

A Tree Grows in Hong Kong

Mary King Bradley

When I moved to Hong Kong in 2016, I thought of that first year as a trial period for a new relationship and a new home. I had visited once, before I knew M, but the Hong Kong he showed me was very different from the one I remembered. He showed me *his* city, shaped by his life and interests. Had I never been to Hong Kong before, I might have thought it consisted solely of bookstores, movie theaters, university campuses, and museums. I struggled with M's version of Hong Kong, not because I disliked the places he took me—we share many of the same interests, after all—but because it was a space to be navigated as quickly as possible while moving from point A to point B. Too many people, too little time made a slower, investigatory ramble inconceivable for M. Besides, he had done his exploring long ago, then carefully excised from his mental map any part of the city he considered extraneous to his very busy life. (I have often told him my suspicion that we would never have become a couple had he met me in Hong Kong; he would have been too focused on the task at hand or already halfway out the door as we were being introduced.)

Meanwhile, I was wrestling with the changes to my living and working conditions. Before Hong Kong, I had taught at various US colleges and universities and then a cram school in Taiwan. Teaching had always provided me with an ideal balance of social interaction and solitude, but in Hong Kong, I made the switch to being a full-time translator. Because I have never felt particularly comfortable working in cafes or other public places, I was suddenly spending most of my time in a small, impersonal room, enduring tremendous amounts of isolation long before the pandemic made such a lifestyle the norm. When I wasn't working and M had other

commitments, I rarely ventured out on my own. The crush of people in busy Yau Ma Tei or farther afield was simply too overwhelming. Even so, I was coping. In addition to a small patch of green visible through the room's huge window, Hong Kong was still temporary at that point, and I can handle almost anything short term.

#

I'm not sure when I read *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* for the first time. At twelve? Thirteen? Several scenes from this semi-autobiographical novel about a young girl growing up in early twentieth-century New York City have lingered in my memory over the years, indelible images in my mind's eye. One of these is the sepia-toned cover of my paperback edition, which shows the main character, twelve-year-old Francie, staring out a window at the eponymous tree. Another is a passage near the beginning of the book, in which Francie's aunts object to her wasteful habit of pouring an untasted cup of coffee down the drain. Francie doesn't like drinking the coffee, but she loves its bitter-sweet smell with condensed milk mixed in, loves the heat of it. For her, the coffee's value dissipates with its warmth. From the aunts' point of view, such waste is scandalous for a poor family. Francie's mother sees things differently. She insists that the coffee is Francie's to do with as she likes; to pour it down the drain instead of drinking it is to have a choice, to be a "have-not" commanding some of the freedom enjoyed by the "haves." Francie's enjoyment of the coffee and her right to pour it away, to choose, turn it into a symbolic space, one over which she has autonomy and therefore agency.

My response to Hong Kong, my choice of how to map the city, has been a slow seeking out of small, quiet oases in the midst of its constant busyness, its streams of people and traffic. During that first year when I lived in Yau Ma Tei, I would sometimes walk to Kowloon Park to say hello to the flamingos and then find a bench away from other people, surrounded by green. A less obvious spot was a small sitting area located at one end of the Yuen Po Street Bird Garden next to the Prince Edward flower market. This narrow street's gentle incline lined with caged songbirds for sale ends in a small octagonal space with greenery and some benches. Beyond it are stairs that lead to the busy street below. People pass through this space, of course, and just how quiet it actually is naturally depends on the day and time, but the lush green foliage and relative stillness opened up a different kind of space in which I was both part of the city flowing past me, and not.

The following year, everything changed. M's father died, and M was abruptly called home from our trip to the US. I didn't go with him. Opportunities to see my family were now rare, and at that point I was still just M's girlfriend. His mother assured me that they were keeping the arrangements small, no need for me to be there. So I was in the US when M made the proposal to his mother and then to me that I move in with his family. After long consideration, I agreed to give it a try.

#

Size is a sensitive topic in Hong Kong. Once, after I had been living with my HK family for some time, I made the mistake of describing our flat as "small" to

M's mother. I didn't do so in any negative sense; I was commenting on how well designed it was to allow four people, a cat, and a very large dog to live there without being too much in each other's way. But M's mother bristled a bit, insisting that our flat was not small. And by HK standards it isn't, that's true. Yet it is equally true that it *is* small compared to other places I have lived, especially when the square footage per person is considered. My parents, just the two of them, moved into a medium-sized condo in the US when they retired. Our entire HK flat would fit into one quarter of it. As a point of cultural reference, even the way Hongkongers and I measure our living spaces is entirely different. The Hong Kong method, which includes the thickness of the exterior walls, makes no sense to me, seeming like an unhelpful inflation of interior dimensions, and even the "usable" or net area numbers feel somehow distorted, the actual space always appearing smaller than the numbers suggest.

