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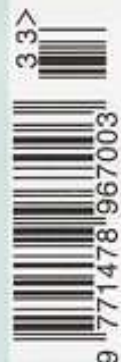
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# HONG KONG

Penelope Parkin finds some oases of calm amidst the hustle and bustle of a city that never sleeps

Perhaps surprisingly, considering its commercial hustle and bustle, Hong Kong is an important spiritual centre for Eastern religion. Widely followed by the Hong Kong Chinese, the concept of Taoism in particular has lost its roots in mainland China where its practice has been strictly curtailed following the revolution fifty years ago. I visited Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and Lantau Island to better understand some of Hong Kong's Taoist traditions.

## Taoism

The scholar Lao Tzu, a contemporary of Confucius, first introduced Taoism as a concept in the sixth century BC. Literally translated as "the way, the path", the concept embraces a calm, reflective and mystic view of the world, steeped in the beauty and tranquillity of nature. Its seminal text, the *Tao Te Ching*, seeks balance in all things and is thought to be the basis of the I Ching which underpins many internationally practiced Eastern disciplines such as feng shui and tai chi.

## Feng Shui

Despite the fact that it has been banned in China, 90 per cent of Hong Kong Chinese still believe in feng shui, the science of architectural placement or geomancy, which literally means "wind and water". Unsurprisingly, many of the great feng shui practitioners or "geomancers"

now live in Hong Kong, having been driven across the border from the Chinese mainland. Today, some ten thousand of them are on hand to explain the mysterious laws of placement governing some of Hong Kong's most prestigious buildings.

Local legend has it that the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank or HSBC occupies one of the most auspicious locations in mainland Hong Kong. Enfolded by buildings either side, it is protected from the wind, which is viewed as "killing breath". It also has lions placed at its front entrance to guard the money and a space in front of it with a courtyard with a fountain, which the government has decreed cannot be built on, an extremely auspicious sign.

Conversely, the Bank of China, which was built next door to the HSBC tower, has caused much controversy as many think its sharp, pointed upper corners and edges unlucky. Raymond Lo, author of *Feng Shui and Destiny*, disputes this theory, however. Taken from the front, the building's lower block is rectangular and depicts the auspicious shape of the Great Wall of China. It is also protected by the "Dragon Arm" and "Tiger Arm" of the Hilton Hotel to the left and the Supreme Court to the right respectively and sits in front of the "benevolent hall" of Chater Garden. The busy flyovers around it similarly form a lucky classic arrangement called "greeted and embraced by multiple

“90 per cent of Hong Kong Chinese believe in feng shui”



# SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY



waters with affection".

The Peak Tower is another extremely lucky building in feng shui terms. Perched above Hong Kong Harbour at the top of Victoria Peak, the tower's traditional upturned eaves resemble a bowl of rice, and the towers either side look like chopsticks, indicating prosperity. Similarly, Repulse Bay houses a building with a hole built in it for luck due to its close proximity to a mountain that is said to contain dragons. If the dragons cannot drink from the sea in front of the building this would be inauspicious, so the hole lets them through, ensuring that luck remains.

Recently, Esther Wong, a spokesman for Hong Kong Disneyland, admitted that the company had rotated the orientation of the park by several degrees after consulting a feng shui master. Following this shift in the early decision-making phase, the park is now scheduled to open in late 2005 or early 2006. Other feng shui aficionados include Cathay Pacific and Cable TV.

If you wish to purchase Chinese feng shui symbols to take home, it is possible to buy them, and good luck symbols, in Hong Kong markets – particularly in Hollywood Road, which sells symbols representing health, wealth and good fortune. Double happiness symbols to put in your relationship corner (the south-west corner of your home or bedroom) can also be found here. If you're looking for friendly service

and a shop used by Hong Kong residents, Victor Ng of Chiu Kee Brass Work in Cat Street just off Hollywood Road itself sells several examples.

## Tai Chi

The discipline of tai chi was created by Chang San-Feng, a thirteenth-century Taoist Master. Consequently, the eight basic I Ching Trigrams, and the five elements of Chinese alchemy, i.e. wood, metal, fire, earth and water, relate to the thirteen basic postures of tai chi.

Other associations between the full 64 trigrams of the I Ching and the tai chi movements also exist.

Tai chi is a slow moving form of yoga and meditation combined. Literally translated as "Supreme Ultimate Force" it seeks the graceful balance of the duality or yin-yang in all things. As a form of exercise the routine is broken down into sets consisting of a sequence of moves, many of which are derived from martial arts and from the movements of animals and birds.

Mr William Ng and his wife Pandora run tai chi classes in Hong Kong harbour at 8am every Friday. As part of Hong Kong Tourism's visitors' programme, they are free and have proved popular with locals and tourists alike. Never having practised tai chi before, our group took to the challenge with slight trepidation but Mr Ng's confidence and the engrossed expressions of his pupils dispelled most of our fears.

“Tai chi seeks the graceful balance of yin-yang in all things”



Protected on both sides under the railway bridge (as good Feng Shui) there was an almost godlike rush of energy (although it is entirely possible that this was more to do with the draughts from the through flowing trains) as the group began to follow Mr Ng's instructions. Charged with positive energy and dressed in an immaculate silk pyjama suit he took us through a series of graceful tai chi movements with upbeat instructions delivered via his headset.

