

Walking Two Harbours Chew Yi Wei

It is spring in Hong Kong. The weather is mercurial. On this mid-March day, the evening is windy, chilly. Yet the harbour at Tsim Sha Tsui is peopled with tourists, mostly from the Mainland, armed with their digital SLRs, sharing the promenade with celebrities who have been monumentalised, immortalised in bronze. Bruce Lee, the most recent addition to the Avenue of Stars stands in all his sculptured iconicity, beckoning one for a fight, his unmistakable, vociferous *kungfu* holler echoing, resounding around the harbour and the Kowloon Peninsula. Other stars like Sammo Hung and Jet Li, in their burnished metallic stillness, are a persistent reminder of Hong Kong's long-standing and remarkable film industry, its transnational celebrities, the 'Hollywood of the Orient'. A director sits regally on his chair, unmoved, as his cameraman operates the device that would send reels of Hong Kong film around the world. Almost strategically, the director sits by the sea, beside a harbour – a convenient and decisive position of access, a place where his art is bound for travel.



From left to right: The Bruce Lee sculpture and the statue of a director seated on Avenue of Stars at Tsim Sha Tsui

I am here this evening to catch a film at the Hong Kong Space Museum, located on Tsim Tsha Tsui's waterfront. Just as Hong Kong films have come and gone in times past and times present, the sea propelling them forward into other continents, other worlds, the wind has escorted me here today for the Hong Kong Film Festival, where an assortment of films from around the world land at the harbour's adjacent buildings to be screened. I decide to come a little earlier just to wander, to walk around a waterfront in a city to which I do not belong to but feel so at home in.

'Walking Two Harbours.' Chew Yi Wei.
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Performance venue at Tsim Sha Tsui

Today, in fact, is my second day here. There is something about this place, this harbour that keeps me captivated. Perhaps it is the sea, the boats that bob up and down the little currents, the sound of the cruisers, the smell of salt, the spray, the foam and the wind, the stunning cityscape lining Hong Kong Island, opposite. I came last night, too, and was quietly awed by the iridescent candelabra of lights illuminating the nightscape, extroverted, flamboyant. Truly, Central by night, seen from Tsim Sha Tsui is a visual spectacular, flamboyant, boisterous, bright. The water between Tsim Sha Tsui and Central serves only to buttress and extol the city's vitality, connecting each peninsula, each isle. Bright, dappled lights emanating from the buildings ricochet off the water, embellishing the night sky, escorting one into a reverie. Yes, I am, without any doubt, a tourist, a recalcitrant urbanite soaking in the classic postcard view of this vivacious, fiercely competitive Asian city.



Left to right: Central, viewed from Tsim Sha Tsui by day and by night

Accompanying my infatuation with this harbour and this city however is something a little more intimate, a little less superficial. There is another city with a harbour not too far away that is, so uncannily similar to this without exception of coincidence. They are inextricably tied to each other by the winds of trade, the exchange of currencies, the entrances and exits of ships, the co-mingling of tongues.

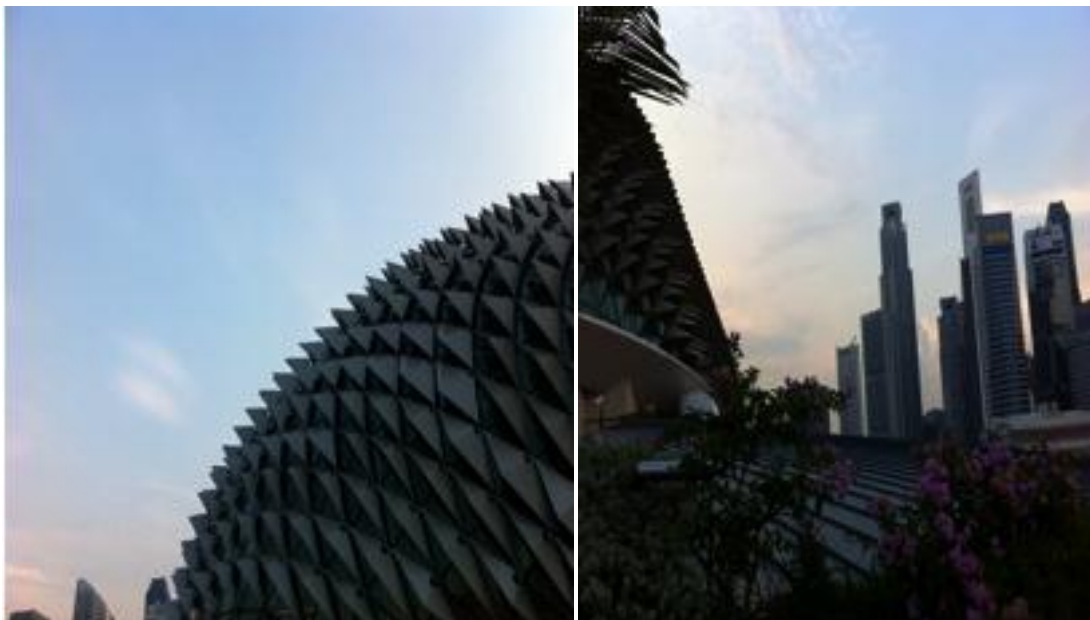
Due to its pointed façade and its waterfront facing, The Esplanade – Theatres by the Bay is a building that has become something of an architectural icon in Singapore. Surrounding it are svelte buildings with shiny surfaces, a confident reminder of the brimming success Singapore has worked herself up to. The reflection of the bay and the river are imprinted daily on the impeccably polished glass windows of the office buildings and hotels that stand amidst the Central Business District, architectural mirrors reflecting the porosity of the city, its contact with the world.

