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A Sense of Place

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Panel: A Sense of Place II

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A SENSE OF PLACE

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By Tang Siu-wa (Hong Kong)

According to Tim Cresswell, Place is a meaningful location, to which specific people are attached in some way. Place is somewhere me or you made meaningful. You have to invest meaning into it, endow it with value. A place is subjective and emotional.

Hong Kong is a Place. Hong Kong is famous for its commercial developments, high-speed pace, for being a shopping paradise, etc. But for me, as a writer and an amateur activist, I can hardly regard those symbolic spaces that represent Hong Kong's commercial success as my own Place, because I don't live there. Those spaces are too expensive and too cool for me. Instead, there are so many hidden stories and corners of Hong Kong that are overshadowed by its economic achievement.

I can identify with only certain locations in Hong Kong. My Places in Hong Kong are often small, inexpensive, and have active cultural communities. For example, some bookshops – like Prairie Lights here that hold cultural events every week, selling mainly books of literature, philosophy and social movements – are my Places. I live in YauMaTei, which is an old district and rent is low. There is also an art cinema nearby, where I meet with friends. The view from my house is poor from most Westerners' perspectives. I can barely see trees and grass, there are hardware shops downstairs and the streets at night are famous for being populated by prostitutes. Neon lights flash all night; my streets never sleep. It is noisy, dusty, messy, restless, dangerous.

But I feel safe there. Many of my friends live nearby – they are also young activists and poor intellectuals. We drink beer and smoke, discuss cultural and social topics all night, plan secret actions, gossip about colleagues. Sometimes we do this after a big social action, sometimes before an important cultural event. Even when I lose my keys or wallet, I can always have a good night's sleep at a friend's house, and there are always plenty of choices for that. Even the street market vendor woman, whom I call sister Kai, gives me free vegetables to feed myself. These Places are too close and hold too much emotion for me to write a proper conclusion about them. I am testing the connotations of the concept "Place", in my life. It is a long process, especially for someone from Hong Kong.

The meaning of Place has to be learnt. And the people of Hong Kong usually learn how important a Place is to them just before it begins to disappear. And many of my Places do. For example, I have participated in social movements and been confronted by police while attempting to preserve public spaces such as the Queen's pier. My Places are those locations

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where activists gather to protest against the government. We often fail to preserve them, but the movements push us to know and love Hong Kong very much. I link more symbolic Places with my emotions, for example those where former writers lived and wrote about, causing their perspectives to envelop the community and all the streets and trees and strangers to become familiar.

It is common to say that the process of globalization will end sense of Place, but this seems to be the opposite in Hong Kong. There, the end is just the beginning. Literature is marginalized in Hong Kong, writers seem to have no Place. But things are changing now. The term HongKonger is searching for meaning. And we writers are thinking about how to connect ourselves to Hong Kong, to create our Place.