

novelist Anuradha Roy describes as contrived “photo-features . . . carefully arranged to appear untouched by modernity” in the book’s introduction.

One criticism *Aam Aastha* generates, however, is its quasi-ethnographic elements, which some may view as categorizing images and people by location, neatly organizing religious practice and its adherents from a limited perspective. An in-depth explanation of each costume is provided by Kuhu Kopariha, except this was placed at the back of the book. Nevertheless, *Aam Aastha* subverts ethnographic views of Asian religions as both unknowable and classifiable by focusing on local variations. The mark of individual performers and spirit of locales are obvious in the range of visual and narrative expression: some performances are centuries old, while others originated in the 1970s, and the fluctuations within costume styles and aesthetics reflect the unique mix of cultures and religions in each area.

Hijacking the universal “catalogue” to express specificity and nuance, Fréger’s photographs reveal no single Indian folk culture, just as there is no Indian cultural monolith. While Roy’s introduction notes the recent impulses by Indian fundamentalists to standardize religious expression, Fréger’s work instead points to the beauty in a vibrant, dynamic faith that responds to its context, just as performers respond to their surroundings on set or before a camera.

Previously, everything from the French Foreign Legion and Māori school children (here, Indian religious festival attire) have come under Fréger’s sharp gaze as a way of exploring the relationship between individuals, their environment, and their “uniform.” Highlighting the universal human urge to dress, Fréger’s *Aam Aastha* gives those who embody gods the opportunity to present themselves as they truly are, and by extension, presents the reader with a wordless, microcosmic view of their world.

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HONG KONG AFTER HONG KONG

By Wong Chung Wai
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At certain times, Hong Kong seems to carry with it an air of disaster (from the Latin *des astrum*, meaning ill-starred). It is a portentous feeling, a black expectation. Whether the bureaucrats in Hong Kong or Beijing care to reflect on it or not, hundreds of thousands have left the city since 2019. Some for economic reasons, in search of new opportunities, for reasons beyond the political, beyond the fractures that have begun to spread; most because of the machinations and the sense of deception.

It was your friend, your neighbor, your acquaintance, your colleague. Everybody knows somebody who knows somebody: wrenched from the familiar, ripped from one’s history and from one’s ancestry, often, if not always, *there*, into the unknown, away from *here*. One of those was photographer Wong Chung Wai. He left in 2021, or, more appropriately, given how the title of his book, *Hong Kong After Hong Kong*, is rendered on the front cover, he has “gone.”

Franz Kafka once remarked that we photograph things in order to drive them from our minds. And so it was that Wong, realizing that his time in Hong Kong was limited, untenable, under pressure, under

duress, traversed the city with his camera for six months, photographing its people (*his* people), its places, and its objects, or the faded remnants thereof. It was his way of conjuring the great majesty of this city (in all its sublime wonder and its shabbiness) of what is now lost, but also a way of opening his eyes to the pain, to the remorse, to the sorrow, a turning toward the stain of the present and the festering wound of the future.

The book’s 69 analogue, medium-format photographs are, or were, a way for Wong to remember, or perhaps, paradoxically, to forget. But bearing no titles or captions, one is left to decipher their meaning and their import, urged to read the images to sense their resonance, their intended melancholy: a solitary man overwhelmed by the city’s concrete infrastructure; the knotted branches of a banyan tree; two lovers embracing; the remains of a tomb; the carcass of a bird; a metal door with “The End” scrawled across its face; an empty cinema with a blank screen; a wall bearing a blunt anti-communist slogan, and Hongkongers, mostly adolescent, expressionless, hinting at precarious times ahead, under the control of the panopticon. There are also a number of images that are too romantic, even a touch saccharine: a plane taking off at night, long exposure; a young woman looking wistfully out to sea as the sun sets; the picture-postcard skyline of the dense city; and closing out the book, a heart, drawn in the sand, partially erased by the the oncoming tide. But perhaps every love story really is a ghost story.

Hong Kong After Hong Kong is an ode, a lament, a love letter, as well as a goodbye, from a man whose parents escaped China in 1980 by stealing into the water and swimming across Shenzhen Bay, a man who sees in their perilous journey a mirror image, a man boarding a flight to England four decades later, perhaps never to return, or if ever he does, to a different city.

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