

Travel and Imagination

Muted signs, traversing desires: a trip with no itinerary in Hong Kong's Kowloon, 1934
[OR, *Street-walking: Geography of Leisure & Control*] / Linda C.H. LAI

[preface] The experiencing subject in place: a post-phenomenological geographic experiment

This project premises on a phenomenological impulse – the desire to tap the complexity of everyday life, to be 'there', virtual-ethnographically, with the quest for a street-level 'immediate experience' in Hong Kong's colonial past between the two World Wars, and the historiographic curiosity to gain access to the sights and sounds and general aura of the colony's urban space in the 1930s. In response, I have inserted myself into the space-time of 1934 Hong Kong (HK) for a walk without an itinerary. The experience that I gain is through the assemblage of found archival material, including newspapers, government documents, yearbooks, found maps and photographs, phone books, movie ads, diaries, biographies, critical writings, literature (novels and poems by local HK, Chinese and English writers) and so on, which fill in the lost details of specific streets and roads from 80 years ago. The found material forms not discursive coherence, but a series of spatially contiguous, linear walks through a few districts in urban HK 1934. The 'experience' I have created is articulated through the narratorial 'I' writing the process of seeing, hearing, observing, orienteering, thinking and questioning, coupling the virtual-perceptual 'I' penetrating through a few thoroughfares of the colony's urban centre, like a first-time visitor, using the present and present continuous tense. The resulting experimental essay situates virtual field work between urban morphology and the phenomenology of atmosphere through naming and describing what is/was on the

surfaces of selected urban places. Rather than arguing for a spatial morphological perspective on atmosphere (Liebst: 2), my virtual walk premises on archaeological sentiments to recover the lost urban morphology. Sentiments are the providers of reasons (Wikipedia on Hume, citing Treatise: 295) that set me to act upon my 'intuition', that is, a series of action to immerse and participate (Goudge, introduction to Bergson: 12), leading to my rediscovery of, and the 'presencing' in, the former colony's urban material surfaces. Such material existence, which has been lost to the domination of monumental history and grand narratives, re-emerges into the perceptual realm through my assemblage of found fragmentary archival objects, thus bringing my attempt for revisionist historical knowledge of the everyday to a full circle.

The tale of my virtual walk in Hong Kong (HK) is set in 1934, a relatively quiet year without any major political crisis – except that the colony was then a hotbed for espionage, with the threat of Japanese invasion severely felt but already experienced alarmingly in China. It was a moment of relief for the HK-British government as the aftermath ripple effects of the anti-colonial General Strike (1925.06-1926.10) gradually died down and life resumed in the colony. The year witnessed the peak of the government's deployment of pacification tactics in population management since 1929 – through the promotion of leisure and internal tourism via the construction of new roads to the urban peripheral, and the relaxation of land purchase and rental legislation. The year also saw a bottom-up 'Cantonization' process forging a local identity around a distinct shared dialect, Cantonese, boosting as a result of the launching of Cantonese-dialect programs in radio broadcasting, consummating in the final arrival of full sound film in Cantonese, and the boom of tea houses around street corners playing Cantonese

songs to catch customers. (Lai, 2000)

My virtual flanerier covers specifically the southern tip of the Kowloon Peninsula, today's heart of tourism, back then in 1934, the government's new site of urban development to ease the over saturated development of the colony's earliest administrative and commercial hub on the HK Island founded 1842. I 'shall' walk through the tourist-swarm main artery Nathan Road, Canton Road, now densely plotted with hotels, and the Temple Street, now known for its night light and street-hawking. The thick description alongside the walk has rich factual value – even as I embody the subjective positions of multiple agency, sometimes engaged in story-telling, other times on-the-spot eye-witnessing. The process-oriented walk aims for enhanced perception and sharpened cognition, highlighting the multi-sensorial, total experience of a journey, yet allowing gaps and ellipses here and there as the perceptual subject is both perceiving from within and via the viewpoints of other documented empirical subjects. The “I” of the walker is multiple. The primary walker is based on a young educated woman who was a regular contributor to a Chinese-language newspaper column in 1934. Through her, I will tie in the less empirical levels of consciousness, such as mindscapes, moods, memories, fantasies and states of mind. I also borrowed the field work of British female philanthropist, Stella Benson, and the subjective vision of local novelist Lui Lun's realist fictional interpellation of HK in the 1930s, to proceed from street to street, like a drifter anticipating chance encounters, at times the curious journalist, the ethnographer, or an investigator.

As a work of historiography, space and place occupy a central position. The critical position I have marked out for myself as at once walker, narrator, ethnographer

and historical enquirer is where a sense of the transcendental, the hermeneutic and the phenomenological converge through a topological narratorial set-up. The use of present continuous tense in my writing refers also back to a mode of temporality Heidegger registers – the 'present', thus the being of things understood in terms of their 'presence' or 'presencing' in the present of a specific place. (Malpas: 9) Heidegger's sense of presence is not confined to just the presence of things in the present, but extends beyond one single mode of temporality. (Malpas: 10-11) My eye-witnessing, yet partial and elliptical account of the city space that I 'walk' through and cognizant through the five senses, allows me to grasp the here and now, thus my being there. I embody the fluid interchangeable notions of 'being' and 'presencing' to mark out the 'horizon of intelligibility' (Malpas: 13) that is only emerging and acquiring shapes and formations as I speak/write to disclose, through compiling found fragments of a specific spot on a specific date of 1934.

The act of 'walking through' and walking through the assemblage of isolated points from 1934 on a coherent spatial plane are complementary to the performance of being. Walking brings together space and time, place and temporality, the ground on which concrete experience plays out. The focus on a single year is a response to the project of the history of everyday life by exploring, first, spatial realism as opposed to event-based temporal accounts of progress/regress and, second, what I consider to be topological, placeful engagement. (Lai, 2006) My spatial premise derives from the insight of Heidegger's place-oriented thinking, a direction that I understand generates a historiographic position that, on the one hand, looks for specificities of a subject as action-makers in concrete space-time coordinates and, on the other, demands individual

doings/makings/beings to be understood as part of a broader life-world. Being in the world is being in place, the key thesis in Malpas' re-mapping of the trajectory of Heidegger's thinking. The question of 'being' (Ereignis) should be addressed from the point of views of 'there' (event, situation), thus 'being there' (Dasein). (Malpas: 14) The body in its spatiality “disrupts the supposed priority of temporality.” (Malpas: 126) The singular event of the walk challenges the pure social, geographical structure – the walk becomes an encounter premised on the experience of a walking subject in concrete places. It leads me to new insights in historiography that is rooted in lived experience in placeful engagement; it also defines my role as a reflexive enquirer who also needs to be 'there' as part of the 'topos' to benefit from my 'sight' of things and the insight they may give. The trajectory of my presencing in the topos I demarcate shuttles between description/history/analysis at one end, and moment-to-moment encounter at the other.

In my tale, the narratorial I's moving from point to point on a road, momentarily turning east and west or north and south to assert its orientation, can be understood as the practice of 'montage' in Deleuze's works on the 'time image' and 'movement' image. 'Time image' calls our attention to the workings of vertical and internal montage within a shot or image, thus the argument that cinema, far from just an aesthetic form, is in fact a new mode of consciousness. The vertical montage within an image holds different moments and sheets of time in one sustained duration; or an image is constantly in a circuitous state of changing levels of consciousness whereby dream and wake, memory and action, past and present and so on are in a constantly fluid state of exchange. 'Movement image' highlights horizontal montage, from image to image, from shot to shot, hinging on the question of 'what's next' – yet the key is not where the series of montage

finally takes us, but the individual moments and the very process of one image superseding the previous. 'Time image' and 'movement image' both point to sustenance – of the single moment, and of linearity in ceaseless forward motion. 'Time image' and 'movement image' are the spatialization of time and the temporalization of space. As Bergson said of space-time, time can only be understood spatially in the process of our attempt to map. (Goudge, introduction to Bergson: 11)

The phenomenology of narration in my flanerite tale is the work of montage as the narrative body is practically the collage-assemblage of different forms of found archival material, each with different textures and voices, turned into the details of a narrated journey, with gaps and disjunctions in between remaining unconcealed, in a prolonged duration as long as I speak/write. In my tale, the dissolution of linear temporality allows contemplation, sensation, dream, illusion, acting here and now to be exchangeable states, as the sights-and-sounds and thoughts I borrow freely all converge in the speech of the present. The hop and flow from one fragment to the next in my tale is not so much for the final culmination of a complete story, nor for the completion of an urban morphological construction, but for the existential moments of durations subject to spatial transportation as the I-flaneur keeps walking. To Bergson, 'duration' is movement in space – the process of becoming, 'an ever-rolling stream of time'. (Bergson: 12) The visible gaps marked by the work of montage create a heightened sense of the phenomenological of the life world.

Montage is the vehicle for the crafting of experience, turning the act of hearing, seeing, bodily motion through space, orienteering, observing, and questioning experience into the continuous process of becoming. By using the present continuous tense, I place

direct awareness before cognition, as I immerse in the flow of the perceptual realm. The walk captures the process of becoming – the experience of a ceaselessly changing process. The use of present continuous tense via walking through is a necessary method to enact duration, as the continuous creation of newness in a future orientation.

