



Photographs: Dena Kaye

Cheung Chau—Dim sum sold by strolling vendors, money stamped Hell Bank Notes.

China Without a Visa

by Dena Kaye

A few miles from China, atop a mountain set in the South China Sea, a thick white mist enveloped the Buddhist monastery of the Precious Lotus. From my crow's-nest on a nearby hill, I watched the tip of its yellow roof disappear. As this cotton puff veiled my vision of the grounds, all the sounds seemed to be amplified: wind rushed in like breaking waves, birds chorused their staccato song with operatic bravura, and the monks' hymn echoed across the valley.

This ethereal picture of mountain

peaks swathed in clouds, painted for centuries by Chinese artists, is seldom the vision associated with a visit to Hong Kong. Rather, this trading post of Asia, born as a British colony out of the opium traffic in the 1840s, has been dedicated to turning a dollar. For the tourist, it has been a bargain counter where custom-made suits cost half the stateside prices, Ming porcelain went for the cost of five-and-ten china, and jade baubles were as reasonable as glass jewelry.

Indeed, 1974 is the Year of the Tiger, a symbol of hard work that, along with the season's winning horse at Happy Valley racetrack, running under the

name Money Talks, may well be a personification of Hong Kong's purpose in life. As Richard Hughes, eminent Australian journalist who makes the city his headquarters, has said, the Hong Kong formula for success is "low taxes no controls, quick profits, hard work laissez-faire."

While this equation may still work in the marketplace, the traveler may want to revise his reasons for a visit. Hong Kong prices, in spite of a five-to-one conversion rate with the U.S. dollar, have now reached inflated American and Western European levels. Duty-free advantages are often negated. And official Hong Kong tourist-office guidebook warn against fraudulent bargains. But with the diminished savings, perhaps the deeper fascination of Hong Kong will emerge.

IF HONG KONG is no longer a shopping arcade worth a trip halfway round the world, surely it remains a repository of things to see. I inspected such sight as the New Territories, once considered the agricultural outback of Hong Kong the village life of some offshore islands and on Hong Kong island itself, those hallmarks of Chinese culture—herb medicine stores, restaurants with provincial cuisines—and ventured out to Aberdeen, the city of the boat people.

Coiners of instant phrases have called Hong Kong Instant China. The closes you can get to Mao's domain is the New Territories, a 365-square-mile hinterland that is actually on the Chinese mainland. It was added to the British colony by a lease from the Chinese in 1898, an agreement that will expire in 1997. But no one despairs about the date. Most consider it an artificial deadline. The New Territories shares a 20 mile land frontier with China. The line of demarcation is the Shum Chun River best seen from a special lookout point called Lok Ma Chau. A thick verdant belt, sliced by beds of water, leads up to a muscular mountain range. "That is China," the guide says. The vista could be anywhere, but it is China, and that somehow gives it a certain cachet. Memories of Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, and Han Suyin's stories flood the mind.

A thousand years ago, the New Territories was a tropical forest inhabited by tigers, crocodiles, and elephants. Today this backyard of Hong Kong provides glimpses of Old China—medieval walled villages, men patiently following teams of water buffalo, long lines of women

quatting in muddy fields to dig up water chestnuts. But each tableau has its updated counterpart. The signs of modernity sprout in the middle of traditional landscapes. The New Territories—the only place the colony can expand—refugees who came after the fall of Chiang Kai-shek—“the market gardeners from Canton and Shanghai”—have cultivated the land into thousands of tiny farms. They harvest six to eight crops (mainly vegetables) annually, grow high-quality rice for export, and buy inferior grain for their own consumption.

The area around the walled city of Shatin—under the Ming dynasty, the incense-growing region; under the Manchu, the source of the Emperor's rice—now Shatin New Town, a commuters' and vacationers' resort. A housing project is being planned in this population safety valve for the relocation of 2 million people by 1983. That equals almost half the current head count of the entire colony.

At least for the time being, a one-reel shantytown still stands, lined with food restaurants, stalls open long into the night, hung with curtains of mangoes (a season), baked sweet potatoes, quail's eggs. The living quarters of the workers, often behind the storefronts, blare with the sounds of new TVs.

I have logged in my gastronomic memory bank a meal at Fung Lum Restaurant, located along this main avenue. I thought it to say the place, though clean, unimaginatively decorated. That might not to dissuade the prospective diner; the menu lists (in English) 323 dishes. I opened with steamed shrimp, shiny and pink, served with a soy sauce mixed with onions, followed with *tung toy*, a kind of broccoli doused in shrimp paste, baked crab in black-bean sauce, fried and baked pigeon, and raised pig rib with “mixed sauce.” This consisted of vinegar, ketchup, and what the chef identified as a white powder. I jokingly pegged it as Adolph's Meat Tenderizer. As it turned out, that, range to say, is exactly what it was.

