

Finding Your Footsteps: A Walk with Prof. Vincenz Serrano

text /Nancy photo /Michael

Field trip: Discovering the sounds of Sham Shui Po

On a rainy Friday afternoon, the streets of Sham Shui Po were bustling with people. Professor Vincenz Serrano and his students wove through the crowd, stopping at seemingly ordinary locations and listening to the sounds surrounding them.

They knocked on air vents at a bus stop, listening to the clattering of umbrellas against metal pipes. In an underground tunnel, they recorded the footsteps of passers-by on their phones. During this soundscape-themed walking tour, they opened their ears to experience the uniqueness of Hong Kong.

As they navigated through the busy urban area, the final stop of the walking tour was Garden Hill. Under a pavilion, they shared the various sounds they had encountered over the past few hours, such as different types of birds chirping and vendors yelling into microphones, selling goods on the streets. They were surprised by how the sounds varied depending on the weight of what people were carrying and how the rhythm changed when butchers were chopping meat.



Exploring Hong Kong's cityscape

After we left the windy Garden Hill, we chatted with Vincenz in a cozy coffee shop, sharing his life in Hong Kong. He describes himself as an easy-going traveller who enjoys exploring a city on foot and savouring street food. He likes eating stinky tofu in Mong Kok and walking in Tai Po before doing grocery shopping. He mentioned visiting the Australia Dairy Company (澳洲牛奶公司), a cha chaan teng (茶餐廳) famous for its fast pace and sometimes rude waiters. "I did not get shouted!" He said proudly.

As a scholar, he reads extensively, so when travelling, he inevitably connects the literature he has read with the scenery around him. He enjoys novels by Nick Joaquin, a Filipino writer who once lived in Hong Kong. The story of his novel *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* is closely related to the city. He said, "Some of the scholarly dimension in me is like matching what Nick Joaquin is saying in the novel with the places I am walking in. He has scenes describing the Harbour, and he references Wan Chai and the Peak."

A poet that walks around, the Identity I can't deny

Everyone puts labels on themselves or is labelled by others. Our lives are inseparable from the constant awareness of our identities at any given moment. When asked which identity Vincenz believed best represented him, he paused for a long time, reflecting on the complexity of identity. He said, "You can't deal with other people unless you have a strong sense of who you are. But the moment the strong sense of identity becomes forced upon other people, it becomes wrong; it becomes an imposition."



Instead of choosing the identity that represents him most, he opted for one he could not deny: "a poet that walks around." He explained that the more he explores certain places, the more he realizes he is only scratching the surface.

"You think you understand the place, but when you see another area, your perceptions of that place change. In today's walk, I understood Sham Shui Po is a busy commercial area with housing projects, but when we went up the Garden Hill, 'Oh this is a new perspective. I did not expect that.'"

Walking, as an essential element that constitutes identity, is fascinating because it is an active behaviour. It involves a process of discovery, searching, and choosing where to focus your attention. Poetry also plays an important role in his life, as he can use words to uncover unexpected insights.

"When you walk around, you have to be open to what you see and hear. As you are walking around, there is a parallel activity happening in your mind. You think about your family and things you have to do. It's an interesting conjunction of what's happening outside and what's happening inside."

During the walking tour, we noticed that Vincenz primarily took photos of streets and buildings. He explained, "I am kind of shy about taking pictures of people, but buildings won't shout at me when I take a picture of them." At the end of the interview, we took some photos of him, and he appeared a little shy. So, we chatted while filming, capturing his naturally cheerful smile.