

Chapter 9

Return movements: back in Hong Kong

9a. Chapter introduction

So far I have concentrated on settlement practices in Sydney and how migrant subjects (including a film director) have interpreted and appropriated elements of a new urban habitat. In this chapter I shift the focus to interviewees who had returned to Hong Kong and their re-encounter with the spatiality of Hong Kong. The actual experience of return is rarely an easy or straightforward switch back to a prior state of being. Accounts of returning to Hong Kong incorporated remembered places in Australia as part of ongoing narratives of migrant passages.

The concept of ‘return migration’ doesn’t quite capture the contingency and fuzziness of Hong Kong emigrant strategies. Returnees could go back to Australia at any stage, especially if they gained Australian citizenship. They could be planning to move back on retirement, or if there are unfavourable ‘changes’ in Hong Kong. Skeldon (1995: 63) suggests the term ‘return movement’, since ‘return migration’ assumes a permanency which may not be justified. Nevertheless, return movements should be distinguished from visits and various types of business and social ‘commuting’ of a very short-term nature.¹ Return movements are significant and relatively long-term strategies. Almost half of my informants have made such a return movement (see table in chapter 4). Most regard their return as relatively long term, but only a few consider their return as a permanent or a final move. Return movements usually occupy the horizon of the immediate or foreseeable future. Even the strategy of the ‘insurance migrant’ with its scenario of instant return on the achievement of citizenship, still holds the possibility of remigrating to Australia. At any rate, migrant strategies are rarely clear-cut: they are open to multiple contingencies that can occur within migrant passages.

Up to this point I have concentrated on accounts of migrants’ sense of place as a means of indexing and evaluating migrant passages and fortunes. In many ways

¹ This is not to downplay the practical or affective significance of short-term forays which are often part of longer term patterns.

returnees' narratives were similar to 'settlers' in Sydney, only in reverse – they maintained a similar structure of comparison between places. Such comparisons were constructed through the fuzzy mixing of elements of practical experience, bodily senses, and shared ('cross-cultural') representations, values and ideology. However, return was never simply a reversion to a prior state, a dispositional switch back to an originary 'default' setting. A place returned to is never quite the same as it was, although people returning usually expect it to be. Migration effects a rupture in the continuity of relations with the place of origin. As Schutz (1964: 116) put it, 'each homecomer has tasted the fruit of strangeness, be it bitter or sweet.' The odd sounding term 'adjustment to home', used by Gmelch (1992: 289) in discussing return migration to Barbados, alerts us to the possibility that returning home may not be homely, or that its homeliness will be different to what the subject expected. The very process of adaptation to urban space and styles of dwelling in Sydney may generate new tastes and habits that require readjustment. I will detail some accounts of the disjunctive feelings experienced when re-encountering the physical spaces of Hong Kong. These accounts often bring into question the contrasting modalities of social interaction implied in the spatial organisation of the two cities.

Returnees had practically incorporated perspectives acquired in the places to which they have emigrated. They had enlarged their sense of possibilities of lived space. Informants who had returned to Hong Kong often continued to reference Sydney (or Australia) as an element within an expanded sense of place, even where it had slipped into the background of everyday re-immersion in Hong Kong life. Remembered places contribute to a stock of 'environmental images' (Lynch 1960: 4) which continue to inform subjects' perspectives and sense of trajectory. Returnee accounts very clearly showed migrant subjects' incorporation of a sense of other social and spatial ways of being and dwelling. Experienced suburban spaces such as backyards and parks were often incorporated into a pastoral fantasy of spatial enjoyment that was sharply contrasted with conditions in Hong Kong. In some cases the presence of these imagined spaces negatively affected the way that Hong Kong was lived and experienced, especially in the case of 'reluctant' returnees. Accounts of the active interrelation of lived places for migrant subjects suggest that we can conceive of the 'place of migrancy' more generally as a whole field of experienced places brought into a relation through migrant practices.

