

Ghosts of Hong Kong

By Daisann McLane

“The Chinese believe smoke is a way to communicate between the world of the living and the world of the dead,” I explain to my friend Leslie. It’s just around lunchtime, and we’re walking to one of my favorite Hong Kong places, the Temple of One Hundred Names. We slip through the narrow gate, clamber up a flight of steep steps, and pass through the antechamber, where 30 or 40 spirals of burning incense spin lazily from the ceiling like coiled snakes. The air is thick with sandalwood smoke. Leslie stifles a cough as we hasten through the smoldering clouds to the inner altar room.

Hundreds of years ago, so the story goes, Chinese fishermen passing by in their boats noticed this same smoky aroma as it wafted out from the shoreside temples and began calling this island in the South China Sea “Heung Gong,” or Fragrant Harbor. Hong Kong is perhaps the only city in the world named for a smell. You breathe in, and it feels as if you’ve inhaled a spirit, something alive.

We stand there for a moment, taking it all in: the cluttered altar with its silk-draped statues of Tin Hau, the goddess of the sea; the two temple priests, middle-aged guys in short-sleeved white shirts, eating rice and choy sam, a popular Chinese vegetable. Chinese opera music wails gently from a radio speaker. A fortune-teller snoozes, slumped over his desk.

And then, unexpectedly, one of the priests looks up from his lunch and gestures to us. “Go take a look in the back,” he says in Cantonese, pointing to a dark door leading to a room behind the altar.

I have been in the Temple of One Hundred Names dozens of times. Not only have I never been invited into the back chamber, I never even noticed it was there.

“Really? It’s okay?” I ask him, to make sure.

“Ho yih!” he repeats in Cantonese, smiling and waving



A vendor sells vegetables at Graham Street Wet Market.

Photograph by Catherine Karnow

us toward the door. “Go.”

My friend and I walk quietly into the back room. It takes awhile for my eyes to adjust to the dimness, the light of incense and candles, but when they do, and I look around, I gasp.

“What’s the matter?” asks Leslie.

“The ghosts! They’re all here! This is where they go!”

IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE cosmology, everyone who dies without family to conduct the funeral rituals and tend their grave becomes a “hungry ghost.” The ghosts roam restlessly between heaven and earth, sometimes making mischief for those of us still on the human plane. Hong Kong is full of such ghosts—as well as another kind of spirit: the ghostly traces of once vibrant neighborhoods that have given way to a shining forest of skyscrapers. Their faint marks reveal themselves only to the careful observer. Sometimes you even have to use your sixth sense to see what’s beneath the surface. As I wander around the city, looking for traces of what came before, I often feel like a ghost hunter.

In 2004, after visiting Hong Kong on trips several times, I wanted to dig deeper than a short visit would allow. I looked around the city—which includes two main islands, hundreds of smaller ones, and a peninsula

that stretches to the border of mainland China—and chose a small apartment located just above the business district. I’ve lived here, part-time, for the past six years.

But there’s a question that’s been puzzling me since I settled in. How did my own neighborhood of lanes, cobblestone stairs, low-rise buildings, and enormous banyan trees manage to escape Hong Kong’s development juggernaut up to now? After all, real estate here fetches some of the highest prices in the world. And my enclave sits right next to the city’s prime business district. I fine-tune my sixth sense and decide to find out.

Just in front of my building, the world’s longest pedestrian escalator carries commuters from their apartment buildings on the slopes of Hong Kong’s steep hills to offices below. They glide mechanically downhill, slipping from sight, one by one, as if on a sushi conveyor belt. My corner of Hong Kong is a mainly working-class and commercial district that overlaps the boundaries of a few of the city’s oldest urban settlements (Central, Sheung Wan, and Sai Ying Pun) and one of its newest (the trendy, redeveloped blocks of boutiques, bars, and restaurants nicknamed “Soho,” for SOutH of HOLlywood Road).

Size-wise, my Hong Kong neighborhood is smaller than my U.S. home base of Park Slope, Brooklyn, but it feels five times bigger. Hong Kong squeezes seven million people into its 426 square miles, making it one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Every block I walk in Hong Kong feels like five blocks in any other place, because so much more life crams into it.

Learning to live like a local has had its challenges. Probably the biggest was finding out how to reduce my footprint, to work and step carefully around my neighbors—because I bump into them everywhere I turn. Jewelry vendors, clothing menders, flower sellers, and newspaper dealers jam the lanes. Here, at lunchtime, nobody thinks twice about sitting down next to a stranger to “dap toi”—share a restaurant table. The most commonly used word in Hong Kong isn’t in Cantonese but English: “Sorry.”

I’ve also had to learn how to see and read a city in a different way than I’d become accustomed to as a traveler. Hong Kong, Asia’s first big modern city, constantly tears itself down and rebuilds anew, at a pace so fast it can be discombobulating. Some mornings, I will wake up, walk to the corner to buy newspapers or milk, and find the corner shop I patronized the evening before swathed in bamboo

scaffolding and green plastic, awaiting imminent demolition.

