

Sunday 1 July

HONG KONG EXPIRATION DATES

by Samantha Culp

Sunday is overcast and hot, but that's better than either rain or a blazing sun. The shops of Causeway Bay are open just as always, selling their version of cool Japanese fashion. Causeway Bay is sometimes referred to as Hong Kong's Shibuya, and that's not only due to the high concentration of hip boutiques and trendy cafés.

During World War II, this is where the Japanese occupation set up their government, and where there are still traces of that violent time. Nearby is the girl's secondary school where, as urban legend has it, a Portugese nun refused to let a Japanese soldier touch her. So he cut off her hand, and buried it under a stepping-stone in the courtyard where it has (supposedly) remained to this day. It is interesting that, while China has retained a deep sense of outrage toward Japan's actions in World War II, Hong Kong seems to have forgiven them wholesale (and retail). Maybe because after the Cultural Revolution, there was another source of unfathomable horror much closer to home.

I walk closer to the harbor on my way to Victoria Park, where thousands of people are already gathered. The Democracy March has occurred each July 1st since 1997, in some years swelling to encompass half a million participants (like in 2003), in others remaining a small, orderly protest about the lack of universal suffrage. But people come for all reasons—to demand legal rights for sex workers, to plead for more stringent environmental controls, sometimes just to show their solidarity as Hong Kong people. This year, the artist-founded gallery Para/site has organized a mobile show, in which five Hong Kong and five Mainland artists were asked to create banners that will be carried during the march. When I finally reach the group, I am assigned a banner that is all rolled up. My friend Ashley and I unfurl it, only to realize that ours is the most political of the bunch. It is a dark red image riddled with bullet holes, and the numbers 6, 4, and 1989. Before we have a friend translate the Chinese text (“Do not forget”), we know what it's about, and jokingly say that if anyone is going to get arrested today, it will probably be us. But we won't be, as Hong Kong is the closest place to China (the only place in China?) where one can publicly acknowledge the so-called Tiananmen incident. Victoria Park is always the site of the June 4th candlelight memorial for the victims of the Tiananmen Square massacre, and that was just a few weeks ago, so it's fitting.

In the boiling park along with assorted artists and friends, Hong Kongers and foreigners both, we begin our march. We head West along Hennessy Road toward Central. I have never walked so far in Hong Kong before. Sometimes we are held up a long time behind the Falun Gong groups, who stop to do little dances or musical numbers with traditional Chinese drums, but that's

okay. We are in a sea of people: though the police, of course, estimate the turnout at 20,000, the organizers put it at 68,000, and by the endless crowd, that number doesn't seem impossible. We walk and walk, and keep walking, holding our artist-made banners in the midst of all kinds of banners, watching the police watch us from the sidelines. Hu Jintao apparently knows about the protest, and while he's not here, has approved of it on the grounds of the “civil order” of Hong Kong people. Today he is at the Happy Valley Race Course, watching the “horses keep running”¹ in a CCP-approved gala spectacle (pop stars, synchronized dance moves, official speeches, confetti). But Hong Kong's people are here. The marchers keep marching.

At night, after the march has finished, friends come to gather on my new apartment building's rooftop. The roof (if not our flat) faces Victoria Harbour with a breathtaking view. Reflected on a glass building next door, even taller than ours, is the neon logo of the Excelsior Hotel, which still has a turbaned Sikh as a doorman and boasts a “full English breakfast” in the basement Dickens Bar. But it's fittingly flipped in the mirror reflection. We wait, staring out over the dark, polluted waters toward Kowloon. Beyond the farthest mountains is China, and China is right here. The fireworks start, from boats in the middle of the harbor, blasting up and out: pink, orange, teal. Finally we see, right in front of us, the pyrotechnic feat we had heard rumors about earlier, and really thought was just a joke: up in the sky, the flames suddenly outline the characters for “Chinese people,” which in Chinese (Cantonese or Mandarin) is “Middle country people.” But instead of the traditional character for “country,” the simplified is used. Probably the traditional would be just too hard to form with fireworks. But still. A moment later, an X-shape, or a plus-sign, or “ten years” flares up. More puffs of light and color, more booms and crackles (a ghostly echo of the foreign cannon-fire across the harbor, on another dark night, that would have started this whole process in motion). And then just gray clouds against the black, and an anti-climactic silence.

1. “The horses will keep on running... the dancing will continue” “Mah jiu paau... mouh jiu tiuh.” This is a reference to Hong Kong's legendary horse-racing tracks at Shatin and Happy Valley, as a symbol of the openness, gaiety, and most of all, capitalistic impulses of Hong Kong that Deng Xiaoping was pledging to preserve.