

THERE IS NOTHING ORDINARY IN THE WORLD

A text about a shopping district in Paris, urban rumors, China and the border between fiction and reality.¹

Rainbows are caused by the refraction of light through water particles in the atmosphere, but during this process not all the light escapes on the first encounter. Some remains trapped within the particle, reflected on the inside of the droplet, only to be refracted later, higher in the sky, as a second fainter rainbow with a reversed color spectrum. And between the two rainbows, the sky is darkened. With the light being split, there is nothing remaining to illuminate this section of the sky.²

I had spent time in the neighbourhood before, perhaps even taken pictures there, but it was not until August last year that I really discovered the Chinese wholesaler district of children's wear. X was visiting me, she had been living in Paris earlier and we visited streets and areas where she had worked or lived. Suddenly we found ourselves in front of a shop at rue du Faubourg Saint-Martin, inside of it 30 almost identical children's jeans were hanging on the wall in three perfect rows. The jeans could have been made out of cardboard, as strict and graphically as they were arranged. Below them cardboard boxes were placed in rows, apart from this the store was empty except for a counter and a Chinese cashier. With fascination we looked at the jeans, they reminded us more of an installation than a shop interior. The jeans were for girls, some of them decorated with flounces and other with pink embroideries, ribbons and glitter. They had identical pink belts. I took some pictures of the interior, and a few of the strange showcase. It consisted of empty cardboard boxes, placed to prevent a view from the street. Some colourful posters of Chinese children were attached to the window, facing the street. When I photographed them I was told by the cashier to stop, without any particular reason. The same thing happened in the next shop, which was very similar to the first one.



France Creation

Rue du Faubourg Saint-Martin begins above the small triumphal arc at metro Strasbourg Saint-Denis, and stretches northwards to Gare de l'Est where it makes a small turn and continues up to Place de Stalingrad in northeastern Paris. The triumphal arc has the shape of a portal and marks the old city-outline, above it rue Saint-Martin changes name into rue du Faubourg Saint-Martin. There are several similar examples: rue du Temple changes name into rue du Faubourg du Temple, rue Montmartre into rue du Faubourg Montmartre, rue Saint-Honoré into rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré and so on. Faubourg means suburb and denotes the sections of Paris that until 1860 were counted as suburbs ³. At the time twelve Parisian arrondissements were increased to twenty, and numbered according to the new spiral system still valid today.

The first time I visited Paris I found the city incredibly kitsch. The narrow and winding streets in which nothing seemed to have changed for a hundred years, the numerous shops you had to visit to be able to cook dinner, and the fact that no one understood English annoyed me. The city was dirty and dysfunctional at the same time as it was expensive and snobbish, and I didn't see much of the trendiness I had expected from the capital of fashion, or of the supposedly remarkable food culture. We lived in the 15th arrondissement, not the most amusing one for a twenty years old art student without money, and I spent hours waiting in lines at the Louvre, the Musée d'Orsay and in the warm, stinking metro.



It took longer than the first ten days to like Paris, but after the third visit I was caught. Five years later I would say that Paris is hard to dislike, it's a complex city full of contradictions and tensions; an extreme mix of people from different cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds share the space. The city frightens and fascinates me at the same time, it makes me depressed and excited. It's very different from the Swedish urban environment, not only considering physical size but considering mental space. I think this is what Paris can offer; mental space, for diversity and individuality. And that's not too bad.

*Look at the sky: that is for you. Look at each person's face as you pass on the street: those faces are for you. And the street itself, and the ground under the street, and the ball of fire underneath the ground: all these things are for you.*⁴

FANNY LOOK

The southern part of rue du Faubourg Saint-Martin, which ends where Boulevard de Magenta cuts across the street and the entire northeastern Paris, are almost totally occupied by Chinese children's wear wholesalers. The section is quite long and inhabits around 80 shops. It's like a colony, a conglomerate; the Chinese have taken over this part of the city and made it theirs.



Nearby there are examples of other Chinese import/export-districts, with jewelry (upper part of rue du Temple), leather and youth's fashion (rue Notre Dame de Nazareth) and so on. Side by side westwards the blocks are dominated by black and Indian people; hair-dressers and nail-care saloons around Chateau d'Eau, cheap Indian restaurants along rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis. But among the Chinese districts the children's wear wholesalers outnumber the rest, and are most densely located. The shops have similar names, interiors and showcases, and the exact same business concept; import and export of children's wear for wholesale. They're not entirely accessible to the public, if you don't intend to make purchases for a shop you're not always welcome. Hidden view from the street, cardboard boxes and a lack of other pieces of furniture are other common interior elements.

