

City Between Worlds: My Hong Kong

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Having for some time been a fan of Professor Leo Ou-Fan Lee's *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, I did not hesitate to grab Lee's newest book *City Between Worlds: My Hong Kong* from the shelves during my last visit to Hong Kong. Like other urbanists, I savor the study of Hong Kong with alacrity. Nevertheless, I must admit I have never been very clear about what Hong Kong is all about. To me, Hong Kong is a city of hyper-industriousness, located in the point of transition between two political realms, surviving for the sake of China's financial enterprise; yet the culture of the place remains intact despite the shifting global economy (and, of course, global economic downturn). Don't be frightened: it is my intention to confuse the previous sentence with conflicted ideas. The sentence in fact reflects my perplexing perceptions of Hong Kong. As Lee quite simply defines the place, so too is it for me: "a city of confusion and contradiction."

For some time, in this city of mainly Chinese residents run by the colonialist enterprise for almost a hundred years, the use of a question of history – is Hong Kong Chinese? – has been the principal manner by which scholars analyze Hong Kong. Yet study of Hong Kong is often facilitated by looking at it not only for its "physical urbanity" but as a heartland of global finance. As such, one needs not take into account what is going on at the "ground level," so to speak: one needs not know how things work in reality apart from the numbers streaming up and down the boards at *Hang Seng* stock market. There are people at the top of the pyramid who produce those numbers. There are people in the middle who physically support those who produce the numbers. And there are people at the bottom level who make things happen through their cheap labor. The fact is that everybody, despite

where they are in the pyramid, is living together in an area about one square kilometer of Hong Kong – twice smaller than the smallest city in China. For such reasons, and perhaps because I am not an economist, I feel that Paul Mozur's (2009) review of *City Between Worlds* does not do justice to the valuable scholarship in Lee's piece. As a trained architect-turned-humanities scholar, I tend to be more attuned to the socio-cultural elements of Hong Kong – especially as portrayed through media such as films, music, and television. Lee captures these elements with captivating insight.

For many foreigners, the first thing felt in Hong Kong is its compactness – its *hyper-density*. Many wonder, how could some seven million people crowd into such a small city? How do they live? Do residences consist of two-by-three-meter rooms with ceilings less than two-meters in height? Can a single bed fit the space? How is everything put together as a package for urban life? Using a wide variety of resources – from an analysis of archival materials, such as old photographs and urban artifacts, to in depth readings of the famous film director Wong Kar Wai's movies – Lee reveals his perception of Hong Kong. These questions are all answered in Lee's *City Between Worlds*.

Stylistically, it is obvious that Lee has not attempted to make *City Between Worlds* a book that sets the momentum for the study of modern China in the same way that his magnum opus *Shanghai Modern* has laid out a blueprint for the study of Shanghai for the past two decades. *City Between Worlds* is much more relaxed and journalistic. It does not by any means discuss the *terra incognita* of the study of Hong Kong. Instead it takes the readers through the viable historical foundation of the city of Hong Kong based on its geographical importance in the process of the city's urbanization. For instance, the first chapter starts by describing the Victoria Harbor, where the city began to develop and unfold in its Colonial day before slowly moving towards the east part of the island and to Kowloon. Then it elaborates on the presence of a more contemporary post-colonial urban culture.

Lee is by no means an established expert on Hong Kong, as he himself points out in the beginning of the book. Yet this proves to be the true strength of the book. Hong Kong history seems to be quite short and straightforward. Why then is it so difficult to grasp the gist of it? This is why Hong Kong experts' knowledge on individual subjects pertaining to the city's history so readily becomes obsolete. In fact, I would argue that Hong Kong can only be understood given an eclectic, multi-disciplinary perspective. As the study of Hong Kong seems to be concealed, for the humanities at least, in a thick mystifying skin; what we really need is someone like Lee to peel such a skin away to allow us to understand the city in all its facets.

In *Shanghai Modern* we see the making of urban Shanghai in its golden age through the eyes of an expert, Lee, who has championed the spectrum of socio-anthropological investigations of everyday life and the urban vis-à-vis the spatial development of modern Shanghai. Lee was born in China before going to Taiwan to read for his undergraduate degree and then attaining a professorship of Chinese

culture at Harvard. His perceptive sense of literature and its criticism transformed the study of modern Shanghai. Two decades later, Lee retired from Harvard University to become a professor in many departments at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and then wrote *City Between Worlds*. The difference between the two projects for Lee is, as he writes in the prologue:

City Between Worlds is a book guided by the roaming reflections of a long-term Chinese resident ... [who was] not born in the city, [but has] chosen to stay here, following a thirty-year sojourn in the United States.

