

Chapter 3.

Walking contradictions: spatial practices in Tsing Yi, Hong Kong.

The map is not the territory. Let's go and have a look at the ground.¹

3a. Chapter introduction

In chapter 2 I surveyed the built and lived space of Hong Kong from the somewhat distanced viewpoint of an historical analysis. This material provided some spatial underpinnings to Hong Kong's colonial development as a major trading port (and later 'world city'). Although I focused on the integral part that ordinary practices of city dwellers have played in shaping the spatiality of Hong Kong, this history cannot provide a direct link to the spatial practices of contemporary Hong Kong dwellers. In this chapter I concentrate more directly on the nature of lived spatiality in Hong Kong and how it is practically negotiated on an everyday basis.

I begin by considering practices of walking in the city. In examining pedestrian practices I zoom in on a small strip of practised space in a residential area in Tsing Yi, in the New Territories. A short walk between two housing estates provided a description of different aspects of everyday spatiality. Observations of this routine walk allow me to isolate specific pedestrian practices and routines as they are utilized in everyday strategies. The built environment of housing estates provided a site for complex spatial practices that belie descriptions of housing estates as placeless or anonymous. The verticality, three-dimensionality and interpenetrating of different uses of space conditions the way that dwellers move around and navigate these built environments. I also investigate the multiplicity of small practices and uses of space, which occur in spaces *in between* the planned spaces of estates. The walk intersected with temporary and improvised uses of space such as momentary meetings of Filipina domestic workers, the territories carved out by elderly people and children, the dumping of rubbish and pets, and ritual practices of 'folk' religion. These practices extend the planned space of the new town environment.

¹ Robert de Niro planning a heist in *Ronin*. (Director: Frankenheimer)

Throughout this chapter there is an outwardly expanding shift in scale. My focus moves from the immediate zone of an experienced space – the description of a short walk between two housing estates in Tsing Yi – to a consideration of the changing character of lived space in Tsing Yi in terms of local identity. Rapid but uneven development in Tsing Yi has created a complex and heterogeneous layering of social milieux. I move on to consider the changing relations between Tsing Yi and Hong Kong as a whole. Tsing Yi as a local place is defined and given meaning in terms of the larger metropolitan space of Hong Kong. This is illustrated by a shift in the representations of Tsing Yi following the opening of a railway station connecting the island to the CBD and to the new airport. This material gives a sense of the symbolic and representational struggles to define the nature of place, of linkages and significances within the context of rapid development and an intensive production of space.

However this material can only suggest some aspects of lived space. It requires a further analytical step to link descriptions of lived space to dispositions of subjects and to indicate tendencies or propensities to act in particular ways. Practical dispositions are background resources that remain largely unthought because they derive from mimetic learning and because they are attuned to activities which rarely require explicit explication. Hence they remain analytically elusive. In the final part of the chapter I explore two of the most apparent characteristics of Hong Kong's lived spatiality – density and speed – with a view to how these complexes might form a link between lived spatiality and dispositions employed in ongoing practices. The sense of place and locality brings together bodily 'fit' with an environment, feelings and affects, representations of place and ideological values.

3b. Pedestrian practices

I use the basic practice of walking as a starting point in examining spatial practices in Hong Kong. Moving through an urban space, and finding your way is much more than a mechanical process. Pedestrian orientation involves reference to categories, meanings, the 'feel' of places, their familiarity or strangeness, desirability or abjectness, the meaning and status of places in relation to other places. Moving and locating oneself, even within a small area, tends to bring into play thoughts,

associations and interpretations of things, directed towards both smaller and larger scales, towards the near and far, the 'internal' spaces of the self and the surrounding horizons. While these processes are 'subjective', referring to an individual's acquired knowledge of things, their sense of themselves and their relation to other things and people around them, at the same time they draw on collectively held suppositions, categories, preferences and spatial practices.

Few of my informants in Hong Kong could give an account of how they orient and accommodate themselves to moving through complex urban spaces. These understandings are embedded in practical logics that tend to operate sub-consciously. When I asked them about navigating around the city, they rarely understood what I was trying to get at. You have to have some distance from the 'naturalness' of such practices to notice ways in which they may be structured and culturally specific.

One can get some idea of urban spatial practices by taking note of how people give directions to find an apartment or a shop. For instance, people rarely give street names or numbers, but landmarks, types of spaces to be traversed. The more immediate urban points of reference are often not 'suburbs' or local administrative areas, but large built entities, such as public or private housing estates (which may well house the population of sizeable towns), shopping malls, and transport nodes such as the MTR² stations. These form more substantial, palpable spatial entities than the grid of streets. Barthes noted a difference in practical orientation in Tokyo, whose space he regarded as 'practically unclassified': 'you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience.' (Barthes 1982: 33, 36)³

I recall trying to operationalize a friend's instructions on how to get to her home from the MTR station via several large shopping malls. Her family's apartment was in Tai Koo Shing, one of the largest privately financed housing developments, which

² The Mass Transit Railway, Hong Kong's metro system, carries over 2.5 million passengers per day.

³ Barthes' problem was that he was unable to comprehend any relation between ordinary practices and meaning for the Japanese. This led him to interpret Japanese society in terms of a total opposition between practices and signs, a mysterious 'empire of signs.'

was built on a former docklands area of Hong Kong Island.⁴ I still have these directions scribbled in an address book:

Get off Tai Koo Shing MTR

*Take City Plaza 1 exit
past Marks & Spencer*

up (or down?) a level

past ice skating rink

→ City Plaza 4

→ ground level

see building on left.

Needless to say, I got quite lost in a maze of interconnected shopping malls (Cityplaza 1,2,3, and 4). This kind of development is quite typical of multi-use developments around railway stations. No doubt my friend's directions were perfectly adequate and functional for a local. I was simply unused to navigating such a large, porous three-dimensional space. At one stage I was able to see the building I was looking for from the midst of the jungle set of a promotion for 4 wheel drive Toyotas, but had no idea how to get out of the shopping mall. After a few visits to my friend's place, I no longer felt any incongruity, or noticed the initially startling interpenetration of commercial, civic and residential spaces.

The implicit knowledge underlying spatial practices will gradually change after a person encounters other ways of negotiating urban space. Abbey had been in Australia for a few years and was back in Hong Kong visiting family when I spoke to her. We were talking about ways of navigating around Hong Kong. She said that she was hopeless with directions, not just her but 'me and my friends, because we were brought up in Hong Kong.' Hong Kong people in general 'did not have a good sense of direction,' she said. She often had trouble finding her way around the expansive spaces of metropolitan Sydney. Was she suggesting that Hong Kong people were lacking some basic spatial capacity? Hardly. What Abbey understood by a 'sense of direction' was filtered through her Australian experience, where 'direction' is a more cardinal conception, more oriented to driving and conceived more in terms of the two-dimensional space of the map. It may also have been a reaction to coming back

⁴ By 1993, Taikoo Shing housed 45,500 people in over 60 tower blocks (Winky Chan 1993: 63).

to the densely concentrated and layered urban fabric of Hong Kong that now seemed less ‘natural’ to her. “Hong Kong is such a small place.....Usually they just know the place or the building”, she said. Cities and their associated spatial practices were contrasted: Hong Kong was conceived as small and concentrated, Sydney as large and dispersed. On the other hand, it was clear that Hong Kong people possessed local knowledge and spatial capacities that outsiders did not: “Westerners don’t know where to shop, they only go to the places you can see from the street. The best places are hidden, you might have to go through other buildings to get there.”

Hong Kong is a very walkable city, as guidebooks point out. Since only a minority of people own private cars, a combination of walking and public transport are the main ways of getting around the city. Simply walking around (*lui haang*) with no other object in mind, is considered a normal form of leisure (*dakhaan*). On Sundays, the only day free for most workers, people usually walk around, window shop or meet others in restaurants, rather than staying in their apartments. A density of urban walkers replaces the usual density of daily commuting. At nights the streets and shopping areas are as busy as during the day. Nearby public and commercial spaces may be conceived as an extension of home spaces. This is evidenced by the occasional sight of people shopping in pyjamas.

