

## 香港: Creating Meaning

*“Men do not . . . actively explore the world; rather, they are defined by it.”*  
– V.S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*

**By**

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Studying abroad is a sort of an odd spectrum. On the one end you've got the tourist: she hits the highlights, sees the city, then departs with some good photos, a broader worldview, and a few passport stamps. And on the other end you've got the local: she's born here, she lives and breathes here, and her passport is merely the physical manifestation of her authentic and unquestionable 'belonging'.

And the exchange student? She is somewhere in between. She may not speak the language, she's not here for a childhood or for a lifetime, and she does get some good photos, a broader worldview and a few passport stamps. But she also falls asleep on the MTR, becomes a regular at her favourite dim sum restaurant, and doesn't always rely on the Lonely Planet for navigation.

But as with any spectrum, this too is a fluid scale. The notch is not in the centre, nor does it stay on one end or the other. And the exchange student most often has some degree of agency in deciding where she falls on this continuum.

This year, I am that exchange student. Every day I am abroad, I hover somewhere between these two poles of 'tourist' and 'local', and every minute I am awake I actively fluctuate between them. Some days I am the tall, blonde, Canadian who can't buy shoes in the right size

very easily; some days I am the friendly and English-speaking local who helps the foreign businessman navigate the MTR.

And in some things that I do, the tension between the two ends is made more evident. And when I say ‘tension’, I want you to think beautiful tension. Like the tension required to make strings sing on a cello. One such experience, and perhaps the most striking, is not wandering around Hong Kong but actually going to class here at CUHK. One class in particular has been especially outstanding, and extremely effective at reminding me every Tuesday morning that I am truly studying abroad. The professor speaks at least four languages, the class is conducted in a captivating combination of Cantonese, some Mandarin, and English – lecture in English, jokes, explanations and instructions in Chinese – that continually reaffirms my state as a tourist-local. I don’t understand Chinese, so in that sense, some of the class content is lost on me; I do, however, understand the English Eastern-worldview-based lecture, and newly appreciate every day that I could not take such a class at home. I will return to my university with a broader understanding of the content: an entire sphere of history, issues, tensions and actors that are rarely mentioned, and certainly not the object of analysis and discussion.

Before I came to Hong Kong, I did quite a bit of reading about the struggle Hong Kong is going through concerning its identity – and why some people say that Hong Kong’s struggle is unlike that of any other city. Hong Kong is the oddest juxtaposition, it is said, of East and West, modern and traditional, new and old, China and the world. And I believed them. Hong Kong has a fascinating history, and a unique position. Its influences have been varied, its future is somewhat uncertain, but its present existence is enchantingly determined to stay ‘Hong Kong’ – whatever that looks like. I was excited to come here and witness Hong Kong’s identity-forming going on around me.

And then I got here. My first day, I wandered around somewhere in the New Territories and repeatedly declared my books and essays full of lies: ‘English on the signs,’ it said. ‘When was that author last here, anyway?’ My un-traveled self was in shock, a bit, and wasn’t sure how to communicate without words. I was thrilled, scared, and hungry – thrilled about all the things I was going to experience over the next year, scared that I was not going to be up to the task, and too reluctant to try buying food from anyone who didn’t speak English. Embarrassing it may be, but my comfortable culture-bubble was being popped, and I’m happy to report that my brief and indignant thoughts about my guidebooks’ claims of ubiquitous English have now thoroughly disappeared. I find the New Territories wonderfully Chinese, but in a way that is still strikingly different from what I’ve experienced in my few visits to Mainland China.

I began this essay with a quotation from V.S. Naipaul’s book *India: A Wounded Civilization*. In it, he questions the state of India: her problems and successes, her many faces, her history, present, and future, and her poverty and her potential. And I know that in many ways, Hong Kong is vastly different than India; I did not choose that quotation because I wanted to make a comparison. Instead, I chose it because I think it is true of all reflective travel. We do not “actively explore the world”, seeing it and then leaving unchanged. True travel is more transformational than that, I think. The most profound part about the spectrum I outlined at the beginning, with tourist on one end and local on the other, is that the process of moving from tourist to local is done through personal change, the same change Naipaul refers to when he writes that we are defined by the world. The significant changes that I have seen in myself already in Hong Kong will not regress and disappear when I return home. Some of them will, definitely – my extreme overconsumption of Pocky, my toned calves from always walking

uphill, and my regular nonchalance toward \$100 bills in my wallet – but some will remain. And it is those that remain that are part of being (re)defined by the places I travel.

I chose my title, ‘香港: Making Meaning’, because I hope it encapsulates both what Hong Kong does every day for its people, and what it has done for me so far during my stay here. Hong Kong is no longer just an Asian city on the other side of the world, but will always be part of my definition of ‘home’. The香港 that were meaningless to me before my time here now carry great meaning, because this foreign city has become a small part of me. It is part of my history and my experiences, and it has helped define who I am. And for that, I’m grateful.



Change is beautiful in the little things, here, not necessarily the bright lights of Central.

**About the author**

Nalanda Barber is studying at the Chinese University of Hong Kong as an exchange student for the 2012-13 academic year. Back home, at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, she studies both English and Philosophy and is in her 3rd year of undergraduate studies.