That is, it is Lee's intention from the beginning not to go very deep, but to put an emphasis on a series of "markers" – historical and political – that make Hong Kong an urban place of contradiction. Some of these are not readily apparent. For example, the handful of half-English, half-Cantonese street and location names throughout the city have become an ordinary sight to tourists, thereby embedding a connotation that Hong Kong has established itself as a melting pot of diverse cultural values. Or, the fact the ultra-modern districts like *Wanchai* and *Causeway Bay* were once, in the late nineteenth century, the turf of the two largest companies plying the opium trade. Thus Lee's is a book that fulfills a long-missing understanding of the city from the standpoint of a person who is neither biased towards the nostalgia of the glittering "neon-lights and skyscrapers" of the delirious urban cityscape nor positioned firmly within the existing scholarship on the city, e.g. the colonial discourse, which can no longer serve the purpose of a contemporary reading of this city and its changing facets of political dichotomy – afterall, it is a city between the worlds of the socialist People's Republic of China and global capitalism.

This contemporary "culturalist project" of Lee's was the inspiration of my own work on Shanghai (2008, 2009). My argument, which arose from reading this book, is about the position of Hong Kong and China. After 1997, Deng Xiaoping's vision for "one country, two systems" pertains to Hong Kong's autonomy to remain a financial center without the socialistic ruling and laws of the mainland, which thus enabled, or required, the city to act as a financial mechanism for China. Lee, a prominent scholar of Shanghai, points out clearly that, unlike Shanghai, Hong Kong's phases of development have never had a hiatus due to political impenetrability – thus, Hong Kong seems to offer a better assimilation model. The agreement between China and Britain to maintain Hong Kong autonomy in situ was achieved in 1984, a short time after Deng became the Chairman and long before he stepped down from the position. This was an effort to reunite the socialist motherland with capitalistic Hong Kong. On the other hand, we can also look at this as an attempt to initiate a platform for capitalism for the rest of the country as a whole. It might be the case before 1997 that capitalists were afraid that Deng would make Hong Kong more like China. But the reality is that the Communist Party actually wanted to make

China more like Hong Kong, in terms of investment strategies alone. This is proven by the efforts and amount of investment initiatives they have put into the Special Economic Zones on the coast as well as the maintained autonomy of Hong Kong. Lee then fittingly talks about the “collective memory” that will shape Hong Kong’s destiny, whether it be solely Hong Kong’s own or China’s as a whole.

The book starts off with a prologue, which provides the key argument Lee uses throughout. It is not a surprise that Lee uses Ackbar Abbas’ (1997) thought about the inchoate definition of Hong Kong, “the politics of disappearance,” to set the stage. Through a series of media and symbolism, Abbas argues that Hong Kong, since June 30, 1997, has disappeared from a fixed definition through the duality of East/West and tradition/modernity. He deems the post-1997 Hong Kong to be evanescent *ad abundantiam*. There is a caveat, of course. Abbas is a critic; hence, he provides a critical reflection on the value that the society perceives, not in some absolute sense. We all know that Hong Kong has not disappeared. Indeed, the energy of a fast city with Chinese/Western characteristics is still there for anyone to feel. Lee picks this up as a point of departure to introduce the next theoretical assumption that he brings in as a framework of criticism for the five proceeding chapters. The notion of a “generic city” is the second theoretical assumption – even more sarcastic, pessimistic, and oppressive than that of Abbas. It comes from the famous iconoclastic architect Rem Koolhaas, who has written quite extensively about the way in which cities in the world have transformed into something more or less the same. Cities all aim only at one same target: money. He alleges that Hong Kong is not only a generic city, but a “model” for a generic city. Koolhaas, as an architectural theorist, is merely looking at the new direction of design and its practice, especially the typology of the city, and he sees Hong Kong through his spatial lenses, which give quite an illustrious contrast with Abbas’s critiques of the society through media and literary texts. Here we see where Lee is going. We also know that it would be pointless, particularly for an eminent scholar like Lee, to write a book to repeat or recapture these two points written back in the late 1990s. That is, Lee, a bona fide cultural theorist, aims at the contradiction of these two assumptions about Hong Kong by giving a broader picture of the city from sundry perspectives. I have personally never been convinced by Abbas’s nor Koolhaas’ theories about Hong Kong, which is why I really enjoy *City Between Worlds*. Lee ventures through the unique and irreplaceable scenes of Hong Kong culture to prove that Hong Kong will cease to maintain its cultural value and inimitability – although he never says it directly.

