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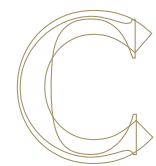


## Introduction

# Deep Water

## Public Spaces in Sham Shui Po

Jürgen Krusche



Claim, reclaim, occupy, enlarge, and extend—these terms come up frequently in Hong Kong. The reclamation of land from the harbour is an old practice in Hong Kong. Large parts of the city are built on ground that did not exist 100 years ago. The temple for Tin Hau, the goddess of the sea, that was erected in 1901 at Yee Kuk Street in Sham Shui Po once afforded a view of the sea. Today, the sea goddess looks out at old refrigerators, flat screen televisions, and other used electronic goods (*fig 1*). Yee Kuk Street is in the hands of the second-hand electronics dealers; they often claim the whole street entirely.



Stores stretch out to the kerb, and often extend into the street, occupying public space.

Just like everywhere else in Hong Kong, Sham Shui Po is too narrow, with apartments, stores, even many parks which are used as public spaces being extremely small. Every square metre must be used. The pavement, as well as the street, become welcome areas for expansion of stores or workshops. Stretching out, extending, and claiming have thus become phenomena that one encounters constantly. However, often that which has been expanded and extended must be packed up again. Goods must be stored back in the shops in the evenings, stalls opulently filled with merchandise during the day must be closed and carefully locked up. It is a constant

spreading out, expanding, and then contracting and packing up that takes place here on the street. Sham Shui Po works like a living organism attempting to make the most efficient use of a small amount of space.

Sham Shui Po is the poorest district in Hong Kong, and a street hawker's paradise. Numerous street markets sell everything one could imagine needing in one's daily life, determining the district's image. However, it is not just the licensed hawker stalls that make up the markets, but also a second wave of sellers. In the evening, as the official stalls slowly end their day, migrants from Southern Asia, Pakistan, India, or Mainland China come with their belongings, arranging them for sale on the side of the street.



Occasionally, official stalls are used for these purposes as well. As one group packs up, the other is just setting up: on handcarts, trolleys, in suitcases and plastic bags. Those who can afford it come with delivery trucks whose doors will be opened and reconfigured into makeshift storefronts (*fig 2*).

On Kweilin Street, south of the Sham Shui Po MTR Station, one can clearly observe these temporary and visibly distinguishable ways in which a "production of space" (a concept introduced by philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre) takes place. First there are shops and restaurants on the ground floor that often spill out onto the pavement. Then the official market stalls on the streets, normally run by Hong Kong people. Finally, there are the improvised stalls of the "outcasts", who subsist on the spatio-temporal "edges" of the formal economy. This shadow economy skillfully manoeuvres between legality and illegality, and is dominated by a high level of informality.

The latter can also be observed by the lighting of these stalls. Most of these stalls do not have any electricity, thus, are very poorly lit. Patrons therefore, show up with torches in order to better inspect the wares. Relative to other areas of the city, Sham Shui Po at night is relatively dark, something that one would not normally expect from neon-filled Hong Kong (*page 141*). This shifting usage of space between day and night, along with the corresponding change in atmosphere is typical of the neighbourhood. The expansion, spreading out, and opening, as well as the packing up and closing, are all temporal phenomena that determine the rhythm and image of the city, especially in Sham Shui Po.

It is often unclear, if what is happening is legal or not, allowed or forbidden, wanted or unwanted. This unclear and ambivalent situation is particularly

characteristic of Sham Shui Po. Is it permitted to expand one's shop out to the street? Is the carpentry workshop allowed to carry out its work on the pavement blocking access to the warehouse, the market stall, and the pavement? The apparent rule seems to be that everything is okay, as long as nobody complains. Thus, homeless people are allowed to leave their belongings in front of a clothing store, and the trash-pickers can store their collected items on the pavement. Unlike the parks, which count as public space and where much is forbidden, there seem to be fewer regulations governing markets and streets. People know each other and come to terms with each other. The use of public space in these cases is governed from person to person, be it for storage, as a workshop, store, or a restaurant (*page 62-69*). In any case, it constitutes what we are interested in studying in the context of this research project, namely the negotiation and bargaining of urban public space: what we call "politics of space".

