THE RE-TAKING OF HONG KONG

There has been much speculation about the political, economic and cultural consequences of Hong Kong's reunification with China on July 1, 1997. The creation of a Special Administrative Region has positioned the former British Crown colony of 155 years at the tail end of the *One-Country, Two-Systems* political paradigm, with China's promise that Hong Kong will be free to determine its own domestic future, including the freedom to practice a form of democracy that was inconceivable under British rule. Hyphenations are not new to Hong Kong; its placement in this handover's double hyphen, however, introduces new elements into an already complex and labyrinthine case history that defies existing modes of cultural interpretation. What emerges as the only unarguably clear conclusion in this re-photographic exploration of Hong Kong's public space sited almost half a century apart, is a unique form of late capitalism in which everything exists just at the point of disappearance.

To be expected in this political handover, Queen Elizabeth II's portrait has disappeared from Hong Kong's public domain, postage stamps and currency, as well as such epithets as *Royal* and *H.M.S.* from uniforms and letterheads. At the nation-state

level, the Union Jack has been replaced by the silhouette of a pea blossom against a red background flown at public sites to the left of the Chinese flag, and reappears on stamps and currency, as well as public trash bins, gift calendars and coffee mugs made in China.

Hong Kongers are not Chinese, as if China or any other country could be meaningfully defined in such general terms, whatever the period. Hong Kongers stopped being Chinese the moment they left their mainland villages or cities whenever. In coming to Hong Kong, much of their previous identities were surrendered along with their passports to the Immigration Department at the border crossing, and what has emerged in the transplantation are new cultural formations: fragments of the old; hybrids with the new; and hyphenations with whoever else expats that separate as well as connect.

This has included language for most, whose other Chinese dialects had disappeared, replaced by the indigenous Hong Kong Cantonese. This has also included the creation of new customs that are alleged to have been inherited from their parents, their unassailable claim to being Chinese: for instance, to ward off bad luck, one never buys a car on a Buddhist holiday; one never accepts a credit card or bank account number divisible by four; and one never kills a spider on one's birthday. Their origins have been forgotten, so it is said, but their disappearance that places these traditions outside the bounds of historical scrutiny thereby makes their otherwise unexplainable practice that much more profound, especially to the unsuspecting tourist mistaking *kitsch* for the authentic.

As a colonized Asian people, Hong Kongers have been assigned to live in the mythical and oppressive world as represented by *The World of Suzie Wong* and *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*, and such functioning but distorted perceptions that Hong Kong is where *East Meets West,* the *Pearl of the Orient* nicknamed *Fragrant Harbour*, and that Hong Kong is bi-lingual. For the natives, negotiating this kind of cultural schizophrenia has necessitated the donning of two masks, one in the front, and one in the back. Indeed, Hong Kong's pea blossom icon that has been identified on the global level as an orchid (see Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich's perception of the relationship between China and Hong Kong as a gorilla holding an orchid in its hand) is not an orchid at all, but more correctly a pea tree, *Bauhinia blakeana Dunn* (*Caesalpiniaceae*), not a natural species, but appropriately for Hong Kong, a sterile, hothouse hybrid named after a former governor.

The disappearance of the British icons and their instantaneous substitutions are not new to Hong Kong. Hong Kongers have always worn two faces simultaneously, one in public for the public, and the other also public but one waiting for the next public: on one level, one is presented to the British colonizers and their various representations, and the other to relatives and proven friends. During the Korean War and much of the 1950s Cold War, for example, the necessity for the public-public face almost spelled the demise of the next-public face, as the Chinese and Kuomintang sent down competing assassination squads in an attempt to reverse the brain drain. The British rulers refereed from the sidelines to minimize the

drain on Hong Kong's bloodbank and maintain local stability by arresting and detaining just about every known political activist without trial, sometimes on the whimsical evidence of reading the wrong newspaper in public.

Even the way they drive in the Hong Kong streets and few miles of highways, and the manner they walk in its numerous crowded shopping malls and streets, reflect their awareness of a disappearing public space, in the same way that colonized peoples all over the world have learned to hide behind anonymity. The drivers have disappeared behind the smoked glass of their late model cars, their automated personae ruthlessly slipping the car into any empty space available, lest some other car—not its driver—occupy it first. This contested public space is viewed impersonally as something that must be taken before it too disappears, or before it is grabbed up by someone else. Walking in public space also articulates personal greed at the intersection of personal place and public space!

