



Memoria e Memorie

(Memories & Memory)

"The advantage of a bad memory is that one enjoys several times the same good things for the first time."

Friedrich Nietzsche

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All places are now an intricate combination of nature and human intervention, or transformation and occupation. Every oak tree from the Limousin in France is 3rd or 5th generation. The only trees in North America that can claim to be *primal*, preceded human invasion, uprooting, fire, and destruction are the giant sequoias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) and the coastal redwoods (*Sequoia sempervivens*).

When the original tribes decided to settle, multiply, inhabit specific locations and expand further, they dealt, battled, fought and attempted to reach a balance between their goals and the omnipower of the environment; eventually they mastered it.

These clans, tribes, bands did not travel too far unless famine, disaster, warfare hit. Local language developed and survived as original as Jared Diamond discovered in the valleys of New Guinea he explored. Language (from *lingua*, tongue), tools, rituals, beliefs to intercede with nature, remained confined and required translators or referees to cope from valley to valley, from island to islet, from one river bank to the opposite, from hamlet to village. Since *homo hominis lupus* they built fences and kept weapons at the ready. They also kept women primarily for reproduction. As illustrated in the Old Testament, they scorned, enslaved, raped, massacred galore the *other* (*goyim*); they were always right.

But when Nature, i.e. plagues, struck it was for everyone.

To unify, then solidify and win, they needed to identify with, and then to their kin or allies: gestures, touch, sounds, cryptic phrases, rituals, sounds and incantations, foods and dishes, body paints or scarifications, sharing mind-altering substances, trances, etc. That was **culture**.

Until very recently this was it: people were born, lived and died within less than 50 kilometers. They spoke **their** language, the communicable essence of their identity.

A case in point: in Sardinia, families and clans controlled a valley or an area with all the particularisms they had solidified. Not only was it their strength, it was **their** identity depending on **their** culture. Sardinia is just an observable –but not necessarily understandable– aggregate of microcosms of human collectivities that ultimately became sedentary and evolved further.

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Sardinian villages have been isolated from one another through the centuries. This is particularly true of the town of Nuoro, standing on high ground at the foot of Monte Ortobene, and the surrounding Barbagia area in the mountainous and once thickly wooded center of the island, with a rich and peculiar fauna. Sardinia has a language of its own, *Sardo*, with many dialects. And, within the Sardinian dialects, the Nuoro dialect is special.



The Nobel Laureate (1926) Grazia Deledda described the life, customs and traditions of the Sardinian people, often focusing on social outcasts that struggle in silent isolation. There is always a strong, symbiotic, visceral, reciprocal connection between places and people, environment and feelings. Her people, mirroring their land, are harsh, tough; some central figures are losing hope. Enduring traditions are equally a trap and a treasure. In Grazia Deledda's Sardinia, life goes on in eternal cycles dominated by nature's seasons. The human world is compared to things of nature: the land, vegetation, birds and animals. In contrast, the natural world is anthropomorphized, becoming alive and knowing the people who populate it. The division between the natural and human worlds is blurred, melting together into a

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pantheistic entity: both the human and the natural are indispensable and inseparable portions of their known universe.

The Sardinian society is in slow transition, a society incredibly distant from that of modern times –as we’ve known them since the *Rinascimento*. Old traditions, superstitions, and a seemingly immovable feudal social structure block creative adaptation to new circumstances. Though separated from the western coast of Italy by only 150 miles of sea, the Sardinia that Grazia Deledda conjures up is an island populated by a few anachronistic nobles and a majority of fatalistic, poverty-stricken peasants who seem locked in an unchanging world of self-perpetuating misery. They are, as the title of the novel *Canne al Vento* –poorly translated as “Reeds in the Wind” as pointed out by Ciriaco Offedu [*Beyond Thirty-Nine* May 25, 2014]– tough canes bending before the winds of fate, unable and/or unwilling to alter the trajectory of their lives’ journey.



