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DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7766-1_8

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APA Citation

Clapp, J. (2018). Hong Kong's Edward Snowden/Edward Snowden's Hong Kong. In: Polley, J., Poon, V., Wee, L.H. (Eds.) Cultural Conflict in Hong Kong. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.

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Chapter 8

Hong Kong's Edward Snowden / Edward Snowden's Hong Kong

Jeffrey Clapp

For a time around 1997, Hong Kong was the most interesting place in the world—in theory. As Evans Chan noted in 2000, Hong Kong was “discovered by the international media, by Hollywood, and finally by the post-modernists,”¹ and soon instanced “hyperreality” or “heterotopia.” When it became an instance of the emergent “glocal,” the tourism bureau got on board, declaring that in Hong Kong, “Asia’s World City,” the future was arriving with a flourish of attractive paradoxes. Hong Kong’s complicated return to Chinese sovereignty only buoyed accounts that identified the city as a paragon or an icon—of something. Twenty years later, this wave of theorizing bears distinct resemblance to the most melodramatic of all handover films, Wayne Wang’s *Chinese Box* (1998). In Wang’s gruelling allegory, the colony of Hong Kong is the Chinese beloved that the English journalist has yearned to possess but will never quite grasp. Handover-era attempts to thrust the city forward in the global imagination have come to look like extractions of cultural capital, leveraging the manner in which, according to Giovanni Arrighi, the “commercial-financial entrepôt” manages to “combine ultramodern technologies and architectures with a political capitalism reminiscent of Renaissance city-states.”² Two decades on, one can ask: is there any ore left in this mine?

There are many ways to answer. Leo Ou-Fan Lee’s *City between Worlds* answered in the name of the everyday, taking the occasion of its publication ten years after Hong Kong’s handover and the attendant theoretical binge, to dispute whether Hong Kong really illustrates, or could illustrate, or did illustrate, a futurology like that of Rem Koolhaas, in which the Asian metropolis aspires to become “The Generic City” comprised of flows of shopping and transportation. Against Koolhaas, Lee writes a history and a geography that insists on Hong Kong’s particularity. But Lee has an even more material objection: for most Hong Kongers, who

¹ Chan, “Postmodernism and Hong Kong Cinema,” n.p.

² Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 79.

lack the kind of resources that can be parlayed into visas, Hong Kong could never become the kind of interchangeable, transitory, cosmopolitan space of which the prophets of postmodernism dreamt. A similar positioning of legal and political realities over against high-theoretical Hong Kong subtends what follows. This chapter revisits the spike in Hong Kong's value in the global imagination that resulted from the city's role in Edward Snowden's whistleblowing on the surveillance activities of the United States. Why did Edward Snowden come to Hong Kong? This question, endlessly asked in different tones of voice, has proliferated through news, media, and narrative like the unquenchable desire of Wayne Wang's journalist. Just as for the journalist, the question is more important than the answer; just as for the journalist, what is wanted in reply is less an answer than an image. Several such are discernible. One is the conspiratorial image, in which Snowden's flight was actually to his Chinese (Russian?) handlers. Another is the international image, corresponding to Snowden's own rhetoric, which emphasizes legal rights and structured governance, in line with Hong Kong's consistently high scores in rankings of "developed" societies. Finally, there is an orientalizing image, in which Snowden cannily walked onto the set of a movie about the world's urban futures—a concept first sketched in the context of Hong Kong's late-nineties ascent to postmodern iconicity. These several images, because they are not mutually exclusive, will not resolve here; instead they will be revolved for suggestions of what Hong Kong now represents—or what it can represent. Snowden's case cannot be typical; as an asylum seeker, he was handled, framed, and represented in ways that rarely resemble the situations of others in flight. If images of Snowden's Hong Kong offer insights, those insights will be suggestive rather than synthetic, just as the images are opportunistic rather than objective.