Walking in Hong Kong is hardly unregulated. The walker is sometimes constrained by barriers such as fences along the edges or in the middle of roads to prevent crossing. There are many such engineered devices that mark out the correct place to be. They seem to be effectively naturalised elements of the urban scene. Guide rails position bus commuters in parallel lines to board buses for different routes. Painted lines on railway platforms indicate passenger boarding aligned exactly with the position of train doorways.⁵ Hong Kong has invested in forms of pedestrian management as a planning strategy since the 1960s. Elevated pedestrian walkways are the most obvious and substantial pedestrian devices – these are purpose built passages channelling walkers into desired trajectories between key places. The system of walkways in Central is described (extravagantly) by one commentator as

⁵ These kinds of people management and queuing devices are a relatively recent introduction in Hong Kong, according to Watson. Passenger barriers at bus stops and taxi stands date only from the early 1970s. Local mythology credits McDonalds restaurants with the introduction of the discipline of

“an amazing network of suspended streets linking the upper level of retail and office lobbies with outer terraces and decks like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.” (Hui 1996: 33)⁶ Less grand walkways are common in most built up parts of Hong Kong, connecting transport nodes such as bus and train stations, residential estates and shopping malls. More than disciplinary devices, such networks are also enabling, contributing to more porous spatial networks, providing complex choices for movement between and through three-dimensional spaces. However, walkways are not always easily navigable without considerable local knowledge, as they are often labyrinthine and discontinuous. As one respondent commented (after I’d mentioned my difficulties in finding a place that involved moving through several buildings at different levels): “Hong Kong people know their way around, but it’s hard sometimes – having to know all these routes to different places, up and down escalators, across footbridges...even I get lost sometimes.” Navigating Hong Kong’s verticalised spaces is not self-evident, even for locals.

Walking and doing ‘urban exploration’ was an important part of my research.⁷ Hong Kong, like any city is only very partially accessible and knowable even to its occupants: it is rarely ‘smooth’ space,⁸ but practical space in which one’s knowledge is punctured by ‘gaps and discontinuities’, social zones (including those of private property) that cannot be equally known or appropriated of all subjects (Bourdieu 1984: 169).⁹

queues (Watson 1997: 92-4).

⁶ Hui (1996) notes that while they are not unique to Hong Kong, walkway systems of comparable scale were designed principally to facilitate movement against extremes of climate, for instance, the elevated streetways in Calgary.

⁷ I was guided by Walter Benjamin’s urban explorations: ‘One only knows a spot once one has experienced it in as many dimensions as possible. You have to have approached a place from all cardinal points if you want to take it in...’ (Benjamin 1986: 25). For de Certeau, pedestrian practices constitute the quality of urban space that is not reducible to the abstract Euclidean space of planning and the map. Movements ‘give shape to spaces’ and ‘weave places together’ – the footsteps of the walker ‘enunciate’ the lived city and its singular spaces (De Certeau 1984: 97).

⁸ For Deleuze and Guattari, following the composer Boulez, a smooth space is open and unstructured by breaks, open to continuous variation. Striated space, by contrast, is physically ordered and temporally regulated by rational (‘metric’) regulation (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 477-8).

⁹ Meaghan Morris (1998: 65) has pointed to the differing conditions for walkers in public space in terms of danger or threat: “For a female, black, queer, foreign, ‘funny-looking’, or just plain unlucky pedestrian, de Certeau’s phatic aspect of walking gains an uncomfortable intensity here. The tactics of avoiding ‘followers’ are basic to the art of communication across suburban space.”

Ethnographic work in cities is problematized by large scale, complexity and changeability. Unlike some imagined ‘village’, there is no spot that I could occupy as a central point of surveillance, no vantage point on ‘the whole’. Within public channels, such as streets and public transport, I was subject to the anonymity of urban life anywhere, like any other commuter, requiring only minimal facework to blend into the crowds.¹⁰ Much of my time in Hong Kong was spent in this zone of curious anonymity. The routine busyness of most of my subjects made chance or casual participant-observation an unlikely strategy. Interviews with informants were usually arranged in the gaps of long working days, lunch breaks or times between work and travelling home. A great deal of my time in Hong Kong was spent in the long periods in between anything ‘happening’, between arranged meetings and interviews. I would spend this abundant time wandering, exploring different localities, taking random bus trips, or merely making routine journeys and finding how the specificity of a place is dependent on different approaches, times of day, its active constitution by practices. My pedestrian observations became material I could juxtapose with the accounts of migrant subjects of the lived space in both Hong Kong and Sydney.

Being unable to walk in other’s shoes, I could never assume the objectivity of what I saw and understood, or assume my interpretations matched those of ‘local’ inhabitants. I had to take into account my own inclination to construct and record things in a particular way, due to my unfamiliarity with urban space in Hong Kong. I tended to notice and to problematise what was different to my own experience and dispositions, to what was exceptional to my own spatial norms. Hence I would notice banal details that are exceptional to someone of my Australian urban/suburban background – from public laundry practices to the scale and density of buildings, the mixture of land and building usage – while no doubt missing the significance of other elements of importance to local residents. This is similar to what my informants do when they comment comparatively on the different feel of Sydney space. As with their experience of Sydney, I did not have a ‘longitudinal’ experience

¹⁰ However, certain markers – stature, gait, dress (unfashionable), disposition (uncertain), and of course my speech, would mark me out to some as a non-local. As a Chinese-looking person, I was often thought to be a ‘mainlander’, and therefore open to suspicion as an illegal immigrant: I was stopped by police for this reason on several occasions. See Goffman (1967: 5-46) on facework, the management of demeanour in public spaces.

of this (Hong Kong) locality over time. Rather, I brought my disjunctive history, the specificity of my embodied experience to bear on it, without being able to reflect on the social forces that have produced and are constantly producing it. I arrived on the scene thinking, ‘this is how it is.’ This feeling could be quickly undermined. For instance, the solidity and apparent naturalness of my temporary home space was undermined when I found out that the apartment development I was inhabiting was built on reclaimed land that had been part of the sea only a few years before. This would have been an unremarkable fact for most local residents.

What follows is a small experiment in orientation: I explore a slice of Hong Kong through the lens of my own spatial norms, habits and horizons, in a sense recording a phase of my own ‘reverse migration’ to a different spatial order. I differed from most pedestrians in that my anthropological interest in the constitution of this ordinary locale can only be based on a greater detachment and disinterest, a certain privileged leisure to wander and observe.

3c. A walk in Tsing Yi

It is mid afternoon as I emerge from the bright stainless capsule of the elevator in the apartment block where I have been staying on the 22nd floor. I walk out of the lift lobby straight into the small shopping centre that forms part of this housing estate. On the way I pass a newspaper stall, pausing to buy the South China Morning Post. I go through a door at second floor level that leads onto a pedestrian walkway. The walkway forms an ‘X’ shape, crossing a roadway and connecting two private housing estates to a bus terminus and ferry wharf. I take a right angle turn to my left and follow the branch of the X that runs alongside a public housing estate called Serene Garden.¹¹ From this point other stairways branch down to a kindergarten, where a group of Filipina domestic workers chat while waiting to pick up Chinese children in their care, and to a small ‘wet’ market and restaurant area. (Sometimes I had taken a detour off this walkway down a ramp into the building or into a small

¹¹ A ‘public housing estate’ in administrative terms means properties managed by the Hong Kong Housing Authority, Hong Kong Housing Society and Hong Kong Settlers Housing Coop, as well as buildings of the Home Ownership Scheme’ (Hong Kong Guide Book 1997: 174). The HKHA is the statutory body and the HKHS provide and maintain various categories of public housing.

podium area where I could sit and read, surrounded by small trees and greenery set in concrete planter boxes around the fringe of this tiled space.) The ten 39–storey blocks of Greenfield Garden tower over me to my right. Behind the estate I can see demolition work on an old factory site – on which another housing estate will probably emerge.