Needless to say, when I moved in with M's family, the physical space I could call mine contracted even more, carved out of a geography stratified long before M ever met me. Still, I saw it as a temporary situation, one that I didn't question for the short term.

As time rolled on, however, it became clear to me that I needed to make a decision that would affect how M and I moved forward. All along, he had been telling me that we could live anywhere I wanted to, but it was slowly dawning on me that he wasn't ending his sentences with a full stop, but an ellipsis: we could live anywhere I wanted to...but he wanted to stay here. Choosing a life with M meant choosing

Hong Kong. I felt that uprooting him from the only place he truly wanted to live would be a recipe for disaster, whereas I had survived transplantation many times over. And so we got married, and I made the corresponding commitment to Hong Kong.

Some months later, I asked M's mom for permission to redo the bedroom I shared with M, and she agreed. M grumbled a bit at the inconvenience but gave in when I suggested there were better options than spending the next twenty-plus years of our pre-retirement married life in bunk beds, assuming he preferred to stay where we were. (He did, and still does. The prospect of moving his hundreds of books elsewhere probably has something to do with this.) The day the bunk beds came down, the topography of our room shifted completely, their removal flooding the room with light from the window they had partially blocked. The cotton tree outside sprang fully into view, no longer obscured by wooden slats and cross supports. From that point on, nothing inside the room would demarcate M's space versus mine. The door and window became the new, more expansive boundaries of our space. Outside our door are spaces we share with the rest of the family. Outside our window is space shared with the rest of the city, or at least, with anyone who cares to walk through our neighborhood.

#

My parents both grew up in a small Midwestern farming community, and even after they had lived in many places that were much larger, had no use for cities.

(When I say small, I probably mean tiny. Back then, my mother's hometown had a population of around 400 people. Now it's only 125. The county seat nineteen miles away, where my father was born, was a bit bigger, with a population of around 2,000.) When I first read *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, I had never been to New York City, although it was only a three- or four-hour drive away from our home in the Philadelphia suburbs. Even excursions into Philadelphia were rare, limited to class trips or escorting out-of-town visitors who wanted to see the Liberty Bell. The idea of cities as dangerous, monolithic entities that might swallow a person whole stayed with me until many years later, when I spent several days in New York with M. Although I had by then been a visitor there several times, I had never really ventured out of Manhattan. This time we set out from our Brooklyn Airbnb to explore other areas of the city, meeting up one afternoon with a friend of mine, a former teaching colleague. I experienced the city, both the concept and the actual place, in a totally different way. New York became a pastiche of neighborhoods, each with its own character and subculture. Most cities are probably like this, if you know how to look at them, but I think this is a quality that is particularly true of both New York and Hong Kong.

The comedian and actor Jimmy O. Yang moved from Hong Kong to the US at the age of thirteen, not to New York, but to Los Angeles. In an interview, he described the culture shock of his return to Hong Kong seventeen years later, commenting on the need to readjust to tall buildings and endless crowds of people. Hong Kong and Los Angeles: two cities, two very different experiences. I understood what he meant about tall buildings; I am always reminding myself to look up when I walk down

a street here. Looking only to the left or right, it's easy to forget about the eighty percent of the city above my head. This is in fact something I love about Hong Kong, how my perspective of the city shifts as I move higher or lower.

M would probably agree with Jimmy about the crowds of people everywhere, but Hong Kong is not always a sea of human bodies. Choose the right time, the right place, and the city can appear almost empty. When the cinemas aren't closed because of the pandemic, M and I will sometimes walk home from a late-night movie in the relatively cool dark. The blank faces of shuttered storefronts watch our progress through the mostly empty streets, the late hour permitting us to walk side by side on spacious sidewalks, swinging our clasped hands. At two or three o'clock in the morning, I might look out our window at the street below and catch sight of a solitary figure hurrying across the road, presumably on his or her way home. Like New York, Hong Kong never fully sleeps, but it does slow down to a drowsy hum, and then the city almost seems to yawn and stretch its cramped limbs.

#

How do we who love a judicious measure of solitude carve out space for ourselves in a city like Hong Kong? Carving suggests that we create space through what is essentially a destructive act, like an old woman who slices open the toes of her shoes to make room for corns and bunions, or the blue-collar worker I saw cutting the fingers off a pair of work gloves during a recent walk in Sham Shui Po. During that walk, I also saw a pair of turtles in a small tank, the smaller of the two standing on

the back of the larger so that it could lift its head to see over the rim. Perhaps there's some sort of metaphor there about the wealthy one percent who enjoy a different view of Hong Kong thanks to the many who remain stuck in the tank, but I don't know. That's another version of the city that sits at the uneasy periphery of my life here. Like most of the Hongkongers I have met, I have very little in common with well-off expats or HK elites.

