

CHAN CHI TAK

Selected poems

The Chinese Garden in Kowloon Park

- in the style of immigrant poets from Mainland China

In the stomach of Kowloon I search in vain for China
They say the land yonder has turned to ashes
while here only dust and mud remain. This lake
is but a puddle where many a mosquito dashes

On the highland where the barracks once were, I dream of China
Amidst the sloping pavilions and winding colonnade
framed in windows, the Hong Kong the colonialists made
beckons me to return with battered feet

Only dust and mud remain yonder; the other side a building site
should be where I had lived before the reconstruction
Is it, deeply buried in the darkening park,

the paradise of Kowloon or China nevermore?
Heavily I lay all my strength upon my feet
and bestow it on Hong Kong, a dream all battered and sore

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Old Streets of Wanchai

First Canto

I

A draft leads us to see the trees.
Rustling, not rain
but leaves, still green
as sight follows footsteps.

Another draft tears down the leaves
and leads us to the breakdown of our speech.
The gathered leaves pile up and become
pallid and scattered stories.

“Has it all ended?” you ask.
The wind is still while the withered trees are left
to stand on the chaos of a just-dug construction site.

Gently shaking our rustling memory—
not rain, but wind reborn,
leads us to see the trees.

II

See the sepia footprints,
the shops and spirits that possess them;
stroke the walls of bread—
there’s an awning, a doorbell.

Non-delivery. Return to sender.
Memory is like a letter marked “no such person”.
The city expands into children’s building blocks.

On the peak we toiled to build,
a whirling gramophone plays music,
collapsing at the slightest push

We see a blue portrait,
painting as we roam
streets with bandaged ears,
our wild and frantic self-portraits emerging step by step.

Second Canto

I

A patch of paint falls off a motley wall.
Layers of handwriting from an unclear time are
separated from the painted image by a mere strip of space.
We have inscribed the name of this old building.

People live, work and sing here
among stubborn traces from past eras.
Never without quarrels, they fall asleep as the sun retreats,
move out when the dawn lightens their shadows.

Sticky tape remains on the windows
Each glass pane checkered with a cross against the wind.
Only it sees through us amid the noise and hubbub.

Memories can't help being mistaken.
Crawling shadows change the old writing on the wall,
making more worn-out portraits as they go along.

II

With its finger tip, the stormy night
scrawls weak and winding symbols at the window's edge
Written language built by generation upon generation
wiped out in a matter of seconds

There are tales one does not wish to mention
images the murky mirror can't reflect
The self-annihilation of flickering demons
Such a secluded corner only lurks in high-rise buildings

Before its final evacuation, the last household
is the only one who solidifies its own
memories of the concrete era.

Cut off from water, electricity and remaining human faces,
Spots of green sprawl
from crevices between windows and walls.

The Road to the First of July

Part II ,

in commemoration of the “10th Anniversary of the
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region”

The candle light is dim; the distance between finger and match too short.
Nothing catching fire, or is everything ignited?
A stream of gushing light boiling behind us
projects a movie, acting out a totally different way of life.
There are cannon fires as well as singing, kisses, laughs and farewells, fade in and fade out.
But there is little we deem worthy of imitation, or are able to
because the candle is too short, the light too dim
because 1989 passes, then 1999, then 2003.
The road to the First of July is too long.

The road to the First of July is too long, we still remember 1984
as a prophesy, more fiction than fiction.
Classmates, lovers, masses of people, even teachers have left.
What had the teachers taught us? Apart from exams, what else was worth teaching?
Exceptions are rare, though the few there are are worth a great deal.
They've gone; they've returned. Changes in mankind don't mean much.
Metamorphosis of our living quarters changes us as caterpillars emerge changed from cocoons.
We change jobs as if attending school opening ceremonies.

The road to the First of July is too long, would the market be closer?
The shopping mall is just around the corner
Through the window you see yet another high-rise go up, yet another sallow and pallid family.
The world is outside the door. Its cruelty just around the corner.
They wrap your newspaper in a plastic bag; even the paper stains your hands.
Pollution is not the ink's fault, you can't be green enough even if you reject the plastic bag.
What are words? Sooner or later they'll stop emerging from the printing press;
while we cannot help but be born from the womb.
We ponder our painful and obscure origin as the umbilical cord is severed

Take the fire engine, the ambulance, the police car.
Who arrives first to the First of July? One cannot forget the fire or the fiery protests.
A silent protest brings an interview; detention is more like some sort of exchange of ideas.

Take the train, bus or ferry to the First of July.
Terminals were rebuilt one by one to cover up the destruction brought by the trend.
Pain brought by globalization. It's getting late, the sweeper trucks are coming
to wash away all germs of opposition, not knowing that cleanliness is yet another form of sadness.

Translated from the Chinese by Chan Lai Kuen

all notes are the translator's:

- *Massive rallies for democracy and other civil rights are held annually in Hong Kong since 2003 on 1st July.
- ✂ The year 1989 saw the Tiananmen crackdown, or the June Fourth Massacre, in Beijing, which triggered a massive wave of emigration into Hong Kong, as well as a sustained quest for democracy during the 1990s.
- © Wrapping newspapers in plastic bags is a common practice of news vendors in Hong Kong.
