

OTHER VOICES,
OTHER EYES

EXPATRIATE LIVES IN HONG KONG

David Nunan

BLACKSMITH BOOKS

For Jenny and Bec
Third culture kids and expats for life

Other Voices, Other Eyes
ISBN 978-988-77927-7-2

Published by Blacksmith Books
Unit 26, 19/F, Block B, Wah Lok Industrial Centre,
37-41 Shan Mei Street, Fo Tan, Hong Kong
Tel: (+852) 2877 7899
www.blacksmithbooks.com

Copyright © 2017 David Nunan

Selected works by David Nunan:
When Rupert Murdoch Came to Tea: A Memoir
Roadshow: A Personal Odyssey
What is This Thing Called Language?
Introducing Discourse Analysis
The Experience of Language Learning
Our Discovery Island
ATLAS
Go For It

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

CONTENTS

I.	TO BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING	7
II.	EXPATRIATE STORIES	11
	1. A happy hunting ground	13
	2. Just another Wan Chai Sunday	27
	3. The graveyard of relationships	31
	4. One for the road	33
	5. How the war was won	45
	6. No place like home	61
	7. A near death by drowning	65
	8. The ruins of the day	79
	9. Così fan tutte	83
	10. Toilet seat rule	99
	11. Only in Hong Kong	101
	12. The shock of the new	113
	13. Fit for purpose	125
	14. A perfect couple	129
	15. The man who knew too much	139
	16. One little death	157
	17. Go back to where you came from	171
	18. I just wanted to get him fired	181
III.	CULTURES IN CONTACT	193
	19. After the ball is over	195
	20. The letter of the law	203
	21. White boys	209
	22. The devil's language	227
	23. Through other eyes	243
IV.	WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED AN EXPATRIATE?	261
	A last word: global flow	281

You're an expatriate. You've lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed with sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafés.

(Ernest Hemingway)

I.

TO BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse. Like the credulous widow who wakes up one day to find the charming young man and all her savings gone, so the consenting subject of a piece of nonfiction writing learns – when the article or book appears – his hard lesson. Journalists justify their treachery in various ways according to their temperaments. The more pompous talk about freedom of speech and “the public right to know”; the least talented talk about Art; the seemliest murmur about earning a living.

(Janet Malcolm)

I am sitting in the Eastern Magistrates' Court in Hong Kong on an unseasonably hot and sticky day in early June. I have met people who will happily spend a day in the law courts. They take a cut lunch and gain temporary relief from their own troubles by losing themselves in the travails of others. I am not one of these people. I'm here to lend moral support to a friend who drank far too much one night and, uncharacteristically, decided to drive home. (He later said he had to drive because he was too drunk to walk). Instead of driving home, he drove into a wall and fell asleep. When roused by the police, which took

considerable effort, and asked what he was doing, he replied, “Drunken driving.” He was promptly arrested and charged.

It is while I am sitting through the thirty-three cases preceding my friend’s that I’m struck by the richness and diversity of Hong Kong’s expatriate population, seven of whom are today to have their fate determined by the magistrate, an imperious Indian woman with impeccable English. They include an emaciated Bulgarian girl caught shoplifting a packet of chocolate biscuits from a PARKnSHOP store to fuel her bulimia; an aquiline Englishman with a young Chinese wife who is head of a large financial firm, and who faces the same charge as my friend; a Nepalese dishwasher accused of rape; a French artist on a domestic violence charge; an Australian university exchange student who was apprehended while trying to score crystal meth; a terrified and bewildered Indonesian domestic helper arrested for overstaying her work visa; and, of course, my hapless friend.

For some time, the notion of writing about expat life has had my fingers twitching, but the urge was not translated into action until this day in court. I watch three-dimensional, two-minute tragedies playing out in real time: the hysterics of the exchange student receiving a fine and two hundred hours of community service; the impassivity of the diminutive Mainland waiter receiving a six-month sentence for impulsively pocketing and selling a mobile phone left behind by a customer. The Eastern Magistrates’ Court is a microcosmic subculture of Hong Kong and its people. Each of the accused who stands before the magistrate with shoulders hunched and head bowed has a story to tell. At home that night, I reconstruct from memory, and the handwritten notes I’ve made (recording devices of any kind are strictly forbidden) of their stories. Because the accused have the right to be tried in their first language, I’ve heard the stories rehearsed in English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Nepalese, French and Bulgarian, then rendered and rehashed into English for the magistrate and Cantonese for the court officials. (No Indonesian translator was provided for the domestic helper, which is a story in itself). It’s a bewilderingly polylingual experience. But as I work

on my notes, something jells: there are Hong Kong expat stories that deserve to be told.

What I tentatively called *The Expat Project* began with a simple question: “What is the post-colonial expatriate experience?” While the question might seem deceptively simple, answering it was anything but. I couldn’t even get my informants to agree on a working definition of this thing called an ‘expat’, and leafing through several dictionaries added little clarity. An expatriate was someone living in a country other than the place in which they were born. In the web of this definition were captured the Mainland waiter and the Indonesian over-stayer. The status as expats of Somali asylum seekers and sundry other racial groups was flatly denied by other expats as well as by local Chinese. When asked, most of my informants were more adept at saying what expats were not than what they were. I put the definitional difficulty to one side, and pressed on with documenting expat lives.

This book is based on many hours of conversations recorded in bars, homes, schools, shopping malls, restaurants and workplaces. Some were recorded at ferry piers, some on beaches and some during the course of hikes along one or more of the trails that meander across Hong Kong’s islands. When, for one reason or another, recording the conversations proved impossible, or, as happened on occasion, the informant refused to be committed to tape, I made extensive notes. I also drew on journal entries and, yes, even that notoriously unreliable instrument – my memory.

For readers who have experienced expatriate life, I hope the lives and stories captured in these pages provide a spark, if not a shock, of recognition. For others, I trust they provide insights into peoples, customs and cultures in contact. Although located in Hong Kong, the most dynamic, dramatic and diverse city in the Asia-Pacific region, the narratives illuminate issues that are universal: from the tensions inherent in interracial contact, to the rich possibilities offered by such contact.