*Proceeding down the walkway, I pass a small 1/4 circle of land, a ‘vacant’ area surrounded by a wire fence perforated by holes through which people could climb. This area is used by residents for drying clothes, especially larger items like blankets that cannot be easily dried by hanging them on poles out of windows. Clothing and blankets are hung from the fence and lines strung across the space. This area is situated beside a large roundabout, which feeds traffic along the main arteries of the island to the north, south, west and to the nearby ferry pier on the east of the island. The sloping walkway has taken me down to ground level. I cross the roadway, passing over a medium strip strangely planted with lilies and Australian paperbark (*Melaleuca*) trees. On the other side of the road I reach an open area which attracts a lot of pedestrian traffic, adjacent to a small playing field where boys often play soccer. This has recently been the site of Tin Hau festivities and Cantonese Opera performances that ran for a week. A temporary building constructed of timber, bamboo and tin sheets held audiences of up to one thousand people for the opera performances. The building is now being dismantled, as quickly and efficiently as a Big Top tent. These temporary structures use the same technology as the bamboo scaffolding for constructing high rise buildings and for the maintenance of the exterior of buildings and signage in Hong Kong.*

I make my way carefully through this small area skirting the football field, along a rough and rocky track. I have to be careful, as the path is slippery, with large puddles of water, and strewn with rubbish, broken bottles, ritual paper money and other offerings. People have strategically placed pieces of wood and cardboard to help with footing in the muddier sections. On the far side of this field is the front entrance to a private housing development called Tsing Yi Garden. For the first time I notice a sign saying “Private property. No Tres-passing” in English and Chinese, with the symbol of a red truncheon. Despite the presence of a benign-looking security guard, no one seems to bother about who goes through into the estate. On

my left, on the other side of a roadway there are clusters of single storey wooden huts used for 'temporary' accommodation' for former boat dwellers and others displaced by developments on the island.

The six or seven 30-odd storey residential blocks of Tsing Yi Garden estate form a local 'square' perhaps half an acre in size, with shops and restaurants on the perimeter and open space for sitting or playing games in the centre. The bottom two floors of the buildings contain hardware stores, magazine and newspaper stores, photo processing shops, record and video stores, Chinese and 'fast food' restaurants, stores for children selling toys and stationary, sweets shops, doctors rooms, hair salons and a small supermarket.¹² These retail outlets are supplemented by the odd hawker selling cheap clothes, CDs, toys or educational material for children. The centre of the square is planted with shrubs and flowers in built up planter boxes, which form different shaded areas for sitting, enclosed spaces of different sizes and elevations. These small areas form miniature social territories. A group of grandmothers cradle babies and chat in the smallest enclosure. Children of different ages play in other areas.

I walk into the Park n Shop supermarket to buy sticky rice buns and Tsing tao beer.

This pedestrian description peruses what seems an unremarkable area in architectural or symbolic terms.¹³ It traces an ordinary passage through and between typical tower block estates, a built environment only a few years old. I made this short journey many times. Usually I walked this way sometime between mid-morning and mid-afternoon. A journey in space is always a journey in time. The timing of this trip evaded the more concentrated movements of commuters moving out of the estates earlier in the morning and returning in the evening. It intersected with the passages of others not directly engaged in the 'mainstream' workforce who commuted from this residential area. Older people, children, jobless people and service workers

¹² Tsing Yi Gardens is not a major retail centre, but a small local centre serving the estate and a few nearby estates. The nearby Cheung Fat shopping centre, part of the Cheung On housing estate, is an example of a fully integrated shopping/transport/residential complex - a retail and service centre with bus station below, all connected by a network of footbridges to surrounding residential towers, schools and other institutions.

¹³ Most accounts of Hong Kong's urban fabric and architectural space have concentrated on the old centres in Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, often emphasizing exotic aspects. I wanted to feature an

(domestic workers, cleaners, security guards) who maintain the estates were the main people I would encounter.

On a scale map this walk would appear to be only 300 metres in terms of horizontal movement. However, if we took account of the vertical journey from my 22nd storey apartment, we would need to add at least 80 metres. Rapid elevators made this the quickest part of the journey – a matter of seconds if there were no stops in between. The enforced intimacy of these shared journeys rarely seemed to present occasions for more than perfunctory sociality. Elevators are not generally conducive to communication – people reverently stood facing the doors watching the indicators, avoiding each others’ eyes. Babies and children sometimes provided an opening for social exchanges. They did not always obey the elevator codes, and were generally the object of friendly comment and questioning.

The ‘three dimensional’ nature of the above journey is apparent. It is generally true that skyscrapers and tower blocks are discrete spatial entities that cannot be laterally traversed. Nevertheless, in Hong Kong tall buildings are becoming more integral to journeys *across* spaces, as the lower levels of high rise buildings have become more interconnected, by podia, footbridges and escalators. The upper levels of tower buildings still tend to be based on a principle of repetition, with layers of duplicated modular storeys. Apartments in recently built residential towers are organised around a central column containing lifts and plumbing and cables etc. Apartments tend to be clustered around the lift wells. Elevator lobbies have become the main site of social encounters entering and exiting buildings. Residents are less likely to encounter others on the same floor, as in the older-style rectangular buildings where dwellings lined long corridors, and are more likely to encounter others in lifts and lift lobbies.

Verticality is always palpable in Hong Kong, always present to the senses, as the precipitous natural environment seems to merge with the increasingly precipitous built landscape, and the built and the natural blur into each other. The steep hillsides to the east of this estate are typically encased in cement and perforated by a grided pattern of drainage pipes.¹⁴ The hills seem as much a part of the built fabric as

‘unremarkable’ place in order to uncover the remarkable in the ordinary.

¹⁴ This is a ‘traditional’ method of stabilising land by covering cut slopes with a surface of concrete

factory buildings and housing estates. From a distance, clusters of tower blocks emerging from behind steep hillsides look surreally like giant stalagmites. The harbour is constantly changing its shape, shrinking as numerous reclamation projects feed the need for flat land for development.

What is apparent in this short journey is the compression and complexity of housing estate environments. While there is more open space compared to older parts of Hong Kong, these newer planned spaces have nevertheless maintained a porous and interconnected quality. This porosity is partly due to the design of built structures and partly due to the tactics which inhabitants employ to negotiate and connect spaces. For instance, the pedestrian walkways I described only partially connected the points in my journey. The discontinuity of planned links between places (estates, shopping centres, transport nodes) requires some degree of improvisation and negotiation to connect them. The fragment of urban space I have traced was defined by everyday use (my own and others'). This everyday use is an improvised 'tactic', cutting across the planned network of streets, housing estates, transport nodes, and retail centres in the locality.¹⁵ The making of a pathway through the disconnected space of the park is such a tactic. A pathway *between* estates supplements and exceeds the principle of self-containment of planned estates in Hong Kong – and goes beyond the functional linking of residences, transport nodes, workplaces and other 'infrastructure'.

The apartment block I lived in contained basic shopping and restaurant facilities. It is a general planing feature of Hong Kong housing estates, that such facilities are close at hand, and are rarely more than a few hundred metres from any residential unit. Public transport links are very close to all major residential estates. This degree of amenity is viable because of high population densities, large-scale concentrated residential developments and well-integrated mass transit systems.¹⁶

skim know as *chunam*. Newer techniques of hydro-seeding and cut and fill have also been employed to deal with Hong Kong's considerable problems of land instability (Bristow 1989: 237-8).

¹⁵ De Certeau used the term 'tactic' to designate a practice that goes against the 'proper' use of a spatial order. A tactic 'must play on and with a terrain imposed on it...' (De Certeau 1984: 37)

¹⁶ See Newman and Kenworthy 1999: 191-200.

