Chapter 7

Cities off the plane: Orientation and dwelling practices in suburban Sydney.

You want space
You’ve got space
Now what do you do with it ¹

7a. Chapter Introduction

Throughout this thesis, I have supposed that dispositions of Hong Kong people have been attuned to the experience of ‘Hong Kong space’ to produce an array of naturalised assumptions and embodied points of view brought into play in migration. In concentrating on perceptual and affective aspects of Hong Kong people’s encounter with different spaces, I am exploring migration as an entanglement of taken-for-granted worlds of experience and subjectivities formed in place, and emergent strategies and possibilities. In chapter 6, I established the basis of a structure of migrant comparisons and interpretations of Hong Kong and Sydney. These comparisons were the discursive product of a migrant group with a degree of commonality of dispositions (more particularly of spatial perceptions) encountering a contrasting urban environment in Sydney. This chapter explores this collision of dispositions and places in greater detail by examining how Hong Kong immigrants engage in settlement practices in suburban space in Sydney.

I have suggested how the notion of ‘settlement’ can be understood to encompass practical, spatial, governmental, and affective dimensions that are intertwined in migrant movement and relocation. The encounter with urban spatiality in Sydney entails both a practical accommodation to suburban ways of being, and a social and existential accommodation to the ‘spaces of representation’ of metropolitan Sydney. The first part of the chapter explores some initial practical encounters with residential spaces (houses and gardens), and with how subjects engage with styles of dwelling that these spaces imply. I use the term ‘dwelling’ to encompass the

¹ From ‘Migratory’ by poet Louise Ho (1997: 31).
ongoing project of developing lived space as an extension of the self. Accommodation to suburban spaces requires the cultivation of ways of inhabiting the new availability of space that presents itself. This involves not just an adjustment in everyday habits and routines but also of modes of sociality. I also examine accounts of orientation to suburban spaces, and of ways of navigating a city which when first encountered seems illegible and disorienting. The enlargement of a sense of place is traced through practices such as driving and exploring unknown places in the city or surrounding countryside. Dwelling practices entail the establishment of places of rest or repose and the extension of horizons of places through movement. Both aspects require the acquisition of new ways of engagement with space and the potential opening up of new modes of ‘spatial enjoyment’.

The second part of the chapter investigates the formation of Hong Kong migrant perceptions of the spatial hierarchies of Sydney through engagement in practical tasks of finding places to live, ‘mapping’ the city according to tastes and preferences, perceptions of status, and generally acquiring a sense of their place within the city. While this spatial positioning mirrors class structures internal to the city, my emphasis is not on an objectified political economy of residential location, but on how these spatialised structures of difference are brought into alignment through the perceptions and dispositions of people from Hong Kong. The distinctions migrants encounter in Sydney’s urban space are overlaid with distinctions they themselves bring to it.

The chapter revolves around the practical negotiation and interpretation of the singular social arrangements of Australian suburban life. I begin with a brief gloss on Australian suburbia as a foil to the much fuller account of Hong Kong space in chapter 2.²

² This asymmetry between the analyses of Hong Kong and Sydney is related to asymmetries of ethnographic material. Informants cannot give an adequate account of taken-for-granted schemes of spatial perception and habitual relations to lived space acquired in Hong Kong, but they are able to supply a more detailed account of Sydney’s urban space because of its difference and disjuncture with acquired dispositions.
7b. Sydney as suburban space

The habitat of the majority of Australians can broadly be described as ‘suburban’. As ‘the dominant mode of occupying this country’ (Healy 1994: xvi) suburbs are not restricted to metropolitan centres – even smallish rural towns in Australia have suburb-like layouts and architecture. Australian cities from early on developed proto-suburban housing features based on the predominance of freehold land and separate family residences embodying an ideal of ‘our own home circle in our own house’ (Davison 2000: 21). Sydney’s suburban character predates the mature formulation of garden city ideology, town planning legislation and zoning mechanisms, and the institution of planning as a professional body of knowledge. The Australian suburb was instituted as a ‘marvellous compromise’ between the city and the bush (Gilbert in J. Kapferer 1996: 102). Having an abundance of land, and few barriers in the form of historically sedimented land use patterns (a result of the conquest of indigenous occupants), the development of Australian cities took place centrifugally, expanding from original points of settlement following available transport routes. (This contrasts starkly with the development of Hong Kong where land shortage and centralised control of land resulted in hyper-urban spaces.)

Suburbia is not just a spatial form; it also implies a set of constantly evolving representations of ‘normal life’. For Constance Perin (1977: 216), who studied the symbolic and normative dimensions of land use and zoning practices in the USA, suburbanisation is ‘not just a visibly evolving geographical process, (it) is equally a moral force.’ Associated with a vision of a ‘bourgeois utopia’ (Fishman 1996: 23-4), the array of social values associated with suburban life includes cultural homogeneity, class neutrality, mass consumption, the primacy of residential function (its separation from industry), the primacy of the ‘nuclear family’ and its ascribed gender roles, private ownership and privacy as a social value. This is not to say that suburban life ever was all these things.

Classical urban theory defined the suburb in opposition to the ‘way of life’ of an urban inner core, a place of density, diversity of function, centralisation. The city was contrasted with the spacious, functionally separated and socially homogenous life of

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the suburbs (Gans 1995: 179). These typifications of suburban life are beginning to lose credibility as actual cities and suburbs outgrow these definitions. New modes of suburban industrialisation (such as ‘edge cities’), suburban cultural diversity, gentrification of inner city areas, the restructuring of suburban centres and the displacements of ‘main streets’ by new retail and service centre developments, the greater mix of building types and densities – all these developments disturb the clear-cut image of the separation of city and suburb. If suburbs were established as a cultural category in opposition to the city, as cities expand and develop more complex spatial hierarchies, a simple opposition between city and suburb becomes doubtful. But however problematical it becomes as an analytical category, ‘the suburb’ remains a powerful, if contested cultural entity in Australian life.

As various economic and political forces vie to direct the production of space, struggles over urban development and density enlist normative values and affects arising from a lived investment in a way of being. Listen to this resident reacting to a proposed town house development in a Sydney suburb:

‘We feel under siege. . .We came here to get the bedroom sizes and the area provided us with big back yards and a feeling of space. We never knew this (medium density development) would be in the pipeline. People have ended up in tears.’ (Tim Jamieson, Sydney Morning Herald 22.3.99: 10).

This fragment from a newspaper report exemplifies a deeply felt ‘Australian’ aspiration to the lived experience of the ‘quarter acre block.’ The report assumes the resident (as well as the reader) is an Aussie subject. An accompanying article maintains that ‘newcomers from European and Asian cities are responsible for much of the demand for high density housing’ and that newly built stocks of flats and apartments in inner city Sydney are usually taken by immigrant groups ‘familiar with this style of living.’ (P. Totaro SMH 22.3.99: 10). In this account migrant others are ascribed different spatial dispositions and different modes of being at home that seem

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4 Lefebvre (1996: 216) maintained that: ‘As the city loses its edges, so does the category suburb, at once physical and moral, disappear.’
to undermine or come into conflict with the local imaginary of homely space. The preference for the quarter acre block is taken to be a property of being ‘Australian’ and opposed to a supposed immigrant predilection for density.

This example highlights the embeddedness of specific cultural norms in urban spatial forms. Large-scale immigration has had little impact on Australian planning practices, housing forms and their regulation (largely through local government). Multicultural policy has not been extended to encompass diverse needs and cultural preferences regarding the organisation of domestic and public spaces (Watson & McGillivray 1994: 203-16). Mandy Thomas argues that the normative spatiality of Sydney suburbs has been a ‘hostile environment’ for Vietnamese immigrants who arrived largely after 1975. As suburbs tend to reinforce images of social and cultural homogeneity, cultural difference within particular suburbs renders them as problematic. The dispersed spatiality of suburban tract housing is potentially isolating and estranging, and local regulatory regimes proscribe or inhibit ordinary Vietnamese domestic and spatial practices. House designs and formats do not easily accommodate different family configurations and more communal forms of sociality. Nonetheless, Vietnamese migrants have made an ‘imprint’ on Sydney’s suburban space, particularly through their inhabitance of public spaces in creating ‘the feel of an Asian marketplace’ (Thomas 1999: 41-61, 86-114).

Migrants from Hong Kong are also familiar with a sense of disjunction with Sydney’s urban spaces. But compared to Thomas’s account of Vietnamese settlement, Hong Kong migrant engagement with the suburbs has been quite different. The greater social mobility and propensity to return of Hong Kong people has conditioned the way in which urban space is negotiated.

