24 x 365 x HONG KONG

A Year in the Life of a City

In 1984 the British and Chinese governments reached agreement that Hong Kong would return to Chinese sovereignty at midnight on 30 June 1997. From that point onwards Hong Kong's inhabitants, who had been allowed no significant part in this decision concerning themselves and their city, lived with the sense of a countdown. They developed a heightened orientation towards a future whose form was already fixed even if its content was worryingly open. This atypical trajectory of decolonization, leading not to autonomy in the form of national selfhood but to absorption into a much larger entity with an alien political system of a deeply oppressive kind, led to the emergence of a strong sense of Hong Kong identity. Ungrounded in any ethnic or national sense of self, in contradistinction to most other cultural identities, this local identity found its expression in both cultural and political forms. It gave birth to a movement for democratic change which put pressure on the British colonial government during its twilight years, but this already-decolonized mentality was as much a challenge to the incoming sovereign power as to the outgoing one.

‹ North Point, with the elevated highway of the Island Eastern Corridor seen in front. One of many places where the natural advantages of Hong Kong's harbourfront location are not exploited to greatest advantage.
16 May 2005

⌄ North Point.

Prior to the handover both the British colonial and the Chinese national government attempted to appeal to Hong Kong people through a promise of 'stability and prosperity', which might be translated as meaning a continuation of both the economic boom which the territory had been experiencing and of the rule of law that was perceived as underpinning it. This depoliticized vision of progress as material enrichment was offered in competition to the more democratic understandings of development which had gained widespread assent in Hong Kong — particularly in the wake of the 1989 bloodshed in Beijing. Its ideological appeal was much reduced following the handover itself, however, since the pan-Asian economic crisis which occurred almost immediately after that event plunged Hong Kong into economic recession. In the years that followed there was a strong sense of backward movement, of a loss of territory gained during the preceding decades. This was the case on the economic front, with unemployment rising and property prices plunging, but something similar also occurred in terms of political and legal rights. The partial degree of democracy that the British had allowed Hong Kong's Legislative Council in the final years of colonial rule was eliminated overnight with the handover, an appointed equivalent replacing it till elections on a considerably less representative basis could be held. In 1999 the rollback of democracy was also to see the abolition of the elected Municipal Councils. The authority of Hong Kong's Court of Final Appeal was likewise dashed at an early date when the government of the newly established Hong Kong Special Administrative Region applied to the National People's Congress Standing Committee in Beijing to 'reinterpret' the Basic Law after it had lost a case in that local court of final legal adjudication.

A whole series of inept decisions by the SAR government in the years after its establishment were to deny this unrepresentative body any widespread sense of legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Constrained to follow Beijing's will, Tung Chee-hwa, the new Chief Executive, had little room for manoeuvre in the face of increasingly vocal public demands and seemed caught between a wish to

assert Hong Kong's uniqueness as a 'world city' and an opposing desire to promote integration with China and a sense of national citizenship.

The low point of this whole period came with the SARS crisis in spring 2003, during the sixth year of the post-handover era. Although, like the Asian economic crisis of 1997, SARS was the result of factors beyond the control of any single government, showing no respect for national boundaries, it was the poor response of the Hong Kong government to the initial outbreak which resulted in a widespread local perception of its bankruptcy. In mainland China the national government's initial reaction was to attempt to cover up the problem, thus allowing the new disease to spread. The control of the media exercised by an unrepresentative one-party state highlighted to Hong Kong people the dangers of un-elected leaders, lack of democracy now being seen as threatening lives and not simply livelihoods. When China did eventually swing into action and respond to the threat of SARS with the resources of a centralized state the contrast with the continued ineffectiveness of the local authorities made many feel that Hong Kong had even in certain respects been given a worse deal than the Mainland as to governance. At least the Beijing mayor was removed because of his incompetence in responding to SARS — his Hong Kong counterpart continued to receive the support of his bosses since publicly admitting that they had made a mistake in their choice of leader for Hong Kong would have too many broader implications for the process of the city's reintegration into the People's Republic.

Although its standing in the eyes of Hong Kong people had never been as low as after the SARS outbreak, the Hong Kong

Participants arriving for the annual memorial rally in commemoration of the
victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, Victoria Park, Causeway Bay.
4 June 2005

government chose that moment to attempt to introduce anti-subversion legislation as required by the Basic Law (which did not however set a timetable nor specify in advance the law's exact content). These draconian measures were strongly opposed by many in the academic, legal and media sectors, and were widely viewed as likely to effect an irreversible change to Hong Kong's way of life, damaging freedoms of expression which were jealously guarded.

With the prospect of a new era of Mainland-style coercion dawning in Hong Kong, local people took their fate into their own hands, turning out for a massive demonstration on 1 July 2003. Despite the extreme heat of that summer's day, a public holiday for the sixth anniversary of the handover, as many as half a million people joined the rally in Victoria Park, Causeway Bay, and the subsequent march to Central. Exceeding all predictions as to numbers, the sheer unexpected scale of the rally made it a profoundly striking expression of people power. Denied opportunities to express their political views through more conventional channels, the demonstrators found in the street the only available site of un-alienated political expression. All the pent up frustrations of the recent SARS era fueled the energy of the rally, but it was extremely peaceful and good natured: almost self-consciously so, as if demonstrating the lie to claims that Hong Kong people were not yet politically mature enough to merit full democracy. Sparking memories of the even larger street gatherings that occurred in 1989 as a response to the Tiananmen massacre, this rally nevertheless differed from its predecessors in being almost entirely focused on local issues.

Taken completely by surprise, Tung Chee-hwa's initial response was silence and inaction. Within a few days, however, albeit after an initial faltering, the government understood that it had no other course in the face of such widespread public opposition than to withdraw the planned anti-subversion legislation. The resignation followed of the minister most closely associated with the measure,
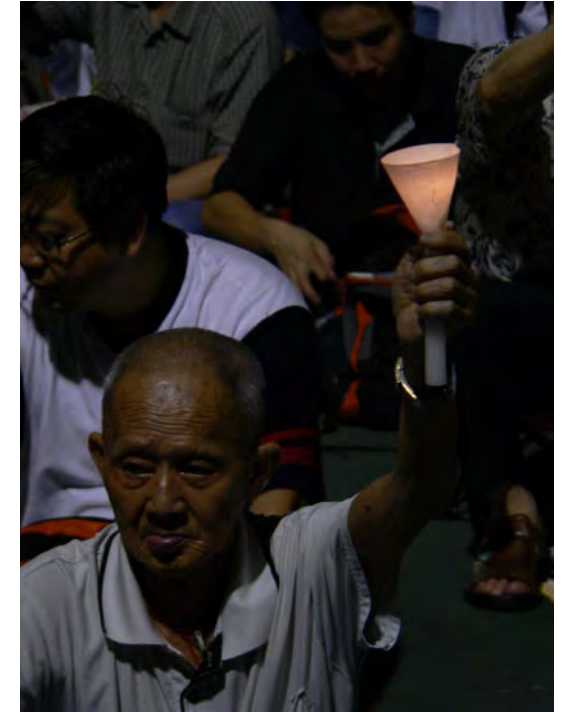
A solemn moment during the memorial rally. Lighted candles, held aloft at certain points in the proceedings, make a link to the gesture of the Goddess of Democracy that stood in Tiananmen Square in 1989. More than just recalling that spirit of democracy the rally participants are in a sense embodying her. Victoria Park, Causeway Bay.
4 June 2005

Secretary of Security Regina Ip, and also of Financial Secretary Antony Leung, a target of the demonstrators on account of an unrelated issue of financial non-disclosure prior to the delivery of his budget. From that moment on Tung's government was reduced to lame duck status, unable to come forward with any positive policy initiatives, and when (as if to emphasize a point) a further equally peaceful rally of similar scale was held exactly one year later, it was to lead to the resignation of the Chief Executive himself.

