

CHEUK NG  
MALL RATS  
(IN A MALL CITY)

*"Shopping in Hong Kong is a serious sport. Indeed, Hong Kong has immortalised the art of shopping till you drop. Some may train for years for Wimbledon or the Boston marathon, I've trained for a lifetime to conquer Hong Kong."*

A friend once offhandedly remarked that "all you do in Asia is consume." It's no secret that the predominant culture and infrastructure of Asian metropolises are shopping havens. Of course, the West have more or less the exact same structures in place—after all, the shopping mall is an American invention—but in terms of sheer variety and esotericism in product range, the Western world simply doesn't sit in the same league when it comes to bizarre, wonderful, and unnecessary items.

While the American mall may be long past its heyday, the mall remains a thriving enterprise and business model in Asian cities. Hong Kong, in particular, remains one of its most burgeoning examples. From its origins as a sparsely populated fishing village to its current (if shaky) position as one of Asia's most significant financial

1. Gershman, Suzy. (1996) "Shop! In the Name of Love." *Travelers' Tales Guide Hong Kong: Including Macau and Southern China*. Edited by James O'Reilly, Larry Habegger and Sean O'Reilly.

hubs, Hong Kong grew into an unfettered capitalist jungle during its century-long British rule, even prospering as a cultural powerhouse for a brief period in the late 80s and early 90s, led by its thriving film and music industry.

Hong Kong is a place ripe with contradiction, elasticated to extremes with geopolitical binaries, perpetually positioned and repositioned between empire and subject, exploiter and exploited. The extent of these incongruities are acutely reflected within its society, beginning with the identity of its people and extending to the city's superficial exterior. Needless to say, the elastic band has snapped, with tensions culminating in the 2019 protests, one of the most significant political events since the handover in 1997. It's interesting to note that one of the crucial arenas for these protests were precisely shopping malls.

On one hand, China looms over the daily consciousness of Hong Kong as an extralegal superego that conditions the material and political reality of the city;<sup>2</sup> at the same time, the underlying commitment

2. Ng, Janet. (2008) *Paradigm City: Space, Culture, and Capitalism in Hong Kong*. State University of New York Press. pg. 2

to free-market capitalism and bourgeois prosperity runs acutely in its veins; it's instilled in the philosophy of the people, and has created huge structural societal inequities as a result.

The Hong Kong spirit encapsulates a classic rags to riches story—a story that centers on the key themes of upward mobility, modernization, and mass consumption.<sup>3</sup> My own family is not exempt from this trajectory: my father grew up in the Kowloon Walled City, the vertical and highly dense "slums" in the eastern parts of the city's Kowloon District, a place long demolished and replaced by a quaint city park. Since its demolition, it's been highly mythologised in filmic depictions of cyberpunk society (*Ghost in the Shell*, *Cowboy Bebop*, and many more) due to its architectural, structural, and political ambiguity and general uniqueness. The labyrinthine structure of the walled city mimics a proto-mall, with its distinctive maze logic and self-contained ecosystem of goods and services. Ungoverned by the British, yet untouched by the Chinese, the

3. Chu, Cecilia, (2016) *Narrating the Mall City*. Department of Urban Planning and Design, The University of Hong Kong. Stefan Al (ed.), *Mall Cities of Hong Kong*. University of Hawaii Press.

# City of anarchy

Kowloon Walled City, located not far from the former Kai Tak Airport, was a remarkable high-rise squatter camp that by the 1960s had 50,000 residents. A historical accident of colonial Hong Kong, it existed in a lawless vacuum until it became an embarrassment for Britain. This month marks the 20th anniversary of its destruction.

**500**  
Buildings built on 27 acres.

Without residential services, there was no rubbish collection, 24-hour security, fire services, or other public services available to the rest of the island.

Other residents were used for services, including, including and maintenance.

There were 27 walls inside the city and 10 walls outside. Each building had a unique name in 120 words in English, French, and Chinese. Some names were also written through narrow gaps in the facade.