9b. Return to Hong Kong: rupture and recognition

Comments about the experience of returning to Hong Kong often included sharp bodily responses on arriving back in Hong Kong. The immediacy of recognition could either be one of familiarity (with a home environment) or of difference (to the 'host' environment). Return was a disruption of attunements made to living in Sydney. Once familiar perceptions could take on altered significance. For instance, Chan reported that the smell of Hong Kong on arrival confirmed one returnee's decision to return home:

When I alighted from the airplane, the smell of Hong Kong immediately reminded me that this was the place where I was born and grew up and I had no doubts of my desire to be here. (Chan 1996: 87)

Whatever the components of this smell, re-exposure to it triggered instant recognition, embodying memories of home and validating return. While habituation reduces the conscious impact and sensitivity to smells, first encounters, or re-encounters with odours often provide powerful affective experiences (Rodaway 1994: 70). Smells trigger strong affects through their presence, re-invoking memories.

Visual memories are invoked by re-encountering familiar landmarks – or sometimes negatively through their *disappearance*. Absences in the built environment break the sense of continuity preserved in memory. Winston came to Sydney as a teenager with his parents and studied engineering in Sydney. Returning to Hong Kong for the first time after five years, he confronted a total rupture of recognition of the familiar: he was unable to locate the neighbourhood where he used to live, in Hung Hom (on the Kowloon side of Victoria Harbour facing Hong Kong Island). Since his family had settled in Australia, this whole neighbourhood had been demolished following a major harbour reclamation and redevelopment.

I used to live next to the sea, but the harbour had been filled in. They just slap out all the old buildings and build them. All new buildings built. Heaps more people around.

I could no longer see the mountains on Hong Kong Island (across the harbour) because of all the building construction.

This shock of physical change is something most re-visitors to Hong Kong will have experienced, given the extent and rapidity of urban development. Nonetheless, it must be difficult to accept the total disappearance of the landscape associated with one's childhood. Familiarity with the landscape of places is part of the sense of one's own historicity.²

Nevertheless, Winston quickly got used to living in a Hong Kong that had changed from the place as he had remembered. This was no doubt helped by the fact that his training was in civil engineering, the business of changing landscapes. He had returned to Hong Kong rather than going to work elsewhere (such as Canada, where he also had relatives) because he could find work on big development projects.

You won't get the same money (in Canada) as you can here. See, ten million dollars, if you're thinking of Canada, it's a lot, it's a very big project. But when you compare to Hong Kong, they're spending around six billion, for only building an airport. The way of thinking money is different. Like in Canada or Australia, they thinking 'I don't want to spend a lot. But I really want a good...comeback, like, how you say, like, money back, benefit. Profit, yeah, I get the word. But in Hong Kong they think, 'If I don't spend a small amount of money, how can I get a big profit?

Winston located these differences in the operation of property development in different ways of 'thinking money', rather than in the very different context of land supply and state planning control in Hong Kong. The power of money is an integral element of the imagined landscape of Hong Kong.

9c. Pastoral recollections of Sydney

Like many other returnees, Adrian was most struck by the different 'pace' of life in Hong Kong. In Sydney he had grown to like what he called 'the country life',

² Physical change in places 'has no meaning without comparison with what used to be...these comparisons in things near at hand are a part of the daily thought processes of all of us in recognising just where we are' (Philo & Kearns 1993: 4).

reading, working on the house – he had described the joys of building a pergola, and installing an automatic sprinkler system. Adrian considered that it took him 3-6 months to change gear. He realised when he first returned that when he was walking on the street, people would pass him by, they were moving much faster. ‘Now I am at the same pacing. It really depends on what kind of personality you have. You will prefer Hong Kong if you like going out, seeing a lot of people’, as opposed to the more self sufficient life contained in the home in Sydney. Returnees index a sense of their existence in a place through the ‘pacing’ of their bodies, the velocity of movements and interactions.