5 In Vancouver, media reports focused on the ‘monster houses’ of Asian, and particularly Hong Kong immigrants. ‘Massive, lavish, new or renovated homes … out of scale and style with their neighbourhoods … caused friction between residents and newcomers (Fennell in Smart & Smart 1996: 40). Smart and Smart speculate whether it is the houses that are monstrous or their inhabitants. Hong Kong immigrants in Sydney have not been singled out in relation to housing style. More commonly in Australia the ‘Mediterranean’ migrant house has been perceived as excessive, in bad taste, and inappropriate to the Australian suburb (See Lozanovska 1994, Allon 1997: 19).
6 Ethnicised Sydney suburbs such as Cabramatta (associated with Vietnamese settlement and drug trafficking), Redfern (with its Aboriginal community), Bankstown and Lakemba (with ethnic ‘gangs’) are widely represented as problem suburbs. The negative images of these places, based on associations
My treatment of Hong Kong migrant engagement with Sydney’s suburbs is not as thorough as Thomas’s account of Vietnamese settlement. My interest here is less with a detailed empirical consideration of how urban spaces have affected (and been affected by) Hong Kong people, being more narrowly focused on how dispositional structures generate a range of strategies and possibilities in practically negotiating Sydney’s suburban spaces.

7c. Migrant dwelling in Sydney: getting a feel for the city

At the same time as requiring a high degree of commitment and functional application, migrant strategies can be fuzzy, inchoate and subject to numerous contingencies. Accompanying goal directed behaviour is the need to develop a ‘feel’ for new environments, a sense of location and continuity (even when this locality is not envisaged as permanent). Subjects often have very little idea of what to expect from suburban environments. When immediate security or material necessity is not the dominant reason for migration, the feel for places becomes more central in settlement strategies. Apparently secondary matters such as weather are important to this ‘feel’.

A: If you go to a different weather country, it takes longer times to settle. We had a chance to go to Singapore, but we didn’t consider it. One of the reasons is the political situation is not good at all, the other thing is the weather. It’s too hot in Singapore. And also too humid.

P: But doesn’t Sydney have quite different weather to Hong Kong?

A: More or less the same as in Hong Kong, I mean, the weather in Hong Kong is more humid than in Sydney, but the temperature here is very similar. I mean when you consider to migrate to another country, you have to think about a lot of factors. Like the schools for the kids, the weather, everything. It has to feel right. (...) Because when you first came, you’re looking for houses, and everything is unsettled. Can your wife settle, and your son settle? Those are the questions you can’t answer unless you experience it. If they come back every day crying, and they feel ill at school, and your wife says the neighbours bad, then you have to go back.

with ‘ethnic crime’, belie their actual demographic diversity and the lived experience of everyday
We might doubt the similarity of weather in Hong Kong and Sydney, but we can understand this similarity as the product of a desire to bring the qualities of places into alignment. Striving ‘to feel right’ is vital for an unsettled disposition. Settling practices aim to maintain a sense of composure in an uncertain environment. Another informant, Janie, tried to furnish a translation of what she meant by feeling settled in Sydney:

We try to feel some sort of balance here. The balance includes comfort. Comfort with yourself and comfort with the environment. *Ngoh lohk* is comfort, *ngoh lohk* also is kind of settled, feeling the settled feeling, yeah.

Problems of translation aside, this constellation of meanings seems to cohere around a sense of comfortable composure of body and emotions. Settling practices tend towards establishing a sense of repose – within a pattern of movement. Practical activities which contribute to this sense of repose include setting up houses, establishing domestic routines, the cultivation of friends, colleagues and neighbours.

Hong Kong provided a constant reference point in most accounts of settlement. Subjects did not assess a place only on the basis of its intrinsic qualities, they placed it in a relation to lived experience of Hong Kong. 7 As argued in chapter 6, clusters of perceptual memories contributed to a sharply demarcated comparison between here and there, which in most cases assisted the subject to evaluate and ‘live with’ their migration pathways. For instance, noise or lack of noise can refer both to the actual sonic conditions within a physical space and the intensity of their modes of sociability. For Angie, ‘quiet’ meant time for reflection and for a routine that suited her as ‘not socially forward’, whereas for Fay quiet was a symptom of isolation, retirement and boredom.

For different subjects living in the same vicinity, ‘social velocity’ could be experienced quite differently. While Fay found Randwick to be too slow, with

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7 This tended to be truer for subjects who had not spent considerable amounts of time in other countries apart from Hong Kong. The few interviewees who had extensive experience of living in a place apart from Hong Kong or Australia did not exhibit such a strong need to frame accounts of Sydney in terms of characteristics ascribed to Hong Kong.
nothing interesting to do, Abbey found the same area ‘busy, convenient, much like Hong Kong.’ These contrasting attunements to a place are related to different trajectories and life cycles. Abbey is much younger than Fay and has a hectic life, working and studying, cultivating a large social circle. The perception of the busyness of a place is related to the social density of everyday life and to prospects of developing relations and pleasures. This is as much a projection of a sense of social connection (or its lack) as a perception of an objective place. The experience of a place is inseparable from the subject’s sense of social centrality (or marginality) in the context of a life course.

Settlement in a new place encompasses ontological and affective as well as spatial dimensions, although these are linked. The intertwining of social and spatial aspects of settlement must bring the dispositions of one place into alignment with the singularity of a new place in all of its aspects, spatial and social. This notion of settlement is closely related to the Heideggerian conception of ‘dwelling’. Heidegger’s argument in ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ starts with the convergence of the meanings of the (German) word for dwelling and building (bauen). Building and dwelling are practically related. One does not simply build a house in order to dwell (the usual understanding): one builds in accordance with a way of dwelling, to enhance one’s sense of being in a place. Dwelling entails a continuous and simultaneous project of habituation and ‘building’, the practical activity associated with making oneself at home. This notion of building points to the ongoing practical project of developing and maintaining a sense of being at home (Heidegger 1971: 142-48). These overlaid meanings of dwelling are pertinent to migrants’ efforts to settle in a new place. The practical negotiation of lived/built environments is integral to a sense of being. Spaces such as houses, gardens and streetscapes are not simply sites or containers for forms of life, since they are inseparable from the practical and emotional investments people make in spaces of dwelling.

8 Hage applies the notion of building/dwelling to nation-building, which entails the pursuit of an elusive feeling of unity which is constituted by the very process of engaging in the practical project of building it up. “Heidegger is here intimating the very elusive nature of the fullness of being for the discursively constituted subject….The subject is constantly pursuing this fullness but never reaching it and at the same time it is only in that very pursuit that s/he gets an intimation of it” (Hage 1993: 99).
Dwelling (like settling) is not limited to a single residential locus, but extends to ways of being at home in the places encountered in practical life generally. We need to consider the specificity of these places and the cultural meaning which is ‘built’ into them. For instance, Australian cultural practices tend to allocate and concentrate home-building in a specific residential space, in a different way to apartment dwelling in Hong Kong. Greig (2000: 218) implies that the Australian suburban ‘project home’ is a social package for the suburban family as project, that is, as an ongoing task, a potentiality to be developed specifically through the cultivation of the private dwelling. I have argued that dwelling in Hong Kong is generally more intertwined with the ‘saturated’ urban spaces interlinked with residential spaces. While the house may be given a different emphasis in dwelling practices in the two cities, dwelling in the wider sense implies a relation between spaces of relative repose, and other spaces that are regularly traversed and brought into play with the more ‘private’ world of the home. Home and locality are practically and ritually defined by comings and goings, entrances and exits, greetings and goodbyes, a dialectic of repose and movement across differently ‘coded’ spaces.

It is necessary to expand this notion of dwelling to the migrant situation. For migrants, modalities of settlement/dwelling must be re-negotiated in a new place, along with the new injunctions and possibilities that confront dispositions attuned to another spatiality. The ‘homely’ naturalness and continuity of spatial experience implicit in ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ must be disturbed to account for the rupture caused by migration as well as the potential enlargement of the scale of dwelling. On a wider scale cross-national migration offers up the possibility of dwelling in relation to more than one (national) place. But here I will start with some accounts of small practices of home building in suburban settings.

7d. House and garden

The unaccustomed space of Sydney’s suburbs can be disorienting and estranging for migrant subjects. On the other hand, for Hong Kong people used to living in tiny apartments, this new experience of space has its attractions – Australia offers

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9 ‘The spaces we negotiate daily are “managed” by places whose being is founded on things like
undreamed of lebensraum. Suburban home-making offers new possibilities for investment in styles of living. Andrea compared the relation between dwelling space and social arrangements in Hong Kong and Sydney:

A: I suppose if the room (in Hong Kong) is too small for so many people, you can’t have your own space. And when you have a day a day off, when you have the chance, you like to go out. You find your way to go. Not like in Australia – it’s a long way to go anywhere. The people in Australia they tend to stay at home when they have a day off. They meet friends in their own place, barbecue, whatever. It’s different from people in here.

P: Here (in Hong Kong) if you meet friends you go out.

A: Yeah, you meet friends in the cinema...because it’s really hard like.... because you know the housing in Hong Kong is so small, and even us, when we have a chance we would like to go out. Because the room is too small. So you know that happens for the Hong Kong people and the Australians. When they have day off, they want to stay at home. But people here, when they have a day off they want to go out.

This dialogue points to the differences between Hong Kong and Sydney in where and how social engagements are located. The experience of the detached suburban ‘home’ in Sydney, opens up the possibility of its functioning more as a centre for social exchanges beyond those of the household. On the other hand this is necessary because urban space in Sydney does not usually offer the density and at-hand resources of Hong Kong’s street life. In Hong Kong, you can ‘find your way to go’, while in Sydney ‘it’s a long way to go anywhere’. The encounter with different socialising practices leads Andrea to voice a sharp contrast between the social modalities in Hong Kong and Sydney.