But on the planet, a few places played another game. Location, location, location is the motto of realtors. It is also at times the one of opportunity and success: the Nile

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and Tigris-Euphrates valleys, the Bosphorus, and many estuaries and deltas: the Rhine, the Elbe, the Tagus, the Pearl River, the Saint Lawrence, the Rio de la Plata, the Thames...

Far from the inland moving at snail's pace towards *Enlightment*, some cities flourished in such locations; two changed the world, centuries apart. These are the two I fell and remain in love with: Venezia (Venice) and Hong Kong.

On January 5th, 1955 at dawn, I boarded the Southern Orient Express at the train station in Ljubljana, Slovenia, back from Jesenice where I had been skiing with Slovenian medical students. I was heading back to Paris after two weeks of slaloming, intense political discussions, liters of *slivovka*, smoking, and earthy *bujta repa* and *mavželj*. The Balkan leg was slow, chaotic, but I knew that soon –in Venice– I would jump into the “real” Orient Express, despite my 3rd. class ticket.

Venezia the sign displayed. Then an eerie silence in the *Stazione di Venezia Santa Lucia* reigned. While I walked towards the other platform, I saw on the front page of *Il Gazzettino*, in huge letters: ***Treni in sciopero***; the railways went on “indefinite” strike. I was stuck in a city of dreams and poets, alone on the *Piazzale Roma*, a few meters from the canal, and for *indefinite time*. The sky was grey, the roofs covered with snow, my wallet very anemic. Who at age 20 had not read *Histoire de ma vie* of Giacomo Casanova, or *Der Tod in Venedig* by Thomas Mann (in which Gustav von Aschenbach gets stuck at the same Santa Lucia train station!)? Who has not been transfixed by the *Sacrae Symphoniae* of Giovanni Gabrieli or the *Quattro Stagione* of Antonio Vivaldi? If every poet, artist, writer, adventurer, lover sees Venice as a magnet, a lit candle attracting the human moths, why should I be different –and stupidly insane?

I changed some Francs into *lire* and asked a carabinieri where was the *Università Ca' Foscari* located; on the Grand Canal, he said, and instructed me to the nearby *vaporetto* stop/shelter.

Every year the theater groups of European universities actively participate in festivals, and our Parisian group usually shared dorms with the Italians –mostly the Venetians. One of the group leaders was a young lecturer in Economics at *Ca'*

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Foscari; his nickname was *Chopin*. With my backpack and a tiny suitcase, I entered the *Ca' Foscari* courtyard, was met by a friendly concierge who called Gianfranco, and a few minutes later my destiny was sealed.



Antica Locanda da' Montin

He took me for lunch to the *Antica Locanda da' Montin*, a classical *trattoria* with a long tin bar behind which *il Signor Montin* officiated, pouring wine from Verona in *litri*, the government certified carafes. In the back of the room a long table with a bench along the wall facing a dozen peasant wood & wicker chairs. It was early and besides the *abbraccio* of *Signor Montin* the only sign of human life was, not far from the table, the sounds and scents from the kitchen. Gianfranco asked if there was a room available upstairs; and there were plenty. I had in a few minutes a roof about my head, some of the best food on earth, Venice without tourists, and –soon– the best friends I could ever meet.

After settling in a large bedroom with a large window over the *Rio de le Romite* [40 years later our daughter Emmanuelle had her honeymoon in that very room].

The stomach-based clock had vibrated or rung and the hungry were coming. There were painters: Guido Cadorin, holder of the *Tiziano Vecelli* chair at *l'Accademia*

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[later, he will host me in the very studio of Titian]; Beppi Galletti [who portrayed me]; Peggy Guggenheim, a neighbor; Ludovico de Luigi, the sculptor; Uto Ughi, the greatest Italian violinist; Luigi Nono, who will be my patient... Food was superb and abundant: *sarde in saor, risi e bisi, fegato alla veneziana, risotto* with cuttlefish and ink, *bisàto* plus *baicoli, bussolai, crostoli, fregolotta, rosada* or *zaléti*.