Proximity to things and services, their handiness and immediate availability, is highly valued by Hong Kong people. The Cantonese word *fóngbihn*, or convenience, is heard very frequently in everyday discussions of the relative merits of places. *Fóngbihn*, literally meaning adjoining room or space has a sense of at hand-ness.¹⁷ A few metres from the elevator entrance in my building were four restaurants (two ‘fast food’), a laundry, clothing stores, cake shops, a pharmacy, electrical store, and the ubiquitous 24 hour *7 11* convenience store. (The loss of this degree of proximity to market services was often bemoaned by interviewees in Sydney).

This may seem too obvious a point. Surely everybody wants valued goods to be available and at hand? Convenience in Hong Kong may not be the same as convenience in Sydney, where driving and parking are more crucial to a sense of at-handness. Of greater interest is the specific contents and intensity of this desire and expectation, which has meaning only in relation to familiar styles of life. A sense of convenience is not just about immediate consumption, the easy availability of commodities. Rather it is about potential access to all the elements of a familiar and viable existence, such as access to transport, work, kin, friends, entertainment, to busy places. This sense of convenience depends on the confluence of planned and built spaces, the many levels of market operation, and the practices of dwellers in connecting and activating new spatial opportunities.

Not everyone seeks to maximize speed at all times. The leisureliness of my stroll had to do with the time of day. At other times, in the rush hours before and after work, the area would have been filled with commuters piling on and off double-decker buses, mini-buses connecting to MTR stations, and ferries into Central Hong Kong.¹⁸ Time seemed to speed up in these periods, as the space became saturated with people. At other times the place was left to elderly people, younger children, domestic workers, maintenance workers (mainly old women wearing broad hats to

¹⁷ *Fóngbihn* also refers to a toilet, in much the same euphemistic way as ‘convenience’ does in English.

¹⁸ These were the main modes of transport connecting Tsing Yi to the rest of Hong Kong. Following the time of fieldwork, a new Mass Transit Railway (MTR) station, with adjoining shopping malls and residential tower blocks, was opened as part of service to the new Chek Lap Kok airport.

keep off the sun), and elderly security officers employed by housing estates, all of them moving to slower, if no less definite rhythms.¹⁹

Spaces were mobilised differently at different times. A group of Filipina ‘maids’ emerge to go shopping, to supervise young children in play areas located around the estates or in the local parks. They exchange greetings, gather briefly to discuss events of the day and exchange news.²⁰ They take advantage of brief interstices of their working days to meet each other, since almost all of their time is spent in the cramped apartments of middle class Hong Kong families. They lend an air of difference, a different speech, presence and sexuality.

Pedestrian walkways are designed to link housing estates with transport nodes, retail facilities, etc. But they do not usually provide links *between* estates, and with other local sites of a non-infrastructural nature. Nevertheless, the incompleteness of a connecting ‘system’ like the walkways means that improvisation is required to link points left unconnected by planned channels.²¹

What is striking about this everyday journey is the blurring of private and public spaces. Tsing Yi Gardens, the private estate with its authoritarian signs, boom gates and guard posts is nevertheless quite open to outsiders, at least to the open areas. But this porousness is uneven: different housing estates are less accessible compared with the almost complete openness of public housing estates built some 30 years ago. These older style estates are open and relatively uncontrolled spaces, lacking in security (both internal and external), with a greater presence of hawkers. Their design – long corridors with front doors facing, sounds and smells mingling – is quite different from the later circular towers with apartments clustering around lift wells,

¹⁹ Security guards in banks and stores such as jewellery shops tended to be south Asian men, whereas, from my observation, security people in residential blocks tended to be Chinese, usually elderly men.

²⁰ Much larger and more conspicuous congregations of Filipina domestic workers occur on Sunday (usually the only day off) in the CBD area around Statue Square, leading to local anxieties about the city being ‘taken over’ (Law 2001: 270-74).

²¹ Sennett, writing of American grid-plan cities such as Chicago, argues for the necessity of ‘disrupted linear sequence’, an ideal of western planning that has nevertheless proven difficult to bring into being in modern cities. He argues that an ‘ethical sense of self-limits arises from the experience of discontinuity’, of ‘places of displacement’. He gives the example of a well-used concrete playground surrounded by wire mesh alongside noisy motorways, preferred by kids over the quiet ‘designer’ playground with its neat turf, greenery, swings and benches (Sennett 1990: 193-194). The disruption of the radical openness and functionality of planned urban forms invites different forms of social

with discrete entrances, guards or door-staff, and monitoring equipment. More recently built private estates are more strictly monitored for security, but there is still a degree of non-resident access indicated by the presence of purpose built stores or hawkers.

The small playing field provides a thoroughfare for people moving between places not formally connected. At times it seems to be a place for meetings and exchanges of a romantic or (perhaps) criminal nature. It also provides a place to dump rubbish and unwanted pets. The field is a place lacking in salubrity (Rotenberg 1993:17-29), not quite 'wholesome', as open spaces in planned environments are meant to be. Rather it is 'empty', in McDonogh's terms:

An "empty" space must be seen in both its limitation and its cultural definition as a place, even if defined by a cultural construction of non-use...such spaces do not define a vacuum, an absence of urbanness, so much as they mark zones of intense competition: the interstices of the city. (McDonough 1993: 4,14)

A 'vacant lot' is rarely vacant. Interstitial spaces are sites of 'excessive' activities, those not contained within a planner's conception of spatial functions. This marginal space underwent a dramatic transformation during the Tin Hau festival²² when it suddenly became a focal point. The site was transformed by the temporary architecture of the opera theatre, stalls selling paper offerings, pinwheels and other spangly doodads, the colourfully decorated *faai pai* panels, flags and banners, all brightly illuminated at night, the amplified sounds of the orchestra drifting across the estates. The opera ran for a week until the last day of the Tin Hau festival, when there was a parade and series of offerings and lion dances, the blessing of boats and local businesses. These ritual events attest to the maritime history of the area. The Cantonese opera performances attracted large crowds, perhaps one thousand people per performance.²³ The calendrical time of festivals, whether officially sanctioned

engagement.

²² Tin Hau, or the Queen of Heaven, is a deity especially associated with fishing people and those who rely for their living on the sea. The opera performances commemorate the birthday of the goddess (Lang 1997: 245).

²³ While still popular, Cantonese Opera performances are increasingly peripheral to commodified tastes – the majority of the audiences are made up of older people. Younger people I spoke to expressed their boredom and sense of anachronism about Chinese Opera.

holidays or local festivals, cuts across the normal daily routines of organised labour, and transportation etc.

In the walk I described in this section there are glimpses of a heterogeneous lived space, intimations of other histories and traditions which emerge in the interstices of daily routines. While my walk only traced a short line between two housing estates, it intersected with the paths of others differently inserted in the lived space of Tsing Yi. This account can only suggest the nature of those insertions and trajectories. At this point I widen the scope of my analysis beyond the immediacy of this experienced place.

3d. A gateway to almost anywhere? Lived and represented spaces in Tsing Yi.

The slice of space I have been wandering through is only a small section of Tsing Yi Island, in between two bridges that link it to the mainland. In this section the scale is widened to the whole of Tsing Yi. Tsing Yi is a hilly island of some three square miles, lying in between the mainland, Hong Kong Island, and the largest of Hong Kong's islands, Lantau Island. The channels surrounding the island are routes for large amounts of shipping between Hong Kong and the PRC.

