

The Shape of Light

Meditations on Hong Kong

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THE LIGHT ON THE OTHER SHORE

As an archipelago comprised of 273 islands, Hong Kong is shaped by its relationship to water. Its built environment, ways of life, politics, and economy have formed around the deep waters of Victoria Harbour and the South China Sea it flows into. Water also separates the city from mainland China. However, as China reclaims the territory, it is suturing this divide, politically and psychologically, through a compulsory patriotism; and physically, through a vast infrastructure of bridges, tunnels, and high-speed rail that connects Hong Kong to the Greater Bay Area (GBA), a finance and technology hub linking eleven cities and seventy million inhabitants. Hong Kong's future is being defined by its role in the GBA, and the city's youth are being groomed as energetic entrepreneurs ready to compete and contribute to the prosperity of a unified nation.

"Be water" also became the unofficial slogan of the 2019 pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. Borrowed from martial artist Bruce Lee's quasi-Daoist reflections on water's formlessness and capacity to assume the shape of whatever surrounds it, "be water" was interpreted by protestors through a physical relationship with the city, as they dispersed, flowed, and crashed through the streets and infrastructure spaces to reclaim the city and defend freedoms that have historically distinguished Hong Kong from the mainland. When the National Security Law (NSL) was passed on June 30, 2020, however, the streets were emptied overnight and all signs of the protests were covered up with hasty paint jobs, boarded-up windows, and cement-patched sidewalks.

The pandemic's arrival aided the suppression of political activity, with bans on public gatherings justified as a threat to public health. Signs promoting unity against a new biological threat—"Together we fight the virus!"—pervaded public spaces, while posters in MTR stations, the site of several violent confrontations

during the protests, encouraged residents to report “terrorist activities” by calling the NSL hotline. Politics and science worked together to control the population through closed borders and an expanded data ecology that monitors the bodies and movements of residents. In the weeks leading up to the twenty-fifth anniversary of Hong Kong’s handover back to China, the government celebrated a return to conformity with red and gold posters heralding “a new era of stability, prosperity, and opportunity.” The economic opportunities promised by the GBA now stand in for the political freedoms lost under the NSL.

Economic freedom has long lured migrants from around the world to Hong Kong’s shores. Created as a channel for capital flows between China and the West, the city continues to operate as the freest market in the world. Political freedoms have drawn countless migrants from mainland China. In the 1960s and 70s, thousands arrived to Hong Kong by swimming across Deep Water Bay, guided by the beacon of light on the other shore. Recalling his own journey, noodle-maker To Wo says, “We swam toward the light.”¹

Hong Kong-born moving image artist Ellen Pau began collecting video footage of lighthouses around the territory in the 1990s, drawn by the symbolic nature of their function as a guide to travelers journeying in darkness.² Three decades later, she was co-commissioned by M+ and Art Basel to create a site-specific video for the LED screen embedded in the M+ façade. Billed as Asia’s first museum of contemporary visual culture, M+ forms part of West Kowloon, an arts district created to be the cultural gateway to the GBA. The building’s slim façade measures approximately 213 feet tall and 361 feet wide and sits atop the gallery spaces, like an illuminated face watching the city from the shore of Victoria Harbour. Pau sees M+ as “a lighthouse overlooking the sea.” Sensitive to the convergence of unresolved anger and political divisions leftover from the protests and the anxiety and isolation of the pandemic, Pau created *The Shape of Light* to be “a beacon of hope and healing for the city.”³

The work combines volumetric videography and a live-action performance in a fourteen-minute video, which played in a continuous loop from 7:00 A.M. to 9:00 P.M. every night from May 20 to July 31, 2022. Central to the work is a sign-language interpretation of a foundational Buddhist text, the *Prājñā pāramitā* Heart Sutra, or “The Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore.” The sign language translation, composed by Parry Leung and Yoyo Fung, made the work accessible to a broad audience, while eclipsing the historical and cultural tensions among the city’s three official languages—Cantonese, Mandarin, and English. It also implicitly acknowledges the city’s many unofficial languages—Tagalog, Hindi, Urdu, Thai, Indonesian—that remain largely unrepresented, and, as such addresses the diversity of Hong Kong often ignored or obscured by a colonial binary. Even more, the sign language suggests that the meanings of the Heart Sutra are best understood through a sensual engagement with the world rather than through written words.

