BEING HOME IN THE PEARL OF THE ORIENT

by

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Hong Kong is an Asian metropolis with a population of approximately seven million. Previous studies on the region concentrate on its history that is marked by radical changes to conclude that the on-going makeovers in the physical environment leave people without a permanence of place. Researchers also say that this fluid history eradicates temporal identity because pre-modernism and post-modernism exist at the same time. This study investigates how to describe and explain the relationship between people and environment in Hong Kong. Six informants who are from Hong Kong and who live in Hong Kong help to portray an image of home that does not agree with earlier studies. By looking at physical and emotional boundaries, expressions, and temporal dimensions, this study shows that people cannot be separated from their environment as both parts constitute the unity of being home. This study therefore concludes that neither the sense of place nor the temporal identity is threatened by the region’s history of instability. Rather, the informants express a strong sense of home because of the fast pace of life in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Anthropology of Home, Hong Kong, the Pearl of the Orient, Home Environments.
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Chapter 1

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF HOME

The ambiguity of this chapter’s title may suggest deceptive intentions on my part. In some avenues of research, the anthropology of home refers to anthropological studies where “field and home coincide.” Anthropologists, arguably best exemplified by Margaret Mead, have often stressed the importance of traveling far away from home to conduct fieldwork. In this sense, the anthropology of home is the other end of the spectrum, the polarized opposite of anthropology away from home. But despite the title of this chapter, I do not intend to place my home under an anthropological microscope. Rather, I am using the anthropology of home as a connotation of the study about the relationship between people and environment. In this study, those people are from Hong Kong and the environment is Hong Kong. Thus, the aim of this document is to present an insight into that relationship.

Why Hong Kong?

Any country, region, city, village or neighborhood could be the target of the anthropology of home. My special interest in Hong Kong is one that has gradually been intensified over the last six years. In 2001, I was introduced to some classic Hong Kong films of filmmaker Wong Kar-Wei such as Happy Together, Days of Being Wild and Chunking Express. These films immediately captured the attention of the cineaste in me. Sequentially, I read various articles on the history of Hong Kong and was especially intrigued by Rey Chow’s groundbreaking essay A Souvenir of Love. Consequently, my interest in the so-called Pearl of the Orient was firmly established. Years later, I came across books that sparked yet another interest of mine. Books such as The Nuer by anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard, A Year in Lapland by anthropologist Hugh Beach and The Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea by anthropologist Annette B. Weiner discussed, in varying detail, the home’s significance for the lives of the Nuer, the Samis and the Trobrianders. Together, those two interests – Hong Kong and the anthropology of home – paved the way for the topic of this thesis.

Method

In a paragraph about the themes in a Hong Kong film, Chow asks the thought-provoking question, “Whose fault is the truth?” This wonderfully phrased philosophical question brings up two points essential to my study. Firstly, the question deals with the dichotomy of right and
wrong, and by implication someone is to be blamed. While ethical questions tend to trigger a philosopher like me into debate, an anthropologist like me finds little value in such questions. Anthropologists describe and explain. We simply state that some people drive on the left side of the road, not the wrong side of the road. This distinction is one of importance since anthropological studies easily slide into the field of politics, of opinion. I therefore wish to clarify that, as an anthropologist, I find political neutrality a matter of course, and nowhere in this study have I intended to wander into questions of right and wrong. Secondly, Chow’s question indicates the presence of objective truth, much to the delight of a philosopher like me. But an anthropologist like me is not in the least interested in objective truth. The only truth I have been in quest of is the one corresponding to my informants’ perception of reality.

Who, then, are my informants, how did I find them, and how did I conduct my fieldwork? While following Mead’s view on how anthropological fieldwork should be conducted could have been advantageous, the possibility to travel to Hong Kong never presented itself to me. I was therefore anchored at home in Sweden throughout the entire research. Instead of physically going anywhere, I used the Internet to gather necessary information. After strategically searching the web for people who were both from Hong Kong and who lived in Hong Kong, I contacted 35 individuals by e-mail, using my university e-mail address. I presented myself with my full name, age and nationality, and followed up with a presentation of my academic discipline and the area of research I was engaged in. If the recipients were interested in assisting me by answering questions via e-mail, I encouraged them to reply. The response rate turned out to be approximately one in six, which gave me a total of six informants: three men in their 20’s, 30’s and 40’s respectively, and three women in their 30’s, 40’s and 50’s respectively.

Open-ended questions gave shape to semi-structured interviews and functioned as a point of departure of the study. All communication was carried out in English, which at times proved to be a mountain to climb. The informants periodically asked me to clarify questions, and I occasionally asked them to further explain their answers. So despite losing the sensory experience of face-to-face interviews, I found the interviews to be exceptionally enriching experiences.

Additionally, my position as an anthropologist could hardly be interpreted as invisible and impotent. I was embedded in my own research as I designed the questions, quite possibly affected the informants’ responses by my mere presence, and perhaps more importantly, my will to conduct this study and present its results could not be anything but subjective. This document should therefore be seen in the light of a product of a myriad of influences from me.
Having said that, we can also contemplate the role of the informants. How can the reflections of one person say anything about a group? What do discrepant views among six individuals say about a population of seven million? The idea of cultural and regional collective identity is the central element in social anthropology and something that André Légaré articulately explains in an article about Nunavut, a territory in northern Canada. He states that

"cultural identity refers to a person’s attachment toward a particular cultural group ... and is based on a retelling of the past, where past cultural events are mediated by various actors (e.g., governments, cultural organizations) who, for political or social gains reconstruct past symbols and memories."

Furthermore, Légaré cites Anne Gilbert in saying that “regional identity is based on certain awareness among inhabitants of their common spatial environment and of their differences from other regions.”

Thus, extrapolating theories about a group from reflections of an individual, or about a bigger group from reflections of a smaller, is not as far-fetched as it may seem at first glance. Within the anthropology of home, seeing the big picture is a necessity because a home, as Carol M. Werner, Irwin Altman and Diana Oxley say, is “associated with memories of past interactions and ties between people.” People share memories and lifestyles. These memories and lifestyles do not cease to exist outside the front door of a house but leaven all through societies. A holistic perspective is therefore the approach that I have emphasized in this study to present the relationship between people and environment in Hong Kong.

