

## Life in a City on Two Calendars: Co-existence between the Solar and Lunar Hong Kong

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The Hong Kong story, it is difficult to tell. This is what I have been hearing since my youthful days. Very different narratives may result depending on how far back historians go when they consider the “beginning” of this city. Literary scholars have many discussions about what should be considered the essence of local literature, and some even go so far as to question whether this “local literature” exist or not. Artists draw on various legacies as inspiration for their work and in turn produce a range of different cultural identities, all claiming their origin in this city. Having been born in this city and living here for more than half a century, I can confirm, from my own experience, the challenge of telling one unified story about this place. (Although I would be surprised if any city of any size claims to have a simple story to tell about itself.) Stories are always difficult to tell because they come from the narrator’s strong feelings about the subject – this strong feeling may be love, it may be anger, it may be companionship, it may be regret, or even mourning. But no matter, positive or negative (though most of the time it is mixed), strong feelings are difficult to control, and words do not always do justice to these strong feelings, nor can they fully express the features and experiences that give rise to them.

The complexity of the Hong Kong story manifests on different fronts. For me, it is the many levels of presence it commands that makes the act of telling such a challenging but exciting venture. Let me give you an example. Hong Kong citizens carry an identity card, issued by the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. On this identity

card one can find the full name of the holder, a photo, and his/her date of birth (if known). This date is a set of numbers, referring to a specific day of a month in a certain year – the Gregorian calendar<sup>i</sup> that is accepted by many countries as the standard way of indicating dates in our world. The date has importance because for the government it is a systematic way to categorise people into groups, for various resources allocation such as free schooling, career and professional development, retirement preparations, healthcare support at different stages of life, and even burial sites planning. For the individuals, besides influences on their public life, the date may have private and symbolic meanings if they subscribe to the celestial imaginary behind the numbers. The stars and their positions on the cosmic map on people's birthday can become elements of the personal stories they tell themselves.

These numbers, however, may not be what they seem.

My generation takes the documentation of birth, and subsequently the issuing of the children and adult identity card for granted because these events occur in a setting where the local authorities are well informed and it is quite impossible to have a mistake or confusion of any kind. When I went to primary school in mid-1970s, for example, I was sure that everyone sitting in the classroom was the same age as me, and that it was impossible for anyone to pretend to be six years old when it was not the case. Things were however quite different in my mother's generation. My mother told us stories about hard times when she had to borrow a neighbour's identity card and pretend to be four years older so that she could work in a factory to earn some money when she should be taking lessons in a classroom. 'Do you look very much like your neighbour?' we asked her. 'No,' she said, 'nothing like her at all. But I was tall for my age, and there was no photo on the identity card. Everybody did that in those days. Life was difficult and every bit helped.'

The post-WWII generation, such as my mother, borrowed identification documents to get a job because there was already a well-established record system. A fourteen-year-old girl could not get a job using her own identity card because it was backed by a series of records showing that she was born on a certain date, with the names of parents on the birth certificate too. I once saw her birth certificate – we were packing to move house, and there was a folder with all the essential documents of the whole family – and noted that it was issued to her when she was already five years old. I did not ask her why, for her relationship with grandpa and grandma had been turbulent for many years and finally died down to absolute silence and disconnection. In my memory, any mention of ‘her family’ brought up incident after incident of hurtful confrontation and furious tears, and our small flat would ring with banging of doors and loud slaps of objects being placed too heavily on the table.

If my mother’s generation found life difficult in the post-WWII Hong Kong, what would have been her mother’s story about life when she was a young woman in the 1920s? Unfortunately, my childhood encounters with grandma had always been ‘duty visits’ during important occasions such as her birthday, or grandpa’s birthday, or during the festivals when adult time was spent on cooking and shouting across the mahjong table and children time was spent away from the kitchen and outside in the corridor until it was time to eat. Big family meals were consumed with the television volume turned up really high, as if they were not confident that family chit-chat would go down well with the food and cause indigestion. These noisy gatherings were a constant in my youth until I entered university. After that my mother no longer talked about ‘having to’ visit grandpa and grandma – I have memory of grandpa being ill, and then not long after we were burning origami for his use in the underworld. As for grandma, I do not even know if she still lives (would be a hundred if she does), or whether she has joined grandpa in that inevitable space.

