

Overseas Reflection

Deliverable 5
Amelia Hui

Introduction: A Dash of Context (Why Hong Kong?)

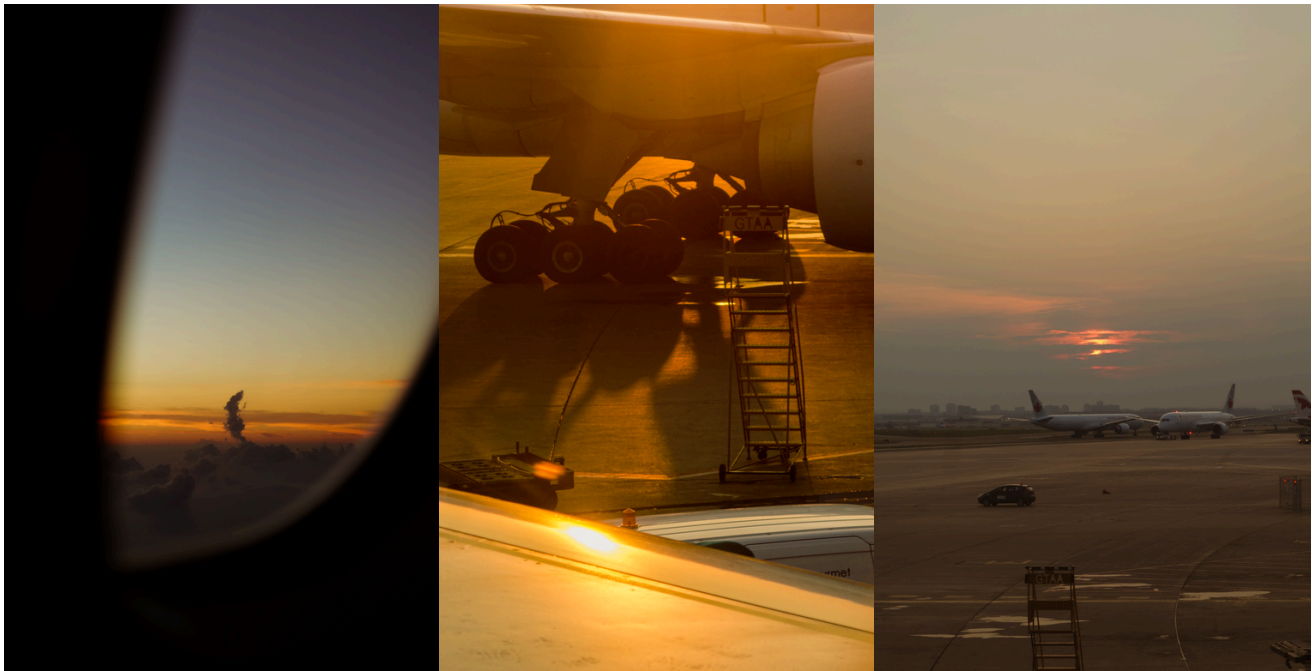
I visited Hong Kong last year, in 2023, for the very first time. I found myself drawn to the city, despite having only been there for around a week. It felt like a second home: I grew up immersed in a Cantonese immigrant household and was partially raised by my grandparents. This trip was the catalyst to my Laidlaw topic, as I wanted to combine my interest in politics with an opportunity to learn more about my heritage.

From an academic standpoint, my research seeks to contribute to a broader discussion on art's role in social movements, using Hong Kong as a primary case study. I broke my topic down into three questions: 1) What role did art play in Hong Kong's protests? 2) More generally, how does political art affect social movements? 3) Finally, how has culture and political sentiment in the region changed after the protests? Remotely, I analysed protest art produced by the Anti-Extradition Bill movement (Anti-ELAB), and identified changes in the aftermath of the 2019 pro-democracy demonstrations. Consequently, for my Laidlaw international experience, I travelled to Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), China, to supplement my qualitative and quantitative findings. I thought this would be a good way to both check off my global experience component and practise my ethnographic research skills, which I had learned about in MUN102 with Prof. Donald Kingsbury. Overall, I sought to answer the third question throughout my time abroad, therefore I focused most on absorbing cultural and political aspects of Hong Kong.