There are several ways to visit the New Territories. It is even possible to be dropped by helicopter. The Friendly Travel Agency arranges tours, mostly using public transportation. The journey began on the Kowloon-to-Canton train before communism, the tickets read (Kowloon-to-London), which follows the shore of Tolo harbor. We debarked at Aipo Kau to board a junk “manned by a Chinese family” and cruised down

Tolo harbor, where pearl-diving started as early as the eighth century, to the Plover Cove reservoir. There are plans for turning this area into parks and gardens with water-sports facilities. Now, it is a bay dotted with sampans, which dart out like waterbugs to meet the junks and take passengers ashore. A public bus transfers any visitor, for a reasonable fare of eight cents, to a carpet factory, where a private minibus takes over.

The New Territories moves at a rural pace, but what is loosely referred to as Hong Kong (actually it is the city of Victoria on the island of Hong Kong) pulsates with big-business activity. Viewed from the Kowloon side, the panorama looks like Manhattan pushed up against the side of a mountain.

Hidden in the middle of Hong Kong's financial district—there are some 73 banks—are the herb stores, the pharmacies of Chinese medicine. The witches in *Macbeth* could have drawn inspiration for their brew from the items on the shelves. Glass canisters line one wall, small wooden drawers fill another, all of them stocked with such remedies as some 40 varieties of deer's antler from the Manchurian forest, sea horses from the Gulf of Tonkin, bear's entrails from the Tibetan highlands, and unfamiliar cures for, among other ailments, “soft feet” and “hidden women's diseases.”

Deer's antler and ginseng root made medicinal history. The first emperor of the Ch'in dynasty dispatched emissaries during the third century to find a

substance to make him live forever. But herbs are the most common prescription. They can be steeped as a tea or, as one package suggests, “cooked with chicken broth.” It is believed that the experimentation with herbs may have led to the extraordinary tastes and richness of the Chinese cuisine. I would hesitate to identify all the seasonings used in a 12-course feast at the elegant Man Wah Restaurant in the Mandarin Hotel, but I had no quarrel with the subtle flavoring of the minced pigeon sauté wrapped in cool lettuce leaves, the cauliflower in crab-coral sauce, or double-boiled winter-melon soup.

This kind of meal shows a formal, rather classy side of Chinese cooking, prepared by a *dai si fu*, or master chef. A repast at the Kowloon Pe-king Restaurant—specializing, as their card says, in Mongolian Bar-B-Que—requires a group effort. Plates of Kleenex-thin raw abalone, garoupa, shrimp, beef and cabbage, bean sprouts, chives, red and green peppers, and vermicelli surround a large, round griddle in the center of the table. An overhead lamp lowers down like a surgeon's light, and everyone concocts his own supper.

Floating restaurants, as they are known, lie moored in the harbor at Aberdeen, a half-hour's drive from Hong Kong. Both the Tai Pak and Sea Palace look like anchored Mark Twain riverboats, transformed, with a few turned-up edges and bright colors, into unmistakably Chinese vessels. At night, yellow lights, bright as topaz, outline the restaurants.

But it is in daylight that the story of Aberdeen unfolds most vividly. Once a pirate shelter, then a center for shipbuilding, Aberdeen has provided a home for the floating population, called “boat,” or “Tanka,” people. They live on sampans and junks crowded into the harbor in neat lines, like waterized covered wagons. For centuries, Tanka people have been considered a race apart. Chinese law forbade them to settle ashore, marry “land” people, or take government examinations. This discrimination no longer exists, and now some of the younger generation attend school ashore and are drawn by the promise of better housing and industry. Equally important in the shifting patterns is the fact that local waters have been depleted, and motorized junks and trawlers now fish farther afield.

Modernity may be changing the habits of the Tanka, but they still celebrate



Tin Hau festival—“Flags fused together like dots in a pointillist painting.”

“An offer to send in a rescue helicopter was among the more conservative reactions to my proposed retreat to the Monastery of the Precious Lotus.”

the annual festival of Tin Hau, goddess of the fishermen. One of the biggest celebrations is held at Joss House Bay, about 45 minutes by ferry from the Hong Kong side. One by one, junks festooned with banners nosed their way into the harbor until flags from the different boats seemed to fuse together like dots in a pointillist painting. Chinese music blared forth from the largest boat, and twosomes performed the traditional lion dance on deck.