Lee has a noticeable style: it is almost like a ‘guidebook’ – though unlike a *Lonely Planet Guide* – in that it discusses countless contextually cogent pieces information, from urban legend to *Feng Shui*, from the standpoint of a curious urbanite rather than of a scholar who loves to make a long list of references. Stories collected from talking to people and learning from the residents are at the core of the book,

which is why *City Between Worlds* has only a small number of notes at the end (which is surprising for a hardcover book almost 300 pages long). History and controversies are neither told in a visible evidence-based mode nor deep-interview anthropological sense, but rather in relaxed story-telling style. After reading a few pages, I realized, since I was in Hong Kong, that I should just go to the places suggested in the book. Therefore, I decided to stroll down from where I worked, at the University of Hong Kong on a steep hill on the south side of the island, down to Victoria Harbor to sip a cup of Chinese tea and to read a book at a local coffee shop by the harbor Lee talks about in his book. Looking back at shop houses in Hong Kong from the harbor front, it was quite impressive how Lee managed to infuse my understanding of Hong Kong with a colloquial continuum, making clear to my gaze what were the remnants and vestiges of Colonial matters and Chinese elites. After that cup of tea, I followed the path suggested in the second and third chapters by walking along the Connaught Road towards *Wan Chai* and *Central* to take a look at the modern skyscrapers of “Central Values” (p. 43) and the location of the famous club as portrayed in the 1957 film *The World of Suzie Wong* (p. 89). I then detoured back to take a tram up the peak to experience the site of “the exclusivity of Europeans and government officials in the 1930s” (p. 112) before coming down to board a ferry to *Tsim Sha Tsui* on the *Kowloon* side where the “characterlessness” (p. 142) and the presence of *Chungking Mansion* epitomize the image of contemporary life of Hong Kong citizens. I walked up *Mong Kok* to find the famous pedestrian street (p. 149) before taking a random bus going up to the *New Territories* to visit *Tai-O*, the oldest and the only fishing village left in Hong Kong, where property-led development prevails (and ended up being where the border of Shenzhen and Hong Kong meets in *Lou Wu*, which is not quite what the book suggested!). The journey was not quite as difficult as I expected it to be, yet the entire trip took three days. To act like a tourist with this book in hand is probably the best crash-course in Hong Kong history and culture – second only to Professor Lee himself leading the trip.

Also worth mentioning is that the book contains a number of high-quality telling photographs – not an ordinary view of Hong Kong skyscrapers we could see anywhere on postcard stands on the street but photographs of hidden scenes, archival images, old rare photos, and present-day photos that capture the dynamic of the urbanism of Hong Kong. In addition, there are three maps of Hong Kong in three scales – from the very detailed of Hong Kong island, to include Kowloon, and to the scale of the Special Administrative Region. All are redrawn and remarkably easy to understand.

Lee’s breakaway from “being academic per se” is the defining feature of this work. Although Lee might not feel the same way, I feel academic writing has long been a rigid and strict framework limiting the ability of “imagination” to flourish through the gaze. Lee’s ability to do just this is why *City Between Worlds* is so groundbreaking.

Despite its thorough provision of Hong Kong's history from its creation to the present, *City Between Worlds* is *not* a substitute for such seminal texts as Steve Tsang's *A Modern History of Hong Kong* (2004) or Frank Welsh's *History of Hong Kong* (1997). Indeed *City Between Worlds* is different: instead of aiming at rendering Hong Kong from a perspective of a historian, Lee represents a viewpoint of a non-local scholar who has seen many things and possesses a profound loquaciousness of deep curiosity towards the "stuff" we normally do not bother thinking about. So, although *City Between Worlds* is not exactly a theoretical piece, it picks up nicely from where he himself left off in *Shanghai Modern*: the way in which a Hong Kong is a "reflection of a reflection" of Shanghai – "a modern or postmodern replica" (Lee 1999: 341) that has for so long modeled itself after the *old* Shanghai but now looks at the *new* Shanghai being modeled after itself to beat Hong Kong in its own game or a new version of the "Tale of Two Cities." *City Between Worlds: My Hong Kong* is Hong Kong from "his" viewpoint. It is a long desired book for anyone who is interested in Hong Kong.

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