We can immediately discern several different and even competing views of Hong Kong in the first drama film to represent Edward Snowden, *Verax*, a quick project by a group of Hong

Kong filmmakers, made while Snowden was actually in Hong Kong in June 2013. Their film is preoccupied with the city's skyline almost to the exclusion of its plot, in which the various parties—reporters, agents of intelligence agencies, local law enforcement—begin to bustle in response to the Snowden newsbreak. Interviewed about the decision to make the film, one of the filmmakers described Snowden in Hong Kong as “a great combo.”³ This notion is apparently a tantalizing one, as many commenters on Snowden's time in Hong Kong also noted an impression of satisfying combination, which they often identified with various genres and authors—the international thriller, the spy story, Kafka, le Carré.⁴ In many ways, this amounts to a repetition of the situation circa 1997, when “tensions before the handover, and the rise of China as an economic and political power in the decade afterwards, made Hong Kong a continued favorite for popular novels of espionage and geopolitical intrigue.”⁵ Sketching the English-language genre literature that has come out of Hong Kong, Leo Ou-fan Lee notes that “One could argue that Hong Kong is the perfect setting for these thrillers.”⁶ But even Lee does not feel obliged to suggest the terms of the argument. Whence proceeds the notion that Hong Kong is a good site for such stories? What is “great” about the “combo” of Edward Snowden and Hong Kong? Or to quote the journalist Glenn Greenwald, who broke the Snowden story, what made Hong Kong “the perfect backdrop” for Snowden's revelations?⁷

It might seem as though representations of Snowden's Hong Kong could only be what Ackbar Abbas has described as “predictable variations on ‘Western images of Hong Kong this

³ Edwin Lee and Shawn Tse, “Edward Snowden's Journey to Hong Kong dramatized in Chinese Film—video.” *The Guardian*, 5 July 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2013/jul/05/edward-snowden-hong-kong-film-video-verax>.

⁴ Even Glenn Greenwald succumbed to the temptation: “the situation seemed so bizarre, so extreme and improbable. This is a surreal international thriller set in Hong Kong, I thought” (Greenwald, 2014, 33).

⁵ Patke and Holden, *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English*, 162.

⁶ Lee, *City Between Worlds*, 150.

⁷ Quoted in Lana Lam, “Hong Kong Still Without Answers One Year After Snowden Saga.” *South China Morning Post*. no date. <http://multimedia.scmp.com/snowden>.

and that,’ compendia of orientalist kitsch produced by compradorist mentalities.”⁸ Indeed, *Verax* frames Hong Kong as a pulsing sky above a thrilling, intriguing cityscape. Yet Edwin Lee, the film’s director, also noted that “We were proud that [Snowden] would call Hong Kong his refuge. He trusted our rule of law and our government to protect him.”⁹ When Snowden left town, Lee and his colleagues were disappointed. Hong Kong had lost a chance to assert its civil society. Anxiety around this possibility is already on display in *Verax*, which inquires to what extent Hong Kong might act in accordance with Hong Kong law, and to what extent it would have to take its cues from Beijing. We witness a mainland law enforcement agent barking orders at the Hong Kong Police; to the question “Don’t we have a rendition treaty with the United States?” the agent brusquely retorts “Let us handle that matter.”¹⁰ In fact, Hong Kong *does* have a rendition treaty with the US—but Hong Kong’s Basic Law grants the “Special Administrative Region” no control over diplomatic matters. How would the case be handled? In fact, after a period of dignified silence, the Hong Kong government behaved as though there were no diplomatic issue, instead viewing Snowden’s case as a law enforcement affair, governed by clear regulations. It neither acknowledged any role for Beijing, nor was it to be swayed by the insistence of US consular officers that failing to detain Snowden would damage US-China bilateral relations.¹¹ This choice of framework, as much as the *Verax* film, is an image of contemporary Hong Kong.

⁸ Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, 11.

⁹ “Hong Kong Directors Make First Snowden Film,” *South China Morning Post*, 30 June 2013.

¹⁰ *Verax*, video, directed by Edwin Lee, Jeff Floro, Shawn Tse, and Marcus Tsoi (Hong Kong: J. Shot Media, 2013). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWVGDBeR42I>

¹¹ See comments by Caitlin Hayden, National Security Council spokesperson, quoted in Zeke J. Miller, “U.S. Government ‘Disappointed’ Hong Kong Let Snowden Leave, Asks Russia to Extradite Him,” *Time Magazine*, 23 June 2013, <http://swampland.time.com/2013/06/23/u-s-government-disappointed-hong-kong-let-snowden-leave-country>.

