OVERTURE

HONG KONG

"If one thing is clear, it's that the times they are a-changin'. We are only the beginning of even more meaningful and significant things to come."

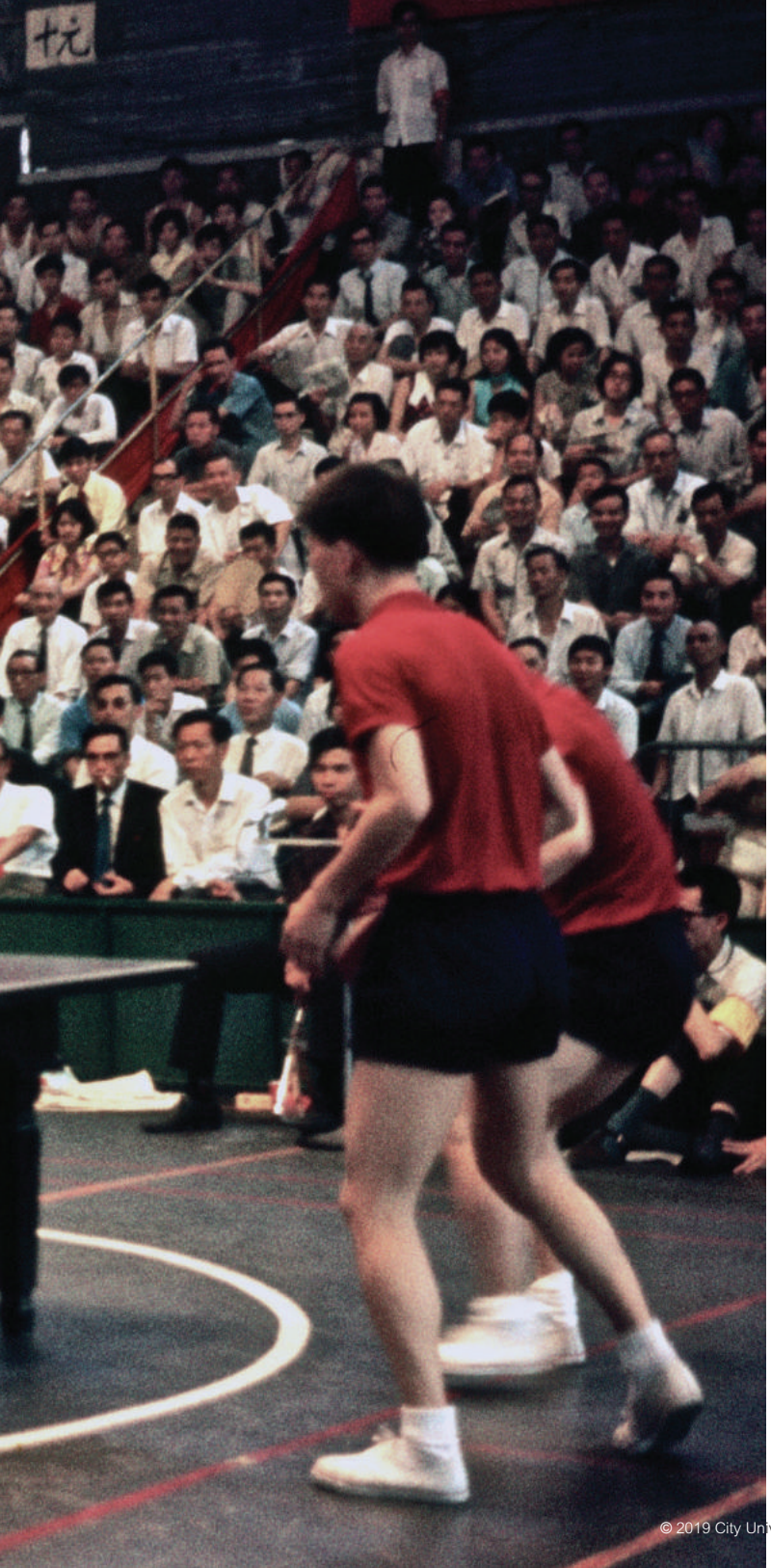
June 22, 1971

The following pages deal with an historic visit to China by 14 young Americans (and one Canadian) in June and July 1971, but it is impossible to reflect on that adventure without discussing the absolutely essential role of Hong Kong in the run up to the trip. In short, our experiences in Hong Kong in fall 1970 and spring 1971 were key components of a truly unexpected sequence of events. I'm often asked, "How did that trip happen?" Here's how it came to pass, with emphasis on the crucial role of Hong Kong in a process that was full of surprises.

