

Memories of a Hong Kong Bicycle Trip

by Yichu Wang '21

One December a couple of years ago, I was able to have two and a half days free to myself, by myself, in Hong Kong. It is in some sense my feat of glory as so inexperienced a traveller, and I'm glad to set these things down on paper, and in doing so, to go through them again one by one — even though they hold no particular promise, no structure, even, but like Wordsworth's daffodils I suppose they have made impressions deep enough to change the mood when they come back and to lengthen a moment until some sort of past emerges

The first free day in Hong Kong it rained indefinitely, though only in gusts and at somewhat long and irregular intervals — which, of course, were all that was needed, hopewise, for me to press ahead with my plans for that damp southern Sunday, which was scheduled for a bicycle trip around some place I had heard to be good. I remember taking shelter from the rain within the wide entrance of a large drafty subway station, watching the grey green sky more than a considerable number of subway stops away from the overcast humidity of where, tucked away among tall unkempt block-buildings deep in the bosom of the city, I stayed. The hotel itself, though, in its haughty, lively way, was far from ragged and it could only have benefited from the closeness of all the warm, worn colors and bustling signs and clothing hang out to dry. The part of the city where the subway — of whose sprawling network underneath the city I had unmistakably had my share — took me was quiet, airy and clean. The streets glistened here and were darkened by rain there. Then I got to the canal and there I managed to rent a bike.

Pushing the bike out from the bicycle yard, I looked about myself in the middle of what looked like a park, luxuriant with waist-height evergreens. I found the bike lane to my right and

it was colored a friendly brownish red, there extending into a taintless morning air swept by sea winds. As tucked far away — years away — as it is in memory, the winter green of the broad, rain-pregnant landscape seems to me now just as...distant, since it's the impression the place itself gives. I can feel the wind, salty and cool though not chilling, blow from over the wide, gently tumbling waters of what must have been an estuary. Across the canal the green hills spread along the shoreline over clusters of modern-day buildings below, and they were all strangely outlined, mixing dull clarity with a bright mist, an effect the weather made on light, no doubt. In the late morning of that Sunday, set apart from the gentle imitations of the sound of waves coming from the driveways, the place was relatively empty, some worlds away from the other incarnations of this same city. What else do I remember, to go through it all again? To go slowly from one to two to three? What do one look for on a trip like this? I don't recall what the sky looked like. Occasionally bikers in tight suits and helmets would rush past as I paddled and watched the water and the parks and those buildings to my right and to my left. As an invertebrate city dweller I must have brought some of my unenlightened urban-ness along — so what did I see, solitary and without any sense of history, but these? — plainly I saw the colors and images of rain, seawater, wind, saw the nice brown roads for bikes and pedestrians, and saw maybe the people. All of these, with a character of their own and therefore needing little art for adornment, kept my attention or emptied it. At any rate with a light heart and freshness in my limbs, I rode till the road, extending like a long, long sentence, for what else could have kept the experience — right? — now turned and left the canal there, diving under a heavy overpass, emerging again into an inner city forest park.

I sometimes wonder how far winter ever gets in Hong Kong. In the park, the green

December rain had brought down leaves, fibers, bits of bark and twigs and also flowers, silky or feathery, of red and of purple, and had strewn them in an even layer over the wet rubber bike lane. The air was cool and the vital breath of the park's winter vegetation rustled and exhaled. This felt different from any winters I knew or came to know later on, which, in most cases, are harsh northern winters, which give over completely to ravages of the cold and which break into blustery, turbid early springs notable only by changes in the sky-light and by early-arriving flowers, white against the chilly air. I suppose the good of travelling is partly this exactly, though writing about, try as I must, it I can only attempt to pin down the brightly colored impressions with as many staples as I can find, to make a good wordy specimen out of the butterfly with its fluttering, ephemeral wings.

The trip continued. Further on I rode through intervals of rain and also along paths leading away somewhere inland and out of the urban area; I then followed the bike lane by the highroads, one time even near a train track, and the rolling hills lay peacefully around. Though these hills were somehow kept at a comfortable distance from the tidy, bluish roads, I felt it was now in their terrain. There were really very few people around, and I let my bicycle slide wildly down a slope when there was one, and pushed it back up again to do it again; all the while lovely trucks crawled busily past. A rain-washed blue sky... I had an odd feeling of being in one of the Japanese animation movies I must have watched at some point. I probably have little ground for making that comparison; at least in my own codes, perhaps, it brings back nicely how the landscape impressed itself upon me and maybe that is what travellers do.