Hong Kong hasn’t obliterated every single trace of its past. In my neighborhood, for instance, several lovely old colonial-era buildings, like the Central Police Station and the Museum of Medical Sciences, remain standing, as well as intact blocks of low-rise Chinese family tenements, called *tong laus*. The graceful, soothing enclave of squat tenements and historic architecture became the neighborhood’s main draw for me.

IN MY TRADITIONAL neighborhood, the pleasures of everyday life are simple, elemental.

“I’m thinking of going to Sheung Wan to buy goose liver sausage and to the Graham Street market to pick up fish for dinner,” says the voice on the phone. “Want to join me?” The call comes from David Lau, a former journalist and a neighbor, friend, and real Hong Konger.

During my time here, he’s become my guide to all things local, especially to that Hong Kong obsession, food. As part of my education, he invites me about once a week to eat a home-cooked Cantonese dinner on his roof, or *tin toi*.

I drop what I’m doing and race down Graham Street until I reach the market—in Cantonese, the *gaai si*. “Waaaay!” I spot Lau’s gray crewcut and wire-rimmed glasses in the crowd and shout out the all-purpose Cantonese “Yo!” to catch his attention. He’s already got three or four red plastic shopping bags bursting with green and purple foliage swinging from his arms. It’s hard to walk more than five steps in the *gaai si* without spotting something you want to buy, even if it’s just so you can take it home and figure out what it is.

Lau leans over by the fishmonger’s stall, as feisty gray groupers and pink snappers leap and flop manically in their plastic tubs, trying to escape their fate. Cantonese cooking emphasizes seasonal ingredients and natural flavors, so Hong Kongers like to buy their fish, fowl, and meat as fresh as possible. “Fresh” in Hong Kong means that you get to witness the final blow.

The fish seller dives her rubber-gloved hand into the tub and pulls out a fat grouper—called a *sek baan*—by the tail for Lau’s inspection. He nods, and the vendor disappears into the back of the shop. I hear a thunk! thunk! thunk! followed by some ratchety scraping, and soon she returns with a somewhat soggy red plastic bag.

I swing it back and forth cheerfully, carelessly, as we climb back up the hill to Lau's apartment on Caine Road. Then, suddenly, the bag containing the just beheaded, gutted, and cleaned grouper jerks sharply and shoots out from my hand as if it were trying to fly away.

I shriek, nearly dropping our dinner on the pavement.

Lau laughs. "That's how we know it's a really good fish. There's a lot of life in that fish, even though it's dead already. It's going to be delicious." Of course. In Hong Kong the freshest, most desirable fish are the ones that won't let go of their spirits.

IN CANTONESE, the words for roof, tin toi, mean "heavenly platform," which is a rather poetic way of describing the top of a tenement building. But sitting with friends on David Lau's tin toi, on a night with a full moon, before a table groaning with the homey Cantonese fare cooked by David and his wife, Petula (salt steamed chicken; pig knuckles slow-braised until tender in mandarin orange peel and soy sauce; and Chinese broccoli stir-fried with the locally made sausage called lap cheung), is about as close to heaven as I can imagine in my Hong Kong neighborhood. Or anywhere on Earth, actually.

"Building the kitchen and eating area on the roof is the traditional Hong Kong Chinese way," Lau explains, as he hands me a bowl of steamed rice. When he was growing up, big families living in the small tong lau apartments used every bit of space. The families on the lower floors would open folding tables and dine al fresco on the street. The tenants on the upper floors jerry-built kitchens, gardens, even bathrooms on the rooftops.

They still do. From Lau's tin toi, you can see Hong Kong's commercial powerhouse of skyscrapers, lit up and blinking like Christmas trees, including Sir Norman Foster's HSBC building. But the lights also illuminate the timeless domestic activity on the much lower rooftops of nearby tong laus, where women in Mandarin collar blouses are stir-frying family dinners in smoking iron woks. Hong Kong, as crowded as it is, can contain both these worlds.

BUT AGAIN, I WONDER, how has my neighborhood survived the onslaught of modernity? I pose the question to my friend and neighbor John Batten. "This part of town has really bad feng shui," he says, as he walks with me along Hollywood Road. We turn up a steep street and then continue climbing, passing gnarled old banyan trees clinging to mold-dappled,

faded pastel walls of old tong laus.

Finally we arrive at Blake Garden, a green oasis filled with dripping banyans that harbor a flock of white cockatoos (urban legend has it they are the wild descendants of tropical birds let loose from the Hong Kong Aviary by the British when the Japanese invaded Hong Kong in 1941).

I can't imagine a more beautiful urban setting, I say to him, but he shrugs. "According to the Chinese science of wind and water, this is a very unlucky location."

