

Liminal City

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HKRB Essays: Liminal City

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“Liminal City: A Meditation on Space and Place in Hong Kong”

At the still point of the turning world ... there the dance is – Eliot, *Four Quartets*

DREAMS OF A CITY

I came here from a place of ancient plains. Drive west for three days and you do not drive out of those plains. There are great virtues to that emptiness. But you grow up and like so many of my people go in search of as different a place as the world can offer. You go to London or New York or Paris, you did last century. Lately you go to Tokyo, or Saigon, or you go to Hong Kong...

100,000 Australians live in Hong Kong. We know what Japan is (the place of geishas, Buddhist monks and pachinko parlors) we know what Vietnam is (the place of elegant women in pearl-white *aodais*, dark forests and the scars of war). What is Hong Kong? We are not so sure ... a nexus of narratives; the transport hub of Asia; the meeting place of empires; the flashpoint of their conflicts; the place where Eastern capital turns into Western dollars, where dreams acquire liquidity. A place of transit; an *in-between* place.

I knew a little before I came

In the Mood for Love – you will come to Hong Kong in the 1960s, befriend your neighbour over a common suspicion of your spouse. Naturally you fall in love. You rent a room somewhere else in the city to conduct your trysts. Wherever you go in the world, the memory of your nights in illicit rooms in Hong Kong will haunt you.

Love in a Fallen City – you move to Hong Kong to escape your past, having shamed your Shanghai family with a divorce. You meet a man just returned to Hong Kong from England. He is handsome, but can you trust him? Will he marry one such as yourself? It turns out you can, and he will, but as you embrace the Japanese Imperial army invade, and the city falls around you.

2046 – you return to Hong Kong after years away. You move in and out of darkling rooms over decades, sleeping with various women, but you cannot reclaim what you have lost. At last you wonder is it she you love, or the memory of a time and place that happened to contain her?

Arriving-in-and-leaving-Hong-Kong is a genre. In his 2002 adaptation of *The Quiet American*, Philip Noyce made a précis of Greene’s opening, saying of Vietnam that “whatever you are looking for, you will find here.” It might be said that whatever you are looking for in Hong Kong, you will get a taste of, but it will be hard to seize and hold, and at last may prove illusory.

Still, the dream of Hong Kong is a potent one.

A student told me her father swam here in the 1960s ... and he couldn’t swim.

“But that’s impossible.”

“He got in the water and made himself swim. He practiced twice before. Then he swam.”

CITY OF MEMORY

Hong Kong – the ‘real’ Hong Kong – is a city that happened *somewhen* else ...

Hong Kong, 1962

Hong Kong, 1939

Hong Kong, 1929

These phrases sound romantic. You are not sure why. You can attach very little that is certain to that name and those dates, yet they conjure rooms of red shadows and lantern light, mah-jong tables, jazz bars and the smoke of flappers’ cigarettes rising up into the ceiling. There is opium smoke too, and political intrigue (some of the taxi dancers are spies), and elegant women in hushing chiffon disappear around corners into midnight Wan Chai avenues ... to where?



Are those cities truly gone? Yes and No.

That woman who turned into an avenue of lanterns and shadows reappears as an old lady on the MTR, riding now to Sham Shui Po to have her ID card renewed. She must keep that lost city in her mind, perhaps a dance step or two from the jazz bars is recovered on quiet afternoons alone. Her granddaughter filled in her ID card forms, and downloaded the QR code reader to her phone. The screen that appears when the app does its work gets her into buildings she moved through like mist in her 20s. She stares straight ahead, or closes her eyes, as though taking as little as possible of what surrounds her. Her daughter, the one who bought her a phone, is beautiful too in her way. But she spends her days running regression models for a data analyst, uploading pictures of her downtime to Instagram, and you feel something has been lost.

Some of the past persists in the built environment. The *pang uk* ‘stack houses’ on the edges of water are surely much as they have always been. The Lingnan style – with its grey facades, bas-reliefs and glazed tile roofs – is there in the Mazu temple at Shek Pai Wan. And some *tong lau* – with Guangzhou balconies and French windows – still stand in Mong Kok ... Then there are the colonial offices, the missions and courts and houses of generals. But most elegant old buildings, await embalment by the Antiquities Board. They are repurposed as museums. Perhaps misremembering is better than outright forgetting.