A: Everybody in Hong Kong is in a hurry. If you got friends, you won’t be able to, um, to go deeper with your friends. But in Australia it’s quite different. You are not in a hurry, in rush at all. So in Australia they emphasise the family life. (…) They spend more time in the home with all the family members and friends. I mean, when you have friends in Australia, you can go very deep with them, but in Hong Kong you have no time to do it.

buildings’ (Heidegger 1971: 151).
P: Before you were saying your friends in Sydney were mainly from Hong Kong.

A: Even the Hong Kong friend,...I told you I had a friend living in Kogarah, that’s why I moved to Kogarah [in southern Sydney]. The friend came back to Hong Kong a few years ago, and now I can see her here. But I can say the relationship with my friend at that time is better than now. When we were in Australia we’re closer. But in here, we can see each other maybe only once a year, or twice a year.

P: Always busy (in Hong Kong).

A: Yeah, but in Australia, we are not so hurried in our work, or whatever. Like the people in Australia, they emphasise family life. The family life is not only for your family but also included your friends to come to visit each other, cook the dinner at home, or barbecue in the yard.

In this scheme, Hong Kong is considered the un-familial environment – a common understanding amongst Hong Kong emigrants. For Andrea, the lack of home space and available time in Hong Kong inhibits the possibilities of family life and friendship. The relative leisure of Sydney is opposed to the speed and obligatory busyness of Hong Kong. This leisure enables the cultivation of family life and friendship, through the medium of the suburban home.

However, there are different orientations towards family life. Wai Man, a gay man from a working class background, lived with his parents and siblings in an older style public housing estate in Kowloon for most of his life. He had to share a bed with brother until he left Hong Kong to emigrate at the age of thirty. ‘Our whole family live in one room of just 200 square feet, with no partitions at all.’ As a gay man this situation presented no possibility of engaging in viable relationships. There was no prospect of privacy or personal autonomy since he could not afford to buy an apartment in Hong Kong. Places are experienced very differently by different sexual subjects. Wai Man experienced the housing estate as a hostile environment. He was wary of gossip and internal surveillance: for instance he didn’t want to be seen with me anywhere near the locality. Wai Man felt there was no possibility of a gay life in Hong Kong. He dreamed of other cities such as San Francisco where he thought a gay life would be viable and he would be able to meet a ‘Caucasian’ man.

Unable to gain entry to the USA, Wai Man decided to migrate to Australia, after a tourist foray of just three days, in which he visited gay commercial zone of Oxford
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Street. ‘I can feel an air of freedom in Australia’, he told me. Wai Man resolutely went about his task of emigrating, finding an Australian lover and his own place to live in Sydney. In Hong Kong before leaving, he would imagine having his own apartment in Sydney. He detailed the colours and furnishings he would like in a flat: he liked nice warm colours, he would have rugs in colours like pale apricot, and how he would like to have wooden floors – ‘they would be very warm in the winter and cool in the summer.’ I said wooden floors could be a bit cold in the winter, he said ‘they look as if they are very warm, from the colour.’ This warmth he imagines is visual, an image of different living spaces. He explained why he liked to think about decorating his apartment:

I think it’s a kind of compensation. Because I was living in a small apartment in Hong Kong with four other people – it is really just one room. When I was younger seven people were living in that room. I lived in an ugly place for thirty years. That’s why I would like to have a nice house, and be able to choose all the colours and the furniture.

For Wai Man exercising his tastes is a compensation. Living with his family was experienced as a social lack. As a gay man in Hong Kong, it was not possible for him to be fully at home with his family. Wai Man was already working imaginatively on his dwelling even before he arrived in Sydney. Home making practices took on added significance – he sought to make a home different from the one he left behind.

But not completely different. Wai Man has a certain urbanised Hong Kong disposition. He is uncomfortable with the Australian suburban garden. He prefers an apartment, as ‘it takes too much time to look after a house. I would not have enough time.’ He did not want a garden, although he would enjoy it, as long as someone else looked after it. ‘I hate spiders. No, I don’t want to have a garden.’ He would like to have an apartment with lots of space, maybe a few pots. When he arrived in Sydney Wai Man moved into a block of flats in the ‘inner western’ suburb of Marrickville. He liked the prospect of quiet and privacy, which he associates with the suburban landscape, and the distance and separation it implies. Nature was desired as a distanced image – a view – since it becomes threatening if encountered in its substance: ‘I like the environment to be quiet, you can see a lot of trees, but I don’t
want to be surrounded by them. We might find a spider web.’ He told me how he no longer used the footpath down the side of their block to get to the flat, but entered the building from the car park below. ‘I don’t want to have this feeling, of being covered with this web.’ (There is a feeling of revulsion in the way that he says ‘web’.) Wai Man spoke of liking to see trees, but not wanting them near. ‘I think I just want them to be in the street.’ Trees are a haven for spiders and their webs. Similarly he mentioned not wanting to live on the ground floor: ‘you are more vulnerable to insects....I don’t like webs. It’s a terrible feeling when you’re looking for something and then you feel this web’. Things of nature are desirable as images but have an undesirable autonomy and unpredictability when in close proximity to the body. Wai Man was curious about my account of a tree-climbing suburban boyhood, especially the notion of building tree houses, which he found surprising.

In adjusting to this new ‘environment’, there is a collision of embodied ‘readings’ of suburban space. Wai Man has an ambivalent interpretation of ‘nature’ and its relation to ‘the good life’. Nature and open space signify increased autonomy and self-determination. But nature also contains alien contents, whose otherness can be disturbing. Wai Man’s small phobias are not disabling, but subtly condition the way he locates himself in Sydney’s urban space.

Others develop a more intimate relationship with nature in the suburbs. For instance, gardening was often initially an unpleasant encounter, followed by a gradual appreciation. Lucinda was living in a house in Sydney with a small garden. She was telling me how she had gradually taken up gardening in the past few months. It took her a while to even bring herself to touch the soil, put her bare hands into it. She was particularly bothered by dirt that collected under her fingernails. Lucinda had grown up in the Western Districts of Hong Kong Island, a dense area of older housing. She was always told by her mother and other family members that the ground was dirty, that it contained germs, and worms, which were horrible and dangerous. Eventually she was growing flowers and thinking of planting vegetables, and happily musing about ‘becoming a peasant.’

While younger Hong Kong people often had this quite visceral phobia about the soil, older people often already had an affinity with gardens. There are a myriad of
improvised gardens on rooftops and balconies of old apartment buildings and on small parcels of ‘waste’ land in urban Hong Kong. Old people tended precarious vegetable gardens created in the recesses of concrete retaining walls at Sui Sai Wan on Hong Kong Island. Probably they had agricultural pasts – they are more likely to have come from China or from rural villages in Hong Kong. One older informant remembered a different Hong Kong: she had grown up in the Tak Shing area of Kowloon where she recalls gardens being common. She later moved to a village in the New Territories where she could have a small patch of land, as gardening was ‘in my blood.’ She saw herself as belonging to ‘old Hong Kong’, and felt a gap between herself and ‘Hong Kong people now’, who are ‘very brash, always running around’.

These brash young Hong Kong people usually had little idea of what is entailed in managing the suburban blocks they had bought or rented in Sydney. Some asked me for advice:

A: Do you have experience in a house?
P: Well, I grew up in a house with a garden in Ryde.
A: Is it difficult to manage, the house? And the garden? How long does it take?
P: Well, you have to spend a bit of time, keep it under control. Because of weeds, grass, leaves falling off trees. But it can be enjoyable, some people like it.
T: I will try to. Spend one day every week to do the gardening work. Instead of going out and spending money (hearty laugh).

Wai-fan is aware that there is considerable effort and investment in managing the house-and-garden complex which both advertises the status and qualities of its inhabitants while affording them a private and secluded space (Kapferer 1996: 104-5). A new dwelling space imposes a challenge, despite or even because of the lack of attunement to it. Wai-fan expressed the excitement of encountering a different domestic space:

It’s quite exciting. Because in Hong Kong you live in a flat, we don’t have back yard, we don’t have front yard, we have no experience to look after the lawn, we have no experience to look after the plant, so we had a lot of things to do, we have a lot of things to learn. So it’s quite exciting, and, more spatial. And we can spend time, leisure time, in the back yard. But it’s not easy, we find that it’s not easy. Because we
have to mow the lawn and do all the gardening and….always weeds. At first we didn’t know what to do, I didn’t have any garden knowledge, I didn’t know what to do with the tools. So much to do. The back yard, yeah, we have to pay for it.

Still we found, if we have a good back yard, we have power, we can invite our friends, OK, this is what I did. So, if we have a good back yard, you can actually increase our self esteem. (laughs) So, quite exciting.

Wai-fan’s excitement coincided with the realisation that gardening is a form of investment that could yield personal and social returns. He had begun to discover social potentials in suburban dwelling.

7e. Orientation practices

Any analysis of settlement practices – establishing a place of repose for the body – must be dialectically complemented by orientation practices. Orientation practices entail finding one’s way through movement, forming new pathways and routines, exploring and defining the boundaries of what is known of the new environment. Orientation practices supplement settling practices, which tend towards spatial consolidation and condensation.