Indeed, the further we go back, the more people's stories are wrapped in a blanket of mystery, demanding an interpretative mind capable of gauging with double meaning, multiple entry points, and sometimes no exit point from the imaginary. My father's identity card states that his birthday falls on the 26<sup>th</sup> day of January. I remember my mother preparing a cake for him every year on that day, but his response was always lukewarm, and he asked us not to wait for him — 'cut the cake and eat, leave a small piece for me,' he always said. His less than enthusiastic reaction about birthday celebrations meant to my young self that the male Aquarius must be rather aloof, as I was much into popular astrology when I was a child. Later I discovered, quite by accident, that my father's aloofness has nothing to do with being an Aquarius, it was simply because the 26<sup>th</sup> January is not his date of birth. He was born in China in the 1930s, and his uncle brought him to Hong Kong when he was a teenager. Without any local birth record, he was the only source of information concerning his birth date, and he told the local authorities that his birthday was the 26<sup>th</sup> day of the first month of the year — only he was referring to the Lunar calendar which was commonly used in his hometown when talking about birth dates.

I checked online and was amused to find that he is an Aquarius after all, in fact he just made it — for his birthday on the Lunar Calendar converts to 18<sup>th</sup> February, the very last day to be included in that zodiac sign. And yes, although the Solar calendar (the Gregorian calendar we are using is one of this type) indicates the position of the Sun relative to the stars and the Lunar calendar indicates the Moon cycle instead, each of them follows a pattern, and one can work out the dates between these two imaginary universes that miraculously exist in the concrete everyday life in our city. In the Lunar calendar, a year is usually 354 days, with a leap year every four years — an additional month — which makes the leap year 384 days long. Every 19 years the two calendars coincide. In Hong Kong, we use Arabic numbers to mark the Solar calendar, and Chinese characters to note the Lunar calendar. While the business

world runs with the Solar calendar, domestic life and cultural and social activities often situate themselves in the Lunar calendar. When I was a child, the best thing about the two calendars co-existing was that I could celebrate my birthday twice, each time demanding different cuisines and presents. For the adult-me who is prone to introspection, having Solar and Lunar dates offers opportunities to reflect on and savour the layers of meanings possible from multiple points.

Most of us see, or should I say that our culture usually encourages us to see, the new year as the beginning of another meaningful section of time in one's life. The New Year Day is a holiday for both working people and students. It is a time to take a rest (after the end-of-year parties), be with one's family, and perhaps to make plans for the year ahead. Probably not many people actually sit down and draw up a list of things to achieve, but the symbolic importance is there. The 1<sup>st</sup> January marks a clear break between the coming 364/5 days and the year before. In Hong Kong, around a month after the dizziness of the end-of-year celebrations and the sober 1<sup>st</sup> January, the Lunar New Year will come upon us, daring us to forget or ignore it despite the already saturated sense of celebration through Christmas and the New Year just a month ago. For many of my lady friends, the linkage between the Solar New Year and the Lunar New Year is especially unmissable, for it means an almost continuous month of rich food eaten with different friends. It takes months to work off the effects of this extended feast.

The local people's respect for the Lunar New Year is such that 'due to the Lunar New Year' is an all-in-one explanation for everything happening or not happening. No employer or customer will blame or complain if this explanation is given for whatever they do not like. I see that even those with the sharpest tongues and most unbridled behaviours treat the 3-day holiday with awe and behave with extra care during the first days of the Lunar New Year period. The Chinese are famous for being "superstitious" in the sense that behaviours have to

match the purpose and orientation of the special Lunar dates. The first days of the Lunar year are believed to be symbolically setting the tone for the rest of the year, so that sharp tongues are packed away, inauspicious words are euphemistically redesigned, special attention is paid to one's appearances, and extra care is inserted into every touch we give to objects. Smiles, verbal blessings, extravagant meals and presents are everywhere to be seen, heard and enjoyed; and people are on their best behaviour because collectively we are 'designing' the theme of the year, as if supernatural bodies will grant us the type of year we deserve based on our performance during the Lunar New Year period.

Besides food, presents, decorations and red packets, one important 'preparation' we make is mental – or emotional, to be more exact – before the actual first day of the Lunar New Year. It is customary for us to note the fortune of the year – the 12 Chinese zodiacs are animal notations of 12 different types of fortune, which becomes the theme of the year by rotation. People who are born 12 years apart share the same Chinese zodiac, and every 5 cycles (60 years) brings a new frame. 2022 is the Year of the Tiger (beginning with 1<sup>st</sup> February which was the first day of the Lunar New Year), and this animal embodies certain qualities and tendencies of behaviour. In the context of Year of the Tiger, people who are born under different animal signs will receive different fortunes depending on how well their birth sign matches with the Tiger tendencies. Way before the arrival of the first day of the Lunar New Year, people will have already checked their own fortune in the coming year, in varying degrees of detail. Emotionally they are braced for what is to come in the next 354 days, at the same time hoping that their good behaviour will help alleviate some of the bad fortune in case that is written in the book of the zodiacs.

