

### RTHK Radio 3 'Viewpoint' - 21 January 2003

On my first trip to China in 1989 I spent 5 months travelling throughout the country and I was struck by two constant images everywhere I travelled: firstly, large Chinese characters were present on almost all vertical surfaces and the other was fences. Driving through such deserted places (though really no where is deserted in China) as Xinjiang or Gansu Provinces you would come across a large piece of land totally enclosed by an elaborately built brick and plastered fence white-washed and festooned with words.

And fences, it seems, is now a Hong Kong obsession. You may recall that one of the first acts of the Tung administration after 1997 was to build a high forbidding spiked fence around its Central Government Offices – even the colonial administration never saw the need for such exclusionary symbols as a fenced government compound. Security and safety it maybe argued, but that is more fitting of the convoluted rhetoric of another great fence builder, the incumbent US President Bush.

I live in the old Tai Ping Shan area of Hong Kong Island – it is the original area allocated to Chinese after the British arrived. It is a wonderful area: old lowrise and therefore people-proportioned flats, staircased walkways that stop any noisy polluting traffic problems, schools and parks. Recently, the authorities have tried to embellish our area. For 'embellish' the word more commonly used is 'improve' – but you and I know that that word is abused if coming from one of Hong Kong's government authorities. Where trees should be planted along walkways to act as shade in summer we have lots of concrete. And every six months the tree pruning squad comes along and brutally and unnecessarily cuts branches off the trees in Blake Park. The old people who sit at the top of the staircase on the corner of Pound Lane and Po Hing Fong have set up makeshift chairs and these (unless tied to the adjacent fence or attached to the ground) are cleared away. Yes, no street benches are provided and this location is halfway up a staggering hill climb from Sheung Wan Market.

And along all these staircased walkways are the safety handrails that have proliferated along Hong Kong's streets and are visually polluting our country parks. Let's be clear, however, they are not handrails – they are fences. Just look at the design. Fences.

Another unnecessary 'improvement' is that for some reason the area's street signs have been replaced. Until a few days ago, the historic Wa Ning Lane boasted of an eighty-year old sign: the Chinese street name beautifully carved into a flagstone. It has gone....And a few months ago just behind my flat in Toi On Terrace there was one of those terrible murders (actually a double murder) that you only read about in *Oriental* or *Apple Daily* complete with bloody photographs. Well - and if you are looking for a label for the Tung administration here is one – well, last week the street sign in Toi On Terrace was replaced with another sign with the 'c' in the word Terrace replaced with an 'r' – it now reads: Toi On Terrare.

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