ALWAYS LIMINAL, ALWAYS IN TRANSITION

Hong Kong as Staircase City

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the 'stair culture' of Hong Kong Island, a place that is constrained by its topography, economic, and social-historical conditions. Staircases are interwoven into an infrastructure of vertical and horizontal pathways. Instead of just being a means of access, staircases play a key role in shaping the urban island. Through a critical examination of these structures and relevant literary and filmic texts (Leung Ping-Kwan's poems, Wong Kar-wai's films, and Tsai Ming-liang's *Walker series* [2012]), the article provides a way of understanding the extent to which the perception of Hong Kong Island is re-imagined by way of an urbanscape punctuated by staircases. Staircases have the ability to mix up people in different classes in such places as the Central to Mid-Levels area and Sai Ying Pun Centre Street. Both districts are initially connected by staircases and later escalators. By examining the impact of escalators (such as high-speed gentrification, closing down of local stores, and the loss of real public spaces) and the effects of staircases on cultural activities in different areas, this article argues that staircases expose the nature of a classed society in Hong Kong Island – and, by extension, Hong Kong as a whole – and represent a nostalgia that is potentially productive.

KEYWORDS: Staircase, escalator, gentrification, public space, walking, resistance

Introduction

Hong Kong is internationally renowned for its density, often represented by an image of the dramatic skyline of Hong Kong Island with Victoria Harbor in the foreground and the Peak behind (Figure 1). Indeed, the same background was where Milton Friedman (1980, 00:08:23) made his famous claim about capitalism, "If you want to see how the free market really works, this is the place to come." However, for those who are more familiar with the city, another image is likely more representative: that of the city's animated, almost visually cacophonous, narrow streets and ubiquitous stairs. The former represents the developmental myth of an ex-British colony and the latter people's everyday life – and, although seemingly vastly different, they are intimately intertwined. Constrained by its topographic, economic, and social-historical conditions, Hong Kong Island's cityscape is crowded with stair-streets, escalators, and overpasses; steps along footpaths, parks, and plazas; and stairs to access buildings and even replacing entire sidewalks. Not just a means of commute or access, staircases are interwoven into both the infrastructural reality and imaginary of the city. Through a critical examination of these structures in relation to relevant literary and filmic texts, this article demonstrates how the perception of Hong Kong is transformed and re-imagined by considering the city as a landscape constructed, figured, and punctuated by stairs. Stairways enable the mixing of different social and

economic classes of people, evidenced in areas such as Central, the Mid-Levels, and Sai Ying Pun, where escalators have replaced staircases as vertical connectors. By examining the impacts and socio-cultural effects of escalators – such as high-speed gentrification, the closure of local shops, and the loss of genuine public spaces – and comparing these mechanical movers with stairs, I argue that staircases expose the nature of a classed society and represent a nostalgia that is potentially productive. Taking the stairs, instead of merely being transported by machinery, is a performative act. To traverse the city's folded spaces is to subvert the logic of neocolonialism disguised as neoliberalism, an ideology that is considered by many (Harvey, 2007, pp. 188–198) to be a failure on a global scale.

Figure 1 - Victoria Harbour, packed buildings in Central, and the broken mountain skyline (2017, author's photo).

This essay approaches what Melissa Cate Christ (2012) calls the "stair culture" of Hong Kong (Figure 2) in three parts.[1] First, an overall view of Hong Kong Island's topographical condition is given, in order to contextualise the Island's stair culture. Second, apart from real sites, the imaginary of Hong Kong as a staircase city as represented in literature and cinema is analysed, including Leung Ping-Kwan's poems, Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994) *Happy Together* (1997) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and Tsai Ming-liang's *Walker* series. Third, as a concrete illustration, a set of staircases around a historic temple in Kennedy Town is described and elaborated. The essay concludes with a discussion of how a philosophical, visual, and spatial analysis of the staircase in Hong Kong Island can inform both literary studies and architecture, suggesting a new way to approach the city's social spaces, to resist its increasingly stratified society, and to work towards freedom within politically oppressed situations.

[1] See also the *Stair Culture* website.

Figure 2 - Narrow streets and ubiquitous stairs (2017, author's photo).

Topography and transit: Theorising Hong Kong's stair culture

Let's begin with that familiar image which represents Hong Kong's economic success: high-rise buildings crowded along the shoreline of Victoria Harbor, with Victoria Peak in the background and an antique-looking junk boat crossing in front. More so than any other city's two-dimensional representation of its skyline, this clichéd image foreshortens Hong Kong Island, suppressing an awareness of the spaces in between the towers and any interest in walking up and down around them. Constraining the imagination of both the city dweller and the tourist, the grand narrative of a mythical, colonial Hong Kong obscures the tension between the high-rises and a general lack of public space: a city of unhindered economic growth, a myth which has persisted even, or perhaps especially, after the 1997 handover of sovereignty to China. But there is breadth and depth to this view: public spaces and rights of way do exist, and are heavily trafficked along the Island's rapidly developed and redeveloped shore.

Since the beginning of colonial rule, there has been a demand for land, especially along the northern coast of Hong Kong Island, starting from what was then called Victoria City. The scope of the City composes four rings (or *wans* in Chinese). They are the West Ring (*Sai Wan*, which includes Kennedy Town, Shek Tong Tsui, and Sai Ying Pun), the Upper Ring (*Sheung Wan*), the Central Ring (*Chung Wan*; present-day Central), and the Lower Ring (*Ha Wan;* present-day Wan Chai). Further west from Sai Wan is Kennedy Town, and further east of Wan Chai are Causeway Bay, North Point, Quarry Bay, Sai Wan Ho, and Shau Kei Wan. The tramway, constructed in 1903, ran from Kennedy Town to Causeway Bay along the coastline and was later extended to Shau Kei Wan. The present-day tramway is basically still running along the historic flat-and-narrow coastline.

The topography of Hong Kong Island features mountain ranges in the middle and a narrow, flat strip of land on the surrounding coasts (Figure 3). Mountains include, from west to east: Mount Davis (269 metres above sea level), High West (493 m), Victoria Peak (552 m), Mount Kellet (501 m), Mount Gough (479 m), Mount Cameron (439 m), Mount Nicholson (430 m), Jardine's Lookout (433 m), Mount Butler (436 m), Mount Parker (531 m), Mount Collinson (347 m), and Pottinger Peak (312 m). Taking Victoria Peak as an example, it can be reached within a 90-minute uphill walk from the waterfront at Kennedy Town via Lung Fu Shan (Figure 4). The cross-section begins with a very narrow coastal land followed by a steep upward climb to the top. Victoria Peak, the Island's summit, is the destination of the Peak Tram, with a maximum gradient of 48%, which has run from Garden Road Admiralty via the Mid-Levels since 1888. One can expect to find their way very easily on the northern coast: the sea is in the north and the mountains south.