Oracle booths are installed at the temple at Wang Tai Sin. The *kau chim* divination sticks you shake out of a cylinder are electronically tagged. You take one and scan it at the booth, and

your future arrives on a printout. This alleviates the pressure of everyone arriving at midnight during festivals, the most precipitous time. And the money for the oracle readings comes in instantly rather than successively, unlimited, as it formerly was, by space at the desk of a human reader.

CITY OF COMMERCE

As with all cities, the signs of global commerce begin in the airport – the advertisements for Chivas whisky and Tag Heuer watches beside advertisements for banks and investment cabals. But those signs don't thin so readily as in other cities. Central, Admiralty and Tsim Sha Tsui are places where the whole world of fashion and finance has set out its stalls. The digital billboards on the sides of buildings are enormous, snatching at your attention with moving coloured light. In a world of noise their resolve is to be bigger, brighter, noisier than their competition. The appeal works for now. I have seen the lines outside Chanel and Gucci shops in Tsim Sha Tsui. Their length and the desperation of the faces recall images of breadlines in the last days of the Soviet Union. Writers sneering at the trade in luxury goods is a commonplace, but there is something perverse about this trade in ... I do not even know what to call it. I do not know what is being sold ... Outside Langham place a girl at a stand selling bottled tea is twice, three-times, as beautiful as the woman on the gigantic Swarovski billboard above her – a peroxide-blond Hollywood actress, trying vainly to cheat time with facelifts and hyaluronic acid.

Global commerce looks most beautiful in the Port of Hong Kong, the container terminals, at dusk, when the lit cranes make patterns against the sky and water and you imagine there is something contained there more noble than bags and shoes and cosmetics made in Chinese factories and hawked by dull Hollywood actors. Of course, there are more noble things. There are medicines. Good wine. There is a question I ask everyone: "Do you know anyone in shipping?" It is not a game. I would like to know. But they stare back at me oddly. As though I have spoken in a different language. No one does – no one knows a captain or a stevedore. In a city so committed to the flow of goods over water, it seems a strange neglect.

There are other places of commerce, of imports, nearer than the ports, but we know them scarcely better ... the houses of prostitutes behind Portland Street in Mong Kok. A single block from the restaurants, their pink signs light the characters 少女 (*shao nu*) 'maiden' above dark and neglected streets. When I first arrived the women from upstairs walked beneath those signs. They were from China and I joked with them in Mandarin. Prostitution is illegal, but a woman can bring who she wants to her room, hence these *Yat Sat, Yat Fung* buildings 一室一鳳 ... *One Room, One Phoenix*. "A girl always costs money," a Japanese futures trader once told me, "and none more than a wife. What you're paying for in the houses of prostitution is the ability to walk away. The license to forget her."

Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers sit on overpasses and at the edges of walkways over a picnic meal each Sunday – their one day off. At an overpass at Prince Edward an ivory white Chinese girl, three inches taller than me, Gucci bag slapping her side, glides past with a sidelong glance at the women eating at her feet as though she sees something her mind is not calibrated to register, a scene from a world other than hers.

The girl who brought food to me while in quarantine in mid-2020 was a Filipina who worked at Citibank. On my first day of freedom, I invited her to a thankyou dinner.

She said her boss hated her. She came home from work in tears some nights. She was looking for a partner, but dispassionately. If no partner came, it did not matter. She had recently broken up with an Indian man.

“I’m ‘maid class’,” she said. “Even though I work for a bank. Anyway, I’ve nearly saved enough to buy a house.”

“In Hong Kong?”

“God no! In the Philippines. A big house in Cebu.”

I suggested that kind of plan must be common.

“Not common. Ubiquitous. It is the reason I broke up with the Indian man. He had made enough for his house in Hyderabad. And he left.

“The Filipinos”, she said, “the South Asians who work the markets and deliver food, the mainland prostitutes, even the Western teachers ... they make money in Hong Kong to build home someplace else.”

“**We don’t even think about it,**” said a friend with whom I walked in a garden at Lok Fu. A podiatrist. She was born here and had never left. She was talking about buying a house.

“But you’re a professional?”

“I could team up with a friend. Or get married, I suppose. I have a couple of friends who went in like that together. Anyway, I’m not sure I’ll stay in Hong Kong. Almost everyone has an exit strategy.”