## Welcome to Sham Shui Po

From our immediate first impressions of Sham Shui Po, it is clear that the situation in which Hong Kong residents find themselves is not an easy one, and that space seems to play a central role. In the taxi ride from the airport to our apartment on the very first evening, we already learned a great deal just from a conversation with our taxi driver. Mr Wang, who is 61 years old, drove us through Sham Shui Po showing us where the homeless people live, and which buildings were currently empty and soon to be demolished. It appeared he does not make very much money: he only drives his taxi at night, and lives in a very small apartment. He was complaining that one has to work much harder in Hong Kong than in Mainland China — every day in fact, with hardly a day off. We wanted to meet him again and interview him; he was excited at the prospect, and gave us his cellphone number.

We began exploring the neighbourhood as soon as we arrived at the apartment. It was



approximately eight o'clock in the evening when we arrived, and we soon met a man standing in front of his shop on Boundary Street (fig 3). He only opens his shop from eight in the evening, working somewhere else during the day. The store is filled to the ceiling and all the way to the outer front edge with his wares: screws, wires, pipes, old tools, a compressor, plastic buckets,

mostly old things piled on top of one another. "One used to be able to go into the store," he told us. He was sipping a beer next to his shop, sitting on a stool, and waiting for customers.

On our way back to the apartment at around nine o'clock, we see an old woman near Yu Chau Street. She paused for a moment, dug an old newspaper out of her bag, stooped to the kerb, collected three or four aluminium cans, which she wrapped in the newspaper and carried them off. These three people who we met and spoke with on our first evening in Sham Shui Po represented a specific group of people living in Hong Kong, with whom we would frequently come into contact, namely those in precarious living conditions. They are forced to work either at multiple jobs or long hours at one job. Some have no choice but to collect recyclable materials off the street in order to survive. They live either in extremely small quarters and have set up their businesses in the smallest amount of space possible. These were phenomena that we frequently encountered later, and which we studied and immersed ourselves in during our trip.

Our first taxi trip also raised another phenomenon, which has become an issue even for such a relatively secluded neighbourhood: gentrification. Many old buildings lay empty, about to be torn down in order to build expensive new condominiums, examples of which already dot the Sham Shui Po landscape in growing numbers.

### The Research Project

Researchers and artists from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Design and the Zurich University of the Arts worked together between

2014 and 2016 on the Politics of Space research project, later called Deep Water. They chose a small area of Sham Shui Po, one of the most traditional districts still remaining in Hong Kong, and investigated public space in the neighbourhood through the lens of urban transformation and gentrification. The research area was bounded by the streets south of Sham Shui Po MTR station as far as the West Kowloon Corridor (fig 4).

Studying these streets, it was possible to observe how people from different classes, social or ethnic groups, or nationalities deal with public space, how they use and transform it, appropriate and occupy it — formally or informally, legally or illegally. This usage of public (street) spaces is what the project defines as the "politics of space" and is considered a good example — according

to our hypothesis — of how effectively public spaces can be used, namely, by a variety of social and ethnic groups at different times during the entire day and night in diverse and often highly creative ways.

What constitutes lively public space was addressed by sociologist Hans Paul Bahrdt in the 1960s when he wrote, "... streets and squares that are used by people of various social classes for different purposes well divided throughout the day and night show precisely what we understand as public life at the lowest, clearest local level, and call the rendezvous of the society with itself."

Over the course of multiple research trips and



workshops, cultural scientist and artist Jürgen Krusche, film-maker Song Yunlong, artist group Baggenstos/Rudolf, and photographer Marc Latzel, together with Siu King Chung and his students from Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Design, investigated public space in Sham Shui Po.

Together, they mapped the social and urban fabric using photo and video documentation, participatory photo observations, video interviews, artistic interventions, mapping techniques, and talks by experts in their fields. Community organisations such as Society for Community Organization, as well as artists from both Zurich and Hong Kong participated in the process.





The results of this extended research process make up the core of this book. It is complemented by contributions from experts on specific topics. This enabled the book to do justice to the complexity of the topic, and to give readers in-depth perspectives and (visual) information about Sham Shui Po itself.

## The Book

### Gentrification

Alternative art spaces, artist studios and offices of the so-called “creative class” are often regarded as evidence of the first signs of gentrification. In his essay, Isaac Leung investigates whether or not this also holds true for Sham Shui Po, while also presenting us with these first new art spaces in Sham Shui Po. He argues that the classical model for gentrification is only partially accurate in describing what is happening in Sham Shui Po. Although rent is cheaper than in other parts of the city, artists and galleries can hardly find any affordable spaces for working or exhibiting. The result is that most of the new art spaces in the neighbourhood are no bigger than a living room. One exception is Wontonmeen, a multistorey atelier building near Prince Edward MTR (Mass Transit Railway) Station initiated and run by Patricia Choi. As an artist and businessperson, she has been following the processes of transformation in Sham Shui Po closely, speaking with many people in the neighbourhood about how they perceive the changes taking place. Two of her interviews are included in this publication, providing a valuable insight to the concerns of residents in Sham Shui Po.