Learning how to locate oneself in a new place is a demanding task. The subject lacks the continuity of assumptions that underpins the familiarity of a known place. The new settler in Sydney must acquire a sense of the city’s spatial organisation around specific physical and symbolic coordinates. (I have already touched on the perception of differences in ways of finding one’s way in Hong Kong and Sydney.) A sense of the city’s topography has to be gradually established and built up. The legibility of its spaces has to be constructed from the ‘from the ground up’, beginning with places in close proximity. Pathways are forged, establishing a sense of coherence of a place, building up routines. Pathways define networks of practical territories, places where particular needs and desires can be met, as well as places that are not always activated. ‘Home’ places are defined as a basis for settling and consolidating existence, establishing sites of autonomy and intimacy, places of relative repose, (even if they are not necessarily ‘permanent’). In the process local
territories of familiarity and unfamiliarity, desirability and undesirability are articulated. Boundaries of these territories can be expanded as the city opens up as a realm of further possibility.

Problems of orientation and practical attunement to a different spatial order are best illustrated by stories of dis-orientation. I was told a story of a woman who had been a minibus (sùbà) driver in Hong Kong:

A: I have a friend, she is already 50, more than 50.... She drive for more than thirty years, she was a mini-bus driver here (in Hong Kong)...
P: A professional driver?
A: But she dare not to drive over there (Sydney). The thing is you get lost over there. You don’t know the place very well, and you don’t know how to read the map, you don’t know how to read the signs, and then you get lost. And she’s scared of getting lost, because she doesn’t know the language. If she get lost, she wouldn’t be able to go home.

This disabling loss of orientation would seem to involve more than not knowing the language, difficult as this can be. It points to a radical lack of fit, of an incapacity to engage with and re-cognise another social space. Although this example is exceptional, it is not uncommon for people to say they find driving difficult, when it was no problem for them in Hong Kong. Fay described her reluctance to drive in Sydney, despite years of driving in Hong Kong:

F: Here the traffic is the most killing thing, most handicap, because I don’t have the sense of direction, you know. Difficult to learn how to get about. Too big a place for me.
P: Do you drive a lot?
F: Not here, no not here.
P: You get the train here? [To her workplace.]
F: I have license, driving license, but I cannot drive here, because don’t know, can’t recognise, especially at night time. The street lights very dim, and no road signs, you can’t read.

I doubt that the street lighting is much different to Hong Kong’s. Perhaps Hong Kong seems brighter, as an intensely built up city that doesn’t stop at night. Too big a
place. No sense of direction. The unaccustomed horizontal distances are bewildering for people accustomed to densely concentrated vertical spaces. Practical difficulties and existential states are closely related – physical orientation and personal orientation are linked because the space of a house, a street, or a city embody cultural logics entailing ways of moving and doing things. Practical knowledge and the achievement of a familiarity with a place feed into a sense of ontological security.

A sense of densities and distances is established practically, and in a relationship to needs and desires acquired in Hong Kong. Winston is a student living with his parents in Seven Hills, a western suburb of Sydney. He was comparing his everyday routine in Hung Hom, a busy area on the harbour in Kowloon, and Seven Hills:

There’s one big difference. Friends...if you ask them, ‘what we going to do afterwards?’ Maybe pub, karaoke, video game shops. But now I’m thinking ‘No. I have to travel an hour to get there.... In Hong Kong we used to catch a bus together, catch a train together, like, we can go out together....Most of the shops, if you’re at Causeway Bay, open till two or three in the morning....But now, if you are really hungry after ten o’clock, what are you going to do? Stay at home.

Perceptions about urban spaces are hardly all in the mind – they do have objective features, such as density and proximity or distance from specific resources. Nevertheless, Winston’s sense of distance and inconvenience in Sydney is clearly linked to the embodied memory of Causeway Bay and its at-hand availability. It was common for Hong Kong people to feel this loss of at-handness, of the convenience which they associate with their native city. Social density and density of physical space are often equated – this may lead to the ‘agoraphobic’ sense of there being ‘too much space’ in Sydney. The city seems too big, lacking in immediacy – this sense can extend to a literal dis-orientation, the feeling of losing all sense of direction. 10 But Winston soon discovered the compensation of sport, which he had had little opportunity to experience in Hong Kong. “Right next to my house, just one minutes walk we have tennis, squash courts and a gym.” The suburbs offer different kinds of availability and at-handness that he soon learned to appreciate.

10 Again, I do not assume this to be purely an individual and ‘mental’ sense: it is related to acquired spatial dispositions and differences in modes of orientating and navigating cities (see chapter 4).
Typically migrant subjects took some time to find a place to live in Sydney, establish routines, ‘corridors’ travelled to workplaces, people they visit, consumption sites, etc. establishing a spatial orbit that gradually expanded in range. Subjects had widely different propensities to expand their spatial range, their desires to do new things and see new places.

Subjects would often go through an initial phase of indulging in the novelty of a place, and visiting various tourist or sightseeing spots. The pleasure of experiencing a place touristically can enable attachments to be formed in a kind of ritual way. Lona remembered vividly her first Sydney touristic experience, in Hyde Park:

I came here eight years ago, we took the photos there, I was standing right over there, next to the fountain. It was a sunny day like today. I still have that photo.

Tourism is not only the commodification of somewhere else; it also assists with the familiarisation of new spaces to be settled. Heunggong yan are avid photo-takers. Snapshots enable commemorative claims to a shared occupation and enjoyment of a place. Other people are vital to share and validate this experience. Copies of photos are typically distributed to all members present. Photographs memorialised places that Lona incorporated into her world as she began to familiarise herself with Sydney and its ways.

Lona also recounted how she discovered a new pleasure she called ‘having coffee on the road – you can drink coffee and look at all the people.’ She remembered the origins of this pleasure, the first time she had coffee sitting on the sidewalk eight years ago, when she was a student. The place she remembered was a little milk bar on the edge of Hyde Park in Sydney’s CBD, which had been run by a Lebanese family. We went looking for this place, but found it was no longer in business. Lona was not fazed, however. Since this is a repeatable pleasure we went around the corner and had coffee on the road in nearby Liverpool St. Lona valued this experience as being specific to ‘here’ (Sydney), establishing a difference with life in Hong Kong. There are few coffee shops in Hong Kong and few alfresco venues:

11 Hong Kong people are not usually coffee drinkers; it's difficult to find good espresso coffee in Hong Kong.
‘Maybe it’s too polluted in Hong Kong . . . (although) there are some places like this on Cheung Chau and on Lamma Island.’

Finding repeatable pleasures is important for viable dwelling. Ordinary pleasures extend routines beyond function and necessity – jouissance is an indicator of successful settlement, establishing zones of pleasurable possibility beyond the functional tasks of negotiating careers, finances, homes, meeting family obligations etc. Touristic impulses are a pleasurable way of extending the range of places beyond functional pathways, of finding new places, and ‘opening up’ new territory.

Many Hong Kong people of ordinary means never had the chance to travel very far to explore an extensive space. Even if they had travelled overseas, they may have only experienced urban tourism or short package tours. Driving in Australia provides a more auto-nomous means of spatial exploration. Ringo waxed lyrical about the spatial pleasures of long distance driving (an impossibility in Hong Kong).

R: I been to Gold Coast twice.
P: You drove up there?
R: Yeah, driving. Ten hours driving from Sydney, straight through to Brisbane. It is good for me, I like it. You can’t just drive like that in Hong Kong. Oh, yeah I love it, I love it. Another goal for me at the present, if I can, a little bit retire earlier, maybe say, around fifty, I will spend a lot of time in Australia, to just travel around, to visit town by town, and you know, I think it’s very very exciting, you know, Australia’s very large. My colleague told me, I asked him [if he wanted to travel to other countries] and he told me, ‘No.’ I say, ‘why?’ ‘Australia is large. I spend nearly forty years, but I still can’t travel the whole country.’

The open road seemed to excite informants from Hong Kong (especially men). Adrian described the gradual development of a capacity to explore new places. He remembered his first time driving between the suburb of Eastwood to Ryde (about 4 kilometres), and how it seemed such a long journey. His spatial reach gradually extended to other suburbs in Sydney. After that he visited (in order) the Blue
Mountains, Newcastle, Nelson Bay, Canberra and the Western Plains Zoo. 12 ‘You have to know the place bit by bit.’ He rhapsodised about seeing a vast country, sometimes he would see a rainbow, and recalled the saying that if you go to the foot of the rainbow you find gold. The sense of vastness was new to him:

In Australia, you are closer to God. You can open yourself, and feel the existence of God. This is because you can see the sky, and the large landscape, you can feel the power of nature, and of the creation. You realise the power of humans is limited. However in Hong Kong, there are more pressing problems facing you – there is not much time to consider things, you can’t just sit back and think of ‘ideological problems’.

Driving and the Australian countryside had clearly enhanced Adrian’s spiritual life. Enjoying the horizontality of Australian vistas was an ecstatic experience for someone accustomed to the dense vertical space of Hong Kong. As with many Hong Kong immigrants, Adrian’s religiosity is very place-specific. Although he had exposure to Christianity in his family background, he didn’t really consider himself as a Christian when he later returned to Hong Kong, ‘I am not faithful’. Hong Kong is not a place for things of the spirit, in Adrian’s interpretation.13 Creation is too far away. Hong Kong’s denatured environment seems too obviously a human construction. Churches in Sydney supply contacts, support networks and a place of familiarity. Adrian no longer had the same social needs upon return to Hong Kong.

