.



So there I was, back in “school,” being taught how to decipher airline tickets, accept reservations, check in customers, read airport codes, calculate travel time between time zones, adapt my sense of time to the 24-hour clock, understand the CX route map, destinations and fleet, memorize the industry’s alphabet (“Bravo Whiskey” was code for “bomb warning” in airspace) and take a multiple choice test at the end. The average employee of any major carrier today does not necessarily even know where the airline flies. Jobs are finely calibrated and specialized so that a reservations staff wouldn’t have the faintest idea how to check in a customer. Of course, this was pre-desktop computing, which meant that seats on board were assigned in much the way your theatre ticket was, by a check mark or sticker on a printed seating plan. Human beings made decisions to avoid seating three passengers in a row if there were empty seats elsewhere, rather than allowing a computer to think for them. Were flights on time and late? Were passengers satisfied and unsatisfied? Could an airline function pretty much as airlines today function? Yes, yes and yes. The only difference was the human dimension, because an employee at virtually every level could be expected to be more personally responsible, since greater autonomy was granted the individual to make decisions. Likewise, an employee could be expected to know a great deal more about the business and customer service, because generalists, not specialists, was the nature of work, and information was not as overwhelmingly data, as it is today.

So a song, then, for the individual human spirit which had more room to flourish and breathe in big-city-village Hong Kong, because we were already getting “bigger” then, though nowhere as big as now. I remember the shock on first encountering the American air travel industry. I was sent to a customer relations conference, since part of my job was to respond to customer complaints. The company used to investigate each complaint, the results of which would be reported to the customer in a letter, signed by a manager. Similarly, all letters of praise for our service received a written response thanking the “pax” or passenger. The writing of such letters was a rotating job which went to the newest flunky in the ranks, and somehow, this ended on my desk. My task was to initiate and follow up all investigations, draft the letters, get these typed by the typists’ pool, proofread and send the final, correct version to my manager for signature. Modern-day customer relations would scoff at this waste of time since “auto-reply” emails suffice for most communiqués, replete with misspellings, bad grammar and inattention to the actual customer complaint (Mrs. Wong complains: “You sent my luggage to New Delhi even though I was flying to Beijing.” Company replies: Dear Mr. Chan, Thank you for your comment which we were very pleased you flew with us. Have a nice day!). Should we mourn the passing of such “time-wasting” jobs in our service industries?

But back to the shock, which was the point of this reminiscence about a vanished world.

I was feeling extraordinarily privileged. There I was, on my first real “business trip” to a conference in Manila, listening to my counterparts in the *really big* airlines talk about “customer relations.” The hotel was unimaginable luxury, the free food and booze like manna for a young and struggling yuppie, and economy travel was almost as comfortable as business in airlines today. As switched on as I pretended to be, at the end of the three-day affair, I realized it had all been gobbledygook. The chatter was about computerizing solutions and performance measurements and nothing about the human face of managing customer relations I had expected to learn. Perhaps I sensed that the future would be the shock of the impersonal. If so, it seemed a bleak vision. Later, when I flew to the U.S. and discovered customer service numbers that rang and rang and rang unanswered (the record was thirty minutes), but which were numbers you had to call to reconfirm your flights (a quaint notion these days except on airlines of far flung micro island nations, surrounded by crystalline blue lagoons, serviced by one flight a week), I wondered if the medium-sized carrier I worked for would one day face those same challenges of market growth, the limits of technology and a beleaguered work force.

Shock often arises from innocence, and I was naïve in my CX days. If, however to be naïve is to dream of fulfilling human potential, then perhaps a little nostalgia and reverie has its place in our fast-changing, world-class city, along with its global home airline and fancy new airport.

The first time I sat in a cockpit for landing into Kai Tak, I had sent my business card to the pilot to request this privilege sometimes accorded to airline staff. It was a quietly thrilling experience. Strapped in, a little to the left behind the pilot, I had a clear view of the sky ahead. The flight engineer was more or less beside me, the first officer diagonally opposite, checking his readings. The space felt strangely large for the narrow 707. Later, the cockpits of the larger 747’s or Lockheed 1011’s struck me as cramped. We circled round, we swooped past hillside housing, and then I saw the runway. My heart beat faster — fear, disbelief, the sensation of the split second that could go wrong — before we landed perfectly. I could have sat there forever.

