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Reflection on Adventure-Ship Internship

Before you go anywhere, but especially to the other side of the world, you want to know what to expect. So before I arrived in Hong Kong, I spent a solid week at school pestering everyone who had ever been to the city. I asked a lot of pointed questions about the people, the food, the atmosphere. But everyone I talked to stammered to explain it. In the end, all I learned was that it was big, crowded, had really tall buildings, and was like a New York – none of which was very helpful.

What I know now is this: Hong Kong is the type of city that defies any easy description. This is an important lesson to internalize before you begin to read my description.

Upon arrival, the first thing I found is that it is true that Hong Kong is in some ways like New York. Central, the city's downtown district, is lined with tall banks, trendy stores selling expensive brands recognizable around the world, and a string of bars and clubs that cater to westerners. If not for the ubiquitous neon signs hanging low above every street, you could be excused for worrying that you'd fallen through the earth and landed in lower Manhattan. As I write this, I know a total of 20 people in the whole city by name – mostly from Yale. Inevitably, I run into one of them when I go to Central. It does not feel far away from home.

There are two ways to get from Central to our apartment in Aberdeen, on the opposite side of Hong Kong island. One is to use the excellent mini-bus service, which is more timely than anything in the States and is rigged to the same one-swipe system used on the subway, rapid transit rail, McDonald's and 7-11. The other is to ascend Victoria Peak, the mountain that dominates the city, and then walk down the other side. Take either route and your perspective immediately begins to change.

If you catch the right bus, you make Aberdeen in ten minutes. When you get there, you have not fully escaped the reach of McDonald's and KFC, but you are in a different world. Aberdeen is home to the original settlement from which Hong Kong derives its name, but it is now packed with enormous dim-sum restaurants, towering apartment buildings that house 300,000 people, and zero bars. It should be said that one of the original attractions of Honk Kong to me was its mix of Chinese and western culture and people. My mother is Chinese and my father is from upstate New York, so the city felt like a good fit. And, for a first visit to China, it promised to be less overwhelming for someone with no mastery of Chinese. But this ten-minute trip crosses enough invisible boundaries that it poses its own challenges. For the few days I was in Honk Kong, the grid was absolutely bewildering – every street seemed to be the same mix of chinese medicine stand, bakery, cheap electronics store, and open-air butcher shops. Because of the lack of English speakers, Adventure-Ship actually gave me a card that described in big black ink where I lived in Chinese. I clutched it in my hand everywhere I went and displayed it a handful of times to get home. And this, in fact, was not enough – a card is not much use when a bus driver is alternating between the breakneck curves above the city and rapid fire questions aimed at you. Nor does it do much good when you realize he

has moved to discussing what to do with you with other passengers. It is absolutely no help, later still, when you find yourself left by the side of the road.

If you want a break from the bus, you can hike directly from the peak high above the city to Aberdeen. There you will learn why it so hard to explain Hong Kong's iconic skyline to anyone who has ever seen it. The effect is dizzying. You stand in the rarified air and look down on the spectacular harbor, which is bordered immediately by the densest district of sky scrapers in the world, which in turn give way abruptly to the deep green of an even taller mountain. As you take in the whole scene, you're amazed at how vertical the city is.

This is also a good place to understand the psychology of the city. Hong Kong is rightly known for its global orientation. If you were not convinced before, a view from the peak of the unending flow of large freighters making their way from the South China sea into the harbor would be enough to change your mind. What you begin to realize, though, is that Hong Kong is held captive to boundaries as much as it transcends them. The skyline has become so memorable because it had to be packed onto a small expanse of land: the city is bounded by water on all sides and a mountain occupies most of the center. The main political issue of the summer in fact, is whether the government ought to fill in part of the harbor to free up space for development. From the Peak, you'll also notice that the staple building in Hong Kong has the impossible dimensions of one or two rooms wide and several dozen stories tall – lanky enough that it seems it could topple in the wind. A crazy setup, but a necessity because the lack of free land has driven up prices for each plot. Hong Kong real-estate developers cannot very well expand into mainland China. Instead they pack people into tiny apartments. There are few establishments with any sort of space to gather – the upkeep is too expensive. This means that the everyday feeling of being in Hong Kong is of being supremely crowded. Nor is there any easy escape from the city– it requires going through virtually all the anxieties of traveling to a new country.

Without the luxury of space, each person's physical space is held at a premium. You don't push through crowds, you step gingerly. I played basketball one day with another of the Adventure-Ship interns at his old high school, Diocesan Boy's School in Mongkok. The Hong Kongers were good; they shoot more accurately than any Americans I had ever played with. But the game resembled ballet more than basketball. There was one hard foul over the course of two hours. I committed it. And it was such a confusing change of pace that it briefly brought the game to a halt as people apologized to me. I found the same dynamic in the field hockey games I played in Happy Valley – the westerners might chip and elbow to assert themselves, but the Hong Kongers preferred to spin and dart around obstacles.

In a city with these boundaries, Adventure-Ship has found an interesting niche. Getting out on the water that surrounds Hong Kong is a luxury and logistically difficult. And once you're aboard the *Jockey Club Huan*, the wide open spaces of the sea seem so much larger for their contrast with normal life in the city. You've traded in the endlessly vertical for the horizontal.. Where on the mainland a crowd is something to be wary of, on the *JC Huan* you have to be use the members of the crowd to get anywhere. One

exercise requires students to balance on the mat floating on the water and reach a ring hanging from the ship. It cannot be done until the students learn to balance on top of each other. Likewise, when students swim to shore from the *JC Huan*, no one can reach the beach unless they cling to the rest of their 8-person group.

It's also a place where Hong Kong's boundaries are contested. On every boat trip I went in, there was inevitably one student who shied away from leaving land jumping into the unknown of the water. When such a person is perched on the edge of a tall ship, this reticence often turns into overpowering fear. But there was a never student who stayed out of the water – and no one seemed to regret making the plunge.

It's also on the *JC Huan* that disabled children can tangibly break down the barriers that leave them in separate parts of the city. One of Adventure Ship's goal is the integration of disabled people into Hong Kong society, and for a short time on the boat, you can come pretty close to seeing what this is like. You eat with, talk with, ride in a motor-boat with your disabled buddy. And you watch as he's dangled from the rigging of the ship. Even if you wanted to escape, there's not anywhere else you could go. You stay at your buddy's side the whole time – through tantrums, naps and bouts of hyper-excitement. And so, forced to continue to sit with a disabled buddy, after a while you begin to notice your similarities more than your differences. And your buddy realizes that you are no longer a threat. Eventually you notice the spark of recognition of genuine friendship in the eye of your buddy. And all of a sudden, you think you can break through any boundary.