Though the traditional way of life in Sham Shui Po is rapidly disappearing, Siu King Chung details the livelihood practices of the craftspeople and how they were able to survive in Sham Shui Po on a very modest spatial and economical means.

Through a series of photographic examples, I illustrate the various ways economic structures

of the neighbourhood are changing. My pairs of photographs were each taken with a time lapse of one and a half years’ separation (in 2014 and 2016) — and based on how the ground floor spaces of buildings are used — convey the slow but gradual changes taking place.

### Public Spaces

The contributions in the second chapter revolve explicitly around the topic of how to negotiate public space. This is achieved mostly with photographs taken from the project’s various sub-groups and video interviews.

The method of “thick showing” (a play on the term “thick description” by anthropologist Clifford Geertz) in my contribution can be attributed to the domain of artistic research. Through individual pictures, pairs, and series, these images create meaning primarily through showing. The brief introduction intends only to provide contextualisation to the photographs when they alone are not sufficiently explanatory. The photographic series broadly focuses on three thematic areas that emerged during the research project, namely Claim and Occupy, Permanent Change, and Multifunctionality.

Both permanent and temporary appropriation and occupation of public space is omnipresent in Sham Shui Po, something that is visible in many activities and phenomena in the neighbourhood, as well as in specific objects. These mainly temporary appropriations and occupations reveal a further typical situation: the constant change, visible over a few hours, from day to night, over weeks or months, or even over years. The third important topic is the multifunctionality of these spaces. They serve not just pedestrian traffic and vehicle flow, but also many other functions: shops, workshops, storage rooms, restaurants, even habitat.

Complementing the book’s photography, there are video interviews by Song Yunlong on the accompanying website. In these videos, the lives

and livelihoods on the streets of Sham Shui Po recounted by individual people are the centre of attention.

Together with some of Siu King Chung’s students, data in the research area was collected in order to examine the socio-economic profile of people living in the area between south-west of Sham Shui Po MTR Station and as far as the West Kowloon Corridor. The maps produced by students were developed further in Zurich for adaptation in the publication. The seven maps explain not only the socio-economic differences in specific categories, such as the distribution of new and second-hand electronics shops and stalls, but also emphasise the importance of all kinds of economic activity in this area, from both official and informal stores, restaurants, and markets.

### Inside / Outside

Photographer Marc Latzel in his contribution examines the relationship between indoors and outdoors, between private and public, on the streets of Sham Shui Po. His photographs reveal the often seamless transitions that make distinctive categorisation impossible.

The artist duo Baggenstos/Rudolf, like other contributions, present a series of photographs documenting an intervention in public space entitled “This is My Private Garden”, which reflects the mix of private and public in the city. They also explore the topic of light. In a workshop at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, they demonstrated how “public light” can be used for private purposes.

### People on the Edge

Anthropologist Akram Mohamed has been working in Sham Shui Po for quite some time, and provides insight into how young Pakistani men make their living on the streets of Sham Shui Po, how ethnic groups interact, and what hierarchies they must deal with. This contribution presents a highly differentiated account of the functioning and structure of the informal

night markets, which make up the day-to-day reality for many Pakistanis in Sham Shui Po. The hierarchies of the streets become clear here too; a hierarchy that must constantly be re-negotiated and re-arranged.

Society for Community Organization (SoCO) takes care of those in society that are in some way excluded, forgotten, or otherwise less visible. Ng Wai Tung and his colleagues are social workers who have worked at SoCO for a number of years and write from several years’ experience working with homeless people in Hong Kong, and particularly in Sham Shui Po. In their account, they explain the often inescapable situations of the so-called “street buddies,” who suffer from the lack of affordable housing and from dated laws that do not address social needs. This article also partly explains what happens in the southward part of the public spaces in Sham Shui Po. ■