Today, more than 50% of the world's population is concentrated in urbanized areas. Consumption appears as a new centrality that transforms the geography of cities. The concentration and power of commerce and information are reshaping the urban realm, and linking up into a deterritorialized urban continuum. [...] The authors of MUTATIONS observe the signs of transformation, analyzing the explosion of the Asian cities, the energy of the African "counter-city", the indifference of the American city, the dynamics of appropriation in the European city, the new space liberated by the Net, and the sound of circulating rumor. [...] Here are keys for the comprehension of the present, of this mobile, changing, contradictory, and passionate reality, and of the political challenge to which it gives rise: the challenge of understanding the city otherwise. ⁵



I'm reading about Chinese cities in the Pearl River Delta, about architects who use computer programs and 'curtain wall'-facades to design buildings in two days. During the construction period then, the buildings might shift function several times; from hospital to office, from office to karaoke bar, since the facade doesn't have anything to do with the content of the building. In the text above 6, which is part of the publication *MUTATIONS* and written by Rem Koolhaas, I'm reading further that Chinese architects are ten times fewer per thousand inhabitants than in the rest of the world, and that they build ten times more for a ten times lower salary. Urbanization increases explosively, especially in Asia. Shenzhen for example, a city in the Pearl River Delta which has been built from scratch during the last twenty years, profits and parasites on the closeness to Hong Kong. Shenzhen offers everything that Hong Kong offers, but cheaper, and the city grew from zero to one million inhabitants in ten years. The following five years it grew to three million, and 450 new skyscrapers were built.

Fanny Look
Fashion Ange
Gary-Boy
Go Star
Happy Little

Jardin Secret
Jeudi Après-Midi
J. Raph
Junior International
Kidsland



Kids Star
Les Petits' Mecs
Licence Kid
Melodie Mode
Minicool
New Emilie
Novo Style
Pastel Pastel

Pretty Style
Shanghai
Soleil Levant
Sweet Baby
Tom-Kid's
Tony Boy
Top Child 2
Top Junior

Everywhere exchange, and less and less substance. Everywhere information and no more politics. Everywhere shopping and junkspace, less and less urban identity. ⁷

X who studies architecture tells me that when Western architects win competitions and get opportunities to design and build in China, part of the agreement is oftenly that they should share some knowledge with the Chinese architects. The Chinese are good at acquiring knowledge from the West and designing buildings according to manuals and copy-paste.



I wonder if the Chinese salesmen at rue du Faubourg Saint-Martin apply the same technique when they choose titles for their shops as when they design skyscrapers in two days; quickly, with the help of computer programs to make the translations. Then they add an indefinite Western aesthetic to the graphic design profile. The titles are some sort of hybrids between English, French and Chinese and the promotion-signs are slightly worn out. One has been colored with a felt-tip pen, the others follow a colorful toy-style a little bit seventies or eighties. Some are clearly directed to girls (*Emiliefashion*, *Petite Sirene*, *Filles du Monde*) other to boys (*Tony Boy*, *Les Petits' Mecs*, *Tom-Kid's*), while others are directed to both (*Espace Enfant*, *Les Petits Choux*). The most frequent words used in the titles are *mode* (12 times), *little* or *petite* (9 times), *kid* and *star* (5 times each), and *mini* which is used three times. My favorites are the strangest ones who sound most imitated and American; *Licence Kid*, *Top Child II*, *Go Star*, *Happy Little* and *Junior International*. To a French person perhaps *Jeux Calins*, which means something like “tender games”, would perhaps be the strangest one when it easily sounds slightly perverse in the context.



I had a dream, a long happy dream. That kind of dream you don't wanna wake up from. I had a dream, I thought you were with me. Let's move away where nothing can touch us. I had a dream and maybe you'd like to follow me to the country, where nothing really happens. I have something you can call a weakness. I cannot breathe the air I so desperately wanted to breathe, in this town. ⁸



The titles and promotion-sign aesthetic of the shops is what first catches my attention about the area. Error and misuse, as a result of direct translations, intercultural misunderstandings and displacements has a creative potential and surprise-effect that can lead to new linguistic expressions and fields of use. Chinese export products and their packages often contain similar examples, for example I have a pencil-case with a golden ship and the text *Plain Sailing* on it. Another pencil-case in the same bazaar (a Persian word meaning “place where one walks back and forth”), had the text *Achieve Grand Plans* and a golden eagle. None of the expressions seem completely correct in English. I also have a fan with the product description *2 Speed Fun* on it.

