

香港街市
Hong Kong Market



DIPPING IN

Is the role of an expat to integrate into local lifestyle and culture and does living in Lantau give us a head-start on this? *Marcus Hall reports*

Marcus Hall pictured in Yat Tung Estate Wet Market, Tung Chung

In a world that seems to show an increasing amount of racial division, is now, more than ever, an important time for expatriates to integrate into local lifestyle and culture? At first this may seem obvious but, when you scratch beneath the surface, the answer becomes a lot less clear.

In simplified terms, an expatriate can be defined as someone living outside of his or her native country. At the moment the number of expatriates residing in Hong Kong hovers at around 5% of the population, and it certainly feels that way on Lantau. In Tung Chung, where I have lived for the past few years, resident foreigners are quite clearly in the minority.

We may forgive an outsider for questioning how far integrating into Hong Kong society could be a challenge for expats. Hong Kong is a technologically advanced Western-looking city, so it would be easy to think that transitioning between different cultures is easy. However, as those on the inside know, there are significant cultural differences. Integration takes a certain amount of effort and commitment.

Intercultural dialogue

Very few expats would say that they moved to Hong Kong to explore Chinese culture and learn some Cantonese. In the main, people move here for job prospects and a better quality of life.

With this in mind, can we really expect expats to delve into local life? Do we have a moral obligation to join our neighbours for *yum cha* at Federal Palace in Tung Chung on a Sunday morning? Play Mahjong with senior citizens at Lai Lai Nursing Centre in Mui Wo? Or sing to our hearts' content with youngsters at a karaoke bar in Tsim Sha Tsui?

It could be argued that there is a fine line between integrating oneself in a culture and abandoning your own personal heritage. Expats often might feel far from home and as a result homesick. This is certainly the case for professionals who move here without a family or spouse. With this sense of homesickness, it becomes only natural to surround yourself with what is familiar to you, or what reminds you of home. For this reason 'expat bubbles', like Tap Tap Bar in Pui O and the China Bear in Mui Wo, are rife, right across Hong Kong.

It has to be said, however, that many expats choose to live in Lantau (rather than, for instance, Mid-Levels) not just to escape the hustle and bustle of life in Central, but also to get a better handle on local life.

Organic integration

It's important to note that forced integration into a particular society is not a positive process. Expats who are pushed into integrating tend to approach the situation with resentment and angst. However, organic integration, which has come about through choice, is a far more beautiful and positive thing altogether.

If you are planning to live in Hong Kong for a month, a couple of years, or for the rest of your life, you rightly have the choice on how

you live your life. But for myself, I cannot help but feel it would be an opportunity lost to move to a vibrant life-filled city like Hong Kong and not desire to learn about the fascinating culture and experience the Chinese way of life.

Travel clearly broadens the mind and gives us a greater knowledge of the world we live in. Integrating into Hong Kong lifestyle and culture could simply be seen as a way of expanding our perspectives and becoming more aware of the society we now call home. Could it then be argued that it is not the duty of an expat to integrate into Hong Kong lifestyle and culture, but rather a boon that we should enjoy and take for granted?

If that does not resonate well with you, there is a much plainer argument. Frankly, we should attempt to integrate out of simple respect for the people whose home we have moved to.

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Thinking back to my childhood in East London, I remember people in local pubs discussing their immigrant neighbours and throwing around comments like: "I don't mind them if they are contributing to society... If they don't disturb my way of life then I'm not concerned with them." Politically, we could not escape the agenda of making sure that different cultures integrated into British society, and arguably this is still the case today. The question is: Would the way I live my life in Hong Kong be accepted by locals if the roles were reversed and I had moved from Hong Kong to London and lived in the same way? Have I integrated enough to 'please the locals' in Hong Kong?

As I enter a stage in my life where I look to have children, I hope that they are able to speak Cantonese. I desire for them to be able to integrate fully into my adopted home. They should not feel separated from society but rather valued as a member within it.

We need to move away from labelling each other as 'locals', 'non-locals', or 'expatriates'. We are all people of Hong Kong, who live and work together for the greater good of this city. The sooner we do this, the sooner we can share in our commonalities rather than wallow in our supposed differences. ☺