Translated from German by  
Brandon Farnsworth





# Extinct Forms of Spatial-economic Practices — Craft Trades in Sham Shui Po



Siu King Chung



Trades have flourished in Sham Shui Po ever since the 1950s; people were able to develop their crafts and trades during this early redevelopment period in Hong Kong after WWII. Workers in the district evidently demonstrated unique ways of fulfilling their livelihood practices, largely because Sham Shui Po was characterised by mixed transportation, residential, commercial and industrial uses. Although the district remains a trading hub for vendors exporting second-hand electronics, mobile phone accessories and household appliances, as well as for buyers from Africa and South Asia who shop for apparel, for example, at the Cheung Sha Wan Road fashion wholesale stores, the ecology of daily life and the nature of the urban communities back then was rather different from what we witness nowadays. Over the past 10 years, the number of examples of how craftspeople traditionally operated in the district have dwindled, exacerbated by the removal of industrial infrastructure (into Mainland China) and the forced urban renewal scheme instituted by the government. Thus, with the passing of this generation, the crafts-industrial tradition in Sham Shui Po is approaching extinction. This chapter documents some of the past social-spatial practices of these workers in the district — especially those who operated in the nooks and crannies — attempting to understand how they developed a symbiotic relationship within the urban community setting in the past few decades.

## Rattan Furniture Making (until 2009)

Driven by the American market and the Cold War agenda in the 1950s, rattan manufacturing had been one of Hong Kong's prominent craft industries. But since the 1980s, with Mainland China's Open Door policy, Hong Kong's rattan furniture industry experienced a drastic recession due to the large-scale relocation of production facilities across the border. At this point, rattan craftsman Mr Liu Tat Shing decided to close down his rattan factory in Tai Kok Tsui and re-establish an "alley shop" at 367A Lai Chi Kok Road in Sham Shui Po, namely, the Tat Shing Rattan Company. While Liu's business continued, the more complex machinery or space-consuming work procedures (e.g. bending and shaping long pieces of rattan) had to move to the mainland and were taken care of by his apprentices. Products were produced and shipped back to Hong Kong on demand. Unlike the operation in his former factory that had ample space for machines





and skilled workers to mass-produce furniture items, Liu had to combine the workshop, warehouse and retail outlet altogether in one shop location and work alone in this limited street corner space from where he took commission orders, handled wholesaling and retailing of hand-made couches, and other small-size furniture items and merchandise, such as car cushions.

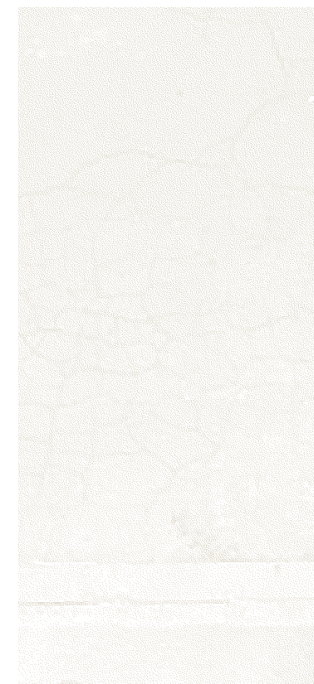
Liu's production process started to evolve into a different mode in his small shop, and his merchandising showmanship took full advantage of the back alley space on the street: boards were shaped and utilised instead of the traditional rattan skeleton of the furniture (thereby saving space in bending the long rattan pieces), and strips of rattan and rattan matting were later mounted to the wooden frame. This was a new type of rattan furniture (*fig 1*) that could be assembled with standard modular parts of various sizes, allowing him not only to perform his craftsmanship in the alley space, but to produce just-in-time batches of varied-size furniture upon his customers' requests. The assembling of readily pre-made parts therefore became a production strategy, designed to save storage and production space and thus enabling him to leave more room for displaying more of his other merchandise at his shop front, including the classic lightweight, airy rattan chairs imported back from his Mainland China factory. Although the new, heavier but



sturdy version bore little resemblance to the classical rattan chairs, they were unmistakably adaptive designs shaped by the ingenuity of the craftsman and the spatial conditions that allowed for such workmanship.

Flanked by a narrow alley (about 2.5 metres wide), the corner shop (*fig 2*) was organised into three sections: the rented shop interior (60sq ft), the front lane and the back lane. The frontal area facing the main road was the "showcase", the shop interior was the office-cum-storage, and the alley constituted the workshop area. Customers were received at the front end where they could see and try out the displayed items, while they could also observe the "work-in-progress" — a kind of showmanship of making — constructing the custom-made furniture at the side.

