City out of Breath

Author(s): Ken Chen

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So all night, we walk in one direction: up.

This is really the only direction you can go in Hong Kong, a direction hinted at by skyscrapers and aspired to by the Hong Kong stock exchange. By "we," I mean my father, myself, and our guide—my step-grandmother-to-be—who somehow possesses both our combined age and our combined speed. Trudging up the stairs behind her, my father and I are already panting. We stop and laugh—really only an excuse to catch our breath—but by the top of the stairs, we're bent and sagging, our hands on our knees. And there, at the end of the street, she's waving at us to hurry up—almost as if to fan away whatever remains of our quaint Californian version of walking. When we catch up with her, she says—in what seems like an especially Chinese blend of ridicule and public affection—that we walk too slow.

If an American city at night is *film noir,* then Hong Kong is just a camera blur. The residents of Kowloon speed around with the same look on their faces, as if they're irked at their bodies for not being cars. You feel that if you stood still, the city would just rotate past you—as if you have no other choice but motion. Hong Kong accelerates as though located on another, faster-spinning Earth. Anyone who has been there knows that time and space can flick off their objectivity and instead pulse and jump, symphonic rather than metronomic. In Hong Kong, the world stretches time until time—along with space and language—goes elastic. It's like a Chinese painting, in which conflicting perspectives soak through the landscape like radiation. A McDonald's sits next to a vegetable cart tended by a woman who looks about five hundred years old. The all-Chinese police band plays bagpipes and marches in kilts for the Saint Patrick's Day parade. Street markets are the opposite of flowers: opening up at night and closing at day. In Hong Kong, all times are contiguous. All times are simultaneous. This essay is an attempt to describe a city that is itself already a description—Hong Kong is a description of time. This essay is also an experiment in time travel—an artifact of memory from July 2000. Hong Kong is now the same city but a different place. Prosperity—once the city's one-word gloss—is slowly becoming synonymous with Shanghai. "I hear everyone's real depressed over there," I say, at dinner, to the mother of a

friend of mine from Hong Kong. "That they're jealous, with all the jobs heading over to the mainland and all." She chews on a piece of lettuce and says, "Yes, they are jealous. But they have a right to be."

Five years later, we spend the next half-hour taking elevators that lead to stairs that lead to elevators. I don't have any idea where we're going and just follow my father, an immigrant from Taiwan whose Mandarin, I realize, makes him only a third less lost than I am. He's following our guide, who, like Hong Kong itself, is all energy and no conversation. "We're headed for Victoria Peak today," my dad announced this morning. The touristy lookout could be the only spot where Hong Kong can be made comprehensible.

Suddenly our guide stops. Are we lost? This possibility is not surprising. It feels like we've been going in spirals, victims to some kind of geographic hoax. Our guide decides to ask for directions in Cantonese. She stops a man with a dark complexion who reminds me of the vendors at the Taipei night market. He has short, wiry hair that resembles a scouring pad and is wearing a security-guard uniform. Chinese—I think—obviously. Probably a migrant from the mainland. "Where is Victoria Peak?" she asks him in Cantonese. The security guard looks at her and says, "Do you speak English?"

Dad and I look at each other. He says, "This is a strange city," and I start laughing, relieved that I'm not the only one who thinks so. We seem to be fumbling through different languages, shifting, testing, trying to find one we can all stand in. A bus rocking through the northern hills speaks to its passengers in Miltonic English: *Do not board or alight whilst bus is in motion.* (Lucifer alights. Buses throttle.) And a week ago in Taiwan, my father had shed the most mundanely engrossing fear of any Chinese immigrant to America: his accent. He became a master of languages, all traces of self-consciousness suddenly gone from his voice. He chatted with taxi drivers and strangers about the drenching humidity or about which restaurants were good, casually code-switching to Taiwanese for jokes, Mandarin for information, and English for translation and one-word exclamations. When we showed up at the desk at the Taipei Hilton, the girls on staff spotted my dad and approached him in nervous English. He paused, got an odd look on his face—the fuzzy expression that Looney Tunes characters have when they're suspended in midair and about to fall—and said in Mandarin: "I'm Chinese!"

Back to searching for Victoria Peak, my father starts to ask the question in English, but someone interrupts. A Hong Kong yuppie standing thirty feet away muffles his cell phone in his blazer lapel and tells us the answer in rushed Cantonese. Some men in black blazers walk by, and some teens with blond spiky hair walk by, and some middle-aged men with grimy white aprons walk by—mostly Chinese, but otherwise unidentifiable. Indian? Polynesian? British? Hong Kong is an intensely international city. Every street in Kowloon is an intersection—not only of wet-walled alleys

and futuristic buildings of glass, but also of the more transparent rays of cultures.