Hyperdensity in Hong Kong is not caused by limited space alone. It is also exacerbated by economic greed and government duplicity in subsidizing big business at investing not only in property development, but the associated retention and reproduction of cheap labor and guaranteed minimal salary demands. When Hong Kong's new airport opens in April on Lantau Island, the height restriction on Kowloon's highrises in the way of the present airport's only flight path will be raised, providing yet another investment opportunity for both the government as well as private speculators. The existing buildings will disappear and be replaced by even higher multi-storied apartments at above $2,000 per square foot.

It was in this economically driven context in 1953 that the Chinese government opened its Bank of China office as one of Hong Kong's first highrises, the fourteen-storied building at No. 2 Des Voeux Road, pictured below, lower center. The U.S. Seventh Fleet with its dominating fast pitch softball teams can also be seen in the middle of Victoria Harbour as an aircraft carrier and several attending destroyers and supply vessels.

This *old* Bank of China building is overshadowed by skyscrapers in the following image, re-taken almost forty-four years later of the same site from the exact same spot with essentially the

same photographic equipment, 2¼ Rolleiflex. U.S. warships have not entered the harbor in years, since parts of the harbor have also disappeared from the massive reclamation projects that have forced the newer, larger warships to anchor in deeper waters next to outlying Lantau Island, such as the *USS Nimitz* in September of this year.

Such instant displacements have made Hong Kong's landscape unrecognizable for anyone who has been away for more than a year. Such disappearances and cover-overs would be normally expected of a minimally-regulated, capital-intense, commerce-

driven profit economy. Commercial and residential buildings go up and down with such regularity that meaningful concepts of individual and community identities must be flexible and adaptive, if not altogether non-existent. When the Ritz-Carlton Hotel was near its completion in 1993, the original owners disappeared after selling it to a multinational consortium that seriously considered savaging the luxury hotel before a single guest had registered, and resurrecting in its place an office highrise because of the potential higher profit. Today in 1997, this hotel has been totally renovated into luxury apartment units; the hotel disappeared after only three years of tourist service.

The remarkable *new* Bank of China building completed in May 1990 at No. 1 Garden Road, and seen from a few eastern-facing windows of the *newest* version of the Ritz-Carlton, is a 70-storied skyscraper visible from most of Kowloon across the harbor, and the higher elevations of the harbor side of Hong Kong, constructed or natural. Looking at it from the Peak—formerly named *Victoria* [again] *Peak*—in the lower right of the image, this diagonally-themed power tower was designed by the distinguished American architect I.M. Pei. Along with the highrises too many to count, it has totally obliterated the constructed features in its twin image taken half a century ago on the previous page. That the *old* Bank of China building is one of the few that have survived this period between their two exposures attests to a precarious permanency attributable to its numerology as No. 2, and the hope that Pei's *new* Bank of China building occupying No. 1 would survive most of the 21st

century, even in the Hong Kong clock of bigger-better-higher-more-expensive commodification.

Commodity by definition is mass production in all of its variants and limitations. Its product usually has a short life, is eliminated, thrown away, laid waste, and then just as quickly resurrected, re-marketed and re-consumed in endless cycles. It has often been said that Hong Kong re-invents itself every few years, and that the disappearance of the old must be a prerequisite for the emergence of the new. A quick look at Kowloon's Austin Road's new (last year) apartment buildings next to the old (ten years) standing side-by-side shows a rare moment, rare in the sense that signs of age and decay are visible, since buildings are obliterated and made to disappear before they have had a chance to become old.

In the economics of this changing cycle of the new replacing the old, how more appropriate that the old colonial domestics who immigrated to Hong Kong historically from neighboring Guangdong Province as house servants and nannies have been replaced in the last decade by Filipino women at next-to-the-lowest racist rung. Like their Guangdong predecessors whose choices in life were severely restricted to the service trades, these 200,000 *amahs* take on an identity that confronts and frustrates their masters—many of whom were *amahs* a generation ago—at least on Sundays on holidays.