Celia once rang me to tell me she had converted to Christianity. She had gone to a church because a friend from Hong Kong who had previously been a Muslim had converted to Christianity. Then she went on some kind of retreat camp with her friend. At first she ‘didn’t have much confidence in God’. But when Celia unexpectedly got a job at a university, she decided that it was not a coincidence, but part of God’s plan. At the church there was a practice of relating peoples’ experience to show the work of God. Celia mentioned another testimony of a

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12 These are all places within driving distance of Sydney. The Blue Mountains are close to Sydney while the Zoo in Dubbo is about six hours drive.

13 About half of my informants were Christians prior to migration amongst my respondents. This was partly as a result of networks I had tapped in to. Some 36% of Hong Kong born people professed to be Christian in the 1996 census (DIMA 2000: 32-3), while the proportion of Christians in Hong Kong is probably about 8 per cent (Hong Kong Government 1997: 340-1). It would seem that Christians have a greater propensity to emigrate.
university student who fell asleep on the night before an essay was due. A salesman happened to call, waking her up, so she was able to complete the essay. Rather prosaic ‘miracles’, we might think: they were nevertheless moments of release from tensions and anxieties familiar to migrants. When Celia began to consider returning to Hong Kong, her Christian fellows advised her not to go back because there were too many distractions from God’s ways in Hong Kong, and people often did not return to the church. This was because ‘the life here is more quiet and routine’. Even God’s power has its place.

7f. Classifying suburban Sydney: the example of western Sydney

I have detailed some accounts of practical engagements with suburban space in Sydney in which subjects attempted to locate themselves in an unfamiliar physical and social topography and to negotiate new spatial opportunities (even to experience God). Relatively affluent suburbs seem the most benign of environments, but they could present considerable challenges for settlers. Hong Kong has few spatial environments that could be considered as ‘suburban’. The building of new-towns in Hong Kong have created a network of ‘multi-centred’ urban sites (Lo 1992: 157), although the New towns have not attained the symbolic or social status of the older centres on Hong Kong island or Kowloon. New town areas may be considered to be sub-urban in the sense of bearing a somewhat peripheral relationship to core urban areas, but they scarcely resemble Australian suburbs as lived spaces. Despite the dissimilarity or urban spaces in Hong Kong and Sydney suburbs, some of my informants drew parallels between places in the two cities.

I used to live in Sha Tin because it’s quiet. Quieter than the city. Now I live in Hornsby, where there’s lots of trees and not too much aeroplane noise.

The resemblance between the new town of Sha tin and leafy Hornsby in Sydney’s north-western suburbs may seem slight. But Angie, talking of her liking for quiet and spacious areas was locating herself dispositionally by creating a personal analogy out of her perceptions of spatial distinctions in the two cities.
Garden city planning ideals had a small impact on Hong Kong. A development with detached houses and gardens called Fairview Park was built near the Chinese border by a Canadian development company in the 1970s. I am using this exception to illustrate the rule – Fairview Park is an anomalous space in Hong Kong. It seemed a very strange environment when I visited it after having become attuned to tower block life. A friend from Hong Kong who had studied in Sydney bought a property in Fairview Park because it reminded him of Australia, and he didn’t want to return to high-rise living. He had once considered migrating to Australia: in a way he took the place back with him. Or rather he found a piece of Sydney in Hong Kong.

Suburban living may provide a means for migrant home-building, of creating a viable mode of inhabiting their new life, as well as being a terrain of social distinction. These two aspects are linked. Suburban homes may offer greater latitude for Hong Kong people to cultivate ‘private life’, to enhance family engagement, or to invest in the space of home through the cultivation of personal tastes. Suburban living may give increased latitude to strategies of investment in the home itself and also to the cultivation of distinctions based on location. Immigrants in attempting to make a viable home typically seek the most advantageous and viable locations within the city given their resources and social connections. This entails a more complex and dynamic process than a political economy approach to spatial location in Sydney could provide. This is because the sense of social/spatial position of newcomers is always filtered through dispositions acquired elsewhere. I want to discuss ways in which Sydney’s urban space is divided and categorised.

Representations of urban space have both syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions. While there is an ongoing attempt to construct a representative and typified ‘Sydney’, the city is at the same time always internally defined by difference. Like any substantial city, Sydney is territorialized and hierarchised in terms of status and class, desirable and less desirable parts. There is a long history of social distinction about suburban locations. The 1895 publication *How to know Sydney* was already fixing a social geography:

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14 Parts of Kowloon Tong were designed along garden suburb principles in the 1920s, with detached two storey residences set in their own gardens (Bristow 1989: 8-9).
Alexandria, Annandale, Arncliffe and Auburn are recognised as working men’s suburbs, the housing being small...Botany is devoted to factories, and Burwood and Bondi to gentlemen’s residences...Darling Point and Double Bay, which are near the harbour are ...regarded as the fashionable part of Sydney. The other fashionable suburbs are Elizabeth Bay, Pott’s Point, Rushcutters Bay, Gladesville (on the Parramatta River), Point Piper, Rose Bay and Strathfield. At all the above places the houses are mostly large, and are surrounded by beautifully laid out grounds...Mosman’s Bay is a charming place on the north side of the harbour,...having lovely views...Parramatta is a large business town, and the centre of a fruit growing district...(in Spearitt 1978:192-3)

Markers of suburban value such as large houses and gardens, distance from the sites of labour, proximity to water and views, have remained much the same, although suburbs themselves have risen or fallen in status and desirability. The association of places with class and status is neither wholly expressive of ‘objective’ social characteristics, nor are they entirely empty ‘myths’ about places. At the same time that places are ‘class-ified’ according to valued social characteristics, social class is ‘spatialised’, attached to spatial moorings. As Rob Shields puts it: ‘spatialisation unifies the discursive (the use of metaphors) and empirical (myths rendered as practice), and indicates their modes of inter-relation (normative codes of spatiality)’ (Shields 1991: 64). Historically, ‘good’ areas of Sydney have been associated with lack of industry and the size of residential properties. In the 1920s, the suburbs of Ryde and Drummoyne were regarded as the Western Suburbs, home of the ‘Great Middle Class’ (Spearitt 1978: 200). Now the west has sprawled further west. Gentrification made over trendy inner city suburbs like Surry Hills and Paddington once thought of as slums that were once targeted for ‘clearance’. Australian newspapers regularly carry features on ‘how your suburb rates’, so people can keep up with the constant flux in the suburban hierarchy, as defined by real estate valuations.

Nevertheless, accompanying this complexity of shifting representations of place is a tendency towards simplifying schemes which contrive to project into space the structures of oppositions we might call spatialisations of class. In analysing migrant practices, I want to invoke an active and heterogeneous conception of class. As an active process of class-ifying, class hierarchies emerge not just from relations of the
productive economy, but from many divisions of the social world. One element is
the continual production of spatial representations and associations of different
groups with specific places. Classifying places and their inhabitants is always a
complicated symbolic struggle. There is necessarily some empirical substance in
representations of place, along with oversimplifying and stereotypical images. Such
stereotypes are potentially enabling as well as limiting, providing a basis for subjects
including migrants to negotiate a position in relation to others and other places.

Class divisions are mapped onto the city as if they were discrete symbolic
territories. The social delineation of American cities is commonly aligned around
cardinal points – Westside, East End, north Side, South end – which have a social
meaning only in the context of a particular city and its historical geography of class
and ethnicity (Allen 1993: 228-9).

Sydney is often conventionally described in terms of broadly ‘tectonic’ regions of the
North Shore, Eastern Suburbs, and the Western Suburbs (sometimes distinguished
from the gentrifying Inner West). Diane Powell (1993: 63) has written of the shift
in stigma from inner city terrace house ‘slums’ characterised by crowdedness and
unsanitary conditions to the supposed featureless and barren sprawl of the western
suburbs, constructed primarily in the post WW 2 period. The western suburbs of
Sydney now bear the stigma of low status, unemployment, and criminality. As
Powell puts it: ‘The compass points have become social indexes with differentiating
auras of status and prestige’ (Powell 1993: 1).

These ‘cardinal’ imaginings are only approximations in a much more finely
graduated status ‘map’ of the city. Such geographically vague categories, such as
‘the west’, in which geographical space, administrative zones and typifications of

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15 Raymond Williams (1973: 259-76) wrote of the bifurcation of nineteenth century London in terms of visibility: London was imagined as a city of light and city of darkness. The glittering gaslit
metropolitan ‘West End’ was opposed to the ‘nether world’ of the East End, a threatening
‘unexplored’ world for the literate who lived outside of it. The vertical classifications Uptown and
Downtown seem to derive from early nineteenth century Manhattan – the residential Uptown was
associated with class and style, opposed to the downtown, the busy commercial and entertainment
areas and the nearby poor neighbourhoods (Allen 1993: 229).