That table was the local *Cénacle*. And, as I discovered soon, it attracted young, elegant, accessible women.

My first--lunch neighbor was Aldo Contanini. He was an art historian, but had to survive, and passed successfully the exam of Official Guide of Venice –a highly coveted, exclusive position. Alas (for him) no trains equaled no tourists, no clients. After (more than) a few glasses of house wine, he offered me his services *per il piacere* (“for the pleasure”). He soon took me to each of the six *sestiere*: *Dorsoduro, Cannaregio, Santa Croce, San Marco, San Polo, Castello*. He knew every *palazzo*, every *sottoportego*, every *calle*, every bridge, every *chiesa*, almost every stone or *marciapiede*. Every day at dawn, we would have our *prima colazione* and –rain or shine-- he would train, teach me to discover, navigate, but above all **love** Venice. This was a sensual, carnal bordering on orgasmic daily, long experience. An initiation to a universe than spanned centuries, continents, civilizations, eternal artists, erosion, rust and rats. If we stopped to snack on irresistible *cicheti* (*cicchetti*) with numerous glasses of *ombra*, it was to discuss and review what we saw, what Aldo had said, what I memorized. It was indeed an initiation ceremony, a voyage through different levels until I reached a faint glow, hoping to discover the next day bright light.

Aldo loved Venice more than anyone, anything else; without reflecting or questioning. True love, although not blind! His passion permeated each pore of his discourse; it overflowed and rapidly contaminated me, infectiously. It found cracks in my hippocampus and nested there. Forever. Since this organ lies close to the amygdala and the hypothalamus, emotions were invasively present in waves of significant dimension, at times overwhelming me into near-ecstasy.

What I discovered with Aldo, and became more obvious later, during my repeated visits, is the female, lascivious, lecherous, lewd, lustful Venice. For me it was and still is a middle-aged (or even aged) courtesan, with her decayed makeup, carbonaceous mascara, her leaky lipstick, her wet kisses, the rags remains of riches, a pauper who wants to fart above her ass. A Faustina Bordoni after her return in 1773, or Teodora Ricci-Bartoli after the Gratarolo affair. Yes, my passion is here as in 1955, but it is more tender friendship that rut.

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Venice had always had some rotten, fetid, slippery areas or aspects; crumbling, blotchy, smelly *calle*. But like Caterina Gabrielli after being taunted for her age by the Milanese *Scala* audience and went back to Venice in 1782, she still was “the most intelligent and best-bred *virtuosa*”.

Just like *La Fenice* that “rose from the ashes” twice. Just like *la Serenissima*. She is “*undoubtedly the most beautiful city built by man*” (Luigi Barzini).

I had met my future wife, Emiko Oguiss, early in 1969. Then in September of that year the International Association of Allergy & Clinical Immunology chose Tokyo for its next meeting in the fall of 1973; just like the Olympic Games this mega-congress happened every 4 years.

A group of French-speaking colleagues asked me to organize a traveling group to the congress, plus a tour of Japan, with stopovers in Hong Kong and Bangkok. I asked my friend Maurice Levi (who was dating my secretary unbeknown to me...) to arrange that tour within a tight budget, but with comfortable hotels and great guides. Maurice called me a couple of days later and suggested that I visit Japan, Hong Kong and Bangkok, all expenses paid and airfare covered by the chosen carrier: Japan Airlines or Air France. JAL contacted me that very day and we agreed on the dates and Itinerary. Air France contacted me 2 days later, too late.

Emiko’s cousin Machiko Kobayashi was –and still is– a French and English translator, and a tea ceremony Master; she would be my guide and *cicerone* through Japan, an outstanding one.

I also contacted two allergists at Queen Mary Hospital of the University of Hong Kong.