**HK\$35**  
Monthly rent rate.

Despite its housing, Kowloon Walled City was not a residential area. It was a city of commerce and industry. It was a city of 50,000 people, but it was a city of 10,000 people. It was a city of 10,000 people, but it was a city of 10,000 people.

Each of which were placed outdoors in private flats.

The ground floor shops were a mix of traditional markets and modern shops. Some were open-air, and others were covered. The shops were a mix of traditional markets and modern shops. Some were open-air, and others were covered. The shops were a mix of traditional markets and modern shops. Some were open-air, and others were covered.

**40sq ft**  
per person.

The area's intense verticality was a result of its high levels of population density and its unique structure. The area's intense verticality was a result of its high levels of population density and its unique structure. The area's intense verticality was a result of its high levels of population density and its unique structure.

There were several public and commercial buildings, such as the telephone exchange.

The mall's shops were built on a grid pattern of the 100 ft by 100 ft plot. The mall's shops were built on a grid pattern of the 100 ft by 100 ft plot. The mall's shops were built on a grid pattern of the 100 ft by 100 ft plot.

There were many public buildings that they were not visible. Public buildings were not visible.

**Population density**  
per square kilometre

UK LONDON	Hong Kong (2000)	Hong Kong (1990)
1,000	4,700	10,000

Residents could not enter the city unless they had a permit. Residents could not enter the city unless they had a permit. Residents could not enter the city unless they had a permit.

**From fortress to park**  
The Walled City underwent a dramatic transformation in the first decade of the 20th century.

1898	1940	1950	1973	1980	1990
700 inhabitants	2,000 inhabitants	5,000 inhabitants	10,000 inhabitants	30,000 inhabitants	50,000 inhabitants

**Natural landscape**  
Building the Walled City was a major engineering feat. Building the Walled City was a major engineering feat. Building the Walled City was a major engineering feat.

**Major infrastructural building program**  
Major infrastructural building program. Major infrastructural building program. Major infrastructural building program.

**Fresh start**  
In 1973, the Walled City was demolished and a park was built. In 1973, the Walled City was demolished and a park was built. In 1973, the Walled City was demolished and a park was built.

Infographic of Kowloon Walled City, courtesy of South China Morning Post.



Pacific Place, Swire Properties

Kowloon Walled City was off-limits for most regular civilians in Hong Kong due to its high levels of triad activity, and concentrated levels of crime, prostitution, and drug abuse. Consequently, due to its odd positioning and obscure legalities, the Walled City became a self-sustaining enclave, perhaps resembling a less-developed version of the modern definition of the mall as a one-stop shop for everything, in a warped sense of the word.

I have vague, foggy memories encased in sticky pictures (Japanese-esque photo booths that prints

pictures with customised kawaii effects) of the now-defunct arcades of Hong Kong, a mirage of endless corridors lined with mannequins in the windows of independent boutiques; a maze so dizzying that the images just appear in my head in flashes. From the upscale malls that house every designer brand that you can imagine, to dingy, smoke-filled gaming arcades sitting in the basements of random shopping centres, these hallways of never-ending amaranthine rows of eclectic shop fronts are brimming with ceaseless tank tops, jeans, caps, any clothing item you can imagine, even including branded stationery. Sometimes



there would even be the odd head shop sitting discreetly at the end of the mall with weed paraphernalia. From the most expensive to the most esoteric, the high-to-low to weird to random can be found condensed in bordering streets in Hong Kong.

"In my high school years in Tsim Tsui Tsui, the mall I frequented the most was 百利商場 [Beverley Commercial Centre.] It used to have a lot of export goods from Japan, like Hysteric, Superlovers, Porter, which were extremely popular at the time. Those brands didn't have flagship shops in Hong Kong then, so someone would import and bring them back to HK. Those shops opened and closed at the owner's desire so you'd really have to try your luck with them. I was really obsessed with Japanese brands at the time, because I loved Japanese fashion magazines like *So-En* and *Non-no*.

