

Walking in Macao

I look down from the window of my 29th floor apartment and below I see Macau's typical urban density. The rooftops of apartment buildings are in varying degrees of repair: some rusting, some new, some have potted plants and half-hearted attempts at establishing small, green, private spaces. Sometimes, when there are fireworks displays at Macau Tower, occupants hold night-time picnics. On other occasions, the occupants slowly practise their tai chi or casual but systematic stretching and beating of their limbs and torso. Many rooftops have illegal structures that residents have built in order to create additional territory. Occupants claim extra space inch-by-inch; and these structures – cages on balconies or even additional building floors – may affect the integrity of the apartment building's structure.

Andy Fuller

THE APARTMENT BUILDINGS are so densely packed that one barely sees the movements of pedestrians and vehicles on the narrow streets. "The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below', below the thresholds at which visibility begins", writes Michel de Certeau.¹ The streets are home to comic rental shops, Chinese cafes and noodle shops, small retail electronic stores, hairdressers and boiled fish snack bars. The main thoroughfare below, Rua Almirante Sergio, however, has a steady stream of busses, taxis and private vehicles. It's noisy and the street is lined with a variety of shops, restaurants and workspaces. The street's landmarks are a McDonald's restaurant, a ParknShop supermarket and A-Ma temple; and at the other end the large Ponte 16 Casino, which also holds a Sofitel hotel. Along the street are small workshops in which men and women make industrial equipment – long and thick metal cords undulate on concrete floors. There is a welder who has adorned his workshop with metal representations of male and female sexual organs. Loud pop music reverberates from his booming speakers. Abba's catchy disco beats break into the soundscape otherwise dominated by the din of busses, motorbikes and other vehicles. The clarity of the music – the regular beat, the choral singing – provides a welcome relief. This old and hybrid street is indicative of some of the changing patterns in contemporary Macau. The street holds some of its past: its signs, traces, smells and marks. Yet, also shows signs of change, forward movement, cosmopolitan tastes and curiosity for otherness and difference.

Urban experience is created through everyday practices. The everyday is something that is ubiquitous, daily, simple, often subtle and generally unquestioned or unremarkable. The everyday is familiar: full of gestures, movements, styles and accents. The everyday is what one does in order to get by; to facilitate one's work, to facilitate one's recreation; it is what happens on the side. It might be that which exists to serve a greater function or a more clearly delineated goal. For Highmore, it evokes that which is the "most repeated actions" as well as that which has the quality of "everydayness".² It is also that which is contradictory: "ordinary and extraordinary, self-evident and opaque, known and unknown, obvious and enigmatic".³ Certeau delineates the study of everyday life through his use of the concepts 'strategies' and 'tactics'. These terms are aligned with common and easily identifiable dichotomies: official vs. informal, waking vs. dreamlike, plan-ning manual vs. poetry, grammar vs. rhetoric. Others could also be added to the list: general vs. specific, lingua franca vs. vernacular, original vs. appropriation, rules vs. subordination.

Certeau's dichotomies can be clearly applied to Macau's everyday urban life. Looking with a Certeauian gaze aids an analysis of Macau. At a market near Rua Almirante Sergio, there is a small garden arrangement; this is fenced off, and it forms a neat bench for market-goers to rest at, in front of one of the market's entrances. Here Indonesian and Filipino maids congregate, meet and swap stories about their lives in Macau. They are part of the city's foreign workforce that numbers more than 100,000 and comprises nearly 20% of the total population. Temporary workers thus provide a necessary service to Macau's economy and they are an important, but marginalized, part of Macau's complex identity. They are here to do the shopping for their bosses' families, I guess. They may be friends or acquaintances of varying degrees of proximity and familiarity. This empty space in front of the market provides them with an opportunity to network and to gossip. Directions issue from a sign in front of this exit: no waiting, no congregating or some such. The maids apparently should be moved on. The place is designated as a space for shopping, and socializing in the place is to be limited. Nonetheless, the maids keep on meeting there; and they keep on ignoring the sign. The mute visual admonishment of the sign holds little rhetorical power over these women; who prefer to engage with their friends who share the same movements through urban Macau.

Busses in Macau are also marked by the frequent Tagalog chatter, conducted over mobile phones or face to face with friends and other passengers. The bus is a space that takes on a dual function: going somewhere (getting to work) and providing a meeting space, networking opportunity. Passengers console each other and share the pleasures and laughter with one another.

Walking is perhaps the ideal means of practicing one's tactics against the strategies of the city's designers, administrators, and police. Moving through the city on foot allows for the practitioner to divert her route spontaneously, quickly and disorderly – subverting the imposed structure of a city's main thoroughfares. Walking allows for a sensory engagement with urban life: "ah, the neighbours are home and they are cooking"; "ah, such-and-such song is popular here in this home or in this shop". Walking facilitates a break between the outer and public domains of urban life to those of the inner and private spaces, which are breached regularly. The serious walker of urban life is the *flâneur*: a Baudelairean and Benjaminian figure of early 20th century Paris. But the *flâneur* is now ubiquitous and *flânerie* is practiced in numerous ways. Macau is a remarkably mobile locale, a tiny node of intersecting routes and trajectories that hosted 28 million visitors last year. Therefore, Macau's archetypal *flâneur* is perhaps the tourist from mainland China: gawking at the Ruins of Saint Paul, photographing the Grand Lisboa, and 'squeezing' the cards at a baccarat table. But such practices seem of limited critical engagement with the urban environment: routes are pre-determined by flag-waving tour guides. Private busses transport tourists from one casino to another; from one landmark to the next.

A city's strategic sense is shaped by the planners, architects, engineers, and police. In Macau wealthy local developers and transnational gaming companies often directly dictate land-use decisions. Much of the newly-constructed cityscape consists of faux interior neighbourhoods copied from other cities: St. Mark's Square in the Venetian Resort and Lisbon under a glass atrium at MGM. These are privatized spaces with a pseudo-public ambiance. These operations of strategic power that are articulated onto the city's built environment are subject to the tactics of the city's users; those that bring urban life into being. Through walking one writes a path into the city, into the urban infrastructure. Through writing and re-writing one's frequently trodden paths one becomes a local, known to others for no other quality except for the frequency of their use of a particular part of the city. And, 'the city' is made up of these countless fragmentary trajectories, written by each city user, city maker, city walker. Looking down at dense and urban Macau from the curious perspective of a high-rise apartment one feels the pull of an "Icarian fall",⁴ a desire to be a part of the crowds below and to walk in the narrow streets where people may be lost and absorbed in the textures, smells and sounds that make up every day urban life.

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Notes

- 1 De Certeau, M. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press; p.158
- 2 Highmore, B. 2006. *Michel de Certeau: Analysing Culture*, London: Continuum; p.1
- 3 Highmore, 2006, p.16
- 4 De Certeau, 1984, p.103



Right: "The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below,' below the thresholds at which visibility begins" (Michel de Certeau).

Left: Macau shop owned by Filipino residents.

Below: A Filipino cybercafé next door to a Chinese shop.