For three months, *The Shape of Light* formed part of the skyline, inviting residents to see Hong Kong, and the freedoms that have defined it, with different eyes. The work offered relief to a city riven by political divisions and driven towards a singular future with its meditations on emptiness, impermanence, and interbeing.

FREEDOM, EMPTINESS, INTERBEING

The Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism was brought to China from India during the Han Dynasty in the third century CE. Today, Buddhism is practiced more freely in Hong Kong and Taiwan than in mainland China, where loyalty to the CCP has sought to replace all other belief systems. Victor Fan points out that in all its polyphonic diversity, Buddhism is built on a single axiom: interdependent origination. He explains: “For Buddhist scholars, forms do not originate from an essence or self-nature but are interdependently originated, and extinguished, from one moment to another, out of a layout of causes and conditions. Hence, forms are by definition empty of existential values.”⁴

The Heart Sutra is thought to express the core of Buddhist thought with its teachings on emptiness. Not to be confused with nothingness or nonbeing, emptiness refers to the irreducible relationality of the universe.⁵ Emptiness is a way of seeing that nothing exists by itself as a separate self; all phenomena—a tree, a building, a sound, a thought—are products of interdependent co-arising. A body, sensations, perceptions, concepts, and consciousness (the five *skandhas* that, according to Buddhist thought, comprise a human) are empty of a singular existence but filled with everything that makes their emergence possible. Buddhist teachers often use the analogy of waves and water to explain emptiness and the co-presence of the world of distinguishable forms (conventional reality) and the dimension of formless relationality (ultimate reality). When we see a wave (a form), it seems to have a definable shape and a beginning and an end; however, if we see with the eyes of emptiness, we see that the wave is indivisible from the water from which it emerges and into which it extinguishes. Thich Nhat Hanh’s new translation of the Heart Sutra clarifies the meaning of emptiness as “interbeing,” rather than nonexistence. As he puts it, “emptiness means only the *emptiness* of self, not the *nonbeing* of self.”⁶ Emptiness and/as interbeing is the “Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore”—freedom from fear and misperceptions and the realization of Nirvana. Neither a physical place nor future state, Nirvana is the nature of reality as it is.

The Heart Sutra’s theme of “emptiness is form, form is emptiness” resonates with Pau’s interests in the formal qualities of video and the technological processes that go into “how an image is produced.”⁷ As a radiographer by day, Pau spends her time producing a legible, reliable image. An active artist since the 1980s, she has been inspired by the shift from analog to digital, while remaining constant in her exploration of video as an art of light and movement. *The Shape of Light* translates the Heart Sutra’s teachings on form and emptiness, permanence and impermanence,



The Shape of Light by Ellen Pau, projected onto the façade of M+, West Kowloon Cultural District, Hong Kong, in 2022. © Ellen Pau. Photo: Lok Cheng. Courtesy Ellen Pau and M+.

emergence and extinction into a creation story, of sorts, with images of Hong Kong forming, dissolving, and reforming within a cosmic setting.

UPSIDE DOWN: SEEING THE CITY ANEW

The Shape of Light begins with horizontal white lines moving from bottom to top on the black screen, like an analog TV on the fritz. The lines begin to undulate and accumulate to form an image of sea waves at night. The perspective seems to be that of the building looking down on the harbor. The sea waves begin to take the shape of Hong Kong, but a Hong Kong turned upside down; buildings descend from the sky and move as if in flight. Just as the cityscape crystallizes into focus, the resolution becomes grainy and the buildings resemble stalactites in a cave, as though they have returned to their primary materials. The evolving cityscape reroutes the forward-moving narrative driving Hong Kong towards a seemingly singular future, while the inverted image of the city questions perception itself. Conventional reality operates through an ecology of misperceptions, or what Buddhists call “upside down” perceptions, such as seeing stable forms and separate identities where there is only impermanence and interbeing.