Batten, an art gallery curator and writer originally from Melbourne, actively serves in a group that's fighting for the architectural preservation of our neighborhood. I figured he would know how it has escaped the wrecking ball.

Batten explains that, due to its unlucky location and its proximity to a hospital (also unlucky), the neighborhood became a center for the funeral industry. He points down a side street near Hollywood Road, where you can still find clusters of coffin makers, incense dealers, and shops that sell the funeral paper which Chinese burn as offerings to the dead.

"That's also why the antiques shops are on Hollywood Road," Batten adds.

Many Chinese don't like to buy secondhand goods, because they may carry the unlucky ghosts of their dead owners. (Most of the shoppers who drop thousands in Hong Kong's famous antiques-row shops never realize the unlucky district was founded not for convenience but because of an old Chinese taboo.)

"But you can counteract bad feng shui by changing the building structures, turning them in different directions, or adding fountains," I say. "Why didn't anyone try that here?"

Then Batten tells me about our neighborhood's double whammy.

Not long after the British settled Hong Kong in the mid-19th century, tens of thousands of Chinese squatters, mainly male migrant workers, moved to this area. Living conditions were crowded and filthy, and when the bubonic plague rampaged through Hong Kong in 1894, some 20,000 people died.

"The English governor, Sir Henry Arthur Blake, had the slum razed and turned into a garden," Batten

explains. “Nobody who could afford better wanted to live around here, because of all the ghosts from the plague years.”

I look hard, trying to imagine tranquil Blake Garden as ground zero of a killer epidemic.

Like so many other places in Hong Kong, the traces of the neighborhood that once was have been almost completely erased. But it doesn’t surprise me to learn that my corner of Hong Kong is as densely populated with ghosts as it is with people.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE BAD feng shui that protected my neighborhood for more than a hundred years seems increasingly forgotten. Ambitious urban development plans are in the works—hotels, parking lots, luxury apartments, and a theme park “old market” to replace the real street market. Rents are going up. Longtime familiar restaurants, like my local favorite Ngau Kee, have had to relocate, and the Chinese medicine shops and storefront printing presses have made way for boutiques and bars.

From Lau’s rooftop, I saw where my neighborhood is going. Cheaply built tin tois are being renovated into restaurant spaces and roof decks for the more affluent residents, many of them working in Hong Kong’s thriving finance and banking industries. They have flocked to the area in the last five years, drawn by the same charms that lured me.

“Foreigners coming to Hong Kong for the first time always ask if Hong Kong has changed since the handover from Britain to China,” said one of Lau’s friends, pointing down from the tin toi to streets filled with Friday evening happy hour revelers. “They want to know if we have become more Chinese. Actually, we are becoming less Chinese.”

Local activists are fighting back, trying to keep the neighborhood’s tradition and flavor alive. (It’s starting to work: Thanks to local pressure, one lane of vintage tong laus, Wing Lee Street, will be preserved, and a plan to add a high-rise tower over the 1910-era colonial buildings that once housed the Central Police Station and prison was scrapped.)

“Hong Kong’s government has to realize that what exists here is far more valuable in the long run than anything they might build over it,” John Batten says. “It’s valuable not only for tourism, but for the cultural memory of Hong Kong.”

I’m hoping they realize this before the neighborhood I have come to love evaporates into the realm of the hungry ghosts.

AT THE TEMPLE OF One Hundred Names, I walk along one wall and then another. They are completely covered, from about chest level to the ceiling, with hundreds of tiny tablets, smaller than a paperback book. Each one is inscribed with a name in Chinese, a date, and sometimes a picture. Despite my many visits to the temple, I never suspected that there was a reliquary hidden in the back room behind the main altar.

“After the bubonic plague,” I explain to my friend Leslie, “the Chinese community in the neighborhood faced a huge problem. They couldn’t live with unsettled ghosts roaming around. But they couldn’t afford to send the remains of all the dead to rest with their families back home in their villages, either. So the community built the Temple of One Hundred Names. The idea is a little bit like our Tombs of the Unknown Soldier. The ashes of all the dead without families are brought here so that the whole community can pray for them and feed them offerings, as if they were their own ancestors.”

“So this is where the ghosts live!” she exclaims.

“Yes,” I reply, “until their families come to take them home. Sometimes they never do. But in the meantime, these spirits will stay at peace. Thanks to the neighborhood temple, they’ll never have to go hungry.”

Just to make sure they don’t, I find a stick of incense, light it, and plant it in the incense pot on the altar. Saying hello to your neighbors is always a nice thing to do.

I wait for a moment to make sure the fire catches before we leave. The unforgettable fragrant smoke of Hong Kong fills the tiny chamber and sends my greeting from this world to the next.

Daisann McLane won both the North American Travel Journalists Association and Lowell Thomas awards for her Real Travel column in Traveler. Photographer Catherine Karnow was born in Hong Kong.