In *Arresting Cinema: Surveillance in Hong Kong Film* (2017), Karen Fang argues that Hong Kong films, and with them both local and global images of Hong Kong, are persistently preoccupied with surveillance. If so, Snowden's revelations about the US's global surveillance architecture would seem readily fitted into the Hong Kong context—a “great combo” or a “perfect backdrop.” But Fang also asserts that Hong Kong's surveillance culture lacks the paranoid dialectic of oppression and resistance that characterizes US representations of surveillance. Instead, Hong Kong tends to understand surveillance as an aspect of the control systems typical of modernity and the rule of law—“the means by which a prosperous city can protect itself.”¹² Fang's reframing of surveillance suggests that there may be more afoot in the representations of Hong Kong occasioned by Edward Snowden's time in the city than Abbas' wary prediction might lead us to expect. The examination below begins by revisiting a particular class of images of the city produced around the handover—those which have often been understood to contain an orientalism inverted into the future, what David Morley, Kevin Robins, and others have termed a “techno-orientalism.” Scholars including Lisa Nakamura have shown that such representations directly conflate the Asian metropolis with new network technologies, as in William Gibson's 1996 novel *Idoru*, which presents Kowloon Walled City as an image of cyberspace utopia. Such representations have been extensively discussed.¹³ It would not be worth returning, except that Edward Snowden's search for refuge in Hong Kong reveals something not previously noticed in them: the persistence with which these texts invoke ideas of asylum. Moreover, these images of Hong Kong propose the city as an icon of lawfulness and regularity just as often as they trade on its exciting, marketable “density.” With this observation in hand,

¹² Fang, *Arresting Cinema*, 76.

¹³ For Yu, such works clearly stand in the tradition of postmodernism, but sacrifice any anarchic energies to their oriental tropes. See “Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures.” A recent revisionist approach to *Idoru* is Tran's “Thinking about Bodies, Souls, and Race in Gibson's Bridge Trilogy.”

the chapter then proceeds to examine other representations of Edward Snowden's Hong Kong, including not only the headline films by Laura Poitras and Oliver Stone, but also the terms in which the media, pundits, and the government itself discussed Snowden's time in the city.

Before Snowden

In the 1960s, Kevin Lynch, one of the originators of urban studies, introduced the concept of a city's "legibility"—the idea that some urban spaces are easily imagined and are therefore easy to navigate and use. He developed criteria by which places become imaginable to their users and which clarify a place's functions and meanings. This eminently modern conception of the city suggests one reason why Hong Kong was made to figure so prominently in postmodern representations: it has a low degree of legibility. Visually and spatially complex geographic features, including islands and peninsulas, mountains and crevasses, along with generations of development, waves of influence, and influxes of investment, have yielded a various city that has proliferated along a series of compressed waterfront regions. Even the waterfronts are no "boundary," to mention one of Lynch's legibility criteria, because more than a hundred and fifty years of reclamation has turned many stretches of coastline into permanent construction areas, neither still sea nor yet land.¹⁴

One of the first representations to parlay Hong Kong's low legibility into a postmodern aesthetic was the 1982 film *Blade Runner*, financed in part by Hong Kong producer Run Run Shaw. Director Ridley Scott has described his film's dystopian futurism as "Hong Kong on a bad day."¹⁵ Ostensibly set in Los Angeles—largely flat, low, and gridded—the futuristic cityscape was rendered less legible by suggesting that by 2019, Los Angeles would be as Hong Kong

¹⁴ See "Mapping the History of Land Reclamation in Hong Kong." <http://www.oldhkphoto.com/coast/Map.html>.

¹⁵ Salisbury, "Back to the Future," 96.

already was. But more important for present purposes is the real source of the “badness” of the day Ridley Scott imagined, which arises through the film’s central narrative activity: endless flight through the city, in search of safety. Though we are initially focalized on Harrison Ford’s Dick-Tracy-style pursuit, it is his targets who eventually monopolize our attention and sympathy. Why did the film’s cyborg “replicants” risk execution to come back to the planet? If we pause to notice that what they want is to be granted asylum, *Blade Runner* neatly conjoins the themes of the Snowden incident: the city of Hong Kong, the fugitive from a dirty justice, and the question of refuge.