Figure 3 - Map of Hong Kong, c.1900, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 10th edition, https://www.britannica.com/place/Hong-Kong/Cultural-life#/media/1/270971/51154

The major reclamation work in Hong Kong Island was primarily carried out in the northern coast, from Kennedy Town to Causeway Bay. A new roadway along the coastline in Sheung Wan was created by land-filling in 1951 and was followed by the two-phrase Praya Reclamation Scheme. From 1868 to 1873, a significant area of land was added to Praya Central, the present-day Des Voeux Road. From 1890 to 1904, some 250,000 square metres of land was added to Central and Statue Square. Then the Praya East Reclamation Scheme, from 1921 to 1931, created a coastal roadway from the junction of Hennessy Road and Johnston Road to Percival Street, effectively expanding Central to Wan Chai. Before the handover of 1997, the Central and Wan Chai Reclamation Project pushed the waterfront along Sheung Wan to Causeway Bay further north to an unprecedented extent. Noticeable changes include the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre Extension on Wan Chai waterfront and the demolition of the historic Queen's Pier (1954–2008) and

Edinburgh Place Ferry Pier (1957–2007). The developmental myth of Hong Kong has been intensified after the handover of sovereignty.

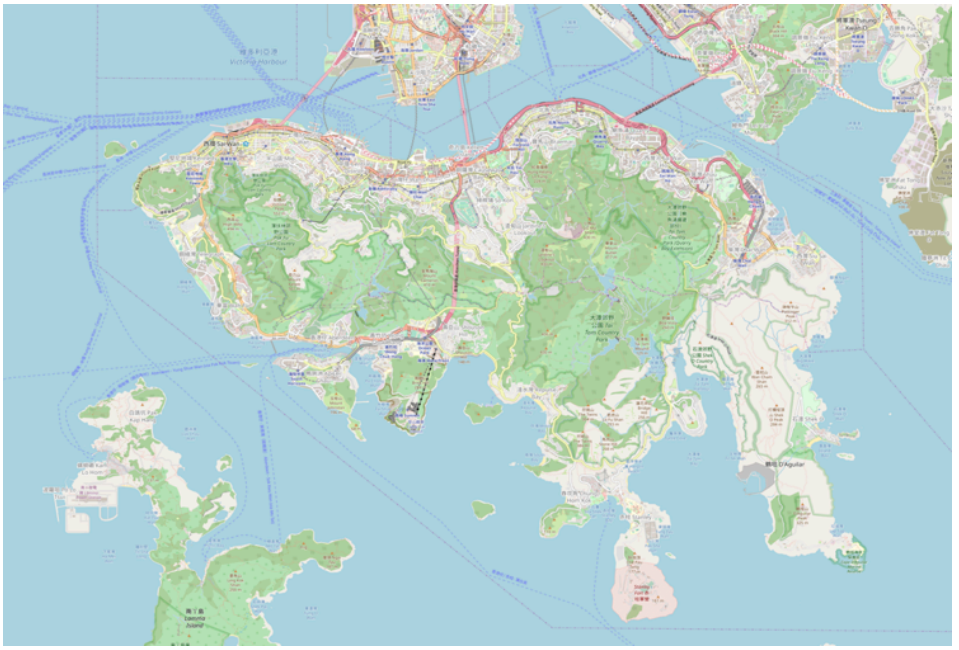

Figure 4 - Map of Hong Kong Island. 2018. *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Location_map_Hong_Kong_Island.png

Beyond the relatively thin band of reclaimed land offset from the original northern island shoreline, the topographical limitations of the original ground of the Island make staircases necessary for vertical transportation to places uphill. In contrast to cities built primarily on flat ground, such as New York, Paris, St. Petersburg, Taipei, Beijing, or even Kowloon, which sits on a flat peninsula on the northern side of Victoria Harbor, Hong Kong Island's streets and spaces negotiate the steep topography through terraces seemingly created by unfolding the ground (Figure 5). Stairs act as connective springboards, allowing pedestrians to leap from one zone to another. The stair city opens itself up to display its heterogeneous spaces, and the stairs facilitate their unfolding. Like a baroque fold, stairways conceal and unveil, include and exclude. The fold "unfurls all the way to infinity" (Deleuze, 1993, p. 3; Liu, 2015). Walking up and down the stairs in Hong Kong Island is not only an act of traversing zones characterised by different social classes, but also a way to work against, or even avenge, the colonial and neo-liberal logic governing the city. A characteristic of the Island is its drastic changes in social and cultural scenes in accordance with the elevation of different zones. Commuting between these zones by vehicles or other mechanical means deprives the pedestrian of the chance to appreciate nuances in their differences. You do justice to the Island by walking in and through it, enlivening public (and not-so-public) spaces, many of which are considered to be obstacles to the incessant construction and destruction of the city. The staircase, therefore, subverts the economy of exchange under the overwhelming logic of neoliberalism, an ideology that values market exchange as an ethic in itself (Harvey, 2007;

Treanor, 2017, p. 3).[2] Walking outdoors is non-commercial (no gym can charge you), taking stair shortcuts beats the traffic (you move faster than vehicles), sitting on the steps is free (you don't subsidise Starbucks' rent),[3] ascending a flight of steps is a social activity, and, on stairs, vehicles can't run you over. Taking the steps is a performative act, one that resists the persistent valuation of Hong Kong as an oppressive money-making machine.

Figure 5 - Sheung Wan and Central, Victoria Harbour, and Kowloon peninsula, viewed from Lung Fu Shan (2016, author's photo).

II. The imaginary of Hong Kong as a staircase city

'Hong Kong' is itself a complex image full of contradictions: an island at the southern tip of China, a British colonial city founded in 1841, and, since 1997, a Chinese special administrative region. The English name Hong Kong (*hēung góng*; 香港 in Cantonese) was coined by the British from the name of a fishing village (now known as Aberdeen, 'Little Hong Kong' in Cantonese) on Hong Kong Island (Hughes, 1968, p. 20). 'Hong Kong' refers both to the island and to the entire British colony including, to the north of the Island, Kowloon Peninsula and, further northward, the New Territories. The deliberate underdevelopment in infrastructure in the New Territories was a policy with a strategic intention to 'islandise' the most important part of Hong Kong, that is, the Island, from her neighbouring country, China.

The islandness of Hong Kong is full of possibility. On the one hand, the insularity and homogeneity implied in the concept of islandness have created a collective subjectivity. In the Hong Kongers' psyche, they live in an imaginary island even though Kowloon is a peninsula and the New Territories are geographically connected to the continent. But this

[2] See Kwok (2011, pp. 172–211) for an in-depth analysis of the redevelopment and gentrification of Li Tong (a.k.a. Wedding Card) Street.
[3] The "stair-chairs" that Wolf (2014) captured are an example of anti-neoliberal objects.

singular subjectivity is created by an unchallenged notion of a Hong Kong identity: the financial center on Hong Kong Island shown in Figure 1 serves as an image of Hong Kong as a city operating according to free market logic. It is indeed a reductive way to understand Hong Kong based on the so-called Central or Core Values (Office of the Chief Executive, 2013, para. 197). Itself economically, culturally, and politically detached from continental China, the entirety of Hong Kong can be imagined as an island, a reverse synecdoche: Hong Kong subjectivity can be understood to be concentrated in Hong Kong Island. Synecdoches use part of the whole to represent the whole, or, in reverse, the whole represents a part of that whole.