The following account of what Chung-hoi also called ‘country life’ in Sydney brings together the now familiar themes of speed, noise, crowds. These are equated with a different *modus operandi* in terms of social and familial life, and the priority of economic struggle:

Yeah, it’s very very different. In Hong Kong, it’s very busy everywhere, and people walking here and there, they never stop. Where in Australia, everything is quiet. Very slow and ah..., it gives you, it gives you some time to think about you, about me, and the people around you. I mean, the personal relationships much more closer..... In Hong Kong, people are very busy, and they live, they believe what we believe. (He laughs, realising that he is not just talking about others, but about himself as well.) We believe that time is very important. We always try to, to go faster than other people, because, when they lost a chance, then they, they don’t know when (it) will come back. So, the chance to buy a house, the chance to get business, to make money... But in Australia, they seem to acquire everything, just enough is OK. They don’t want more. In addition, it might be their social security, much better than Hong Kong, so they don’t much to worry about when they grow old. In Hong Kong, if you don’t have much income (?) you might be very worried about your old age.

Busyness, intensity, speed are counterposed with quiet leisure, and the cultivation of more intensive personal relationships. Sydney is imagined as somehow outside of competitive relations and material necessity. This difference is often tied to the availability of welfare support in Australia, which Chung-hoi imagines erodes the need to pursue material gain. This is a common ‘ideological’ explanation expressed by Hong Kong people – that the economic ‘drive’ of Hong Kong people is a product

of a necessity that is somehow absent in Australia, negated by social welfare measures.³

Perhaps this dream of Australia as an idyll of leisure and personal cultivation is a compensation, offsetting that of Hong Kong as golden place, a pure world of economic instrumentalism to which other social possibilities must be sacrificed. The emphasis on the development of friendships or familial relationships no doubt has some practical basis. Many returnees yearn for days just spending time in the house in Sydney, not having to do anything. They lament that in Hong Kong people don't just get together 'for no reason', that in Australia they had a chance to 'go deeper' with friendships and relationships.

The Australian back yard was often referenced by returnees. Joe was talking about the suburban house and garden he had inhabited in Sydney.

The garden was killing me, I need to do the lawn mowing at least twice a week. When I went back to Hong Kong I think, ah, no need to worry about the lawn mowing, but when I back to Hong Kong, I miss it. Quite enjoying sometimes. And sometimes I'm thinking about sitting out the back with some friend or neighbour who drops by. I miss it, since my wife think she really want the Australian life. That means the living standard in Australia. But of course she really want the job opportunity and entertainment in Hong Kong. We're from Hong Kong, we know exactly we can get whatever, entertainment.

Joe and his wife had returned to Hong Kong because she was unable to find an adequate job in her field after looking for six months. Remembering the back yard brought into play a yearning for 'Australian life', even though Joe had begun by complaining about the labour required for its maintenance. The back yard embodied aspects of life perceived to be missing in Hong Kong. Joe was expressing ambivalence about their trajectory through the space of the back yard. He was

³ Reliance on social security assistance is often felt to be shameful by people from Hong Kong. An Immigration Department study notes the 'remarkably low rate of use of government benefits and welfare payments' by Hong Kong-born Australians (DIMA 2000: 3). This disdain for welfare support was often accompanied by a lack of knowledge of the political context of these issues. This sense of self-reliance pleases governments. Australian policy reduced access to social security payments to immigrants prior to attaining citizenship through the imposition and extension of waiting periods on

determined to work hard and save to retire early in order to go back to Sydney to live. Again Australia emerges as a pastoral dream of retirement from the urban world of work and money in Hong Kong.

Memories of Australia were often expressed in terms of 'living standard', spaciousness (both physical and social), environment and nature, a set of qualities opposed to Hong Kong which is perceived to lack these things. I spoke to Wai-fan was in his apartment by the harbour at Tuen Mun.

W: Australia is a large country. I had a feeling of freedom, a feeling of fresh air, I can't express...During our holidays we would go to the park and have a picnic there, and also see some animals, we feel close to the natural environment. And this is what I miss the most.

P: What about this bit of nature out there? You've got a view of the sea (pointing out the window which overlooks the harbour.) (We laugh). It's a very busy harbour.

W: Yeah, very busy, and commercial. Not like the harbour in Sydney. Too many ships. We are worried about the pollution. There are a lot of ships parking in the middle of the sea, during the night time, so next morning when they go, they leave a lot of rubbish, dumping a lot of rubbish. It's difficult to control. How can I expect the government to control so many ships? There are hundreds of ships. In Australia, in the residential areas, you don't find any pollution.

P: Well, there might be some (laughing).