In the following chapters, I am going to investigate how different elements, or layers as I call them, help to describe and explain the meanings of home in Hong Kong. The first two layers, physical and emotional boundaries, will be my starting point in the next chapter. By dividing home into three territories (the primary which is surrounded by the walls of one’s apartment or house, the secondary which includes lobbies, gardens, elevators and other areas close to the primary territory, and the public which covers areas far away from the primary territory) and by taking history into account, I show that physical and emotional boundaries cannot be separated from people but form a oneness in which people are incorporated. In chapter 3, I bring five expressions of home to the light: necessity, familiarity, control, privacy and action. By looking at those expressions, we will expand our understanding of the connection the people of Hong Kong have with their environment in more abstract terms. The necessity of basic elements, the familiarity of the environment, the control of norms and behavior, the privacy obtained from locking out the public, and the action of engaging in activities all form the concept of home. The final layer, temporality, is the focal point of chapter
4. Here, I present the relationship between home and time in Hong Kong and cover perspectives on linear and cyclical time as well as timelessness. While linear time can describe and explain many biological characteristics relevant to the connection between people and environment, cyclical time points to patterns of repetition that are evident aspects of that connection. Both ways of looking at time help us understand the relationship between people and environment. Yet, we may be inclined to point to the presence of timelessness in Hong Kong as many theorists do. That will be the essence of chapter 4. Finally, in chapter 5, I leave concluding remarks and propose possible directions for further research on the topic.
Chapter 2

SPATIAL AND EMOTIONAL BOUNDARIES

Home is where the heart is, the proverb goes. It refers to a special emotional attachment to a physical place. But for millions of refugees around the world, George Lipsitz says, “Home is where the hatred is.” Today, he says, people “flee the hatred at home to seek a better life someplace else, making displacement, exile, and homelessness common experiences.” For others, home is not spatially static but relative to one’s geographical position. For example, home can be California to someone in Texas, Los Angeles to someone in San Francisco, Downtown to someone in Hollywood, Figueroa Street to someone on 7th street, and so on. In this chapter, I intend to map out the area encapsulating six individuals’ perspectives on home in Hong Kong. By doing so, I aim to present a first framework for comprehending the relationship between people and environment in the Asian metropolis.

Territories of home

Patrick Chan, a man in his 30’s, had lived the past six years in the same apartment in Hong Kong by the time I made contact with him. When the question regarding territories of home came about, he graphically described the picture he had in mind. “I live on the 40th floor and each floor has eight flats. And, for security reasons, each flat has a gate of steel installed in addition to a wooden door,” he said and pointed out that for him, home was anywhere between the walls of the apartment and the wooden door. Patrick’s description of home could be categorized as being of the primary type, a place where he sees and spends time with people of his own family and close friends. As it turned out, most of my informants agreed with him.

Alex Yeung, a man in his 20’s, told me that he had lived with his parents in the same apartment in a public estate all his life and considered home to be of the primary type. Likewise, the third person I interviewed, David Lau, a man in his 40’s who had lived in his current apartment for the past fourteen years, also agreed with Patrick and Alex. Lucy Lam, my fourth informant and a woman in her 40’s, had no objections. Home was of the primary type, she said and added, “I have lived here for over twenty years and I do not think about relocating because I love my place. I will always keep this flat and never sell it.”

Amy Chiu, a woman in her 50’s who had lived in her current apartment for the past eighteen months, included the hallway between the apartment’s door and the elevators when she was faced with the question regarding territories of home. Thus, she had a spatially wider
definition of home than Patrick, Alex, David and Lucy. Amy’s description of home could therefore be categorized as being of both the primary type and of the secondary type, a place where she sees close neighbors.9

Finally, Maggie Wong, a woman in her 30’s who had lived in the same apartment for the past 23 years, told me another story. In her description, home was equivalent to the district in which her apartment was located. Consequently, she had the spatially widest definition of home of all my informants. Her description would therefore best be categorized as being of the primary, secondary, and public types. In public territories, people see mostly strangers.10

Interestingly, most of the informants expressed a long-term attachment to their current residence, and conveyed, without the slightest hesitation, that they had no plans to relocate. In comparison, several studies has estimated that the average American moves fourteen times during his or her life, the average Brit eight times, and the average Japanese seven times.11 In yet another study, the average Swede is said to move ten times during his or her life.12 Noticing this long-term attachment to apartments in Hong Kong, I curiously asked my informants about their relationships to their neighbors.

Home territories and neighbors
When Alex mentioned his neighbors to me, he explained, “People in the past used to have closer relations with neighbors.” He attributed this to poor standards of living in the old days, which in turn led to people often asking their neighbors for help. Alex said that he did not know his neighbors well, but “I still say ‘good morning’ and ‘how are you’ to them,” he continued.

Patrick had similar experiences with his neighbors. When I asked him how well he knew them, he said,

To be frank, not really well. We just say ‘hi’ when we come across one another. It is due to the fact that Chinese are a bit passive, and each flat has that steel gate and the doors are closed round-the-clock, so I cannot access them easily unless I ring the doorbells.

David, Maggie and Lucy, on the other hand, expressed having closer ties to their respective neighbors. “We know each other’s families and visit each other every New Year. Occasionally, we exchange gifts from our travels,” David said. “I know their family names,” Maggie said and continued, “I also know how many people there are in each flat, their occupations and much more.” She explained that most people, including herself, had lived there
for more than twenty years. “We have known one another for many years,” Lucy said. “The relationship between us is good.”

As Werner, Altman and Oxley say regarding social rules and social relationships,

Arrangements of homes around a center or plaza versus row arrangements are likely to reflect and foster different forms of communication between neighbors, different temporal flows of interaction, and different types of interpersonal relationships. Similarly, organization and use of space inside the house support different kinds of communications and meanings for residents.13

In accordance with this theory, the steel gates on the 40th floor in Patrick’s apartment building, for example, is one way of using space and is a reason for the neighbors’ lack of communication. Having lived longer at their current addresses, David, Maggie and Lucy know the routines around their apartments – often referred to as life on a block – and those routines can contribute to increased communication between neighbors. For stronger emotional attachments, however, we need to look at how people project emotions onto physical objects.

**Furniture and memories**

Maggie, David and Patrick rendered their emotional boundaries of home through stories about specific furniture and other household items. Remembering a time when playing hide and seek, Maggie said that she attached memories to one of her wardrobes in which she was accidentally locked inside twenty years ago. To her, that wardrobe was not a lifeless object, like any wardrobe on display at IKEA, but something else, something full of emotional significance. David told me about a vase. It was a big porcelain vase that his grandfather had given to him to which he attached specific memories. Patrick mentioned a coffee table that he had emotional ties to. It was a gift from his wife’s brother.

The implicit idea is that people and objects are intertwined in particular relationships. As Werner, Altman and Oxley say,

People are ... linked to their homes by affective and emotional bonds; social relationships are manifested in spatial, psychological, and interpersonal terms, as people use objects and areas in the home to engage in social interaction. ... [H]ome can also be a symbolic representation of those relationships, as it becomes associated with memories of past interactions and ties between people.14
As we listen to the stories from Maggie, David and Patrick, we see this profound link that binds people, furniture and items on an emotional level. Hong Kong is, however, different to most places insofar as its history is concerned. This history needs to be taken into consideration, as foreshadowed by Alex’s remark that people used to associate with their neighbors more often in the past.

A brief history of Hong Kong

In January of 1841, a controversy between Britain and China emerged. China blamed the British for using Hong Kong Island as a port to smuggle opium into China. Britain claimed the allegation to be false as British stationed in the surrounding waters had no such intentions. They came in peace, in search for shelter and food, British officials said. As the disagreement between the countries escalated, Britain invaded Hong Kong Island, resulting in the First Opium War. The war came to an end the following year. Through the Treaty of Nanking, China surrendered Hong Kong Island, which at the time had a population of less than 10,000, to the British.