As a piece of historiography, my project embraces two ways to know that Bergson characterizes: to occupy a viewpoint around the object of my investigation as well as to find my positions from within. (Bergson: 21) My experimental essay below is the performative enactment of a tourist, looking around with absolute subjective focus, who is also an ethnographer, that is, a gleaner-documenter of concrete, though loose, perceivable fragments surviving from the past, and a historian, a producer of knowledge of the past. I cast the 'I' of the historian to be the 'I' of a tourist whose sight-seeing is also the performative unfolding of time and space, through constructing (narrating) places with layered temporalities. This is how I elevate thick description (the work of ethnography) to accounting the past (the work of historiography). Placefulness breeds the history of being. Walking in order to uncover (what is buried and hidden) and recover (what is lost and ignored) is the anti-thesis of the tourist's walk premised largely on consumption. As for the history of being, the strategic narratorial framework I set up proposes a way to materialize human and more-than-human intra-action at work.

The Walk

I often wonder what gives me the pride of being a Hong Kong Islander except for the reason that I was born and grew up on this island, go to school and still live here, unless if my parents decide to move one day. Kowloon, just 'on the other side of the

harbor' like we Islanders say, has always been the geographical background of my daily movement through the Island. It could be that Kowloon is mainly a product of the 20th century, the way it goes in our daily conversations, a mere offshoot of Hong Kong (HK), unlike the Island, where the heart and soul of the colony lies.¹ On our Island, you have HK's first business centre, first magistrate, first concert hall, first police station, first public school, first hotel, first department store and even the first prison. Every street on HK Island has a counterpart on the Kowloon Peninsula. Our Robinson Road, the first main road built on the mid-level, used to be also the name of Kowloon's main artery, now Nathan Road, renamed since 1908. (Tregear and Berry: 18)

A poem I read one day kindled my curiosity. It is by Wen Yiduo, a key figure of the May Fourth Literary Movement in China, titled “*qi zi zhi ge*” [the song of the seventh son], in which he spoke in the first person on behalf of Kowloon. Calling him(it-)self 'the younger Daughter', Kowloon pleads Mother China's attention to the pain and suffering of her elder Son HK Island. Literary writer *Zhang Ruogu's* travel journal on his visit to HK last May (1933) also concludes with a patriotic lamentation our being occupied by Britain. (Lo: 39) Strange poem! I am proud of being a HK citizen. I don't know about many sufferings on my island.

I also read columnist Lee King-sun [*Li Jingxin*] writing about how he set aside a whole day to make a meaningful trip to Kowloon. [*WKYP*, 30 July 1934, 4:3] How he packed the day with a busy itinerary intrigues me. There seems to be so much to do there: seeing friends and relatives, visiting schools and some of the historical scenic spots and

¹ Hong Kong Island was ceded to Britain in 1842 at the end of The First Opium War under the Treaty of Nanking, whereas the Kowloon Peninsula was added to British possession under a rent-free perpetual lease in 1860 under the Convention of Peking, marking the end of the Second Opium War (1856-58).

so on. As a matter of fact, he has turned the entire trip into a four-part essay series titled “After visiting Hong Kong and Kowloon” [*you Xianggang Jiulong hou*] (1-4). (*WKYP* 30 Jul, 1 Aug, 4 Aug and 8 Aug 1934, 4:3) I read every line with utmost curiosity but am quite disappointed – these articles give me almost no clue to what the Peninsula is really like. I want to hear and feel the steamy noisy streets of the thick residential areas, or to see with my mind's eye the bustling business center that is supposed to be there. His obsession with the less developed part of east Kowloon and the romantic overtone attached to his highly idealized accounts of Kowloon Bay, the Walled City and the Hau Wong Temple [literally 'temple of the Monkey King'] make Kowloon seem like an ancient idyllic spot celebrating nature. What about shopping on Nathan Road? What about the lonely young poet traveler and the middle-age Spanish widow turned hostess in dancing halls in Tsimshatsui that my favorite novelist Lui Lun wrote about? Lui also talks much about Kowloon City as a new hub for young intellectuals and I know many new film companies have set up their shooting studios there. It is frustrating! I need to see Kowloon for myself. I want to do my own walk. I am not going to cram my day with many activities. A map of Kowloon is all I need – I shall stroll leisurely as streets and roads take me, starting from the southern tip of the Kowloon Peninsula. My traveler's journey will begin with crossing the harbour – as both a 'tourist' and 'local citizen'. Hopefully, in the 'foreign' land of Kowloon Peninsula, I should feel a little more at home at the end of my walk. I may even contribute a small article to the *Industrial & Commercial Daily* [*kung sheung ribao*] in which I have published a few of my dairies about my sports activities in their column pages.

Crossing the Harbor

The ferryboat trip from Central, HK Island, to Tsimshatsui in Kowloon takes five minutes, but columnist Fan Ting has spent a few thousand words on the grand beauty of the harbour, which translates into the burst of emotional dramas, the lamentation of tragic romance. Midway through his article ‘On a Ferry Boat’, he shifts from pure scenic description to direct speech relating a female friend’s intimate confession:

“One evening last month, I was invited by Cheung to XX Dancing Hall. After dancing, he invited me to XX Hotel. There I felt so enchanted by him like I was drugged. Whatever he asked of me, I gave my consent. One month later, he turned his eyes away from me as if he didn’t know me at all. This is a wound from which I shall never recover. Tonight, our visit to the dancing hall brought back the pain of my wounds and I couldn’t help it. ...” (*WKYP* 21 Aug 1934, 4:2) Something about this ‘confession’ gets to me – the cautioning voice spitting the danger for a young female who participates in socialite activities. I know I have heard this many times. I remember this newspaper article that goes by the title “*gao shimaon nuzi*” [warning women who are after the trendy and the fashionable], criticizing the ‘new woman’. The author complains about the formation of a new class of leisure women who frequent entertainment places, hang out in dancing halls, cinemas or parks just to catch a man’s attention. (*WKYP* 21 July 1934; 4:3)

Tsimshatsui

Getting off at Star Ferry Pier in Tsimshatsui, I find myself at the southern end of Salisbury Road facing the bus terminus, and greeting me is the 44-meter Clock Tower erected in red bricks and granite marking the entrance to the the 18-year-old Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR) Station. I look up at the 7-meter lightning rod on top of it, wondering if I can also see the steep staircase leading to the tower top inside. A.B.

Hubback, designer of this tower, also designed the Railway Terminus in the Straits Settlement, Malay, our neighbor colony in Asia.² Hushing up brushing by me is a host of rickshaw men lining up to pick passengers. [Map 17] [Photo 33] These rickshaws, painted red, are each manned by a puller with a pointed straw hat. Not for me today! I am going to walk.

To most Chinese people, Tsimshatsui means Salisbury Road, Nathan Road (a left turn from Salisbury and running northward) and what is west of it, including Peking Road and Haiphong Road. East of Nathan are mainly residences occupied by European expats on quiet roads with trees, far from any market place and free from noisy entertainment facilities. [Photo 34]

A dream plan to develop the long strip of land east of the KCR railroad along the shore has been announced. [WKYP 31 Aug 1934; 2:3] “A certain major corporation” has put together HKD300000 to kick off the construction of a much sought after multi-purpose recreation centre for Kowloon residents. The proposed center will extend northward from the KCR terminal to as far as Hung Hom, a wharf area, in the form of a longitudinal open plaza. Facilities on the plaza will include schools, clubhouses, sport fields and so on. The eastern boundary will be turned into a harbor-front boardwalk of concrete surface with trees planted along the way. A portion of the road would be devoted to the construction of a garden, a fountain, plus nine rectangular spaces of 80 feet by 100 feet each for various leisure purposes. The plan also anticipates a skating court and a swimming pool that will extend to the sea, plus hotels, restaurants, shooting courts and so on. The announcement is indeed great news to Kowloon residents. I feel the plan

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clock_Tower_Hong_Kong, read December 30, 2012.

is comparable to putting together the variety of all leisure facilities operating on HK Island from the past century, now in one single event onto one humongous space on the peninsula. Were the plan to materialize, it would be an urban spectacle for the Kowloon side that would for sure dethrone HK Island's status of supremacy.

Readers in 2013 know that the plan was nothing but a glorious pipe dream. No major infrastructural construction occurred along the eastern shore of the Tsimshatsui tip until after the 1970s.