I would also go to Harbour City, where I'd also go to I.T. [a luxury retail concept] later on, which is the kind of shop you would get intimidated in, because the people who worked there are very stern and cool; they sort of have a Dover Street Market attitude, they would look you up and down from head to toe."

On Ying Lai,  
Designer, ½ of Yat Pit

Historically, Hong Kong held a strategic role as a free port in South East Asia, facilitating the movement of goods between China and the rest of the non-communist world. A significant fabric manufacturer of the garment industry prior to the opening up of China, Hong Kong bore the weight of much fabric production that was exported to Europe. Before there was "Made in China," there was "Made in Hong Kong." During the early 2000s to 2010s, Hong Kong became the mainland's de-facto shopping mall, where the availability, circulation, and accumulation of luxury goods were rendered extremely desirable in a then-not entirely developed China (at least in terms of consumer infrastructure). In fact, after the SARS epidemic of 2003, the Hong Kong Tourism Board initiated the first annual "shopping festival" to further its image as a shopping haven.

The city experienced much economic prosperity from the 1980s until the handover in 1997, in turn propelling a large part of the population to experience upward social mobility. With its lax taxation and commitment to free-market capitalism, the commercial spirit and commitment to money-making, as well as a generation with significantly more disposable income than what they were raised with,



K11 Musea, Hong Kong. Image courtesy of K11 Musea

the seeds were sowed for a society that loves to spend. At a wider scale, the turn of the millennium can be argued as a pinnacle of a new historical era—that of post-modernism, where consumption escalated and globalized in an increasingly interconnected world, increasingly dominating every waking moment of human

lives. The act of consumption is an act of expenditure; although an object is acquired in the process, one can think of it as the obverse of production. Furthermore, the transitory satisfaction experienced by the act of consumption often creates the association of consumption as a frivolous activity. Therefore, the mall represents



Aerial view of the Kowloon Walled City.

a playground for the fervent display of garishly flashy wealth, an arena for the rich with money and time to spare, and indeed, in Hong Kong, these spaces are concentrated and rife.<sup>4</sup>

Still, in considering the history and trajectory of Hong Kong consumerism, I'm urged to read the city's insidious mall culture with more nuance and benevolence to its very obvious capitalist symbolism, and extend the narrative of this unique environment past

vessels of capitalist behaviour. Instead, I consider it a crucial part of the fabric of Hong Kong life, omnipresent and enmeshed in the memories of its denizens. In a place where commercialism is drilled to the core of the mentality of the people; where money is God, and consumption a piety, the mall symbolises far more than a church. As Janet Ng writes, "Every Hong Kong citizen understands the importance of consumption to the identity of the city, indeed, the survival of Hong Kong as a polity."<sup>5</sup>

4. Schor, J. B. 2005. *Born to Buy*. New York: Scribner.

5. *Ibid.*, pg. 89.

Every person in Hong Kong consumes, in one form or another, every day: we consume not only food, drink, clothing, electronic goods, and housing, but also culture: television programmes, hit pop songs, advertisements, images, and ideas. In a way, as soon as I could walk I was walking around in malls, streets lined with billboards, advertisements plastered so far into the horizon it obfuscated the sky itself. Somehow Hong Kong feels especially severe in comparison to other Asian postmodern societies, where the focus of life has shifted for many from production to consumption. It's fair to say that most people don't live to work but work to live, with their leisure pursuits—particularly their purchase and enjoyment of goods and experiences—being most central to their lives.<sup>6</sup>

The experience of walking around in Hong Kong feels intense, and mall-like, to say the least; the physical compression in the narrow and densely-packed streets of the city, scintillating shop windows, billboards, neon signs, and designated shopping routes—there's really never a lack of something