I often walk along the promenade after a performance or after a meal. Many others like me – tourist or local – are consistently drawn back just to sit by the stone benches or to watch the daily laser display shooting forth from the newest architectural icon rooted in Singapore’s urban landscape – Marina Bay Sands, or MBS, for short. Stationing itself firmly on the roof of the skyscraper triplets is a ship-like structure, waiting almost, to sail off onto a highway in the sky, an aerial ornament brazenly bearing its imprint atop the three towers and the city-state. Housed in the interior of one of the towers is a newly-built theatre mainly staging performances with high production values. *The Lion King*, *Wicked*, *Annie* and *Avenue Q* are but a few of the musicals that have been staged there so far since its opening in 2011.



Left to right: View of Central Business District and Marina Bay Sands from the Esplanade, by night

As if to hide its penchant for order and paternalistic statehood, Singapore constructs on its urban surface, architecture that is daringly sensational. The Esplanade Theatre nestled for a good ten years now by Marina Bay is a building one can either find admirably audacious or haplessly hideous. Slicing the air with its shark-fin-like metallic shade awnings, the rounded roof of the Esplanade comes across as more inimical than inviting. Even its curvatures fail to soften the chiseled, pointed look of the building. Yet, in the past ten years, the Theatre has managed to secure itself as a chosen performance venue for a multitude of acts both local and international.



From left to right: The spiky roof of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay and view of the Central Business District from the rooftop garden of the Theatre

The tripartite confluence of harbour, business district and art seem almost inevitable when I think about both cities, Hong Kong and Singapore. As I walk down the promenade at the Avenue of Stars, not only does the wind carry my thoughts back to my home city a little down south, but the words of Edwin Thumboo drift resonantly, swiftly, into my mind as well. Through a peripatetic weaving of words along this promenade, across the seas, Thumboo makes a transnational connection between the two harbours. In his poem aptly titled ‘Two Harbours,’ Thumboo articulates with much perspicuity the fates and comparability of the two harbours. He says,

For us, tides are destinies. They brought hopeful
Eyes that built and bred a Tao whose unfolding still
Proclaims, still travelling with cool audacity; flows in
Cutting edge stuff; dare caress global twist and spin.
We too house the world’s stage, ever shifting rock
And hum, spliced mass media, traditions redesigned.

The unremitting pulsations of trade, the aggressiveness of economic activity are shaped by the movements of tides, the direction of the wind. What blows into our tiny shores makes or breaks our futures. We are two harbours interconnected by the whims of the wind and the turn of the tides. Aspiring eyes of migrants, the diligent trudge of the fisherman and coolies who form the perambulatory course of our history have transformed our rivers, harbours and cities into the ceaseless hubs that they are today. Embodied in the organic word ‘Eyes,’ these seeing glasses, these lenses that project themselves into our present and future still persist in creating a vision, a transnational Tao that unifies the unfolding and enfolding of harbours, of cities. That Thumboo chooses ‘Tao’ reveals a universalising principal behind his words, an intimacy and likeness of relation between the histories, presents, and futures of the two harbours – a trajectory ‘spliced,’ aquatically connected. Almost like a dance – a ‘global twist and spin’ – both harbours’ dalliance with imports and exports, render a daring environment of industry and enterprise. With iconic performance venues located there, the two harbours and their cities become a ‘world stages’ where the arts and its global audiences gaze and strut. Most starkly then, what characterises the similarity of the two harbours is their sense of invitation for the arts. Indeed, the harbours of Singapore and Hong Kong are

More alike than we care to know, we compete,
Yet share creative get-up-and-go, vie to be tops,
How tickets sold, count good reviews.

