



## PROLOGUE

*City Between Worlds* is not a guidebook to Hong Kong but a book guided by the roaming reflections of a long-term Chinese resident—one who, though not born in the city, has chosen to stay here, following a thirty-year sojourn in the United States. Thus, my perspective is neither strictly native nor old-colonial. Nor, for that matter, is it the viewpoint of longtime expats, whose loving sentiments for Hong Kong often run deeper than those of the former colony's Chinese population. Sometimes I intentionally combine all three perspectives, but invariably I find my sympathies entrenched on the “inside.” It is largely from this angle that I choose my sights/sites and narrate my story of Hong Kong, voicing opinions, wherever possible, on behalf of a Chinese community whose members have not chosen to write about their city in English.

In 1997, after a century and a half of British colonial rule, Hong Kong formally became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China. We might begin our exploration of Hong Kong by asking: What makes this city so “special”? A rational answer is hard to come by, for Hong Kong thrives on confusion and contradiction. Its dynamism is expressed in a variety of ways and manifested above all by a collective energy and self-imagery that does not fit preconceived categories, including the stereotype of a “capitalist

emporium.” This refusal to conform to outsiders’ images forms the basis of what Ackbar Abbas, a Hong Kong native and scholar, calls “the politics of disappearance” in his perceptive book by that title. In Abbas’s view, “disappearance” does not imply nonappearance or absence, nor even nonrecognition. It is “more a question of misrecognition, of recognizing a thing as something else.” This “something else” may have to do with the Western media’s image of Hong Kong at the time of the handover. The city’s “imminent disappearance” as a British colony was what precipitated such an intense and unprecedented interest in Hong Kong’s culture.<sup>1</sup>

But contrary to Western predictions of collapse, Hong Kong did not disappear. Its economy and lifestyle did not buckle under the new political regime but attained higher levels of prosperity than before. Even in 1997, when Abbas’s book was published, the atmosphere no longer signified a sense of “doom and gloom” so much as “doom and boom,” as he put it: “The more frustrated or blocked the aspirations to democracy are, the more the market booms.” In Abbas’s view, one effect of colonial administration has been the absence of outlets for political idealism or action. And as a result, “most of the energy is directed toward the economic sphere”—speculation on stock markets and real estate or obsession with fashion and consumerism.

Abbas’s observations were extremely perceptive at the time, especially about the West’s images of Hong Kong. But more than ten years after the handover, perhaps they need to be revisited and updated. Does his “disappearance” act still capture the energy and vitality of the Hong Kong people and culture today, now that the dread of doom is gone? Is the pursuit of money and obsession with consumerism still merely a form of “decadence”—a displaced political urge? Does Hong Kong culture continue to suffer from what Abbas calls “reverse hallucination” or “not seeing what is there”? And if so, what *is* there that we continue to fail to see?

I believe that Abbas’s important and scholarly book demands a sequel and a response, but I am incapable of writing about such theoretical matters with great sophistication. The premise of my present work is much more pedestrian: to find out what indeed is (or was) there, in Hong Kong’s past, that may still shed

light on its culture today, and on a new wave of “disappearance” that now threatens the city both physically and spatially. In the accelerated pace of urban renewal, Hong Kong’s old monuments and streets are being demolished at an alarming rate, and more reclamations of land from Victoria Harbor are being planned. Under this relentless pressure to tear down and build, Hong Kong’s self-image, its collective memory, and its unique lifestyle are at risk.