Blade Runner is seminal for the “cyberpunk” dispensation that Fredric Jameson identified as a key mode of postmodernism. If there is a lot of “punk” in *Blade Runner*, the “cyber” component is much more in evidence in another originary text, *Ghost in the Shell*, an animated film made by Mamoru Oshii in 1996.¹⁶ The story is set in Japan, but to anybody who has seen the city, Oshii’s film quite obviously depicts Hong Kong, which again appears as an image of dark futurity. As Wendy Chun argues, Oshii’s choice of Hong Kong is displaced from its local specification through an act of techno-orientalizing that offers us the frisson of “the tourist’s oriented disorientation.”¹⁷ The film dwells at length on this sensation; just as in *Blade Runner*, the plot thrashes through the city’s spaces, one character chasing another. At the end of the film, as we overlook the city, its main character, a cyborg law enforcement agent named Major M, enunciates its resonant final line: “The net is vast and infinite.” This vatic pronouncement perfectly embodies nineties optimism about the internet. But it contradicts everything else we have seen in the film, which focuses precisely on how Major M and the police utilise an array of powerful surveillance technologies to oversee the city. In other words, the film’s action directly

¹⁶ The film has overshadowed its source, a Japanese manga comic by Shirow Masamune.

¹⁷ Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 201.

belies the idea that there is an urban or cyber vastness into which one might escape. Here Hong Kong is much more vast than infinite, and that vastness is itself no hindrance to a certain form of legibility. This is true even when the film turns its attention from the skyscrapers of “Central” to the more specific and recognisable images that evoke Hong Kong districts like Mong Kok or Sham Shui Po. One might imagine that between and within, in the gritty interstices of the global city, we might find a Hong Kong of hidden places, a warren of anonymity which might be rendered as a redoubt of anarchic authenticity. Instead, agents of the law monopolize our attention as they move through these districts with a practiced and capable technocracy. On what does *Ghost in the Shell* turn, then, if not this contrast between the official and the unofficial cities? The answer is, again, asylum. In the very first scene of the film, Major M disrupts an attempt to leverage “international law” to gain “political asylum” on behalf of a “classified programmer.” Major M immediately shoots the person talking such nonsense in the forehead. But asylum as an theme will not be dismissed so easily. The film’s climax comes when “Program 2501,” having achieved sentience, demands political asylum against the predations of the police forces, including Major M, who are trying to destroy it as it moves across systems and networks. Major M initially combats this demand but ultimately grants it, joining her own cybernetic programming with that Program 2501. Like *Blade Runner*, therefore, *Ghost in the Machine* offers Hong Kong as a surprising icon of asylum.¹⁸

Fans of nineties cyber culture and its Asian inflections, like Edward Snowden,¹⁹ would have seen *Ghost in the Shell*, the most prominent anime film of its time, and they would also

¹⁸ The 2017 remake of *Ghost in the Shell* persists in presenting a story set in Japan within the cityscape of Hong Kong. But the film’s villain can no longer be reconciled with the city via the body of Major M, nor is it plausible to offer urban space as a metonym of cyberspace. *Ghost in the Shell*, 2017 film directed by Rupert Sanders.

¹⁹ Reiji Yoshida, “Snowden Web Manga Profile Still Online,” *Japan Times*, 15 June 2013, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/06/15/national/02-profile-paints-snowden-as-manga-anime-gun-girlish-geek-with-list-of-likes>

have read *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson (1992), a central cyberpunk novel and yet another text that envisions Hong Kong primarily as a place of refuge. In a world in which nations have been superseded by corporate enclaves, Stephenson's characters consistently find safety in a particular place:

The sign stands out because it is a rare one, a green-and-blue sign, soothing and calm in a glare-torn franchise ghetto. It says:

MR LEE'S GREATER HONG KONG

Hiro is . . . pinioned in the crossfire of a dozen red laser beams scanning him from every direction at once. The Hong Kong robot security system is checking him out. Her, too; she looks down to see the lasers scribbling across her chest.²⁰

One might imagine that Stephenson could transfer the apparently empty modifier "Hong Kong" from the "robot security system" to the "glare-torn franchise ghetto" with which "Mr. Lee's" is said to contrast. But as in both *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell*, there is an element of unsuspected consistency in the way that Stephenson has written Hong Kong. Whatever else Hong Kong can represent, it is defined by ubiquitous surveillance and identified with the promise of secure legal refuge. This does not seem like a wilful misrepresentation. When ambitious theorists have identified Hong Kong with the "fractal," or mapped Hong Kong's spatial dispensation onto Foucault's heterotopias, Certeau's walking, or Bhabha on an "in-between space," they have intended a transvaluation in which "inscrutability" is recoded as tactical resistance.²¹ But does this amount to a full account of the texts above? They appear to invest just as centrally in something more above-ground: legality, sovereignty, and even

²⁰ Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 83.