Somehow you are supposed to teach yourself how to comprehend Hong Kong's energy and flashy contradictions: Asian and Western; the encroaching Chinese mainland and the remnants of England; the greasy night markets of sticky rice tamales and knock-off leather boots that slouch right across from Tiffany, Chanel, and Prada. The only things common to these are the offices sending air-conditioned blasts into the street, a kind of longing for money, and, most important, the sense of storytelling that the city seems to require as a visitor's pass. Hong Kong has a way of turning on your internal monologue. Walking becomes an act of silent storytelling, figuring people out. You feel like you are lost in some prelapserian novel where the plot has begun but the characters wait for you to name them. In some time, at some place, we step into an underground Cantonese restaurant and I see a gray-suited, red-tied man act like a parody of the States. American, I say, with an American accent: good-natured smiles, occasionally the slow English dispatched on foreigners and children, and a slightly uncomfortable look, as though he's worried he's outnumbered.

Finally we find Victoria Peak, by which I mean that we find the gondola to get us there. We buy tickets and step in, waiting to be hoisted up into the humid nighttime atmosphere. The cab starts moving. At first, nothing in the windows but the ads on the sides of the tunnel, and then suddenly the city. Our gondola windows have become postcards. Hong Kong poses before us, bright, earnestly capitalist, electric, multiplying. A concrete wall blocks the view, and then the city is back again. Under us, a small red house sits on the cuff of the panorama. Light drops out of a pair of shutters, a door or window is open; someone is home. More stone, more wall. We hit the crest, reach our destination: Victoria Peak, the highest spot in Hong Kong and, for a tourist, the best. We suddenly have a god's-eye view of the skyline. The buildings shine yellow, white, orange, blue, all reflected in the dark bay waters; giant corporate logos shrink, skyscrapers huddle, and the city glows with a brilliant coolness. My eye seems too small to hold it all in.

We take the bus back. I sit on the left of the top of a double-decker bus in a city where they drive on the left side of the road. As we shake downhill, making acute turns, I begin to regret my seating preference: the wobbly tourist's corner. The bus hits a few branches, careens over double yellow lines, winds downhill. Whipped by full-motion vertigo, I grope for the metal railing, squeezing it as if for juice, and then laugh at my own cowardice. I gasp, then yawn in a slow, measured sort of panic, a civilized form of suffocation. Hong Kong—a city out of breath.

After we've been back from Victoria Peak for a few hours, I go to the front desk of the hotel. A Hong Kong–Chinese woman in her midtwenties looks up the Internet rates for me. She reads the per-minute charges off a

small white card, and her voice compresses Mandarin, English, and Cantonese into a linguistic diamond: the Chinese-British accent. There's the Merchant Ivory sound, the lilt that movies tell us is cultured but that also seems austere and imperial the way Chinese period films do. Yet the sound is also familiar, humble, and awkward: a Chinese voice wandering inside the English language. The sound of it reminds me of my parents. I can't get enough of it.

A few days later, we are ready to leave. Henry James wrote that when one has tired of London, one has tired of life. But Hong Kong seems denser than any dream an American could have about London. We are suddenly sick of it. Everywhere is crowded: the restaurants at two on a Wednesday afternoon, the train platform every few minutes, the sidewalks wet with people. This is the opposite of loneliness. It is the abundance of people that alienates us.

My father and I step into an underground Cantonese restaurant, the one with the red-tied American, and the other diners speed by us, blurred, the abstract expressionist's version of people. A man sits across from us, the only person at his big round table. I'm guessing he's Indian. He has a sharp lawn mustache and a black satchel. A businessman from Britain? An engineer out for dinner? The other diners speed by us in streaks. I turn around and see the waiters coming by our table—or maybe just one waiter over and over—to set tea cups upright, rip open chopsticks from their packaging, bring dishes, bring towels, even bring blankets when we say we are cold, bring the check. I hear another noise drift over the wheel of our table: the TV at the bar. The news is on: a fire yesterday in Tai O burns down homes in one of the few remaining fishing villages in Hong Kong, leaving seven hundred homeless. No, I'm getting it wrong. I'd read about it on the front page. There was no TV in that restaurant, not even a bar. Hong Kong quivers, not out of fear or sadness, but the way something quivers when our idea of it has changed. The waiters push out of the kitchen as if it's on fire, as if they're scrambling to escape it.

But the fire is Hong Kong.