These reductive and restrictive characteristics of islandness have undergone a transformation since British colonial governance, especially in 2016–2019. In the protests and large-scale social movements, Hong Kong's islandness was metamorphosised through a sense of sovereignty, autonomy, and what might be termed an 'oceanic' tendency. Ackbar Abbas (2012, p. 4) argues that before 1997, people in Hong Kong were allowed to have a more "floating" identity, whereas after the handover there was a need to adopt something more "definite" (in order to resist "an alien identity about to be imposed … by China"). The anxiety of looking for a new identity described by Abbas has opened up new possibilities. The 'oceanic' tendency residing in transformed islandness drives citizens in Hong Kong to imagine the special administrative region not as part of a nation with a long history, but rather, as a newly-invented entity connected to others, just like the way an island constantly creates unexpected affinities with its neighbours across waters. For example, Chin Wan (2011, pp. 77–78) theorised Hong Kong as an autonomous but not independent city-state that could facilitate a loose but effective "Chinese confederation" with Macau, Taiwan, and China; and, as opposed to official views that Hong Kong is part of China or the product of British colonialisation, Eric Tsui (2019, pp. 38–39) traces an alternative, three-fold origin of Hong Kong peoples – Baiyue culture, Western modern civilisation, and Chinese refugees – suggesting an outward-looking, expansive historical view free from the submission to an essentialist Chinese identity or British post-colonial subjectivity. Moreover, as Hong Kongers develop an affinity with countries in Northeast and Southeast Asia (such as Japan and Korea, or Taiwan, Thailand, and Myanmar in the online democracy and human rights movement 'Milk Tea Alliance' [Barron, 2020]), one can now imagine Hong Kong as part of an extended archipelago in the East and South China Seas. Rather than being introverted in islandedness afforded by post-coloniality (McCusker & Soares, 2011, p. xii), globalisation allows people in Hong Kong to be out-going, improvisatory, and creative.[4] An even more fluid identity than that before 1997 is created when Hong Kong faced crises of an unprecedented scale, in the process turning the closed-off island-image of a one-dimensional neo-liberal state into an islandness that is expansive and innovative.

To understand these complex images of Hong Kong's islandness, I would like to start with lines from a poem:

> *We need a fresh angle,*
> *nothing added, nothing taken away,*
> *always at the edge of things and between places.*
>
> (Cheung, 2012a, p. 89)

[4] For an alternative image of post-2014 protests Hong Kong, see Wu (2020), especially Chapter 5 on Lion Rock.

This verse is taken from the poem 'Images of Hong Kong' (形象香港 - *yìhng jeuhng hēung góng*) by the Hong Kong poet and cultural critic Leung Ping-Kwan (a.k.a. Ye-si), first published in 1990.[5] Let's start by looking at the title to give a sense of where the analysis will lead. The noun "images" (形象 - *yìhng jeuhng*) in the original Chinese title can be used as a verb, "to give shape," "to form an image," or "imaging," because *yìhng jeuhng* is somewhat awkwardly placed before "Hong Kong." To give an image of Hong Kong, instead of merely showing Hong Kong's images, is to avoid "cliché after cliché" (Cheung, 2012a, pp. 142–143), as the poet imagines the flame tree would say in 'The Flame Tree'. The Chinese title, 'Images of Hong Kong' or 'Imaging Hong Kong', allows this ambiguity, making it feasible to portray a Hong Kong in the process of becoming, rather than as succession of fixed, ideal forms in a Platonic sense. Instead of stepping through forms of beauty to only then understand the final, perfect image of beauty, as Socrates describes Diotima's metaphorical staircase in Plato's *Symposium*, giving shape to Hong Kong is to subvert this Platonic model, and to instead call for a phenomenological analysis of the city through walking its stairs.[6]

II.a. Translation and transition: How to do things with nouns

The Chinese original of the verse "always at the edge of things and between places" is 永遠在邊緣永遠在過渡 – *wíhng yúhn joih bīn yùhn wíhng yúhn joih gwo douh*, which plays with a repeated five-character phrase starting with 永遠 – *wíhng yúhn*, meaning 'eternal' or 'always'. Osing and Leung's 2012 translation, "always at the edge of things and between places," while preserving the word "edge," regrettably conceals the repeated structure in the line: *wíhng yúhn … wíhng yúhn*… To convey this sense of repetition, it could be translated as "always on the margins, always in transit," or, preferably, "always liminal, always in transition." Also, the ambiguity between the spatial and the temporal is not adequately conveyed by the English translation; "always at the edge of things and between places" primarily stresses the physical and spatial condition of Hong Kong, whereas the Chinese verse 在邊緣 – *joih bīn yùhn* … 在過渡 – *joih gwo douh* conveys a rich subtlety of inferred meaning. The first phrase, 在邊緣 – *joih bīn yùhn*, specifies a literal spatial condition of being on the margin, or being liminal; whereas the second phrase, 在過渡 – *joih gwo douh*, signifies a temporal condition: a continuous tense or an act of transition.[7] These two conditions, the marginal/spatial and the transitional/temporal, when combined with the repetitive structure, can be read as emblems. Hong Kong is always on the margin in terms of its geographical and political relationship with both Britain and China and Hong Kong is always in the process of becoming, occupying the eternal liminal space of a city of/in transition. This in-betweenness is evidenced by the city's transformation over the last 175 years from a marginal Chinese imperial city, to a British colonial *entrepôt*, and now, to a special administrative region under China's 'one country, two systems' policy.

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[5] This essay uses the Yale Romanisation system to transcribe the original Cantonese, the spoken language used in Hong Kong.

[6] Diotima, retold by Socrates, says, "Like someone using a staircase, he should go from one to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful practices, and from practices to beautiful forms of learning. From forms of learning, he should end up at that form of learning which is of nothing other than that beauty itself, so that he can complete the process of learning what beauty really is" (Plato, ca.385–370 B.C.E./1999, p. 49). See also Monaghan (2006, pp. 1–3) for a discussion of how Plato uses the image of stairs to formulate his theory of Forms.

[7] For a discussion of the English translation of Leung's poetry, and the extent of his involvement, see Cheung (2012b, pp. 28–31).

While acknowledging the political-allegorical interpretations of these two phrases, which I translate as "always liminal, always in transition," the silent change from the spatial in "always liminal" to the temporal in "always in transition" is deliberately confounding, opening up another way to understand the first phrase. While the term 在邊緣 – *joih bīn yùhn* is usually used as a noun, meaning margin, the reader could instead impose the logic of the second phrase and turn 'margin' into the verb 'marginalise'. The first phrase then reads as "always self-marginalising," rather than "always liminal." The insertion of the reflexive is inferred from two lines earlier in the poem: "We need a fresh angle" and "I need a new angle" (Cheung, 2012a, p. 89). The poet is looking for new ways to see the city, implying that the marginalisation is not done to others, but is a self-reflexive act. The insertion of the reflexive is inferred from two lines earlier in the poem: "We need a fresh angle" and "I need a new angle" (Cheung, 2012a, p. 89). The poet is looking for new ways to see the city, implying that the marginalisation is not done to others, but is a self-reflexive act. Here, the meaning of self-marginalising can go in two directions. Reading it negatively, one could say that Hong Kong's politically marginalised position is not recognised as such, since it is disguised by its neo-liberal and economic development. In this way then, to understand the logic of gentrification as an act of self-marginalising is to recognise the problem: Hong Kong has alienated itself through the actual physical erasure of its history and unique culture. Reading it positively, "always self-marginalising" can be understood as a way to formulate subjectivity through the process of critical self-evaluation: a process of self-discovery instead of alienation. The poem is looking for a new way to write history, "nothing added, nothing taken away/always at the edge of things and between places" asking in the coda, "Could a whole history have been concocted like this?" (Cheung, 2012a, p. 89). The risk is that the search is open-ended, that "each of us finds himself looking around for – what?" (Cheung, 2012a, p. 91). This self-marginalising suspends the action of the subject, demanding the answer not so much to the question, "what am I looking for?" but rather, "who am I?"