But it was takeoffs I learned to love, because taking off held the potential for the unknown. I sat in the cockpit less often for takeoffs, but often enough to recall the surge, like a wave carrying you forward, and I think, perhaps this is what it feels like to surf or snowboard or parachute out off a plane, all those physical experiences beyond my ken.

Then 9-11 ravaged airlines and airports worldwide. A person would be crazy to think she could sit in a cockpit now to experience, vicariously, the



fiction of flying. The romance of travel has blunted. The way we are may not be the way we used to be, but the way we could be hovers, its potential beckoning, summoning visionaries.

My romance of long-lost family dinners is of small concern. Let us hope that there will always be another maverick with yet another vision of the “perfect” way to fly. Reveries drift through our psyches as long as we choose to ponder, ruminate, dream a little. It could be worse. We could still be galley slaves, rowing with Zhang-he, Magellan or Columbus to the old-new world, without movies or seat belts, and only the amazing speed of wonder.



### CONVERSATION SPACE

I have a Cantonese friend with whom I converse. This should be an oxymoron in this city, because how else do we converse with friends except in Cantonese or “Canto-Ching-lish”? But this friend is unique because we converse in a Cantonese that is both our “native-but-not-exactly-first” language, and our friendship comprises these conversations that occur because I visit his bookshop, one that specializes in Chinese art. When Cantonese fails us, he reaches for a Putonghua (Mandarin) equivalent and I for English, at which point we consult one of the many dictionaries on his shelves. His spoken English is halting, limited to words or phrases, and my spoken Putonghua is clumsy, often lost in translation; we both read better than we speak each other’s “native” language. Of course, since the handover, our city is supposed to be tri-lingual, claiming Cantonese, Putonghua and English as our tongues, or so the government claims.

Linguistics names our brand of conversation “code switching.” Only academics could come up with this idea of “code,” as if the language of friends is some mysterious, hidden means of conveying messages among a secret society. It makes me feel a little like a spy. In some ways, I suppose I am, because my friend and I, through these code-switching conversations, are privileged to “spy” upon each other’s lives, so separate but equal, so removed from the other save for the intimacy of our conversation space.

I met Kar-Ning because I finally entered his shop, sometime in late '95. Early the next year, I downsized to a flat downhill on Aberdeen Street, in a bid to lower my rent; I wanted to save enough money to quit my job at *The Asian Wall Street Journal* and lead a “real writer’s life,” meaning without a full-time

corporate position but financially liquid enough to feast in a garret. Prior to that, I occupied a “luxury” flat on Robinson Road which was damp with mold and where mosquitoes nightly drank my blood. The point is, all these spaces were along a hillside, more or less parallel to each other, and it was my habit to walk the mile or so from my office and then uphill each evening after work, which was cheaper and less tedious than the stair master at a gym.

The wooden white sign on the pavement with its red lettering in English and Chinese for “Tai Wan Art Books” (in Chinese, literally: “Big Freight Art Bookstore”) regularly caught my eye. It was on Aberdeen, several doors below my flat. I had noticed it when I lived on Robinson and had meant to stop in. But my life was consumed — as lives in my city often are — in my case by work, divorce, the writing of fiction, frequent business trips, and a muddled affair with an on-again-off-again Chinese lover whose Putonghua often gave me headaches whenever he chose to visit from up north. His wife and children gave me ulcers, the idea of them I mean, but that’s a different story. In this way, months passed, and I would remind myself to stop in and see what the shop was about.

There was nothing particularly extraordinary about the day I finally entered. It was a Saturday afternoon, I believe, but memory is unreliable and chronological exactitude an unnecessary hobgoblin in the telling of tales. The shop was up a flight of stairs in a single room, approximately 100 feet square, perhaps slightly larger, with a bank of windows overlooking the street. It had once been a *tong lau*, a residential “Chinese flat” in an old-fashioned shop house, which means the building was solid concrete, the stairwell dank but cool in summer or dark to morbid in winter if you were an imaginative child.

Shelves lined the other three walls which were packed with books. These were mostly large, coffee-table size art volumes or odd-sized volumes of the historical or theoretical variety. Under the bank of windows were low shelves filled with smaller books, as well as Chinese ink brushes and other paraphernalia associated with calligraphy and painting. In the center of the room was a rectangular island of shelves with a table top counter awash in a sea of yet more books. At the far end of the island was a desk, at which a well-built, slender, middle aged Cantonese man sat reading, his back to the windows. On subsequent visits, I would almost always come upon him reading, or occasionally, practicing calligraphy. He will look up, rise, break into a grin, exclaim my full name in Cantonese and say, “so you’re back again.” This is Kar-Ning, who moved his life from Beijing to Hong Kong in the eighties.