6. Lui, Tai Lok. (2001) *The Malling of Hong Kong. Consuming Hong Kong Culture and Society*, edited by Gordon Mathews and Tai-lok Lui.

to look at. The daily conduits of pedestrian life, such as walkways and arcades, are so integrated into the fabric of the city planning, undoubtedly providing the foundation of Hong Kongers' education in consumption. Most malls, as Cecilia Chu notes, are connected to major public amenities, including the city hall, the public library, metro stations, as well as large public parks. Often the malls function as extensive networks of thoroughways in the city, connecting one place to another, providing preferable air-conditioned passages in the city where one can walk around without being subjected to air pollution, traffic, and the intense subtropical climate.

"When I was at the age that I could hang out after school, I was dwelling mostly in Kowloon City. I don't know if I was at an age to go to malls yet, so I just "lan gai-ed" on Lion Rock Road and bought really suspiciously sourced makeup. When I [got to that age] my friends and I went to a place called Kowloon City Plaza [also known as KCP] — it was a poorly lit, sketchy mall. There would be a few recognisable chain stores, and the rest were local independently owned boutiques, and there would be an arcade at the basement where it stank of smoke and we would never go





SOGO, Causeway Bay. Photo courtesy of *Time Out*.

near. On the top floor there was a KFC and McDonald's. It was relatively fancy and better lit, because those chains would invest in renovation, creating a contrast. There was also a 酒樓 [Cantonese restaurant/dining hall], hence there was everything you needed in a mall—a compact, damp, dimly lit mall. We spent so much time there. The year I changed schools to a different district, the hot spot was New Town Plaza, back then there was still a basement level with affordable rent so there were sticker machines and independent stores that sold furry pencil cases and useless

things. That is all I remember, sticker photos and furry pencil cases." They were giant—the size of a mini pillow. All I bought was stationery, makeup and earrings. When we got older and were trusted to take the public transport, we'd move on from KCP for an upgrade. Opposite KCP was the minibus 25M bus stop that we took to get to Kowloon Tong, where of course we'd go to Festival Walk (a much larger and higher-end shopping mall) where they had a Red Earth, the makeup brand of Esprit, which I would save up for occasionally. There was a CitySuper (a fancy

supermarket that prides itself in its unique buying choices), the food court with Yoshinoya, and Pacific Coffee, which used to be our place to use the free computer (with timer) and to show we have sophisticated adult taste for cafe culture. There's the cinema, AMC...I never got a haircut at Esprit but I envied richer girls who regularly spoke about haircuts there."

Joyce NG,  
*Photographer*

In the entirety of Hong Kong, the MTR (Mass Transit Railway) stations form tentacles pervading through every district, and undoubtedly one, if not multiple, of the exits from each station will lead you straight into the shopping mall. Causeway Bay station has 7 exits, all of which leads to either a mall—Windsor Place, Times Square, Sogo, Hysan Place, Sino Plaza—or Jardine Crescent, a narrow street market selling hair accessories, vests, and other bits and bobs. The MTR stations are themselves small-scale malls with convenience stores, bakeries, sometimes even boutiques, banks, and bookstores. Commuters usually have to go through walkways and flyovers that take them directly into a mall or a shopping arcade before they can exit onto the street.

These surroundings acculturate the everyday experience of Hong Kong's excesses in our everyday lives, moving about the plant of the city, where one's sensory perception is continuously mediated by a commodity culture marked by the creation of desire.<sup>7</sup>

The lucid recollections of the precise mall, brand, product, and object goes to demonstrate the cavernous depths of how much consumer culture in Hong Kong has infiltrated into the personal memories and histories of the place. If you ask any local Hong Kong person, many of us recite with absolute clarity the specific shopping related activities, brands, shopfronts, to precise descriptions of purchases or branded objects. Consumption sites provide structures of feeling, and simultaneously provide a space for social activity, for everyday hangouts, leisure, and the locus of identity construction. Tactile and visceral experiences through listing of consumer products—things are auratic and steeped in history and politics and tainted by memory—more importantly, they are indicators of a specific time, place, and feeling. But even if

7. *Ibid* pg. 95

the recollection of memory itself is floating and mercurial, for Hong Kong people it's enmeshed within a superficial reality of consumption. In that case, memory resembles the structure of a mall: the vast site of which is stored an abstract sea of shops, with each shop adding up to an accumulation of a chaotic and stochastic series of consumed pleasures, experiences, objects, and locations.