In the same way, if the second phrase of "always liminal, always in transition" 在過渡 – *joih gwo douh* ('in transit' or 'in the process of transition') is read as a verb, 'always transitioning', the necessity for a body to empower its own transition (up a set of stairs, for example) is emphasised, instead of forcing it to relinquish its spatial agency to a machine of transit (such as an escalator). However, if read as a noun, 'always in transit', the meaning eludes the subject in transition, echoing the earlier line "one can't switch identities fast enough" (Cheung, 2012a, p. 89). The 1997 displacement of the airport from urban Kowloon City to peripheral Lantau, symbolises Hong Kong's transformation from a city of transition to a transit city. Being in transition implies a state of infinite potentiality, whereas being in transit is the opposite. When a place lacks potential, in particular the potential to achieve political autonomy, it is in what Abbas (2012) calls a "decadent" state of economic growth, energy, and vitality. For Abbas (2012, p. 44), a decadent situation is defined not "in the sense of decline (because we see what looks like progress everywhere), but in the sense of a one-dimensional development in a closed field."

In discussing Leung's poetry, Abbas (2012, p. 49) argues that there is a "secret violence" operating in the poems' "choice of language, form, and subject matter," comparable to a horror film with "muted violence, violence with the sound track turned off." The "matte, non-sensational, ordinary quality" of Leung's writings marks the violence as not one of appearance (as in the case of Hong Kong's popular visual culture), but of "dis-appearance and indiscernabilities" (Abbas, 2012, p. 48). Abbas (2012, p. 49) understands Leung's poetry as a symptom of Hong Kong's politics, where disastrous events have no consequence: "that things can just go on, that no breakdown has actually taken place, that the system can

perpetuate itself." This very non-consequence is what he calls the "secret violence" (Abbas, 2012, p. 49). So, for Abbas, it is important to understand Leung's poetry as a non-representation of a new kind of a colonial space, what Abbas (2012, p. 52) calls a "decadent space," which "reduces choice, forecloses options, blocks exit." Quoting the last line of Leung's poem 'The Leaf on the Edge', Abbas (2012, p. 59) advocates for the "other listening" that Leung's poetry evokes, as a way to tune in to the "de-cadence" and perceive the built-in violence of life in Hong Kong.

II.b. Escalator and Stair: Discipline and Epiphany

This "decadent" tendency can also be found in the gradual gentrification that has accompanied the installation of escalator systems in public spaces in Hong Kong, such as the Central to Mid-Levels escalator (Figure 6) and the Centre Street escalator in Sai Ying Pun (Figure 7). In these places, steep streets and staircases are the primary modes of vertical access between topographically, and often socially, separate areas. As communities seek convenience and speed by constructing escalators to replace staircases as means of connecting social spaces, these mechanical steps become Trojan horses, giving way to neo-liberal urges of gentrification that ultimately lead to the urban displacement of the poor (Lees et al., 2008; Finch, 2016).

Figure 6 - Escalator and walkway system from Central to Mid-Levels (2017, author's photo).

The essential difference between stairs and escalators is that stairs allow for autonomous actions such as walking up and down, staying, sitting, jumping, and playing games, whereas escalators are passive-aggressive machines that constrain pedestrians into an unidirectional journey, limiting choice, restricting mobility with repetitive, mind-numbing, multi-lingual safety warnings. So, the lively sounds of the city are replaced by mechanical mediated recordings. In this way, escalators call to mind the person-sucking machine in Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* (1936), or the underground laborer-transporting lift in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927). This passive-aggressive nature is also embodied in the design of the escalator risers. They are not high enough to stop

people from walking, but are just high enough to make walking uncomfortable for those who cannot resist the natural delight of ascending or descending stairs, or when an escalator is broken or shut off. The dangers of escalators are ever-present in the urban imaginary, especially after the fatal 'devouring-escalator' incident in a Chinese shopping mall in 2015. Widely circulated in social media, a heroic woman pushed her child off a panel which had caved in at the top of an escalator, only to be pulled into the machinery herself (Jiang, 2015). Much more alarming and visually terrifying is the image of falling bodies that piled up at the bottom of a fully loaded 45-meter-long escalator in Mong Kok's Langham Place in 2017 (Ng & Cheung, 2017). A system of staircases runs along and at times underneath the Central–Mid-Levels Escalator, seemingly offering options to move between the two pathways and to observe from different vantage points. But unless the pedestrian can resist the attraction of merchandise in the shops and eateries along the staircases, the choice is only a false one. Perhaps an escalator can only be creative when pedestrians actively reclaim their agency by suspending the act of walking and engage in actions other than transiting, such as in Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994). The air hostess (Valerie Chow) and Faye (Faye Wong) greet Cop 633 (Tony Leung) in an apartment next to the futuristic moving walkway in Central (Figure 8). Viewed from the inside-out, a mesmerising stream of people float by, carried along by the constant and steady motion of the walkway. In contrast, Wong's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) shows Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung) descending and ascending a staircase to buy take-away. Set in the 1960s, Su's beautiful *cheongsam* is nostalgically highlighted by the soundtrack and the slow motion. It is also the setting for an important chance encounter between her and the male protagonist Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) (Figure 9).[8] A stair allows people to act in a variety of ways, whereas an escalator reduces people to a thing unless they rebel against the intended function of the moving machine.

Figure 7 - Sai Ying Pun Centre Street escalators (leading up to Bonham Road) (2017, author's photo).

[8] On the staircases in *In the Mood for Love* (especially those in the hotel where Chow writes martial-art novels), see Liu (2015, pp. 88–142). See Huang (2004, pp. 31-28) for an analysis of the importance of walking in the global city in *Chungking Express*.

Figure 8 - Still from *Chungking Express* (1994).

Figure 9 - Still from *In the Mood for Love* (2000).

II.b. Towards a bodily understanding of the city

Osing and Leung's translation, "always at the edge of things and between places," draws attention to the idea of being on the edge, an idea that is made the center of attention in Leung's poem 'The Leaf on the Edge', first published in 1986. Just like how paying attention to a marginal lotus leaf can reveal "a hidden song [that] needs other listening," in my analysis, the often-marginalised stairway is now the centre of attention for its importance both as a mode of transit and as a metaphor of transition between classes.

