

## When the Migrants Amass: Notes from the New Territories. // By Lee Chi-Leung

1.

Many times, when people knew of the fact that I lived in Sheung Shui, they would tell me, “that’s very far away!” I would ask in return, “where do *you* live?” When the other person told me where they lived, I would then reply, “that’s very far too!” And thus, geographical location decides if people come together or apart, and the ways people interact. And people would only be able to put up with and get used to geographical limitations as such. There is no freedom at all to speak of.

2.

The north of Boundary Street is called New Territories. As it is named by ones who govern.

Xinjiang<sup>1</sup>, New Territories, New Reclamations. Everything antiquated must be replaced with something new.

This is especially true in the minds of the new governors. All land apart from that of country parks in Hong Kong is land for development. Tai Mei Tuk (大尾篤) which meant “the very end” mutated into “大美督”, meaning the big and beautiful admiral. Yam O (陰澳), which literally meant “shady bay” was modified to mean “Sunny Bay” (欣澳). The reclaimed land at Tai Kok Tsui in West Kowloon is instead directly addressed as “where Olympian City is at, or Olympic Station”. All semblance of folk and custom have been washed away by decorative names.

3.

Before 1980, me and my family lived on Queens Road Central, Ichang Street in Tsim Sha Tsui, Tsuen Wan’s Sha Tsui Road, Fanling’s Luen Wo Hui, and many other places. In 1980, we were assigned public housing and moved to Castle Peak Bay in Tuen Mun. Like thousands of families sent to housing projects in remote areas en masse in the early 1980s, we were drafted as oxen to plough new land. In 1990, we moved to subsidised housing in Sheung Shui and stayed there until 1997. Later, I lived in Tai Po Market, Tai Wo, Yuen Chau Tsai and Wong Yue Tan. Recently, I’ve moved back into one of the apartments I have lived before in Sheung Shui. From there you can see the newly painted Jockey Club clinic, which is washed in pink. According to my mother, it used to be a maternity home, and I was born there.

I have come full circle. Hong Kong, Kowloon, New Territories, squatter’s huts, Tong Lau<sup>2</sup>, shop attics, private highrise apartments, public housing, home ownership flats<sup>3</sup>, village houses – I have lived in all of them. I have lived everywhere but on the streets, government dormitories or luxury villas. As I look back upon my history of moving, I’ve realized that I have always been moving away from the city to remote areas. I guess if I were to move further, I would have ended up in Sha Tau Kok<sup>4</sup> or the outlying islands. Where I end up depends on the real estate market, my family’s income, job opportunities,

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<sup>1</sup> Translator’s Note: 新疆 – literally translated as New Terrain.

<sup>2</sup> Translator’s Note: 唐樓 -- Tong Lau, urban shophouses found in predominantly Chinese cities in Southern China and Southeast Asia, such as Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Macau, Singapore and Penang.

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s Note: First introduced in 1978, Home Ownership Scheme is a subsidized-sale programme of public housing in Hong Kong.

<sup>4</sup> Translator’s Note: Sha Tau Kok (沙頭角) is situated between North District of Hong Kong and Yantian District of Shenzhen, China. It lies on and extends across the HK-China border. In the past, it used to be a highly-populated village. When the lease of Hong Kong was officially extended to the New Territories in 1898, Sha Tau Kok River was used as a geographical marker to delineate the borders of the Frontier Closed Area.

policies on population/housing/education/public transport, their financing modes and permitted rate of return, as well as other factors. People would always have to put up with where they lived. Since I was three, I have always lived behind the Lion Rock.<sup>5</sup> Neither have I been allowed the freedom of movement, nor have I been allowed to aspire.

4.