Salisbury Road and Nathan Road

Here I am, right outside the Star Ferry on Salisbury Road, which is known for two buildings, the YMCA Hotel and the grand hotel Peninsula. [Photo 35] Right across the road from Peninsula Hotel next to the KCR rail tracks is a small leisure facility called the Little Luzon entertainment-park with shooting and other regular games. I find myself in the midst of a crowd hissing around an ambulance's open rear doors. Pedestrians around me are murmuring. Some say a 12-year-old girl just had her left leg wounded by a misfired gunshot in one of the games. At the rear of the ambulance, I see a young man. Some say he is the girl's companion. [WKYP 18 Nov 1934; 2:2]

Kowloon Wharf – Canton Road

I decide to explore the west side instead of the east. From the Star Ferry, I walk up Canton Road with the Kowloon Wharf (KW) on the left (west) along the shore. (Fung: 37)³ Next to the Star Ferry in its northwest, Kowloon Wharf (the holding company) is the biggest landowner in the southwestern part of the Kowloon Peninsula. The wharf has five artificial outlets to load goods and passengers, one of them reserved for the British liner

³ The full name for Kowloon Wharf was the Hong Kong & Kowloon Wharf and Godown Company Limited, co-founded in 1886 by the colony's two biggest business enterprises, Chater and Jardine-Matheson.

the Empress. (HKGPR album #1/*/392)⁴ KW has over fifty warehouses serviced by a few hundreds of coolies. Other job positions range from warehouse management, weighing, slot assignment to the tallyman, totaling another few hundreds. I walk by the five major piers one by one. It is eye-opening: two train coaches are being unloaded onto a large metal ramp from one of the ships, one of them a dining-parlor-car. (HKMH – Clark Album #P92.3.90 and #P92.3.91)⁵ [Photo 37] I am overwhelmed by the countless on-going activities surrounding me. Canton Road does not feel like a road to me. It is a big sea of people I have to elbow my way through. In the midst of the screeches of wheels and carts carrying cargoes, finely dressed males and females, Chinese as well as European, come to pick up their visiting friends and relatives on arrival from ocean liners such as the Empress.

KW is a main generator of capital for HK as an entreport, so says our textbook. Below its five outlet-bridges, though, is a totally different 'subterranean' world of marine life. This “under-bridge” community has about a hundred plus *tanka* people, an indigenous boat people whose ancestors were here before HK became a colony. Under the bridges, they find full subsistence with a fast breeding fish in summer and shellfish throughout the year, which they catch in baskets. Most of the working people gather around one of the five bridges. This is a rotation system they have invented: in order to preserve a sustainable catch through the year, they concentrate their catch at one bridge only in a certain week, and move to the next bridge the following week. Their main

⁴ The photo collection at the HK Government's Public Records finds a series of cruisers that had docked in the harbor in 1934, among them the “Empress” Liner.

⁵ My description is based on photos from the private family albums from the 1930s of Frederick George Clark deposited at the Resource Centre of the Hong Kong Museum of History. Clark was a civil engineer employed by the Royal Naval Dockyard on the Hong Kong Island.

customers are coolies and other residents in the vicinity. (*WKYP* 16 August 1934).

At the end of the first block of Canton Road northward from the Star Ferry, I turn right (eastward) into Peking Road, which cuts into Nathan Road at the end of the block. The first eye-catching structure is the market on the right, sitting opposite KW's carpentry workshop across the street. Outside the market, a government notice announces the second 'Safety Campaign' of the year organized by the Police Department to promote road safety. I remember the campaign was first launched due to numerous cases of citizens knocked down by cars and killed while crossing the road. What's the urgency for a second-round campaign? Probably due to a rise in casualty figures in recent months. The announcement, in the form of a poster, has stills from a short movie on road catastrophes, the kind of public service announcements shown in cinemas before the main feature. The design of the poster calls attention to images from a new version of the publicity short to be screened in the evening of September 1-13, this time at twenty different outdoor locations, mainly outside markets and on playgrounds, in the urban area of HK Island and Kowloon. The Tsimshatsui Market on Peking Road has been scheduled for September 8, and the show would begin at 7:30pm. [*WKYP* 27 August 1934; 2:4]⁶

Near the market, a pawnshop catches my attention. Next to it is another one with Japanese words on the signage. (HKGPR photos #8/9/280 and #8/9/292) Across the street from where I am, at the junction of Peking Road at Hankow Road, I see the famous Star Theatre [*Jing Xing Xiyuan*] with a huge advertising board facing the street on the ground level. [*Jingxing xiyuan*]. [*WKYP* July 21; 4:3] Star Theatre is a two-story building with its

⁶ The locations for the PSAs range from playgrounds, temporary non-built space between buildings, new reclaimed land from sea-filling along the shore, markets, empty space near ferry piers, sports ground, space outside a police station, and in a few cinemas.

main entrance on No. 17 Hankow Road, with a tower structure built on top of the southern end of the building facing Peking Road. [Photo 38, 39, 40] The Star Theatre was constructed in 1920 from the material of the old Victoria Theatre on Des Voeux Road Central on the HK Island. Most of the masonry, timber and steel were transported across the Victoria Harbor and reassembled to recover the same appearance. (SCMP 17 Feb 1937 and Carl T. Smith archival notes #00178753)

It is August 23. Star is showing a 1931 British release *The Woman Between* (aka *The Woman Decides* in US release; dir. Miles Mander) for the second day of its two-day round, right after a 3-day program of *Gold Diggers of 1933*.⁷ A screening has just finished. I pause to observe the front lobby. I have not seen that many women going to movies by themselves like I do. And here comes a woman older than me, in her mid-twenties I think, catches my attention as she emerges from the cinema by herself. She looks absorbed. Her leisurely stroll distinguishes her from the other visitors who are hurrying away chitchatting with their companions. She reminds me of the wife of the bohemian protagonist in Lui Lun's novel *Chewing Gum*, who often hangs out in movie theatres to kill time as her husband obsesses with an artsy female pop star. (Lui 1951: 1-30)⁸ With her long strides I also imagine a sense of loss. Was she also there in the movie to see if chance would lead her to her husband and his secrete lover once again? Wasn't it in front of the movie *Love Parade* (1929) with Jeanette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier that the lover once decided to dump her husband? This 'lonely wife' gradually disappears around the street corner. Here's another woman emerging from the cinema,

⁷ *Gold Diggers of 1933* was shown for two more rounds at Oriental (September 9-11) and Kwong Ming (December 2-?) in 1934.

⁸ This is based on Lui Lun's short story "Chewing Gum."

briskly, at the rhythm of some chewing gum in her mouth. If Lui Lun were here, he would have said the way she moves reminds one of Barbara Stanwyck. Would she be the bohemian pop star Lui Lun's male characters lust after? The kind who will take the initiative to converse with male strangers. Her face the demo of the latest cosmetics. Her best numbers: *Night of the Bay of Napoli* and the *Prisoner's Song*. Slim and wiggling: I could see her doing belly dances in a straw skirt. She should also have a radio in her house; and she plays the guitar. She probably lives in Kowloon Tong, the “garden city” residential area engineered by the government on the peninsula. She may well have all the tempting qualities for the opposite sex, but I also sense her mockery for those who may fall for her.

By 1934, most non-Chinese language films shown in local cinemas are from the major studios of the United States. Star Theatre in a way preserves its unique role as the colony's biggest showcase for films from Britain. About one-third of all the British films exhibited in the colony this year are shown at Star, where films from Germany, Italy and France are shown occasionally.⁹ Star Theatre does not show films made in HK or Shanghai. Its main sponsors are the Europeans and Americans living in the area, or local Chinese with high English proficiency. Another main source of audience is very likely to be the international guests who are staying in the three hotels nearby. There is the Kowloon Hotel (completed 1923), on Middle Road (one block south of Peking Road) at Hankow Road. There is the top-class Peninsula Hotel (completed in 1928), right in front of Kowloon Hotel, with its back on Middle Road and front entrance on Salisbury Road. There is also the YMCA guesthouse next to Peninsula on its south separated by Hankow

⁹ The estimation is based on my archival research on film exhibition for 1934 in the colony.

Road. [Photo 41] I remember my parents telling me what a news-maker Star once was between 1923 and 1926, when its live opera performances were the favorite object for live radio broadcast experiments before government-run radio broadcast program officially began on 30 June 1928. (RTHK 1988: 13, 16)

Unlike other cinemas also with a foreign film program, Star has never offered any synopsis or oral explanation in the Chinese language. Before sound films arrived from the West, in cinemas with a stronger concentration of Chinese audience, interpreters were hired for silent foreign films. One cinema might hire as many as a handful of interpreters to take turn for the job. (Tong, Toong, Cheung and Mo: 105)¹⁰ Now, at Star, though the program has relaxed to include some Chinese films once in a while, the effort to facilitate Chinese visitors for their English-language program remains minimal. (*WKYP* 19 Aug 1934: 4:2)¹¹ In *WKYP*, the Chinese-language daily I read, Star's movie ad is only one-half of Hong Kong Theatre's and one-sixth of Alhambra's by size. Are Star's golden days all gone, or is it because we Chinese people are of really low priority to them?

I am standing in front of ABC Cafe right across the street from Star Theatre. The owner is a British lady with a grave look. Conducting chores is a fragile young waitress with a sad but nice-looking face. She must be Clara (Lui 1948: 1-44): hiding in her new job after quitting Peacock Cafe run by the Russians in the neighborhood in order to escape from her Philippine sponsor, a musician who works in a 'dancing college'.¹² Clara loves literature – her favorite novel *La Dame aux Camelias* (*Camille*; Alexandre Dumas

¹⁰ Tong, Toong, Cheung and Mo, p. 105.

¹¹ Mao Dan [*Mou Dan*], “*ban dao wen jian ji*” [what I hear and see on the peninsula] series.