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My destination was a dam, and I must recall another trip, a hiking trip, that also involves a

dam, both of which were in fact very much like bridges. In my memory the clear, white-blue waters were still lapping at the foot of the dam, which also happened to be the wrong dam, while a gentle haze rose and softened the distant shorelines and muffled the sound of the sea. The taxi that took me there was apparently vaguely conscious of some mistakes that were being made, since I did mention the name of the “second” dam as my destination but, thinking we were there upon the first dam coming into sight, too hastily asked the driver to stop. It hovered somewhere behind as I walked irresolutely up the dam, poised between the seas and the steeply falling slopes of the dam, there in a high wind. Then the bright colors of the taxi-car were gone and I was left with the watery, blue landscape, into which one could see very far, at the other side, where I promptly sat down, relaxed, and ate my sandwich which I had bought for lunch.

That proved to be a wise decision as surely the squall that stormed and nearly vanquished me a quarter of an hour later would have entirely ruined the sandwich. The premature disembarkation brought me to a grey winding road for cars in the mountains, which overlooked the sea that rolled and rolled imperceptibly but very tangibly along the jagged shoreline of exposed red earth. I never met a runner, though I knew there should be some of them around and did see one out of my taxi window. So, except a couple of green taxi cars, sometimes empty and sometimes full, I only ran into a lean black bull grazing by the roadside where damp, red-green leaves pasted close together on the muddy ground. That was minutes before a storm in its full force and scale swept over the mountain road and there and then struck terror into my heart with the wild battering of wind and water. I waited for it to blow over, though I remember that part of my terror was exact of the very vastness of the storm, pitiless, driving down hard, and giving the impression of being endless. For a while nothing existed beyond the immediate surroundings —

the road, some trees — and beyond, it was all crushed and grey. Since there seemed nothing else better to do, I walked on in the storm, partly to keep warm and to keep numb, I suppose. In the middle of that storm, the road opened up a view of the grey, dashing ocean with a turn, and there it lay under the storm, a stern, heaving regularity. The place must have been the furthest reach of the mountain for nothing lay beyond except an island crag of some sort that ominously stood guarding the entrance to an iron expanse. The sea unleashed its dimensions without the frame of a beach or the reassuring screen of roadside trees, and so became a heaving threat against existence. The little platform formed by the road extended into the nothingness, turned, averted its gaze, and dived back in among the shaggy drenched trees.

I suppose I never knew if I was lost after the official trail began once I had walked the length of the wind-blown “second” dam. The rain had stopped, a gurgling stream trickled down the rough stepping stones underneath the thick leaves of possibly tropical types, and all colors and shapes were congenial with fineness and brilliance. In the mountains I overtook a group of appreciative hikers in their twenties, who, as I actually learned later, were on a company trip and were all colleagues, and whom I had waved at when, earlier on the mountain road for cars, I had felt obliged — or was I left unusually excited by the squall, which was reduced next to a mist by that time — to acknowledge my miserably drenched state to a car of people whizzing past me and disappearing ahead. Then I met an old purple-haired couple from Shanghai who walked too fast for me to outstrip; so I fell in good company. Seeing that the day was drawing to a close, we found a path leading down to a little mountain bus stop where the Shanghai couple chatted in Cantonese with the locals, in a Shanghai dialect between themselves, and very considerately and patiently, in Mandarin with me. All the time we were quietly talking, breathing with ease out

there by the nowhere stop of a nondescript mountain route, we sat on the stone rim of a dried pool, which was next to a temple, artificial and dilapidated. Yet it was everything but obtrusive, and now I think of it, the rest of the city often seems to have impressed me the same way, remaining natural and engrossing in spite of the sometimes gaudy, sometimes tattered style of its existence. Like a stream emptying out into a small mountain lake, the path brought the group of happy office workers to us, too, to board the stuffy bus together and, so, put an end to that part of the day.