16 The ‘south’ of Sydney is not so clearly demarcated and typified and does have such a clear-cut
identity as the north, east and west. Areas such as Bankstown, Fairfield and Cabramatta are sometimes
described as south-west, or sometimes included in western Sydney.
social status are intertwined, create a sense of discontinuity of social conditions in
discrete places, rather than contiguity and interdependence between places
(Zerubavel 1991: 6-9). The directionality of social identifications such as ‘the west’
are relational and give the interlocutor a sense of ‘where we are’ within a panoramic
sense of the city that fades off into the distance of familiar representations and
routine movements within the city. Powell shows how a typical newspaper
description of the western suburbs placed the reader in a particular way in a
‘discourse space’ that also depends on that reader’s position in the context of a
hierarchised urban space. In her example, the reader is presented by the writer (‘I’)
with an account of ‘the dumped population syndrome’ which has resulted in a whole
litany of ‘problems’. The reader (‘you’) if, from the western suburbs, is positioned
as part of the problem. In Benveniste’s words, “the third person is the one who is
absent, not really a person at all, but ‘the verbal form whose function is to express
the non-person’” (Benveniste in Powell 1993: 13-14). A reader who lives elsewhere
in Sydney is able to adopt a complicit ‘you’, reinforced in their difference and
distance from the discursive site of such problems.

Michael Symonds (1993:66-7) points to western Sydney being the other which is
lacking in exoticization. Unlike the paradigm exotic other of Said’s Orientalism
(1978) there is no secret desire for the other – the west is simply a space of lack
without compensatory attractions. Adopting a more ‘culturalist’ explanation,
Symonds sees the west as urban space constituted as without culture. He sees the
myth of the west as a projected ‘colony’ resulting from the bifurcation of Sydney –
culturally and materially – from the 60s to the 80s – Australia’s ‘age of
enlightenment’, when urban elites gradually acquired a sense of being in an
international city with a distinctive culture located in the city’s inner suburbs. This
was accompanied by the peripheralisation of the west and the ‘westie’ as the cultural
leftovers, ‘what has been left behind’ in the civilising process (Symonds 1997: 90).
But Symonds does not consider the multiple representations attached to places
identified with migrant settlement.

How have specific cultural and ethnic differences been represented in the context of
this concentration of cultural capital in the inner city? ‘Multiculturalist’ distinctions
have been mapped onto the structures of Sydney space to produce zones of taste and
distinction. This is brought out in Hage’s study of restaurant practices in Sydney. If the west is the place characterised by lack of culture (or of cultural ‘appreciation’), it can also be conceived as a ‘wild’ zone, where exotic game can be had. Cabramatta, a western suburb with a major concentration of immigrants, particularly Vietnamese, is associated (in media reports and ‘urban myth’) with the drug trade and criminality. Its concentration of Asian restaurants is imagined as a wild but fertile territory by inner-city gourmands looking for new and fresh fields. Cabramatta is a place which potentially ‘enriches’ the urban tourists’ experience of authenticity/ethnicity, hence their cultural capital as a whole. The local council actively encourages this internal urban tourism, promoting Cabramatta as ‘A Day Trip to Asia.’ But this enrichment relies on the maintenance of the distinctions between places and populations identified with them: multicultural consumption is envisaged as being provided by one group for another – ‘cosmo-multiculturalists’ – presumed to live in the east. These distinctions are projected onto representations of the urban space of Sydney as a whole (Hage 1997: 118-23). We should not take this scheme too literally. The point is that there are competing imaginaries of place operating within discourses of taste. The lived space of the ‘subjects’ of ethnic difference who build of homely environments including the provision of food, is juxtaposed with the ethnicised space of consumption which draws on representations of commodified difference. Different subject positions generate multiple spatial images in relation to dominant representations of the city and suburban structure. 17

Cities are complex and always shifting constellations of real-and-imagined locations, structured by multiple practices and view-points. Real estate markets, zoning and planning regimes, cultural perceptions, discourses and representations, the collective desire and abjection projected on certain places are all constituents of the received

17 The rebellious son of Greek migrants in Christos Tsiolkas’s novel Loaded describes Melbourne in cardinal terms:

I detest the East. The whole fucking mass of it: the highways, the suburbs, the hills, the rich cunts, the smacked-out bored cunts. The whitest part of my city, where you’ll see the authentic white Australian, is in the eastern suburbs . . . East are the brick-veneer fortresses of the wogs with money. On the edge, however, bordering the true Anglo affluence, never part of it ........ The West is a dumping ground; a sewer of refugees, the migrants, the poor, the insane, the unskilled and the uneducated. There is a point in my city, underneath the Swanston Street Bridge where you can sit by the Yarra River and contemplate the chasm that separates this town. Look down the river towards the East and there are green parks rolling down to the river, beautiful Victorian bridges sparkle against the blue
(and contested) knowledge of city dwellers. The next section traces how my informants from Hong Kong mapped and (re)interpreted their own social geography of Sydney’s suburbs.

7g. Hong Kong mappings of Sydney

Recent migrants from Hong Kong have not shown a great tendency to marked settlement concentrations. While they may initially stay in areas near relatives or friends, this has not prevented a quite wide spread. There are relative concentrations in areas such as the north shore, Hurstville and Parramatta areas. My emphasis here is not really on the empirical ‘patterns’ of the social geography of urban location. I am more interested in the way in which migrant subjects form an image of Sydney as a whole, in finding their place within a symbolic geography of Sydney through ordinary migrant practices.

When I met Tony, he had only been in Sydney for a couple of months. He was living in the inner suburb of Ultimo, and still gravitated mainly to places where he could meet other Chinese. Since he had a lot of leisure time, not having yet found work, he would often wander to the Haymarket Chinatown, Chatswood, Hurstville, and the local library, which has Chinese books and newspapers, a contemporary Chinatown circuit. He didn’t go to the Chinatown locations principally to shop, saying he preferred the supermarkets at Leichhardt ‘where you can get everything’\(^{18}\), but to be amongst Chinese/Hong Kong people. This ‘stage’ of wanting to be enveloped in Chinese space is usually short-lived.\(^{19}\) I interviewed Angie five years after she had settled in Sydney. Initially she wanted to live in proximity to Hong Kong people, but expressed a typical desire to disperse:

> sky. Face West and there is the smoke scarred embankment leading towards the wharfs. The beauty and the beast... All cities depend on this chasm. (Tsoiolkas: 41, 143-4)

\(^{18}\) Larger retailers have begun to realise the potential for marketing to the diverse cultural groups found in many parts of Sydney. Supermarkets like ‘Big Fresh’ which first opened in Leichhardt and later other locations embody a multicultural ethic in selling a wide variety of national produce, with subsequent market success. In the process they have taken ‘shopping as spectacle’ to greater lengths, with singing and dancing animals and vegetables, strolling clowns and musicians, etc.

\(^{19}\) Older people typically have less capacity to acquire language skills and new social connections and thus are less likely to change. Community agencies working with Chinese such as Australian Chinese Community Association (ACCA) devote by far the largest part of their programs to older immigrants. As a community worker told me, “the younger (Hong Kong-born) people are too busy working or studying, or if they are not working, looking for jobs to be involved.”
At the beginning ... if I meet people from Hong Kong where I come from, then I can get more social gatherings... and I can get more consultation advice. I won’t find it so strange in a new environment...But now after five years, I can live anywhere. I am accustomed to Australian way of life, and so it’s just the same anywhere, it’s the same.

Angie was past the stage of needing to live in proximity to other Hong Kong people. This is not the kind of perspective which we would associate with the formation of ‘enclaves’ or any strong immersion in concentrated ethnic community. Hong Kong Chinese have nevertheless made a contribution to the appearance of Chinese concentrations, the creation of a number of putative ‘Chinatowns’. New areas have emerged where there is a visibly Asian presence in the form of stores and restaurants beyond the established Chinatown in Haymarket – such as Chatswood, Hurstville, Parramatta, Eastwood. These are principally retail and eating sites that provide visible signs of Chinese-ness. ‘Chinatown’ in Australia has shifted from being a single enclosing ethnic ‘enclave’ which supplied a wide range of specific community functions, to more dispersed zones of consumption –culinary and shopping areas (See Anderson 1990, 1993).

I am more interested in places in Sydney in terms of processes of orientation, and how subjects have practically made sense of the city through its divisions, its places of desire, fear, indifference. These understandings may not be entirely incongruent with the ‘Aussie’ social imaginary of Sydney. Dana, who had spent a couple of years living in Blacktown in Sydney’s western suburbs while studying prior to emigration, put it this way:

When you divide the city, east-west and south-north, the best place to stay is east or north. You know about it. In the western area, there is a lot of, you know, people, but the quality of people is not as well as the other part.

This sounds something like the general structure of Aussie accounts of Sydney’s social spatiality. These impressions of the class topography of Sydney could come
from any number of sources – through friends and colleagues accounts of places, media stories, or personal experience. But Hong Kong people have not simply reproduced the social map of Sydney in the same form as the natives’. Migrant accounts of suburban differentiation typically encompass their own experience of finding their place in the city relative to a sense of their social position. Decisions about settlement in Sydney involve diverse and often protracted strategies of testing out the best place to be. Settlement strategies are understood in relation to past trajectories, and indexed to specific places. Adrian bought a block of land in southern Sydney. Because land and property is worth far more in Hong Kong due to the extremely short supply he was able to buy a much more capacious dwelling in southern Sydney.