¹² A “dancing college” [*tiao wu yuan*] in the 1930s was not purely a school where people learned dancing, but an entertainment institution where people sought companionship through dancing. The age, number and place of origins of dancing hostesses were publicized to attract customers.

jr.). She also goes to church. She is struggling to run away with a young Chinese writer who fell in love with her at first sight while staying in HK temporarily to complete a screenplay.¹³

Across the street from Star Theatre on Hankow at Peking Road, too, is an empty space with some construction projects about to commence. Most buildings in the area are more or less four stories high, with shops like the ABC Cafe occupying the ground floor and above it for residential usage mainly. There is something else about Peking Road – most stores carry *yang huo* [goods from the west]. Buildings here are modern and well equipped, mainly occupied by Europeans and the well-to-do Chinese. Beyond Star Theatre further east in the direction of Nathan Road, the street continues to be busy with construction work, mostly started a year ago as I am told.

The Ethnic Community of the Chaozhouese – Canton Road and Haiphong Road

The great contrast between the European highlights on Peking Road and the indigenous *tanka* people I saw near the wharf is striking. I decide to walk back, past Star Theatre, to the western end of Peking Road to continue northward on Canton Road. As I draw near, I find myself moving into a thick, undifferentiated mass of hailing, chanting, singing, and the sounds of different Chinese musical instruments underlined by the hysterical lamentation of the *er hu* (nicknamed “coconut” among the Cantonese, and often described as “the violin of the Chinese”). A couple of blocks up Canton Road at Haiphong Road, a hustling bustling crowd is fidgeting ahead of me. It is the local

¹³ This is based on another of Lui Lun's novel, *Hei Li La* [Clara] (completed 1937), in which the female protagonist Clara is trapped among her pimp, a Philippino-musician, the colleagues of a Russian café, a mean-spirited female English owner of another café where she works, and a young Chinese novel and film writer who, passing by Hong Kong, falls in love with her. The idea of Tsimshatsui as a multi-ethnic center of struggle for survival is most alive in this work. See also Lui Lun's *Xibanya xiaojie* [the Spanish miss], for similar concern for multi-ethnic livelihood in Tsimshatsui and Yaumatei.

associations of the Chaozhouese “celebrating” the Chinese Ghost Festival.¹⁴ The date is Thursday, 23 August 1934, the fourteenth day of the seventh month of the Chinese Lunar Calendar. From afar, I see a special altar with joss-sticks five feet tall and three-inch diameter burning, next to which slaughtered chickens, pigs and lobsters, all salted, are laid on wooden planks surrounded by sand. Different kinds of performances are going on in a few street corners on temporarily erected bamboo “stages.” Here I am, in front of a traditional puppet show. I have to get really close as these puppets are just a few inches tall manipulated by iron wires; some characters I recognize are from folk tales, some are new inventions, I think. A troupe of children are making music for the show. Nearby is the regional opera of the Chaozhouese [*chao ju*]. A classmate of Chaozhouese original told me that in occasions like the Ghost Festival, a must-do opera number is the famous ‘the ghost avenging at ‘Kwong Cheong Lung’ [*da nao Guang Chang Long*], a love story between a man and a female ghost. There is simply too much heat and noise and far too many people. I only manage to get inside one of the halls to have glimpses of a special tableau set of the Eight Fairies, a Taoist folk legend most Chinese know, surrounded by chairs with embroidered covers and offerings that are small dishes of fish.

Retreating from the craze of Chaozhouese festivities, on the northern side of Haiphong Road east of Canton Road is the Whitfield Barrack. On the southern side across the street are residential buildings, a dozen of which are KW properties used for dormitories for the company’s Chaozhouese coolies. In fact, a large proportion of western Tsimshatsui’s residents are KW employees, or those of nearby business firms and the

¹⁴ The Chaozhouese have been the biggest regional ethnic group among the Hongkong Chinese. Although administratively speaking Chaozhou is in the northern part of the Guangdong Province, they have their own dialect and customs distinct from the rest of Guangdong, and culturally speaking, they are much closer to the people of the Fujian province in its adjacent north.

KCR station. Besides the dormitories on Haiphong Road, Chaozhouese people also filled up a group of buildings called the Thirty Houses on Canton Road. Most of the buildings are about four stories tall. Looking up, I see a constellation of clothes hanging to be dried on bamboos sticking out from the buildings. 

In the 1930s, Tsimshatsui residents of Chaozhou origin take it upon themselves the obligation to organize Ghost Festival rituals. To them, the Ghost Festival is more zealously remembered than the Chinese New Year. Most of the Chaozhouese in Tsimshatsui cluster around Haiphong Road and Canton Road in the district. They are mostly permanent or temporary coolies for KW. There are about a few hundreds of them in the district, and organized under three local associations, Tai Shing, Tim Shing and Hop Wo Shun. It is a custom that the Chinese Ghost Festival is a public holiday for all coolies. A working class native Chaozhouese have to donate two to three HK dollars for the event, which is more than what a movie ticket costs. The better-to-do donate as much as over a hundred dollar. [*WKYP* 30 Aug 1934; 4:2 Mao Dan part 2]

It is the peak hour of the day. I am surrounded by coolies swarming through the road to get to work or out of it. I try to imagine what this street was like two years ago when trade depression just set in. I should hear the sounds of woman's wooden clogs during the peak hours – they are the 300 to 400 female workers employed at a big textile and weaving factory manufacturing sweaters and socks on Haiphong Road. I also imagine invading silence setting in as night fell upon the shutting off of noisy weaving machines at the end of the day. [*WKYP* 21 July 1934; 4:3] Standing here and now, business seems fine and steady. Most restaurants are Chaozhouese if they are Chinese, offering inexpensive food in reasonably clean facilities. Many of them hire young women

to wait tables to attract more customers, as the saying goes.

Barrier between Tsimshatsui and Yaumati [see Map 4, 5 for relative location]

Tsimshatsui has long been appropriated by the British Army for military use due to its relatively flat and open topography as well as its being less than a mile away from the opposite side of the harbor. The monumental presence of the Whitfield Barracks, on the north side of Haiphong Road and east of Canton Road between Canton and Nathan, has taken away a big chunk of land.¹⁵ Together with a small affiliating naval yard along the west coast, Whitfield cuts off Tsimshatsui, the southern tip [of Kowloon], from Yaumati which is immediately north of it. (Leeming: 67) [image]

In order to get to Yaumati, I have to make a detour through Nathan Road. The road is wide enough for 4 vehicles to go through side by side – it is a kind of spaciousness I have not experienced on HK Island. I have immediate good vibes for the century-old tall trees which form natural shades on both sides of this very busy yet reasonably sun-soaked road. [image] Columnist Mao Dan describes the road as the most ideal place for dates and long strolls in the evening. What a pity that the government has announced to cut down some of the trees! Mao also worries that direct exposure to electric lights without the trees will turn the road into hang-out spots for night-life lovers and prostitutes. (*WKYP* 12 Aug 1934: 4:2)¹⁶ [Photo 36]

Jordan Road – Koon Chung Theatre [Guan Chong xiyuan]

After walking a few blocks northbound on Nathan Road, past Austin Road, I make a left turn on Jordan Road. Jordan Road, the boundary between Tsimshatsui and the

¹⁵ In 1970, Whitfield Barracks was finally demolished and the site was turned to commercial development.

¹⁶ Mao Dan [*Mu Dan*], “*yan xia hua Mi Dun*” [on Nathan in the deep summer], “*ban dao wen jian ji*” [what I heard and saw on the peninsula] series.

adjacent district of Yaumati, parallels Haiphong Road, a few blocks north of it, and

perpendicular to Nathan Road the north-south-running artery of the peninsula. Until

1927, Jordan Road's development has been slow and 'had very few businesses'.

(Leeming: 68) Although the Chaozhouese community is no more than a ten-minute walk away from Star Theatre and its higher-end hotel neighborhood, a visit to an “appropriate” movie theatre for the Chaozhouese takes a 10-to-15-minute walk northbound in the opposite direction, at the 3-year-old Koon Chung Theatre, no. 60, Jordan Road at Woo Sung Street's south side.¹⁷ Like many minor cinemas, Koon Chung has no daily listings in any of the major local Chinese-language newspapers I read. It is run by Chinese people with no connection to any major cinema business conglomerates. It mainly offers a repertory program, especially second-run *guo pian*¹⁸ alternating with little known silent films from Europe and the US, at a time when most foreign films are cherished for sound.

The cinema district of Yaumati on Nathan Road

Nathan Road no. 344-362 – Kwong Ming Cinema [Guang Ming xi yuan]

After a short detour for Koon Chung Theatre, I find my way back to the junction of Jordan and Nathan Road. Walking northward on the west side of Nathan for about three minutes, I see Kwong Ming Cinema across the road, on Nathan Road at Sai Kung Street, the cinema is owned by the Hongkong Amusements Limited (HKAL). It has a mixed program of re-run films, over 75% from Paramount and Metro-Goldwyn. As for 1934, they have already shown 5 [of the 13] local made films for this year. I know HKAL also owns King's Theatre and Queen's Theatre in Central, the two grand movie palaces

¹⁷ Koon Chung started business in 1931 and was closed down on 10 August 1939. The location was then turned into the western part of the King George V park for the general public.

¹⁸ The term *guo pian* refers to movies made in China or HK, as opposed to Hollywood or European films.

where I have watched a couple of films. By comparison, their portfolio on the Kowloon side seems to be less spectacular.