This worry brings me to another work that hovers over my thinking—the concept of the “generic city” as formulated by the renowned architect and theorist Rem Koolhaas. Over the years since I first read a shortened version of his essay, which he expanded into a long and richly dense explication in his book *S,M,L,XL*, I have had mixed and often ambivalent reactions to it. Is Hong Kong becoming a “generic city” in which history is meaningless and “any regret about history’s absence is a tiresome reflex,” a city in which the past has become “too small to be inhabited and shared by those alive”?<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Abbas, for whom Hong Kong is “a post-city on the site of the ex-city,” its culture a “post-culture,” Koolhaas is not describing a kind of phantom mental creation but a real urban phenomenon, especially in Asia. “A large proportion of Generic Cities,” he writes, are situated “in a warmer than usual climate . . . on its way to the south—toward the equator—away from the mess the north made of the second millennium.” Hong Kong, being not so far from the tropical zone, is certainly one of a cluster of burgeoning South Asian cities that includes Bombay, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok, and Dubai. And Koolhaas’s further observation about the inevitable trend toward “verticality” in these generic cities—“the skyscraper looks as if it will be the final, definitive, typology”—is another accurate description of Hong Kong’s cityscape. But most important, I was astounded to realize that the three main characteristics of Koolhaas’s generic city—airport, hotels, and shopping malls—were formulated using Hong Kong as his model. The city’s new airport in particular—ranked number one in the world—is itself a characterless generic city in the making, and a perfect space for “transit.”

Certainly the new breed of global cosmopolitans who feel equally at home in every city (which by Koolhaas’s definition are interchangeable anyway)

qualify as transients. But what about the people who have nowhere else to go, not even into exile? Is Hong Kong, for them, interchangeable with all the other urban spaces in South Asia, a generic place that can be “British” at one moment and “Chinese” the next with no discernible crisis of identity? On the eve of the 1997 handover, most of the seven million residents of Hong Kong had no choice but to stay in their home city, and this real existential situation—of being grounded in one place, for better or worse, like most of the world’s population—seems to have eluded the global theorizers.

For Koolhaas, himself a multinational luminary, the issue of identity is passé. Identity is merely a “mousetrap in which more and more mice have to share the original bait, and which, on closer inspection, may have been empty for centuries.” In his view, a person (or a whole city) should never be trapped in one identity, since all of us now have “multiple identities.” As one of Koolhaas’s former colleagues at Harvard University, I too aspire to be a cosmopolitan with multiple identities, and indeed I have taught an undergraduate course about contemporary Chinese culture in just that way. But does this postmodern formulation, put in pithy and sardonic if not cynical language, really solve the problems faced by Hong Kong’s seven million people? The lived culture of these permanent residents of Hong Kong is part of what inspired me to write this book.

Working in the shadow of these two brilliant theoreticians, I find myself plowing away just to pick up some piece of empirical debris or the occasional relic—a few small cultural substances from Hong Kong’s streets and from the material world of its everyday people. “Re-searching” this quotidian culture is not a useless gesture, in my view. I share the sentiments of another local researcher, Jason Wordie: “Wandering about Hong Kong Island’s backstreets . . . one can sometimes feel like an archaeologist of the modern day working without a shovel, piecing together isolated fragments from what was here until almost yesterday to build up a picture of a very different sort.” As a longtime Hong Kong citizen himself, Wordie laments the forgetfulness of Hong Kong’s residents about their own past.<sup>3</sup>

In Koolhaas’s view, the urban archaeologist will come up empty-handed, for the generic city “perpetuates its own amnesia” and “its archaeology will there-

fore be the evidence of its progressive forgetting, the document of its evaporation.” Still, the posture of an “archaeologue” (one who pursues archaeology but with a freer interpretation) is precisely what I have adopted in this book, together with that of a local *flâneur*. The process of digging up sources and imagining what it was like for people to live in such a city has given me countless hours of both pleasure and pain. *City Between Worlds* offers my tentative report on Hong Kong’s “postcondition.”

EACH CHAPTER PRESENTS a slice of the city’s history and culture, called up by the streets, sites, and artifacts themselves, and by associations with literature and film. I begin by foot on the streets of old Hong Kong, which in early colonial days was called Victoria City. Hong Kong island became a British possession in the 1840s, following China’s defeat in the Opium War. The protection offered by Victoria Harbor, along with the prospect for gain, quickly drew British merchants, Chinese laborers, and Indian guards and policemen to this bustling port. The old police station, magistracy, and prison are still standing near Hollywood Road, along with the Man Mo Temple, the center of Chinese civic life in the nineteenth century. Today, the sights and smells of the open-air bazaars and food markets along Queen’s Road Central and in present-day Sheung Wan recall a Cantonese population whose labor built this imperial outpost—under the watchful eyes of colonial masters and Chinese elites, and under often appalling conditions of life and death.