²¹ See for example Wong, "On the Edge of Spaces," 18.

international law.

Snowden's Hong Kong

The very first image of Hong Kong associated with Edward Snowden was, to use Neal Stephenson's language, both "blue-and-green" and "soothing and calm." The twelve-minute film by Laura Poitras that revealed Snowden's identity, and his location, to the world, begins in the tranquil embrace of one of Hong Kong's coastline typhoon shelters (Figure 8.1).



FIGURE 8.1: Snowden's Hong Kong, according to Laura Poitras. Reproduced by permission of Praxis Films, Inc.

Poitras' shot is probably stock footage, but not by any means the most likely stock footage of Hong Kong. The likely image—skyscrapers, neon, density—was not long in appearing. When reporter Glenn Greenwald was interviewed on the American TV station CNN about Snowden's revelations, footage of Hong Kong's garish nightly "laser light show" was piped in behind him.

Every evening at eight o'clock, the show plays to a crowd of tourists gathered along the harbour front: it combines Hong Kong's skyscrapers, and its neon, in a public preface to the fireworks let off at Hong Kong's Disneyland every night.²²

The contrast between these two approaches was reprised in the two leading nonfiction accounts of Snowden's actions: Luke Harding's *The Snowden Files* (2014) and Glenn Greenwald's *No Place to Hide* (2014). Harding describes Snowden as having found a "Hong Kong hideout," but also as "lost in a densely packed metropolis of 7 million people."²³ Given such rhetoric, one can understand why for Harding might conjecture that "As [Snowden's] plane came in to land, the crowded lights of Hong Kong twinkling below, there was for the first time a sense of certainty."²⁴ Harding's account of Snowden's state of mind arises from the theory that Hong Kong's "crowded lights" blind the eye of the law, making the city safe for the lawbreaker. As both Karen Fang's account of Hong Kong surveillance, and the above reading of techno-oriental representations of Hong Kong have shown, this is truly inaccurate: Hong Kong does not in fact conflate density and lawlessness, nor does it imagine that its lights impede the surveilling eye. Harding's exoticism is not entirely absent from Greenwald's *No Place to Hide*, but after meeting Snowden, Greenwald offers an informed opinion on what Snowden actually thought of the city:

Hong Kong, though semi-independent, was part of Chinese territory, he reasoned, and American agents would find it harder to operate against him there than in the other places he considered as candidates for seeking ultimate refuge. . . . He also wanted to be in a place where the people had a commitment to political values that were important to him.

²² The show is officially titled "A Symphony of Lights." See: <http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/see-do/highlight-attractions/harbour-view/a-symphony-of-lights.jsp>

²³ Harding, *The Snowden Files*, 113; 251.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

As he explained, the people of Hong Kong, though ultimately subject to the repressive rule of the Chinese government, had fought to preserve some basic political freedoms and had created a vibrant climate of dissent. . . . Hong Kong, he felt, provided the best mix of political security and political strength.²⁵

There are two factors, and neither of them involves a sense of security provoked by twinkling lights. Instead, according to Greenwald, Snowden's choice of Hong Kong was in two senses about the legal status of the Special Administrative Region. First, there was the extent to which Chinese state power might offer protection against the long arm of the US intelligence services. Second, just as China's "political security" might serve as an asset against prosecution by the United States, so might the SAR's "political strength" serve as an asset against persecution by China. From this vantage, Poitras' original image is singularly well-chosen: rather than an infinite net of lights into which one might disappear, Hong Kong offered a harbour. A structure of nested sovereignties, rather than a fantasy of invisibility, defined Snowden's Hong Kong.