The dimensions of life are partial and narrow. They are realized when our psyche meets our physical landscapes. Often, depression attacks soon after I move into a new high-rise unit. This is something that isn't self-prophesized, but is true and tested. I can judge the distance between one person and another, if their looks are kind and natural. I am very sensitive to the breadth of spaces, the constricting tightness between buildings, and the way such spaces too constrict the psyche. With boundaries set by stone walls, patrolled passages and greening projects, residential projects are isolated communities, in which people are alienated and shielded from each other. The diverse populace is subjected to uniform management. These walls reject the external world but also deprive our privacies. The inhabitants are numerous and yet lacking in vital energy. Their formalities restrain and alien neighbors from each other, as gossip transfer in cold gazes... between cramped buildings, we avoid each other, and we can only manage to relax when we are alone in our small confinements...

As I turned off my computer, bathed and changed, I couldn't help but check myself in the mirror to make sure my face is prepared to meet the others. The moment I stepped across threshold of the estate, I longed to turn back. I hate going out. I hate staying in even more. When I am out, I would have to pass through each and every one of those shopping malls that interlink train stations or bus terminals to get to my destination. I feel victimized just going inside them. Everyone looks as if they are enjoying themselves, as if the products on display are completely novel and unseen, that they are eager to take them home, those who walk quickly would slow down, laying their greedy gazes upon every face they touch... the charming and flirtatious voices of those powdered, fashionably clad saleswomen make me feel lonely again and again, compelling me to shield my face in escape.

Should I return to the ground, I would immediately crash into the traffic – trucks, cars; consumed by shopping malls, Shek Wu Hui has been rapidly diminishing in size. Streets spaces have been rapidly devoured by bank branches, money changers, real estate agencies and pharmacies, established to cater to cross border commuters from mainland China. Two luxury skyscrapers have been built before Hong Chai Street, arising freshly from the bare ground. Next to them, old architecture like four or five storey buildings look minute, as if they were the steps that led up to the new skyscrapers. A mere "7-11" or "Prizemart" could cut off the business of all the other tiny stores that sell groceries like oil and grain on the whole street.

5.

People say that they can grow "emotional attachment" to a place. I do not. Places that attest to personal memories are being knocked down, what is built in place of them will also be demolished, and rebuilt. Should anyone take me to Tuen Mun again, its sight would unquestionably trigger my grief. Taking up the place of the oxen of the previous generation, the new ones would do nothing but torture the land until it is barren and jejune. Unless, hating a place is also a form of "attachment". I hate each and every one of the spaces that have imprisoned me. I hate my neighbors who squabble and make a commotion late at night for no reason. I hate being scanned by the gaze of the guards and other people whenever I go out. I hate that my letters have been opened, here at a place which

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<sup>5</sup> Translator's Note: Until the opening of Lion Rock Tunnel in 1967, the Lion Rock Hill has been a major natural barrier between Shatin and Kowloon Tong. The tunnel has catalyzed the development of Shatin as a new town and New Territories by large.

calls itself “civilized.” I hate being blocked by salespeople in the middle of truck-congested, shop-filled and people-crammed passageways. I hate being rushed on expensive train rides where “i-cable news” and pointless phone conversations are being foisted upon me. I hate the four parking lots beneath where I live. I hate property owners that do nothing but profit from speculation. I desire peace and silence. I am always moving and moving. I am moving next year again, before my furniture has been properly set down, before I have gotten used to its arrangement. Before my attachment has laid root, I would have to leave. Unless, hating a place is also called a form of “attachment.”

6.

Historically, the development of New Territories could not have been divorced from concentration-camp-like resettlement estates, the logistical network and other resources central to the operation of the city. Even the water from the reservoirs here flows to Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. As I was in Taipei taking a public bus to Xinzhuang, I had the sudden epiphany that the bright orderly lives of city dwellers owe to blood and tears of those toiling hidden behind the backdoor. The poverty of city life stems from the poverty of time. Apart from working, commuting, and filling our stomachs in between, there is nothing but sleeping and shopping.