Not long after the Lunar New Year, the whole city of Hong Kong will be surrounded by the (commercially) romantic aura of Valentine's Day. Bouquets of various sizes are a staple, and those who can afford other presents will do their best to impress. Ironically the

lovers and the beloved are probably more assured by the readings stated in the Chinese zodiac books than their belief in invisible cupids flying around sending arrows their way. Valentine's Day, arguably a western festival, is every bit as material as the next few festivals marked on Hong Kong's annual calendar: Easter, the Dragon Boat Festival, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. All these are public holidays (not Valentine's Day though) in Hong Kong, with the Easter break being an extended holiday for students, their last one in the academic calendar before the final examination. Having spent 13 years in a convent school, my memory of Easter breaks is a symbolic comparison between Jesus Christ's resurrection and our ability to make use of this holiday to turn around our appallingly lax attitude to our studies. It was also a matter of life and death for us.

After the materialistic celebrations scattering across the few months since the beginning of the Lunar New Year, the most iconic 'festival' in the Lunar calendar takes its place a little after mid-year. The Hungry Ghost Festival (or *Yu Lan Jie* in Chinese) is the fourteenth day of the seventh Lunar month, which means it falls on a day in August, deep summer in Hong Kong. Usually we 'celebrate' a festival, but I could hardly refer to the detailed and meticulous preparations for the Hungry Ghost Festival as anything close to celebration. It is believed that the seventh Lunar month marks the official 'opening' of the gate of the underworld, releasing all the ghosts from the netherworld to ours. It is a time for the living to pay tribute to ancestors by burning paper-made commodities such as clothes, furniture, money, and all sorts of daily life necessities – fire is considered the threshold between our world and the underworld – to deliver them across to the other world. This can be done throughout the month, but the fourteenth day is recognised as the specific day for rituals such as a sumptuous meal for the ancestors.

Ensuring that the ancestors are well-fed and well-supplied with daily needs is not the main purpose of the Hungry Ghost Festival. The Ching Ming Festival (usually early April in

Hong Kong) and the Chung Yeung Festival (usually October, after the mid-Autumn festival) are both common days for family tomb-sweeping. ‘Hungry Ghosts’ is actually not referring to those ancestors who are worshipped by their living descendants, for they are named and their names are written/printed on tablets which are placed in respected positions within the descendants’ home or on the family tomb. They should never go hungry because they are housed – but, unfortunately, there are large numbers of wandering spirits because the family line has ended, or they are neglected by their living descendants. These hungry ghosts suffer from neglect and hunger throughout the year, and can only wish to be pacified during this month when the gate is open and they are free to roam in our world.

The Hungry Ghost Festival<sup>ii</sup> is iconic not only because of the very visible preparations made – in a few public places in Hong Kong (such as playgrounds and communal parks) a whole area would be cornered off for the entire month, the area carefully set to enable smooth accomplishment of the important mission of appeasing and pacifying hungry ghosts. Among the various temporary altars covered with different kinds of offerings, the centre piece will be a huge paper effigy of *Da Shi Ye* [literally translated as The Great Master], God of the Underworld. Also referred to as *Mian Yan Da Shi* [The Great Master with the Burning Face], the God of the Underworld is often portrayed as a double-horned figure with a red face, big round eyes, and fangs. According to popular belief, this armoured God of the Underworld is there not just to discipline the wandering spirits when they partake in the offerings, but also to ensure that they have a chance to hear the prayers offered by the human descendants, and thus be evangelised into Buddhism. On the head of *Da Shi Ye*, one can see a small figure of *Guan Yin* [Goddess of Mercy], indicating the Buddhist origin of this popular religious practice. It is noted in many Buddhist scriptures that *Guan Yin* assumes many forms when she goes around answering pleas from different beings, human or otherwise; *Da Shi Ye* is one of them.



While the huge paper effigy *Da Shi Ye* is easily the most visible item in the Hungry Ghost Festival setting, the most audible is definitely the traditional China opera performances. A small stage would be built for performances of traditional Chinese opera with the theme of filial piety to take place – it is said that these are entertainment for the ghosts and therefore either no seats are prepared, or even when benches are set before the stage, no human audience would actually go and sit there. After a full month, all the decorations will be taken off, the *Da Shi Ye* effigy will be burnt, and the place returned to its original purposes. Next year, the same events will happen if there are enough sponsors – and this ‘if’ has become the concern of the dwindling number of practitioners in the field. The cost of the Hungry Ghost Festival rituals is usually borne by the nearby community, including the shop owners and resident organisations. With the local communities increasingly dominated by chain-stores rather than corner stores, and housing complexes replacing old-style residential buildings, the number of sponsors is decreasing. In fact, this is one of the declining businesses and disappearing traditions in Hong Kong.<sup>iii</sup>