On that first visit, he looked up in acknowledgement, welcomed me to his shop, and left me to browse. The majority of books were in Chinese, although there were a few bi-lingual volumes. I found a couple of the latter that would be a useful addition to my own library. These I purchased, and, as a result of this single, commercial transaction, our conversations began.



It would be impossible to record the hours of talk that flew around our space. Initially, we spoke of our lives, exchanging personal histories and family tales. We were both divorcing, a contemporary exercise that brings people together while driving marriages apart. It was rare to be able to speak frankly to a Chinese man about marriage and divorce, and our early conversations dwelled on the simultaneously guilty and innocent consciousness that the ones who provoked the split must balance. He has two daughters, I have no children, but the thing that connected us was the need to speak to someone else who also bore the “stigma” but would not judge the other harshly. Between us, we could leave that stigma unsaid.

Does our enforced use of a “not-exactly-first language” medium create or obscure truth? Our exchanges are blunt but civilized. In the early conversations, we spoke of infidelity, post-marital sexual abstinence and lust, the inability to develop satisfactory relationships in Hong Kong. Over the course of my friendship with Kar-Ning, I ended the unsatisfactory affair with my Beijing lover and eventually cemented a far more satisfactory relationship with my New York man. He, meanwhile, found someone with whom he could enjoy a relationship after a long spell of brief, unsatisfactory encounters. We update each other on our lives when we meet. The unique spatial encounter allows us to recognize the true condition of the other because we are usually correct when we say, *you look healthy* or *you look worn*, followed by, *so what’s happening in your life?*

But we speak of other subjects beyond the movement of our lives. I am particularly interested in his take on Hong Kong, which is the closest to my father’s attitude I’ve ever encountered. Dad was, like Kar-Ning, a “Chinese foreigner” in the city, an immigrant who arrived from China as an adult and remained the next forty-nine years until his death, all the while ensuring that he would not stumble down the same path as the unfortunate locals.

Their attitude can best be described as one that embraces *a state of absence* regarding Hong Kong. Neither man believes that this city, meaning its government, culture, ethos or existence, can truly embody meaning for a people, by which, I imagine, each means himself. One of the best examples is language.

As a child, I would sometimes hear Dad speak Mandarin to friends and associates. He was proud of his fluency, and welcomed opportunities to converse with others equally as “civilized.” Cantonese was to his ear and tongue barbaric, and my siblings and I delighted in our Canto-lish code switching, enhanced by Pig Latin and French, which neither parent could fully comprehend. Years later, when I pointed out to my father that the roots of ancient Chinese are more evident in modern Cantonese than Mandarin, he would look at me slightly askance as if I were that tiresome adolescent to whom he must pay some, but not total, attention.

Yet Dad and I found our conversation space, usually around four in the morning on our verandah.

For years I’ve enchanted audiences and the media with the story of my youthful “awakening.” At the age of eleven, I awoke one morning at four and crept out to our verandah. The sight of Hong Kong harbor by night was so beautiful, calm and entrancing that I wrote an essay right then and there which became my first published piece. We storytellers are an amoral lot; we know what audiences like to hear and repeatedly conjure a flattering image of ourselves in our desire to be “good copy.” For all the truth of that first awakening, which led to a lifetime of early morning writing, the story that is harder to tell is the one of the noise in your head, the voices that shriek and will not leave you alone, the fury and shouting that keep you awake in search of the relief that only writing seems to bring.

In such an insomniac’s fit did I first discover my father, sometime within a few months of the first awakening.

Dad often went to bed late, well after my mother, and stayed up into the morning hours reading or, as I eventually came to understand, reflecting on life. We lived on the top two floors of Far East Mansion on Middle Road, where my parents had purchased these two narrow flats and constructed an interior stairwell to connect them. The bedrooms were upstairs and the downstairs living and dining room opened out onto a long, open, “suicide-jumper” verandah which used to face the Hong Kong harbor. The building has survived demolition, but looks worse for the wear, especially now when surrounded by shiny new towers and renovated hotels. It still faces the harbor, what little we have left of it, but no longer has a view, blocked as it was years ago by the Sheraton Hotel. I keep tabs on the top floor lounge of that hotel, visiting it now and then to reclaim the sights of childhood.