Stairs facilitate an active mode of transport, allowing communities to mix and mingle, and are rich in their dramatic and philosophical implications, as well as in relation to the body itself, as can be shown through looking at another Leung poem, 'Ladder Street' (see Figure 10):

> *Right here in Ladder Street I almost lost them [my clogs];*
> *I slipped out of my clogs and I slipped from the spell [of magic].*
> *How strange and ordinary, like birds disappearing in thin air.*
> *I hunkered here in the concrete, felt for my shadow.*
> *In spite of roads above and below, I heard your voice,*
> *I hunkered here in the concrete, felt for my shadow.*
>
> (Cheung, 2012a, p. 83)

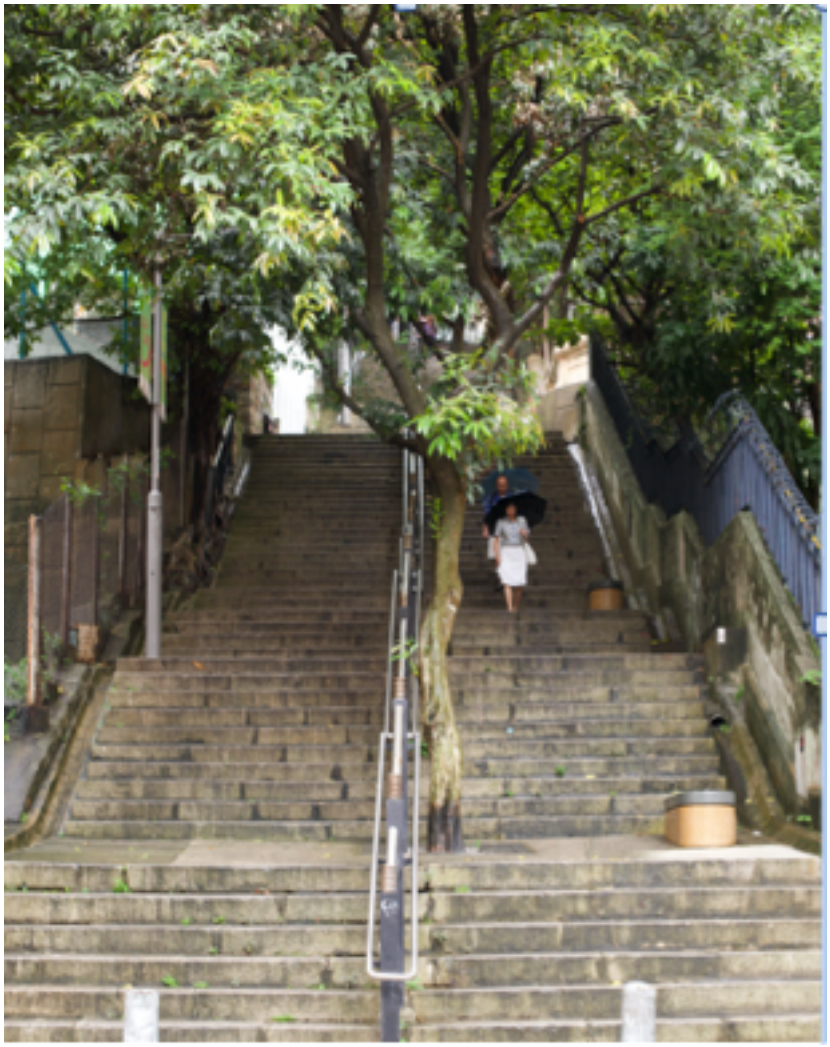

Figure 10 - Ladder Street (2017, author's photo).

When the bilingual version of Leung's 'Ladder Street' was published in 1992, the title was changed to 'The Clogs'. In doing so, the site-specificity of this historical stair street, which runs from Queen's Road up to Caine Road, is replaced by an object. The poem's emphasis therefore shifts to the aural effect of clogs on stone steps: wood on stone (not "concrete" as in the English translation), two ancient construction materials. The poem focuses on sounds: "ankle speaking to ankle," "Cloths poles!", "Any scissors to grind? Knives to sharpen?", "I talked to myself," "I heard your voice," "a jump-rope song," and, finally:

> *Why can't one make appointments with bygone voices*
> *"Tomorrow at ten; wear the clogs; I'll hear you then."*
>
> (Cheung, 2012a, p. 83)

While the concern of the poem 'Images of Hong Kong' (or, preferably, 'Imaging Hong Kong') is a "strictly visual matter" (line 2), the aural references in 'The Clogs' illustrate how sounds on stairs can evoke memories, and vice versa. In these moments of reflective distraction, ascending or descending the stairs along Ladder Street becomes effortless; even the sound of breathing is eliminated. However, sometimes that reflection reinforces the present and requires our full attention, such as when one is reminded by the ankles that repetitive action is required in order to travel through space. Thus, stairs offer a change in rhythm. Going back to Osing and Leung's translation of 永遠在邊緣永遠在過渡 – *wíhng yúhn joih bīn yùhn wíhng yúhn joih gwo douh*, though no words are repeated, the iambic hexameter in "always at the edge of things and between places" retains the non-stop, rising rhythm of the Chinese verse. The line in both languages reads like an ascending scale, imparting the effect of going up a flight of stairs, when the body and senses are activated. Pallasmaa (2000, pp. 7–8) describes the effect of the stair gradient on the body:

> *Ascending a stair makes our heartbeat and breathing faster. Steep stairs address the heart, whereas gentle stairs echo the rhythm of our lungs.*

Comparing the change in breathing caused by ascending and descending stairs, Sigmund Freud (1900/1981, p. 355, fn 2) argues that dreaming about a flight of stairs is sexually symbolic:

> *We come to the top in a series of rhythmical movements and with increasing breathlessness and then, with a few rapid leaps, we can get to the bottom again. Thus, the rhythmical pattern of copulation is reproduced in going up stairs.*

Freud (1900/1981, p. 355, fn 2) also notes the sexual connotations of staircase in the French phrase *un vieux marcheur*, which is *ein alter Steiger* in German, meaning 'an old rake'. In the same vein, the enjoyment of ascending staircases involves the anticipation of a potential visual delight, coupled with the physical relief of reaching the top. The view from the top is clear and free of obstruction, at least by the stairway itself. The *jouissance* is not purely sexual, but also stems from an ocular and epistemological discovery. People exclaim, "Oh! Look at that," even though they are still catching their breath at the top of the stairway.

It is in this spirit of resisting a dominant ideology that walking the stairs becomes a political act. An example of this new way of approaching the city is the slow walking in Tsai Ming-Liang's *Walker* project. Shot in Hong Kong, Tsai's short film *Walker* (2012)

shows a monk (Lee Kang-Sheng) descending an old concrete stairway with his back facing the camera (Figure 11). He is walking so slowly that it takes him more than two minutes to descend two steps. As the action is almost as slow as a still shot, the audience is forced to contemplate the walking, the city space surrounding him, and their relationship to each other. The monk walks in this same way for nearly fifteen minutes in *Journey to the West* (2014), this time descending a flight of stairs and other public spaces in Marseilles (Figure 12).[9] Lee faces the camera, but since the light source comes from behind him, the audience cannot see his face or discern his feelings. In both shorts, the slowness extends the spatial and temporal dimension of the staircase: it becomes the monk's universe. The monk's slow descent, unlike the choppy frames depicted in Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier* (*Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1912), portrays the continuity of a suffering body characterised by the sustained long-take. The city and the body become allegories for each other.

Figure 11 - Still from *Walker* (2012) – opening sequence.