The other side of the Hungry Ghost Festival is just opposite of the flamboyant visual presentations – the presence of the invisible world amidst our material one. I remember from my childhood, mother would warn us sometime during summer holidays that we should not still be out when it was late. I remember also warnings against stepping on unburnt or half-burnt origami, although it was only later that I managed to guess that the burnt origami were meant for ghosts, and stepping on it might annoy them and attract punishment of some kind. We children were also reminded to walk right in the middle of the pavement, for too close to the kerb would cause invisible hands to push us out on the road, and being too close to the walls’ side might mean rubbing shoulders with the ghosts because they are said to be leaning on the walls as they move. We never question these warnings, although probably not many people have actually seen these ghosts. In our mind, the co-existence of the underworld with

its invisible citizens and us is perfectly acceptable, to the extent that we are careful not to offend them so as not to give them a reason to punish us – to cause us death and take their place in their world instead.

After summer, the autumn and winter festivals are joyful ones, at least in their present forms in Hong Kong. The Mid-Autumn Festival which falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth Lunar month, and later the Winter Solstice, which marks the end of harvest in ancient times, are both celebrated by an extravagance of food. In Hong Kong we witness more and more varieties and favours of mooncake being created, and the temptation to overdo it is so great that in recent years there have been calls for discipline – just buy what you plan to eat, and give away whatever you cannot consume. Winter Solstice is not only the day with the shortest daylight hours of the year, it is also referred to as the ‘Winter Festival’ (*Dong Jie* in Chinese), a day even more important than the Lunar New Year – the saying goes like ‘*Dong Jie* is bigger than the New Year’. The proof is that no matter what happens, the family shall gather together for Winter Solstice dinner, a sumptuous meal even more extravagant than the one served on the day of the Lunar New Year. At the closure of the year, when the harvest is completed, people know that provisions for the next year are secure, therefore the celebration is well-deserved and well-taken. Nothing makes one feel more satisfied than the knowledge that there is no material lack in the coming year.

The Lunar Winter Solstice is usually the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, just a few days before Christmas. In a place such as Hong Kong, where the ‘East meets West’, or where the Solar and Lunar calendars co-exist, the last 10 days of December is an extended period of celebration in an interesting hybrid language. I remember the years at convent school, when we usually had the Christmas party on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, and we girls enjoyed the once-a-year opportunity to eat (sandwiches, cakes and junk food) in the classroom. On the very same day, when we went home, our families would be eating the most important meal of the year –

the Winter Festival. While food and company are two of the best things in life, to have the Solar and Lunar fills of the best on the same day were a bit overwhelming for my young self, with the result that I usually stayed at home and ‘be good’ in the next two days. Besides this slight discomfort, the first term of the school year was always enjoyable, for it ended with the Christmas vacation, to be closely followed by the Chinese New Year holiday. The Hong Kong story for a student is marked by the Solar and Lunar holidays intersecting each other.

Adults, however, have a more complicated story to tell about life in Hong Kong. Throughout the year, the Solar and Lunar festivities, no matter whether they are joyful, romantic, sombre, or familial, remind us not only that our city is a place of encounters between the East and the West, but also that we are living a transgressively interesting life because of these encounters. As we move from the sober day of 1<sup>st</sup> January with our new year resolutions through to the heady celebrations toward the end of the year, our daily practices take us across different worlds and values, both visible and invisible. While we put out our best to celebrate the richness that we can afford, we also dedicate much efforts into establishing a harmonious relationship with the unseen world. I believe the unique Hong Kong story can be told through the annual cycle of the Solar and Lunar worlds that drive our daily practices and the thoughts behind them.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The Gregorian calendar, or the Solar calendar, is the basis of the calendar most western countries are using today to mark the dates. Many countries have their own traditional calendar, such as the Lunar calendar. In Thailand, for example, there are two parallel calendar systems. The official and day-to-day operations refer to the Gregorian calendar, which was introduced in 1889 by King Chulalongkom. In 1941, the first day of the new year was changed to 1<sup>st</sup> January when it used to be 1<sup>st</sup> April. The traditional events and Buddhist religious practices, however, refer to the Thai Lunar calendar. The rendition of the years in Thailand follows the Buddhist Era, which is 543 years ahead of the Common Era. In this way, the year 2023 is 2566 in the Buddhist Era.

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ii The Hungry Ghost Festival is an important event in many Chinese communities across the world, although the actual rituals and practices may differ depending on the hometown traditions of the community. A recent publication by Terence Heng, *Of Gods, Gifts and Ghosts: Spiritual Places in Urban Spaces* (Routledge 2021), presents an excellent study of such traditions in urban areas today.

iii The Hungry Ghost Festival, officially known as Yu Lan Festival (Chiu Chow Tradition), was accepted into the Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2011, in the domain of social practices, rituals and festival events.