Few references to sovereignty or security appear in Oliver Stone's film *Snowden*. He begins with a swoop; elevating over the western shoulder of Hong Kong Island, we are treated to the view that has made Hong Kong's harbour first famous, then iconic, and finally clichéd. As we consume this generic establishing shot, a pensive question is nonetheless meant to arise: where, amidst this visual complexity, is Edward Snowden? Reaching an apex, the shot pauses to begin its descent: in this film, we will go down there and find him. Stone distributes this will to local knowledge through the film's structure, intercutting the story of Snowden's life from adolescence onward with a set of flashes forward to Snowden's time in Hong Kong. The effect is to foreground the image of Hong Kong in the representation of Snowden's life, so that the

²⁵ Greenwald, *No Place to Hide*, 49.

increasingly thrilleresque aspects of Snowden’s challenge to the US security state seem to lead naturally to the Hong Kong skyline. One can see this movement being prepared in the film’s second shot, at once conventional and conventionally exoticizing. No viewer will remember this shot, the front of Kowloon’s Mira Hotel, but again it is not without significance: it is canted, taken from the sidewalk, and thus shows the building—modern, but not particularly interesting nor particularly large, and certainly not part of any spectacular skyline—as though it were part of such a skyline, jutting angularly upward. Nobody actually sees the building like this, because nobody on the sidewalk looks up, with the exception of tourists enjoying what Chun termed “oriented disorientation.” If an interesting fringe of “tropical” vegetation frames this image, then an old orientalism becomes the penumbra of an new one (Figure 8.2)



FIGURE 8.2. The Mira Hotel, according to Oliver Stone. Reproduced by permission of Sacha, Inc.

It is worth belaboring Stone’s genre filmmaking because it comes into such stark contrast with Laura Poitras’ parallel choices in *Citizenfour*. The first shot Poitras used in her full-length treatment of Snowden was not the harbor footage she chose when breaking the Snowden story. Poitras’ new opener was an abstraction: a dashed yellow line emerging from the screen’s centre point and streaming up toward its right hand corner. It wavers and flickers; we hear Poitras

reading one of the missives that “Citizenfour,” later revealed to be Snowden, sent to Poitras. As Snowden’s letter closes, abstraction resolves into representation: we have been looking at a series of fluorescent light tubes flowing past a car travelling through a traffic tunnel. Yet only after Poitras has laid down her critique of the US surveillance state do we return to this tunnel and burst out into the Hong Kong district of Causeway Bay. As in Stone’s film, we see a skyline; as in Stone’s film, we are watching a moving camera. Yet we are in a car, not a helicopter, and further, this is not an iconic skyline. Amazingly, *Citizenfour* does not feature shots of the harbour, or of Victoria Peak, or Hong Kong’s most iconic buildings. Instead, Poitras, reversing the motion down and into the dense complexity that Stone emphasizes, figures the city as an emergence from a dark tunnel out into the light of a bright day.

The pattern of repetition and interference in the two filmmakers’ approaches continues in Poitras’ view of the Mira Hotel. From another building across Kowloon Park (probably the W Hotel, where Poitras and Greenwald stayed), we look out at the Mira, which appears almost squat or diminutive in front of some of the more extravagant buildings of the Tsim Sha Tsui district. The shot is dead-level, not craning its neck. For long seconds, the camera does not move, and only a rustle of traffic noise reveals that this is film at all. Whereas Stone’s image intends to quicken the pulse, Poitras palpably desires to calm it (Figure 8.3).



FIGURE 3. The Mira Hotel, according to Laura Poitras. Reproduced by permission of Praxis Films, Inc.

This pattern of partial contrasts persists in the films' representations of what appears outside the Mira's windows. Both films spend substantial time with Snowden's hotel room window and with the image of Snowden looking out it. Yet the world that appears outside differs considerably. For Stone, the window frames neon, motion, angularity, and above all darkness. After Stone's first images of the city, which are in daylight, it remains night for the entire middle strophe of *Snowden*, and whenever we see Snowden's hotel room window, we see an evolving panoply of red, green, and blue, or LED images strobing up the side of the ICC building.²⁶ When we approach the window more closely, Stone offers glare, lens flares, and the "thematic" image of Snowden gazing into his own proliferating reflection.