Within a week, before the FAX or Internet era, my professional itinerary outside Japan was set, and confirmed.

I flew to Japan early at the very end of October taking advantage of the (in)famous French “bridges” that convert a weekday holiday into a whole week of paid-vacation: November 1st and 11th are Public Holidays there. And mid-November I landed at Kai Tak airport. My colleague took me by the Star Ferry to Hong Kong Island, then to the Robert Black College that had opened just two years earlier (I/we would stay there

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for many years later on).

Early the next morning I gave two lectures, and had lunch with the Head of Paediatrics, Professor C. Elaine Field and the Staff. Over the fried rice, Professor Elaine Field asked if I would consider coming back regularly, and if I could consult with a French-speaking patient. I acquiesced to both.

The patient, Chinese from Cholon, French Indochina, was the wife of a French self-made millionaire, and her problems were easy to solve; her husband made sure that we would meet in Paris within a month or so.



Prof. Field confirmed a few weeks later the invitation and suggested a program with a schedule over three years; I accepted and started witnessing the amazing metamorphoses of the Fragrant Harbour from a large, busy, but a tad colonial-provincial trading post to the vibrant, unique metropolis where I still love to work and marvel.

Narrating the Hong Kong evolution, mutations, transformations that I witnessed for over 4 decades is left to permanent, omniscient observers. Visiting a country –any country, continent, city- means *work* for me. I could make this recent quote of Paul Theroux mine: *“I hate vacations. I hate them. I have no fun on them. I get nothing done. People sit and relax, but I don’t want to relax. I want to see something. Sit down and have a massage, have a spa, have a cupcake—I go nuts. If I want to relax, I go home.”*

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My connection to Hong Kong was both human –through my Chinese colleagues, friends- and sensory- sights, characters, faces and addresses to memorize; smells and flavors to analyze and identify; sounds and musics to discover or flee; lacquer, woods, cloth or fabrics, soft or hard or tender or grainy or rough when touched; and food, foods, endless food, constantly reinvented that blended all of the above. It was and remains a perpetual challenge, an uncharted trek or sailing.

If the stink of exhaust is probably omnipresent, you will often smell the *chou doufu*, *suen choy*, *ha jeung* or curry fish balls. Hong Kong seasons can also carry the scent of *Bauhinia* – the national emblem of Hong Kong, the Peach tree, the Lotus-flowered Magnolia, the Chinese Juniper, the Camphor tree, the yellow and common Oleanders, the Frangipani, the sweet *Osmanthus* or the Chittagong tree.

Some districts are more fragrant –or smellier- than others; Causeway Bay or Mongkok being the most...varied.

But for me Hong Kong remains the Gourmet Paradise. All foods were, and more are available, a cornucopia delivering the world to your chopsticks, bowl or plate. It is now also the best place to taste and savor wines or tea.

The exploration of green tea alone required years with loving experts: Dragon well, Dragon Mountain, Green Top, Gunpowder, Rain Flower, White Cloud, Furry Peak, Jade Sword, Jade Dew, Cloud and Mist, Fire Green, Wuliqing, Green Bamboo are some of the teas I discovered that still make me dream. With food, I prefer oolong teas like Iron Goddess or Big Red Robe; and after an oil-rich meal it will be Pu-erh or *Bolay* in the proper thimble or translucent cup.

Until the late eighties we could enjoy at the Dragon Court on West Des Voeux Road, the *Dragon*, *Tiger*, *Phoenix Big Braise*, and every festive event had to include Ming Dynasty shark fin soup; now you may have to travel to Zhuhai, Zhongshan, possibly Macau to taste them.

The best “Peking duck” is served in Hong Kong; Hakka food must not be ignored: *Poon Choi* and salt baked chicken.

