



Welcome to Hong Kong

An Experience Essay in China

[I wrote this essay for the 'INSEAD class of 1993' alumni newsletter. It contains a few references intelligible only to us, the class of 1993. Please excuse their smugness.]

Eating Out

Since you've just escaped from France – that hell hole upholstered with baguettes (whose only claim to fame is that they become indelible – I mean, inedible – even sooner than New York bagels), there are many good reasons for coming to Hong Kong, but none better than to experience the world's finest cuisine.

Not Chinese cuisine of course, but Swiss: have breakfast at The Kowloon hotel and eat the world's best Bircher Musli. On the other hand, if you insist on local food, try Aberdeen, a lovely little fishing village with hundreds of seafood places. Yingshin and I went there one evening right after we arrived. We were both pretty hungry that Saturday evening and were scouting for a place where the locals go. Not only would that be delicious, we figured, it would also be cheap (that was important since I didn't have a job yet and Yingshin was on an unpaid leave of absence). Soon we found what suited our tastes. We climbed the stairs to the third floor - is there a law in Hong Kong against decent restaurants on the ground floor? - and perused the menu. Yes, wholesome food at wholesome prices. We ordered some beef and a stir-fried vegetable. Would we also care for some fish? HK\$50 for the beef, \$30 for the vegetable, plus a fish? How much might that be in total? HK\$150 max. Our Y2 easily supports that. We finished the beef and vegetable and waited for the fish. "We're sorry," apologized the waitress, we've killed the wrong fish." Would it matter if they served the one they had slain?" The waitress stuck a piece of paper under Yingshin's nose with the names of the two fish in question written on it. The left one looked more complicated than the one on the right. I feared there might be a reason. "It costs a bit more," explained Yingshin, "but I told them to go ahead anyway. I'm still very hungry."

The fish arrived - a nice complement to our beef and vegetable - and accounted for \$550 of our final bill. It also accounted for about \$500 we weren't willing to pay. At first we resolved not to pay. Later, in a face-saving exercise, we resolved, at least, never to come back.

Getting Around

Taxis are cheap in Hong Kong. Take them anywhere. For example, after you arrive at Kaitak airport in Kowloon, take one to your hotel on the island. Taxis are perfectly safe and work strictly by the book. There's no need to read the fine print on the driver's seat; and certainly there's no point in reading it after the driver has left and gotten into the normal Hong Kong swing of things. You'll have a great ride all the way 'til you arrive. You pull out a few tens of dollars – that's all it'll show on the meter – and are eager to pay. After all, you've just taken a one-hour cab ride and all you owe is \$40? Plus you're tired.



"100 dolla plea," the driver beams at you. That's \$40 for the ride, 2 times the tunnel fare – \$10 each – \$5 for each piece of luggage – you've brought 5 small pieces because, like me, you're relocating to Hong Kong -and a meager \$15 in tips.

"\$15 tips?"

"15% se'vice chage."

Ha, got that bastard.

"15% of \$85 isn't \$15," you explain triumphantly.

"But of \$100," the driver smiles and takes your centino. Live here long enough and this sort of make sense.

Ok, taxis are cheap so long as you don't have luggage, don't cross the harbor and know that there isn't any service charge for taxis. Period. But a better way to go, by far, are the hsiuba - Hong Kong's minibuses. There are many of them and they're cheap. Honestly – "Why don't you take the #22 minibus to Bonham Road?" asked a friend. "Oh, I was going to." In truth, I hadn't even heard of them, but now I was going to try.

I put myself next to what looked like a bus stop and waited. A couple of minutes later a hsiuba showed up – a #22 too – and whooshed right by me. As the second and third and fourth whooshed by me, I began to hypothesize: 1) It's full; 2) It's only for Chinese; 3) It's only for British – but how could the driver tell? (I don't have that Iain Turner look?) No such thing, of course. You've got to wave and they screech to a halt.

So you get on. Then you've got to figure out how to pay and how much. That'll keep you busy for a while, probably long enough to have to begin wondering how you get off. Not a foreigner in sight and the driver looks mean. He also never looks back. Waving won't work this time. A local yells something and in no time at all my face is pressed against the lovely hairdo of the lady in front of me. She gets off, without failing to impress on me that that's not what gentlemen do, and, although I really want to get off too, I wonder what the consequences might be of following her.

So I stay on. A few more times I hear this phrase: "Yao lo," it sounds like. Should I try it? The driver still doesn't look any friendlier, and, if I get the tones wrong, who knows what I might be saying, might be calling Him, the driver?

I eventually did get off without any problem, and I discovered Pokfulam, the final stop of the #22 minibus. Try it! It's cheap. And we now have an apartment here in Pokfulam.

Relaxing

As some of you know, I play a fair game of - I mean, I'm fair game at – tennis. But this has taken on a different meaning here, in Hong Kong. I usually play to relax, to be in the fresh air, to get a good work out. I love tennis.



So I was delighted when Andrew and Henry, two Hong Kong INSEAD alumni of a few years ago, asked me whether I'd like to go play tennis with them the next day.

"Wonderful, I've been looking for to a relaxing game of tennis for quite a while."

"Have you played in Hong Kong before?" Andrew asked.

"No, but I've played quite a bit over the last year." In truth I hadn't played for six months, but would it make a difference?

"You'll be ok. It's already October. The summer heat is gone," Henry, the other alumnus, assured me.