On June 26, 1843, the treaty was officially confirmed as Hong Kong Island became a British colony. British military, however, did not stop the invasion at Hong Kong Island. Troops moved forward and into Kowloon. British and Chinese troops were again engaged in battle, this time in what later came to be known as the Second Opium War (1856-1860). Through the Treaty of Peking in 1860, China surrendered Kowloon to Britain.

As the population of the region rapidly increased, Britain saw the benefits of enlarging the dimensions of their colony. It needed farmland that could deliver meat and vegetables. Britain reacted quickly. The New Territories were officially part of the British colony in October of 1898. And through the second Convention of Peking, China agreed to lease the colony to Britain for 99 years, until June 30, 1997.
The population of the colony continued to grow and had passed one million before World War II. But following Japan’s occupation of the area in the mid 1940’s, hundreds of thousands of civilians fled to the Mainland. The statistically negative trend proved to be temporary, however, as the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949), in which the communists achieved success, caused millions of refugees to search for a better home in the British colony. The effects were dramatic. Approximately one million people found their homes to be temporary huts, and the overpopulation of the residential areas led to a spread of diseases. The conditions were nearly unbearable. Additionally 50,000 people became homeless in 1953 after an extensive fire on Christmas Day. Furthermore, the presence of millions of poor people in the colony meant cheap labor, which in turn set off an economic boom. In 1982, the population had climbed over the 5 million mark.

As the 99-year lease approached its end, British and Chinese officials arranged meetings to discuss the future of the colony. On December 19, 1984, the prime ministers of China and United Kingdom signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration. It stated that Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and the New Territories would, on July 1, 1997, be handed over to China. At this time, reports stated that people who were born in the colony had no say in the matter.

According to agreement between the two countries, a Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of China was to be established. A one-country, two-system solution would secure the autonomy of HKSAR as China agreed not to interfere with the politics in HKSAR for the next 50 years. HKSAR was therefore able to continue to operate through capitalist systems and not be forced into the socialism of the Mainland.

From the 1980’s and onward, big housing projects could be seen in the colony. In the New Territories alone, seven new cities were undergoing development. The New Territories, it was said, should, as a chain in securing possibilities for further economic growth of the colony, aim to house a third of the entire colony’s population. Thus, the physical environment of the colony underwent constant change when real-estate speculations paved the way for buildings to be demolished, and new buildings to rise, only to be demolished again. Stability and permanence did not exist. According to historical accounts,

“People had little to hold onto. They found it difficult to identify with anything – trends, fashion, business practices, architecture, power structures, etc, – because it changed too quickly for appropriation into the mainstream.”

9
Hong Kong today

HKSAR, commonly just Hong Kong, consists of Hong Kong Island (pop. 1.3 million), Kowloon peninsula (pop. 2.1 million), the New Territories (pop. 2.1 million) and approximately 260 islands in the South China Sea.\(^{38}\) The total population of Hong Kong is roughly seven million,\(^ {39}\) distributed in less than five percent of the region’s land.\(^ {40}\)

Often described in dichotomies, Hong Kong exhibits remarkable contrasts. Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover portray Hong Kong as,

a leading finance-capital center of the world [that] functions as a commercial center for Southeast Asia and southern China. A postmodern [region] with an international airport, skyscrapers, traffic jams, and cellular phones, Hong Kong has been at the forefront of neo-liberal free-trade policies. The former British Colony, now Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, [Hong Kong] has the world’s freest market economy, the world’s most service-oriented economy, and Asia’s highest per capita income in terms of domestic buying power. Hong Kong has the world’s second most competitive economy and the world’s seventh largest trading economy. It is the world’s second largest per capita holding of foreign currency, the world’s fourth largest source of direct foreign investment, and the world’s ninth leading exporter of services. Today, successful businesspeople thrive in what has become one of the world’s capitalist showcases. A mapping of Hong Kong reveals high-walled private homes, neon signs advertising goods from every continent, and blocks of luxury hotels and indoor malls. Another dimension of this landscape, however, is its sweatshops, storefronts, urban pollution, and shantytowns of unrelieved squalor, with too many people for too little land. Poor laborers, sole proprietors, and street people inhabit this terrain.\(^ {41}\)

The high inequality in the distribution of income generates a divided population of rich and poor. And “nowhere,” Odham Stokes and Hoover say, “is social class polarity in Hong Kong more evident than in residential patterns.”\(^ {42}\) Describing this pattern, Odham Stokes and Hoover state,

Apartment size is generally limited to one or two rooms, with running water, electricity, and private space facilities. It is not unusual for a family of six to share a 10 ft (3.05 m) by 12 ft (3.6 m) space for eating, sleeping, socializing, and working. Long lists for existing as well as future units means that the wait may be years. Meanwhile, the wealthy, far removed from the hurry and scurry of life in the crowded metropolis below, live in lavish homes along the road leading to Victoria Peak and in high-rise penthouses on the far side of Hong Kong Island or along Clearwater Bay in the New Territories.\(^ {43}\) (My parentheses).
Home territories and history

The polarized space of luxury hotels and indoor malls, traffic jams and pollution echoes a history of fluidity. An ambivalence, a two-mindedness of belonging to China, but not, of being controlled by a communist regime, but not, of having two passports at the same time – one issued by the United Kingdom before July 1, 1997, which is still valid today, and one issued by Hong Kong after June 30, 1997– all point to this fluidity. This uncertainty of who one is, where one is and to what one belongs leaves people with, as we have seen, very little to hold on to.

When the environment changes with the wind, what better to rest on than that which remains intact: one’s apartment? The many years my informants have lived in their respective apartments and the few times, if any, my informants have moved imply the existence of a special correlation between people and environment. Hong Kong is overpopulated and waiting lists for new places to live in are long. Both are inescapable conditions that leave people with little room for choice. Simultaneously, one can easily see how one’s apartment on the 40th floor becomes a sanctuary, a protection “from the hurry and scurry of life in the crowded metropolis below.”

If a wooden door is not enough, a gate of steel may be. My informants hold on to their apartments, establishing order. This order is essential for being. As Philip Sheldrake says regarding place and belonging, “A sense of ‘home’ seems vital if human identities are not to be fragmented” and continues, “‘Home’ represents our need for a location where we can pass through the stages of life and develop our fullest ‘self’.” In Hong Kong, that location is for the most part of the primary type.

Being home

Up to this point, I have presented a constellation of the anthropology of home in Hong Kong by focusing on spatial and emotional boundaries. The spatial boundaries do, in all cases, surround the apartments. We have seen, however, that in some cases the boundaries are not only of the primary type but also of the secondary type (Amy), including close neighbors, and of the public type (Maggie), including strangers. We have also seen examples on how specific objects such as furniture become tangible memories and thereby create emotional links between people and environment.

Talking about the function his home has in his life, Alex provided me with food for thought in saying that

for me, as for most people in Chinese communities, the term ‘home’ is a place that cannot be separated from one’s life. Home is not just a place for
us to rest, to eat, to play, but also a place for the family to stay together and I think that is the most valuable part of having a home.