Yeah, Australia is so spacious, fresh open air, wide and completed roads. So I purchase a block of land in Beverley Hills and built a new house there. The living condition is very comfortable, compared with Hong Kong it’s much better. You couldn’t buy this much land for no matter how many millions. Only very rich people in Hong Kong own a house and a garden, so spacious, very luxurious for ordinary people in Hong Kong.

Adrian’s sense of upward mobility is certainly enhanced by the unprecedented access to land in Sydney, and the status this seems to imply. Adrian implicitly references Hong Kong space in evaluating his own trajectory in Sydney.

P: When you first came to Sydney, where did you live?
A: In the south, in Beverley Hills.
P: Why did you choose that place to live?
A: In the first place because my sister lives in Beverley Hills, and it’s logical that I live in a place near to my sibling, so they can render me consultation advice. I know nothing about Australia when I first arrived, so I logically found a place adjacent to my sister.
P: Did you like living in Beverley Hills, did you feel at home there?
A: After all, is quite good, but after all I found more Hong Kong people live in the north than in the south. But I may consider moving to the north later but not now.

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20 None of these exclusively cater to Hong Kong immigrants. Other ‘Asian’ shopping areas with less Hong Kong presence include Cabramatta, Ashfield, and Bankstown.
We can see how Adrian referenced Sydney’s urban space in terms of the location of other Hong Kong immigrants. A distinction between location in ‘north’ and ‘south’ emerged in these accounts of relations between migrant subjects, perceptions about lifestyles and styles of housing. One interviewee commented:

The wealthy people settle in the north shore and the people with less money further south, such as in places like Hurstville. Most people we know live in the north, but they do not have much time for us. (…) Yes, I think it makes a difference to Hong Kong people where you live and what kind of house you have.

Again status is measured in relation to the location of other people from Hong Kong. Being less habituated to the internal spaces of Sydney, migrants construct their own maps of Sydney’s hierarchies of places and associated meanings. I want to present two cases of gravitation to the suburb of Carlingford, as a way of comparing different trajectories and readings of class and place.

Stephen described his family’s movements in Sydney over several years. For some nine months he and his family rented a house in Lindfield in the north shore, which they had heard was a good area to settle and invest in property. They were still deciding whether to stay permanently at this stage, but wanted to buy property if they were going to stay in Australia. When they had made a decision to remain in Australia for good, they tried out several residential locations including Eastwood, before deciding on Carlingford, because it was close to a good school, where the children go.

Stephen differentiated Carlingford spatially and socially from the ‘north shore’:

They are different, they are different. The people living in Carlingford, they are the workers, they are in the blue collars, they’re working types there. The one in the north shore, normally they are rich, they own business, or they just want to come to retire.

But here we see a subtly different reading of the class grading of the city, viewed from a specific migrant viewpoint. The search for the best place to live, given one’s
social and economic resources, entails forging a particular social map of the city filtered through a ‘Hong Kong’ sense of positionality. But this social map must also mesh to some extent with dominant local representations of the city’s structure. Carlingford occupies an ambiguous position in the changing cognitive map of Sydney. Does it belong to the north shore or western suburbs? Physically Carlingford lies in between Parramatta and the western edges of the ‘north shore’. Carlingford could be positioned either at the far end of the north shore, or the beginning of the west, depending on viewpoint. This is a question of imputing its class representation, given that the north shore is locally associated with wealth, usually ‘old money’, while the west is associated with working classes, and relative deprivation. North shore residents may consider Carlingford as part of the West, since it is close to Parramatta, definitely ‘westie’ heartland. Another informant living nearby thought of Carlingford as part of the north, because of its proximity to Eastwood, a middle class suburb with a sizeable Asian migrant population. But Stephen distinguishes Carlingford from the north shore, which he understands to be the abode of wealthy Hong Kong Chinese, especially those living around the Chatswood area. The characterisation of Carlingford as ‘blue collar’ is relative to the north shore as the most prestigious zone of Hong Kong settlement – ‘they are rich, they own business, or they just want to come to retire.’ Rather than deriving the social position of Carlingford from the ‘dominant’ perception of Sydney’s status geography, migrants may map the city partially through their readings of the migrant group and its social divisions. Few locally born Sydney-siders would think of Carlingford as ‘blue collar.’

Stephen was making a synthesis of impressions of general class divisions in Sydney, as well as of the Hong Kong migrant field.

We might compare Wanda’s move to Carlingford from Wentworthville, a western suburb near Parramatta. When she found a job in Parramatta, she bought a unit in

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21 This example of a particularly ambiguous suburban location was suggested by a discussion at a seminar in 1999 called “Writing the West”. It was about western Sydney and the way it is represented relative to other parts of Sydney. There was some discussion of this contested social spatialisation of Carlingford. To many of the discussants, this boiled down to whether Carlingford is a nouveau riche area, or a ‘genuine’ part of the west. For instance, one man who grew up there said it was becoming part of the north, because it is now a gentrified area, unlike the time of his childhood. Most people at this event regarded themselves as ‘authentic’ western suburbs intellectuals confronting a class bias directed against the region. Curiously, they succumbed to the same class-ifying logic that they were trying to criticise, in adopting a ‘proletaroid’ position in relation to the ‘marginalisation’ of the western suburbs. Carlingford no longer fitted the category of west, because it no longer contained the authentic battlers.
nearby Wentworthville because of its proximity to work. Wanda came to live in Carlingford via the ‘west’ not via the ‘north’, so her experience and sense of distinction between places is partly based on living in the west. She experienced the different evaluation of the western suburbs more directly, and came to the realisation that the area was not so ‘suitable’ to Hong Kong people of her background.

P: What did you think of living there (in Wentworthville)?
W: Well, it’s not too bad. I guess where I lived in Wentworthville the street is quite high population, it’s all units, and it’s got a few blocks of Housing Commission units as well. So after a while, I feel, like, in terms of value, it wasn’t that great.

P: Was it affected by the Housing Commission places?
W: Well, it’s just, I think the kind of stigma with the western suburbs. Although we didn’t have any problems where we were, but we think the house, I mean the price of the unit, hasn’t really raised in a few years. And I’ve got a lot of friends living in Eastwood, Carlingford area as well, and a lot of Chinese sort of live around this area, (...) and because our office moved to Telopea, and I sort of beginning to, like this area. ….The western suburbs, I think, is not as good as where we’re living now, and it’s sort of mainly working class people. But we didn’t really have any trouble, but I guess I feel in the long run, it’s probably better to be in a place where we can live long term.

This association of ‘trouble’ with proximity to working class people did not arise from any negative experiences with neighbours. Rather Wanda became aware of the difference in value ascribed to the area – both in terms of the sense of stigma attached to it and its inhabitants and to the real estate values that were not appreciating like most of Sydney. She has incorporated the association of ‘units’ and public housing with lower status, even though she can attribute this lower status to ‘stigma’.

The social maps that Hong Kong people form of Sydney (and these are certainly not static) often include ethnicizing certain places in relation to the presence of other Chinese communities. For instance, it is common for Ashfield, where there is a concentration of PRC immigrants, in particular Shanghainese, to be referred to as ‘Shanghai’, and Hurstville ‘little Shanghai’. I have heard Hurstville referred to as ‘Singapore in Sydney’, not because there is a Singaporean concentration there, but
‘because it’s very tidy, and the police do a good job of cleaning up crime.’ I was told there were signs in the streets saying ‘No loitering’ and threatening a $500 fine. These regulations would have had nothing to do with the presence of Singaporeans in the locality. However, these readings of place seem to reflect a Hong Kong regional template projected onto the topography of Sydney.

Particular places can be associated, either positively or negatively with other Asian groups. Dana was drawn to other (East) Asians, Koreans, Japanese and Taiwanese, living around Chatswood and St. Leonards near her north shore apartment block: ‘because they look similar to you, you feel more comfy with them.’ On the other hand, the presence of other Asians can often be problematic for Hong Kong Chinese. Wai Man, who had been looking for places to live in Ashfield mentioned that he didn’t want to live near mainland Chinese in Ashfield, as he didn’t feel safe around them. The transposing of this distrust is not so surprising, given the common stigmatisation in Hong Kong of ‘mainlanders’, typically identified as ‘illegals’ and blamed for crime and other problems. This distinction is really about established versus recent immigrants in a city of immigrants. Helen Siu noted negative terms for recent immigrants from the PRC such as ‘mainland boy’, ‘green stamp alien’, ‘Ah Chan’ which seem to date from the 1980s (Siu 1988:1). An emergent sense of identity in Hong Kong, distinct from one based on Chinese origin, would seem to be partly constituted by an ethos of material progress, threatened by ‘less developed’ immigrants. Mainlanders are perceived to be the cause of a multiplicity of problems in Hong Kong, including competition for jobs, impeding the supply and access to government housing, and most emotively, of crime. Also, mainlanders are thought to be characterized by lack – of style and of cosmopolitan savvy, even though they often share the same place of origin as their detractors. They must work hard to acquire the look, speech and style of the Hong Kong urban ‘natives’.