And –of course-- Cantonese food with too many various, changing incarnations and presentations: Lo Mein and Yi Mein noodles, Lu Mei. Siu Laap or Char Siu; but Dim Sum reigns: Jiaozi, Xiaolongbao, Zongzi, Hargow, Guotle, Zheliang, Shaomai, Char siu baau, Haam Seoi Gaau, Coeng fan, Sou and to end on a (not too) sweet note Longan Tofu, Mango pudding, or the egg tart from Macau.

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I know that I am exhausting my word ration, but food is not only for calories: it is either *yin* or *yang*, for summer or winter, and attempting to correct or rebalance the *Six Excesses* (*Liu Yin*). Chinese Medicine, dating back more than 4,000 years, is food--based for many ingredients and culinary preparations; diet is a major part of the medicinal advice.

Hong Kong people (I now feel one of them) have a passion for food that is ferociously cultish, but never negative. Each-and-every food is **good**; many depend on complex considerations, but fear or health concerns are not one of these. Attention is paid to details in composition, structure, flavors and most importantly to heavenly surprise. Then we/you talk about it, endlessly.

Since the early 1970s Hong has become a **very** different city. Limited flat land created a necessity for dense infrastructure, and the city became a center of modern **architecture**, earning Hong Kong the title of the world's most vertical city. There are close to 1,300 skyscrapers in Hong Kong, which puts the city at the **top of world rankings**. It has more buildings taller than 150 m than any other city. The high **density** and tall skyline of Hong Kong's urban area is due to a lack of available **sprawl** space, with the average distance from the harbor front to the steep hills of Hong Kong Island at 1.3 km, much of it **reclaimed land**. This lack of space causes demand for dense, high-rise offices and housing. Thirty-six of the world's 100 tallest residential buildings are in Hong Kong. More people in Hong Kong live or work above the 14th floor than anywhere else on Earth.

The antique shops lining the stairs of Cat Street, the night flea market of Sheung Wan, the Western and Central (wet) markets, the Tuen Mun goose open air stalls in the shadow of the San Miguel Brewery, the Central Ritz-Carlton Hotel, the *mama-san*-run Pussy Cat club of Wan Chai, the fleet of berthed junks in Aberdeen (including the floating mini-brothels), the above-mentioned Dragon Court Restaurant, the Jordan Street Ferry to Sheung Wan and many, too many sites that were the heart and soul of Hong Kong and its working-class people, are all gone.

To resolve traffic congestion and to provide a more reliable means of crossing the Victoria Harbour for commuters and residents, a rapid transit railway system (MTR) was planned from the 1970s onwards. Hong Kong has a highly developed public transportation network and 90 percent of the population relies on mass transit by road or rail (11 million), the highest such percentage in the world.

The manufacturing industry opened a new decade in the 1960s employing large

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sections of the population. The construction business was also revamped with new detailed guidelines for the first time since World War II. But family values and Chinese tradition were challenged like never before, as people spent more time in the factories than at home.

In the 1970s, the opening of the mainland Chinese market and rising salaries drove many manufacturers north. Hong Kong consolidated its position as a financial, banking, commercial and tourism center in the South-East Asia region. High [life expectancy](#), literacy, per-capita income and other socioeconomic measures attest to Hong Kong's achievements over the last four decades of the 20th Century.

Hong Kong's competitiveness in manufacturing gradually declined due to rising labor and property costs and new development in southern China under the open-door policy. Nevertheless, Hong Kong has successfully transitioned its economy into a service-based type, as evident in the high rates of growth during the 1980s and 1990s. Towards the early 1990s, Hong Kong has established itself as a global financial center, a regional hub for logistics and freight, and one of the Four Asian Tigers (fastest-growing economies in Asia). But these came at a price: one of them was corruption. The ICAC (Independent Commission Against Corruption) was established in 1974. Despite early opposition to the ICAC by the police force, Hong Kong eradicated corruption in public bodies, police force, firefighters and business corporations, which led to Hong Kong being regarded as one of the least corrupt cities during the 1990s.