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But all these were off topic. I don't know. Back on the other side — probably the very opposite corner — of Hong Kong, on my bicycle trip (whose memory is of course incomplete without all else that happened during that two-and-a-half-day vacation, namely the hiking trip, or indeed during all the trips to Hong Kong I made later), I was descending down a broad lane tree-lined on one side and on the other, accompanied by low hills. In the overgrown tall grasses a statue of Buddha stood, about as high as a building of three stories. Its beautiful head and shoulders I had seen earlier from afar, across a bay of iron-colored waters.

There were clear signs that I was in the countryside now and the houses by the hills were comely and also western in style. The December world, again, was green and noiseless. These soon passed into closed food stalls, bike sheds, and narrow strips of sand for bathing after I began to make for the dam.

I had planned to have lunch some time before reaching the dam, which was connected to an island. At that point I hoped to turn back and retrace my tracks. For now, while I was stilling expecting to have my lunch, the lane should have swung round, just there, to move closer to the

ocean, and it was said that along the way there would be places to eat by that tree-shaded path. The lane did swing round and I did paddle past a number of small sheds selling cold drinks and grilled sausages. In front of these sheds were white plastic tables and chairs that went with them, and behind the sheds were stretches of pale sand. There were even bicycle yards and some other building whose function I could not tell, because all of them were closed, because it was out of season. It mattered little to me, though, and I was happy to keep to the road. Quite consistent with this, I had kept away from bigger restaurants during most time of my stay in that wonderful city for food, out of shyness, considering that I was by myself, muddy, and constantly rather damp.

And that was it, when finally I came to what I probably had in mind when I began this experimental treatment of what I have in hand. The dam that was to be my destination lay at the end of a gently ascending slope of cool moist asphalt, behind a two-bar metal swinging gate. Past the gate, the tree-shaded lane having a long time ago left the rubber bike trails behind, broke out into the open. It was also then that the storm finally broke and began to fall in earnest after a few showers of hard, sparse raindrops — at the time when I was climbing unto the dam that was to stretch six-kilometers before my eyes, or so I thought, for on the far side there was only grey smoke and mist, floating. I could see through squinting eyes that there were stumped cement things with a smudge of red on each, and I found they were milestones marking the wide dam-road, wide enough for two cars, that connected the island ahead, invisible now, and this corner of the quiet rural Hong Kong. The grey gale whipped the iron sea below, which tumbled and heaved with loud impassibility. Rain closed in upon the dam. Soon my field of vision became a turbulent fury of spray.

Not stopping, I nudged through those billowing curtains of water, nursing some stubborn hope of some change, perhaps. I was half-soaked from head to shoes and oddly enough, my shirt under my yellow windbreaker was dry and it had felt nice and warm. If I'm to find something similar, it reminds me of how, at night, in the winter fairyland of blue, white and orange near the Lyman Lakes one could walk and walk until the cold burns out each shred of nerve, picking and ironing and unwinding until one might just as well have nothing left. The cold sets in deeper, and then in the end there would be only the warmth that is me and the still swirling snow-flakes, swarming. That is a good instance of dissolving into integrity, in some sense, though back on the dam, without the protection of those shaking, smoking cluster of trees I struggled hard, there above the sea, wiping the water out of my eyes before more torrents lashed into my face while trying, with some success, to keep an umbrella propped up. It was difficult to get air because the water took away my breath the same way one had to fight with a strong wind for one's own breathing. I kept an eye to count the milestones as I wildly tore through the rain and exalted in the storm that ravaged the land as like a finger it pointed out into the sea.

Then, a hedge fencing the low, craggy shoreline now emerged, turning behind which the road ahead vanishes. One milestone marked six thousand some hundred something, I don't recall. It was the pitiful end of the way, and I had no intention to go on the small island there behind the thick hedge, looking as if it had withstood many a baking noon day with its friend the dirt road; then I imagined the whole place would glow hotly with the calm of a busy place temporarily deserted because the lunch hours had begun. Anyway, I dropped off the bike by the milestone and landed on my sippy shoes while the last of the storm was gradually appeased and exhausted. Rain in my home city Beijing, where rain comes mostly in summer and never in December, tends

to be long and solid, if somewhat less hard in its insistence to batter at you, and in Beijing people say that one is bound to catch a cold, to go unprotected in those chilly wet weathers even for only a couple of minutes. That day however I was well and only a little tired from paddling and a sense of heat was already rising from the robust vegetation of that Hong Kong winter. I believe I nearly expected to hear the insects next. And what should happen now, but that, turning my bike around, before I had any time to notice the nonexistent transition phases for the sky to clear, it brightened on me, over the six kilometers I had covered, the sky turning blue and the mainland shores green, with one luminous, tremulous white cloud that rose slowly from behind the trees and behind which must be the sun.