Following the class was relatively easy. Mr Ng is a positive force to behold and watching him is hypnotic to the point of mesmerising, so much so that it is easy to become absorbed and lose yourself in a trance-like state whilst following his movements – which is the idea. Breathing is very much focused upon during the exercises and at the end of the class I felt much more relaxed and peaceful. Poses that sound complex such as "the eagle", "grasping the bird's tail" and "white crane flaps its wings" are also relatively easy to perform, and many of the postures are based on simple movements such as carrying or bouncing an invisible ball.

Performing the movements stimulates the flow of chi throughout the body, promoting health and well-being through the nervous and vascular systems. It promotes good posture and is said to break patterns of movement that are stressful or detrimental to the body. The practice also calms the mind through focus and concentration, and creates harmony between the body and mind. I noticed that it also draws attention to areas of stress in the body. I particularly noticed that my chest and arms were tense.

If you've tried kickboxing or karate you'll love tai chi. In fact long-term practitioners of the discipline can become skilled martial artists as emphasis is placed on channelling potentially destructive energy (i.e. an assault in the form of a kick or punch) away from the body. If you enjoy

yoga but want a more dance related form of exercise you'll also find tai chi a refreshing alternative or addition to your exercise regime.

### Wong Tai Sin Temple and Fortune Telling Alley

The Wong Tai Sin Temple in Kowloon is one of Hong Kong's most frequently-visited Taoist temples. Despite its popularity with local residents,

however, it is seldom visited by tourists. Dedicated to Wong Tai Sin, a legendary hermit who reputedly had healing powers and could foretell the future, the complex has a clinic where both Chinese herbal medicine and Western medicine are practiced and retains its fortune tellers who ply their trade along "fortune tellers' alley".

Local Hong Kong residents visit the bright red and gold decorated temple regularly to burn incense. They also place brightly coloured offerings including flowers, fish, meat, fruit and chocolates on a central altar, which bears a picture of Wong Tai Sin. The offerings themselves indicate that the temple is Taoist rather than Buddhist (as these temples have no meat offerings). They also pray and consult the gods through a variety of fortune telling methods.

One method of divination uses numbered bamboo sticks called "chim" in a pot, which you shake repetitively until one loosens

itself from the bundle and falls on the floor. I recommend shaking lightly as it is easy – and highly embarrassing – to spill the entire contents. Once you have obtained your number whilst thinking of a question you want answered, you take it to a fortune-teller in the grey and rather utilitarian-looking fortune telling alley behind the ornate red and gold temple, who will divine your fortune from a series of numbered, sugar paper chim interpretations.

I had numbers 94 and 32, relating to two separate questions, and was





decided to consult the first fortune teller in the block, whom I was advised was a retired schoolteacher. From his interpretation of the legions written on the papers, I appear to be in for some good luck in business and romance but the stories themselves are rather hard to relate as they are complex eastern folk tales. Advice has it that you should choose a good fortune-teller the way you choose a good restaurant.

Keep around and see who has the biggest queues!

Another popular divination activity amongst temple goers is the throwing of "Buddha's lips", two red wooden kidney-like shapes, tied together with string and thrown on the ground to determine percentage odds. Apparently one lip up and one face down is good as it represents yin-yang balance. Conversely, both lips either facing up or down shows a negative result. This system is frequently used to enhance betting luck for horse racing, and some locals frequently call their bookies on their cell phones from the temple.

If you want to leave fortune-telling entirely to the experts, you can consult a practitioner for a face, palm or astrological reading. Many people come to Wong Tai Sin to have an expert consult an almanac of auspicious days on which to host weddings or christenings. In fact, we were there on the day of the full moon, which was highly auspicious. There are also auspicious days for starting a business or naming a baby.

#### Po Lin Buddhist Monastery, Lantau Island

Buddhism is Hong Kong's other main religion and its temples abound on the Hong Kong mainland, often sharing space with Taoist temples. The rather more solitary Po Lin or "Precious Lotus" Monastery is a Buddhist retreat situated on the 520-metre high Ngong Ping Plateau to the west of Lantau Island. It can be reached by a steep bike ride from the

Silvermine Bay ferry terminal but is probably best tackled by bus or in one of Lantau's blue taxis, stopping off at the 3km long sandy beach at Cheung Sha. A vegetarian lunch is served in the monastery daily, so the spot makes an ideal half-day's trip away from the hustle and bustle of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island.

The monastery is a Buddhist retreat, developed from a modest stone



hut built in 1920 during the Qing Dynasty by three Zen masters as a shrine to Buddhist worship. In the 1930s the building was expanded with funds from donations, and today its impressive scarlet and gold temples form a point of pilgrimage for Hong Kong residents. The setting is peaceful and contemplative, although it is possible to actively worship here and for tourists to watch videos explaining the nature of Buddhism.

Adjacent to the temple complex, the world's tallest outdoor seated bronze Buddha statue, Tian Tan, can be reached by an exhausting 268 steps from the monastery and was constructed in 1993. It is seated in a meditating position at the top of the Muyushan or "Phoenix" mountain, surrounded by six stone deities or bodhisatvas, each bearing gifts of flowers, fruit, light, medicine, music and gold.

Tian Tan creates an impressive but somewhat incongruous figure next to

the low-lying temple with its bright but modest offerings, nesting amongst courtyards of simple grey stone. Its blazing bronze construction ensures however that it will withstand Lantau's powerful heat. Inside the Giant Buddha is a museum with three halls, the "Hall of Benevolence Merit", the "Hall of Universe" and the "Hall of Remembrance". A giant bell in the central entrance hall rings 108 times a day to alleviate the 108 troubles of mankind.