This demonstration of people power was clearly an episode of major importance within the recent history of China as a whole, let alone within that of Hong Kong itself. Although there have been many popular protests in mainland China during the last few years, they have tended to be small in scale and focused on local issues. Not since 1989 had there been such a large scale protest within the People's Republic, and of course the important thing is that on this occasion the demonstrations were effective in achieving their goal. A whole new generation not old enough to have participated in the Hong Kong mass rallies of 1989 experienced empowerment, exercising collective political muscles they may not have known they possessed.

The 2003 and 2004 rallies brought back a sense of agency to the lives of Hong Kong people. It gave them a taste of being the active subjects of their city's story rather than the passive victims of a procession of inept decisions made by a curious alliance of communist cadres north of the border and capitalist multi-millionaires to the south of it. If this recalled in certain respects the period of the handover, when the spotlight of History with a capital 'H' was most determinedly focused on Hong Kong, then it was a sensation that was not to last. Real change had happened, the political landscape had been redrawn to such an extent that — for instance — the veteran radical street politician Leung Kwok-hung of the April 5th Action Group, who had earlier served a prison term for one of his disruptions of the Chief Executive's speeches from the Legislative Council's public gallery, was now elected as a Legco

‹ Two veteran pro-democracy politicians, Lee Cheuk-yan (centre) and Szeto Wah (behind him, to the left), after taking a memorial wreath to the replica of the Goddess of Democracy statue which stands in the centre of the Park. This ritual, which takes place every year at the height of the rally, is followed by the re-igniting of a flame, symbolic of renewal, which is then carried back from the statue to the stage from which the officiating party began its journey. Victoria Park, Causeway Bay.
4 June 2005

⌄ Carrying a wreath to the replica of the Goddess of Democracy statue.

⌄ Victoria Park.

member himself. Nevertheless, there was still no clear timetable for constitutional change and China's National People's Congress Standing Committee (as part of a new spirit of interventionism in Hong Kong by the Beijing regime) was in April 2004 to rule out democratic elections for the Chief Executive in 2007 and for Legco in 2008.

It is this moment after the adrenalin rush of making history had subsided which the photos in this book record. Taken during an arbitrarily chosen twelve months between 5 October 2004 and 4 October 2005, they mark a period when there was relatively little sense of momentum in the Hong Kong political sphere. This was so even though it contained the resignation on 12 March 2005 of Tung Chee-hwa (who could not have been allowed to leave office too soon after the 1 July 2004 rally since there had to be a pretence that it wasn't the cause of his departure), and thus the end of the first phase of Hong Kong's post-handover political life. No startling new initiatives from his successor, Donald Tsang, had emerged by the end of this period, but the much smaller numbers attending the 1 July 2005 rally (around 20,000) perhaps indicated a willingness by some to grant the ex-civil servant a chance to demonstrate how he proposed to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of Beijing autocracy and local desire for constitutional progress. Tsang was to introduce an extremely limited proposal for constitutional change a little after the end of this twelve months period, but it failed to gain Legislative Council approval due to a united stance against mere window-dressing by the pro-democracy legislators. A further mass rally a little before this on 4 December 2005 was a reminder that people power had not disappeared, but was merely being held in reserve. Among those who took to the street on this occasion (as many as two hundred thousand according to some accounts) was Anson Chan, head of the civil service under the last colonial governor and a symbol of continuity in her role as Chief Secretary for Administration and deputy to Tung Chee-hwa (until her sudden resignation in 2001). Read by many as signaling her political reemergence, the sight of this venerable establishment
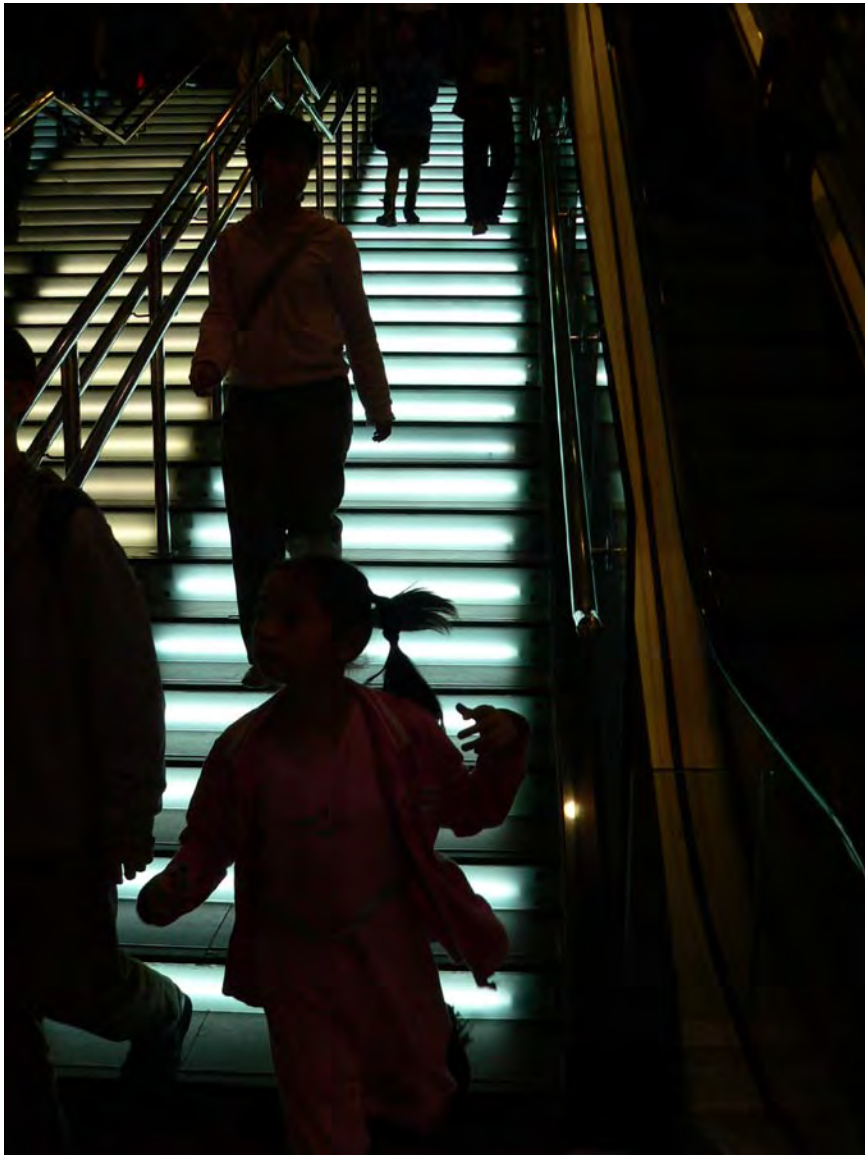
Causeway Bay at night.
3 December 2004

figure joining a street demonstration for the first time in her life was a further reminder of how much the fault lines of Hong Kong politics had now moved.

Given only history with a small 'h' to record in Hong Kong itself, but nevertheless a desire to engage with the city in its temporal specificity, the photos to be found here have responded by choosing to get up close to their subject. They approach it through an assemblage of details and oblique viewpoints which hope to add up to a picture more vivid than that conveyed by carefully framed views of major moments and locations. Such a micro-historical approach, involving a search for significance in the everyday and an attention to the nuance of a particular moment, is one which photography seems particularly suited to, given its emphasis on concrete visual reality and the unbreakable indexical bond between a photographic image and the instant in time when the shutter was open. Moving beyond the straightforwardly realist aesthetic of much black-and-white documentary photography, however, as well as the fascination with surface glamour and visual cliché found in many colour photographic publications addressed to the tourist gaze, the attempt here is to introduce a note of subjectivity. It is very much Hong Kong seen through one person's gaze that is offered, a selective and highly personal view from a position involving immersion as well as critical distance.

