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11-16-2015

## Person to Person in Hong Kong

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### Recommended Citation

Pope, Conner K., "Person to Person in Hong Kong" (2015). *2015-16 Field Notes*. Essay. Submission 7.  
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November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015

### The life of a “Hong Konger”

I decided to interview Kristen Chan, a classmate I’ve had the honor of working with on a number of group assignments. She’s a third year student at Hong Kong Baptist University, and a local “Hong Konger.” My interview with her ended up following the pull of my Anthropology major, as I began with asking about local family structures and religion, and our conversation concluded with an in-depth discussion on local beliefs regarding luck and superstitions.

My first questions had to do with describing the typical Hong Kong family. Kristen mentioned that the most traditional family home held 3 generations, including grandparents, most if not all of their children, and grandchildren. I asked her how often she tends to see this structure today, and she admitted that Hong Kong’s living/housing space issue has almost terminated this idea of the typical family. With housing costs up with the most expensive in the world, a family is “lucky” to live with grandparents, one married couple, and their children. Hong Kongers typically stay in Hong Kong to study and to work, unless a student fails the “public exam.” This exam, to be taken between the high school and university levels, acts like a ticket into a public university institution, at least with a good enough score. Kristen says that most study enough to do well on the exam, however those who fail may be sent to a foreign country to study - with the help of government aid if their parents work for the government. I found this to be really interesting - I couldn’t see the Federal Government helping me much if I wanted to study in a foreign country (without including semester abroad programs). This discussion led to the opinions on working for the government, which were positive. Government work pays very well, and a youth who decides to pursue the police force instead of university could begin making \$20,000HK per month (\$2580 USD).

We briefly discussed her parents’ work, and other businesses her friends

work for if they didn't pursue university. Then I asked her to explain to me the small prayer shrines you find on every Hong Kong street. A small red gazebo the size of a mailbox sits near the steps to almost every restaurant, bar, market and business. Kristen tells me this is hard to explain, but she will try her best. She tells me it doesn't have much of a religious connotation, but it is tradition. These shrines are mainly dedicated to ancestors and are tended to roughly 3 times a day. People will set fruit and burn 3 sticks of incense during meal times, every day. These rituals are supposed to "feed" ancestors, as well as bring good luck and prosperity to the other living family members in the establishment. Kristen mentioned that there's another type of shrine you will see inside more often than outside, and I knew which she was talking about. These shrines I've seen in small handyman shops and local pubs are dedicated to a certain goddess, Guanyin, and are bigger and more detailed than the mailbox sized shrines outside. These Guanyin shrines may be as tall as myself, and as wide as my shoulders, usually complete with fruit and incense burning inside, in front of the peaceful feminine statue of Guanyin. The goddess is to bring luck and safety in particular to the establishment.

Our most in-depth and interactive subject was on local luck and superstitions. At first, Kristen wasn't sure what I meant by superstition, so I gave her a few examples. I told her that breaking a mirror, opening an umbrella inside, walking under an open ladder, and watching a black cat cross your path are all signs for YEARS of bad luck. I also mentioned four leaf clovers and rabbit feet are considered good luck. She got the idea, and said that while she will laugh telling me about these superstitions, they're actually considered quite scary. She blamed her laughter on the translation into English, and claimed that the stories are much scarier in Cantonese. In regards to lucky things, she told me rainbows are considered lucky, as is wearing red at events such as weddings, holidays, and other family gatherings. Next were bad luck examples. Seeing a crow in Hong Kong culture is considered a bad omen, and an even worse omen is getting bird poop on yourself. Apparently this is an example of some of the worst luck a person can have, unless it misses the person closely, in which case good luck is administered. Stepping on a rat is also considered very bad luck. When I laughed and said that could never happen, she claimed it happens all too often. The rats

are so fast, they have run under her friends' feet before.

The most interesting part of our conversation had to do roughly with the month of May on the Old Chinese Calendar. Kristen said this month is considered the Festival of the Ghosts. Some stipulations of the month include not picking up "lost items," such as loose change or other small things you might find on the ground. These items may belong to a ghost, and this might anger it and convince it to follow you home. Certain colors of clothing are also important. While the white ghost is innocent, the red ghost cannot stand a living being wearing red, and it angers him/her. Wearing black puts the person in the "same magnetic field" as the ghost (I struggled with this translation, and almost want to call it an aura). Wearing yellow during the month is your safest choice, as it's the same color of the paper that is burned to keep the ghosts away during rituals. Also, the sound of cutting fingernails after dark attracts the angry ghosts, and combing one's hair after midnight is a bad omen waiting to happen.

In terms of differences between Kristen's culture and my own, it's easy to see that luck and prosperity play a larger part in Hong Kong culture. While our superstitions are considered somewhat comical, the examples Kristen gave me were particularly scary as she mentioned. I wish I asked her how prominent these beliefs, particularly the ones involving shrines, are in the higher-class business world. I wonder if the executive bankers and stockbrokers have suits that smell like incense, and bring extra fruit in their lunch for their relatives.