During the pandemic, Hong Kong has often felt a lot like that glass turtle tank, a place where I can barely see past the rim of this one neighborhood into other areas of the city, and taking a flight back to the US to see my family and friends there seems like fantasy. After I've been stuck inside for a while, even home can feel like that tank, and I sympathize with our cat. His waking hours have recently been divided between meowing piteously for entrance to the forbidden second bedroom and meowing imperiously for someone to unbolt the flat door and prop it partway open, allowing him to survey the empty hallway through the steel bars of our security door. Like the street outside my window in the very early morning, the view into the hall brings an occasional glimpse of someone in the corridor and snatches of distant sounds and smells. In the space between inner and outer doors, he must have the feeling of a protected space that belongs just to him, where he is both part of a broader world and separate from it. Nowadays, I live too far from Kowloon Park to go there often, but I have found other spaces closer to home that create this same feeling: a rock in a quiet corner of the park across the street, a gazebo at the medical center a short walk up the street, steps rising through a treed and concrete-terraced slope that eventually give onto the road to Monkey Hill. But perhaps my very

favorite place, when the time of day is right and I am on my way to or from some other part of Hong Kong, is the front seat on the upper deck of a bus. Sitting there, the whole city seems to open up in front of me, for me alone, a mental space as real as the road that stretches to the horizon. I cherish such moments of relative solitude before I return to a flat that is neither small nor large in a city that is both large and small, all at the same time.

#

I find it interesting that when we lived in Yau Ma Tei, M was always willing to walk to Tsim Sha Tsui, but never in the opposite direction when we visited his parents each week, although the distance was roughly the same. When I lived in the Philly area, I thought nothing of driving an hour to get somewhere in the suburbs, but to drive an hour into the city seemed much too great a distance. Once, when a Hong Kong writer and I were sharing experiences of the places we had lived, she mentioned that there are people in the New Territories who have never been south to Hong Kong Island; presumably the reverse is also true, and there are many Hongkongers who have never bothered to travel north into the New Territories. We project our mental spaces onto the physical ones, creating boundaries no less real than my feeling of solitude when I sit in the front seat of a double-decker bus.

The last movie M and I saw before the most recent lockdown was the independent Hong Kong film *Far Far Away*. I appreciate films like this; although stylistically it reminded me of the better sort of Taiwanese light comedy-romance, it was very

much a Hong Kong film told from a Hong Kong perspective on space and distance. Date a girl who lives in one of the rural villages? Might as well date someone who lives in Taiwan! Get on an airplane and you could be there just as fast! This idea of what constitutes far away to a Hongkonger is another way I know that my version of Hong Kong is anything but complete. It also makes me doubt that I will ever see “all” of Hong Kong, even if the size of this city with all of its outlying islands covers an area far smaller than the US.

Like Francie’s Tree of Heaven in her Brooklyn neighborhood, the cotton tree outside our bedroom window has become symbolic of my Hong Kong. The tree exists in a space of its own, a sliver of nature tucked into a relatively quiet urban street. Every time I look at it, I see the places where branches have broken, torn loose by storms. The scars are still visible, but the tree goes on growing, serene, a home to birds who come there to sing, to preen in the sunlight and dine on its flowers, pollen, and small insects. Over the years, its shape has changed somewhat; the birds come and go. But it continues to produce new flowers, new leaves, new seed pods plump with cotton that the wind will pick up and carry away. Like the city, it is always there, always full of movement and life, always in a state of change.

Leaving Tai O

Marco Yan

There we were, west of Lantau, weighed down by the midday sun.

Sprawling seaward, the old fishermen's town appeared charred above water.

A scatter of fish leapt out of the surface, silver shards refracting light everywhere.

Boats motionless. Trees drooped. Even the thorns on brambles were soft to the touch.

You took me to a small hill away from the plaza, away from the scent of shrimp paste
and sun-dried egg yolks.

As we reached the top, the winding slope, from our vantage point, straightened,

a slash, in the hand of some deity, bisecting air into the sky's cyan and evergreen.

You called it *une ligne de force* while I gazed upon the guileless seam of beauty.

Among the swell of weeds and crickets' rage, I thought about flowers and fortune
and regretted

not having kissed you enough that morning when everything was cool and quiet.

Beyond the gazebo overlooking the ocean, there was that line again, glinting,
the horizon defining two shades of blue.

It was one of the last threads holding us in place.

How careless we were when we left.

We yanked. We kept pulling—

The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press: Copyrighted Materials