Tsing Yi's development over the past forty years encapsulates many elements of the transformation of Hong Kong's rural hinterland. Agricultural cultivation had been the mainstay of the local economy and was still in evidence in the 1970s. There has been significant industrial development since the 1960s, when cement works, oil storage depots and a power station, were established. The developers of these enterprises were required to form a consortium to build a bridge connecting the island to the mainland at Kwai Chung. This bridge enabled Tsing Yi to be rapidly integrated into the urban expansion of the nearby new town centres of Tsuen Wan and Kwai Chung. There had been seven village settlements on the island, as well as a sizable squatter population, living largely on boats, which had moved to Tsing Yi when displaced from other areas by squatter clearances and harbour reclamations (Hayes 1993: 145-153). Photographs from the early 1970s show harbours completely filled with wooden boats crammed in end to end. Extensive harbour reclamation has taken place on the eastern and southern coast of the island creating

extra land for dock facilities, industrial uses, and more recently for housing developments. The island became a site for public housing estates from the late sixties. More recently many private housing estates have been constructed as part of Tsing Yi's transformation into a new town, attracting a more middle class population. Tsing Yi Garden, built on the site of the fishing village of Lam Tin after the site was resumed, was one of the first (Lai 1996: 121). This is consonant with alterations in the class structure in Hong Kong accompanying the government's drive to increase levels of home ownership.²⁴ Tsing Yi now has a population of well over 200,000. The estate where I lived, Greenfield Gardens, comprising a dozen 38-storey buildings, was built on land from harbour reclamation. Tsing Yi now has the distinction of having a sizeable new park, also created out of reclamation land, which attracts busloads of visitors, and a sports stadium. In the process of this redevelopment, the original villages in Tsing Yi were re-sited and thousands of boat dwellers 'removed'. A number of temples were also re-sited. This gloss of recent spatial developments can only hint at the erasure and displacement of forms of life on the island.

The transition from semi-rural settlement to industrial area and then new town did not occur without resistance. Because of its close proximity to heavy industry areas on the north west corner of the harbour, Tsing Yi was earmarked as a storage area for potentially hazardous materials such as oil, LPG, chlorine and other chemicals. The government began to release land for private housing constructions right beside oil and LPG depots. From the mid 1980s the Tsing Yi Concern Group waged a long campaign organising thousands of residents into tenants' groups. Their actions had some success: the most dangerous depots were eventually relocated away from residential areas (Ng 1993: 64-71). I mention this protracted grassroots campaign because it suggests some hidden aspects of the apparently homogenous planned development and production of space in the New Territories. This political movement highlights the environmental costs and potential dangers inherent in a

²⁴ 1985 saw the doubling of rents for 'rich tenants' in public housing, in an attempt to move them into Home Ownership Scheme flats, a subsidized home-ownership scheme. Accordingly the proportion of public tenants dropped from 41% in 1986 to 35% in 1998. State subsidized home ownership grew from 4% to 12% in the same period. However, the proportion of unsubsidized home owners did not increase, probably due to spiraling housing costs over this period (Lee 1999: 44-49). Such policies have no doubt produced a change in aspirations towards home ownership and an increase in social distinctions between public tenants and home owners.

form of centralized planning that allows little citizen input. It also points to the 'contradictory spaces' generated out of such development processes. Diverse spatial elements, planned and unplanned, are folded into the fabric of lived space in Tsing Yi. Looking from a certain viewpoint the newer parts of Tsing Yi may resemble a Le Corbusier vision of 'towers in a park' – thoroughly modern, ordered and functional. But other parts look more makeshift, improvised, like the meandering pathways linking factory sites, market areas, temples and resettled villages. High-rise buildings and single story resettlement huts, public housing and new private luxury developments, orderly planned parklands and fragments of 'wasteland' between building sites and railway viaducts, sit side by side. Ritual spaces periodically emerge and then disappear. One gets the sense of a jostling of places that speak of other histories.

Tsing Yi is now directly connected by rail since the recent construction of the railway link to the new airport at Chek Lap Kok on Lantau, the largest of Hong Kong's islands. From being distinctly peripheral to the older settled areas and even the major new town centres such as Tsuen Wan, Tsing Yi is now being presented as a central location. The promotional brochure for a new housing estate near this near station tells us:

Because of Tsing Yi's unique location, it has been cited by the Government as the centre of Metroplan, one of the largest projects to be staged in the history of Hong Kong...aimed at boosting Hong Kong's economy to unprecedented levels. Creating the perfect environment for all.Tsing Yi will be a new gateway to almost anywhere in Hong Kong...Giving the freedom to go anywhere you want, any time you want. (Villa Esplanada Phase One brochure, 1997)²⁵

Built on recently reclaimed land, the development nevertheless aspires to a state of nature. Its proximity to the new MTR station integrated with a new mall development provides a claim to both urban centrality and convenience, and a sense of local specificity turned into spectacle:

²⁵ Villa Esplanada is located about 1 kilometre to the north of the locality I was describing. It is a three stage private housing estate development begun in 1997.

At Villa Esplanada, you will discover a place of total relaxation. Take a stroll along the 2km ocean promenade and you will enjoy the whisper of gentle breezes and the blessing of the lush greenery. Within 1 minutes walk, you will access the latest MTR Corporation-owned and managed shopping centre, Maritime Square. This 500,000 sq. ft. Maritime Square houses themed shops, restaurants, cinemas, supermarket and entertainment facilities. Excitements include Hong Kong's first 3-dimensional audio-visual shows, "Old Market" thematic bazaar and nautical interior scenes. Walk in and find everything you need. (Villa Esplanada Stage 3 promotional material, 1999)

A gateway to almost anywhere? Until recently a semi-rural 'backwater', physically and socially isolated from metropolitan Hong Kong, then an industrial zone with particularly noxious industries, Tsing Yi can now be projected as a centre – of a newly decentred Hong Kong. Tsing Yi turns out to exemplify rapid transformation in Hong Kong, the erasure and displacement of quite different kinds of lives. These new representations of Tsing Yi select then homogenize diverse images of development, planning, prosperity, private property, nature, leisure and technology. Postmodernised spectacles mark ways of life that have been largely supplanted. Lived histories are entangled with glossy representations that accompany the selling of places. Who will remember the 'real' histories of this place? Not the new residents of the Villa Esplanada with their Italian marble washbasins and smart card operated security systems. Like the residents of the recently built estate where I lived, they would place little significance on the Tsing Yi area. It was simply a location where they could afford to buy private housing within commuting distance of the CBD and other centres.

If I seem to be engaged in a moment of nostalgia for a place and history I cannot know, it only serves to dramatise the upheavals of lived space which are almost a given in the experience of Hong Kong people. In focusing on spatial dispositions, attunements to specific ways of living and moving through urban spaces, it is important to register the volatility of urban space in Hong Kong, a context of continual erasure and remaking of the city.

How seamless has the assimilation of these rapid changes in lived space been? Many of my informants described radical spatial transformations in their environments.

Living in Hong Kong entailed numerous accommodations to changing conditions. Residential spaces have often changed from extremely minimal public housing or squatter housing to high-rise apartments with amenities such as swimming pools and tennis courts. For many Hong Kong people such marked changes in the built environment within relatively short time spans are inextricably linked to changes in material life-conditions, the sense of class mobility and 'progress' that has taken place in a short period of time. Urban experience and memory are closely linked to a sense of social and economic trajectories. With Hong Kong's economic growth and state interventions in housing and planning, the majority have experienced increased standards of living. Many Hong Kong people, even people only now in their thirties have vivid memories of more precarious ways of living. Lee can recall living in a squatters camp, then a 'resettlement area' for dislocated squatters and villagers located on the perimeters of more heavily settled urban areas, before moving to a public estate near the area I described above.

P: Where were you living when you were a child?

L: In the resettlement area. Formerly my family lived in a wooden house. All the people were lower level, I mean lower class people, they earn very little money, blue collar people, every family was more or less the same. ...

P: What was it like living in the resettlement area?

L: The hygiene was poor, and we had to share the public bathrooms, the toilet, and there's no water tap in the house, so we had to go to the common room, and we have to take the bucket, carry the water into the house. Every family usually had a big container to store the water, and they have to prepare the dinner outside the house, just in the corridor.

P: So there was just a small space to sleep in the house.

L: About two hundred square feet for about eight people. So, you can see that living was so packed.

P: How long did you live there?

L: I was born there, until I was twelve or thirteen. We moved to the public housing estate in Tsing Yi called Cheung Ching. The living place had been improved quite a lot. Things getting better in Hong Kong, more opportunities.