When I'm told not to photograph the interiors and showcases of the shops I wonder if they think I will copy their concept, or if the Chinese are extra suspicious. Maybe they're unusually anxious to get exoticized by contemporary Western artists? Perhaps they're suspicious because some of them are here illegally, without a work-permission or passport. A few days later I'm told, by X who's been living in Paris during the past six years, that the business activity is a cover up for the Chinese mafia. I google 'Chinese mafia Paris' but I only find uninteresting information, like an incomprehensible blog-statement from somebody called 'Chinese mafia brother from another mother'. Next time I photograph the stores I use the zoom and stay on the opposite side of the street, I work quickly and pretend to always be heading somewhere. I get a few suspicious gazes from the salesmen, but the only person who addresses me is a man passing by on the street, he asks me if it's for my photo album. *Oui* I reply politely, smile and pretend to be in a hurry. The Chinese don't seem to have many customers today, the salesmen are hanging around the shop entrances.



Sometimes the salesmen's entire families are hanging around the entrance. In fact I don't think that I have ever seen anybody buy anything in the Chinese shops.

*Please leave all shiny objects behind, you won't need them where we're going. Relax, take a deep breath, and concentrate now, we really must be gone. There's a risk in everything we undertake, but now you must trust me more than anyone. 'Cause I've seen things, that you could only dream about. I've been to places that you'll never find. And I've had dreams that you couldn't even fit inside your head. All the places I wish I could find.*¹⁰

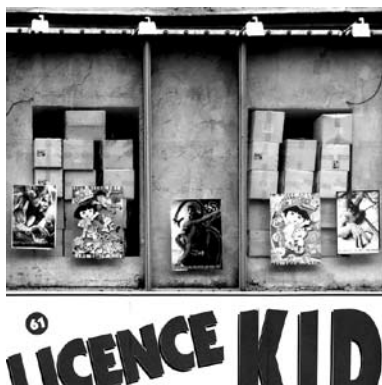
Shanghai

The sound of circulating rumor

Triad (literally "Triad Society" or a general term for criminal organizations) is a term that describes many branches of Chinese underground society and/or organizations based in Hong Kong and Macau and also operating in Taiwan, mainland China, and countries with significant Chinese populations such as Malaysia, Singapore and also Chinatowns in Europe, North America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Their activities include drug trafficking, contract murder, money laundering, illegal gambling, prostitution, car theft, extortion, and other forms of racketeering. A major source of triad income today comes from the counterfeiting of intellectual property such as computer software, music CDs and movie VCDs/DVDs. They also trade in bootleg tobacco products.¹¹



The Chinese mafia was formed in the 1760s as a resistance to the Manchu Emperor of the Qing Dynasty, and went under the name *Tian Di Hui* (The Heaven and Earth Society). When it spread through different parts of China it was branched off into many groups, among others known by the name *San He Hui* (The Three Harmonies Society), and the trinity of heaven, earth and man was symbolized by a triangle. The triangle, often combined with the image of a sword or the Chinese God of War *Kwan Kung*, gave rise to the name *Triad*. Over centuries the triads developed from a patriotic resistance group into a criminal organization, even though the Qing Dynasty lost the power of China in 1911. To adjust from a life outside of society and its' laws became too difficult for many of the ex-rebels and they started to support themselves via illegal activities. When the Communist Party seized power in 1949, organized crime diminished and the triads were forced to immigrate and continue their business in Hong Kong, the then-British colony. In the thirties there were eight main triad clans, the *Wo, Rung, Tung, Chuen, Shing, Fuk Yee Hing, Yee On* and *Luen*, who had divided Hong Kong into different geographic areas. The police collaborated with the triads, and especially until 1974 when police corruption was abated, they had great economical and political influence. In the eighties and nineties the triads began to monopolize certain sectors of the economy, for example the *Sun Yee On* had almost entire control of the cinema sector. Today there are around 57 triad groups in Hong Kong, the scale of membership is difficult to ascertain but they vary between 50 and 30.000. The most well known groups are the *Sun Yee On, Wo Shing Wo* and *14K*. Another type of clans called *Tongs* originated in early immigrant Chinatown communities, during the second half of the 20th century, all around the United States and Europe. They were based on the triads and at first they formed a resistance to racist acts. However, without a clear and unifying goal the activity of the tongs soon became more and more criminal, and came to include for example extortion, gambling, human trafficking, murder and prostitution. ¹²



L'Angelot Lee's Lapinnoir

*The Government of Hong Kong has proudly declared that Hong Kong will be a world class international metropolitan city, especially after that they will build Disneyland in five years. I am sure that there are a lot of ghosts at Lantau Island, where they will build Disneyland. You know, there was a massacre in 1197 at Lantau Island. The Chinese soldiers practically killed all the residents there. There will be a lot of sad spirit hanging around Mickey Mouse.*¹³