The morning I encountered my father on our verandah, I felt like an intruder coming upon another. To my girlish eyes, the tiny downstairs space by night was cavernous (there was possibly 200 sq. ft. of usable space, plus an impossibly cramped kitchen). But it was not a space to be shared when everyone was supposed to be asleep. Once I’d found that “room of one’s own,” I selfishly deemed it mine, at least for a couple of hours before creeping back to bed.

Dad looked at me in surprise. He had finished his nightly scotch — this was likely the second glass he consumed if he was still up — and asked me what I was doing. I told him the truth, that I sometimes woke up and wrote in the mornings. That first encounter was brief: he nodded, told me not to stay up too late and then went to bed.

What I recall is that I wasn’t afraid of my father by night. When my sister and I were very young, aged three and four, Dad could be irascible, impatient, angry at noisy and uncontrollable children. We were hit for being naughty, and



felt the sting of his bare hand; in the worst case, Dad whipped us with the bamboo rod of the feather duster until my mother intervened and put a stop to this form of punishment.

But by age eleven, when my father's business had begun its irreversible downslide, I already suspected that he was in fact a gentle man who loved music and learning but could not change the path of his life. He could still be a stern parent by day, insisting on quiet the moment he got home at which point Mum would send us the children upstairs to our room to continue the fracas. Yet he could be lively at dinner if he were in a good mood, engaging us all in conversations ranging across subjects from the minute to the gargantuan. After dinner, he even was known to play Monopoly with the family, which is the main reason I learned the streets of London. So I was not afraid of him by night, in the "half-late third watch" time that is the Chinese equivalent of "graveyard shift" or the "wee hours." He was like a shadow man, who did not dictate the way a parent would, who treated me as if I were another shadow being floating past him in the red dust of the space-time continuum. And I suppose we were shadow beings, even then, since my later life would take me far away from my parents, often for years without a physical meeting. It was the beginning of the insomniac's life, approved of by my father, and the absurdly powerful reality of those early morning encounters would shriek me awake in multiple cities and towns on various continents, out of warm beds, away from the warm body beside me, in order to write and embrace my *raison d'être*.

It is the pleasurable sensation of conversation I always recollect, rather than the actual words spoken. With Dad, and later friends like Kar-Ning, I knew the importance of words shared about the puzzle of life, regardless of our physical experiences. Through the ravages of puberty, when I learned that I was not the pretty Chinese girl I once imagined myself as a child, but instead an odd, too-dark-complexioned being that Hong Kong Chinese boys didn't quite know what to do with, Dad would appear in our phantom encounters and I could speak of something other than the painful life of the flesh. Did God exist (my mother was staunchly Catholic, my father barely so)? Was love a real or imagined delusion? Why was philosophy the subject I absolutely must take at university (this was the one firm idea regarding education my father expressed)? Did corporal life matter in the slightest and if so, why? And why the hell did we have to live in Hong Kong anyway?

Because Hong Kong, with its stunningly gorgeous harbor view by night, seemed only a preparation for something else back then. My father spoke lovingly of Shanghai, where he had spent one term at St. John's University before fleeing in 1949, an unfortunate year for Chinese capitalistic jazz-playing students from Indonesia. He described a traditionally classic schooling in Indonesia that

prepared him for tertiary education in China. He invoked other harbors — San Francisco, Rio de Janeiro, Copenhagen — from his actual and armchair travels. He made it clear that my future did not belong in Hong Kong, an idea I both savored and resisted.

As a teenager, I could not articulate the resistance, only the longing to be someplace else. Yet all memories of our conversation space bring me home to Hong Kong, time and again, and to that harbor. Even Kar-Ning draws me back with his new-and-improved "Big Freight" space to converse over tea and oranges. He overlooks Lyndhurst Terrace now instead of the police residential quarters on Aberdeen, having moved around the corner from law enforcement to the historical red light district. Today, Lyndhurst is a busy commercial street of camera shops, art galleries, framers, chic restaurants, my one-time favorite stationers, along a sloping street near the harbor, a street which once was virtually the waterfront before reclamation.