“But it’s wonderful here,” I said

“Because you don’t speak the language. You don’t hear what the people say. Pay close attention and you will see the strain the people are under.”

I remembered a man at the entry of Langham Place shopping centre who stood silent and unmoving in the midst of a weekend crowd and all at once began screaming; a middle aged woman who sat down alone at a café at Lok Fu, ordered with a smile, took off her facemask, then sobbed like a child. On one of my runs in that little nether region of motorways and railways in West Kowloon, I stopped and watched a young couple alone, hugging each other on a bridge. They did not kiss or speak or even move in five minutes of my staring. I ran on.

The world is pitiless unless we have a place from which to retreat from it.

ANOTHER PLACE

I visited an exhibition of Australian photographers at the Fringe Club at Central. All had taken Hong Kong as their subject. Palani Mohan, an Indian-Australian photographer who lives in Hong Kong was among them. His photographs were taken from a book called *Wind Water* – a 100+ plate meditation on Hong Kong inspired by that branch of Chinese geomancy

called *Feng Shui*. Numerous and contradictory English definitions circulate, but they seem to add up to this: ‘the energies of constant change, and our attempt to align our lives with them’.

Mohan’s is not the city found in newspapers and tourist brochures. There are a few people in his photographs, no crowds, few hard edges or fixed lights. What he depicts instead are the ephemeral and peripheral aspects of place. The scenes his camera frames will vanish the moment the shutter closes, though we imagine they might return to one patient enough to wait.

One of the first plates shows the harbour in a storm, a pier of thin pilings edging into wind-driven waves before an iron bridge, barely traceable, being swallowed by mist – everything is in motion; everything dissolves in a grey blur. On another plate is the Star Ferry at dusk, plying water so dark it inks the sky and the boat itself. The glass panels of a skyscraper reflect a fleeting arrangement of clouds. A vector of sunlight, that can only have lasted moments, strikes the International Commerce Centre in West Kowloon.

In his *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot valorised the “still point of the turning world ... Where past and future are gathered ... Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance.” These still points, where we may stand and watch the natural world move around us and inflect our lives, are the points from where Mohan has taken his photographs of Hong Kong.

“I look for the signs every day in the clouds,” he says “the wind and the rain that pass through Hong Kong” [1]. He looks, I suggest, as I do, as we all do, for sacred *places* in the midst of what Manuel Castells calls the ‘global *space* of flows’ [2]. To use Eliadean terms, he looks for an irruption of the sacred into the mundane flow of time [3]. That this footing should be found in wind and water is hardly a paradox, for these belong to eternity in a way that nothing we have built may. Unsurprisingly, Mohan says that the search for his images gave “a great sense of peace.”

There are many such places, available to one willing to attend the moment. They come of their own volition, and they *emplace* you in cities you would not before have called home ...

We had spent the day at Lamma Island walking over the hills and through the villages where villages were 5000 years ago. A storm was closing in and we had misjudged the hour. We would not make it back to Sok Kwu Wan before dark. We walked onto a little ledge and the forest opened up and at once a light such as I had never seen broke the clouds. The islands to the south and the giant cargo ships between them were lost in a ribbon of rose-gold. In the shallows below us were bathers, silhouetted like the figures of a dream, each moving through golden water and sky. A little way beyond the swimmers was the one fishing boat at a perfect distance between horizon and shore, tucked behind a peak, so it sat in vivid relief. The boat was a sampan, its pilot a woman, an old woman by her stoop. She stuck a barge pole in the water and pulled the boat toward a landing. She took up her nets and her catch. A child came running to the edge of the water. Then the light was gone and I could no longer see, but I thought, tonight they will eat fish, as they did when she gathered those nets and her catch a thousand years ago, when she said, *Go inside, child. Light the fire. A storm is coming.*

Endnotes

[1] Palani Mohan, *Air and Water* (Berlin: Kehrer Verlag Heidelberg, 2017).

[2] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Series*, vol. 1 (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1997).

[3] See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).

Patrick Holland is the author of seven books, including *The Mary Smokes Boys* and *The Darkest Little Room*. His work has been published throughout the Anglosphere and in Italy and Japan, and has been recognised by such international awards as the Commonwealth Writers Prize. He is an Assistant Professor at HKBU.