

## “FOODSCAPE” – TRAVELLING WITH A BITTER MELON

**Gérard Henry**

Cooking and food are two essential ingredients in Hong Kong culture. There is no doubt that they form the main topic of conversation in this city. A visitor to Hong Kong soon notices that when Hong Kong people meet, rather than saying “hello”, they ask each other whether they have eaten and if it was good. In the late 1990s, the city saw a new trend in culinary arts - artists (painters, photographers or art critics) became cooks, abandoning their pens and their paintbrushes in favour of the wok, transforming their apartments or studios into semi-private restaurants.

It was in the cafés and restaurants, over a drink or a meal, that the world was put to rights, that ideologists confronted each other, that revolutions took flight. Or, to put it more simply, it was in these often very noisy and smoky dens that hearts opened up, that life’s paths crossed, that tongues become untied.

The poet Leung Ping Kwan and the photographer Lee Ka-Sing understood this trend well. In *Foodscape*, an installation of poems and photographs, they offer us a journal of their culinary and geographic peregrinations, from Hong Kong to Toronto via London, Berlin, Brussels and Tokyo. In each city, they examine a culinary speciality that reveals the country that is hidden behind, as well as covering chapters of Hong Kong’s history.

Food is never innocent. With each mouthful, with each gulp, words break the silence, memories resurface, allowing daily life to take its place at the dining table. And in this way, images of the city emerge - Hong Kong in its past, present and future. Being both real and something internal, the key to this journey is, in each case, a dish – the onion with its many layers revealing the complexity of Hong Kong identity, the Ying-yang, the famous tea-coffee with milk, the unique drink that belongs strictly to Hong Kong - that demonstrates the great divide between East and West, within the city.

These are just a few examples of *Foodscape*, which is a dialogue between poems and images, with neither one describing or illustrating the other. A strong complicity can be felt between Leung Ping Kwan and Lee Ka-sing, with the latter opening up a different field of vision. He creates semi-digital images that he then prints onto canvas. These very rich images are superimposed like the layers of memory, in which one sees ancient maps or the sky, old photographs, illustrations from school textbooks, texts in several languages, playing on the levels of both space and time, and in so doing, they plunge deep into history and Hong Kong memories. As if a traveller had emptied out his bag in front of our eyes. Personal culture and memory act like the contracted reflection of a collective culture made from interwoven words and images. Leung’s poem *Travelling with a bitter melon* best sums up this journey of the uprooted Hong Kong resident who retains a taste for this very distinctive Chinese melon that is

both sweet and bitter, but so appropriate to describe the feelings in Hong Kong during this period of transition.

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Translated from the French by Bernie Mahapatra.