Fay was quite blunt about Hong Kong people not wanting to mix with other Asians in Australia, singling out Vietnamese and mainland Chinese. When I asked her why she said: ‘those PRC Chinese elbow you in the crowd and spit in the street, climb on a wall to get their photo taken. They will even divorce their spouses to get the single parent’s benefit.’ Fay was herself an immigrant from Shanghai. I ask her why she thought mainland Chinese were like this.
The Chinese people are different from Chinese many years ago. They don’t have that tradition, the sense of value is different. They are too practical. I saw couples coming to Hong Kong, recently migrated to Hong Kong, and the husband got ill, and the wife just dump him like garbage. No good, always wanting to climb up, saying ‘we don’t suffer enough, don’t want to suffer any more. I want my share, it’s my time now to enjoy.’ They forgot how hard Hong Kong people work. . .

In this narrative, the Chinese from China have lost certain Chinese virtues, which have somehow been maintained in Hong Kong. These cultural tensions acquired in Hong Kong are projected onto certain spaces of danger in multicultural Sydney. 22

Wai Man initially lived in Marrickville, an area in the ‘inner west’ of Sydney characterised by a diverse population including people of Vietnamese, Lebanese, Greek, and Pacific Islander origin. He had been disturbed and anxious about his safety, particularly because of the visible presence of public drug dealing near the Marrickville railway station. Wai Man was worried that they were mostly Vietnamese, an often stigmatised group in Hong Kong. 23 Vietnamese in Hong Kong are negatively associated with ‘boat people’ who were effectively incarcerated there for long periods by the Hong Kong government. Wai Man felt he was being ‘harassed’ about money by mainly young men who would ask for small change. Once he said no to one of them and he thought the youth was following him. In Hong Kong, he had never felt threatened by beggars, since they were mainly old people, or ‘those disabled people who just hold out a bowl’ and didn’t present a threat to him. A sense of danger cohered around negative images of class and ethnicity, probably derived more from Hong Kong than from local sources. Wai Man later moved to Hurstville, where he felt much safer:

I feel much safer than in Marrickville. The crime rate is lower. There was always drug dealers and drug users, you could tell which ones they were. And also, no one comes

22 There has been little attention given to racism in Hong Kong, either in popular discourse or in academic studies. For a discussion of the invisible forms of racism and national distinctions from the standpoint of the teaching of anthropology in Hong Kong institutions, see Lilley 2001.
23 This was in 1998 when there were newspaper reports of the street trade in heroin having spread to Marrickville. From my observations in 2000 visible trade had vanished from the vicinity of the station.
up and asks you for money here. People are nicer here, they say hello to you in the supermarket. Not like in Marrickville, the people in the shops, they are so rude. …

They call it [Hurstville] Sydney’s second Chinatown. It is a big metropolitan town. Now Hurstville is the second largest suburb, apart from Chatswood, for the gathering of the Chinese. There are many people there.

We can see how the specific localisations of fear of crime and violence are transferred from a specific Hong Kong Chinese disposition towards other ethnic groups. These localisations may well run parallel to local Aussie ethnic typifications of crime and danger, but they are not identical in origin.

In Dana’s social topography, negative perceptions of the western suburbs were linked to crime and people perceived to be lower class. She spoke of her fear of violent crime and robbery when travelling at night from Blacktown. At the same time she speculated that crime might not be objectively worse in western Sydney than in parts of Hong Kong where she had lived, but rather:

D: …the impression when I got here is I’m like (an) outsider here, so I couldn’t ventilate so much. In Hong Kong, you know the places because you are born there and you know about the peoples around you, and the different areas. In case of emergency, you got some help from the other people. You can ventilate better.

P: Ventilate?
D: Yeah.

P: What do you mean by ‘ventilate’?
D: Like you know, there’s a lot of things you can’t talk with the other people too personally…. In Hong Kong, even I stay in the area which is not very good, you know, for accommodation or whatever, but you still find the place, you know, is more comfy.

I was puzzled by this use of ‘ventilation’, meaning something like an intimacy and sense of security in a place. Perhaps a mistranslation of a Cantonese usage, it struck me as an apt Hong Kong English invention, revealing in its affective specificity. ‘Ventilation’ seems to imply a capacity to ‘breathe easily’ in an atmosphere one knows in a more ‘comfy’ and personal way. A lack of ventilation – not having a
sense of the familiarity of spaces and people around her – allows Dana to succumb to insecurity and a fear of criminality.

Anxiety about crime in empty spaces is not an uncommon feeling among Hong Kong people in Sydney. I recall accompanying a friend from Hong Kong to the bus terminal at Central Railway to wait for a bus to an eastern suburb where he was staying. I waited a while talking with him before he suggested that he would be all right, I could go, although I sensed some unease. When I said I would wait with him, he was immensely relieved, admitting he was quite scared when no one was around. He didn’t like to be out after dark in Sydney, although he told me he felt quite secure in Hong Kong at any hour. He felt more secure in familiar spaces – ‘It’s your place, you know it’. A feeling of security is not just based on objective chances of crime or violence occurring, but on a certain sense of belonging or ‘ownership’ of a place.

7h. Chapter conclusion

In this chapter I have presented some ‘spatial stories’ of practical encounters with suburban space Sydney. They detail moments in individual strategies of dwelling, fragments of ongoing projects of establishing and augmenting a sense of being in a new place. These accounts do not give a whole picture of Hong Kong migrant adaptation to Sydney’s environment. They tell more about affective states and how subjects become attuned, develop a ‘feel’ for suburban milieux.

Settlement practices encompass both repose and movement, and take place at different social and spatial scales: from the cultivation of the proximate spaces of house and garden; the expansion of routine movements and the exploration of new parts of the city; to the gradual formation of more complex representations of the city as an aggregation of regions and a structure of differences.

Subjects typically confront a sense of ‘too much space’, the initial perception of intervening space as a barrier to the intimacy and at-hand availability of Hong Kong

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24 It struck me that expressions of fear seems to be more easily and commonly expressed by Hong Kong men than by Australian men.
life. These spatialised feelings are projections of a sense of ‘social density’ relative to the degree of integration of the subject, their sense of centrality in relation to the newly adopted place.

Ordinary activities such as gardening may confront people from Hong Kong with a sense of uncontained and sometimes threatening irruptions of ‘nature’. Phobic responses to spiders, birds or soil in part derive from the de-naturalised environment of Hong Kong. Living in suburban houses or neighbourhoods has to be learned: suburbia is by no means the natural state Aussies imagine it to be. Learning to dwell in suburban settings is assisted by the acquisition of new ‘spatial pleasures’ – enjoying the spatiality which was initially a barrier to feeling at home. Migrant dwelling goes beyond necessity, often expanding to encompass new possibilities and tastes for the unfamiliar.

Establishing practices of suburban dwelling often entails shifting the primary site of social interface towards the house, creating a different sense of relation between work and domestic life, the public and the private in the two cities. The suburbanising of social experience in Sydney is often the basis for sharp comparisons with Hong Kong. A ‘deeper’ sociality, friendship and family life based on leisure and space is equated with Sydney, and compared with the speedy density and functionality of Hong Kong. It is as if economic relations did not exist in Australia or a private and intimate sphere was not possible in Hong Kong. While these dualistic comparisons apparently misrecognise many aspects of social relations in Hong Kong and Sydney, at the same time they are also ways of actively orienting subjects in negotiating social tendencies and differences between places brought together by migrant trajectories.

Dwelling in a city as a whole entails the construction of an ‘image’ of the city and its divisions. Although in some ways mirroring locally hegemonic spatialised hierarchies of class, status and ethnicity in Sydney, migrant subjects overlaid their own templates as a basis for distinctions between places, based on hierarchies and power differentials derived from Hong Kong life. These spatialisations of urban space actively affected settlement strategies and the lived sense of place in Sydney. I pointed to some broad ‘native’ spatial/social distinctions about Sydney’s urban
space, in particular the stigmatisation of the west. Broadly speaking, western Sydney was viewed negatively as a place of lesser dwelling potential by Hong Kong migrants. However, the strongest cardinal distinction within the settler horizon was between north and south with the north shore representing the ideal place for successful migrant settlement.

Subjects generally did not attempt to ‘recreate’ Hong Kong in Sydney by building homely milieux or enclaves. Rather, migrant subjects adopted a form of dwelling in Sydney that complemented their still active connections to Hong Kong. Sydney presented ‘another side’ to the mode of urban experience in Hong Kong. Inhabitance in Sydney was often conditioned by the prospect of return or frequent shuttling to Hong Kong. A further dimension of cross-national migrant accommodation – between places – needs to be considered. This will be examined in chapter 9 using accounts of subjects returning to Hong Kong and the way they have incorporated their experience of Sydney into their sense of place.

The next chapter examines a cinematic account of the ‘globalisation’ of a single family from Hong Kong, traced in their movements and interconnections between Hong Kong, Australia and Germany. Migrant struggles with settlement in Sydney outlined in the last two chapters are amplified in the more elaborated narrative structures of a film that emphasises the contrasting lived spaces of migrant experience in several locations.