In those sentences, Alex captured the essence of the interwoven relationship between people and environment. As Werner, Altman and Oxley say, “The ideas of place attachment and place identity suggest that when people attach psychological, social, and cultural significance to objects and spaces, they thereby bond themselves and the environment into a unity.” Therefore, I find that in Hong Kong, people are not at home; in Hong Kong, people are home.
Chapter 3

EXPRESSIONS OF HOME

The relationship between people and environment in Hong Kong penetrates more layers than just the spatial and emotional boundaries discussed in the previous chapter. Being home also comes with a layer of expressions. In this chapter, I will present five such expressions: necessity, familiarity, control, privacy and action.

Necessity
When Alex, Patrick, Maggie and Lucy discussed the meanings of being home, they all concentrated on their family. “My family is all I really need,” Alex said and emphasized the same again, “I can live without everything but my family.” Likewise, Patrick often referred to his family when sharing thoughts on the meanings of being home. Maggie made sure to mention her family in an account on what makes a home her home. Finally, reading what Lucy thought about her home, I noticed an emphasis on what she considered her “basic needs” which her family was part of. She dotted the i in her very last words to me, “Wherever I am staying with beloved ones – that’s my home!”

While being home in most cases becomes synonymous with some form of satisfaction, Sheldrake notes the essential effect “a sense of home” has on people. Alex’s, Patrick’s, Maggie’s and Lucy’s thoughts on the meanings of being home follow Sheldrake’s conclusion that home is a necessity to avoid fragmentation of personal identity. Alex’s home is not merely a physical building, encapsulated by physical and emotional boundaries, but a connection to the necessity of family. Therefore, he emphasizes, “I can live without everything but my family.” Thus, being home in Hong Kong refers to a state that incorporates the manufacturing of “basic needs” into the boundaries discussed in the previous chapter.

Familiarity
One of the more complex relationships between people and environment in Hong Kong that I noticed during the interviews was one focusing on degrees of familiarity. The complexities evolved from discussion about the feelings of being home as opposed to the feelings of not being home. “In my home, I am at ease with everything because I am familiar with everything here,” Alex said. Patrick also found the distinction to be evident, and touched the theme of familiarity in saying that “this is my place and everything.” Going against the stream, however,
Lucy partially rejected this principle so evident to Alex and Patrick. She mentioned how the idea of familiarity depends on the amount of time one spends at different locations. “I have gotten quite used to staying at different places because of the nature of my job,” she said, but added, “but of course, I feel the best when I am being home.”

In an article about the experiences of dwelling, Susan Saegert explores this topic. To her, home is “a location in which significant activities of daily life are conducted and to which an occupant would apply this symbolically charged label.” In Lucy’s case, her job – namely that of being a flight attendant – keeps her away from home two thirds of every month. Fittingly, as Saegert says, “one may tenant a house or apartment but carry out most important daily-life activities elsewhere,” possibly resulting in “metaphorical descriptions” such as “I feel at home wherever I go.”

If we consider architect Kimberly Dovey’s theory that being home means being “oriented in space,” being familiar with the territory, we satisfy part of my informants’ statements. Suiting Alex’s and Patrick’s thoughts, Dovey says,

> When we wander through the dark in our home, we do not need to see where the furniture and light switches are; we can ‘feel’ them. The home environment is predictable. Although when we are away from home we need to be alert and adaptable, at home we can relax within the stability of routine behavior and experience.

Amy and Maggie brought the expression of familiarity to these sensory experiences Dovey discusses. “Every home has its unique scent,” Amy stated and made the connection between home and the sense of personal smell. Maggie agreed. She told me about the personal scent in her apartment, and added that the sensory experiences of sounds and views personalize her home.

**Control**

In my interview with Amy, another expression of home became apparent. She pointed to the impact of ownership on the experience of home. While owning a property might be the ultimate expression of home control, Amy also directed attention to owning “personal stuff,” referring to things inside the property. Away from home, she was not in control of “stuff.” In yet another sense, David talked about being in control of behavior, associating home to “a place for self-retreat.” Patrick added, “Furnishing and decoration are customized by me to fit my way of living.”
Being in control seems to be an expression of freedom. This expression is articulated by anthropologist Nicole Constable in an article about women from the Philippines who have migrated to Hong Kong. Constable extensively describes the life of one woman, Acosta.

Although Acosta agonized about whether it was better for her to be with her children or to send them money from abroad, for her Hong Kong was the home away from home. … She was empowered by the independence and freedom she negotiated for herself there. She described Hong Kong as a place where … she felt ‘free’. In Hong Kong, she had become ‘her own boss.”

In home theory, as suggested by Ralph B. Taylor and Sidney Brower, “feelings of territorial control and responsibility [gradually] diminish … as one moves away from the home.” Contrary, control reaches its climax when someone is home and in power to decide appropriate action and behavior. Certainly, control itself is of relative idiosyncrasy, meaning that Alex’s control when being home may be less than Lucy’s, for example, possibly because Alex lives with his parents and Lucy does not.

Privacy
When David referred to his home as “a place for self-retreat,” he not only touched the expression of controlling the norms of behavior but also the expression of excluding interpersonal association – privacy. This expression of being home was, according to Maggie, the most significant. “The biggest difference is that I have privacy when I am home,” she emphasized.

In a paragraph on social dialectics, Dovey states that “the phenomenon of privacy, like that of home, is not so much a place as a dialectical process of being in contact and being out of contact with others.” That phenomenon, exemplified by David’s and Maggie’s statements, is our fourth expression of the concept of home.

Thus far we have found different expressions of home in my informants’ statements; yet, they have been scattered in all directions. The statements regarding one expression, though, point in the same direction, that of action.

Action
During the interviews, I was struck by the description of home as a verb and not only a noun. As previous chapter stressed, I found home in the context of Hong Kong to better capture the
essence of my informants’ statements if preceded by any form of the verb to be. That led me to distinguish between being at home and being home.

Evident in the analysis of the concept of being home, actions such as eating, playing, reading, watching TV and so forth, explain the on-going process of being home. Home is therefore not just a noun or any form of the verb to be, but dependent on all possible actions. Thus, I propose that we incorporate every verb into the concept of being home.

In this chapter, we have gone from the boundaries of chapter 1 into the realm of expressions. We have found that the relationship between people and environment in Hong Kong can be traced to necessities, the “basic needs” such as that of being in contact with family. We have also found that an expression of familiarity may play a key role in being home. Another ingredient of being home is the expression of control, making any individual feel like his or her own boss. Contrary to the expression of being in contact with family, the expression of privacy points to the excluding factors of being home. Lastly, being home is not synonymous with only being, but with every possible verb, giving us the expression of action.
Chapter 4

TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS

In this chapter, we are going to enter the most analyzed topic in current studies on Hong Kong, namely temporality. To place this topic in its right context, however, a brief historical account covering old Greeks and modern anthropologists will serve as highly relevant background information.