This part was the workshop area, which was partially shaded from the sun and rain; a makeshift table was set up on a daily basis for the rattan treatment and woodwork. Procedures such as lacquering and colour-spraying, would be carried out in the open alley area at the back (*fig 3*), as these needed sunshine and good ventilation. The existing drain at the side of the alley, when filled with water, readily became a basin for Liu to soak and soften the rattan strips before bending and shaping. →





Liu's daily activities such as making, displaying, selling and unloading his merchandise, chatting with neighbours, or eating all happen in the little area between the pedestrian walkway and his work area which he claimed from the public space. He was able to develop mutually supportive relations with passers-by, neighbours as well as the residents around his shop. It created the condition to encourage communal mingling and to build neighbourhood trust: not only did the shop offer a communal sitting area for his neighbours who would regularly drop in for a chat or relaxation, Liu inevitably became a watchman of the lane, generally helping to keep the neighbourhood safer. And in return, when there was a need to leave his shop (say, for a toilet break), nearby neighbours would temporarily look after the shop for him. In that sense, the street corner space not only epitomised the adapt-and-survive spirit of a generation of artisans, who were able to deploy the public space for their ingenious and communal uses, but also helped to maintain a caring community network among residents of the neighbourhood.

For a craftsman like Liu, the street was a spatial and communal resource to be employed; it allowed his craft to survive and perhaps necessarily transform, and also enabled certain communal relations to develop. However, after 2007, it unfortunately transpired that the entire street block was soon to be “re-developed” into a new



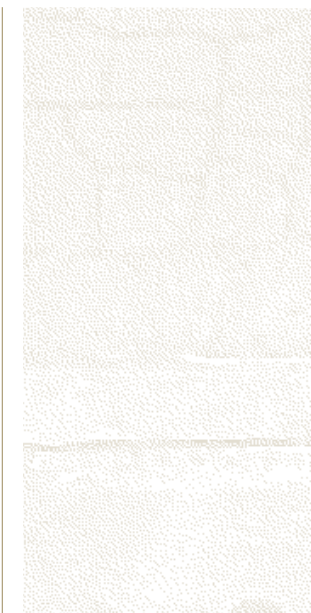
residential high-rise by the Urban Renewal Authority (*fig 4*), and Liu had no choice but to curtail his workshop operation and reluctantly move his retail business to another shop location 100 metres away on the same street, with higher rent. This was shortly before his sudden death in 2009. The street corner where his shop was located has been replaced by a Herbal Tea shop (*fig 5*).

### Wooden Cart Making (until 2013)

In the midst of “city revitalisation”, our local communities and Hong Kong’s vernacular cultures are being uprooted. The following craftspeople, Mr & Mrs Lee are another case in point.

Mr Lee was originally a self-taught DIYer and Mrs Lee, a seamstress working in a garment factory. She joined her husband’s trade in the early 1980s. During the 60s, with Mrs Lee’s enthusiastic encouragement, they decided to start their own business selling handmade carts and trolleys to the then burgeoning street hawker community. Their shop, Yau Kee Cart, naturally resided in Sham Shui Po, being a prominent industrial and residential area where street hawkers used to aggregate, even over the next few decades.

Out of frugality and ingenuity, the couple managed to cut production costs by reusing materials discarded by their neighbours. They produced wooden carts of various sizes and





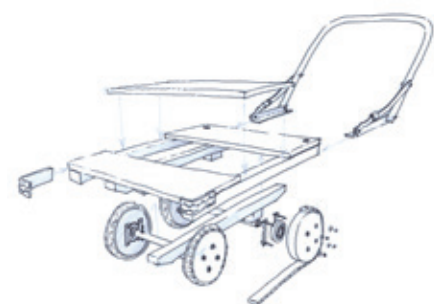


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designs (*fig 6*) from discarded materials — wooden planks from old beds, used tyres and ball-bearings, etc — acquired cheaply from an informal network of “material providers” such as street cleaners and garages. Their basic livelihood practice was to upcycle or refashion discarded resources gathered from the neighbourhood and produce custom-made as well as standardised wooden carts for sale, back to the same grassroots community — street cleaners, hawkers, carpenters, construction workers and the like. The couple each had a distinct role, with Mr Lee being the artisan, and Mrs Lee, in an informal sense, the Creative Director and Manager. While Mr Lee concentrated on the making and developing of necessary tools and methods to realise their commissions, Mrs Lee liaised and purchased used materials from the garbage collectors or providers, managed budgets, and (often) received tailor-made orders from their customers. She was able to negotiate with and advise their customers on the specific designs and come up with detailed instructions for Mr Lee to proceed with their just-in-time production. It was said that they could assemble a wooden cart from pre-fabricated parts in just two hours (*fig 7*).