About 93.6% of the people of Hong Kong are of Chinese descent, the majority of whom are Taishanese, Chiu Chow, other Cantonese people, and Hakka. Hong Kong's Han majority originates mainly from the Guangzhou and Taishan regions in Guangdong province. 70.9 percent of this population has a monthly household income of less than 20,000 HKD (US\$ 2,580), and even subsidized public housing is expensive. No wonder that many have two –even three jobs, and the average working hours are >47 per week. Many older Hong Kong residents have no pension or social support; you see them collecting cardboard, newspapers, empty plastic bottles or pushing huge loads of full garbage bags on primitive trolleys up steep slopes. Some sleep near the Central Star Ferry terminal or under freeway passes in cardboard boxes.

Indeed, rotten billionaires of a few groups –Sun Hung Kai being in the news have expelled the dwellers to cages or remote decaying public *estates* to build glittering office skyscrapers, where monthly rent exceeds a yearly income. Hong Kong has

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the distinction to display the highest income gap in Asia Pacific. According to a report by the United Nations Human Settlements Program in 2008, Hong Kong's [Gini coefficient](#), at 0.53, was the highest in Asia and "relatively high by international standards". Hong Kong is ranked fourth in terms of the highest percentage of millionaire households, behind Switzerland, [Qatar](#), and [Singapore](#) with 8.5 percent of all households owning at least one million US dollars.

These plutocrats make the news headlines, parade on TV evening shows, kiss each other at nightly eminently boring long black-tie events (where all watch their smartphone screen), almost faint of faked pleasure while sipping oxidized first-growth Bordeaux, babble with trophy wives or purchased mistresses looking like a Cartier shop window, and jump into their chauffeured Rolls Royce to crash in bed of their gated enclave on The Peak. If not on Victoria Peak, they live in one Golden Ghetto of Shek O, Kadoorie Villas, or Repulse Bay, with a nearby exclusive club which caters to all their quirks and whims.

I initially accepted to be dragged and meet with some of these tycoons who fancied outfacing a University professor. Soon I gave up and sheltered in my room, with books, work, at times students. I am not, shall not, and have not the slimmest desire to be "one of them". The people I hobnob with are true wine connoisseurs, scholars, office staff of the Department, visitors, cooks and chefs, students, or a few expats whose brain is much, much bigger than a hazelnut.

In fact, I meet and congregate with a lot of people as part of my job but having a



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“social” life is another story.

If Venice evokes a decaying superb aging actress –or courtesan, Hong Kong cannot be defined or described. It is China’s complexity and whirlwind, but with its own knack. It is both a very traditional *nushi* and a modern, aggressive *xiaojie* or even *santing*; a Lady and an escort. It is also soulless, still young, without a real identity. Despite a vocal, at times annoying stupid Christian evangelical fanatic small minority, most Hong Kongers do not care about any religion. The society, especially the rich one, the *tai tais*, claims prudery, but it is blatant hypocrisy. Gigolos and escorts pullulate, but are never mentioned. Every weekend volunteers and well-dressed children ask for donation, geared towards exclusive or international charities, on walkways where senile beggars lie, ignored on the soil.

When I asked for advice a female friend about a questionnaire I had designed on Pleasure for a group of adult students (mostly women) she exclaimed ‘*Georges, you have forgotten **the most important: shopping!***’. The real idol worshipped here, as soon as the income is high enough to let you jump into the middle-class, is the Golden Calf. The reverence for wealth, riches, money, fortune, profit, lucre is still the core of this trading post, now manufacturing financial derivatives and hedge funds. Art is for show-off and investment. Love is for establishment and housing. Gambling or playing the market is visceral. Talking about Miguel de Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, Italo Calvino -or Grazia Deledda, Franz Kafka, John Steinbeck, or Rabindranath Tagore generates a blank stare. You must have an intense interior life –and then you **work** in Hong Kong. And you love it until you go...home.



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