In the period prior to the 1997 handover the sense people had of a rapidly approaching transition often led to a mood of premature retrospection. In the otherwise quite different moment in time specified by the photos of this book, such a nostalgic gaze at the present in search of signifiers of identity threatened with loss is also to be found. The closure in July 2005 of the Man Yuen noodle stall, a long-established Dai Pai Dong or street restaurant in Elgin Street, for instance, or of the Tai Cheung Bakery in nearby Lyndhurst Terrace (which reappeared again across the road from its original location in September of the same year, not so long after its final farewell in May 2005, once more selling its famous

< Participant in the democracy rally and march, with giant bowtie in comic reference to Donald Tsang, Hong Kong's new Chief Executive, who habitually sports one (albeit of more modest proportions). Near Sogo department store, Causeway Bay.
1 July 2005

∨ Escalators at entrance to Times Square.
4 June 2005

egg tarts) were examples that fell within this arbitrarily delimited twelve months period. Evidence of the continuing or even widening appeal of a sense of local identity, fabricated from the fragile available symbols of material or popular culture, these instances also speak to an increasingly strong perception that Hong Kong is becoming somehow more prosaic and homogeneous. In many cases the Government is seen as the unthinking agent of such erosion of difference, as in its attitude to the future of the Central Police Station site or (more generally) in its neglect of the city's magnificent harbourfront and willingness to collude with the strictly limited interests of large developers, or with the blind logic of the marketplace.

One such case, which was to preoccupy public attention throughout this year, was the plan for a West Kowloon Cultural District. Tied in with broader debates about the need to preserve and enhance the harbour and the importance of making existing older landmark buildings available for cultural or community-enhancing purposes and not simply turning them over to commercial use, it exemplified much that was wrong in Government thinking. Instead of organic cultural development based on existing concentrations of arts or leisure activity it was to be planned all at one go, built on reclaimed land, and entrusted to a property developer. A return to the top-down, hardware-first approach to cultural planning which had been adopted in the 1980s, this was in a sense even worse since it privatized the process of cultural provision, and to a sector which had shown little previous concern for it. Such a model of cultural development has not been proven successful anywhere else in the world. Sole among the bidders for the project to question any of its fundamental premises was Swire, which offered an alternative plan of decentralized development using other harbourfront locations as well, such as the Tamar site (left vacant following the closure of the colonial-era naval base at Admiralty) and the former airport runway at Kai Tak. Including plans for a Frank Gehry building and a greater appreciation of the need for greenery in the heart of the city, this model was not even short-listed for consideration. As the

Yellow ribbons tied by marchers to roadside railings near a pro-Beijing office building as a symbol of protest. Between Causeway Bay and Wanchai.
1 July 2005

year in question drew to a close it seemed that the Government was still setting its heart on filling the key Tamar site with official office buildings. A further wave of harbour reclamation in the area, despite fierce opposition, was also well under way.

In part the West Kowloon Cultural District project stemmed from a crisis of confidence at Government level concerning Hong Kong's distinctive character and role after reunification with China. This offered a belated echo of the identity discourse which had driven much oppositional political thinking and cultural expression in the pre-handover era, and which was still active at a popular level: 'We love Hong Kong' had been one of the slogans of the 1 July 2004 rally and its predecessor had also been equally a celebration and rediscovery of local belonging. The Government concern, already articulated by Tung Chee-hwa during his first term of office, was to make Hong Kong a 'world-class' city on a par with London or New York, and the West Kowloon Cultural District project was hatched from a tardy recognition that cultural provision plays a major part in such status. Apart from the flawed assumption that a cultural richness developed over decades or even centuries could be matched within a few years by the construction of a handful of museum buildings there was also the strange idea that distinctiveness could be found through mimicry. A similar pattern was found when the slogan embodying the new global vision ('Hong Kong: Asia's World City') was accompanied by a stylized logo of a dragon: not only was this the adoption of one of the most generic symbols of Chineseness imaginable (and thus not in any sense distinctive of Hong Kong), it was also a sad, belated copycat response to Singapore's Merlion emblem.

This cultural anxiety about Hong Kong's post-colonial role, and the superficial mimicry or borrowing of standards of excellence from elsewhere was found in many other governmental initiatives than the West Kowloon Cultural District project. As part of an attempt to create a bounce-back from the economic downturn (and in particular the effects of SARS on the local tourist trade) a

Looking west from the revolving restaurant at the top of the Hopewell Centre, completed in 1980, and becoming Hong Kong's tallest building till construction of the Bank of China tower was completed in 1989. Queen's Road East, Wanchai.
12 May 2005
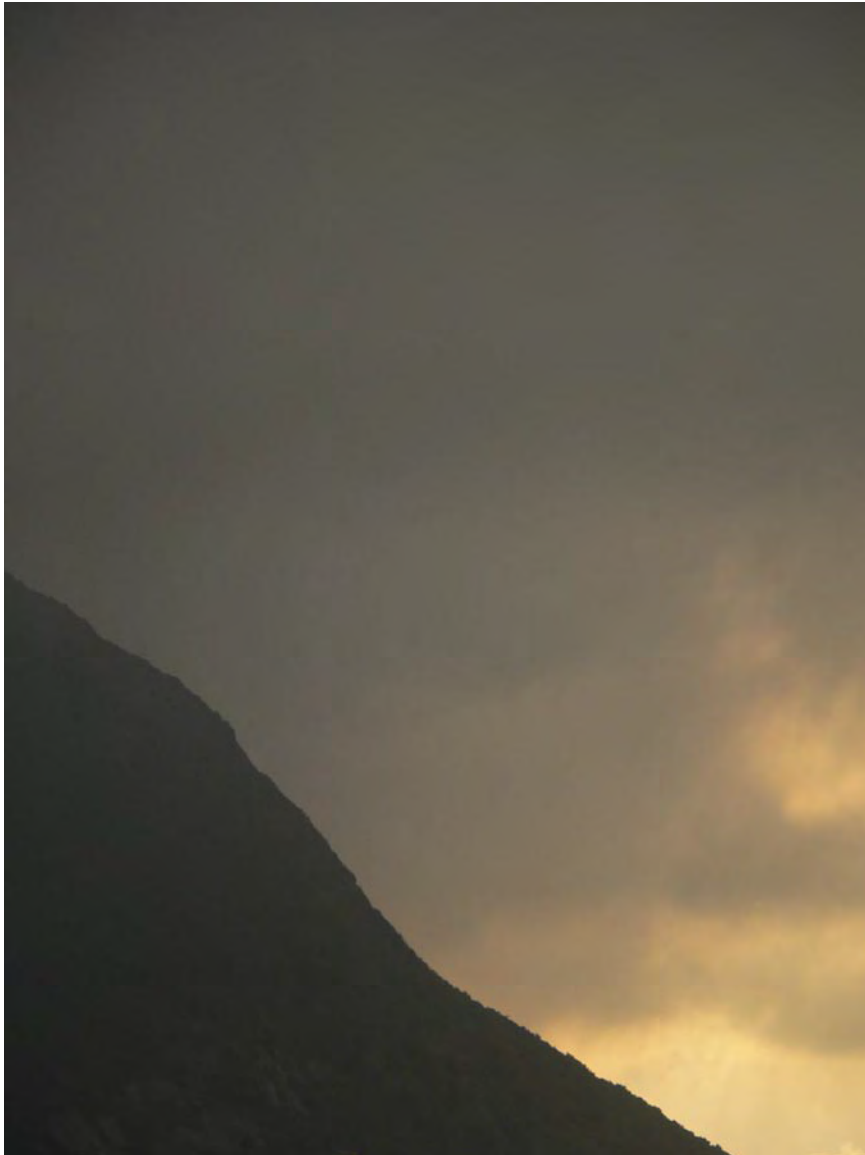
series of music concerts were held on the Tamar site under the title 'Harbourfest'. Featuring imported talent such as the Rolling Stones it had no links to local cultural patterns and could thus be no more of an advert for Hong Kong than the flagship stores of overseas brands found in the city's luxury shopping malls. On a much larger scale than Harbourfest, which became a scandal because of its high cost and the poor quality of its outsourced organization, was the Hong Kong Disneyland project at Penny's Bay on Lantau. Opening to the public during the twelve months period documented by these photos (in September 2005), it provided the most clear-cut example to date of the sad attempt to import standards from the very places Hong Kong was supposed to be rivaling. The involvement of the Pompidou Centre in one of the West Kowloon bids, and the constant reference to the example of the Bilbao Guggenheim during discussion of the project indicated the same reliance on external standards of expertise and cultural value would be likely to figure in Disneyland's high cultural equivalent.