The sea at Tuen Mun is not associated with nature in the same way as the sea in Sydney. Wai-fan did not recognise the existence of pollution in Australia. He envisaged even the urban landscape of Australia as pristine, a state of nature. Perhaps he was not long enough in Australia to recognise problematic and political dimensions there. Wai-fan and his family intended to stay in Australia but returned to Hong Kong because of the ill health of one of their children. There the family was able to hire a domestic worker to care for their child as well as having familial support in caring for the child. Australia remained in their minds as an ideal topography of another life, another possibility. Angela, Wai-fan's wife voiced her experience of emigration and return:

immigrants by Labour and Liberal governments (David Leser, *Sydney Morning Herald* Good Weekend 12.9.1998: 16-23).

It's a good experience to explore. We did explore something that we couldn't experience here. We had more space there. I think we didn't have much time to explore the place of Australia. If we stayed there longer then we'd have gone travelling with my family there. I think that I would have liked this kind of life. But in Hong Kong we can't do this. If we could control ourselves and we have good planning, the lifestyle in Sydney is better than in Hong Kong. Not so many people are very materialised [materialistic]. Some people maybe, but not as much as in Hong Kong. It wouldn't have so much effect on my children.

Their foray to Australia gave them a sense of another way of being, expressed as a sense of spaciousness and potentiality. This sense of space is both empirical i.e. deriving from different living conditions and practices, and a projection of a sense of lack in their present life. Again Australia is a kind of utopian space free of the 'materialised' way of being in Hong Kong. But this could only be obtained by work, self-control and 'good planning' – and the place for that is Hong Kong.

9d. Displacements of return

A few interview subjects had ongoing difficulties placing themselves between Hong Kong and Sydney. When we encountered Celia in chapter 6 she was on the verge of deciding to return to Hong Kong. She eventually returned to Hong Kong, but was still doubtful about whether she wanted to stay there.

P: You said before that sometimes you felt like going back to Australia?

C: Yeah, like when I'm in here, but when I'm in Sydney, I want to come back to here to see my family. I think maybe it's that kind of escape feeling, I mean the feeling to escape some realities, something that is not so smooth. And, I think that the people in Sydney they are kind and helpful, but in Hong Kong because the taxation is lower, much lower, that's why I keep, I want to earn more money.

As I observed before, Celia had not been able to arbitrate between places and decide where she wanted to be. She felt both Sydney and Hong Kong to be lacking when she was there. But again we see the familiar opposition – Hong Kong represents the place of economic maximisation and Australia of social maximisation. In Celia's

case these typifications are counterfactual – she had not made much money in Hong Kong, nor did she find satisfactory relationships in Australia. She still felt a constant displacement, a feeling she described as ‘something that is not so smooth’. Hong Kong is the womb, but it is a hard place, unkind, fierce and competitive. Australia represented freedom *from* the maternal, although it doesn’t deliver as well as Hong Kong in terms of economic provision – it is not such a good father in that sense. Speaking in Hong Kong Celia mused:

Hard and good times, yeah, my life experiences in Sydney. Mmmmm.....Rod Stewart has a song called ‘I’m Sailing’, have you heard that? That reminds me of Australia, that kind of independent life. (Starts to sing snatches of the song)

*We are sailing, we are sailing
Home again, across the sea.
We are sailing stormy waters
To be with you, to be free.*

*We are sailing, we are sailing
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We are sailing stormy waters
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The song seems more about unrequited longings than ‘freedom’. The unclear definition of the subject, shifting between ‘we’ and ‘I’, and the indefiniteness of ‘home again’ seemed (to me) to be appropriate to the vacillations of Celia’s trajectory. But perhaps ‘freedom’ resides in a suspension of obligations and the lack of moorings – sailing, flying and open space – associated with life in Sydney. (Songs operate affectively, not strictly through ‘rational’ interpretation.)