Nathan Road – Majestic Theatre [Da Hua xiuyan]

I catch sight of part of the sign of another cinema behind the trees a little up ahead on the opposite side of road. I cross the road and find the six-year-old Majestic Theater, on Nathan at Pek Hoi Street. Trees in front of the cinema provide a nice big shades from the sun. Majestic has a facade that looks like a church to me. On its right (south), buildings are three stories tall whereas on its left (north), a 4-story building with big verandahs looks about the same height as the cinema.  Majestic, a major showcase for western films in Yaumati, is owned by the H.K. & Kowloon Film Company [*Jiu Long yingye gongsi*]. (Carl T. Smith's archival note #32891-2)¹⁹ I have heard a lot about this company. The managing personnel is connected to a much broader network of investment in film, movie houses and entertainment business. Manager of Majestic Lo Kock-fe is also the Manager of San Lok Fung Records since he returned to HK in 1929 from Cambodia, where he founded no less than a handful of theaters and film organizations. Before his adventure to Southeast Asia in 1925, he was Publicity Director for HKAL which he joined in 1922. (Carl T. Smith archival notes # 32891-2)²⁰ Majestic's Managing Director Liang Chi-hao also holds the same position for China Entertainment and Land Investment registered in 1930. He has also been the Chairman of the famous South China Athletic Association, a major patron for sports activities in the

¹⁹ The original name of the company was read in Chinese in my research as *Jiu Long yingye gongsi*, literally meaning 'Kowloon film enterprise company'.

²⁰ Smith's notes refer to *A Century of Commerce* (1947), p. 147. The notes also showed Lo's training in Chinese medicine and involvement in labor union and political groups. Back in Hong Kong after 1929, he also organized the San Kwong Company, using record machine Havitone.

colony, since 1922, and for the Tung Wah Hospital, HK's major charity organization.

(Carl T. Smith archival notes # 25051)²¹ At once owners of entertainment businesses and philanthropist, they are a new species of our local Chinese elite! They are no more 19th-century compradores – native Chinese who worked for foreign companies to help Westerners to trade in Chinese societies – but make-doers for the local people.

The day is August 9. Majestic has taken this day out of its regular American film program to test the waters for local-made Cantonese sound films²² with Zhonghua Silent and Sound Films' *Tragedy of Love* by Li Beihai, the elder brother of Li Minwei, an innovator of Chinese cinema based in Shanghai and Hong Kong. The posters outside the cinema also announces that the main feature will be preceded by a short documentary on a performance of *Wu Yang huanghou* [the queen of Canton, title of an opera number] by famous Cantonese opera artist Pak Kui-wing [*Bai Qurong*]. I have seen this kind of arrangement in many theatres on the Island. [check movie ad image]

Nathan Road no. 380 – Po Hing Theatre [Pu Qing xiyuan]

Less than a minute away from Majestic, Po Hing Theatre openly proclaims its support of Chinese films.²³ [Photo 42-a-b] A big sign by the entrance screams: 'starting this day, any visitor who buys a ticket at Po Hing will get for free a pair of socks by local garment manufacturer *Li Gong Min* or an under-sweater from department store *Da Xin*'. This is to celebrate Po Hing's premiere on the Kowloon Peninsula [sic] of Lianhua's *Liang Xiao (Fine Nights)* scripted by Zhu Shilin known for his literary touches. [WKYP

²¹ Notes cite *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 8? Jan 1930.

²² 1934 was the last year in the history of Hong Kong cinema when silent films were still shown. The same year saw a few curious film companies doing their first experiments in sound film. In 1935, all locally produced films were with sound.

²³ See image of Po Hing's front steps at: <http://gwulo.com/node/2853>

July 14; 1:1 and 2:4] More slogans inside the theatre describe an ongoing “*guo pian* and Chinese products” campaign [*guo pian guo huo yundong*]. On the in-house movie ads, I notice they have a regular mix of live Cantonese opera performances and the screening of *guo pian*. On one wall is posted the same announcement I saw in Tsimshatsui on the government's second road safety campaign. The screening of the publicity shots at Po Hing has been scheduled for September 9 at 8:30pm on the empty space outside the cinema. I also recall reading newspaper announcements on and off of Po Hing turned community hall for Kowloon residents – for example, this year's variety show celebrating Children's Day was held at Po Hing. [*WKYP* April 4; 2:2]

Nathan Road no. 383-389 – Alhambra Theatre [Ping An xiyuan]

Across the road from Po Hing is a building with a big sign that says Chinese Gymnastics Society [*zhongguo jianshen hui*]. On its immediate right (north) is HKAL's Alhambra Theatre, opened February 1, 1934. [Photo 43] The new cinema is bounded by Kansu Street in the south, Market street in the north, and Suchow Lane at its rear (west). Now I see! This is HKAL's movie palace for the Kowloon residents, the counterpart of HK Island's Queen's and King's. Alhambra does not look like just another cinema for me. Its front has the fresh look of a new completed building with a small crowd gathering, something I did not see in the five cinemas I have passed by in my stroll. Are they passers-by, on-lookers, or customers? Alhambra is obviously a hot spot. Reports suggest the British-HK HKAL and the Chinese-pawn Po Hing have been competing against each other to capture audiences.

This is the evening of January 31, 1934. The usually quiet portion of Nathan Road across from King's Park is packed with celebrities with much 'heat and noise', as the

Chinese expression goes. Alhambra Theatre is celebrating its much delayed Grand Opening after a sluggish 9-year planning and preparation period. The event has attracted a full house. It is a special program tonight, consisting of *Curiosities*, *Bring 'em Back Sober*, a 'Mickey Mouse' plus other cartoon pictures, a musical film, and a color-tone revue. The guest of honor for the inauguration, the Hon. Dr. Robert H. Kotewall, has inaugurated three grand theatres and many important social events in the colony – definitely the most ideal choice for a substitute of the HK Governor who couldn't make it. The gentleman accompanying Kotewall, I am told, is J.M. Noronha, HKAL's Chairman. (Feng, pp1583-1588)²⁴ In his inauguration speech, Kotewall pinpoints Alhambra's advantageous location of being in between two large residential areas of the Kowloon Peninsula, Tsimshatsui and Kowloon Tong, "Alhambra is placed at the very doorstep of Kowloon residents."²⁵

Alhambra's regular screening opens with Warner Brothers' *Gold Diggers of 1933* at 2:30pm on February 1, 1934. All of the current and 'coming soon' movies displayed in its lobby are Warners productions – unlike Majestic Theatre across the road, which exhibits films from all US companies except Warners films. I gather that Alhambra should be much appreciated by Warners who is still struggling to maintain its market share in quality sound film back home in the US. Many details in the lobby display also boast Alhambra's being the showcase for quality sound film, or else the colony's new-

²⁴ Alhambra in (HK) in 1934 was part of a broad theatre network managed by a strong financial partnership. Alhambra's Chinese name, *Ping An*, meaning 'peace', was shared by a number of cinemas within its pan-Chinese consortium, which covered Beijing and Tianjing.

²⁵ According to Kotewall's speech, the Hongkong Amusements Limited was at that time running nine cinema theatres in the colony. According to my research, these include Queen's, Tai Yat (aka First) (not far from Alhambra), Star (in Tsimshatsui), and New World (Central), among others. Another source other than the *South China Morning Post* spells Rosselet as C.S. Rosslet.

generation movie palace. (*WKYP* 1 Jan 1934; 1:2) To be a 'first-grade' 'movie palace', the HKAL has put in almost a million HK dollars. A report on Alhambra's grand opening in the elite English-language daily *South China Morning Post* (*SCMP*), however, carries a sarcastic note, "Kowloon has reason to congratulate itself on possessing a theatre that is a credit to the mainland [i.e. that peninsula], and the Hong Kong Amusement Limited is to be congratulated upon its initiative in sinking so much money, ...such a modern cinema house [was built] on the *wrong* side of the harbor, [and it is] up to Kowloon residents to show that the Company's faith in them [is] justified." (*SCMP* 2 Feb 1934, 9) Whatever such comments mean, I do feel Alhambra's being endowed with a unique leadership position in culture in Kowloon – at least that seems to be HKAL's aspirations.

This is now Alhambra in the month of May 1934. In its fourth month of business, the theatre management is launching a special campaign to draw movie-goers from HK Island to its deluxe-class installations and facilities. Effective May 19, Alhambra has announced, anyone with an Alhambra movie-ticket of any price group will get a special coupon available after 12:30pm every day for a free ferry trip with the Yaumati Ferry Company. (Leeming, 68)²⁶ Those who cross the harbor in their motorcars via the 3-year-old vehicular ferry facilities can be exempt from the regular fares. In addition, a special ten-cent-per-head charge would entitle each visitor to a round-trip journey valid after 4:30pm every day. [*WKYP* May 16, 1934; 2:1] The first film to go along with such special benefit is Columbia's *Men in Her Life* (1931). The ferry pier referred to is the Jordan Road ferry pier, which is about 15-20 minutes' walk from the Alhambra. The real

²⁶ The ferry at Jordan Road started its service in 1924, whereas the vehicular ferry service between Victoria and Jordan Road began in 1932.

target audience from the HK Island seems to be the well-to-do who can afford to travel in one's own cars.²⁷ Based on my daily newspaper reading, the idea of a deluxe palace is associated with a more decent movie audience – which is in line with the government's intention to cultivate a more visible European presence on the now developing Kowloon Peninsula. As I stroll around the theatre, I am more certain that my view is no casual hunch: the completion of Alhambra's cinema facilities is accompanied by an annex of European-style residential housing, mainly for Europeans, with shops on the ground floor. This annex was completed before the cinema – the latter's opening date delayed due to the late arrival of its air conditioning system.