By the period covered in the photos of this book the initial desire of being an Asian rival to New York or London had faded, and a long latent fear that Hong Kong may not even be keeping up with Shanghai had come to the fore. While lacking that city's current self-confidence and sense of economic possibility, Hong Kong has seemed at times to be following it in its embrace of a superficial visual glitz. Although in fact much more mature in its understanding of the capitalist marketplace, since it has lived through recession as well as boom, its recent obsession for decorating its buildings with changing displays of coloured lights and laser or searchlight beams seems borrowed from the fashion of its northern counterpart. The Symphony of Lights, a choreographed light show in which the buildings on the Hong Kong Island waterfront are nightly participants, is perhaps a more deliberately contrived attempt at optimism than its more laissez-faire counterparts on the Bund or elsewhere in Shanghai, and is something Hong Kong never seemed to need before. Where Hong Kong is able to compete with the current rush to verticality of Shanghai architecture, as in the case

Tram on Johnston Road, Wanchai. ›
21 January 2005

Back of a tram from the front of a following tram, ›
Johnston Road, Wanchai.
21 January 2005

of Two IFC (which on its completion in 2003 became the tallest building in the city), it is largely because of decisions taken before the onset of the economic crisis. Residual momentum, rather than real economic vitality (which is only now beginning to return), is to a significant extent responsible for this continuing transformation of the local skyline.

At times the Government has not seemed so much in search of alternatives to the Hong Kong identity discourse as desirous of co-opting and taming it directly. Antony Leung, as Financial Secretary, quoted the lyrics of the well-known Cantonese pop song 'Under the Lion Rock' in his April 2002 budget speech, for instance, and a voter registration campaign TV announcement in 2003 asked people 'Who are you?', to which the reply was (note the use of the second person) 'You are Hong Kong!'. In a number of pro-government morale-boosting TV commercials during the darkest days of the economic recession various figures associated with distinctively local cultural expression were drawn upon to give credibility to the message that we should all buck up and pull together. Fruit Chan, one of the most interesting local film directors to emerge since the handover, was referenced through the use of an actor associated with his film 'Hollywood Hong Kong' and the street calligraphy of Tsang Tsou-choi, the 'King of Kowloon', was also appropriated. This sense of the margins having moved to the centre, or of the commodification of signifiers of the local in this period can be most clearly demonstrated through the story of Tsang. At one point the most obvious symbol of social marginality one could imagine, writing his calligraphic protests of displacement on walls and items of street furniture all over the city, he was to be used for a whole range of commodity promotions in the post-handover period. This mainstreaming of his work came to a culmination on 31 October 2004 when a piece of his graffiti was sold at a Sotheby's art auction

‹ Shadows of pedestrians on an overhead walkway, near Harbour Road, Wanchai.
22 May 2005

‹ Shadows cast by bamboo leaves in artificial light on a wall of the Hong Kong
Academy for Performing Arts, Wanchai.
14 January 2005

for well over its reserve price. Now confined to a wheelchair and thus no longer able to roam the streets, he lives in an old-people's home. By the time the images of this book were taken, almost all his calligraphy had been removed from public locations, but one particularly vivid example has (seemingly by official decision) been allowed to remain on the Tsim Sha Tsui Star Ferry concourse.

In respect of both the West Kowloon Cultural District project and Hong Kong Disneyland there has been a curious ambiguity as to whether the primary concern was to produce attractions that would appeal to overseas and Mainland visitors or to enhance provision for Hong Kong people themselves. At least when signifiers of local identity were being appropriated it was clear that this was part of an address by the Government and its allies to the people themselves, rather than a matter of managing images of self for others. But here too there was an inherent ambiguity: in this case between such borrowings of the discourse of the local and an equally strong desire to promote among Hong Kong people a sense of national identification. Both of these mutually contradictory messages could at times be presented in a potentially appealing form, with the subtle skills of marketers and image managers helping hapless and uncommunicative politicians to sell local identity messages, while the visit of China's first astronaut, Yang Liwei — or even of a relic of the Buddha's finger — were attempting to enhance patriotism. On a bad day though, with the spin-doctors off duty, the Government lapses back into a paternalistic voice learnt in the colonial era to disseminate instructions via a plethora of radio and television announcements and posters, while the lectures on patriotism from Mainland spokesmen are delivered in a condescending or hectoring tone.

Hotels above Pacific Place.
28 May 2005

≫ Pacific Place.
14 October 2004

≫ Inside the shopping mall at Pacific Place.
29 October 2004

In attempting to characterize the brief period of time addressed by the photos in this book it has already been necessary to make reference to certain particular locations in Hong Kong, and indeed the whole of this book is as much concerned with space as with time. A photograph belongs to the place it was made just as irrevocably as it is wedded to the time of its making (unlike a painting of a place, for instance, which could have been produced in a completely different location — and time — from that it represents), and throughout the book there is a concern to provide information as to the place and time in which individual photos were produced. Obviously there is a spatial as well as a temporal frame to this project, since only photos taken in Hong Kong itself have been deemed eligible for inclusion, but spatiality is also foregrounded directly in the way the images have been arranged. Rather than choosing to present them in a strict chronological order so as to create a simple chronicle of twelve months in Hong Kong, I have decided to arrange them in accordance with a spatial logic. As a result the photos tell — with many aporias — the story of an imaginary journey across Hong Kong. We start our excursion on the Peak (the closest we get to a panoramic overview of the city), before quickly descending to North Point and then gradually making our way along the harbourfront strip of Hong Kong Island in a westerly direction. Briefly exploring the back of the Island before climbing into its unpopulated interior we then cross the harbour to Kowloon. Gradually we make our way up to the New Territories before going off to explore a few of Hong Kong's outlying islands. Although quite a distance is covered, given the relative compactness of Hong Kong one could imagine actually completing a journey analogous to this within a single day.

Such a trajectory does not enable any kind of systematic exploration of Hong Kong, and that indeed is not this book's intention. Just as the style of the images, in its eschewal of a documentary realism, is more concerned to bring forward private, expressive and poetic dimensions, so this arrangement is designed to emphasize just how personal is my passage through the city. Since I tend to come

< Architect Frank Gehry, at an unveiling of his design for a museum on the Tamar site as part of Swire's presentation
of its Holistic Harbour Vision plan, Pacific Place.
11 March 2005