In the poem, the tension between the triptych of relations – harbour, business district and art is evident. While the harbour ushers in the arts, profit must be of firm consideration, too. Which harbour makes an arts hub? Can the economy, patently emblematised by the central business districts of Hong Kong and Singapore, afford a greater stake in the arts? Maybe that which keeps the city economically vibrant is not so much art existing for its own sake, but art that receives rave reviews, art that makes itself for an adoring audience. How can these two harbours afford it, otherwise? Just

like the ships at the harbour, the arts only 'arrive to depart'; they are made of tos-and-fros, of impermanence, of movement, of mobility. Thumboo, being one of Singapore's pioneer poets, has seen the nation develop from a backwater to the affluent city it is today. However, being a poet, and as such, one who stands in the interstices of society and art, he does not seek to moralise, but questions the tensions inherent in this triangular relationship. He hopes, but does not insist on any high 'truth'. He celebrates the energy and hive of economic activity of the two harbours, but concomitantly wonders about their compatibility with the arts.

Indeed, the sculptures at Tsim Tsha Tsui tell a greater story; a story about how far the Hong Kong film industry and the cinematic creativity of Hong Kong have travelled on their transnational journey. Having them positioned by the sea, at the harbour, is revelatory of the 'creative get-up-and-go,' the dynamism of the artistic process. However, all is not so simple and romantic; cast in bronze, these sculptures are also a staid reminder that artistic success and profit are inexorable bedfellows, be their relationship tense or comfortable.

I pause to take a picture of Bruce Lee's statue. There is still a little time left to walk around before the film starts at the nearby Hong Kong Space Museum. As I circle the waterfront, the salt-tinged breeze ruffling my hair, I remember the harbour back home. I remember ambling along the half completed Esplanade in 2001; back then, its spikes had yet to jab the sky, the harbor, its present promenade a construction site cluttered with cranes, sticking their necks of steel into some distance above, beyond. I wondered then how the finished product would turn out, how it would change the way Singapore is perceived, how it would mar or enhance the city's skyline, whether or not it would pave the way for any sort of renaissance the city-state was aspiring to.

A year later in November 2002, I went for my first performance, *the* very first performance at the Esplanade – the musical *Singing in the Rain*. By that time, the thorns were fully constructed, indignantly and determinedly proclaiming to the world the theatre's entry and its presence. The performance was full of spectacle but mediocre: to my mind, it was more a show of the technical capability of the theatre, more braggadocio than art. I wasn't provoked, as it were, by the performance's content, but then again, I could not expect a popular musical to ask any sort of probing question that addressed the nuances of human nature. I was proud of the new theatre, but I wondered why the inaugural performance had to be a popular musical, performed by an international cast. Need this maiden performance go down in the annals of Singapore's history as the one that opened the new theatre? But then, I came to a realisation, when I saw water being poured down from the stage ceiling drenching the performer below. He continued to sing, to sing in the 'rain' no matter how stylised, how artificial this 'rain' was. His insouciance articulated a certain, perhaps sobering truth. In order for a city to gain global recognition, it needs to have its arts scene injected with international currency. That's how hubs function; that's our destiny, brought about by the ebb and flow of confident tides. And that's one of the reasons I am here at Tsim Tsha Tsui this evening: the Hong Kong Film Festival is not a free event, but a ticketed, sponsored international one and I am, indubitably, a part of this massive transnational exchange of cultural products.

Fortunately, against the reality that art need not merely be made for its own sake but for profit as well, can be set another more optimistic truth. Thumboo concludes with a very powerful 'But' – a conjunction on which hope is predicated:

But the Arts

Conclude to start again, to shut doors so open others.

I am certain that the film I am about to watch will tell me another truth: a truth that will be less pragmatic; a truth which exists on the other side of art; a truth that emerges from another door, another harbour, somewhere. I do not want to be naïve, nor do I want to be cynical; it is indisputable that art is in large part, a mobile product in today's transnational ambit; but it can, despite its economic obligations, be a beacon in the dark, no matter where it is viewed.

The drizzle is setting in and I run into the museum, just in time for the film.