From Hong Kong, 2023.

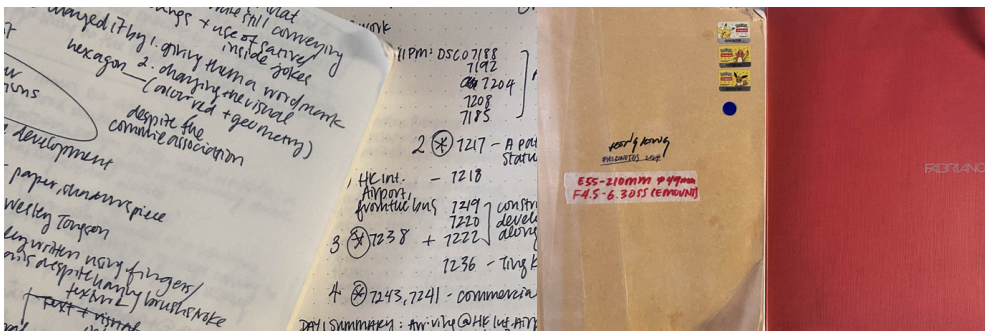
Before leaving Toronto, I decided to research past locations that were of significance to the 2019 Anti-ELAB demonstrations. Based on my one previous visit, I was decently familiar with the way the city operated; I therefore created a plan to visit certain districts in Hong Kong and photograph anything that piqued my interest. Overall, I went into the trip thinking I would be able to replicate iconic images from the protest taken by the press, to showcase the difference between 2024 and 2019 Hong Kong in a political context. I quickly pivoted, however, as it became apparent that this was too lofty of a goal for me to accomplish in a month. Instead, I decided to spend the 4 weeks photographing and immersing myself in the city as if I, too, were a Hong Konger—in true ethnographic fashion. However, I also paid a lot of attention to anything I thought would be relevant to my project.



Images taken as I left Toronto. I had a two-hour (approximately) layover in Frankfurt, before arriving in Hong Kong. The trip was long and tiring, but I was glad to have arrived at Hong Kong International Airport safely.

Methods: Documenting the City

My camera was arguably the most important object I brought with me—besides my passport and laptop. I knew photography was going to serve as my primary mode of documentation for this project; as predicted, I ended up with hundreds of photos on both my phone and SD card. I also brought two notebooks with me, one for fieldnotes and the other to gather my thoughts at the end of each day. This combination of digital and physical documentation—hybrid note-taking, of sorts—worked surprisingly well. It allowed me to both focus on my project and work, while also enjoying the city and travel experience without accumulating too much stress. Although I initially had a bit of trouble getting into the habit of documenting everything, I was able to settle into a good routine. During the day, I would photograph anything that piqued my interest and jot down any relevant thoughts; once I returned home to the serviced apartment, I would then go through each photo and edit as necessary. I usually selected the best 10 to 20 images to edit individually, prioritising those that were of particular relevance to my project.



My fieldnotes, and the two notebooks I used. (Tan from Muji, red from an art store. Originally bought as a sketchbook for high school, but ended up repurposing it for this project.)

Fieldwork: Walking, Roaming, and Google Maps



(Left to right) Top: Sunbeam Theatre for Cantonese opera in North Point area. Bottom: Hong Kong International Airport and a view of the ports on the way to the main districts.

In the first week, I was diligently following this routine of photographing, writing, and editing everyday without fail. Most notably, I visited M+ in the West Kowloon Cultural District; I knew I wanted to prioritise this site over all else because it covered much of Hong Kong visual culture and art history, and would help develop and reinforce my understanding of political art in the region. Throughout the coming weeks, I visited several more museums in Hong Kong, including the Hong Kong Palace Museum, Cheung Chau Theatre, Centre for Heritage Arts & Textile, Hong Kong Heritage Museum, and PMQ. These spots helped me gain a holistic understanding of Hong Kong's history in a formal manner, as well as gauge the evolution of political art given efficient integration with the mainland.