The city and Lee's body are transformed into what Chang Hsiao-hung (2007, pp. 148–149) calls the "body-city": the super slow performance of everyday, banal activities, captured in sustained long-takes. By seeing the "authentic body" played by Lee as a "non-actor," cinematic time is restored as "authentic time" (Chang, 2007, p. 137). Developing Deleuze's argument on time-image, Chang maintains that Lee's body is transformed to "pure optical and sound situations" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 13, cited in Chang, 2007, pp. 137–138). Tsai's slowness reduces the city and the body to authentic images. While the slowness of the staircase scene in Wong's *In the Mood for Love* shows a romanticised suspension of time to evoke a sense of "sentimentalism of nostalgia" (Chow, 2006, p. 185), Tsai's slow-walking monk suggests a radically different way of encountering the city. If Tsai's feature films are about people and their cities, primarily Taipei but also Kuala Lumpur and Paris, Wong's city is Hong Kong. Even though set in Buenos Aires, *Happy Together* is the story of Hong

[9] On Tsai's slowness, see Lim (2014). See also Sing (2014) for an analysis of Tsai's cinema as "transart." For a discussion of Tsai's cinematic images in relationship to the city, see Lo (2019).

Kong. Staging the film in the Argentinian capital that is the antipodes of the then British colony, Wong turns Hong Kong upside-down in order to read the city in an allegorical manner (Tambling, 2003, pp. 23–32). Comparing *Happy Together* with *In the Mood for Love*, Rey Chow (1999, p. 35) remarks that the nostalgia in the former is not an emotion related to a traceable past as presented in the latter, but "rather, it [i.e. *Happy together*] is attached to a fantasised state of oneness, to a time of absolute coupling and indifferentiation that may, nonetheless, appear in the guise of an intense, indeed delirious, memory" (see also Natali, 2004, p. 21). Slowness, walking, and alternative perception are transferred from the imagination into the everyday act of walking the stairs, creating an active, productive, positive nostalgia where the past and the future are condensed and experienced in each moment. While Wong's nostalgia evokes a sense of longing for the past, this positive nostalgia can be found in moving through stairs, as I will elaborate further below – an analysis which aims to provide a way of walking out of the "decadent" in Hong Kong.

Figure 12 – Still from *Journey to the West* (2014) – descending a staircase in Marseilles.

III. Approaching Lo Pan Temple

An unexpectedly quiet public space can be found in Kennedy Town, an area that has been gradually gentrified since the opening of MTR Island line stations. Located halfway up the slope between Belchers Street and Pokfulam Road on Ching Lin Terrace, Lo Pan ('Lu Pan' in Mandarin) Temple can only be reached by ascending or descending a staircase. First built in 1884, the temple is dedicated to Master Lo Pan, a Chinese *si fu*, or master builder, from the late Spring and Autumn Period, (c. 770–476/403 B.E.). According to Chinese legends, he is the god of carpenters and the master of construction, and is celebrated on the thirteenth day of the sixth month of the traditional Chinese calendar.[10] He is still

[10] The Chinese traditional calendar is a lunisolar calendar that decides festivals and important events. The name of the year is denoted by Stems-and-Branches or 干支- *Gan-zhi*, a system that has a 60-year

widely worshiped by craftsmen and builders in Hong Kong. The temple was classified as a Grade I Historic Building in 2009, meaning that there is some level of protection for the structure.[11] The terrace where the temple and other residential buildings are located can be accessed by two systems of stairways.

The first way is via Li Po Lung Path (Figure 13), an almost hidden stair street wedged between two buildings. Along this gentle slope to Ching Lin Terrace, the stairs have deep treads and short risers and pass by a kindergarten, residential buildings, various small shops, and an architectural studio. As one ascends the steps, the busy Belcher's Street recedes and is replaced by a quieter, less visually cluttered area. After enjoying the gradual steps, generous vista, and shade offered by the trees embedded in the stair's landings, one arrives at the top of Li Po Lung Path to be confronted by a high and imposing white retaining wall that deceptively blocks the way up, giving the illusion of a grand building behind, like the Ruins of St. Paul in Macao, perceived on ascending the wide and open flight of stairs at its base. High up on the wall, there is an arrow pointing to the left and a sign with five Chinese characters which reads, from right to left, 魯班先師廟 – *lóuh bāan sīn sī miuh* ('Master Lo Pan Temple'). The second part of this path has a very different atmosphere. Backed by the retaining wall that bears the sign, a red brick stairway adjacent to a vegetation-covered slope (Figure 14) leads to the north-eastern corner of Ching Lin Terrace (Figure 15), the location of the temple.

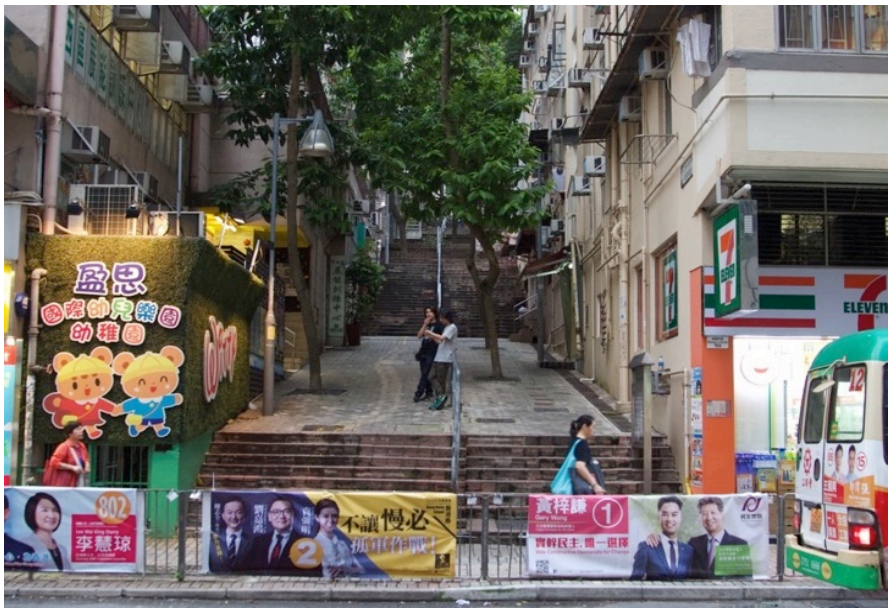

Figure 13 - The Entrance to Li Po Lung Path on Belcher's Street (2017, author's photo).

cycle. For example, 壬寅 - *rén yín*, the Year of the Tiger, began on 1 February 2022. See Henderson (2006) for an introduction to the premodern Chinese calendrical systems and the concept of time.

[11] See "Assessment of 1444 Historic Buildings and New Items" for a description of the Antiquities and Monuments Office assessment metrics and lists of grades and buildings. Visit Hong Kong Antiquities Advisory Board" webpage for a summary of the history and architectural highlights of the temple; see also Billinge (2020).