I was to meet them in the morning at 9:30 at the tennis court. Just a little ways away from our apartment in Pokfulam.

"Yet," Henry advised me, "take a cab."

I'm not that stupid. I've got a map and Yingsin pointed the meeting place out to me. I'll walk. I was looking forward to a relaxing game of tennis - at most two hours, including approach, departure, shower and all. I left at 9:10 and walked for 5 minutes. I checked the map and soon decided to start jogging. At 9:40 I arrived, drenched. My friends arrived refreshed, having come in a taxi.

Because we were late, our booked court had been given away. We decided to stay, though, and booked a court from 10:30-12:00. "In the meantime," suggested Andrew, "let's go play against the practice wall." What a great idea.

At 10:30 we began driving the 200 feet distance from the wall to the court we had reserved. The short two-minute ride in the cool of the cab's aircon made for wonderful relaxation.

Since I had tried hard during the practice-wall warm-up to look my best, Andrew was quick to pick the other side, together with Henry. As they were getting ready to play, I was wondering why they don't make the rackets longer...it'd be so much easier to lean against them and relax.

After what seemed like an eternity of roasting in lovely Hong Kong autumn sun, at about 10:40, I collapsed and sat in the shade for about an hour watching those guys play - wonderfully relaxing.

Then Henry drove me home, and I slept for the rest of the weekend. Extraordinarily relaxing.

So, if you're looking to relax in Hong Kong, call Andrew for a game of tennis.

Shopping

The United States is the country of convenience. If people ask me what the U.S. is all about, I reply without hesitation: 800-numbers – "Let your fingers do the walking". I love buying; I hate shopping.



We arrived in Hong Kong full of enthusiasm about our new environment, our new working life. Everything excited us. New food to taste, new people to meet, new hiking trails to explore, a new apartment to move into, and many new things to unpack.

First, of course, we had to spend a full week's worth of shopping. While in the States shopping leaves me merely exhausted, in Hong Kong it left me devastated. Be prepared. It starts with a constant sense of having just been had. The item you consider buying is marked at HK\$600; you offer \$300 (because that's what your guide book advises you to do). The store keeper's face distorts; his fingers hasten across a worn-out abacus; his wife looks haggard; the kids clearly need an education. \$550 is the best he can do. You offer \$500 - after all, you are only human. You're ruining his future, but ok, you'll get the gadget: pay cash and there's no box – some unintelligible explanation is given for its disappearance - and, don't you ever forget, if he'd give this kind of deal to everyone, he'd be out of business. What a deal, you think. You'll gladly pay and begin thinking about how envious your friends will be: Gizmo-Gadget-Thingo for a rock-bottom \$500 and acquired under moral duress. They can't fool with you. As you leave, the shopkeeper asks you to come back again and, please, tell your friends about his store. You've just been had.

Of course, at that point you're riding a crest in the stormy sea of your Hong Kong shopping cruise, except you don't know it yet; it can get much worse. For example, you go to a stationery store and ask for letter-size hanging folders. "We 'ave A-foa foda," the assistant informs you. "Well, yes, I've seen them, but I really need letter-size hanging folders."

After a few more exchanges you're convinced that this store doesn't have what you need. That's a let-down, but then comes the killer. When you get around to asking whether she knows where you might get Letter size hanging folders, she'll tell you point-blank that nobody makes them.

"Nobody makes them!?" you ask incredulously. "NOBODY!" Does she think you're stupid?" you wonder. Rest assured, she does.

The emotional ride continues on downward. As you go to the next stationery to ask for your much needed Letter-size hanging folders you're reminded of the old saying that it's better to shut up and be thought stupid than to reply and remove all doubt. Again, there are no letter-size hanging folders, but this time the shop keeper is a sweet heart. She spends minutes explaining to you where to find your desperately needed Letter-size hanging folders. Finally someone who knows! You're relieved. All your filing troubles will be over shortly. As it turns out, she had no clue where to find these damn folders, but skillfully saved her face, and you're being sent on an exploratory tour of the New Territories, hopefully never to be heard from again.

The downward slide turns into a nose-dive when in the next store you ask for Letter-size hanging folders and leave it with a fax machine that will – guaranteed – accept Letter-size paper. Perhaps you're not cheap, but you were certainly easy.

So, in conclusion, the best thing that can happen to you is that the merchant just plainly dislikes you.



You walk up to him and ask whether he carries Letter-size hanging folders. He takes one brief look at you, snorts, turns away and continues stirring a steaming pot of pig feet. You now can get on with your life, posting a letter later that day to a close friend back home – asking if he could please mail you some Letter-size hanging folders.

Feeling good about yourself and your future in Hong Kong

Yinghsin and I like to pick our toes at night. Now I realize that that perhaps isn't what one should admit in public, but it keeps us busy while watching boring Chinese soap operas.

O[course, it does seem quite idiosyncratic and we often wonder whether other people do such things, too, or whether we should be concerned.

So we were pleased when on our way home the other day, close to the Star Ferry terminal, our eyes caught an indigenous and healthy-looking bum sitting in the middle of the road showing no interest in the people passing him, but instead concentrating on the job at hand: picking his toes. Our future here in Hong Kong appears secure.

There's much more to Hong Kong, of course. The only way to find out, though, is to come and visit us here. We'll make sure you'll have a great time. Don't forget: take the No.22 minibus, right to the end.