Do we uncover meaning in conversations about the roots of our hearts? To converse requires that other person, in ghostly or other demarcations. Near the end of his life, my father spoke of Hong Kong as a city that had everything he needed. He visited me once in New York during the late eighties and was disappointed by the lack of modernity, the crime and filth, the inefficiency and sheer unmanageability of it all. By then, Hong Kong seemed so much more modern, desirable, livable. By then, Hong Kong was his home.

Like Kar-Ning, my father perpetually disdained local concerns, and continued to do so even as he acknowledged the city as his space in time. Dad had a lifelong interest in politics generally, and regularly read several local papers — he took all the English morning and afternoon dailies back in the sixties (the *South China Morning Post*, *Hong Kong Standard*, *China Mail* and *The Star*); in Chinese he initially subscribed to the *Wah Kiu Yat Pao*, but in later years switched to the pro-Communist *Wen Wei Pao* plus the *Sun Maan Pao* (New Evening News) until the latter ceased publication. He watched ATV World and TVB Pearl English television news, which are broadcast simultaneously, taping one while viewing the other, but never was comfortable with Cantonese electronic media. As well, he read the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, glanced at both *Time* and *Newsweek*, and maintained a subscription to *Kompas*, the Indonesian daily. Yet in his later years, I could never interest him in anything fostered by either Governor Patten or Tung Chee-hwa (he dismissed both men as ignoble and ignorable), and to him, Hong Kong's political existence was simply an aberration. There are no "real Chinese" here, he believed, something Kar-Ning appears, at times, to echo. But both men are themselves a funny-peculiar breed of Chinese — Dad a mixed-race Fujianese-Javanese who speaks a different dialect from the vast majority of the local populace; Kar-Ning a Cantonese who speaks his

“own” dialect with a slight Putonghua accent, although he has by now learned our slang and Cantonese script so that local newspapers are comprehensible.

Had my father ever met Kar-Ning, he would initially have liked conversing in the rolling tones of Beijing Putonghua. They both would probably have delighted in abhorring Hong Kong, eventually tempering their remarks by what they do appreciate of the city, since they are both reasonable men. They would likely share a vaguely pessimistic outlook as to the future of “Xianggang.” Yet what would puzzle Dad would be the very existence of this man, Kar-Ning, another “Chinese foreigner in Hong Kong,” a man a little like himself, who also pays tribute to the Chinese tradition that shaped him, one that allows him to survive in the foreign mud that has become “home.” Perhaps they will meet someday in the red dust, high above the skies of Hong Kong, and converse as civilized people will, without the strictures of time and space.

I wished for many more verandah conversations with my father, but grown up daughters leave home, our family sold that space years ago, and now, the view has changed dramatically. I wanted to tell Dad that cities have cycles, that even New York recovered and became newer, cleaner, more livable, but he died before I could.

He visits me still, always when I’m back in Hong Kong, startling me awake from dream-sleep in the early morning hours. His visits are benignly normal, without the painted-white, gory, *gwai* images of Chinese cinema billboards that haunted my childhood. He usually says something about life when he visits; the very familiarity of those encounters takes me back to our verandah and harbor. In the mornings, I know he will always be there, and that our conversation space is eternal.

## space break

*It's made of sticks  
Sticks and bricks  
But you can get your kicks  
In the house of bamboo*

*from House of Bamboo (1958)*

*Music and Lyrics by Bill Crompton and Norman Murrells*

*Recorded by Earl Grant (1960)*



## A GLOSSARY OF EVANESCENT ENGLISH FROM OUR SHORES

“Gloss it,” says my academic linguistics friend. He uses “gloss” the way I use “plot” in the construction of fiction, transforming the noun into a verb, narrowing its meaning to a writer’s craft technique, directing a student who needs advice for a story or novel.

*Gloss.* Such a beautiful, transitive verb. Its sound evokes the transparent glare of glass as well as the glorious romance of glow. To gloss is to give something a deceptively attractive appearance. But if we choose to transition the noun into a verb, to gloss then becomes to illuminate the hidden meaning behind a complex or difficult idea, thus enriching and enlarging its possibilities in the imagination. Hong Kong English is one such complex idea, a notion that neither academics nor ordinary citizens can entirely embrace. English was once the *only* official language of Hong Kong, and it remained so until the seventies when Cantonese was accorded the same status. A rather late date for the language of the masses.

*Neverrrrrmind*, as Rosannadanna used to say, the fictional TV character on *Saturday Night Live* played by the late Gilda Radner, a talent evanescent too young, too soon. What’s done is done, what’s past is went and will not be going anywhere unless, at the very least, we preserve the past for future, puzzled generations, should they choose to gaze back at pieces of the whole, in an attempt to reconstruct a fuller picture.