"The translucent plastic bag, besides being the representative national fish and flag of Hong Kong, appears to have been invented to only partially conceal its contents and thus satisfy the eternal curiosity of Hong Kong people for other people's shopping."

Dr. George Adams  
*Games Hong Kong People Play: A Social Psychology of the Hong Kong Chinese.*

Truth be told, I didn't spend nearly half of the time that my peers did in these malls. Shopping didn't really form a huge part of my adolescence, and since my age sits on the cusp between millennial and Gen Z, e-commerce took off in my teenage years, deeming in-person shopping an unnecessary hassle. Instead, the ever-so-intense density and avid commercialism of

the city felt extremely stifling and suffocating; in my youth I held a lot of resentment towards it. If you've ever walked around in Hong Kong, especially in the summer, you'll know what I mean.

It's no wonder that Hong Kong is a shopaholic's paradise, yet its militant consumerism is only something I've been able to appreciate in the past year. With the majority of the aforementioned malls in serious disarray, interiors untouched since the 70s or 80s, somehow the charm and romance feels reclaimed from its original bustling days, as that space is left for you to fill in in the imaginary. Perhaps it's becoming rarer and rarer that these places stay intact due to the government's addiction to demolition and redevelopment, or maybe this lingering and pervasive nostalgia is symbolic of a common desire of the people to return to a time of prosperity and cultural dominance. There are whole neighbourhoods, such as Tsim Sha Tsui East, which feels entirely unscathed from the 1980s. An ambitious land reclamation project from the 1970s, the area was the hotspot for discos, nightlife, as well as a shopping sanctuary. Now a mere shell of its past, it's a ghost town in serious disarray, shopfronts all

Lee Gardens, Causeway Bay



emptied and the area barely frequented by locals.

There's a general mourning for the loss of older shopping malls, and as a result, local retailers have rapidly transformed these places of consumerism into "symbols of community" worthy of protection. The wider narratives that surround Hong Kong's shopping malls underscore the specificity of histories and spatial practices of urban life. The city maintains this in-built amnesia due to the sheer rapidity of its re-development, fuelling the people's desire to memorialise these histories. Oftentimes, the histories exist in our memories, intact in the alleyways and spaces that they once inhabited. The aforementioned illusionary and cosmetic components that make up the memories of Hong Kong is at a constant race against time, as

Walter Benjamin first elucidated in his majestic *Arcades Project* (*Passagen Werk*) (1927-1940), the original ode to mall culture: "The worlds of memory replace themselves more quickly, the mythic in them surfaces more quickly and crassly, [and] a totally different world of memory must be set up even faster against them."<sup>8</sup> Writing in the 1930s about the then-outdated Parisian shopping arcades of the century prior, Benjamin reminds us that the very definition of consumer spaces, like fashion, is their rapid obsolescence. It makes sense, then, when Akbar Abbas describes the condition of Hong Kong, a polis built on exchange and shopping, as having "always already disappeared—*deja disparu*."<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly, sweet shiny gloss of nostalgia paints a layer of romanticism on top of these fragmented memories, especially for the chaotic and disparate time where pinnacles of Hong Kong identity are at risk of total obliteration.

8. Susan Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* Boston: MIT Press, 1991.

9. Abbas, Akbar, *Cinema, the City and the Cinematic, in Global Cities: Cinema, Architecture, and Urbanism in a Digital Age*, pg 10.