The announcement has now been out for two weeks. *WKYP* reports, “Ever since Alhambra Theatre collaborated with Ferry Company on ‘free ferry’ benefits for customers and vehicles, movie audience visiting Alhambra from the Hong Kong Island side has increased to around a thousand or more. Many indeed came in their motorcars via the vehicular ferry service although the exact number is not known.” As I look to the other side of Nathan Road from across Alhambra, I see an extended stretch of unused space, which is big enough for over a hundred cars to park. (*WKYP* 30 May, 2:4) The obvious effort to help Islanders like me to ‘overcome’ the harbor is amusing.

Evening sets in. Alhambra is like a diamond in the dark. Now I understand the content of a publicity signage I saw earlier on outside Nathan Hotel, opened 1930, near Majestic and Po Hing: “from the vantage point of your room you might be able to see the towering Alhambra Theatre and gaze on the dazzling electric lamps.”²⁸

²⁷ Motor cars were not commonplace in Hong Kong until 1910 and mainly owned by the British people in the colony.

²⁸ See publication by China Light & Power, chapter 3, section 1, p. 42, read in December 2012 on:

Nathan Road – New Tai Yat Theatre [Xin Da Yi xiyuan]

Further north on the same side of Nathan, within a minute away from Alhambra at the Public Square Street, I find an aging item of HKAL's cinema portfolio, a big cinema that looks a bit dilapidated. Formerly Tai Yat Cinema Theatre (= first movie house) and founded in 1919 on a site further north, it has been renamed New Tai Yat Theatre and relocated to the current site in 1922. In 1929, it was expanded to its current size of 17187 square feet from 8800 square feet. A cinephile I am, I do not recall reading any daily listings in the Chinese dailies I read, but the cinema is obviously still open. Display material inside and outside the cinema shows its regular program split between repertory and second-run recent films, also a thorough mix of *guo pian* and foreign films. HKAL Managing Director J.M. Noronha has been in negotiation with the government to extend the duration of the lease for New Tai Yat as well as the nearby Yaumati Cinematograph Theatre [*You Ma Di xiyuan*], founded in the 1920s, from 3 years to 6 years, but none of the plans has come through yet. Had he made his way, his dream to monopolize movie theatre business in Yaumati would have become a big threat to other stake-holders. But it is obvious to me that HKAL's portfolio is extremely varied.

Here I am, on Waterloo Road approximately two minutes further north of Public Square Street, about to leave Nathan Road for my southbound stroll back to the Star Ferry. I am totally amazed: five theatres within a 10-minute walk on both sides of Nathan Road, each with a different history, marketing objectives and contrastive conception of its role as cinema and commercial/cultural institution, and yet the ambition of one company

struggling. This kind of clustering of cinemas distributed in a few nearby streets is only known to me in Central on HK Island.

The 'other' Yaumati

From the intersection of Waterloo Road and Nathan Road, I make a left turn and move into a very different Yaumati from the one on Nathan. Here lies the main settlement of the district, west of Nathan, with all streets forming a rectangular grid plan.

[Map 18] A large part of the land under my feet and westward towards the harbor shore was reclaimed from sea by land-filling. (Leeming: 4, 67) [Map 19] I imagine the sea roaring beneath my feet. Before 1920, Yaumati was mainly a dockyard and village communities. Since then it has evolved into a self-contained district with its own district centre, markets, restaurants and other cultural. [Photo 44a-e] The clustering of similar trade and business is an important feature of the Yaumati streets. Away from Nathan Road on Waterloo and southward, I pass by Portland Street, Shanghai Street, Reclamation Street, Temple Street and so on. In my random strolls back and forth, I see wine merchants gathering on Temple Street and Reclamation Street, metal workshops and dealers of charcoal and firewood mainly on Reclamation Street, dealers of salt and coal at the northern end of Canton Road, whereas dealers of used clothing, hardware merchants and Chinese jewelers form their cluster of specialization on Shanghai Street. (Leeming: 84) [Photo 45] Yaumati is 'at once metropolitan and suburban, industrial, commercial and residential, seafaring and land-based'. (Leeming: 68)

Off Nathan Road – the make-doings of the everyday

On Reclamation Street and Waterloo, I come upon yet another cinema – the 4-

year-old Yaumati Theatre²⁹, an eager sponsor of local cinema, capitalizing on a patriotic-nationalistic ethos. Or is it just a business formula? The day is July 15. Yaumati is holding its second “use Chinese products” campaign, compatible to Po Hing Theatre’s ‘watch *guopian*’ initiatives with Chinese products for freebies. [*WKYP* July 14; 1:1 and 2:4] Signs and posters scream: any ticket for the Cantonese-dubbed version of Shanghai film company Mingxing’s *Shi Lian* [loss of love] can be used to redeem a box of baby powder of the Orchid brand solely distributed through Sincere Department Store. [*WKYP* July 15; 1:1 front page] [poster]

To the left of Yaumati Theatre’s entrance is Shanghai Street, parallel Reclamation and one block closer to Nathan. In the years to come, Shanghai Street would become Yaumati’s main street, packed with Chinese-style jewelers, garment businesses and expertise shops for Chinese wedding gowns and bedding for the newly wed. (Leeming, 71) In 1934, the neighborhood is marked by the noisy, jolly “publicity group” [*“xuanchuan tuan”*] proclaiming the “gospel” of Chinese herbal medicine. The group, with a dozen members all known to be “healers” of rare diseases using Chinese herbs, runs a herbal medicinal tea shop on Shanghai Street. If I had been here a few months earlier, I could have seen with my own eyes the much talked about waitresses serving the customers who packed the entire shop. Ask anyone in the neighbourhood, and they will tell you how much herbal tea you should drink to qualify for a chance to attend their “publicity” gatherings in the evening. I have no problem seeing it with my mind’s eye the group members each doing a special number with background music played on a gramophone as the sun sets. That would be the chance for each member to present the

²⁹ Yaumati Theatre opened on 30 June 1930; read 31 Jan 2013: <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/20979>

herbal medicine of their own specialty, usually turned into pills, powder form or adhesive patches ready for use and for immediate sale. In front of me now is just a vacant shop premise. Rumors brew that their prosperous business suddenly quit one day due to disagreement among the group members. (*WKYP* 28 Dec 1934, 4:2)³⁰

Within an hour-long northbound stroll on the Kowloon Peninsula with many on-looker's pauses, I feel many different worlds have brushed by. It is time I tracked back southward in the direction of the Star Ferry. I follow Reclamation Street, stroll southward in the direction of Tsimshatsui. I then side-track into Temple Street, parallel and east of Reclamation.

Off Nathan Road – Temple Street and its world of licensed public conveniences

I don't think my parents and teachers would love the idea of me walking down Temple Street at all. I am absolutely thrilled and curious being here and yet maneuvering with a great caution that I try to shake off. Here I am moving step by step into the heart of a site of legal brothels for Chinese customers. I look intensely and cautiously, knowing that what is in front of me will vanish by June next year (1935) when a complete ban of prostitution is in effect, as the Government has announced. Temple Street emerged as the new brothel center in Kowloon since 1903, when the Government moved the center of prostitution on HK Island westward from Possession Point to Shek Tong Tsui to accommodate the growing number of Chinese residents living near Central.³¹

Anecdotes I have read in popular literature lure me to look for the last traces of

³⁰ Mao Dan [*Mu Dan*], “*Xuan Chuan Tuan*,” part of the “What I Heard and Saw on the Peninsula” [*ban dao wen jian ji*] series..

³¹ Possession Point is adjacent to the business hub in Central on its west, also the location where British soldiers first raised the Union Jack in January 1841. Shek Tong Tsui is further west along the shore of the Victoria Harbor, where Chinese residents concentrated.

the 'small houses' [*si zai*]. Prostitutes in “small houses” are unlicensed, and therefore do not need to go through the mandatory annual physical check-up imposed by the government’s Sanitation Department. During the day, they receive a man for two dollars per visit, and in the evening four dollars, which gives the “small houses” another nickname, “two-four houses” [*er si zai*].