Throughout history, the concept of time has been intensively debated. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus (approximately 535-475 BCE) claimed that everything is in motion, and mentioned that nobody could step into the same river twice. Parmenides (approximately 510-450 BCE) confronted Heraclitus by saying that everything could not possibly be in motion. If so, we would not know anything about the world. Instead, he proposed that everything is constant, giving no room for time to exist. Having this philosophical standpoint, Parmenides was ill treated as people opposing his argument enjoyed making fun of him. Zeno of Elea (approximately 490-430 BCE) was a student of Parmenides and, in an attempt to help his teacher, presented a set of arguments in support of the theory that everything is constant. According to Bertrand Russell, “Zeno’s arguments, in some form, have afforded grounds for almost all theories of space and time and infinity which have been constructed from this time to our own.”

One of Zeno’s arguments involved Achilles, known as the fastest of all Greek warriors, and a tortoise. If the two were to race each other, and the tortoise was given a head start, Zeno argues that Achilles never in fact would be able to overtake the tortoise. While Achilles would run from his starting point A toward the tortoise’s starting point B, the tortoise would move ahead to point C. Then, Achilles would run from his current position, point B, toward point C. While Achilles would be occupied doing that, the tortoise would, even how little, have moved ahead to point D, and so on. Therefore, Achilles would never be able to catch up with the tortoise. In fact, Zeno said, neither Achilles nor the tortoise would be able to reach the goal line. Before the runners could run the whole distance, they would first have to cover half of it. At this point, the runners would have to run the first half of the second half before reaching the goal line. Mathematically, the runners would always be subjected to running half of the distance remaining before reaching the end of the race. If one meter remained, they would first have to run ½ of a meter, ¼ of a meter, ⅛ of a meter and so on. Because the denominator could be of infinite size, neither of the runners would consequently be able to reach the goal line. Zeno also
applied the same theoretical model to conclude that neither Achilles nor the tortoise would even be able to get started.57

As this text is no place for going through all of Zeno’s thought-provoking paradoxes designed to prove that nothing is in motion, the story about Achilles and the tortoise hint to one important factor relevant to the temporal dimensions of being home in Hong Kong. People have different conceptions of what time is and how to refer to it. Anyone who has been culturally trained to think of time in a past-present-future sense may be confused when confronted with a culture that cannot be explained linearly. Instead of thinking about time as a mathematical measurement, we may think about time as a rhythm of life, a social time.58 And instead of seeing a calendar as something that measures time, we may think of a calendar as something that gives time a rhythmic form.59

Anthropologists and time

Bronislaw Malinowski’s fieldwork at the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea is well known for its functionalist approach. His conclusion about time does not deviate from that as he sees time as a tool to measure motion. With this tool, he says, we can accurately measure time spans, date events and coordinate activities.60 For the Trobrianders, though, time does necessarily equate a natural source. As anthropologist Nancy D. Munn says,

Malinowski argues that gardening activities rather than natural sequences are the ordinary media of Trobriand time-reckoning, although gardening experts make use of an ‘independent [natural] scheme of time-reckoning’ (namely, the lunar cycle).61

In the classic book The Nuer, E.E. Evans-Pritchard discusses at great length how time is perceived among the Nuer. Firstly, he distinguishes between oecological time and structural time. The former is a reflection of the Nuer’s relation to the environment, and the latter is a reflection of the Nuer’s relation to one another.62 “The oecological time is a year. Its distinctive rhythm is the backwards and forwards movement from village to camps, which is the Nuer’s response to the climactic dichotomy of rains and drought,”63 Evans-Pritchard says and continues,

It is the activities themselves … which are basic to the system and furnish most of its units and notations, and the passage of time is perceived in the relation of activities to one another. Since activities are dependent on the movement of the heavenly bodies and since the movement of the heavenly bodies is significant only in relation to the activities one may often refer to either in indication of the time of an event.64
Structural time, on the other hand, refers to a distance within a structure. Instead of dating an event to days, weeks, months or years, the Nuer may use “the place they made their dry season camps” as a reference point. Furthermore, time is perceived locally, meaning that every group of people “has its own points of reference.” Additionally, people may refer to the “age-set system” in determining the year of an event. Evans-Pritchard further explains, “There are six sets in existence, the names of the sets are not cyclic, and the order of extinct sets, all but the last, are soon forgotten, so that an age-set reckoning has seven units covering a period of rather under a century.”

When Clifford Geertz discusses the concept of time and how it is incorporated into the Balinese way of life, the ideas of timelessness and invariability emerge as ideal. Unwritten rules for behavior, such as avoiding conflicts and holding back expressions of feelings, create a society without climaxes, a society where everything seems constant. Specifically, Geertz gives a detailed account on the most important Balinese calendar, the permutational. The mathematics of the permutational calendar can be described as “the interaction of independent cycles of daynames.” The calendar has a total of ten of those cycles, which are of unequal length that together give form to the concept of time reckoning on Bali. This calendar is not constructed to measure time; rather, the idea behind the calendar is to determine the current kind of time. Geertz explains, “There are good and bad days on which to build a house, launch a business enterprise, change residence, go on a trip, harvest crops, sharpen cock spurs, hold a puppet show, or (in the old days) start a war, or conclude a peace.” Thus, the calendar does not indicate if today is the first of a certain week of a certain month of a certain year but if today is the day to engage in some sort of activity.

**Linear time in Hong Kong**

The spatial and emotional boundaries of home coincide, for most of my informants, with their apartments’ physical boundaries. Expressions of necessity, familiarity, control, privacy and action add another layer to the concept of home. Now, our focus is on the temporal dimensions of home, and firstly, we are going to investigate how being home in Hong Kong can accurately be described in terms of linearity.

Thus far, we have already seen examples of how the informants chronologically date events. Quite obviously, some of their statements fit perfectly into a perpendicular, past-present-future relation. All informants convey a sense of a linear past as they reveal their age and how many years they have lived in their current residences. Patrick’s story about his coffee table,
David’s recollection of his grandfather and the porcelain vase, and finally, Maggie’s memories about being accidentally locked inside the wardrobe further fortify the place of a linear past in their perception of time.

Occasionally, the conversations with my informants changed direction into topics not precisely correlated to the anthropology of home. On the subject of beauty, for example, Alex said, “I am thinking about my life ten to twenty years from now, when, hopefully, I will have my home with a wife, sons or daughters.” On the same subject, Patrick said, “When I get home from work, and my wife and children are all waiting for me to dine – that’s a beautiful thing.”

A future-oriented, linear thinking is embedded in Alex’s statement, substantiating the presence of the perception of linear time. Hardly to any surprise, the relevance of linear time to life in Hong Kong cannot be exaggerated. Where capitalism is working at full speed with stock market speculations, luxury hotel reservations, and cellular-phone communications, Hong Kong depends on the ability to measure time linearly. Moreover, this temporal dimension can also be projected onto family life. In an article about home environments, Roderick J. Lawrence points out that “domestic life has an explicit linear quality in which there is no turning back, at least in a biological sense” and exemplifies this by referring to “the first months of marriage, the early years of parenthood, the adolescence of children, and then their departure from the parental home.”

But, as we shall see, the existence of linear time does not thwart the existence of cyclical time.