Almost all of us were PhD students engaged in dissertation research on the history, politics, and society of China. In those days it was impossible for university-based U.S. China scholars to gain access to China. When graduate students in this field went abroad to do research, they typically chose between Taiwan and Hong Kong. I was among the American graduate students who showed up in Hong Kong in October 1970. Most of us settled in at the old Universities Service Center (USC) (大學服務中心) on Argyle Street in Kowloon. We were provided office space and library support. We gathered almost every day in the USC lounge to chat and in the USC dining room for a simple lunch. It was exhilarating to meet graduate students from different American universities. We bonded and many of us became lifelong friends. Some of us were loosely associated with the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS), a fluid coalition of Americans mainly comprised of graduate students and junior faculty in the Asian studies field who were critical of the U.S. war in Vietnam. I shared a flat with several other students at the recently constructed Mei Foo Sun Chuen apartment complex in the New Territories near Lai Chi Kok Bay and took a double-decker bus to the USC on Argyle Street almost every day.

Our dissertation research topics varied tremendously—I was studying the heated literary debates that played out in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s—but all of us wanted to visit China someday. It was frustrating to be so close, yet so far. China's isolation from the rest of the world was stunning. Hong Kong tour buses actually took curious travelers to a hill overlooking the border so they could "see Red China" in the distance. I preferred to check out organizations and enterprises in Hong Kong that had direct links to the People's Republic of China (PRC). These units included the large Bank of China in Central District, the tiny office of China Travel Service off Nathan Road in Tsim Sha Tsui, and several PRC-linked newspapers including *Ta Kung Pao* (大公報), *Wen Hui Pao* (文匯報), and *Hsin Wan Pao* (新晚報) based in Wan Chai. Of special interest was a fairly large department store in Tsim Sha Tsui at the southern tip of Kowloon right by the Star Ferry Pier and the old Kowloon Railway

"The Fragrant Harbor" — A tranquil corner of the Hong Kong waterfront in summer 1971.



Station. The complex was called “China Arts and Crafts.” I enjoyed wandering around the store and occasionally purchased a funky knickknack. But to this young explorer, the store’s most intriguing space was a small bookshop on the second floor. Frankly, there was not much there, mostly mid-Cultural Revolution Mao cult propaganda. But I had never seen such a thing and was always curious about what was on display on a given day. The staff was very friendly. Visits there felt a bit like vicarious trips to China itself.

One day in early 1971, as I was wandering around that bookshop, I noticed a new photo display, and was thus made aware of the fact that such exhibits changed from time to time. Already interested in visual culture, I wondered what would happen to the photos when the exhibit was taken down. I asked a young staff member who said she didn’t know. She said she would make an inquiry and I could come back in a few days for any news. When I came back, she greeted me and handed me a small slip of paper.

In May 1971, the author was invited by PRC representatives in Hong Kong to attend a rare visit to the city by the famous Chinese table tennis team.

Group photo taken in Hong Kong prior to departure in 1971. Bottom row, left to right: Ray Whitehead, Paul Levine, Ann Kruze, Susan Shirk, Kay Johnson; Middle row, left to right: Jean Garavente, Tony Garavente, Rhea Whitehead, Kim Woodard; Top row, left to right: Paul Pickowicz, Judy Woodard, Uldis Kruze, Ken Levin.

The group departing Hong Kong on June 23, 1971.

It was written in Chinese and said I could go over to Wan Chai to meet with a certain Mr. Lee. In early 1971 there was no tunnel under Hong Kong harbor for cars and trains. You had to get on the Star Ferry and take a slow but always charming boat ride over to Central, then hop on a tram.

I went to the address on the paper: 18 Causeway Bay Road, second floor. It was a small building, very close to the much larger *Ta Kung Pao* newspaper building. I walked up the stairs and knocked on the door. A middle-aged man answered. It was Mr. Lee. More specifically, I would soon learned, he was unassuming and mild-mannered Lee Tsung-ying, editor of *Eastern Horizon*, a monthy English-language magazine linked to *Ta Kung Pao*. I told him about my interest in the photo exhibit. He was very friendly and said he would be happy to look into it. He invited me to sit down for some tea in his extremely bare bones office space. He was very interested in who I was and why I was in Hong Kong. We had a long chat about my dissertation research and that of the other American graduate students in Hong Kong including our collective of friends at the USC. I explained that I was 25 years old and that it was my first trip to Asia, outlining my brief stops in Japan and Taiwan before settling in Hong Kong.