Their business reputation spread across the neighbourhood primarily through word of mouth. The Lees were seen to closely attend to users’ requirements and were able to cultivate good relationships with their customers by offering warranty services for their products sold. Sometimes clients even brought their own used materials to the Lees and requested them to transform their materials into specially designed carts or other customised furniture. An informal community economy had thus grown and was sustained for the last few decades in the neighbourhood. It was a time when handicraft and community resources were still valued, conserved and shared; and the street (as opposed to a mall) was an open platform, a community space, for all these materials, informal economy and human exchanges to occur. For instance, Yau Kee Cart was able to use the street as a temporary working and storage space without many regulatory measures from the government. It was the norm that all owners/tenants were entitled to use the pedestrian walkway openly in front of their shop. Neighbours naturally instituted a “check and balance mechanism” along the street and its public uses; they were rather self-regulated, as well as mutually supportive. (Unlike nowadays, the uses of the street are strictly regulated by officers who patrol daily from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department.)

Driven by rent increases, Yau Kee Cart relocated its premises a couple of times since the 1960s, but remained around the Sham Shui Po neighbourhood. Between 2005 and 2013 (that is, before Mr Lee passed away), the shop used a space provided freely to the couple by a sign-making company on Boundary Street, under the agreement that the Lees would, in return, look after the shop for the owner if the



(Drawing by Brian Lee)



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latter was out on business — this is a perfect example of mutually supportive neighbours in practice.

When the sign-maker was present, he was regularly stationed in an air-conditioned (office) cubicle within the shop; the Lees would stay at the shop front and by the walkway (*fig 8*). Two-thirds of the shop area of the sign company (around 300sq ft, along with the pedestrian walkway) served — for the wooden-cart maker (the “free” tenant) and the sign-maker (the shop owner) — as the workshop and also the sales area for both parties, housing all the materials, the pre-fabricated components, equipment and hand-tools, as well as their merchandise. All the cart-making operations took place at the shop front, primarily on the floor. The shop interior, including storage, toilet and kitchen at the back, were also shared, so were some of the tools, like the welding and drilling machine.

The shop had no decoration, only a big Chinese signboard with the company name, Yiu So Kee Hardware Co at the top. For the Lees, an A3 hand-written board was hung on the side of the shop: Yau Kee Cart, 9A Boundary Street, plus a telephone number (*fig 9*). A few carts were constantly on display. This was all Yau Kee Cart used to “advertise” and distinguish itself from the sign company. Of course, the Lee couple, and particularly Mr Lee was always present at the shop from 9:00am-6:00pm as a “living sign” and “frontman” of the business for both parties. A sign-making company and a cart-making workshop had curiously developed a symbiotic relationship with each other in a semi-communal shop-cum-street space.

For half a century, the Lees not only pioneered a unique type of customised crafts practice by “upcycling” (as opposed to recycling, which is less ecologically friendly) available scrap resources from the community, their endeavour also presented a viable business model — a self-help grassroots community which was able to leverage a reciprocal economic relationship developed from the street and neighbourhood (human as well as discarded material) resources. This was an almost forgotten form of community sharing practice at street level, reminiscent of Hong Kong’s early urbanisation. Unfortunately, this code of spatial and economic practice is now being replaced by more stringent street control from the government and incoming “modern” enterprises, such as property agencies and franchised supermarkets, and exacerbated by incessant rent rises and the disappearance of the original established population in the district, and generally in Hong Kong. ■



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# Streets of Sham Shui Po

## A Visual Ethnographic Expedition



Jürgen Krusche

Space is rare in Hong Kong. Not only are private spaces confined, but also public spaces are limited and used intensively. Public life takes place, mainly, on the streets. Their high density often leads to very close proximity between neighbours: fried duck hangs right next to a shoe rack; flat-screen monitors are stacked next to a newly opened oyster bar (*page 60*). Pavements become the extension of shops or workshops. Passers-by walk through the workshops, which spread across the pavements and onto the streets. The boundaries between interior and exterior, private and public, dissolve. This type of occupation of public space is ever present in Sham Shui Po (*page 62-63*).