Henry Steiner's "The Art of Graphic Communication" Exhibit. I was most excited to visit this part of M+ because it was a special, limited exhibition that I had heard about online, through social media. It covered some of Stein's biggest projects, much of which are iconic modern-day designs in Hong Kong.



Pieces with political undertones or related interpretations displayed at M+.

During the second week, I attended the Common Purpose workshop at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), with University of Birmingham students. Although slightly impromptu, this experience proved to be an extremely valuable opportunity to learn about leadership, teamwork, and workplace skills in an international context. Despite being the only student from the University of Toronto, I felt welcomed and heard by the other students from both HKU and Birmingham. The three-day workshop prompted a lot of introspection; we reflected on what leadership meant to us, participated in team-building exercises, took the MTR to Oil Street exhibitions, and heard from several executives working in different social impact roles around Hong Kong. I noticed that it paid off to share my perspectives, whether it be culturally or educationally pertinent, to partake in the conversation. Overall, I'm so grateful to have been given this chance to hear and learn from others, and meet people I would have never encountered otherwise. I also was able to share some of my thoughts on geopolitics and discuss with others as if in an informal seminar setting, which I found thrilling as a Political Science and Public Policy student.



HKU campus in the morning.

The third and fourth weeks blurred together as my notes became shorter and I stopped editing my images on a daily basis. Instead, I adopted a quicker method of exporting my photos everyday and editing when I felt I had taken a good amount of “edit-worthy” shots. Beyond documentation, I became truly familiar with the MTR stations and navigation (although I still relied heavily on Google Maps), and improved my Cantonese by communicating with locals. I visited the buildings where my mom and her parents grew up, ate at signature Hong Kong cafés, and trekked on between the sweltering heat and sudden rain.

Takeaways and Reflections

These four weeks helped disprove many of the assumptions I had about Hong Kong and especially its relationship with the mainland. Most notably, the Hong Kong art scene is not dead; political art is still showcased today, as seen through M+. I felt that most Hong Kongers were apathetic towards political subjects, especially regionally and nationally. There was a lot of emphasis on reintegration with the mainland, which I saw as a vigorous effort to re-piece together Hong Kong’s scattered identity in the aftermath of the protests.



I was in Hong Kong during the July 1st celebrations, marking the 27th Anniversary of HKSAR’s return to mainland China. (Left to right) Top: Sign that reads “Implement the great policy of “One Country, Two Systems” and safeguard Hong Kong’s prosperity and stability.” located outside People’s Liberation Army headquarters. Flag raising ceremony, done every morning. Bottom: Three helicopters fly past, two carrying the regional HKSAR and national Chinese flag, respectively.

Apart from politics, I noticed that a lot of the traditional shops are at the brink of extinction because of a large decrease in tourism, especially from Westerners. After visiting Western Market in Sheung Wan, for example, I learned that the fabric market on the top floor, once filled with tourists and patrons, now sits quietly as both owners and their stock await visitors. Many of these workers are older, and have been involved with their traditional industries for decades—their parents, grandparents, and those before were likely also building livelihoods through the same businesses. Due to my limited Cantonese, I wasn't able to fully hold conversations, but I vividly recall leaving Western Market troubled by this reality.



Fabric shops at Western Market.

More broadly, I also noted the stark difference in age groups as I roamed the city. There were three main groups I would encounter, particularly on the MTR: white-collar workers, students in uniform, and seniors lugging large bags or leaning on their canes. I was impressed by how strong many of the elderly were; many carried groceries or pushed carts full of cardboard. It was also obvious that Central, Admiralty, and Causeway Bay were considered the core of Hong Kong, based on the hoards of people getting on and off the train (similar to Bloor-Yonge or Union in Toronto). Moreover, despite the amount of museums I visited, I found little to no mention of Hong Kong's history during British rule; much of the content focused on ancient Chinese history, if history was mentioned. I ultimately felt this visit to Hong Kong taught me a lot about my own heritage and the spirit within the city.