The cityscape is then absorbed into a circle light rippling on the surface of the water. A woman’s body (dancer Alice Poon) ascends from the bottom of the screen. She appears in silhouette as the light expands behind her and transforms into an image of the earth. Her figure assumes the proportions of a divine entity. This is not an anthropocentric vision of the human as master of a universe under her control, however. Rather, the image echoes Hanh’s commentary on emptiness: “Our body is empty of a separate self but full of everything in the cosmos.”⁸

Just visible on Poon’s face is a black mask, signaling the virus and invoking the transience of (human) life. She wears a loose black robe, appearing more like a ghost than a god, while primordial images swirl around her. As she recites the Heart Sutra with fluid hand movements, the primordial forms transform into images akin to a science-fiction film, suggesting a past-future unfolding simultaneously. The images begin to unform and return to a single circle of light surrounding Poon’s body. Like the cityscape, her body blurs and fades into the light, which contracts and extinguishes into blackness.

Each night, *The Shape of Light* played alongside Hong Kong’s other nightly light show, *A Symphony of Lights*, the largest and longest running light show in the world. This perennially popular spectacle is promoted as expressing the spirit of Hong Kong, with the city’s iconic skyscrapers beaming colored lights in all directions to the pulsing beat of an electronic score. *Symphony of Lights* projects a reassuring image of the city’s prosperity and stability, embodied by its illuminated urban form. Banks and corporate towers turn into dazzling ghosts or demigods casting their colored reflections in the undulating waters of Victoria Harbour. On the other shore,

The Shape of Light transformed these monuments of concrete and steel back into their elemental origins.

At the same time, it transformed M+ and the technology of the LED screen into something organic. Body and building merge in the work, calling to mind philosopher Yuk Hui's conception that in Chinese thought, "the human is only a technical medium facilitating the realization of the cosmos."⁹ *The Shape of Light* animated an extended "anthropotechnical body," a more-than-human milieu that acts, senses, perceives, and exists as an interdependent entity.¹⁰ This played out in the site itself. Located on the other side of the LED skin are the M+ staff offices. Lights from the offices mingled with the video outside, adding a layer of live performance and pointing to our coexistence with the architectural forms and technological ensembles that sustain us. Pau embraced the transparency of the façade, appreciating how it immersed the audience in the work and introduced dimensions of light she did not predict.¹¹

INSIDE OUT

Pau created a three-hour live version of *The Shape of Light* that took place inside M+ in a room looking out onto Victoria Harbour. A small screen in front of the window showed images from the video playing simultaneously on the façade, while performer Wong Sze Mei stood beside signing the Heart Sutra. On the other side of the room, a gong and singing bowls were arranged on the floor (sound by Shane Aspegren), filling the room with vibrations that mirrored the movements of the waves outside. In the middle of the room, a small audience sat on cushions. The atmosphere was that of a healing ritual, with an intimacy and collective focus rare in Hong Kong. The performance took place from 5:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M., capturing the liminal period between daylight and darkness. For the first two hours, the sun shimmered on the water, bouncing off the buildings across the harbor and into the room. After sunset, the spectacle outside receded and a multitude of lights inside the room illuminated the space (lighting by Amy Chan). The lights alternately dimmed and brightened in syncopated rhythm and seemed somehow to merge with the vibrations from the sound-bath. The room felt like a breathing organism. It was as though the city itself was brought inside, distilled into waves of sound and light and given shape by the darkness surrounding it.

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NOTES

1. Hannah Beech, "Everything in Hong Kong Has Changed," *New York Times*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/30/world/asia/hong-kong-china-anniversary-handover.html>.

2. Ellen Pau and Ulanda Blair, "Healing through the Heart Sutra: Ellen Pau on "The Shape of Light,"" *M+ Magazine*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/magazine/an-interview-with-hong-kong-artist-ellen-pau>.
3. Pau and Blair, "Healing through the Heart Sutra."
4. Victor Fan, *Cinema Illuminating Reality: Media Philosophy through Buddhism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 7.
5. The Sanskrit word *śūnyatā*, which has been translated into English as "emptiness," indicates a process of conditional causation.
6. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Other Shore: A New Translation of the Heart Sutra with Commentaries* (Berkeley, CA: Palm Leaves Press, 2017), 20.
7. Ellen Pau, "Energy and Vibrations: An Afternoon with Ellen Pau," May 28, 2022, M+, West Kowloon, Hong Kong.
8. Hanh, *The Other Shore*, 33.
9. Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 205.
10. Fan, *Cinema Illuminating Reality*, 6.
11. Pau and Blair, "Healing through the Heart Sutra."

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