Again we encounter the optimism arising from the spatial experience of upward mobility. The generation of my interviewees, whose childhoods fell in the period of

the 1950s to the 1970s, generally possess an expectation of continual improvement, not only of residential space and conditions, but also of access to education, money, commodities and standard of living in general. Their accounts of housing provide an ideal ‘narrative of social change’ condensing general social conditions into memories of the proximate spaces of the home (Lee 1999: 109-133).²⁶ The particularity of lived experience is often enmeshed with a more collective sense of social trajectory and ideologies/images of Hong Kong as a ‘space of representation.’ Hong Kong is conceived as an economic space, an intensified site of economic energy and opportunity. However, this opportunity is understood to require a large investment of time and labour. Hong Kong is perceived as a place of both opportunity and competitive struggle. An array of experiences, perceptions, and representations combine to generate the sense of expectations and limits associated with a place.

In considering some elements of spatial practices in Hong Kong, I have largely focused on the particular attributes of a local lived space. The weave of local practices and interactions on a short walk through Tsing Yi hint at other traditions and perspectives which cut across the apparent imperatives of planned space.

However, cities are inhabited at many scales. Urban subjects rarely live wholly in a single locality or neighbourhood. Localities are defined practically by comings and going, entrances and exits, movements between zones of different kinds of private and public space (Mayol 1998: 11). Subjects interact with the wider city, engaging in education and labour markets and the various practices of consumption.

At the same time I have been pointing to the influence of representations associated with the larger identity of Hong Kong. Attaining a larger flat is associated with ‘things getting better in Hong Kong.’ If Tsing Yi has a local sense of place, it must also be considered as a place positioned within a wider hierarchy of places in Hong Kong.²⁷ ‘Hong Kong’ provides an imaginary framework within which its inhabitants can align their trajectories and sense of possibilities in a relation with

²⁶ Lee’s more detailed studies of housing trajectories of middle class homeowners similarly point to the commonness of memories of deprivation and struggle, and the high motivation to attain better housing conditions (Lee 1999: 133).

²⁷ As Massey (1992: 13) suggests: ‘The identity of a place does not derive from some internalized history. It derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with ‘the outside’.

others'. This sense of the city is magnified by Hong Kong's small size and its political enclosure.

So far I have described some aspects of changing spatial practices and representations emerging from a particular part of Hong Kong. I have also suggested that these local understandings overlap with a more generalised sense of place associated with Hong Kong as a whole. In the remainder of the chapter I discuss dispositions towards urban spatiality which might be considered common to most people raised in Hong Kong.

3e. Spatial dispositions in Hong Kong

It is my purpose in this thesis to relate not just the spatial conditions and experiences in Hong Kong but to identify aspects of spatial dispositions that are deployed in migration practices and accounts of migration and settlement. The notion of 'spatial disposition' points to acquired ways of relating to the spatiality of environments structured around the experiences of particular spatial conditions. Spatial dispositions 'condition' tendencies or propensities to act in particular ways. (A 'spatial disposition' can only be an analytical emphasis, since all dispositions must have a spatial aspect.) A dispositional approach to social action relies on a causal relation and comparison between different (historical) states of being, in this case between living in Hong Kong and settling in Sydney.

Establishing a relation between spaces, practices and dispositions is not, of course, straightforward, and must remain highly speculative. Practical dispositions are background resources which remain largely unthought because they derive from mimetic learning and because they are attuned to activities which rarely require explicit explication.

It would be spurious to attribute behaviours or attitudes to any determining spatial properties in a mechanistic way. The 'facts' of Hong Kong's spatial production do not in themselves provide a link with current dispositions and practices. Environments are never simply stamped on subjects, even where spatial contexts are clearly powerful. We have to consider lived space or 'habitat' as an active interplay

between subjects and spaces. One is never a simple cause of the other. As Bourdieu put it: 'If the habitat shapes the habitus, the habitus also shapes the habitat, through the more or less adequate social usages that it tends to make of it.' (Bourdieu et. al. 1999: 128). Even this formulation needs to be treated cautiously. The relationship between habitat and habitus is unlikely to be symmetrical. It is necessary to avoid the construction of an overly linear causal linkage between people and places.

Nevertheless, I want to insist on a complex causality between lived spatial environments and the dispositions of its inhabitants. Spatial arrangements tend to convey patterned routines, orders and possibilities. Subjects mimetically develop a sense of external, objective space, of directionality and relative position, through practical bodily engagement and movement (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 100-102). The body of the subject is continually linked to the world by contact and exposure. The social world, differentiated by various fields in which actors participate is 'comprehensible' through corporeal knowledge acquired in the practical negotiation of physical environments. Orientating oneself within a place imparts a naturalising sense of 'how things are' in general. However, it is not just a matter of a space or a spatial order negatively 'shaping' its inhabitants and their practices. Rather, embodied experiences of moving in a space are active means of learning. Subjects must devise ways of orienting themselves and exploring spaces, developing capacities for improvisation, tastes for certain spatial qualities, and a certain 'existential' sense of inclination and possibility. For instance, one of my informants related her childhood disposition to wander and explore to her propensity for travel and later migration:

When I am very young, like when I am studying in primary school, we usually go to school and come back home by ourselves. It just depends on whether our father is available to get us. And I usually use different routes to get home. My father always go direct from one place to another. No bends. But I always think, what if I turn down this street and go there, if I'm not lost I will still get home. So I will just do different ways to get home.

Active orientations and spatial propensities are grounded in particular 'local' engagements with place. The differentiation from the pathways of the father is obviously important here. Practices and remembered spatial relations become

generative elements of a person's sense of themselves and how they respond to environments and challenges, capacities which are transferable (more or less) to other places and situations. This qualification – 'more or less' – is salient: I will be primarily concerned, in dealing with migrant practices, with a *range* of capacities and dispositions (as well as incapacities and indispositions) to move between and accommodate themselves to different places.

There can be no single vantage point in a complex and differentiated space, no typical inhabitant. Just as there can be no definitive or homogenous 'Hong Kong space'. (Tsing Yi was chosen because it seemed to be an emergent kind of space reflecting recent developments in Hong Kong.) There is no privileged point of view of a city, only situated perspectives and differently developed capacities to inhabit spaces (and by extension other spaces beyond Hong Kong). 'Spatial dispositions' can only be an approximate, speculative category, covering some aspects of the spatial experience of Hong Kong which may form a common background context to practices entailed in migration. However, it is not only 'lived' experience (in a narrow sense of immediate presence and availability) that generates dispositions. By linking the notion of spatial dispositions to Lefebvre's spatial dialectic – of lived, conceived and represented space – we can speculate on the multiple dimensions of the subject's attunement to places. All these dimensions of spatiality will be relevant to spatial dispositions. Practical capacities and dispositions cannot be separated from representations, images and values associated with particular places and spatial hierarchies. Places have an ideological aspect because ideologies always attach themselves to places.²⁸ Urban space is also an idiom, a basis for shared rhetorics and representations, both imposed upon and utilised by subjects. My analytical task was to capture the way in which these rhetorics and representations mesh with the lived sense of experienced space in Hong Kong, and how this generates dispositions which are transferable into new spaces and new situations. In the final section I discuss the most commonly raised points of contrast made between urban space in Hong Kong and Sydney, that of urban 'density' and 'speed'. I investigate speed and density as figures around which a sense of urban space and embodied experience coheres.

²⁸ 'What is an ideology without a space to which it refers...whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies.' (Lefebvre 1991: 44)

3f. Embodiments of density and speed in Hong Kong

Hong Kong inherited a singular colonial mercantile development in which a small site became the locus for an intense concentration of development and change. Hong Kong became a point of exchange of economic and symbolic goods, and of people, at once drawn to its opportunities and to the labour of fulfilling its potentialities. It could be argued that Hong Kong's colonial development entailed a particularly intense local implementation of what Harvey (1989: 240-59) termed 'time-space compression', an acceleration and compression of spatial worlds. Has this compression been generally incorporated into the everyday practical understandings of Hong Kong people, and their sense of Hong Kong as a place? Taking the accounts of my informants as a guide, the city is commonly understood as a kind of 'force' constituted by crowdedness, dense and heterogeneous environments and the intensity of its lived spaces. The ubiquity of this complex compelled me to examine the relations and associations between these elements. At some risk of oversimplification, I approach these issues by using the figure of 'urban density', which is also connected to the embodied sense of speed as a Hong Kong characteristic.