Sure they still do the shopping, cooking, laundry, ironing, cleaning, garbage disposal and are certified in CPR, and they still walk the dogs and take care of the children. But on Sundays and public holidays they dramatically defy disappearance.

Congregated in small groups along some of the world's most expensive sidewalks, in front of the Hang Seng Bank, the five-starred Mandarin Oriental Hotel or a similar billion-dollar building, they are not out-of-sight and not out-of-mind. These all-day picnic gatherings include mats for their food, drink, song and games. Their territoriality based on shared dialect and geographic origin can identify them as that group from Luzon, that one from Manila, and that from Baguio, a virtual map of the Philippines. They are also the vulnerable sheep to American evangelicals, including the Church of the Latter Day Saints, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Missouri Synod Lutherans, and especially the Pentecostals. What an ironic public statement against this newest variation of late-capitalism that is Hong Kong, this gargantuan economic imbalance in which a very few are making fortunes from other people's misery.

Currently there is a growing billion-dollar industry that focuses on historical preservation, and it is linked to Hong Kong's attempt to re-take its identity by turning to its past, by looking at its landmark buildings, by looking at old sepia photographs from which to construct a visual narrative of its own history, to not be a colonized people in their own country, whatever the number of hyphens. It is interesting to note that this effort had its beginnings only after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Premier Zhao Ziyang signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration in Beijing in 1984 that signaled the return of Hong Kong to China.

Such preservation inherent in the construction of public memory plays a crucial role in the restoration of place and hence history, however facile and however inaccurate, particularly in the hands of the post-colonialists. They are more interested in investing in the artifacts such as authentic native furniture,

paintings, even costumes, than they are in the total human experience including the pain and suffering that sometimes accumulate in shit. Their interest in preservation stems in part in their effort to alleviate their guilt, in part as re-colonization in the act of cultural piracy, except that now they have to cash up, and in part as an honest attempt to see what they've ignored for nearly two hundred years. The restoration of Kowloon's Walled City devoid of its drugs, prostitution, and other forms of human misery, has elevated it into the most sophisticated expression of *kitsch*, the theme park for tourists.

If the military is the first outpost of imperialism, then surely culture will be short-listed as its last. But, not before the natives have acquired the practice of mimicking the masters, sometimes surpassing the rulers in this corollary to their masters attempting to preserve local culture. This is not a secret in the power exchange between rulers and natives. Look at Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s for a recent example. In the continuing saga of periodic re-invention, Hong Kong's recent reunification might even be regarded as an opportunity for another makeover. The expatriates have all but disappeared from the formerly racially segregated Hong Kong Jockey Club, its car park currently occupied by the latest Mercedes, Jaguars, BMWs, Rolls-Royces and Ferraris owned by the Hong Kong-Chinese new rich who are definitely into symbols of conspicuous consumption to the extreme. Expensive watches that begin at $10,000, pens at $1,000 and jewelry are displayed prominently on a more portable level. A Provisional Legislator has built a replica Bordeaux wine cellar into his office suite with temperature and humidity controls, two air conditioners guaranteeing a constant

16° C environment behind thermal glass panes so that visitors can see through them—a dramatic display for someone who freely admits that he doesn't even like wine. Another spent $54,000 on wine at a dinner for six, so that—as he proudly admitted in an interview—he could be noticed.

Perhaps this dramatic, symbolic flaunting of economic excess is a statement about the need for claiming a personal narrative, a stay against a vanishing background. For now, against this changing landscape of the last half a century, there remains one inexpensive, nostalgic constant that has not disappeared: the green-and-white reliable Star Ferry that connects Kowloon and Hong Kong every twenty minutes, at 30 cents a crossing in first class. Count them: Day Star, Solar Star, Morning Star, Northern Star, World Star, Shining Star, Night Star, Golden Star, Celestial Star, Silver Star, Meridian Star, and of course, Twinkling Star. Take a ride now—who knows how soon the ongoing reclamation projects will make even the harbor disappear.

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(A late update. Connie Bragas-Regaldo, chair of United Filipinos in Hong Kong, was upset on February 3, 1998, when the government, anticipating a temporary economic downturn, announced a freeze on the minimum monthly wage at US$498.26 for foreign domestic workers. She argued that her constituents would be equally impacted by the economic forecast, if not more so.)