∨ Illuminations on the side of the AIG Tower (built at the site formerly occupied by the Furama Hotel). Chater
Road, Central.
28 September 2005
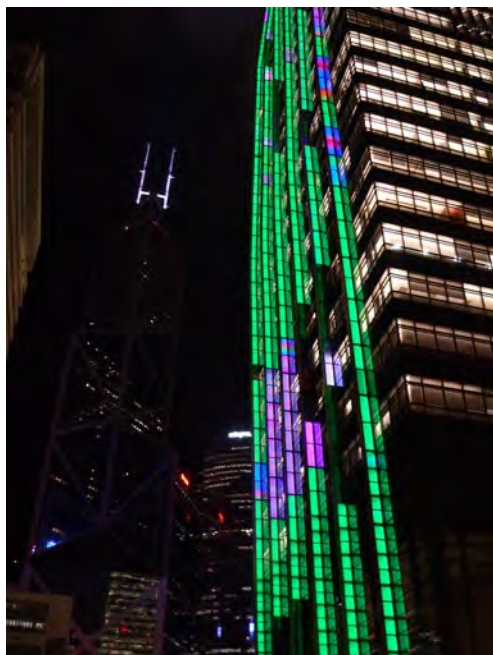
∨ National day fireworks in Victoria Harbour, seen from the Tamar site.
1 October 2005
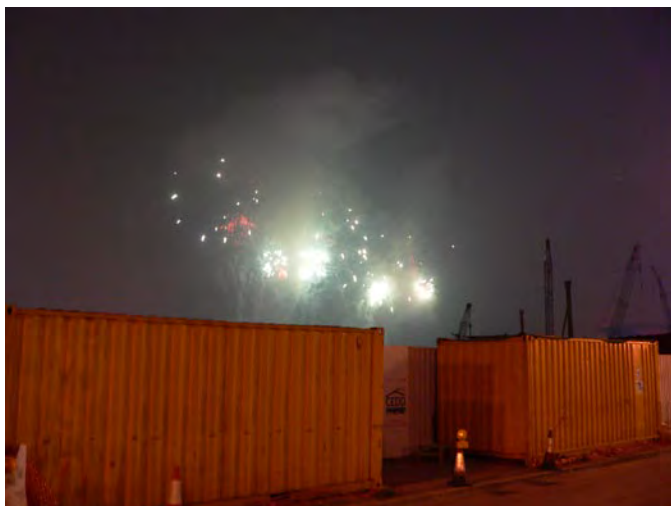
across photos spontaneously in the process of my everyday travels around Hong Kong (rather than making expeditions to hunt down preconceived subjects at pre-decided locations) this arrangement offers a fairly accurate record of where I spend the greater part of my time. Of course, there are less opportunities for taking photos while at work than while at leisure, and thus no great concentration of images showing Pokfulam (where I spend most of my working days), and a similar logic leads to a certain preponderance of night-time images. Photography at night has always interested me, and it is at that time of day that I'm more likely to find time to traverse the city in a less goal-orientated way. A certain amount of leisure is a precondition for the kind of divergent attention that enables one to avoid visual clichés, and surprise oneself into discovering a new way of looking at even quite familiar surroundings.

Having something in common with the dérive of Guy Debord and the Situationists, a deliberately purposeless drifting across urban space intended to generate a politically-liberating psychogeographical knowledge of a city by experiencing it against its grain, this differs in being a fictional journey only, albeit one assembled from material that is in itself real. As a fictional traversal of an actual place it might perhaps be compared to a movie shot on location in a real city, and indeed the montage-like accumulation of individual images into a larger whole does have a parallel in the world of film editing. In the world of literature one model might be that offered by James Joyce's Ulysses, the story of a day-long transit through Dublin of a single character, Leopold Bloom, whose interior monologue is given equal status to the actual city itself, which is never reduced to a merely physical topography.

Because of the compacting of a whole year's worth of time in order to create spatial continuity in this fabricated journey narrative, sudden shifts in time of day or season are a common occurrence. Such small-scale temporal disjunctions or folds in time enable an introduction of contrast which will hopefully add a further dimension to the viewer's sense of the locations represented, as multiple

Building adjoining the Tamar site, Harcourt Road, Admiralty. ❯
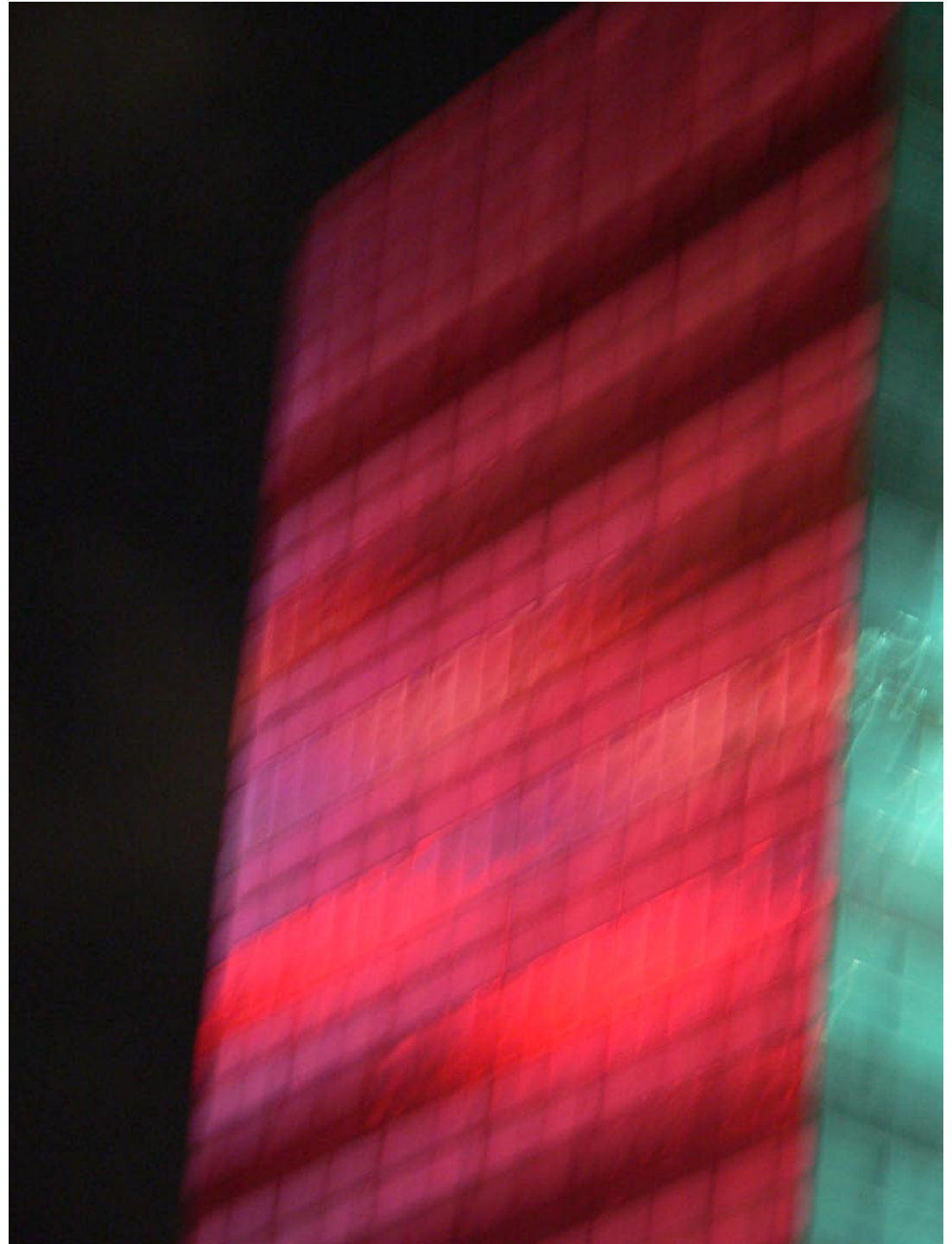29 October 2004

Tower block with illuminated sign on roof, Admiralty. ❯
29 October 2004

Advertising light box at entrance steps to Admiralty Mass Transit Railway station. ❯❯
29 October 2004

Bank of China tower (*right*), with illuminations reflected in ❯❯
the Cheung Kong Centre (*left*) and the AIG Tower (*centre*). Garden Road.
10 June 2005

viewpoints on a single place (and even alternate photographs from the same episode of picture-taking) are also intended to do. Disjunctions of a spatial nature are also of course an inevitable feature of this narrative, which leaves many intermediary sections of the journey unrepresented, and without attempting to hide the cuts as a realist novel or film tends to do. Sudden changes of mind seem to occur on this expedition, leading to wild meanderings: at one moment we are making our way from Central to Sheung Wan by following the tram tracks along Des Voeux Road, but then we decide to travel along Queen's Road instead, and even venture further up the hillside for a while. The most obvious disparity in the narrative occurs when we come to traverse the harbour, since we decide to cross it more than once, unable to decide between a trip by tunnel bus and the more time-honoured route offered by the Star Ferry. The speed of our movement also varies quite widely. A great deal of the time we are clearly on foot, even lingering at certain sites while others move around us, but when appropriate we avail ourselves, say, of the viewpoint offered by the top deck of a tram, or of the convenience of a taxi to fast forward between To Kwa Wan and Kowloon City.