Thus, a certain type of shopping mall, a certain means of marketing, a certain architectural style, a certain product trend, a certain mode of arranging space, a certain concept of leisure and the production of their corresponding facilities, a certain network of transportation, a certain eating culture, a certain mode of dress, mannerism and persona...were mass produced and duplicated with their pre-fabricated parts in the newly-developed, tax-levied land of the New Territories. As shoddy begets shoddy, humanistic lives, as well as the relationship between people and their place can only prove to be “broken” or “nonexistent”.

Being in Sheung Shui, the conflicting relationship between the preprogrammed life and the violent effort used to maintain it is becoming more and more distinguished. People are preprogrammed and placed in the city’s ever-expanding logistical network. They are never allowed breaks nor given the opportunity to acknowledge the presence of their fellow people.

Sheung Shui station is linked to the community hall, the municipal services building and 6-7 private and public housing estates, extending as far as Tai Ping Estate<sup>6</sup> and North District Hospital. It is itself connected to 5-6 shopping centers small and large, as well as the Sheung Shui bus terminus. Its ground level exit is connected to the taxi stand and the minibus stations, which connect to the neighboring country areas, as well as Sha Tau Kok, and Lok Ma Chau<sup>7</sup>. There are also illegal and legal village shuttles between Yuen Long and Tuen Mun, and the official shuttle to Disneyland and the airport. Because it neighbors Man Kam To,<sup>8</sup> the streets of Sheung Shui are laid with massive tractor trucks, crane lorries carrying large construction parts and other forms of heavy transportations. Those who cross the border on land, including the parallel import traders, commuters between the New Territories and the city, as well as the numerous ever-present logistics, construction and delivery workers – they are all stuck in Sheung Shui’s San Fung Avenue, or in the streets and pavements connecting to Lung Wan Street. That’s how it is in this place. You do you, I do me, and we bare each other our cold shoulders.

This colossal pitch-black crowd that rages unceasingly like the flowing tides of day and night – the fact that they could be orderly and not cause accidents, that they could silently repress their urges, that they could maintain a certain tension and not explode, that they could rub shoulders and quietly bear the toil of being trapped in a cramped train car, silently living a manic life that has lost all

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<sup>6</sup> Translator’s Note: Tsuen means estate.

<sup>7</sup> Translator’s Note: Sha Tau Kok and Lok Ma Chau are major ports to Shenzhen.

<sup>8</sup> Translator’s Note: Immigration Control Point to Shenzhen.

semblance of human sense and balance. Apart from work, commuting, and filling their stomachs in between, there is only shopping and sleep, or only sleep. There is no aspiration to speak of.

(This essay is originally titled “No Aspirations on the City Outskirts – Scattered Remarks of a Migratory Person in New Territories.” Published in *Ming Pao* in October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007. The present version appears in Lee Chi-Leung’s *A Room Without Myself*. (Hong Kong: Kubrick & 29s, 2008; Kubrick, 2017)

#### **Author Bio**

LEE Chi-leung 李智良 (fiction writer, essayist; Hong Kong) is the author of two books: 白瓷 [Porcelain] (1999), a Chinese & English bilingual volume of poetry and short stories, and the essay collection 房間 [A Room Without Myself] (2008), which won the Hong Kong Book Prize and the Hong Kong Biennial Award for Chinese Literature. His essays and fiction have been anthologized in 走著瞧香港新銳作者六人合集 [Wait and See: Collected Works of Six New Hong Kong Writers] (2010). A freelance translator, editor and lecturer, he participated in the Iowa Writing Workshop in courtesy of the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation. His essay collection *A Room Without Myself* has been reprinted recently by Kubrick.

#### **Translator Bio**

Joy Zhu is a recent graduate from Middlebury College in Vermont. At Middlebury, she took classes in French, German and Russian. She is also very preoccupied with Wittgenstein. Apart from school, she translated [Lam Wing Kee’s description of his ordeal](#) and has published an [article](#) on Edward Leung. She is trying very hard to leave Hong Kong forever.