A rumor from Hans Ulrich Obrist's project *Urban Rumors*, in which he invited a artists to submit printed material on the theme, by Hong Kong-based artist Oscar Ho. Where I grew up, me and my friends would joke around using the expression "I've heard rumors downtown that..." and then continue with something quite personal, like "you borrowed my black jacket last time we met" / "we are supposed to meet up at X's place tonight" / "your mother has bought a new car". It was a way of making fun of the fact that the town where we live was so small and uneventful that such rumors could actually exist. No matter how insignificant, rumors and myths are interesting phenomena. They can be harmful, as the artist William Lim points out in *Urban Rumors*; "Malicious rumor is vicious. History tells us that rumor can hurt or even destroy, particularly those who are out-spoken and dedicated. [...] They ruin personal relationships and family lives..."¹⁴.



Then he continues with the more positive aspects of rumor, like the fact that myths and rumors often have played a significant role in the maintenance of oral narrative traditions in elder cultures. In late capitalist society there is hardly room for other voices and opinions than those of the rich and powerful, he continues. Voices of the other, of minority groups and other unprivileged individuals or groups, are marginalized. In Asian countries which undergo strong economic developments today, human rights' organizations are often weak and alternative voices are being oppressed. Rumors can be used as an efficient tool to preserve alternative memories and stories, which can find room and expression in unexpected gaps in society, even during severe periods of oppression.

T O I E T M O I

The best rumors are the unverifiable ones, those we'll never know are true or false. An ambivalence, regarding what we think that we know about the world, arises when rumors and established truths merge, facts and fiction or dream and reality intermingles. I think of all the artists and authors who have been inspired or based their pieces on rumors, half-truths, anecdotes and hearsay, and the ones who did the same but with remarkable and seemingly unreal *real* events. For example Paul Auster's project *True Tales of American Life*¹⁵ which later became a book, in which he asked the American radio audience to write down and send in anonymous stories from their lives;



remarkable events that really happened, but seemed unreal or extraterrestrial. The boarder between reality and fiction really gets blurred when you read them. During the beginning of a film I saw recently in the cinema, about an American double agent, the qualities required to become a good spy are described: *A suspicious mind. A love of complexity and detail. To remain a hopeless romantic...*¹⁶. 'The same qualities required as for being a contemporary artist' I think to myself when I leave the cinema.

*When a whale dies, it falls through the ocean slowly, over the course of a day. All the other fish see it fall, like a giant statue, like a building, but slowly, slowly.*¹⁷

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1. The title is a quote from "What I loved" by Siri Hustvedt (here the Swedish edition was used, "Vad jag älskade", Stockholm: Norstedts 2004, p. 274).
2. Sigrid Sandström, Gavin Morrison, "Grey Hope" from *Grey Hope: The persistence of Melancholy* (Sigrid Sandström and Atopia Projects, 2007), p. 8.
3. Source: Wikipédia
4. Miranda July, "The Shared Patio", from *No One Belongs Here More Than You* (Great Britan: Canongate Books, 2007), p. 11.
5. Francine Fort, "MUTATIONS: Rem Koolhaas Harvard Project on the City, Stefano Boeri: Multiplicity, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi and Hans Ulrich Obrist" (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2000), p. 800.
6. Rem Koolhaas, "Harvard Project on the City" from *MUTATIONS* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2000), p. 316.
7. Nadia Tazi, "Fragments of Net-Theory" from *MUTATIONS* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2000), p. 49.
8. First Floor Power, from "The Dream", from the album *Nerves* (Stockholm: Silence Records, 2003)
9. Source: Wikipedia
10. Flotation Toy Warning, from "Happy 13", from the album *Bluffer's Guide to the Flight Deck* (USA: Misra Records, 2005)
11. Source: Wikipedia
12. Main source: Wikipedia
13. Oscar Ho, from "Urban Rumors" by Hans Ulrich Obrist, *MUTATIONS* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2000), p. 754.
14. William Lim, from "Urban Rumors" by Hans Ulrich Obrist, *MUTATIONS* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2000), p. 760.
15. Paul Auster, "True Tales Of American Life" (New York: Faber & Faber, 2002)
16. Robert De Niro, "A Good Shepherd" (USA: Universal Pictures, 2006)
17. Miranda July, "The Shared Patio", from *No One Belongs Here More Than You* (Great Britan: Canongate Books, 2007), p. 9-10.



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