

吳靄儀：容身處
A Place of One's Own
By Margaret NG
Translated by Paul M.H. OR

Our new Cultural Centre is in Tsim Sha Tsui. For dwellers on Hong Kong island, it is right in front of you the moment you step off the Star Ferry. Every time I have to go to the Cultural Centre, however, it just seems so very far away.

I cannot explain this. Perhaps it isn't the actual distance that matters, but the psychological distance. Dwellers on Hong Kong island just don't like Kowloon. To them, Kowloon is inconvenient, remote, noisy and cluttered, a place to avoid if you can.

The feeling is in fact mutual. Those who have got used to living in Kowloon don't see anything wrong with it. They rather think that Hong Kong island is complicated, chaotic, remote and so on.

Needless to say, dwellers on the Island and in Kowloon are united in their dislike of the New Territories—they say public transport is poor, and it is messy, dirty and the like. Hong Kong being so small, isn't it strange that it is divided into three regions with deep regional prejudices against each other?

Perhaps this is how the people of Hong Kong indirectly express their fondness for their habitat. They know very well that their part of Hong Kong is no heaven, but they just like to talk as if other parts are even worse. Perhaps this is because they have no choice but to stay in Hong Kong, but they do have a choice of which district to live in.

I was born in the New Territories, and I also spent my childhood years there before moving to live on Hong Kong island. Naturally all my prejudices are centred

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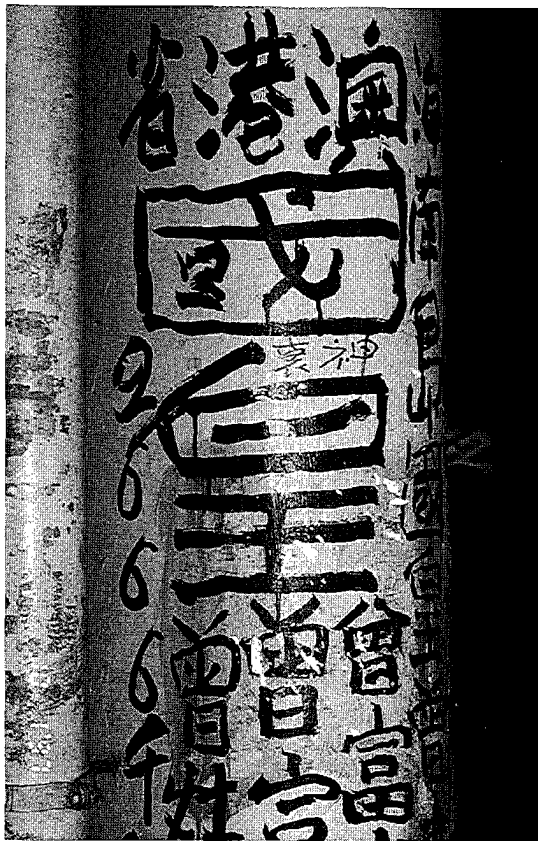
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CHAN Hoi Wai 陳凱威
The Island, 1996.
Mixed media, 66 x 75 x 75 cm.
*Contemporary Hong Kong Art
Biennial Exhibition 1996.*

on Kowloon. Names like Sham Shui Po, Mong Kok, Kowloon Tong and Yau Ma Tei provoke immediate resistance. Any proposal from a friend to rendezvous in any one of these districts will meet with strong objections from me.

Tsim Sha Tsui, though in Kowloon, is the one exception. I feel safer there. Isn't it nearest to Hong Kong island after all? But still it has to be one of those big hotels or department stores in a main street. How can you expect me to tell Austin Road from Austin Avenue? God knows how many times I have lost my way somewhere between Cameron Road and Carnarvon Road. Just the thought of going there gives me palpitations.

Yet even for Kowloon, I can think of a lot of places that have left their impression on me. One evening, for example, I was with my friends trying to get to a Thai restaurant someone had strongly recommended. We walked along Temple Street at dusk and saw lots of stalls selling every kind of goods you could think of. There were fortune-tellers' pitches, cooked food stalls and even some street theatre booths. In contrast with the colourful silk flags and banners on the wall, the opera singers wore modish tight jeans and high-heel shoes. We were in a hurry to get to our dinner. After dinner we passed through the street again, in a hurry to get to work. As I was thinking that just this fleeting glimpse was enough to bring to mind



Handiwork of Hong Kong's Graffiti King.
Photograph by the editors.

numerous stories, my friend was already giving a running commentary on how different Temple Street had been in the past.

According to him, the street was once much more colourful, much more lively, had much more character. They sold much better sweet soups and sweetmeats back then, and various sorts of under-the-counter goods. It had seen triads, exploited prostitutes, mysterious happenings, and stories of both ruination and rags to riches. Not any more, and no turning back. What is left for us to see today is comparatively commonplace.

I believe him, even though I believe too that people at our age get nostalgic all too easily. The truth is, if something belongs to you, you tend to think of it as something special. Even if it is ugly, it is still fascinating in its own ugly way. If it is beautiful, then it's the fairest of them all. Temple Street is not my friend's property. Nor can I claim Hong Kong island, Kowloon, or the New Territories as mine. It is just that being emotionally attached to the place for so long, I cannot help feeling that I own it. Nostalgia is but an unsatisfied desire to possess, I think. *