Hai Tan and Yee Kuk Streets are particularly crammed with goods from resident second-hand dealers who sell used electronic and household appliances (*page 64-65*). The shops, which are much too small, depend on the storefront, footpath for storage of goods delivered during the day. Here, the street is used as a temporary warehouse until buyers — usually traders from Nigeria — arrive at night to load and transport everything in trucks (*page 66-69*). The streets and pavements are used differently according to the time of day — between daytime, evening and nighttime, the space is divided / shared for different functions. By day, garments are sold, by evening food is cooked and served. The rooms are used very efficiently in this way (*page 70-71*). Even life in front of a regular bank or on the next street corner varies completely between day and night (*page 70*).

The streets operate like warehouses, not only for those who use them as shops, but also for those who earn their livelihood collecting and selling discarded goods. For people like the “Big Eye Sister”, collecting, storing and transporting things to the recycling station is a daily task (*page 74-75*). Everything that is not recycled, she then sells in the evenings at the night market at her pitch in front of a pharmacy, the Universe Dispensary (*page 76-77*).

For migrants and Hong Kong's poorer or elderly, the night market is a place to buy and sell daily necessities — from cups, plates, clothes and pastries, to mattresses and sofas. Everything can be bought second-hand. This shadow economy is for many the only way to secure their survival in Hong Kong. The street becomes a business, a workshop, a workplace and a space of social gathering (*page 72-73*). The night market is in a constant state of flux. When officially licensed stalls close in the early evening, a second tier of traders with trolleys, handbags, suitcases or small vans, spread their goods over the very same stalls used by the daytime traders. The daytime traders generally know their successors very well and there is a shared understanding (or exchange) between them (*page 78-79*).

To be occupied, a space must also be secured. In the case of food distribution, the place one wishes to inhabit is marked by some arbitrary objects (*page 80-81*). Objects play a large symbolic and territorial role in appropriating, occupying or claiming space. Numerous self-made landmarks delineate the limits of the market (*page 84-85*). Even chalk lines can identify spaces for a meeting (*page 82-83*).

Plants and chairs of every kind testify to the private use of public space. If the wooden or plastic stool is symbolic and idiosyncratic of a certain Chinese identity, then in Sham Shui Po it is characterised by the office chair (*page 86*). Trolleys are another object characteristically found in the district. Used by a wide variety of people in various manners, this ubiquitous vehicle is a useful object and one that is utilised by nearly all strata of society — so much so, that one can almost describe it as a ‘democratic vehicle’ (*page 88-89*).

Another characteristic of Sham Shui Po not to be missed, are the towers of foil-wrapped electrical appliances: video recorders, DVD players piled up, often stacked on the streets for days awaiting removal (*page 92*). Along with these, there are other piles of goods — often covered with fabric or tarpaulin — hopefully to be sold by the evening, otherwise they might serve as a makeshift shelter for a homeless person (*page 90-91*). Another inexpensive means of storage is the ‘redwhiteblue’ plastic bags in which goods are transported for sale at the night market. These bags, however, are less an expression of a democratic society and more a global phenomenon — as such, they can be regarded as an expression of involuntary nomadism (*page 93*). It is not unusual to meet people in Sham Shui Po who carry all their belongings in these bags (*page 94-95*).

Homelessness is clearly visible in Sham Shui Po and has various causes. Sometimes it is a voluntarily choice, taken to escape the high pressure of a merciless performance-oriented society. A life under the bridge offers an alternative. However,

the government barely tolerates this kind of lifestyle and people who engage in it are subject to repression (*page 98-99*). Private organisations and institutions such as the Society for Community Organisation attempt to take care of the homeless. They organise meals and so-called shared events with residents of Sham Shui Po, giving food to the needy several times a week (*page 96-97*). To try and prevent people living on the street, the city takes radical measures by adopting so-called “defensive design” tactics, which makes space uninhabitable for the unwanted. One might ask, which is more alienating — that empty areas become ‘homes’ for the homeless, or that they are fenced off and secured to remain empty? (*page 100-101*)

The Hawker Control officials are increasingly active at the night markets. More and more officers intervene and force hawkers to pack their goods and move on. These strategies have not forced the night traders out entirely, but the government's presence here serves to enforce certain civic hierarchies (*page 102*).