The spatial disjunctions built into the narrative and the changes in pace of our movement both help to make visible to us aspects of the city's psychological and physical geography that might not

otherwise become apparent. They highlight contrasts between wealth and poverty, and between old and new, for instance. In broad terms this is a story that moves from the affluence of the city's commercial centre, much of which is housed in tower blocks of recent construction, to the relative simplicity of existence in rural and island life, where older patterns of settlement can still be discerned and even landmark buildings dating to the pre-colonial era. Such a characterization of Hong Kong space needs to be made with many qualifications, however, since the New Territories have all but lost their former agricultural role, and new development — primarily residential in nature — is everywhere to be found. The opening of the new international airport at Chek Lap Kok, together with its associated bridges and transport links, has also shifted the city's centre of gravity away from Hong Kong Island. Life on Lantau Island, for instance, which is home to Disneyland as well as to the new airport, is much altered from even a decade earlier. As a result of changes such as these, sudden contrasts between new and old or rich and poor are a characteristic of Hong Kong's urban space itself, and not simply of this photo sequence's representation of it. Evidence for this can be found where contrasts are highlighted within individual images, and not just across them. In Mong Kok, for instance, the massive new consumption and leisure development Langham Place looms up behind a sign for a pawn shop, while in To Kwa Wan we see new tower blocks rising at the back of older housing occupied by those with less possibility of social mobility. Height is usually associated with power or status in Hong Kong, a logic which produced the bubble lifts and revolving restaurant in the Hopewell Centre (once the city's tallest building) and the panoramic views of the harbour from restaurants at the top of the
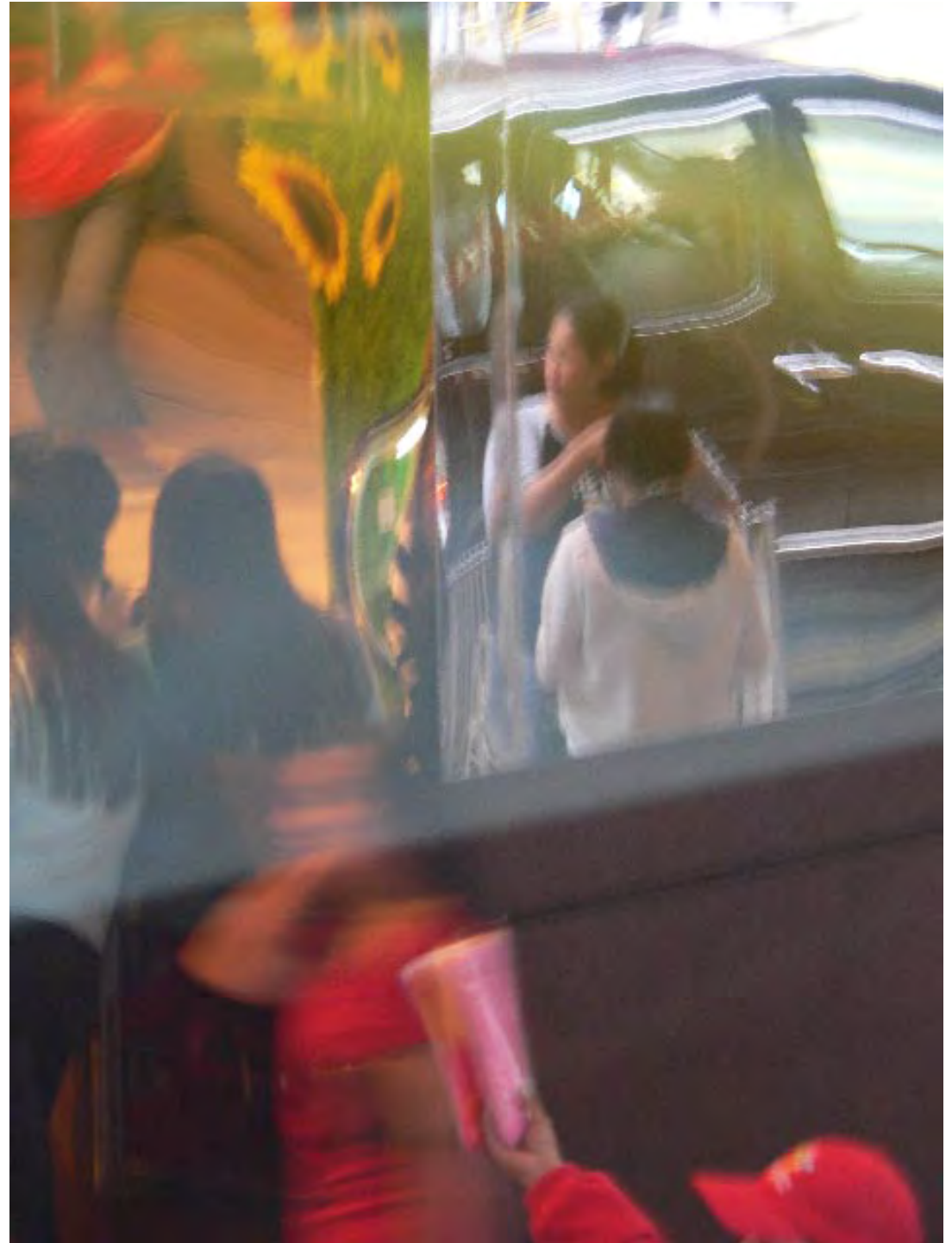
recently opened tower at One Peking Road, Tsim Sha Tsui. Such an equation is perhaps most famously made explicit by the placement of the urinals in the men's toilet at Felix (on top of the Peninsula hotel) against plate glass windows offering commanding views of the city below.

One of the locations in Hong Kong where such contrasts and disjunctions are particularly visible is that which stretches from Central to Sheung Wan. Because the former is the core of Hong Kong's economic and political life, housing both its Central Business District and its governmental buildings, it naturally features heavily in the photos of this book. Less consequential by far in the larger scheme of things, Sheung Wan (and the area linking it to Central) is also strongly represented here simple because it is the area of the city in which I live, and thus spend a significant proportion of my time. While other districts such as Wanchai could equally serve to exemplify the process of 'development' by which the city's fabric is being transformed, Sheung Wan's proximity to Central makes it ideally suited for such a study.

During the period represented by these photos, and in the years immediately preceding it, a spread of consumer culture and urban modernity from Central out in the direction of Sheung Wan can be observed. Such a process began in earnest after the construction of the Central to Mid-levels escalator, which led to the development of the SoHo dining area around Staunton Street. Such nightlife activities, originally centred only in the Lan Kwai Fong area of Central are also now increasingly found along Hollywood Road and the area below it near Gough Street. New, taller buildings have appeared among the older housing stock in this area (most recently Centre Stage on Hollywood Road itself), showing a pattern of high-rise residential redevelopment following in the footsteps of street-level consumer culture's penetration. Such consumerism is itself often following the lead of more alternative cultural or leisure venues, whose need for lower rents coincides with a predilection for sites on the perceived margin of the downtown area. The shift of

∨ Building with temporary illuminated sign celebrating Chinese National Day.
29 September 2005

