

Cultural Food Walk Host: Daisann McLane



In 2004, Hong Kong's rebellious Trotskyist politician, 'Long Hair' Leung Kwok-hung, was elected into our city's Legislative Council. It was a revolutionary moment. The moment sparked the start of a five-week shadowing campaign by journalist Daisann McLane who was working on a profile of the radical for the New York Times Magazine.

She followed him everywhere – to all of his meetings, demonstrations and meals. After five weeks she penned a 5,000-word story, and they became 'really fast friends'.

McLane, a travel writer but also a journalist who's written across the subject spectrum, sees Leung as a person who knows everybody in Hong Kong and can be pals with both his allies and enemies. Indeed, it was Long Hair who introduced her to many political, bohemian,

literary and artsy figures in the city, like film director Herman Yau Lai-to, online radio host Stephen Shiu Yeuk-yuen and former lawmaker Margaret Ng Ngoi-ye. Wherever they and their friends went, they were always eating in intriguing places, and these interesting people would tell her stories about Hong Kong's history, its people, its buildings and its food.

"Nowadays there are a lot of foodies in Hong Kong," says the National Geographic columnist. "There's barely one little vendor of fish balls who has not been reviewed 65 times on koi fan [openrice.com]. However, I still know places that are not on koi fan, because of all the people Long Hair hangs out with. I have all these secret places and I know all these things about Hong Kong."

Born and raised in New York, McLane is now using this 'wonderful, assorted collection of Hong Kong people coming from every economic level and every walk of life' to let visitors see more than just the Peak and the Star Ferry. In 2009, she founded Little Adventures in Hong Kong, providing those who want to see – and taste – 'the real Hong Kong' with private cultural food walks meandering through the city's hidden gems. So far, she's hired four other hosts who are experts in food, journalism, photography and arts to help out.

McLane insists on taking no more than three people on a tour so that they don't disturb the neighbourhoods they visit. For her, this highly urbanised city is too crowded to bear larger groups. She wants to tell her clients stories, no matter whether they're walking along Sheung Wan's busy dried seafood street or around Fanling's quiet, historic walled villages. Some of her destinations even include slope reinforcement areas across town with pipe ends sticking out of the hillside, as well as the city's first public toilet and bath-house in Sheung Wan's Pound Lane.

McLane says she's fascinated with the city's language and culture. She first came to the fragrant harbour in 2000 on an assignment for the New York Times, when she was a columnist for its travel section. Later, she returned to study Cantonese at the Chinese University. Since 2006, she's kept an apartment here and stays here or about six months a year.

"I'll fall in love with a culture that's not my own," she says, "and will immerse myself in it."

But what really keeps the writer coming back is Hong Kong's complexity and the fact it has a language that's 'strong, expressive and idiomatic'.

"What attracts me about any culture is complexity, the sense of humour and sense of irony," she says, "I just like everything that's complicated and Hong Kong is such a wonderfully complicated place."

Even before visiting the city, McLane had been one of the 'film geeks' in New York who adored Hong Kong films. She misses the period when Hong Kong's movie industry was at its peak and she's annoyed by its current overemphasis on the Mainland market. She feels our city's culture is eroding in much the same way, making room for what she calls the 'holy trinity of Hong Kong': the shopping mall, the hotel and the parking lot. That's why, when she has time, she likes to take the MTR to a random, obscure place and explore the unknown neighbourhoods. She also hopes to take local expats out of their 'bubbles' in bars or on junk trips and let them see the rest of Hong Kong.

For her, the 'real Hong Kong' lies in the public housing areas. "I'm an uncommon gweilo," she says. "But now I've figured out how to make a business out of it."

—Shirley Zhao