Record it, recall it, write it.

Gloss it.

*Journey to Beijing* is a documentary by filmmaker Evans Chan that chronicles a 1997 walkathon from Hong Kong to Beijing, the purpose of which was to raise funds for literacy in China. The walk becomes the cinematic path for a discussion about the handover, through interviews with some of the walkers and their families, as well as with an eclectic range of artists, filmmakers, politicians, and social, political, environmental or cultural activists.

In the film, one of the walkers says that some of the people he met in China expected Hong Kongers to speak English. They were surprised to meet these Chinese beings who were “like them.” If we Hong Kong citizens could be that shockingly unknown only a decade earlier to folks in the “inner territory,” the way the Mainland is sometimes referred to in Chinese, how far can we really have gone on our city’s voyage towards Beijing?

Yet we cannot deny our rather unusual English language legacy, neither its colonial roots historically, nor its prevalent and continued usage in the global commerce that marks our city. The language sequence of public announcements

and telephone information recordings is perhaps the most telling comment on our linguistic culture: first Cantonese, then English, and then Putonghua. Sometimes, the latter two are reversed, but just as often, English “walks first,” as we say in Cantonese.

Hence this glossary of English and almost English, one that does not pretend to be anything more than a space break in this journey of memory and moment.

### *The Glossary of Evanescent English*

**ABC** neither the alphabet nor a media company, just as neither are **BBC** nor **CBC** nor **NBC**, these acronyms used to identify the passport or birth origins (i.e.: American, Australian, British, Canadian, New Zealand), although often incorrectly so, of any ethnic Chinese person who does not look, move, speak, behave sufficiently Chinese enough for local tastes; the list is probably expanding faster than can be tracked.

**Asian Values** a useful fallback position that has been vetted by supposedly superior minds for those who cannot *bear* anything Western to be of value.

**Basic Law** an idea that is already past its sell-by date.

**Canto-pop** perhaps the only truly authentic Hong Kong music.

**Censorship** a non-existent state in this wild and crazy place where “anything goes” until someone complains and the *wok* must be shouldered.

**China daily** 24-7, non-stop, incessant, “you are always on our minds.”

**Chief Executive** (Manufactured English) formerly, Running Dog.

**Christianity** a safe Western precept for Hong Kong politics, unlike Marxism.

**Colony** the quaint condition of the city’s existence for some 150 years that anyone under the age of twenty-one might find exceedingly foreign unless used as a synonym for the S.A.R.

**Critic** a breed under threat of extinction that should be signaled for wildlife conservation.

**Dai wok** (Cantonese) lit. “big *wok*” meaning the Chinese hemisphere pan which cooks who know what they’re doing use to sauté, steam, boil, poach, deep fry just about anything that walks, crawls, flies, swims; also slang for a major, usually catastrophic, situation, applicable to the city whenever it starts to sink, even temporarily.

**Dimsum** (Globalish) lit. “touch the heart” Hong Kong’s most successful worldwide colonizing strategy, yet to be properly absorbed by the Tourist Board.

**Etc.etc.etc.dangdang** linguistic root uncertain but a life form which flourishes locally, not unlike *la cucaracha*; secondary etymology in the Chinese verb “to wait.”

**Expat** a web presence on this homepage of a city.

**Friend** (Canto-Asian-lish) pronounced “frand” or “frrrennnddd” (soft r, sort of rising tone) an uncertain state of being that may or may not equal its English meaning, especially in the wee small hours of *le matin*.

**Freedom of speech** what local media claims it has.

**G.O.D.** (Truly Hong Kong English) an acronym, surely, what else could it be?

**Gong Wu** (Cantonese) or **Jiang Wu** (Putonghua) the least evanescent vocabulary there is since marital arts film buffs will archive and preserve those cinematic offerings in which the hell-paradise that is *gong wu* exists.

**Gwai** (Chinese) lit. “ghost” or “devil” but used in virtual English as a synonym for Westerner.

**Hang Seng Index** (Globalish) Hong Kong’s other worldwide colonizing strategy now that Wall Street is truly 24-7.

**HKID** (Fictional Language) lit. acronym for “How Kindly I Dream” that you are what you are because you think you are so and now we have a picture and thumb print to prove it.