The following tale of another reluctant returnee differs from Celia’s. Cal knew where he wanted to be, but was unable to be there. Cal and his wife Dana went to Sydney with the intention of settling permanently. Cal had returned to Hong Kong to work at his old job when he couldn’t find suitable work in his field, leaving Dana and their baby daughter in Sydney where Dana was working as a nurse. He would make trips to visit his wife and child whenever he could get time. I couldn’t help but be amused by this one particular incident in astronaut family life. I accompanied Cal around the Park ‘n Shop supermarket in Wan Chai. He had heard there was a special on a brand of disposable nappies – *Baby Love Premium Quality* – that were on sale for just HK\$22 for a packet of 16. These were actually made in Australia. Cal excitedly

bought four bulky packets to take to Sydney exclaiming, ‘made in Australia but only half the price here!’

This banal moment in the life of a ‘reluctant astronaut’ runs counter to the image of astronauts as wealthy entrepreneurs and professionals awash with money. It was also an everyday way of affirming Cal’s links to his family in Sydney. I was struck by the sense of temporariness expressed by Cal’s apartment in Hong Kong, which contained few traces of things acquired for more than basic survival purposes. The kitchen was largely requisitioned with airline paraphernalia – Ansett, Qantas, and Cathay Pacific coffee cups, piles of portion control packets of coffee, salt and pepper, Corn Flakes etc. from various airlines and hotels.

Cal was depressed about his failure to find work in Australia, and especially about the prolonged separation from his family. He would constantly express this disappointment by idealising Australia. “Australia is so clean, tidy, no pollution – I feel it’s very sweet..and very..comfort. I love the place, the people.” Cal was prone to dramatising his situation in Hong Kong. ‘Life is hard, and poor’, he would say periodically. He elaborated an heroic story of how he had torn himself away from paradise in Australia to provide a better life for his family. He would also project his disappointment onto the political situation in Hong Kong. ‘I feel some darkness in the future...Out of control. I feel, I fear that, fear..’ It seemed to me that this ominous cast was based more about Cal’s personal state of mind than on any objective political events in Hong Kong, since he seemed to take little actual interest in details of political life. He was drawing on the peculiar *zeitgeist* of the handover period (this was 1997).

I remember walking with Cal one hot and humid night in an older part of Wan Chai. I asked him if he liked this area and he replied, ‘no, it’s too dirty, buildings very old’: the street markets, the jostle of the Hong Kong street life had become repulsive to him. Strong feelings were attached to the topography and the climate. We had just been to Victoria Peak, the famous lookout over the harbour, where was it quite cool, due to the higher altitude and the breeze. ‘Did you feel the difference up there? Just like in Australia.’ For Cal the cool breeze of the Peak was associated with the open spaces and horizons of Australia for which he was yearning. A bitter critical gaze

was turned on every aspect of Hong Kong – its political situation, environment, climate and social values – as an expression of disappointment and failure and the suffering of separation. Hong Kong had become abject and unliveable.

I have presented some fragments of accounts of unhomey return, not because they are typical, but because they display some of the tensions that result from dispositional shifts that are not (immediately) resolvable in practice. Most subjects who had returned to Hong Kong were quite adjusted to living in the place they knew best. Subjects who were most content returning to Hong Kong were the ‘insurance migrants’ who rarely had any regrets. They had planned to return in a finite time, the few years required to gain a passport, and were generally more open to new experiences in Australia. They often draw on a potential to take advantage of the situation – to ‘enjoy the best of both places’, as one person put it. Those who planned to stay in Australia and had reluctantly returned to Hong Kong take on the representations of Australian space as thwarted social potentiality, which may negatively affect their quality of dwelling in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, both reluctant and willing returnees tended to utilise similar structures of comparison between the spatiality of Sydney and Hong Kong, while adopting different viewpoints and affects towards their experiences in the two cities.

9e. Concluding comments: a note on place and migration

While the past few chapters examined how the lives of Hong Kong people meshed into different spaces in Sydney, this chapter focused on active spatial memories of migrant experience in Sydney from the perspective of returned migrants in Hong Kong. Interviews show how remembered elements of experience in Sydney persisted within an overall sense of place enlarged by specific migrant trajectories. Accounts of living in Sydney were incorporated into a larger network of places within the worlds of migrant subjects. Multiple places coexist within the life-worlds of subjects expanded by migrant movements. Returnees continue to reference Australian spatiality in assessing their trajectories and prospects. Remembered places – from specific houses and gardens to more generalised representations of ‘the environment’ or the ‘quality of life’ in Sydney – remained a presence even for subjects happily re-immersed in life in Hong Kong. Returnee accounts clearly showed migrant subjects’