**Cyclical time in Hong Kong**

When Alex and Patrick spoke about the time they spend in their respective apartment, words such as *sleeping, eating and relaxing* dominated. David added *reading magazines* and *watching films* to that list. Amy lengthened the list of activities with *working*. Maggie contributed with *showering* and *going online*, while Lucy also mentioned *listening to music* and *being with beloved ones*.

My informants explained to me that these activities had periodic characteristics, performed on a regular basis such as in the morning, after work, at night or on the weekend. Furthermore, Alex calculated the time of being home to be equivalent to approximately eleven to fourteen hours per day, including eight hours of sleep. Patrick, David, Amy and Maggie reported similar routines. Lucy, on the other hand, deviated from the group because of her employment as a flight attendant, leading to her being home roughly ten days per month. In those ten days, she said, time was “fairly evenly divided between staying home and going out.”
These patterns correspond to cyclical aspects of living, performed routinely over and over again to the extent that they become predictable. Certainly, cyclical time does not intrinsically mean conformity with Evans-Pritchard’s oecological time nor Geertz’ Balinese time. But these everyday activities in the lives of my informants give form, through reiteration, to the cyclical time of *being home* in Hong Kong. We are therefore forced to conclude that cyclical time does not contradict linear time. As Munn proclaims,

> The circular-linear opposition has also been questioned on the basis that so-called “circular” (repetitive) time does not logically exclude “linear” sequencing because each repetition of a given “event” necessarily occurs later than the previous one. The analogy between time and a circle closing back on itself misleads here.\(^74\)

Arriving at this conclusion, we may wisely pause for a brief moment to ponder the idea of timelessness. Does not *timeless* suggest a state without time as opposed to the cyclical state exemplified by Geertz’ portrayal of the Balinese? I suggest that timelessness should be understood in light of a state in which time does not apply. Up to this point, we have investigated linear and cyclical time, and have found that both can be traced to the lives of people in Hong Kong. The idea of timelessness, though, will leaven through the rest of this chapter.

**Homesickness**

Temporal dimensions of home do not only point to linear and cyclical patterns of behavior but also to feelings. One expression of feelings of temporal dimensions of home is the feeling of homesickness. I therefore made sure to address the topic when interviewing my informants.

> “I think I have not experienced that up to this moment,” was David’s comment as I brought up the subject. Patrick followed David’s lead and stated, “I am not someone who gets homesick. After all, my home is mine, and I know I will be back after working, playing or vacationing.” But for Alex, homesickness was not a rare feeling. “It happened quite often when I was a student at the university and could not go back home because of the workload,” he said and continued, “I also get homesick after four to six days of traveling. I find new places exciting the first few days, but after that I start to get homesick.” Homesickness and traveling emerged as partners, and interestingly, Amy felt homesick on her way *home* from traveling. “I get homesick when I am waiting at the airport for the bus to take me home,” she said. Contributing with yet another story, Maggie stated, “I feel homesick when I am under stress at work and when travels take me to dirty environments.” Finally, Lucy distinctly remembered a specific
moment of feeling homesick. “When I left home and went on a long trip, I missed my home so much,” she said.

People’s experiences of homesickness constitute in many ways a difficult area of comparison because of the undeniably individual characteristics of feelings. On a more general and theoretical level, though, researchers have come a long way. Starting from the basics, Dovey points out that “being intangible, qualities of home are often only identified when they are lost.”75 A criterion for feeling homesick seems, per definition, to be that of presently not having a home. But our inclination to hasten to a conclusion may prove detrimental to our comprehension of homesickness in Hong Kong. The essence of homesickness may well rest on memory and not on location. As Sheldrake proclaims, “Human memory about landscapes has a more powerful effect on us than the physical contours.”76 If, then, home is “carried in memory and by acts of imagination,” as Hamid Naficy proposes, homesickness seems to involve the longing for a past that is gone and that is not coming back.77 Quite paradoxically, we all go back home after our travels but linearly arrive in the future. Therefore, homesickness becomes only a wish to return to past experiences transcribed in memory. This leads us to the topic of nostalgia.

**Nostalgia in Hong Kong**

In saying that the beat of Hong Kong is incredibly fast, we give time by implication the function of measuring the rate at which something moves. Nevertheless, we ventilate our standpoint through a filter of relativism. Life in Hong Kong, we say, move about in a faster speed compared to, for example, life in Cairo, Chicago and Rio de Janeiro. The speed of life is in this sense like a race. People such as the Balinese represent Zeno’s tortoise, and the people of Hong Kong represent Achilles. But according to Zeno, Achilles will never catch up with the tortoise because the movement of time is an illusion. Our senses deceive us, he says. Regardless of the validity of Zeno’s argument, we may pose the question if the speed of life, if it exists, somehow can become overheated, resulting in a state of timelessness. For in the state of timelessness, the purpose of any time, linear or cyclical, as a tool to describe and explain human behavior is defeated. Dovey states,

> The speed of environmental change erodes the sense of home inasmuch as it threatens temporal identity. When identity is anchored in places, a certain continuity is required in order for dwellers to assimilate changes and to accommodate their sense of identity to the new images as they emerge.78
Homesickness involves a sense of longing for something lost. In her article *A Souvenir of Love*, Chow elevates this sense to the realm of nostalgia, claiming that abrupt nostalgia is the temporal identity of Hong Kong. She discusses the idea of nostalgia in terms of the existence of a constant environment and nostalgia-like feelings in terms of the non-existence of a constant environment. In the former case, “seasons, scenery, architecture, and household objects” do not change, but people come and go, giving rise to feelings of nostalgia. In *The Key to the House*, historian Patricia Seed argues that this kind of nostalgia is the only one possible. “Retaining the key to a house that is likely no longer standing and a lock that has undoubtedly long since disappeared, however, is not a nostalgic gesture,” she says and points out that “nostalgia springs from capitulation, resigning oneself from the irretrievable loss of familiar objects and well-liked faces, the bonds of friendship, shared learning and languages.” Chow does not argue against this but suggests that in Hong Kong, the environment is constantly changing, eradicating the possibility to give rise to nostalgia. She asks, “In the midst of a chimeraical concrete jungle, where one’s senses are forever jolted by the noise of wrecking balls, bulldozers, pile drivers, air hammers, and power drills, how does one begin to be nostalgic?” The question of whether or not the speed of life in Hong Kong has progressed to the degree of timelessness where abrupt nostalgia, as I interpret Chow’s theory, is the way of life is therefore the most appropriate one to ask and to answer in our search for the temporal dimensions of *being home* in Hong Kong.

**At full speed**

The pace of life in Hong Kong has captured people’s attention. One of the most amazing portrayals of this comes from Ester C. M. Yau and describes life in Hong Kong the years leading up to the 1997 handover.

Within a few months, fear motivated everyone to seize any remaining opportunities to accomplish everything before the year 1997: these few years saw an increased demand for overseas passports and assets, a real-estate boom, reinvigorated interest in Hong Kong’s history, a sudden respect for local writers and artists, the birth of a tabloid newspaper, and strategically, a rush on the part of the late-colonial government to establish district representation and political parties. Everything developed quickly and all at once. In this frenzied atmosphere of rapid accomplishments, Hong Kong entered an unprecedented era: it became a glittering boom town with a deadline.

