

Many visitors try to define Hong Kong; in doing so, they often compare it to other cities, share anecdotes about urban quirks, and express their wonder of its commercial success, its dynamism and its density. I have been one of these visitors, having been to Hong Kong in the winter of 2003-2004 with my college roommate, a Hong Kong native. Like most visitors, I discovered a part of the story of Hong Kong and found myself fascinated. I realized that few visitors get the type of experience that will allow them to see how these impressions of the economy and urban culture weave together with social realities, shaping the experiences of the people of Hong Kong. One and a half years later, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to come back to Hong Kong for nine weeks through Yale-China's Summer Service Internship Program. I believed that this immersion experience would lead to a greater understanding of the city and its residents, but I had no idea that my placement at Adventure-Ship, not the length of my stay nor my after-work activities, would be the critical factor allowing me to plunge into the Hong Kong experience.

I need not mention (but will anyway) that Hong Kong is a remarkably international city. But for the residents of Hong Kong, it is also insulated and bound on all sides by China, which acts as both its mother country and a giant mystery. The city is guarded by both immigration checkpoints and great expanses of water, so that a journey that might be a casual Sunday morning drive in the United States becomes the matter of a seriously planned trip in Hong Kong. Having journeyed three times from the SAR this summer, once each to Zhuhai, Guangzhou and Macao, and having explored the waters of Hong Kong aboard the *Huan*, I appreciate the logistical and financial barriers to travel to other locations, even those within the same country. Because it is that much more difficult to leave the SAR, and especially because what lies just beyond the border still appears somewhat alien, Hong Kong society is inward looking.

And why shouldn't Hong Kong be focused on itself? The territory boasts great variety in geography, people and activities. Furthermore, it has long been insulated from larger global issues by its status as a British colony and now as part of China. Its inward focus has allowed remarkable energy to be spent on its economy and quality of life, creating a city that is super-urban, ultramodern and comparatively affluent. I have found myself commenting like a broken record about the efficiency of the public transportation system, the cleanliness of the streets and the density of the skyscrapers. But through Adventure-Ship, I have connected this energy and success with its social implications. In self-strengthening Hong Kong, a hierarchy has been tacitly formed around economic factors such as income, place of residence, migrant status and the perceived ability to contribute to the growth of the economy.

To children of those marginalized by this hierarchy, life is harder. Those from rural areas live far from the shiny MTR trains and the access they allow to new and exciting experiences. Those from poor or broken families find their ability to engage in the exciting attractions of a city built for the affluent and white-collar class limited. Recent migrants from Mainland China are hindered by language barriers, poverty and latent prejudice. Perhaps worst of all, children with disabilities are isolated from the community, often living in hostels and having little interaction with the outside world. The natural inclination of Hong Kong parents to be protective of their children only exacerbates this problem, as they fear that giving their disabled children varied and unstructured experiences could be harmful. On the contrary, they are robbing both their children and society of a mutually positive experience for growth and learning.

Adventure-Ship is unique in Hong Kong because it bridges this most crucial gap for childhood development, bringing children with disabilities and disadvantages to a place where they can have totally new and exciting experiences. The *Huan* is a place where socioeconomic restraints dissolve and mental and physical handicaps do not hinder adventure. It connects children with what they are

missing most due to their place in Hong Kong society. Sailing on a ship around Hong Kong is a pleasure usually only the affluent enjoy; many of my relatively affluent friends in America have expressed their jealousy of the Hong Kong children that can travel on the *Huan*. For disabled youth, the experience provides a further opportunity to connect with other members of society, and in turn gives the volunteer buddies the opportunity to turn their view more outwards than the demands of their busy lives often permit. The *Huan* and the sea itself are great equalizers, as participants of all abilities and backgrounds marvel at their strength and beauty. I experienced this fact personally, as on my journeys on the *Huan*, I joined the training activities. Not knowing Cantonese, I, too, suffered from a kind of disability. But the participants, although at first hesitant to interact (as was I) soon began practicing their English, teaching me games (including my favorite, Bing, Bang, Wah!) and sharing stories about favorite local foods, sights and hang-outs.

Along with my partner, Karen, it was my duty to overhaul Adventure-Ship's website. I made it my goal to capture via an online format the force of Adventure-Ship's impact on those that board the *Huan* and to try to impress upon internet visitors that the an Adventure-Ship journey is undeniably powerful and transformative. We increased the profile of the individuals involved with the organization – along with its unique vision, these people are what make Adventure-Ship a success. The crew is first-class and professional and the staff innovative and friendly. They have interacted with us as colleagues and as friends, a valuable experience for me, as I am now entering the “real world”, having graduated from Yale in May. They took us to such places as the wishing tree in Tai Po, the Chi Lin Nunnery and a modern dance performance; taught us how to make dumplings and how to use critical Cantonese phrases; and took us on culinary adventures ranging from fish balls to BBQ (my favorite) chicken feet.

Appropriately, Adventure-Ship gave to me what it gives to its participants – the ability to travel beyond one's normal geographic and social sphere, to interact with people different from oneself and to plunge into adventure. It even put me in touch with Karen, who, like those that volunteer during voyages for disabled children, was my “buddy”, helping me cope with my linguistic and artistic disabilities when at work, as well as with ordering lunch at local canteens!

My experience this summer was unforgettable – a summer at sea, a summer in the service of others, a summer of adventures both nautical and cultural. Thank you to Yale-China, the Adventure-Ship staff, the Jockey Club and many others for making it possible.