I want to develop a broader notion of density that encompasses the multiple ways that the intensity of urban spatiality is experienced in Hong Kong. We can start with the demographic fact of high population concentrations in a small area. The social 'effects' of urban density are the subject of considerable argument. On the one hand, high density environments pose problems in terms of the scarcity of valued amenities, heightened competition for spatial resources, and the concentration of environmental stresses. At the same time, high density has its champions amongst planners, who see it in quasi-economic terms as a maximisation of utilisation of land and resources, and of the high concentration demand which can enhance the viability of public transport and other infrastructure (see Pun 1994; Fouchier 1994). This view is allied to the vitalism we have already seen in Leeming and other urbanists. Hong Kong is celebrated in a Japanese architectural journal as:

...a mixed use and lively city; the space generated by high density has a palpable atmosphere of life and vigour. Such a hectic spatial sensation is seldom felt in cities where zoning has priority. (*Space Design* 1992: 24)

In this discourse rigorous zoning is opposed to spontaneity, heterogeneity and liveliness. Hong Kong is seen as heterogeneous in its spatial practices even compared to the relatively loosely zoned space of Tokyo.

This perspective is not so far removed from a certain 'native' sense of lived space in Hong Kong. Aspects of Hong Kong's 'hectic spatial sensation' are often valued by inhabitants, who are attuned to an easy proximity and convenience to a range of services and pleasures, and the flexibility of spatial arrangements. Cantonese language uses reflect this appreciation of energetic centres. *Naauh sih* means a busy shopping area or market – the word *naauh* is associated with noise and disturbance. The adjective *yiht naauh* literally meaning hot and disturbed or noisy is used in appreciation of lively, bustling, exciting spaces, like the exuberant street life of crowded retail centres like Monkok and Causeway Bay.²⁹

Density must be understood relationally and historically, not merely as an objective demographic fact, a ratio of persons to a given area. Even planners distinguish 'perceived densities' from physical densities (Fouchier 1994: 9). I am often reading newspaper stories of suburban residents in relatively spacious Australian suburbs and even rural towns and their anxiety about increasing density. The 'high density' developments that threaten suburban dwellers in Sydney would not seem dense to a Hong Kong dweller. Here density shifts from an experiential sense to a rhetorical term. It becomes a value: in the Sydney case it is usually perceived as a negative value. By contrast, Hong Kong people are more likely to valorize and appreciate density, centrality, and convenience as desired states in their urban environment. At the same time they will often complain of the lack of residential space or crowded conditions.

²⁹ It should be said that these terms are also used elsewhere in China, and are hardly generic to Hong Kong.

Of course there could be no absolute propensity for density or non-density. Perceptions of density are contextual and evaluative: density, or crowdedness, can be valued as a positive or negative in different practical contexts. A sense of over-crowdedness or intrusion may be associated negatively with undesirable social relationships. A sense of densities is related at once to bodily sense (of an individual, household or community), to specific occasions, and to different kinds of spaces and territories defined by use. Density has a temporal as well as a spatial dimension. For instance, the division of lived space and time into that of work and journeying to work, and that of home and leisure, produces different rhythms of spatial use, different zones of lived space, and specific bodily modes of engagement and discipline. Commuting 'requires travelling a maximum of distance in a minimum of time.' By contrast a leisurely stroll might aim at giving 'the maximum of time to a minimum of space', to enhance the exploratory pleasure of a more gratuitous activity (Mayol 1998: 12-13). In these two pedestrian modes, density is strategically exploited in different ways to achieve the best use of time, as with the different bodily rhythms of commuters and strollers in Tsing Yi. Nevertheless, density is often cited as a 'cause' of social conditions and norms in Hong Kong, particularly in regard to sociality and work. Freddie expresses a common formulation of the relation between urban space and lifestyle:

The life in Hong Kong is more busy. You have more chance to contact with more people. Due to the high density of population in Hong Kong, you have to be moving all the time, you have a busy life, you have to work much harder.

Density is causally associated with motility, business and the necessity for labour. Density and speed are equated in a native conception that echoes that of urbanists and planners.

Human bodies 'gear' themselves to particular tasks and environs, and to the movements of others, relaxing or intensifying posture, gait, and velocity.³⁰ Places convey different rhythms at different times – the orchestrations of collective practices, of routines and their relaxation, of the social time of different people. On

³⁰ 'Our bodily movements – kinaesthetic, locomotive, operative – gear, so to speak, into the world, modifying or changing its objects and their mutual relationships.' (Schutz 1973: 209).

the whole though, speed is adopted as a stereotypical characteristic of Hong Kong people: *faai di, faai di*, (faster, faster) is among the most common of phrases on the streets of Hong Kong. Speed is part of the urban self-understanding of Hong Kong people. An ‘urban myth’ about impatience in lifts (told to me several times) found this expression in a scholarly article:

According to an international survey carried out by Otis, Londoners wait a saintly 30 seconds before they take a second stab at the (close door) button: even nervous New Yorkers pause for 17 seconds. But on average Hong Kong people cannot wait more than 5 seconds before unfurling their full fury on the button a second time. (Siu 1997: 39)

(I never saw anyone in Hong Kong wait that long.) Speed is not just a rate of performing an action but an embodied attitude and style. A television ad for Toyota cars made for the Hong Kong market exemplifies the relation between speed and vitality, savvy and sense of urbanity.

An elderly woman is talking while taking tea in a *yum cha* restaurant. She speaks very quickly: My son in law is so slow. He tells me to slow down. I can't. It's not my nature. I do everything fast. *Ngoh sing gak lo faai jo faai*. He thinks I'm old. I'm seventy eight but....who's quicker? I am, of course.

Siuje (She beckons to the waitress. We hear the roar of an engine and see fast motion shot of a car zooming through a narrow HK street, scattering pedestrians, market stalls and cyclists).

A speedy disposition is not simply a matter of environmental forces acting upon individual subjects. Simmel famously equated modern urban life with a new kind of ‘mental life’, an ‘intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of *outer and inner* stimuli.’ (Simmel, 1997: 175, my emphasis.) Despite the rather mechanical language of ‘nervous stimulation’, Simmel was pointing to a dialectical relation within the lived body of the city dweller, between an intense experience of attractions and demands of the ‘external’ environment, and ‘internal’ drives, motivations, and desires. I am suggesting that these urban ‘drives’ are intensified for Hong Kong dwellers. Speed is experienced as

an internal and external quality, as a kind of imperative that is conveyed through collective motion. The visceral sense of the speed of the city's movement is brought to notice particularly when emigrants return to Hong Kong. Joey's description of his impressions on returning to Hong Kong are quite typical:

The people still is very quick and move very fast. As you know, in Australia you don't have to worry about the other people. With my wife, we're just walking down in MTR (metro railway station), all the people just pushing, we say, 'Oh, Jesus'. It's the first time I can't accept it. I think it's the same for you (he is speaking to me) when you are first in Hong Kong. Just see the people, why they are walking too fast, and try to push. It's funny isn't it? A lot of people around, and the people talking is too noisy, and maybe if you're in Australia we'd call it 'screaming'. People screaming, ohh, Jesus. But after one month, less than a month I think only two weeks, then I can totally merge in that community. Just walk very fast, and the people ask me, saying, "Oh, Joe, why are you in a hurry?" I say, "I don't know." But, you know, all the steps, they move very fast, you get behind and you need to chasing them up. I say, "O.K. Can't stop". Yeah, it's the style.

Return to Hong Kong provokes a sensory shock. The density of bodies, their bodily speed and intensity, the collective *push* experienced as an imperative, is gradually incorporated back into the returnees' own movement. Myriad footsteps beat out a rhythm that demands to be kept up with. Voices form a chorus which must be rejoined. Soon it all feels completely natural again, as Joey merges back into the communal rhythm, the Hong Kong *style*. What Joey understands as style encompasses the way in which bodily bearing and performance defines a collective way of being which is perceived to have a common intentionality and direction. The density and speed of Hong Kong is also an idiom which migrant subjects utilise to mark and symbolise their passage between places.