This *hurry and scurry*, as Odham Stokes and Hoover call Hong Kong’s pace, did not cease when the United Kingdom left the scene in 1997. For example, Yau mentions that visitors to movie theaters run the risk of being subjected to busy schedules.
Even though the practice of skipping over parts of a film … in order to shorten projection time is infrequent …, theaters commonly turn up the full house lights even before the film credits appear so that the audience leaves quickly to make way for that of the next show.

The correlation between the speed of life in Hong Kong and Hong Kong cinema is, in fact, astounding. This relationship can be traced both to the production of films and to their contents. Because of the demand to produce large quantities of films, they are often written, shot and edited within the blink of an eye. Since the 1980s, the average production time for a film is four months. “These films”, Yau says, “are temporal commodities, produced at full speed and consumed hastily, to a far greater degree than the lavish Hollywood product and the films of other national cinemas.”

Anyone who has seen a Hong Kong film has most certainly been exposed to subtitles written in poor English, symbolizing little time and little effort. Subtitles are simply not a priority. Furthermore, dialogues are often carried out as quickly as possible, and people orient themselves on the silver screen in a constant hurry, perfectly illustrated in a film such as Wong Kar-Wai’s Chungking Express or any Jackie Chan film. In this sense, the directors become anthropologists, depicting their own culture. The pulse of Hong Kong is indeed record-breaking, and we are left with the conclusion that the tortoise has no chance in this race.

**Fast enough?**

In a state of timelessness, when the only time is the present, memory does not exist. We must therefore argue, if indeed timelessness exists, that memory is of no use to people of Hong Kong. As a side note, a political theory focusing on the Mainland states that the idea of forgetting history has deep roots in China. “Any detail of history that is not in the interest of the Chinese Communists cannot be expressed in any speech, book, document, or other medium,” Fang Lishi says and calls the effect the Chinese amnesia. This is done “in an effort to coerce all of society into a continuing of forgetfulness.” But Lishi does not, however, say to what extent, if at all, this has affected Hong Kong.

Ackbar Abbas, pioneer in the field of temporality in Hong Kong, has a much-acclaimed theory. The history of Hong Kong is one of shock and interruption, marked by radical changes. “As if to protect themselves [from rapid change],” he says, “Hong Kong people have little memory.” The constant changes in the environment and the hurry and scurry of Hong Kong life, the argument goes, give people little chance to build memories. And because the people have no memory, they fantasize the past, making it beautiful. Citing a journalist from Hong
Kong, Chow states, “What is beautiful has to be in the past tense.” Therefore, the people of Hong Kong live in a world where the appreciation of the past glitters at museums, on posters, in the media and, not least, in antique shops selling *souvenirs of love*.

How, then, do we describe the temporal effects of living in the fast lane with no memory, in a place where the environment undergoes daily makeovers and beauty is an illusion of the past? Chow claims to know the answer. According to her, temporal dislocation gives rise to feelings of nostalgia. In Hong Kong, time itself has several layers, which explains the presence of bamboo scaffoldings around modern buildings. An anachronistic juxtaposition, a mix of two temporal worlds, produces a society out of time. This temporal dislocation defies therefore coherence of time in Hong Kong.

Dislocation is generally understood as something out of place. Diasporic communities, for example, may only be understood in terms of dislocation. In a study about people from India living in the San Francisco Bay Area, anthropologist Purnima Mankekar points out that “certain commodities sold in Indian grocery stores evoked a range of nostalgic emotions in some of the men and women who consumed them.” This nostalgia, she says, “Entailed contradictory emotions, sometimes in the same individual who would, at once, feel a sense of loss regarding certain elements of the past, and a sense of relief of having left that past behind.” Therefore, diasporic Indians living in the Bay Area “may not want to actually return to India, but felt nostalgic all the same.” If these Indians go back to India, they will miss the Bay Area. By staying in the Bay Area, they miss India. Wherever they are, they will miss something else, establishing a sense of atopia – no place. The same holds true, the argument goes, with temporal dislocation in Hong Kong. But instead of meeting the conditions of *no place*, Hong Kong meets the conditions of *no time*.

The conclusion that researchers such as Abbas and Chow arrive at conveys words of timelessness. Neither chronological nor cyclical time can adequately explain life in Hong Kong because pre-modernism and post-modernism exist at the same time. But contrary to popular opinion, my standpoint, to which I now turn, breaks the pattern and arrives at another conclusion. I believe that somewhere in the current discourse of temporal dimensions in Hong Kong, theories have started to absorb too much that they have gone sour.

The constellation of time in Hong Kong

Based on my six interviews and literary works of others, I propose that we ought to rethink our stand on the temporal dimensions in Hong Kong. Certainly, everything moves at the speed of light in Hong Kong. The examples drawn from theaters, film productions, and the reports on an
environment in constant change as buildings fall and rise do point to this fast-paced life of hurry and scurry. But does, as Dovey claims, “the speed of environmental change [erode] the sense of home”? My informants say no. The sense of home expresses itself in their detailed descriptions of their respective home. The physical boundaries, the emotional qualities, and the particular expressions indicate the existence of a sense of home. This sense is further elaborated in Alex’s and Patrick’s accounts on how they feel different being home as opposed to not being home. Maggie’s privacy, her apartment’s view, scent and sound, and her feelings of home in the district in which she lives dismiss any theory neglecting her sense of home. Amy’s idea about the correlation between her home and her personal belongings, the things she uses and controls, and her theory that “every home has its unique scent” portray an image of a strong sense of home. Whether we understand home as primary, secondary or public territories, home exists in Hong Kong despite its fast pace.

My second objection to the discourse on temporality in Hong Kong focuses on the premise that people of Hong Kong have no or little memory. But again and again, as I read through the letters from my informants, I fail to see this cultural characteristic that researches have found obvious and taken for granted. Already in introductory paragraphs, I read sentences stating how long my informants have lived where they live and how many times they have moved. As the interviews deepen, I see the memories of a young Maggie playing hide and seek. I see Alex saying, “I like attaching memories in my mind.” And I see Patrick distinguishing “a home” from “my home” because “my home is a place with many memories and experiences with my family.” When we read about my informants’ memories of trips resulting in feelings of homesickness, how can we doubt the existence of memory? The idea of a fantasized past and that beauty exists only in the past does not capture the views of Alex and Patrick. Patrick finds beauty in the present and Alex finds beauty in the future. I find that the current discourse on temporality in Hong Kong leads us to a dead end because of its incapability to explain thoughts and behavior of people of Hong Kong.

When the physical environment changes with the wind, people hold onto what they have, perfectly exemplified by my informants who do not leave their apartments for new locations. Instead of destroying the sense of home, changes in the environment increase that sense.

The fast pace of life in Hong Kong has not eradicated memory, which one may be inclined to believe. Quite the contrary, the speed of Hong Kong has no such effect, and that leads me to object to Abbas’s theory. Because memories about home exist, my informants get
homesick when traveling. These memories point to important factors of being home such as familiarity, privacy and control. Only a society where speed is experienced as traumatic has power to be perceived as timeless and without memory because in trauma, we cannot narrate. My informants show no sign of inability to narrate, giving us no reason to conclude that they are in a state of trauma. Thus, Dovey’s claim that “the speed of environmental change ... threatens temporal identity,” has validity only if that speed leads to traumatic experiences, and my informants do not fit that profile.