Archaeological digs show that Cheung Chau, or Long Island, was already a fishing village some 2,500 years ago. Today, it is known as a weekend spot for the people of Hong Kong, who are just beginning to discover the “country”; as a residential quarter preferred by Hong Kong’s journalists (someone said that if there was a typhoon on Hong Kong, no one would ever know because the journalists couldn’t get back there to report it); and as a place for storekeepers to open up a second shop.

Yet Cheung Chau retains the look and the smells of yesterday’s prosperous fishing community. On this small island, which can be covered on foot in three and a half hours, there are no cars, and bicycle bells and cowbells are the only sounds that might jangle a stroller’s nerves. The best time to arrive is mid-morning by the water taxi from Hong Kong. Then the boardwalk becomes the marketplace. Hakka women, in their sombrero-like hats with the curtain fringe, painstakingly arrange pale-beige shrimps on nets to dry in the sun; others chop *daufu*, or bean curd, into shapes that would fit a jigsaw puzzle designed by Braque; a gnarled man draped in black bends over straw baskets that hold fresh yellow flowers and green *bok choy*; and a young boy threads his way through the crowd, carrying fresh steamed shrimp, trailing a tantalizing aroma. To appease an aroused appetite, one could reach for the nearest *dim sum*, tidbits wrapped in dough bunting, offered for a few pennies by strolling vendors.

Beyond this marketplace, the side streets provide an accessible, close-hand look at some Chinese traditions. In one shop, jade is turned from coarse rock

(piled at the doorstep) into polished rings and bracelets. Next door, an old man sells paper replicas of boats, television sets, airplanes, and money stamped “Hell Bank Notes” that are buried with the dead, a symbol of some of the luxuries unattainable in this life but available in the hereafter.

The harbor area of Cheung Chau devotes itself to commercial enterprise, but the other side of the island is quite rural. Toward its center, green-and-yellow fields carpet the curve of the hillside, and tropical shrubbery edges a path leading down to secluded beaches. On this very path lies a graveyard whose tombstones slant toward the sea. Here is an example of the arcane science known as *fung shui*, a phrase that translates literally as “wind and water.” The location of new buildings and auspicious burial sites, to name two things, is determined by the prevailing winds, running water, and contours of the land. (The price for an improper burial runs high—nothing less than misfortune cast upon future generations.)

Fung shui holds as important a place here as astrology does in India. The idea permeates even the most sophisticated businesses. Hong Kong Land Company, one of Asia’s biggest realtors, always consults a *fung shui* expert before beginning construction. Sheraton set the opening date for its new hotel with *fung shui* help. And the manager of Sheraton’s next-door neighbor, Hong Kong’s famed Peninsula Hotel, checked with *his* sources to make sure that the Sheraton didn’t have bad *fung shui* for the Peninsula. In that event, he had planned to install mirrors on the appropriate floor, a traditional method to repel such adversity; but it proved unnecessary.

Lantau Island, twice the size of Hong Kong and an hour’s ferry ride away, is earmarked for a 900-acre resort development. Located at Discovery Bay, the complex will have luxury hotels, apartment units, resort homes, community centers, and shopping facilities ready to welcome a projected 20,000 visitors by 1980. Until then, island attractions include sprawling Long Beach, Tung Chung fort, Tai O fishing village,

and in my view, the special experience of spending an afternoon and night at the Precious Lotus Monastery.

A monastery? One would have thought I was Héloïse, stashing myself away in perpetual self-denial, destined to sleep on wooden boards and dine on vegetables and rice forever. Well, I suppose on the surface it was a startling departure from the impeccable quarters of the Mandarin Hotel. An offer to send in a rescue helicopter was among the more conservative reactions to my proposed retreat. Few seemed to remember that it is the tradition of Buddhist monasteries to welcome guests. The going rate here is four dollars for bed and board. For those who want just a morsel of monastic life, the monks offer a vegetarian lunch—mushrooms and bamboo shoots, egg roll, fried bean curd, mixed vegetables, and praise be, that American standard, Campbell’s alphabet soup.

Once a series of huts atop the mountain ridge, the 70-year-old monastery compound consists of two large, ornate buildings—prayer halls adorned with orange, red, and yellow flags, golden statues of Buddha, elaborate wall carvings, and fruit offerings—dormitories and a dining hall. Urns of orchids and greenery bloom in the profusion expected of a Shangri-la, and adorn every possible corner.