3g. Chapter conclusion

While Chapter 2 provided a linear historical account of the ‘production’ of Hong Kong’s urban space, this chapter has tried to provide an account of everyday spatial practices. Of course, no single study could capture the diversity and complexity of lived space in Hong Kong. I chose to examine a small area of Tsing Yi and then expand the scale of my analysis to bring it into a relation to Hong Kong as a whole. One reason for writing about a new town location such as Tsing Yi is that little attention has given to these localities as lived spaces. For instance, in Abbas’s writing on built space, the habitats of the majority of Hong Kong estate dwellers are simply consigned to the invisibility of ‘anonymous high-rise blocks’ and ‘placelessness’ (Abbas 1997: 85-89). I have been concerned to counter this erasure by highlighting the multiplicity of practices that animate an apparently unremarkable residential area. While I have also pointed to the monumental scale and uniformity of public and private estate developments, I gave equal weight to the multiplicity of local micro-practices that occur within the complex planned spaces of estate developments.

In synthesising an account of lived space I started out with the specific act of walking and with a particular site. The layered space of the built environment of housing estates, transport networks and retail sites provides a dense and concentrated context for walking practices. The spatial habitus of the walker is more highly attuned to the palpable qualities of this lived space rather than to the geometrical space of maps and gridded streets. I also described spatial routines and improvised ways of using ‘in-between’ spaces. These ordinary practices exceed the demarcated territories of estates and planned functions of these spaces. Various groups of dwellers carve out provisional territories and routines at different times, creating distinct rhythms of inhabited space.

In moving from the detailed everyday practices of a small area to changing landscapes and representations of a rapidly changing locality, and eventually to consider the place of Tsing Yi in relation to representations of the metropolitan space

of Hong Kong, I hoped to simulate a sense of the interconnected scales which constitute the lived experience of a city.

Some residents can remember Tsing Yi as a semi-rural economy based on fishing and agriculture, before the development of factories, shipping, and more recently, of mass private housing. The island's built environment is a curious assemblage of industrial and port facilities, reconstructed villages and resettlement estates, older public housing estates and newer, more up-market private estates. Tsing Yi bears traces of a series of overlaid social and cultural ecologies.

This examination of Tsing Yi underscores the fact that there can be no simple characterisation of spatial experience in Hong Kong. Many contrasts could be drawn between lived spaces elsewhere in Hong Kong, for instance between the CBD, new town environments and the remnants of the older unplanned city. These contrasts relate to the decentring and regionalizing of the city implemented (unevenly) through planning regimes enacted in the past thirty years. However, there are also elements common to these urban spaces. In the previous chapter I argued that planning in Hong Kong did not entirely dispense with a desire for urban centrality and 'at-handness'. The emergent spaces of Hong Kong seem to exhibit a 'decentred centrality' that maintains a certain dynamic of concentration and centrality. The spatiality of housing estates and other public spaces incorporates elements of the 'saturated landscape' of the older city – the multiple uses of interlinked spaces, the concentration and at-handness of various services and resources – but within dispersed clusters of highly concentrated and verticalised built spaces. Subjects are attuned to the three-dimensionality of these spaces, and are easily able to orient themselves within dense, interconnected and sometimes labyrinthine built environments. Their mode of navigating urban spaces relies less on a flat map-like conception of space and cardinal directionality and more on embodied local knowledge. They draw on an experienced sense of the shape of monumental built spaces, negotiated through passageways connecting resources and contact points.

Some aspects of these spatial practices were easily observable. However there is no simple or direct access to the practical logics of other people. Ethnographically, it was helpful to explicitly contrast my own attunement to a different spatial order. The

experience of orienting oneself and navigating an urban space to which one is not initially disposed provides one with a degree of objectivity that is perhaps not available to Hong Kong dwellers 'at home'. This is an aspect of the ethnographic 'mini-migration' (Clifford 1992: 99) that was mirrored by Hong Kong people's spatial experiences in Australia. This 'contrary motion' provided a meeting point between my own experience of both cities and that of my informants. The interface of different experiences provided an initial basis for comparison of dispositions towards urban spatiality. It was through the comparison of accounts of migrant subjects that dispositional differences most clearly emerged. This study relies on the internal contrasts generated between accounts – my own and my informants – of the sense of spatiality in Hong Kong and Sydney.

Informants who returned to Hong Kong seemed to attach little importance to the particular residential localities they resettled in, being more concerned with provision of space, convenience to transport and easy access to certain familiar services and goods. They seem to posit the parts of the city with a certain unity and homogeneity. (This generalisation of urban experience may be an effect of migration.)

Informants would often refer generically to the spatiality of Hong Kong. The experience of particular localities within Hong Kong must be counterposed with common forms and spatial conceptions that connect localities within an urban system.³¹ Increased infrastructural incorporation of local areas within cities is often accompanied by attempts to increase the symbolic homogeneity of the metropolis as a whole.³² We saw how the incorporation of Tsing Yi into the MTR network generated new representations of the relation of Tsing Yi to the city as a whole. While there can be no single privileged vantage point on 'Hong Kong space', this example suggests how a particular locality could be ideologically 'telescoped' into a sense of Hong Kong as a whole.

³¹ The metaphor of the urban 'fabric' suggests a 'proliferation of a net of uneven mesh' (Lefebvre 1996: 71) linking together particular places within the metropolis, incorporating them within an interlinked urban entity.

³² Cities especially prone to the dynamics of real estate boosterism such as Los Angeles exhibit elaborate practices of spatial invention and erasure, a 'history of forgetting'. See Klein 1997.

In considering the relation between urban space and the practices of subjects, we have to consider both localised experiences which have contributed to spatial capacities and ways of being, and generalised ideas and images of the larger urban entity of Hong Kong. I want to hold in tension the more particular and localised spatial experiences in Hong Kong, and the larger sense of the city as a whole. Both elements will later emerge in the analysis of migrant encounters with the different spaces of Sydney. Very specific memories and experiences that have strong affective resonances for particular subjects may take on an importance for migrant subjects. At the same time, dispositions associated more generally with Hong Kong as a whole take on increasing importance in the context of migrant movements. They provide shared points of identification and contrast with migrant destinations.

The reader can probably sense the speculative nature of this discussion. It is difficult to 'put a finger on' a disposition, since dispositions exist partly as potentialities. In a sense dispositions only come to 'exist' in relation to an encounter with different practices, environments, tastes etc. to which one is disposed, whether favourably or unfavourably. It is in such encounters with difference or change that dispositions emerge in a relatively clear manner, for instance in accounts of returnees to the lived space of Hong Kong. Joey's re-acquaintance with the 'style' of a Hong Kong crowd seemed to literally embody a whole way of being and a specific sense of urban intensity. His account tells us something about the suasive dimension of practical immersion in a place. Re-gearing to a lived spatiality is at the same time an embodied re-cognition of a way of being and an everyday regime that is sharply differentiated to that of Sydney. But this recognition is not purely bodily and therefore 'unconscious' – it is turned into a story of different places. Density and speed seem to most capture the lived qualities of Hong Kong space, being the characteristics most commonly used to describe the difference between Hong Kong and Australia. The figure of speed in particular brings together somatic states and a 'way of life' associated with a place.

Both this chapter and the previous one attempted to examine links between lived spatiality and spatial dispositions of Hong Kong people. My interest in this study is in how these dispositions are activated in migration processes, when subjects

encounter the different spatial environment of Sydney. The reader will have to wait until chapter 6 for my accounts of migrant accommodations to lived space in Sydney.

The next chapter takes another tack in presenting a social profile of Hong Kong-Australia migrants. This may seem to have little connection with spatial dispositions. Nevertheless, it is important to supply the demographic and social context to migrant strategies of moving between Hong Kong and Sydney.