Contrary to Chow’s premise that Hong Kong resists to be described and explained linearly, my study strips Hong Kong from its cloak of timelessness. With or without the presence of bamboo scaffoldings, hotels take reservations for next year and people go through “the first months of marriage [and] the early years of parenthood.”96 The element of chronological time clearly expresses itself on various stages and explains, at least to a certain degree, life in Hong Kong. Simultaneously, the element of cyclical time also makes its way onto the same stages. People wake up in the morning, go to work, and come home in the evening, day after day. Pre-modernism and post-modernism may exist side by side, but that does not eradicate these patterns of linear and cyclical time.

**Liminality**

In a broader context, we may consider anthropologist Victor Turner’s principle of liminality in search of theories of timelessness in Hong Kong. Turner prefers the term state over status when addressing someone’s or something’s current condition in a transitory period.97 Between the separation from the initial state and the entrance to the final state, the state of liminality symbolizes a complex, unclassifiable condition.98 This condition refers to a state outside time and space, a situation in between two classified states. In liminality, no clear structures exist.

Following ethnographer Arnold van Gennep’s *rites de passage*, Turner applies the theory of liminality to the Ndembu in Africa.99 Similarly, we can position Hong Kong between the state of being categorized as British and Chinese. While The United Kingdom has ceased control over the region, The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has yet to take control. According to the joint declaration, the PRC will not interfere until the year of 2047, leaving Hong Kong in a condition that one may classify in between two states. But instead of describing Hong Kong as being permanently present, and instead of describing the people of Hong Kong as being without real memories, we can describe Hong Kong with the oxymoron *presently permanent*. This year marks the tenth anniversary of Hong Kong’s 50 years of liminality, and for the past ten years, and for the next 40 years, this unclassified state of not being British and
not being Chinese has not and will not change. The condition of Hong Kong resembles therefore a state of being presently permanent.

Consequently, I find the idea of timelessness in Hong Kong to be far more convincing when applied on a macro level than equivalent theories operating on a micro level. On the latter level, I have already concluded the existence of both linear and cyclical time, defeating the concept of a timeless state. On the former level, however, timelessness in terms of liminality seems to better portray the temporal dimensions in Hong Kong.
Chapter 5

BEING HOME IN THE PEARL OF THE ORIENT

To summarize, we can conclude that people of Hong Kong, exemplified by my informants, possess a strong sense of home. This study shows, by directing focus onto several layers, that this intense sense of home creates an intangible relationship between people and their environment. The relationship is a unity that I call *being home*.

Firstly, we find that the history of Hong Kong is fluid in terms of instability. This instability and the effects of a landscape that changes its physical image at the speed of light correlate to residential patterns. In Hong Kong, people hold on to what they have, perfectly illustrated by the long-term attachment to apartments. Thus, the physical boundaries of home are first and foremost of the *primary type*.

Secondly, people project personal feelings onto objects located in the home territories. That draws emotional boundaries to the concept of home. Since my informants find the home territory to be of the *primary type*, the emotional boundaries of home coincide with the spatial ones.

Thirdly, we find that five expressions of home etch its way to further engrave the significance of *being home* in Hong Kong. A necessity such as the impact family members have on personal identity points to the abstract realm of *being home*. Furthermore, not only the environment in itself, but also familiarity with the environment is just as meaningful. That familiarity can be perceived by the senses. For example, the scents and sounds of an apartment intensify the sense of home. *Being home* also comes with an aspect of being one’s own boss, of being in control of the appropriate norms and behavior. Likewise, the dichotomy of private and public signals that the boundaries of home can be expressed in abstract ways too – in terms of privacy. Yet another expression of *being home* can be traced to actions such as reading or watching TV.

Fourthly, we can discuss the temporal dimensions of *being home* in Hong Kong. This layer originates from both linear and cyclical faces of time. While the number of years, for example, one has lived in an apartment explains the linear characteristics of *being home*, the routines of daily, weekly, and monthly habits explain the cyclical characteristics of *being home*. Most theories, however, point to an element of timelessness in Hong Kong. But this study has shown that timelessness is a temporal dimension that loses its significance on micro levels.
Rather, we find that timelessness in the sense of liminality explains the issues on macro levels to a far better degree.

Finally, we cannot say that the people of Hong Kong have this strong sense of home despite the fast pace of life in the region. Instead, we are drawn to conclude that the people of Hong Kong have this strong sense of home because of the fast pace of life in the region. And in no way does this fast pace eradicate the temporal dimensions of life in Hong Kong.

Further research
One of the limitations this study suffers from is its long-distance relationship to the people and environment in Hong Kong. While the Internet has made this thesis possible to write, enabling me to find and converse with informants without going anywhere, this study rests on secondary sources. I have never been to Hong Kong. I have never sensed and experienced life in the Asian metropolis. However, the conclusions of this study show that we have found fertile ground to develop new theories. We no longer stand in the corner of timelessness. On the contrary, the combination of the speed of life and that of being home opens doors.

Going to Hong Kong for a long period of time is the ideal. Only weeks separate the time when I made the first contact with one of my informants and today, allowing only compressed information on both my part and of the informants to build my case. By going to Hong Kong, staying there and seeing the people and the environment, one will find new, fruitful perspectives on the topic. That study has potential to incorporate more people than the six that limit this study. While I am pleased with the outcome of having six informants at ages spanning from 20’s to 50’s, I am also aware of this study’s failure to include informants from varying social classes. My conclusion that people and environment cannot be separated gives rise to questions regarding homeless people. If I am home as opposed to at home, what should be said if I am homeless? I can only speculate.

Finally, one may wonder what the future holds for Hong Kong and its people. When the year of 2047 closes in, we are likely to see an explosion of new reports focusing on the very same things that this document has. What does the word home mean in Hong Kong? What will happen when the PRC takes full control? Is the speed of life still record-breaking and how does it affect the temporal identity of the region? With this study, I hope to have opened a few new doors that will pave the way for many new, interesting studies on the meaning of being home in the Pearl of the Orient.


NOTES


4 Ibid., 70.


7 Ibid.


9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.


14 Ibid., 4.


20 Ibid.


22 Ibid.


24 Ibid., 4.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid., 5.


Ibid., 6.

34 Ibid.


36 Ibid.


40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 1.

42 Ibid., 10.

43 Ibid., 11.

44 Ibid.


46 Ibid., 49.


48 Ibid.


50 Ibid.


52 Ibid., 37.


59 Ibid.
Ibid., 96.

61 Ibid.


63 Ibid., 95.

64 Ibid., 102.

65 Ibid., 104.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 105.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.


71 Ibid., 392.

72 Ibid., 396.


83 Ibid.

84 Ibid., 3.

85 Ibid., 4.


87 Ibid.


90 Ibid.

91 Ibid., 74.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.


98 Ibid., 96.

99 Ibid., 151-279.