In Chapter 2 the perspective shifts to the modern part of the island, the Central Business District or CBD, where the “Central values” of present-day Hong Kong—capital accumulation, profit motive, free-market competitiveness, land development, global trade, consumerism, and pervasive efficiency—are flourishing in both business and politics. Chapter 3 moves eastward through the hustle and bustle of the island’s most congested streets, in Wan Chai and Causeway Bay. A rider on the slow-moving double-decker tram can exit at any point and plunge into the crowds, searching for relics of local history and culture, and for evidence of the policies that threaten to destroy them.

Chapter 4 invites the reader to board the Peak tram for a ride up to Victoria Peak, where the wealthiest of the British colonials once lived. The writings surveyed in this chapter, penned by residents and travelers alike, offer a sense of the mentality and lifestyle of these late Victorians, who found themselves “stranded” in this exotic outpost, not yet a cosmopolitan metropolis. The old colonials seldom set foot on Kowloon peninsula or the countryside beyond, and contemporary visitors, as they enjoy the view from the Peak, can ponder the implications of such a sheltered existence.

In Chapter 5 I board the Star Ferry and cross over to Kowloon—a crowded jungle of high-rise buildings arranged in a labyrinth of streets congested with traffic. It is inhabited predominantly by Chinese, alongside a small minority of Indians. Westerners seldom venture beyond the upscale Tsim Sha Tsui shopping area near the Star Ferry terminal, and as a result they miss seeing this most indigenous part of Hong Kong. Kowloon became a British possession in 1860, following China’s defeat in the so-called Second Opium War. Our path takes us through the congested streets of Mong Kok and eventually to the site of the old walled city of Kowloon, established as a Chinese administrative outpost in 1847 and demolished in 1987. During the 1980s, over 31,000 residents squeezed themselves onto less than three acres of land in this teeming city-within-a-city.

The New Territories, a large land area leased by the British in 1898 for ninety-nine years, was home to Hong Kong’s first Chinese settlers—all rural villagers. A trip by train or car leads to the few remaining walled villages near the border, where an outsider can gain a “feel” (a prevalent word in popular Cantonese parlance) for local history going back many centuries. Scores of offshore islands that also provided homes and harbors for migrant clans can be reached by ferry or bridge. In Chapter 6 I provide a brief account of these early farmers and fishers, along with their religious rituals and festivals.

The book’s last two chapters—on Hong Kong lifestyle and the complex relations between Hong Kong and mainland China—are based on my personal experience as a witness to the great changes that occurred during the decade after the handover. The views expressed in these chapters are at considerable variance with those found in official statements or in most Western media accounts,

and the reader is forewarned of their possible bias. Yet it seems to me that most Western media, in their overemphasis on Hong Kong's role in the global economy, have not explored the dynamics of local culture and its interaction with the official political regime. This lopsided view is partly due to the language barrier and partly to stereotypes that have been glamorized in popular fiction and film. In my attempt to "set the record straight," I may have inclined toward the other extreme of localism, a position which in this age of globalization many people consider no longer viable.

While writing this book, I found myself constantly trying to draw mental maps not only from the many walks and wanderings I have taken all over these areas but from the diverse anecdotes, vignettes, memoirs, and fiction I have read, and films I have seen (which are often described in these pages). In piecing together these fragments, I do not arrive at an overall picture of this "city between worlds." What I offer is rather a smorgasbord of thoughts and impressions—a food metaphor that may not be inappropriate for Hong Kong, a city well known for its culinary delights. Readers of this book can pick and choose from its contents and read at random. I hope they find some of the dishes served here to their taste.