

Welcome to Hangover Square. Hangover Square is a fictional place, but it's located somewhere rather realistic. But not so many people are aware of this place. Today, I will introduce some major landmarks in Hangover Square.

The first one, a thumb-sized copperplate script of the word 'placebo', manufactured in 2008. What does 'placebo' mean to you? The band? Hopefully, that's true for you, cos that's what it did to me. In 2008, I got 'placebo' written on the left side of my rib. I was 15.

What triggered me to get that tattoo? The strict rules enforced on my appearance by my dad. For example, I wasn't allowed to perm or colour my hair or even grow it long. I could only dress in clothes approved by my dad. Getting a secret tattoo was the only way that I could decorate my body the way I liked. Inspiration also came from my classmate's small, floral, arm tattoo. Daring. Following her lead, several classmates and I visited the same tattoo parlour. At the age of 15, we were considered cool and rebellious. It was unusual for teenagers to have tattoos. Especially students at our private high school, predominantly from middle-class backgrounds. I was, and remain, the only person in my family to have tattoos, and I expect the same for my tattooed classmates. The tattoo parlour we visited had skilled artists, though I now question their moral standing as they tattooed underage students at a high price.

I went to the tattoo parlour alone after school with 600 yuan, about 65 pounds, in my pocket. I knew exactly which tattoo I wanted and how much it would cost. It didn't take me long to choose. Placebo was my favourite band and I liked the word. The meaning, the letters, and the sound. Not many Chinese people know this word or would guess the right pronunciation. I wanted it to be unique. The tattooist was quiet and didn't initiate any small talk. But when he started tattooing me, he put the song *Every You and Every Me* on in the background. What a sweet gesture! The process lasted about a half-hour, and the Placebo music also helped set me at ease. It wasn't particularly painful. At the time, I didn't think the tattooist knew I was underage. I avoided wearing my school uniform or behaving like a teen. But looking back at photos of me at the age of 15, I realise I looked 12.

After getting my 'placebo' tattoo, I became even more obedient to the dress code my dad set for me. I knew there was somewhere on my body he couldn't take any charge of or even know about. I was happy enough to rest the entirety of my soul on the thumb-sized piece of skin I owned. Even now, although I'm covered in tattoos, my dad has no idea about the existence of my 'placebo'.

The second landmark on Hangover Square came merely half a year later. Not quite creative, just another copperplate script of a song by Placebo - 'Soulmates Never Die'. I remember very little about getting this tattoo. However, looking at my later tattoos, I can speculate about my motivations. I was very depressed as a child and teen, unsurprising given that I had a controlling dad and an abusive domestic environment. The only thing I could do to distract myself was to get another tattoo. This tattoo is located on my right hip and is the size of a finger.

The third landmark was built one year later in the summer of 2010. This was the first tattoo I got with friends, and it remains the only one. My two high school besties and I decided to get friendship tattoos together. We all got a thumb-nail-sized triangle in different colours on our left shoulder. Mine was blue, theirs green and navy. 'Friends that get tattoos together stay together?' Unfortunately, we fell apart. One of the other two girls was one of very few students in my school not from a privileged background. And that difference was shown when we all graduated from university in 2015. She was the only one who needed to become a breadwinner immediately. She soon became bitter and defensive towards the other girl and me. After a big argument, she stopped talking to us. I stayed in touch with the other girl until a couple of years ago when I realised it was always me initiating chats. I was the only one who seemed to care about the friendship. I decided, just for once, I'd wait till she spoke to me first. She never did, and we haven't spoken since then. Apparently, they both covered their triangles with new tattoos years ago, but I still have my little blue triangle. This story may not have the best ending, but I still remember the joy and platonic love I felt on the day we got tattoos together.

In 2011, I graduated from high school and moved to Nanjing for college, a city 500 miles away from home. It symbolised the first major expansion of Hangover Square. I knew that whatever tattoos I got would have to be hidden by my clothes when I got home and saw my dad. I only had a few palm-sized ones added to my limbs during the first year. They are: a watercolour-styled Saturn on my lower left arm, a cartoon unicorn on my ankle, 'Better Yourself' in Chinese on the inner side of my upper left arm, and a pink marijuana leaf with the copperplate scripts 'obsess' and 'addict' beneath it on my upper right arm. I always say I never regret my tattoos, but this last one is the only one I have considered removing or covering. I wasn't a drug addict. In fact, I have been nearly teetotal my entire life. It's not that I am against alcohol or drugs. My body is just too weak to cope with them. All the tattoos I got at this stage had barely any meaning. They were all from the tattooists' available flashes. I liked the aesthetics, colourful and childlike. I also just enjoyed having my skin blemished by the inked scars. Rebelliousness? Perhaps.

All those new tattoos were done in a tattoo parlour in Nanjing. I googled 'best tattoo parlour in town' and they showed up. And they didn't disappoint 18-year-old-me. All the tattooists there were very stylish, in a hippy way. They played rock-n-roll music, smoked weed, and were covered in tattoos. Although I already had a few tattoos, I felt so out of place. But they were nice people. I liked them very much and subconsciously wanted to be one of them. My tattoo collection grew speedily, and each new tattoo got bigger and bigger. I got a long copperplate script of 'Welcome to the Reality' in Swedish tattooed across the length of my left forearm. I came across the sentence in a postcard sent by my Swedish friend congratulating me on getting into university. The idea of 'Reality' felt so appropriate for me at that moment, enough to make it a permanent mark on my body. But the reality that had blown my mind wasn't university or adulthood. Instead, it was the subculture I finally had the freedom to embrace.