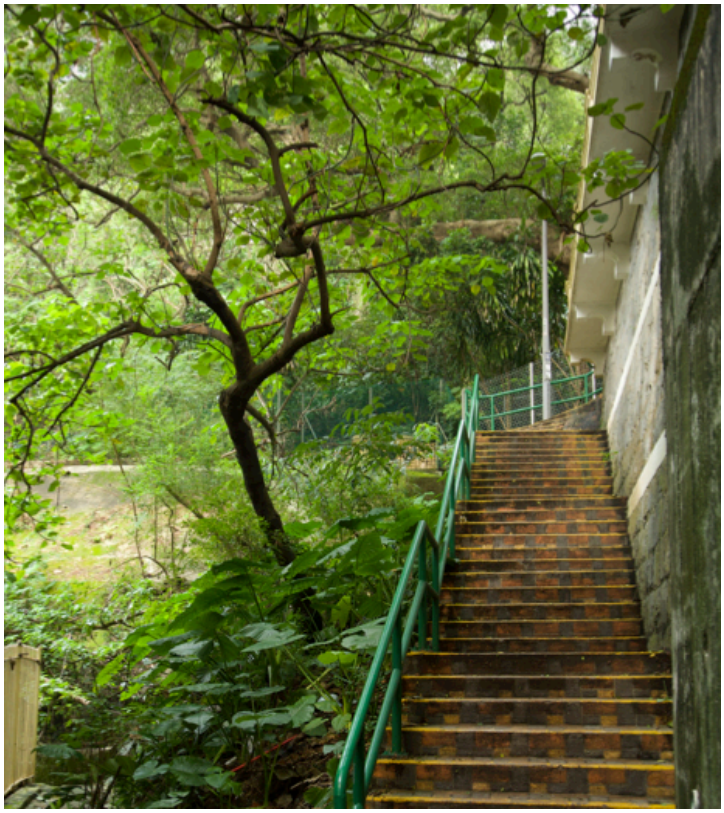

Figure 14 - Staircase alongside a retaining wall (2017, author's photo).

Figure 15 - Ching Lin Terrace (2017, author's photo)

The second route up to Lo Pan Temple is less convoluted and more open. At the right-angle turn from Sands Street to Rock Hill Street, a lift, as well as a wide flight of stairs with a bright mural painted on the risers, leads to the upper portion of Sands Street (Figure 16). This sloped, pedestrian-only part of the street has a number of seating areas and a covered walkway/escalator system (Figure 17). Through a combination of staircases and slopes, this elevated street provides access to Tai Pak Terrace, Hee Wong Terrace, Ching Lin Terrace, and To Li Terrace on the north-eastern side, and to a number of residential buildings along the south-western side. Unlike the Mid-Levels and Centre Street escalators, the lift and escalators here are reasonably well-designed and integrated into their environment. This portion of Sands Street is a quiet and green open space that terminates at a cul-de-sac at its top (Figure 18). From there, looking back and down Sands Street, the sea is visible: the waterfront feels unexpectedly close to the stairs (Figure 19). This sudden realisation of one's relatively close proximity to the harbour can also be found, though much obscured, when looking down Eastern, Centre, and Western Streets in Sai Ying Pun. One arrives at the south-western corner of Ching Lin Terrace by taking one of several stairways (Figure 20).

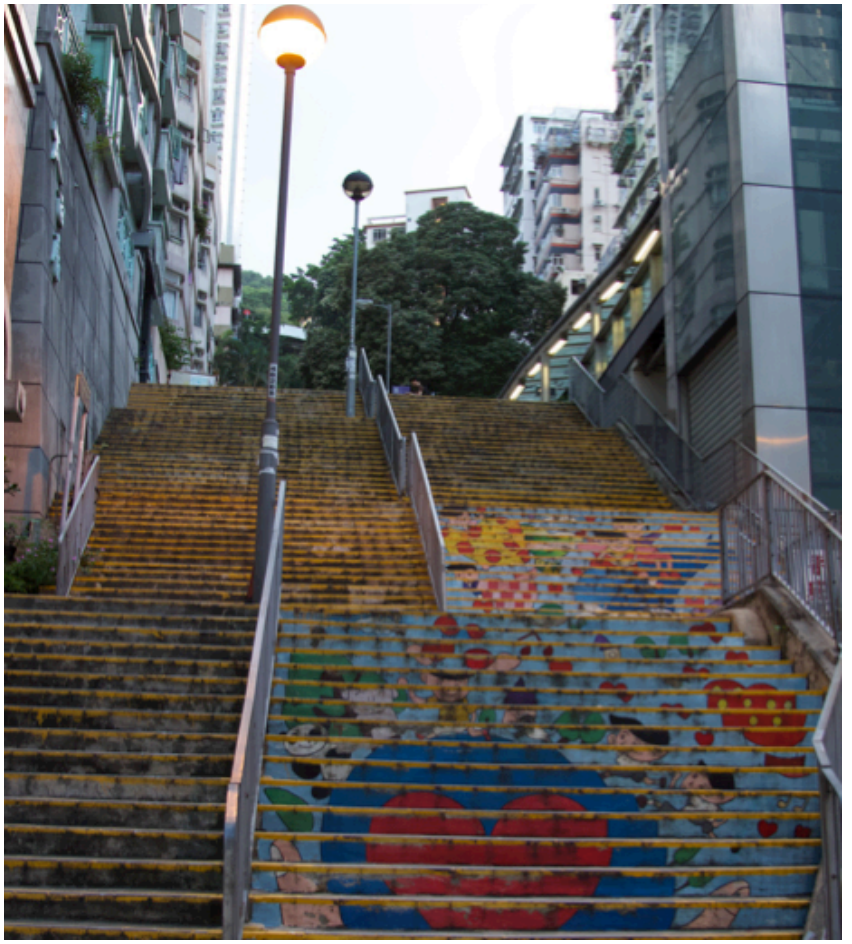

Figure 16 - Sands Street staircase (2017, author's photo).

Figure 17 - The covered walkway and escalator system on the elevated part of Sands Street (2017, author's photo).

Figure 18 - The covered walkway and escalator system on the elevated part of Sands Street (2017, author's photo).

Figure 19 - A view of the Victoria Harbour from the cul-de-sac (2017, author's photo).

Several buildings are situated along the terrace: the two-story Lo Pan Temple; a students' hall for the University of Hong Kong, which was the site of Hon Wah Middle School until 2006 (its signage is still hanging on the tree) (Figure 21); and a few residential buildings. A rectangular yard lining the down-slope, western edge of the terrace allows access to the buildings and serves as a shared open space. On any given day, residents and secondary school students climb up and down these stairs on their way home or to school. And, on the Master Lo Pan's Day, masons, carpenters, builders, and architecture and engineering professionals and students climb up the stairs to worship him in his shrine. In this way, Ching Lin Terrace acts as an island floating above the heart of Kennedy Town. It is indeed a form of pilgrimage to ascend (or descend) to this unusual space. It is a serene, non-commercial, semi-holy, public, vegetated space that is the incongruous result of the fortuitous siting and design of a temple dedicated to craftsmanship in a city which many would say has lost touch with its traditional crafts and other intangible heritage. In fact, the names of the seven neighbouring terraces (together, they are called the Seven Terraces of Sai Wan), are related to the poet Li Bai (701–762) (Sze, 2016, p. 235, n 37). The poetic name Ching Lin, meaning 'green lotus', adds to the heterogeneous nature of the area and evokes Leung's poem 'The Leaf on the Edge': "Have you ever noted a marginal leaf/observed the veins converging like noisy streets" (Cheung, 2012a, p. 95). The stairways connect these layers of irreconcilable meanings: colonial British Hong Kong; place names

associated with a prominent poet from Tang Dynasty; post-colonial, neo-liberal Hong Kong; a temple dedicated to the Master of Craftsmanship who bears the name of a destroyed, small but sophisticated, state (State of Lu) before a unified concept of China was formed; and a green open semi-public space in the middle of a busy city. In this way, Ching Lin Terrace can be seen as a Foucauldian heterotopia, offering a critique to the spaces surrounding it. Contrary to unreachable and non-existent utopias, heterotopias, or "different spaces," are real and locatable spaces in a city that can offer a "contestation, mythical and real, of the space in which we live" (Foucault, 1967/1998, p. 179).