Lee Tsung-ying and I got along very well. Over the next few months we met from time to time, always on a weekday, always for lunch, and always in a simple Chinese restaurant in Wan Chai. I mentioned early on that my friends and I had talked informally but frequently about our desire to visit China but had no idea about how to make a formal inquiry to express our interest. The United States and China had no diplomatic relations and my U.S. passport at the time said explicitly that travel to "Cuba, Mainland China, North Korea, North Viet-Nam" is authorized "only when specifically validated for such travel by the Department of State." I asked if he had any suggestions. He said he would think about it.

I enjoyed my relationship with Lee Tsung-ying. He seemed very friendly. In fact, I always got the feeling that in his heart of hearts he hoped for better relations between China and the United States. There was a sincerity about him. Some of our encounters

were amusing. For instance, I suspect he was behind an invitation I received to attend a grand sporting event on Hong Kong Island on May 4, 1971, that featured the world famous Chinese table tennis team led by 30-year-old Zhuang Zedong（莊則棟）. I still remember the team marching into the arena, standing in a straight line, and bellowing out quotations from Mao before the games commenced.

My friends and I met from time to time to talk about many things, including the idea of writing up a proposal to visit China as a group. It seemed hopeless, but why not try since we were already in Hong Kong? On March 26, identifying ourselves as CCAS members living in Hong Kong, we completed a rough draft but continued to doubt our chances.

But everything changed—and the world was shocked—when the U.S. table tennis team, participating in a tournament in Japan, was suddenly and spontaneously invited by Chinese authorities to visit China. It was a 10-day trip that started on April 10. Everyone was talking about it. Was this a fluke or was something happening? There was a lot of speculation in the world press, but nothing solid. I met with Lee Tsung-ying again and stated flatly that we very much wanted to send forward our proposal. He too had been caught by surprise by the invitation to the U.S. table tennis team. He said the chances were slim, but suggested sending the statement to the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries（中國人民對外友好協會）in Beijing. We did so on April 16. But nothing happened; there was no response.

Then something highly unusual occurred. Lee called me one morning at my Mei Foo apartment, something he had never done before. It was Friday, May 28. We always planned our informal meetings way ahead of time and had never met on a Friday. He asked me if I could come over to his office right away. I dropped everything, jumped on the bus, and then took the Hung Hom ferry across to Hong Kong Island. Lee was waiting, looking both astonished and excited. There has been an "inquiry" from Beijing, he said, about the group and our proposal. He stressed that this was very unusual but was not likely to amount to anything definitive. Still, he asked whether it would be possible for him to meet with the

group. I assumed he had been asked to do so by people in Beijing.

I immediately notified everyone, and we held an urgent meeting at the USC. Our imaginations were running wild. We later met with Lee on June 5 over at his *Eastern Horizon* office in Wan Chai. It was a diverse group that included two Protestant missionaries. Members of the group shared an opposition to the war in Vietnam and a deep curiosity about life in China, but individual political orientations varied considerably. The meeting with Lee went very smoothly, except to say there was a surreal atmosphere of disbelief. Why? Because Lee told us that, in his opinion, when an inquiry of this sort was made, it was usually followed by a formal invitation. What!!?? Two days later, on June 7, 1971, the official invitation arrived. The trip was to begin on June 23.

For some reason, the Chinese authorities wanted to keep the news of the invitation a secret. They asked us not to mention it to friends or the press until the eve of our departure. Was something going on behind the scenes? Even with this request, I couldn't resist the temptation to write to my beloved mentor at the University of Wisconsin, Maurice Meisner, with the startling news. He wrote back on June 13: "What absolutely marvelous news! I am delighted, excited—and green with envy. It's a great opportunity for you and I suspect you had a great deal to do with the making of the opportunity. I am very deeply moved that you wanted to share the news and your feelings with me and, needless to say, I shall remain completely silent." He added, with characteristic humor, "If I thought it would do any good, I would ask you to inquire about what might have happened to the visa application to the People's Republic I made in Hong Kong (via the China Travel Service) in 1960 or '61." I had explained to him that my dissertation work would necessarily be put on hold for a time. He responded, "Better to make a bit of history than write about it."