Street scene, Des Voeux Road, Central.
14 October 2004
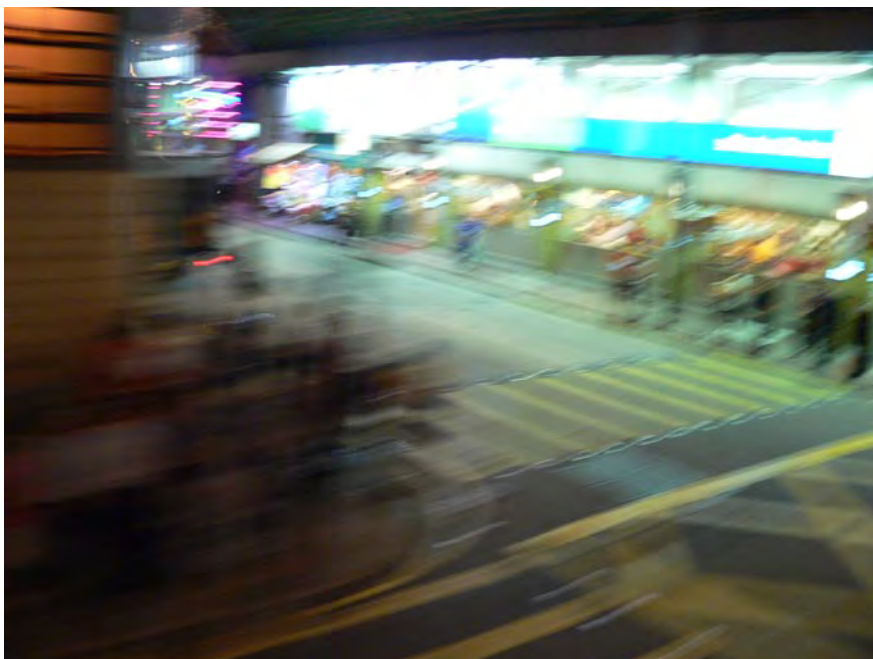
that margin can be seen in the closure at the end of October 2004 of Club 64, a haunt of artistic and political radicals that perched at just one remove from the bustle of Lan Kwai Fong on Wing Wah Lane. After a gap of a few months it reappeared in May 2005 in a back lane below Hollywood Road, as Club 71, named now for the date of the July 2003 rally rather than that of the Beijing Massacre. Visage One, a hairdressing salon that holds regular semi-private live music events also moved in around the same time scale to an adjoining NoHo location from its previous SoHo home on Graham Street. Jazz club Blue Door, which had earlier seemed itself to be in a marginal site on Cochrane Street, now shares a neighbourhood with smart sushi restaurants and other such businesses that are pressing ever further from Central along Lyndhurst Terrace. Such newcomers compete for the custom once enjoyed by Dai Pai Dong street food stalls just beyond this area, being closed in accordance with Government rules as license holders die. Only Para/Site Art Space, all the way out at Po Yan Street in Sheung Wan, and one of the first alternative cultural venues to venture so far off the beaten track, seems relatively immune from the homogenizing march of gentrification on these fringes of Central and the Mid-levels.

Even in Sheung Wan itself, however, change is occurring inexorably. This area with its Chinese medicine wholesalers and dried seafood shops still retains a degree of cultural distinctiveness, as a place of work as well as of residence where products rarely found for sale outside the world's Chinese communities dominate commerce. While the district's businesses can still be seen sorting or drying their produce on the pavements in the old way, this mode of life is already being remade as a spectacle of itself. Government renewal plans have seen the introduction of new signage and information boards around Sheung Wan, making it legible for the reifying tourist gaze, while new lampposts and street furniture unify the look of neighbourhoods. More insidiously than elsewhere where the old is being replaced by the new, here a fake-old look with no intrinsic belonging is being grafted onto the cityscape. Analogous to the Government's previously alluded to co-option of the Hong

‹ Rainy weather, Central.
30 June 2005

⌄ View from a bus window in rainy weather, Central.
30 June 2005

Kong identity discourse, or extending it in spatial terms with the aid of landscape architects rather than public relations companies, it similarly offers a self-conscious, depoliticized and packaged nostalgia. The past and its relics become a scenic counterpoint to life in the modern city, a touch of local colour, and not a source of memories and occasionally uncomfortable truths that may disrupt its governing ideologies.

In tone the preceding remarks have tended towards the critical rather than the celebratory, identifying a time when no clear movement towards participatory democracy occurred in Hong Kong, thus leaving its fundamental problem unaddressed. Instead of such real progress the traces of a purely commercial 'development', itself less exuberant in pace than before the 1997 economic downturn, is seen as changing the face of the city. If one looked beyond Hong Kong during this time there would also be little cause for a straightforward optimism that the world was becoming a better place to live in. Quite apart from such natural disasters occurring during this period as the Asian Tsunami, there have been clear signs of a rollback of human rights in the Western world, with the continuing operation of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Centre and the fallout from the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal both serving to invalidate American claims of offering a model for the development of freedoms elsewhere. Although both of these facilities were operated off American soil the media images of poverty and racial division in New Orleans, circulating the world in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, showed all was far from well within American society itself.

If the bigger picture in Hong Kong has no marked positivity to it, nevertheless the evidence of the twelve months offered here does give room for hope. The photos included in this book often choose to identify sites where struggle for rights are occurring, such as the 1 July 2005 rally which demonstrated the continued vitality of a pro-democratic politics of the street in Hong Kong, and the 4 June 2005 memorial rally in Victoria Park which kept alive remembrance of

❮ Street scene with rain, Central.
30 June 2005

⌄ Halloween, Lan Kwai Fong.
30 October 2004

the most traumatic moment in China's recent history. Even outside the political domain they search out moments of creativity — in music or dance, for instance — in sites where a non-commodified relation to culture can be temporarily reclaimed. Or they simply try to discover an instant of poetry in effects of light or colour, finding a celebratory moment that can often be more properly described as belonging to the photograph itself rather than to the world it represents. While these photos hope to feed a critical engagement with the city, and are committed to starting from a demystified encounter with it, even in treating its less attractive aspects there is a wish to transmute them into something with a visual appeal. A phallic skyscraper, say, may half-disappear in mist, or a site of commerce may be dissolved in a blur of movement, revealing effects of colour not otherwise specifiable. Oblique perspectives, including views from above or below, may disempower a building's claims to importance or reveal new aspects of the urban landscape, as may a sharp close-up, cutting and abstracting the structures it engages with. In the process of image-making, the city becomes as it were manipulable, and a less alienating relation to it is won. It is this celebration of the liberating power of creativity, its ability to carve a space for freedom of vision, that this book wishes above all else to share with those who encounter it.

AFTERWORD

A note about tools

All the images in this book were produced using digital cameras. The vast majority were taken with a Panasonic Lumix DMC-FZ20, which has a Leica lens with optical zoom equivalent to a 35-mm camera with a range of 36–432 mm. A few images taken for this project between August and September 2005 were made using a Panasonic Lumix DMC-LC70, which has a Leica lens with optical zoom between 35 and 105 mm (35-mm equivalent). The vast majority of images are presented here as they came from the camera, without any kind of digital manipulation having been made at a later stage. A small handful of images have had minor adjustments in Adobe Photoshop, mostly slight changes of tonal balance such as might be made during the printing of a negative in conventional photography.

The use of Leica lenses for this project represents a continuity with my earlier photography of Hong Kong, as represented in my book *Reclaimed Land: Hong Kong in Transition* (Hong Kong University Press, 2002), which covered the last five years of the previous millennium, a period which included the return of the city to Chinese rule. The majority of images in that project were taken with a (non-digital) Leica Minilux camera, which has a 40-mm lens. All of the images were made using black and white film, predominantly Kodak T-Max 400, which I found particularly suitable for the large amount of nighttime photography I was undertaking. For both that project and this, I have preferred the use of a camera small and light enough to carry around on a daily basis, thus allowing an integration of photo-taking with ordinary life activities in a way that would not be possible with heavier, more tripod-dependent tools. I prefer using a single camera for the whole of a project, where possible, even though this might seem a sacrifice of flexibility. Persisting with the same tool in this way allows a deeper familiarity to develop, so that it can become, as it were, an extension of your own body. Rather than lamenting the loss of photos your particular tool is unsuited to taking, you end up seeing the world in terms of what your chosen tool is capable of imaging, and you adjust your aesthetic to that tool.