These “small houses” around me are substitute marks of the vanishing, heavily class-based prostitution system. Two years ago, there were still two kinds of prostitutes in this area. The “superior” prostitutes were reserved for Chinese men, whereas another group, the “very inferior” ones, lived in the so-called Big Number houses, used by soldiers, sailors and other lower class customers from Britain and other European countries. The houses for the Chinese were found to be clean and tidy, whereas the Big Number houses were filthy, disorganized and chaotic. I was very shocked when I first read about this. I could hardly imagine any European of the lower class, and I still cannot, having seen the Alhambra and its annex for European middle-class residents. I guess we do have lower-class Europeans – now I recall soldiers and sailors hanging out in Central and Wanchai on HK Island, and that quite a few of them have deserted their services. A group of British women's rights advocates, led by Stella Benson and Gladys Forster, lobbied against prostitution after their 'field visits' to the area in 1931.³² And thanks partly to their effort that the Government finally decided upon a phaseout ban of prostitution in

³² In most official accounts, the names of the female philanthropists associated with the abolition of licensed prostitution are those of the wives of HK governors and top government officials. Stella Benson and Gladys Forster, who were most involved and had lobbied rigorously for government actions, did not receive the recognition they deserved, not to mention the Chinese Mrs Ruby Mow Fung, Forster’s co-runner of To Kwong Girls School, also one of the three Chinese women on the local sub-committee of the League of Nations Traveling Commission on Trafficking.

the colony for good between 1932 and 1935. (Benson in White: 182-92)³³

I finally reach the end of the northern portion of Temple Street on Kansu Street, which also marks the southern boundary of Alhambra on Nathan. I cross the street. Standing in front of me on the left (east) side of Temple Street at no. 7 Kansu Street is the 15-year-old Kwong Chi Theatre [*Guang Zhi yinghua xiyuan*], the oldest cinema in the area, between Shanghai Street and Temple Street in the heart of Yaumati. By 1934, Kwong Chi no longer has daily listing in the Chinese newspaper and is barely surviving as a repertory cinema showing whatever old movies are available. I walk past Kwong Chi and follow Temple Street for my southbound stroll.

I gradually find some of the remaining 'superior' houses on the southern half of Temple Street. The interior of the brothels are divided up into cubicles all very much alike, tawdry, but clean. Except for one out of a few that may have a window, most cubicles are like "horse-boxes, partitioned off along the length of the landings, at a right angle to the street." Each cubicle is half-filled by a large bed with clean linen, and occasionally one finds linen decorated with the girls' own crude hand-embroideries. Next to the bed would be a table crammed with ornamental accessories and a chair. Pasted on the walls are "bright-color posters, Chinese advertisement pictures, photographs and cheap colored fancy things." Visuals with indecent suggestions are basically absent. A trestle bed stands outside each of the girls' cubicles. It is the sleeping bed for the *amah* (an elderly maid) provided for each girl. (Benson, 184-5)

Despite the intimacy of space they find themselves, the girls do not really entertain any ideal of a close community. They would not know, for example, why and

³³ Benson's report is based on a field visit on March 4, 1931.

how the girl in the next cubicle became a prostitute. Practically, they live 'separately' like 'separate families' with no effort to probe into the private affairs of one another. Most girls in the superior houses were brought to the colony from other parts of China, and quite many from Macao, too – all of them lost in touch with their families. (Benson: 185) Many girls claim to have been sold into prostitution to pay for their brothers' education. (Benson: 184) I find this sounds too much like a movie.

Many of the girls in the Chinese houses are much younger than they are supposed to be. One can tell some of them are simply children just by their look, according to Benson and her field-workers. Most of them got licensed at the age of fifteen whereas they usually claimed themselves to be twenty-two when registering. Not taking the government officials seriously by lying is one thing. The fact remains: the girls or their 'Mother' (brothel-mistress) pay between thirty and forty dollars in bribes to get a license like a 'normal' practice. Corruption is perhaps part of their daily life since bribery ensures a 'harmonious' relation between the prostitutes and those who come into direct regular contact with them – cops, inspectors, clerks, doorkeepers and so on, whether English, Chinese or Indian.

South Temple Street is a world of women with their own ecological system of 'preservation'. Those in control are the 'Mothers'. Then there are the often “mean and sullen-looking” brothel-*amahs*, holding the role of a maid servant to the prostitute, but in fact in tight control over the girls. For every single dollar a girl makes, fifty cents go to Mother, another twenty-five cents to her personal brothel-amah. The twenty-five cents left are theoretically at their free disposal, but often withheld to pay for various daily provisions Mother supplies. The girls are not prisoners though. They can, for example,

take leave to visit their family briefly. Yet frequent going out is not encouraged -- mainly because it is undesirable for an inspector who calls to find a licensed girl absent, the cost of which could be the cancellation of a license.

I have seen some young women of my age passing by every now and then. I wonder who they really are: during the day, girls from the brothels can be very plainly dressed and modest-looking, just like me and my friends. Occasionally I seem to hear singing behind the walls of the brothels. Of course. It is their normal practice that girls take singing lessons during the day when business is low. But it is not a general vocal training section. Mothers would decide when a girl must learn a new song and what song it should be. A 'professional' teacher will then come to teach that particular song which may cost between fifteen and forty dollars, depending on how long the song is. The cost will then be charged to the girl's account. About three years ago in 1931, a group of woman philanthropists founded the To Kwong Girls School on Temple Street to do something for the girl-prostitutes in the area. (Hoe: 255)³⁴ Girls have to pay for a small sum to attend the school. Some Mothers accept the idea of their girls attending the school so long as that does not interfere with their work at night. Some Mothers are in fact rather willing to let the girls do something at To Kwong since that may make the girls feel more indebted to their kindness. The only reason for objection from Mothers is the danger of an inspector's visit to the brothel while the girls are absent. In any case, the girls pay for their own schooling.

It is a rather ordinary afternoon walk I am doing, I must say. There is nothing

³⁴ See chapter, "Stella, Gladys, Phyllis, and Brothels." The school was co-run by Mrs Ruby Mow Fung and Mrs Gladys Forster.

dramatic here, nor do I sense any danger lurking around the corner. Streaming in and out of these 'brothels' I see footmen carrying water, peddlers selling food and other wares and hangers-on of all kinds, but all males. Women are not allowed into the brothels except for those with business connections. (Benson: 185-6) In front of some houses I see idlers sitting, eating and drinking with the *amahs* and so on, and the girls joining them leisurely and chatting, 'wearing scanty underclothes only'. Here and there, a small girl or two are running around on the street. They are probably daughters of the brothel-*amahs*, Mrs Benson suggests. These little children basically have no home except the brothels where their mothers work. Their existence on Temple Street is somewhat fiendish: they have to stay out on the streets in the evening until two or three in the morning so as not to be seen by drop-in inspectors during the 'business hours'; and it does not look like they can attend ordinary school either – they go to bed too late and will not make it for nine o'clock in the morning when normal classes begin. (Benson: 183) I stop one of the little children running around me and ask her who they are. “We live somewhere else and just come here to play during the day,” the little girl answers, her eyes blinking the rehearsed broad lie as it is uttered. (Benson: 186)

Somewhere in a newspaper column, I read that business does not necessarily take place inside the brothels. Quite often, the girls are sent for to the Chinese hotels on that street where they entertain Chinese male diners. They deliver their special songs, chat with the customers, and then bring the special sponsor of the night back to their “horse-box” cubicles.

I decide to take a diversion from Temple Street and move into Woo Sung Street just a block away. This is where the Big Number houses used by British soldiers, sailors

and other Europeans gather. Here and now, a lot of the brothels have quit their business due to the ban's ultimate deadline approaching. The gradual removal of these inferior Big Number houses began towards the end of 1931 when the government announced that the ban of prostitution should begin with non-Chinese services. A mind block returns, once again, noting what I see and recalling the new European middle-class residential community about to emerge with the movie palace of Alhambra three blocks away.

Standing outside the buildings now of ambiguous usage, I force myself to see with my mind's eye the much more mature-looking girls, 'brazen in manner', trying to look friendly and delightful, as Benson's writings lure. Their dresses are "tawdry and soiled semi-European (non-washable) clothes." Some were out in the street "in their underclothes," and almost all of them had "more or less unhealthy skins." Most of them showed "signs of having European blood" or else "evidently Eurasian." Yes, I have difficulty picturing all of this, but thanks to Mrs Benson who dwells on every detail of the Big Number brothels. To a curious traveler like me who is keen on a contrast between the Chinese and European counterparts of this brothel district, I must admit I share 'the dismay of a well-bred European woman gazing at a deteriorating "European" habitat:

"The entrance halls of the Big Number houses [are] larger and brighter and perhaps a little cleaner than the 'Chinese district' houses, also the stairs [are] in better order and cleaner, superficially. But the condition of the cubicles [is] quite horrifying. In no cubicle [is] the bed made. It seems that the linen is not even straightened or smoothed from night to night. All linen [is] in the filthiest condition, the pillowcases literally black with greasy dirt and the sheets loathsomely dirty and in complete disorder. ... On the landings, dirty clothes were lying on the floor. All this in spite of the fact that it [is] by

now after five o'clock and the girls [are] beginning to expect visitors." (Benson: 186-7)

In between brothels, one sees [saw] a little cafe or similar business. Children are [were] seen everywhere in and out of the houses, just like those still seen on Temple Street South.