**ICQ** (Acronymlish) “I, too, Can handle the Quill,” language irrelevant.

**Laissez faire** (French) lit. “leave” or “allow to do” but so widely understood in Hong Kong as a characteristic of our economy and, some would say, culture, that it might as well be Chinese.

**Massacre** (American, comparable to Kent State) considered obscene usage by some in this city.

**Mickey Lo Shu** (Chinglish) blurring the distinction between “mouse” and “rat” for that globalized Chinese cartoon character of profit, profit and more profit.

**Motherland** euphemism for “Benevolence” in common parlance.

**MTR** (Subversive English) “must travel right” or you might miss the through train.



**Onecountrytwosystems** synonym for supercalifragilisticexpialidocious, i.e.: “Even though the sound of it is something quite atrocious” oops, “precocious” oops, “precious, of course, *precious*,” the syllabic inconsistency be damned.

**Peg** (Financialspeak) what neither Chinese currency currently wishes to do without *vis-à-vis* the U.S. dollar.

**RTHK** (archaic) once a broadcasting entity that was a public *vox pop*, often openly critical of the Hong Kong government; current usage tbd although “Run The Hills Kill” (sung to the tune, badly, of “The Sound of Music” oops, “Money”) has been advanced by some.

**S.A.R.** (English, more or less) lit. “Special Administrative Region,” the quaint condition of the city’s existence since July 1, 1997, sometimes mistaken for a serious respiratory ailment that plagued the city causing a virtual shutdown for a time.

**Shanghai Tang** (Anglicized Cantonese) lit. the shore of Shanghai, also known as the Bund in English; also, how to be “Oriental” in the West, and not even nostalgically.

**Sun Yat-sen** local hero of historical significance publicly honored by government funding; also, a resounding failure as a political leader except among his diehard followers.

**Tango** a uniquely expensive dance form among the jet set in this city costing in the millions in any currency. Go figure.

**Tiananmen** a large public square in Beijing where the Olympic torch will blaze and which was the site of some historical incidents, we forget what.

**Tri-lingualism** virtual linguistic reality; a.k.a. wishful thinking.

**Uh huh uh huh** (Oral Hong Kong English) meaning unclear but often incorrectly mistaken for the affirmative by native English speakers.

**Wui Heung Jing** (Cantonese) lit. “return to your home village authorization” but local thesaurus allows as synonym for patriotism.

**Xenophobia** a state of cultural grace to keep unwanted “foreigners,” including Mainlanders, out of the city, except as money-spending tourists.

**Yan** Chinese, literally “person” or “human” but so often used to exclude all but the Han Chinese that anyone who has spent more than a minute in Hong Kong gets the message.

**Yuan yang** (Spiritual Chinese-English) for kool kats who are into “chinese culture.”

**1949** in Youthspeak, like, you mean there was *life* back then???????

**1967** in olden days, this marks the year of living courageously.

**1984** the year of being swept down the river-harbor of iron-lady negotiations.

**1997** (Numerology) to be read in any language as a matter of interpretation; also, four numbers that add up to a busted Blackjack hand to prove, beyond an unreasonable doubt, that we were either asleep or illogically incautious after being dealt the first two cards of a winning hand.

**2046** a room number of startling insignificance or possibly a year of living indecorously, if not dangerously.



### KEY STROKES BY LOONG HEI

Note by author: *These post-'97 op-ed's are by a bi-lingual (Cantonese-English) native of Hong Kong. "International" writers, who do not embrace either the language or ambivalence of the majority, opine and emote on developments in this city till their keyboards are worn, certain their words define a superior moral stance. Loong Hei, whose pen name means "Dragon's Breath," has never been entirely sure that words, or rather "key strokes," should ever carry such weight. Likewise, Loong Hei is uncertain whether pen names, however pseudonymous, do in fact conceal an author's identity.*

July 2002

#### *"Psychological Reversion"*

And what would life be like without the morning's dose of *China Daily*? Consider today's report: “Five years after the reunification, the S.A.R. government has done a lot of work to promote cultural identity and *psychological reversion* among its population.”

It is mid July and we are hot. The annual celebrations are over, life goes on, but we are now reassured by the establishment of a new Culture & Heritage Commission, the subject of today's news story. Printed words are Serious Business, so I've spent this morning digesting and ruminating over psychological reversion. The headline declares our city's culture is thriving. The writer of the