A note about style and working process

In the introductory essay for this book there are occasions where the focus shifts from a discussion of Hong Kong to a discussion of the aesthetic approach which has guided the creation of this collection of photos. It has been noted, for instance, that the images are deliberately intended to explore more private, expressive and poetic dimensions, viewing the city from a frankly subjective perspective rather than offering the illusion of objectivity which the camera is so often employed to produce. It has also been indicated that the style of the images is not a matter which can be discussed in complete isolation from the question of their meaning, tied as they are to a broader project of critical analysis, with oblique viewpoints and the cutting or blurring of the motif serving a desire to look awry, to refuse clichés of representation, or to disempower privileged viewpoints or subjects. With the images already presented, however, and thus the risk somewhat diminished that words about them from their maker might unduly influence the freedom of the viewer's gaze, a few more points about the images as images is here offered.

While there are a great many photographers whose work I respect, such as Eugène Atget, Henri Cartier-Bresson or Robert Frank, in many ways the greatest influence on the style of these images comes from my study of painting. This dialogue with painting has always been important to me as a photographer, teaching me many lessons concerning form and composition for instance, but it has become especially significant since I moved to embrace colour photography. In the world of black and white image-making (despite the tonal sophistication that painters are without question capable of, most particularly perhaps in the monochrome practice of Chinese brush and ink work) photography has made a distinctive contribution without real precedent in earlier art, but when one comes to the question of colour, at least for me, the achievements of painting are almost a necessary point of reference. Such an influence has come via my own occasional stumbling and ineffectual efforts with a paintbrush (which have nevertheless provided important learning opportunities by permitting a personal engagement with the handling of pigment), but also through a study of the use of colour in the work of well-known artists such as Henri Matisse or Mark Rothko, as well as certain lesser-known colourists such as Albert Irvin.

Occasionally there are images in this collection which can be taken as alluding to particular precedents in painting: an empty nighttime view might have a trace of Edward Hopper's cityscapes about it, for instance, or a shadow of bamboo on a wall might bring to mind the Chinese brushwork for which this was such a favoured subject. For the most part however it is hard to see such straightforward one-to-one correspondences — and perhaps particularly with respect to the most crucial area of colour — because of the very differences between the media of paint and photography.

I share with modernist painting its insight into the impossibility of realism, of truthful or unmediated representation of the world, but because the medium of photography is different, the foregrounding of this medium's elements takes a different form from that found in painting. For colour to be foregrounded in a photo, for instance, there often needs to be the employment of blur or a deliberate lack of sharp focus. By using these strategies colour is made to float to the surface of the image, as it were, becoming more powerful than it would otherwise have been. Blurring (whether caused by movement of the camera, movement of the subject before the lens, or both) is one way in which formal elements such as lines become more visible as such, thus denying a straightforward realism. While there are analogous phenomena to be found in the painting of the Italian Futurists of the early twentieth century, this is a special case of paintings inspired by photography, and it is to that latter medium alone that the blur, an irruption of time into the image, really belongs.

While play with blur and focus help to emphasize two-dimensional design qualities of images as images, as do certain other means I frequently employ such as radical decisions concerning what is allowed to be within the photo's frame, the use of reflections and their spatial ambiguity, and the naturally simplifying nature of low light conditions, it is never my intention to create abstractions. Meaning and reference to the world are crucial to me, even if I sometimes see a value in attenuating the link and shrinking literal content towards a bare minimum, a mere trace. Indeed the unbreakable indexical link between a photograph and what was before the lens when the shutter was open is one of the things that attracts me to the medium, and my allegiance to that moment of exposure leads me to shun the kind of radical post-facto reworking that is possible when computer software is applied to a digital image. Such tools offer an alternative means of making photography more like painting, but one which holds little interest for me.

The post-facto manipulation which I do find important, on the other hand, is the evaluation of the many images I have taken in order to isolate those which have the greatest value, and (for this book project in particular) the editing process of arranging them into an appropriate sequence. Whereas for the photo diary project on which my earlier book *Reclaimed Land* was based I took at least one photo every day for the five year period it documents, for this one year project I decided not to impose such an external rule upon myself. While there were therefore days when I took no photos at all there were also days when I might take several hundred (a method of working

that was in part made possible by the relatively low cost of producing and storing digital images compared to those made on film). As a result I was to produce around nine thousand images in the one year of this project, compared to approximately eight thousand over the five years of its predecessor, and the role of editor thus became proportionately more important.

The first stage of this editing process was a selection of the best images from those taken during any given session. Normally I would make duplicates of any images which passed this initial quality test into a separate folder soon after I had downloaded a session's worth of photos from my camera's memory card. I always keep the original digital file of every photo I take, stored in due course on DVD, since one can often discover valuable images at a later stage which somehow escaped notice earlier on. For this project I stored files in folders organized on a month by month basis, so at the end of a month, just prior to burning backup copies, I would have a further check through for images to put in the 'best of' folder. Repeated viewing of this folder over time would result in a gradual winnowing away of the weaker images as I raised my own bar of judgment. Although knowing that my images may later be presented as part of a sequence does perhaps encourage further my tendency towards open compositional formats and my interest in oblique viewpoints, it is a precondition that all images must work well individually before I can consider them as possible participants in a larger whole such as this book.

As regards the process of deciding on a basis for the sequencing of images, I endeavoured to avoid having preconceptions as much as possible, and tried out a number of possibilities, letting the images in their various juxtapositions offer suggestions as to what was most cogent. In the end a spatial arrangement rather than a strictly time-based one seemed to allow the images to speak to greatest effect, as it had for *Reclaimed Land*, but rather than categorizing the images according to particular types of space as I had in that book, I came to feel that a single integrated narrative of a spatial journey would work better for this more subjective project. Once this governing idea about sequence had been decided upon, to some extent the images were then to organize themselves according to its logic, and juxtapositions of images were made with respect to spatial proximity. This means that certain effects of contrast or continuity of either a visual or a thematic nature were produced purely as a matter of happy accident, but some control was still exerted since any individual image could always be suppressed if it didn't work well in its spatially given context, and equally

(since there were plenty of images in reserve) new and more appropriate images could be added. Greater flexibility concerning arrangement was also present at those points in the sequence where a number of images were available for a given location. Sometimes such images are simply presented in a straightforward chronological sequence, which might lead to a film-like grouping of images made within seconds of each other, or alternatively to a sudden jump between seasons. Other logics also intervene, however. Sometimes, for instance, a less legible image might be followed by one which 'explains' it, in reverse of the usual filmic strategy of starting a scene with an establishing shot. A visual or a thematic reason by itself, of course, could also be allowed to decide the arrangement of images.

One further way in which painting has influenced this project other than through its example in the use of colour and other formal elements is through the influence of the genres of subject matter as they are traditionally understood in the Western tradition. Like other photographers I have followed painting's precedent in allowing myself to think of landscape (and cityscape), still life and portraiture as separate tasks which have their own individual inherited stock of solutions with which one has to engage. Of course, I have felt a need to try and discover my own particular solutions valid for this time and place, even moving beyond those which worked for me in my earlier black-and-white work to a certain degree (one of the attractions of a move to colour photography has been the way it has forced me to reinvent my approach to image making to take account of the new visual factors in play). For instance, I have often found it necessary when making portraits to attempt to capture people in motion, rather than in static poses addressing the camera in a collected way, or else to capture them when they are in a state of absorption in some activity, such as the playing of music. Still life is often the most consciously contrived of genres, offering the image maker plenty of opportunities to arrange their chosen objects in a particular way and to construct artificial effects of light. I have always eschewed those possibilities, however, in line with my more general concern for making the moment of photo-taking a spontaneous encounter, albeit one in which I attempt to think ahead to the image I hope to create from whatever is before my lens. Thus where a still life is found in this book it is a grouping of objects that have been discovered in their natural environment, as it were, and isolated only by the framing action of the photo itself.