There it was, the dam, now plain with new-found clarity and sun-lit. The sea, and the shores, they were lit too and now lay brilliant and breathtaking with colors. I think of it as an incredible piece of luck to have such dramatic effects, but so it happened, and I thought it was a miracle for quite some while, for that straight line of the dam could well have been a road to some heavenly place. A golden pattern of light, rather than shadow, drifted over its arrow-like length as the clouds above moved. Seeing all of these, I swung myself on the wet bike and with joy threw myself back on the road. All the way I could not but feel some kind of passage, or rite, that was being performed. Not that I didn't know that at the other end was the low swinging gate and the stone wall, at shoulder height, from which trees of fresh, dormant winter green looked down. What lifts the heart tends to be very strange.

It was near the last stretch of the dam that a helmeted head — underneath the helmet, a pair of black goggles leered and grinned — and then the hunched body slowly rose up from below and whizzed past me and my bike. Now it was all strange and intricately shadowed on the sea

with the effects of light, and to the distance the waters showed green and yellow near the shore. A heavy ship, grey and stolid, moved past nearby. Then someone else in another sort of outfit, who I presume lived on the island, climbed onto the dam with a wicker basket hanging from the handle, just as I was descending. The sky hung huge and I watched as her pink t-shirt recede to a patch and then to a point along that ceremonial path to some heavenly place, by all rights and in all probabilities and no less than any other place. The two of these bikers had emerged out of the banks of rain, it had seemed to me. Where were they, hidden from the wind or paddling madly to keep the balance, separately in that squall of rain that just minutes ago drew curtains across one's imagination and caused one to be alone with oneself? It seemed just right that they should appear now, not later and certainly not earlier. It began to rain again lightly through the brisk December foliage when I turned unto a road going back to the city. The sea — or was it different and only a lake? — glittered, with sundry white barges and sailboats shining in the rain sun. So were the ways of the warm Hong Kong weather imprinted on my memory.

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This happened a few years ago, and my heart was so swelled with things romantic that once on a plane I mistook the few long slim freighters upon the sea, beer-bottle-green, as they slid among the island with their white wake, for trains with white trail of smoke, unseen by each other as they hurried in a sea of vegetation from which rose dark protruding mounds of a deeper green...I may justify my vision thus: I was quite unprepared for what I was to see despite weeks of planning; also, that I was looking out of my window on the plane, having just been startled out of a doze.

And there were more memories which I must mention: a commemoration event, which I

happened to have run into, with candlelights wavering and loudspeakers heard far in the tired, be-postered night in those multi-colored, old-looking Hong Kong streets alive with signs that stared like blood-shot eyes down at the crowd streaming towards the source of all the lights and noise; the salty warmth of mingled sweat-, sea- and rainwater; the wet ground of the crossroad shining oily and black in a wash of orange as night life and shopping stood one wall of indiscriminate, lively, orange-tinted people against another as the two, across infinite space, waited for the traffic lights to change; those subway cars, the frowning babies in them, the ferry, the 7-11s, the humidity in the air to be felt physically in the palm, the hamburger shop by the street and the old bookstore whose owner was friendly, and the friend I met in another bookstore who ate hamburger with me in a friendly-looking place inside the mall that housed the bookshop, and more and more and more. Away from the city areas again, there is of course another trip to an another island, this by boat, with the tropical forests, the empty, rocky beaches, and the return trip, forced upon us ahead of the original schedule, during which we watched as the storm chased across the sea, caught up with us, and thoroughly drenched us — a trip like all others I made in Hong Kong, warm, busy, substantial...On every one of them I could have elaborated till everything is enlarged and blown up and out of proportion. I continue to enjoy these memories and there must be something special about the city, for it to be able to offer such a variety of experiences, all lively, all memorable. The bike trip to the dam is truly one of the happiest things to be found when I foray into the past, whose memory is so like a forest and grown thick at places, it discourages the one that is looking around with ginger fears of disappointment. I will heartily recommend anyone to experience the beauty of Hong Kong, especially to go around it and, slowly, let the things leave an impression.