incorporation of a sense of other social and spatial ways of being and dwelling. Experienced suburban spaces such as backyards and parks were often incorporated into a pastoral fantasy of spatial enjoyment in Sydney that was sharply contrasted with conditions in Hong Kong. In some cases the presence of these imagined spaces negatively affected the way that Hong Kong was lived and experienced, especially in the case of ‘reluctant’ returnees. Accommodations to places could draw on both hopes and fears.

Given the range of migrant strategies – in a continuum from ‘one way’ settlement to the high mobility of astronauts – I think it is useful to extend the conception of ‘place’ to encompass the singular experience of multiple places. The awkward semantic sense of the phrase ‘multiple places coexist’ points to the dominant conception of place as a) singular; b) immobile, and; c) subsidiary to the more abstract, universal notion of ‘space’, which ‘contains’ places in providing a structure from which is derived relations of distance, scale, size etc.

The spatiality of migrancy can be conceived in terms of an enlarged notion of place, accommodating a plurality of experienced places brought into relation with one another. Rather than a specific location occupied by a subject (or subjects), place can be conceived more broadly as a whole field of experienced places brought into a relation. Malpas (1999: 170) conceives of place as: ‘a *bounded* but open region *within which* a set of interconnected elements can be located.’ These ‘elements’ or qualities of place are maintained through a continuous interrelation of experience and memory. Commenting on that epic fictional treatment of memory and being, Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, Malpas writes:

Place must encompass both space and time, and hence memory. Place conceived as ‘a structure comprising spatiality *and* temporality, subjectivity *and* objectivity, self *and* other. Indeed, these elements are themselves established only in relation to each other, and so only within the topographical structure of place.’ (Malpas 1999: 163)

Proust’s narrative problem – to find a sense of continuity in multiple and disjunctive times and places – is one shared by migrant subjects. Places are never neutral sites but

are saturated with numerous associations and ‘representations’ (class, status, values, ideologies, affects, images).

Malpas reverses the usual derivation of ‘place’ from ‘space’ by giving place an ontological primacy over the more general notion of space. Place is conceived as a structure of experienced and incorporated space. This suggests something like a ‘place-world’ (Casey 1993: 179) which provides a structure for the subjects’ singular sense of location between places. This formulation seems apt to describe the collective ‘place’ of migrancy I have been documenting – the intricate phenomenal web formed between Hong Kong and Sydney.

Place can be conceived as a unitary field of experienced and represented places. This expansive field of place is not a flat symmetrical space in which objects, relations and affects are located like points on a map. Instead it has a ‘folded’ character: ‘Places can turn outwards to reveal other places and locations; they can turn inwards to reveal their own character or the character of the subject who identifies herself with that place.’ (Malpas 1999: 172) The spatial stories of Sydney told by returnees in Hong Kong exhibit various ways of folding two places connected by different relations and investments. These accounts comment through comparison on the externality of relations between (often) sharply dichotomised places, as well as on the ‘internal’ states of migrant subjects expressed in terms of the perceptions and affects directed towards these places.

We can see from these accounts that the expanded ‘sense of place’ of this particular group of migrant subjects is rarely ‘homogenised’ into a single place, but is typically deeply territorialized. The interaction of these ‘territories’ can operate powerfully on subjects at an affective level, as the narratives of Cal or Celia show. There is a jostling of places in people’s attempts to give an account of ‘where they are.’ I have suggested an ongoing process whereby migrant trajectories are constantly compared and valorised in relation to both places, Hong Kong and Sydney. Through an accumulation of memories, stories, and perceptions, places are positioned in a relation to each other. This construction occurs at different scales – between nations and cities, between suburbs and parts of cities, down to a sense of specific bodies and their boundaries. At the same time as places serve as contexts for action and

possibility, they are constituted as objects of attachment, desire or abjection. In the next chapter I consider the question of what might constitute 'belonging' or attachment across the topographical structure of place accommodating both Hong Kong and Sydney.