Poitras does not treat Snowden's hotel room as a womblike refuge from the exciting

²⁶ This is the "ICC Light and Music Show." See <http://icclightshow.com.hk>.

danger of the city, but instead a repeated insistence on dailiness and normalcy. Outside her window we find a wide swath of calm green, Kowloon Park. Across the park stand a series of unremarkable structures which could appear in any metropolitan area. For Poitras, the important contrast is not between the hotel room and the dark world outside of it, but between the unscrupulous power of the intelligence agencies of the United States, and the conceptual space of Hong Kong. An exception proves the rule. Poitras' film uses a single moving camera shot of the Hong Kong cityscape, and this is stock footage, chosen from among the dozens of views of Hong Kong available from a company called Axiom Images. In the one Poitras used, we look straight down on Hong Kong's buildings, which thereby lose much of their most lauded characteristic: their verticality. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that to find and purchase this footage through Axiom's website, one filters for "day" rather than "night," and "sunny" skies rather than otherwise.²⁷

After Snowden

In his account of the canons of absolute hospitality, Jacques Derrida emphasizes that nothing may be asked of a stranger before hospitality is extended—not even their name. To do so would be to summon a lineage, a patrimony, even a nationality, which would allow that these factors bear on the extension of hospitality—that it is not, after all, absolute.²⁸ On 15 June 2013, after an extended silence about Edward Snowden, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, CY Leung, made the following statement: "When the relevant mechanism is activated, the Government will handle the case of Mr Snowden in accordance with the laws and established

²⁷ Axiom Images, "Bird's Eye View of City Streets and Skyscrapers on Hong Kong Island in China Aerial Stock Footage SS01_0019," http://www.axiomimages.com/aerial-stock-footage/view/SS01_0019.

²⁸ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 77ff.

procedures of Hong Kong.”²⁹ Yet eight days later, Snowden left Hong Kong for Moscow. On 25 June, the Hong Kong government informed the public of its reasons for not holding Snowden: the “relevant mechanism” had never been “activated.” Hong Kong had asked the United States to confirm Edward Joseph Snowden’s name, which was both stated incorrectly (“Edward James Snowden”) and spelled incompletely (“Edward J. Snowden”) on the extradition paperwork.³⁰ Not receiving corrected paperwork, the government had no reason to detain Mr. Snowden. In other words, the Hong Kong government declined to make any attempt to ask Snowden himself what his name might be, despite the fact that he left Hong Kong through normal procedures at the airport. The city extended to Snowden what Jacques Derrida has described as an absolute hospitality.

United States officials were incensed. Rather than acknowledging Hong Kong’s “mechanisms”—or its hospitality—they responded according to geopolitical imperatives, suggesting that bilateral relations between the US and China had been imperiled by Hong Kong’s evasive bureaucratic maneuver, and assuming that Hong Kong had acted according to the beck of some parties to its north. But Hong Kong never acknowledged any role for other authorities, nor for geopolitics, in its handling of Edward Snowden: the police commissioner, for example, announced in a rather deliberate monotone that the “Hong Kong government” would handle the case according to “Hong Kong law.”³¹ CY Leung, speaking shortly after Snowden left, struck the same notes over and over again in responding to “expressions of displeasure” on the part of the United States:

²⁹ Statement by Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying, released 15 June 2013, documented at http://archive.news.gov.hk/en/categories/admin/html/2013/06/20130615_195120.shtml

³⁰ “HK Says US Got Snowden’s Middle Name Wrong,” *South China Morning Post*, 27 June 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1270242/hk-says-us-got-snowdens-middle-name-wrong>.

³¹ “Hong Kong Silent over Edward Snowden Extradition,” *The Guardian*, 13 June 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2013/jun/22/hong-kong-silent-edward-snowden-extradition-video>.

The people of Hong Kong, as well as our friends in the international community, expect Hong Kong to uphold its own laws. . . [they] expect us to follow the laws of Hong Kong itself, they expect us to uphold our rule of law, and equally importantly, they expect us to follow procedural fairness and procedural justice. . . . There was no legal basis to stop Mr. Snowden from leaving from Hong Kong. This is a good example to illustrate One Country Two Systems, Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong, and the high degree of autonomy that we have. It was also a good example to illustrate the rule of law that we uphold and the procedural fairness and justice that we uphold.³²

This rhetoric is not only a rejoinder to the US, but also involves a more general set of claims, namely that the Edward Snowden situation had the potential to represent—in the form of an “example”—the nature of Hong Kong. That “nature” appears in Leung’s repeated reiteration of the strong connections he perceives among procedure, law, and justice. The strength of these connections, moreover, amounts not only to something which Hong Kong aspires, but something which already defines it in the eyes of its “friends.”

