

Short Social Stories 1: What do you take with you?

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There's a question that has been popping up in popular culture for many years, and it goes something like this: if your house was on fire and you could save only a few items, what would you take with you? This question has been a part of dinner parties, tumblr accounts and even a recent book. It asks us to stop and think about the everyday objects in our lives and how we decide what is important. As the author Foster Huntington has said, the question can reveal "a conflict between what's practical, valuable and sentimental. What you would take reflects your interests, background and priorities" (<http://theburninghouse.com/>).

In our current research project, we haven't been concerned with burning houses, but we have been asking people in Hong Kong what they took with them when they migrated to another country. Since our participants were all voluntarily moving to places like Canada and the UK, they did not experience the quite literally burning houses that some forced migrants do. Yet the things that they selected still revealed a great deal about their lives.

Many people brought things like photographs that were irreplaceable and incredibly meaningful. These kinds of mementos connected them to people and places that they couldn't take with them on their journeys. But people also brought banal objects like facial tissues, soap, and instant noodles. Though these were mass manufactured products, and would have been easy to purchase after arriving in a new country, their mobility emphasized just how important they were to these migrants' everyday lives.

If you aren't from Hong Kong, you would probably be surprised to hear that facial tissue, for instance, is a very important part of local Hong Kong culture. After all, in many parts of the world, facial tissues are purchased in boxes to sit in private spaces. They are used most often for blowing your nose, and become of crucial importance if you have a cold. Yet for many Hong Kongers, facial tissues are an essential part of every day. As one of our participants, Lisa, told us, she carries a small package of tissues with her at all times. They give her "a feeling of security because maybe you don't know when you will use it". Jill also recalled how her uncle once gave her a small package of tissue, warning her: "You never know what's going to happen. You should keep it on you, just to be on the safe side". It's not just that people in Hong Kong are paranoid about being separated from their tissue, but that they are using them constantly, in both public and private spaces.

You can almost imagine this in terms of daily migrations of facial tissues all around Hong Kong, as they are purchased, carried in pockets and purses, used and discarded. They

become important when you go to public toilets that don't have toilet rolls or paper towels. They become useful when you come in from the hot sun and need one to wipe sweat from your face before an important meeting. They become shared when you go to a restaurant and aren't provided with napkins to wipe your hands or face. Jill told us that she "grew up with [her] whole family offering tissues", and "it would be common practice for someone to put the pack of tissue on the table for them to pass around to everybody. And [they] would use that instead of whatever the restaurant would give you." Tissues are routinely carried, and routinely given to family or friends, which led Lisa to guess that Hong Kong people use about two small packages with 5-10 tissues each, every day.

Carrying tissues around with you every day is therefore practical, but it's also cultural. Sharing tissues with other people, or teaching children how to carry and use them, becomes part of the common knowledge of the city, and the routine practices of city life. This is why tissues are something worth taking along to a new country – they're a simple object, a practical one, but one it can be hard to imagine life without.

In this way, even though it's easy to dismiss the meaning or importance of everyday items like packets of tissue, they can be more central to our lives than we often recognize. Perhaps it's time then to ask a new question: what do you carry every day and yet underestimate the importance of?