I lost track of time getting new tattoos. My favourite Chinese poem was tattooed on the right side of my upper back. Then a featureless sketch of me in a green jumper covered my left upper arm. More stars and planets accompanied Saturn located on my left forearm. A cat tattooing another cat on my right calf. I became more creative in designing my body

art and confident in asking for custom tattoo designs. Friendships between the tattooists and me gradually grew. My effort to brutally cover myself in tattoos worked. In the meantime, I had to wear long sleeves back home, even in the 40°C heat of summer.

Why did I want to fit in with the tattooists? Probably because they seemed genuine and free-spirited, different from anyone I had met before. I blamed my depressive childhood and teenage years in pretentious and hypocritical middle-classed surroundings. I could see the possibility of having a chill life if I embraced the hippy lifestyle. Plus, I couldn't stop dreaming of how pissed my dad would be if I ended up in a social group he hated. In a sense, I tried to fit into a working-class subculture to break from the socioeconomic class I was born into.

My long sleeves strategy worked till it didn't. At some point during my last couple of years at the university, my dad found out about my tattoos. He spotted the corner of my 'cat tattooing cat' tattoo popping out from the bottom of my trousers, and I showed him a few more tattoos during his interrogation. "You've become a hooligan." He said. And then he was silent for a couple of hours smoking cigars. He was petrified and utterly disappointed in me. I try not to remind him of my tattoos, so my long sleeves have still been on around him even after that day. Most of the time he would just pretend not to know about my tattoos but occasionally, when he saw other people with tattoos, he would be reminded of my own and demand I remove them. I agreed just to calm him down but decided no, I wouldn't get them removed. The colonised era of my body was over.

In 2015, I graduated. And my favourite graduation gift was a free tattoo from my tattooist friends. The last symbol of my time in Nanjing. It was both the only free and most elegantly customised tattoo I had ever received: my favourite Chinese medicine herbs across my clavicle. My first degree was in Chinese medicine. I took away almost nothing from that degree. In fact, I don't even remember the name of the herbs tattooed on my clavicle. They look like flowers and leaves in different shades of pink and green. Very pretty. It would be worth more than 2500 yuan, about 300 pounds, at the time. "Are you sure you're not doing an MA?" The tattooist asked me while he was tattooing me. "Well, I'm not

particularly academic..." I replied. "If I were you, I'd do one. Then it'd be much easier to get a proper job, and then a proper life..." "Oh careful. You're starting to sound like my dad now." aside from being covered in tattoos of course. At that moment, I realised something. To my tattooist friends, I was nothing more than a rich kid who would eventually go back to the *normal* life. They were right. After a month or two, I started my 9-5 office job in my smart casual workwear. They were also right about the MA later on.

The construction of Hangover Square ceased in the two years that I was working. I didn't do it intentionally. But working was just so draining. Besides, I had to cover my tattoos when meeting clients.

On the last day of 2017, I resigned and moved to the UK to close the long-distance separation of my jeopardised relationship. Long story short, by the end of 2018 I was dumped, had no friends in the UK, and had drifted away from my family and friends in China. I booked my most expensive tattoo to date with a famous Chinese tattooist during Christmas break, 2018. He was one and a half hours late for our appointment. Eventually, the noise of his sports car got louder and louder before stopping abruptly. He finally showed up. What a poser, I thought. While tattooing me, he asked me why I chose 'nowhere' to be tattooed in cursive across the length and width of my upper right arm. I had nowhere to go, nowhere to call home, and nowhere I felt comfortable. "Can I ask you a question?". He interrupted my thoughts. "Do you think Europe is... open? Sexually? Everyone casually has sex?". I replied, confused. "What? I don't know... probably depends on individuals. Why do you ask?" "My girlfriend's studying in Italy... I'm really worried about her..." "Well, it sounds more like you're worried about being cuckolded," I tittered. After a three-hour tattooing session, chatting and paying him about 800 quid, we surprisingly became friends.

In 2019, Hangover Square had the biggest expansion to date, mainly because I was tremendously lonely and depressed in the UK. I was craving physical pain, to cover the emotional pain. Twelve tattoos from the size of a palm to covering a quarter of my back were done across 2019. Most of them were black and morbid, with elements of skulls.

They were contrasted by funny tattoos like a cartoon arcade machine on my right arm and a manga-styled kinky bum on my bum cos why not? I had the minimum motivation for living but I managed to travel to different cities in the UK to get those tattoos done by the tattooists I adored. Getting tattoos was the motivation for me to stay alive.

After a year and a bit of drama and trauma, I actually felt better than ever entering 2020. I had 2019 in Arabic tattooed near my left ear in January 2020. Was it a memento, souvenir, or monument of 2019? I wasn't sure. I just really needed it.

The construction of Hangover Square was slowed down by Covid and me moving on from my tattoo-as-therapy phase. I had two hand-sized new tattoos added after covid in 2021, both originally booked in 2019. And my pet beetle, Sam, tattooed right next to the arcade machine on my right arm in September 2022, shortly after they passed away.

Some studies show that tattoos on working-class bodies are spontaneous and likely to be done during holidays after a hangover. In contrast, middle-class tattoos are exquisite and well-planned. My body has the visual effect of the working class. My tattoos are messy, with very little consistency in styles. I often get judged by people who are religious, professional, or middle class. I am stereotyped as sexually open, doing drugs, and having bad taste. Although I carefully planned every one of my tattoos and had them done by decent and professional tattooists. My body doesn't look middle-class, which may or may not have been my plan.