And in the eyes of strangers? Snowden’s passage through Hong Kong reveals a throughline of insistence on refuge and asylum, and on procedure and legality, through several different genres, over a period of several decades. It may not be sheer fancy, therefore, to consider that Hong Kong’s handling of Snowden’s case took its course and form according to the laws of hospitality, which Derrida has also articulated as a kind of strict “mechanism.” As a group, these texts open an interpretation of events in which, finding themselves not in point of fact in possession of the name which they did not want to have, Hong Kong’s bureaucrats

³² Statement by Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying, 24 June 2013, documented on news.gov.hk, http://archive.news.gov.hk/en/categories/law_order/html/2013/06/20130624_163906.shtml

decided that hospitality could be extended according to a universal dictum, even amidst a legalistic modernity. Given the well-established pattern of representing Hong Kong as a place of refuge and asylum, that framing appears less opportunistic than habitual. Furthermore, despite what one might initially conjecture, this image does not ultimately depend upon seeing Hong Kong as playing by “another set of rules” that one might describe as “Eastern hospitality,” but instead consists substantially in foregrounding the city’s global modernity. In a similar vein, Janet Ng has described Hong Kong as a typical-atypical “paradigm city” in which “the physical state of the city, the efficiency of the transit system, the transparency in business practices, and the *rule of law*, are all cited as factors that make Hong Kong a *hospitable* place for both tourists and international corporations.”³³ Of course, Ng’s usage reflects a deformation of the concept of hospitality, one which has led to the emergence of a “hospitality industry” which serves tourists and businessmen. But Ng’s statement also demonstrates that hospitality retains its specific connection to the notion of rule-like constraints.

Why did Edward Joseph Snowden, NSA leaker, come to Hong Kong? Was he looking for the Pearl of the Orient? Were there machinations beneath machinations, such that the answer to this question, like all other questions about Hong Kong post-1997, is always “Beijing”? As it turns out, one good answer can rest on Hong Kong’s continuous characterisation and self-characterisation across genres and forms, in which it is possible to see both Hong Kong’s Edward Snowden and Edward Snowden’s Hong Kong through the prism of universal hospitality. This hospitality consists primarily in the legalistic dictum Derrida unearthed in the concept, and which has persistently emerged in images of the city, from cyberpunk to the banal rhetoric of the chief executive.

³³ Ng, *Paradigm City*, 9. Emphasis added.

The story of Snowden's Hong Kong, however, has not ended. While this chapter was being written, and even as it went to press, the refugees with whom Snowden stayed after he left the Mira Hotel have been placed under significant pressure from the Hong Kong Immigration Bureau and have taken the advice of their lawyer, and Snowden's, Mr. Robert Tibbo, and applied for asylum in Canada. While Immigration Bureau strong-arming is hardly unusual, particularly for political dissidents, Tibbo has framed the scrutiny of these individuals as extraordinary, widely publicising their situation and their images, and generating a whole new set of images of Edward Snowden's Hong Kong. Tibbo's rhetoric offers rich repetitions of the logics we have been examining above: "the strategy was to put Mr. Snowden within an area of Hong Kong that was densely populated because again people wouldn't expect Mr. Snowden to be located there. So again it was a strategy to hide Mr. Snowden in plain sight."³⁴ That this statement directly contradicts itself, counterpoising the notion of a complex density that inhibits vision with the notion of a "purloined" Snowden who could not be found because all too visible, should no longer surprise us. It should however dismay us if the individuals who took Snowden into their homes—in at least one case, according to a principle of universal hospitality, without knowing who he was³⁵—found that they were seeking safety a different Hong Kong than the one which hosted Snowden himself.

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³⁴ Robert Tibbo, speaking at the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club, 5 April 2017, video at <https://www.fcchk.org/event/club-lunch-the-inside-story-of-edward-snowden-in-hong-kong/>.

³⁵ Theresa Tedesco, "How Snowden Escaped," *National Post Online* 2017, <http://news.nationalpost.com/features/how-edward-snowden-escaped-hong-kong>.

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