What I pertain to see through the lens of Benson's writings has faded away to near desolation around September 1933. Since then, only about a dozen of brothels remained in the Yaumati area. Some "Mothers" have pooled their funds with the prostitutes' to negotiate a good price the landlords to buy up the premises in order to keep their business. The government has stopped issuing new licenses for prostitutes; the number of women in business has dropped by 70-80 per cent. Many of those still in business are so due to the immense debts they owe the "mothers." (*NCP* 3 Sep 1933, 2:3)³⁵

I have read a lot of criticism for Benson's effort, questioning if she could be too ignorant of the delicate local situation. But I share her frustration with the government's lame procedures and lack of determination to put an end to prostitution in the colony, especially the deep-seated corruption implicated in the prostitution business. Don't Benson's critics even know that she is actually severely critical of "the British way" of things in which a kind of "hypocrisy" is culturally embedded? Benson says: "the only excuse usually given for licensed prostitution ... is the safeguarding of the health of men. ... There can be no safety for men in such conditions... As for the girls themselves, ... their position as licensed public conveniences...robs them of their human heritage." (Benson: 183) Benson totally speaks my mind: the girls pay to bribe the government officials in order to get a license that does not give them any real protection. "If payment

³⁵ *NCP* is *Nam Chung Po* (pin-yin *Nam Zhong Bao*), a Chinese-language local daily.

of bribes is refused or delayed, the government employee follows the girls to the brothels, suggesting that if satisfaction is not given, adverse reports of the establishments will be made. ... It seems probable that this initial outlay in bribes...is chalked up to the girl's debt; ...in this respect, the Government's toleration of the brothel system adds to the hopelessness of the girls' enslavement." (Benson: 183) Furthermore, Police and other government employees have used every possible means to dissuade girls from going to the Salvation Army home. (Benson: 187-8)

The pursuit of Benson, Forster and Mow Fung may well be far from effective. But I admire the details in their reports, which stand in stark contrast with most circulating popular Chinese paper's exotic news on prostitutes, which emphasizes the romantic sagas of the prostitutes and their lovers. I remember reading in a book store on Hollywood Road in Central stories told by Hutchinson Law [Luo Liming] on his adventures with prostitutes in Shek Tong Tusi, the main brothel centre on HK Island. (Tse 1994; adapt. Law 1963)³⁶ Law's accounts are mainly episodic portrayal of legendary personalities and incidents, conveying the general atmosphere of exotic love and pathetic ways of life within that community, often suggesting the different forms of 'sacrifice' the rich young flower-seekers and the prostitutes acted out for each other. These printed stories often carry titles such as *Tang xi hua yue hen* [the marks of the moon and the flowers on the west side of Shek Tong Tsui]. What puzzles me is how much these writer like Law are highlighted as a prominent member of the local intellectual elite. (Tse: preface)³⁷. In my

³⁶ Tse's adaptation includes due corrections to some of the factual errors in Law's original memoir.

³⁷ Hutchison Law (aka Law Lai-ming, 1903-1968) received English-language education from St. Stephen's College. After graduation, he devoted himself to classical Chinese and Chinese calligraphy. At the age of 19 (1922), he published his first novel in old-style Chinese (*ping si li liu wenti*). In 1925, then editorial chief of *Xiaoshuo xingqi kan* [novel weekly], he published his first novel with HK as the

view, he is just a minor casual writers making a living by selling sensational writings.

The desolation around me suggests very little about the intricacies and magnitude of the labor force within this community. On 4 December 1931, *SCMP* reported at least 10,000 people were directly or indirectly interested financially in organized prostitution. (Hoe: 258) Mrs Mow Fung believed the number of licensed prostitutes was near 3,000, and that of unlicensed girls in “sly” brothels was greater. (Benson: 184) Law's stories suggest a total of 200 “legitimate” brothels with 7000 “legitimate” prostitutes in the entire colony at the peak moment in 1930, involving a total work force of around 20000 to 30000 persons, including the service personnel at the brothels and those in restaurants serving brothel guests. (Tse: 361) These numbers differ significantly from those reported by the governor to the Colonial Office in May 1930 – only a total of six brothels with 17 European prostitutes, and 222 known Chinese and Japanese brothels, with 2,657 prostitutes. (Tse: 250)

Sunlight is dimming. I have had a full day of images and sounds and my head full of new facts and details, new conclusions to draw albeit inconclusive queries. I decide to move back to Nathan Road to enjoy a quiet walk in the big shades of trees through Tsimshatsui – to find my ferry back to my Island.

Clara's desire brewing – or mine?

The back of a young man loitering swings and sways ahead of me.

“The exotic colors of Tsimshatsui and the quietness and fresh air of the area fit all my ideals.” (Lui 1948 - *Clara*: 1) In front of some Apartment Building D, the thoughts of

backdrop, as well as edited a special feature called “The Western Literature,” introducing English writing styles, proverbs and idiomatic expressions. His writing repertoire includes anecdotal accounts of HK, prostitute business, the Cantonese opera arena, and reviews on Cantonese operatic numbers. After WWII, he was mainly in the publishing business, also attempted film producing in the late 1960s.

Clara's movie-writer-lover swarming my mind.

“Although my traveling life is burdened by a pending movie screenplay project, I do want to move for a change of environment and to re-tune my moods to allow myself to forget the things and people that I should, or perhaps even to forget myself.” (Lui 1948 - *Clara*: 1)

Are you from Shanghai, China's movie centre? Have you met Mr. Shek Chung-shan in Hong Kong, in his late twenties, who has written the screenplays for his younger brother Shek Yau-yu's three movies this year, now talk of the town for his sharp commentary of human problems in modern society? Do you know for ten years he was teacher and headmaster of Sacred Heart Secondary School where I go to school? He is the Chairman of the Catholic Youth Association while also running the new Huayi Film Company. What inspirations does Hong Kong give you? You must meet up with Mr. Shek. (Lai 2006: chapter 4)

“My life is now as plain as blank paper. During the day, I would go to Western book stores to browse books, magazines and publications.” (Lui 1948 - *Clara*: 1)

Browsing books? Tell me more about it! I have exhausted most of the bookstores on Hollywood Road on my Island. Do you mean the famous Swindon Bookshop next to the Chardhaven Hotel on 23-25 Nathan Road with a banyan tree in the front?³⁸

“In the evening, I would drop in any movie house to watch just any film, or I would grab a book and read in a café, to spend the time that would have been wasted on lying in bed. I often stay out and would not go back to my apartment until late at night.”

³⁸ An advertisement in Singapore's *Straits Times* on 24 Oct 1939 shows Chardhaven Hotel announcing the sale of the business due to the owner's sickness. According to various other sources, Chardhaven Hotel was called Baron Courts in the 1940s and Star Hotel in the 1950s, all sharing the same address. See, for example, 'Gwulo: Old Hong Kong' at <http://gwulo.com/node/8261> read on 9 Feb 2013.

(Lui 1948 - "Clara": 1) How I wish my parents would allow me to do exactly that without worrying the guts out of them.

"At first, I was not distracted by the fuss Clara caused and I paid no attention. I forgot how and when it started: I lost my trust that any city woman would have a soul, especially waitresses in a cafe who wear many faces..." (Lui 1948: 2)

But you did fall for her, didn't you? ...

"She is a city woman, but she doesn't have the polluted heart most city women have. Her body may be carrying all the stains and indecencies that life has brought her, but she has got a noble spirit." (Lui 1948: 20)

Thanks for your generous sympathy, my respectful Mr. Lui. I know, according to your story, Clara's father is an invalid and opium addict, and her brother a prisoner. But isn't this too dramatic, too much of the usual stuff we imagine about a prostitute in fiction writing? Can a waitress be just an ordinary woman? Does she always need extra justification via the merciful understanding of a man who offers her love? Remember you put her to death after all. The fateful events you have created for Clara's brief life effectively turn her into the pathetic voyeuristic object for lovers of romance melodrama.

Guess I should put on to this map a catholic church close enough to the writer's apartment so that when its bell tolls he can hear it. Name the church St. Theresa, as Lui calls it so. And lastly, I must not forget to add in a government hospital where a Catholic nun says her last prayers and draws the cross upon the end of Clara's life.

I don't know what I shall be as I'm graduating soon from secondary school. I love reading and writing. Today, I discover I truly love walking. What is out there awaiting me? Clara, what's your view? Mr. Lui, how about you? And Mr. Shek my dear teacher,

do you see where I can be?

CONCLUDING NOTES

An immediate discovery of my *flanerie* exercise, or, in Lefebvre's terms, my production of space via walking on the southern tip of the peninsula of Kowloon, is the colliding time sheets slabbing with complex ethnic, class and temporal markers. Movie theaters sprouted to mark many turns of street corners, especially the one-cinema-per-block situation west of Nathan Road in Yaumati. European sex-workers were almost entirely evacuated; Chinese brothels were on the way out sweeping the last bucket of gold, whereas disparate attempts were made to bring a modern quality to the district, significantly via the growing presence of the cinema and its imaginable upscale visitors built around the exhibition of Hollywood films. As Gillian Rose suggests, "if space is a performance of power and we are all its performers in our everyday relationalities, the project of interpreting space critically cannot claim to be an effort to escape power. Instead, it must work towards its realignment in particular contexts." (Gillian: 249)

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Abbreviations:

- HKGPR = archived photo albums at the HK Government Public Records
- HKMH = archived photo albums at the Hong Kong Museum of History's Resource Centre
- HKMH-Clark = private family photo albums (1930s) by Frederick George Clark deposited at the Hong Kong Museum of History's Resource Centre.
- I & C* = *Industrial & Commercial Daily* (daily – Chinese language, HK)
- SCMP* = *South China Morning Post* (daily – English language, HK)
- RTHK = Radio Television Hong Kong
- WKYP* = *Wah Kiu Yat Po* (daily – Chinese language, HK)

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