Figure 20 - Staircase on Sands Street leading up to Ching Lin Terrace (2017, author's photo).

Ching Lin Terrace's islandness – its isolated, detached, and surrounded nature in relationship with Kennedy Town – is similar to that of Hong Kong vis-à-vis China. Hong Kong's islandness is best understood via the allegorical image of the floating city described by Xi Xi's 'Marvels of a Floating City', which opens with "Many, many years ago, on a fine, clear day, the floating city appeared in the air in full public gaze, hanging like a hydrogen

balloon" (1997, p. 3).[12] Xi Xi's floating city, an image of an island, is an allegory of Hong Kong. As a small capitalist city next to its communist neighbour, to live in Hong Kong takes faith: "to live in a floating city, however, you need more than courage; you need will-power and faith as well" (Xi Xi, 1997, p. 5). Hong Kong's 'isolation' and 'detachedness' facilitates Friedman's neo-liberal experiment, but its transformed islandness also offers Hong Kong a potential to resist against a unifying discourse.

Figure 21 - An old tree and a wooden signage 'Hon Wah College' on Ching Lin Terrace (2017, author's photo).

In the north-eastern corner of the terrace, there is a meandering stairway with a railing on one side that ascends to Pokfulam Road (Figure 22). Narrow in width, with low risers and disproportionately deep treads, the stairs precipitate the gait required by a hiking trail. The final ascent to Pokfulam Road is made by means of a wide spiral staircase that winds around a massive, out-of-scale central shaft (Figure 23). From the top, birds can be seen perching on the roof of Lo Pan Temple, one of the few 'fire roofs' left in Hong Kong (Ko, 2008, p. 150) (Figures 24 and 25). Seen from below, the spiral staircase recalls William Blake's depiction of a staircase leading up to heaven in his painting 'Jacob's Ladder' (Figure 26).[13] Looking down the stair itself, the vertigo-inducing spiral (Figure 25) evokes the nauseating zoom-in, track-out shots from the bell tower's rectangular spiral stairway in

[12] The author wishes to acknowledge the inspiration from one of the anonymous reviewers' reference of Xi Xi's allegorical short story 'Marvels of a Floating City'.

[13] Based on a biblical story, Blake's 'Jacob's Ladder' (c. 1805) depicts a spiral staircase on which angels and God ascend and descend. It is interesting to see how Blake imagined the dreamed ladder to be an inverted spiral staircase, a structure between heaven and earth dreamed by Jacob who receives God's order and blessings (Genesis 29: 12–16).

Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958).[14] But when climbing up the spiral, a sense of repetition and an illusion of progress are created, much like Piskaryov experiences in Gogol's short story 'Nevsky Prospect' – "Watch your step!" (Gogol, 1832/1998, p. 12).[15]

Figure 22 - Stairway (middle part) with a concrete railing (with words inscribed) (2017, author's photo).

[14] For a discussion of staircases and the creation of suspense in Hitchcock's cinema, including *Vertigo*, see Decobert (2008).

[15] The artist Piskaryov hears a warning — "Mind your step!" — from the beautiful woman he is following up a spiral staircase, which, like Nevsky Prospect, creates a "phantasmagorical" (Gogol, 1832/1998, p. 4) effect: he goes nowhere although he thinks he is ascending to somewhere. He kills himself when he realises his disillusionment. The woman's warning, together with the spiral staircase, is an allegory in itself.

Upon reaching Pokfulam Road, the primary vehicular connection between the west end of the Mid-Levels and the Southern District, the sudden opening of one's visual field and the sound of traffic mark the end of the spatial and temporal experience of the ascent. The stair connects two different worlds. The exit/entry point of the spiral stairway is marked by an excess of signs, even an obsolete one for Hon Wah Middle school (Figure 28), serving as a textual reminder of the path just traversed, but which only puts names to the places, not to the experience itself. The unfolding of the spaces made possible by the staircase show how bodily experience is "enforced" by the stairways. Exploring Lo Pan Temple and its neighbourhood on foot (which is the only possible way) evokes a sense of "positive nostalgia" within the body as much as within the mind. Rather than visualising nostalgia on screen in a sentimental manner to long for the imaginary past, a generative form of nostalgia can be achieved with bodily movements and a practical engagement with space through the act of walking the stairs in this part of the city that is deliberately suspended in space and time.

Figure 23 - Spiral staircase (2017, author's photo).

Figure 24 - Roof top view of Lo Pan Temple (2017, author's photo).

Figure 25 - A Close-up of Lo Pan Temple's Rooftop (2017, author's photo).

Figure 26 - William Blake's *Jacob's Ladder* (c.1805), pen and grey ink and watercolour on paper, 39.8 x 30.6 cm, The British Museum, London.

Figure 27 - Spiral staircase (viewed from top) (2017, author's photo).

Figure 28 - Signage on Pokfulam Road (2017, author's photo).

Conclusion

Amazed by the high architectural quality of Lo Pan Temple, Ko (2008, pp. 150–151) wonders why there is only one temple dedicated to the Master of Construction in all of Hong Kong "considering Hong Kong's feverish love affair with construction." Applying Abbas's analysis of Hong Kong's decadent tendency, this "love affair with construction" can be seen as primarily a euphemism for the greedy desire to generate wealth through real estate development.[16] Topographical limitations combined with residential demand have resulted in terraced slopes which need staircases for access. But, at the same time, the walking, experiencing, perceiving, and thinking made possible by the staircases provides an opportunity to rethink not just Hong Kong's physical situation, but also its cultural, social, and political situation as well. Although seemingly hidden and just functional, I have demonstrated the importance of Hong Kong's stair culture as a means of resisting the on-going neo-colonising power of neoliberalism. Taking the stairs is to allow the body and the city to interact, so that they transform each other. Gaston Bachelard (2014, p. 46) differentiates ascending and descending stairways: going down to the cellar imprints our dreams, whereas going up the attic stairs, steeper and more primitive, "bear[s] the mark of ascension to a more tranquil solitude." He also mentions the "joy for the legs" (Bachelard, 2014, p. 46) that comes with ascension. Hong Kong's stairways allow the body to move slowly and freely in its detouring encounters with the city. Since the aleatory nature of such peregrinations opposes the quasi-religious status of capitalistic logic, staircases offer an opportunity to develop inventive and imaginative phenomenological understandings of the city through its very traversal. As a global liberal economy requires full submission of the mind to progress and a commodification of all

[16] The majority of the HKSAR's revenue comes from land leases and taxation. See the Hong Kong *Government Revenue Report* (Census and Statistics Department, 2021).

objects cultural and natural, the most productive way to revolt and achieve ultimate liberation is a self-conscious, phenomenologically informed mobilisation of the body in the staircase city.

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