Beautiful, albeit isolated, the monastery is a home and a study center for the older monks *and* nuns, but as the reservation clerk informed me in halting English, the younger generation of monks and nuns only come here for study. They all pad around in slipper sandals, dressed in gray or brown robes; their heads shaved smooth as globes. None of them speak English; yet I was a strange but welcome guest, and one nun smiled and said “thank you” as I passed by. It was a touching gesture of communication.

At a respectful distance, a guest can watch the prayers, which take place at sunrise, mid-day, late afternoon, and evening, and partake of the vegetarian dinner, mostly bean curd prepared in different styles, and some repeats from their luncheon menu.

But mostly, the monastery is a place for contemplating and perhaps considering some of the excesses of one’s own life. And so I did, curled up on a hard bed draped in mosquito netting, dull to drowsiness by the whispered prayers of the nuns at my bedside, only the rattling of their beads to stir the stillness.

Inside Story

by Henry Hewes

After the New York Drama Critics Circle had voted British playwright David Storey's *The Contractor* the best play of the 1973-74 season, it decided by the narrowest of margins, one vote, to select the best American play as well. Again by the narrowest of margins, one point (in a 3-2-1 weighted ballot system), Miguel Piñero's *Short Eyes* edged David Rabe's *Boom Boom Room*, with Terrence McNally's *Bad Habits* finishing a very close third.

All this suggests a certain critical reluctance to endorse any American play this year, and the objection to *Short Eyes* was presumably that this play of prison life, written by a 27-year-old ex-convict, is more documentary than drama. But although *Short Eyes* is primarily a synthesis of the wretched yet somehow vibrant world found inside a New York City house of detention, it does have a plot and a good deal of dramatic imagination.

Inside a tiled dayroom, caged human beings co-exist by observing each other's territorial imperatives. The whites are in the minority, and despite the advantage of being supervised mainly by sympathetic white police, they must accept the new realities that go with being outnumbered by Puerto Ricans and blacks. Each prisoner must also accept the fact that physical confrontations are inevitable and that the only protection is an ultimate willingness to fight back. This applies especially to those sensitive and boyish inmates who attract homosexual advances from their sex-starved brothers.

The play attains a degree of focus through two characters who in different ways are released from this human zoo. One is Cupcakes, an attractive young Puerto Rican, who is soon to be homosexually raped, not because he wants it, but because his will to resist is weak. This weakness is also demonstrated when Cupcakes "places himself above understanding" to side with the pack in their brutal attack on a mentally sick child-molester. At the end, Juan, the wisest member of the group, tells the depart-



Short Eyes—Wretched yet vibrant world inside a house of detention.

ing Cupcakes, "Hey, wait. Don't run. Your fear of this place stole your spirit, and this ain't no pawnshop."

The other focal character is Clark Davis, a white man with a wife and child, who is addicted to entering into forbidden sexual experiences with little girls. This kind of offender (nicknamed "Short Eyes") is considered a contaminating element in a community of "normal" criminals, and only Juan is able to balance the reality that if Davis gets out of jail he will only "scar up some more little girls' minds" against his Christian understanding that Davis is just one more human being pressured by social and psychological forces into deviation from prescribed norms. The investigation and cover-up of the prisoners' assault on Davis by a white police captain adds a touch of irony, because the captain is concerned not about justice but about the dangerous example of a white police officer condoning and assisting an attack on a white prisoner by non-whites.

HOWEVER, the stories of Cupcakes and Davis are treated as elements in a larger whole. What is really happening in *Short Eyes* is the fierce struggle of men to find ways of existing within the barbaric conditions of detention.

Although the proceedings are corro-

sively crammed with undeleted expletives, slang inaudibles, and repulsively violent action, there is a joyous theatrical imagination at work in the playwright, in director Marvin Felix Camillo, and in the actors (most of whom are themselves ex-cons) that lifts the interplay above documentary or case history into real theater. A bunch of inmates ingeniously creating a bongo concert with only a table and their voices builds into a celebrated interlude. And a black convict relating his sex fantasy about Jane Fonda is zesty and funny.

Short Eyes was first presented in January by Mr. Camillo's group, The Family, at the Theater of Riverside Church. From there it was moved by Joseph Papp to the Off Broadway Public Theater. Finally, in May *Short Eyes* was restaged in David Mitchell's extremely effective new setting at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater, where it stands as the most theatrically vivid attraction of the New York Shakespeare Festival's first season of occupancy.

Beyond the contribution *Short Eyes* makes to art and prison reform, it is a visible product of a phenomenon with a history and a future. In the following pages Barbara Mackay explores this growing theatrical development. □