

Hong Kong, Beijing and Back

On the drive from the airport into Kowloon, my first reaction was to compare the scenery with my hometown of Vancouver, BC. Having lived two years in Arizona, to see such urban density surrounded by hills and water was enough to make me reminiscent. However, I soon saw that the island of Hong Kong itself loomed much more spectacularly—especially at night, when it lit up like a UFO, its many sky scraping buildings undulating and flashing with lasers and coloured lights.

On our first venture out into the streets the next day, the din of construction and traffic was at first unnerving, as were the rather forward street vendors who marked us easily as new arrivals and who seemed hell bent on equipping us with new (fake) Rolex watches and tailor-made suits. Though the streets were crowded, the pace seemed laid-back—perhaps due to the lethargy-inducing humidity—as crowds of locals milled around or slowly ambled as one along the main streets.

Over the next few days we acclimated and found our way to some rural locales—surprisingly close by and easy to access: we took a series of ferries to a small island called Peng Chau where we made our way through small ramshackle alleyways full of local wares—everything from cheap household goods to Buddhist icons—and found a small rising path which we hiked along into some dense foliage until we reached a view of the bay.

On another day trip we found our way, via ferry, to Lantau Island, where we taxicabbed to the Tian Tan Buddha, also known simply as the ‘Big Buddha’, which is the largest outdoors sitting bronze Buddha statue in the world. Completed in 1993, it is home to the holy ‘bone relic,’ a tiny shard of crystal which is said to have come the Buddha’s own body—his bones having

turned to crystal at his death. The fragment is on display behind a gate and thick glass and is the size of a fingernail.

Out on the town that night I had the chance to converse with a local couple whose English was a lot better than my Cantonese. They were amenable to my questioning them about how they perceived mainland China as compared to Hong Kong with its ‘Special Administration’ status, and what they thought of the recent violence in Tibet. They both acknowledged feeling culturally distanced and somewhat superior to mainland China in terms of Hong Kong being a more cosmopolitan city and less insular than most other mainland urban centres; but they also expressed a loyalty to China and complained of the west’s perception of China as being slow to make social reforms. In short they believed that, given enough time, China would turn the corner on its human rights record. It was an illuminating conversation—even though at times it was difficult to hear above the ruckus of the rockabilly band.

Next stop: Beijing. Leaving the airport, the first thing I noticed was the pollution; to breathe was to feel a stinging in the lungs. What looked like a nimbus of fog wrapped around every street light was actually smog. In the days to come, I got used to it. I am a smoker after all.

For two days went sightseeing. Centuries of history are literally layered and embedded throughout the city: adjacent to Tiananmen Square—probably most recently famous in the west for the 1989 pro-democracy protests that occurred there which resulted in a harsh government crackdown—is the six hundred year old Forbidden City. Labyrinthine, magisterial, once the Imperial Palace through 24 Emperors and two Dynasties and off limits to everyone except the Imperial family and high ranking officials, it is now overrun with tourists. I imagined 24 Emperors rolling in their graves. Back in Tiananmen Square, only a stone’s throw away from this now effete site of Imperial Power, we found a more recent relic of political authority: the

persevered corpse of Chairman Mao. His body is on display within a crystal coffin for anyone who cares to see it. And many people do. There was a long line up of mostly Chinese, but the crowd moved quickly as we were ushered through, constantly reminded that cameras were strictly forbidden, as was the wearing of hats or the putting of hand in pockets. To my eye, Mao appeared serene but waxy—perhaps too waxy. I discovered later there is a theory that the body displayed is actually a wax replica. But who knows?

In the days to come we also visited the Great Wall, the Summer Palace, the Ming Tombs, the Temple of Heaven and the Lama Temple. Yes, it was an onslaught of history, something only available in a city that is over 3,000 years old, and quite an overwhelming experience to take in, in such a short time. Contrasting this was the modern city, undergoing a great boom in development, in part due to the Summer Olympics, not to mention the burgeoning of capitalism. Near our hotel in the Dongcheng district we discovered a very westernized area, complete with glitzy malls (ugh) and Starbucks (alas) and a bookstore that carried only English titles (yawn). Craving something a little more locally flavoured, we took a subway to the Nanluoguxiang Hutong district, a neighbourhood of alleys and ramshackle little buildings which housed shops and cafes and art galleries. It felt like a Chinese version of a somewhat gentrified bohemian scene: local, artsy and comfortable. If I were ever to live in Beijing, I'd like to live around here, I thought.

Well, it was a jam-packed trip, and in retrospect I am happy with how much I was able to see and do each day I spent touring through these two cities. In terms of my writing life, I'm sure some of my travel experiences will come to shape and colour my future poems, that I now have access to new images and metaphors, new ways of seeing and thinking. I am very grateful to the Piper House for giving me this opportunity. Thank you.