The development of Hong Kong — and unfortunately this is not exclusive to Sham Shui Po — inevitably means that things disappear: an age-old market stall, a butcher, a tofu maker. Slowly but surely, traditional street life in Sham Shui Po is disappearing. As far as ‘new’ and ‘clean’ public spaces go, there is a perfect example very close to Pei Ho Street (*page 102-103*). Despite being open day and night, it is empty and hardly used by passers-by. Is this the future the Urban Renewal Authority imagines for Sham Shui Po? Is this what Sham Shui Po's future looks like? ■



PAVEMENT AND STREET AS SHOP EXTENSION AND WORKSHOP









# IN FRONT OF THE TEMPLE



# THE USE OF PAVEMENT DURING THE NIGHT









# OBJECTS TO CLAIM A PLACE FOR FREE FOOD DISTRIBUTION





TROLLEY, A DEMOCRATIC VEHICLE





# 12 Faces 12 Videos

Song Yunlong



www.shamshuipo-deepwater.com

## 1 Big Eye Sister and Her Recycling Job

People call her Big Eye Sister. No one knows her true name or how old she is. She agrees she looks younger than her true age. She spends most of her time collecting items to recycle, with her trolley. Early in the morning around 5 o'clock, she takes part in the illegal dawn market near the jade market. And in the evening she sells items in the illegal night market on Pei Ho Street (page 76-77). She collects and stores her items by the construction site. As part of her daily routine, she brings cartons and metal pieces to the recycling centre (page 74-75). During breaks she takes a free shower using the shower facilities in the sports stadium. She does not apply for any government welfare assistance because she wants to work and earn money with her own hands.

## 2 Coffee Shops and People's Drinking Habits

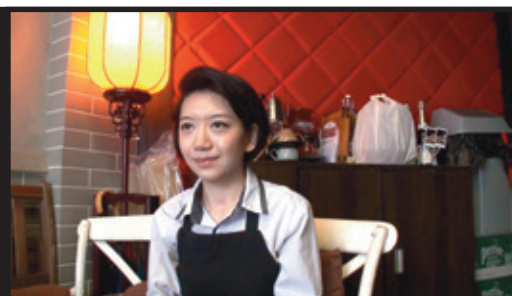
Until now there had only been a few coffee shops in Sham Shui Po. Ms Yu works at what is probably the first coffee shop in the area. The shop opened at the end of 2013. It took time for the staff to learn how to make a real cappuccino. Thanks to a mobile phone app, young people can follow the map to find this shop and order a coffee with a special milk design. A bear face is a popular choice. People in Sham Shui Po don't really drink coffee. The gentrification process has started — more and more new businesses are moving in. Ms Yu works six days a week. She moved to Sham Shui Po to live with a cousin.

## 3 The Designer Couple and Their Concerns

In a very small stairway a designer couple called Ines and Remgo make bags following their own designs. They are local but now they only work here, and live elsewhere. The reason they work here is because of the inexpensive and diverse textiles and fabrics. This is still the area with the most fabric and textile retailers. But this business is declining because of strong competition from Mainland China. The couple finally moved away from Sham Shui Po and have given up their shop. One of the main reasons is that they are afraid of the many foreign immigrants here. They have not felt safe here for a long time.

## 4 Street Haircut for All

For HK\$30 one can have a hair cut on the street. It would cost several hundred dollars elsewhere in Hong Kong. On Kweilin Street, there is an open hair salon where people can wait on the street, or access the hair salon via the narrow back lanes. The aunt — which is how local people refer to the hairdresser with her mouth mask — says anyone can come here for a hair cut, young and old, men and women, local and foreign. Prices are low and there is a constant flow of customers. The ladies work in shifts here. In the background they listen to old Mandarin songs from Mainland China and Taiwan.





## 5 Street Buddy with Two Bags

Mr Choi lives on the street by choice. All his stuff fits in two bags, which he hides behind the bushes after a Vietnamese man stole his belongings. His property in the two bags amounts to: several T-shirts and a jacket for winter time, a blanket and a bottle of shampoo (*page 94-95*). During the day he works in a 24-hour restaurant from 05:00 till 13:00 and in the evenings he sits in a 24-hour shop from 22:00 till 02:00. Then he goes to the sports stadium and sleeps in the spectator stand. He keeps it a secret that he is homeless. He says he used to work as a truck driver delivering frozen meat and seafood to restaurants and earned a lot of money.



## 6 Louie in His Happy Garden on Ki Lung Street

Born in 1960, Louie lives alone with his elderly mother in an apartment on Ki Lung Street. His aunt is a vendor at the corner selling vegetables and eggs. Louie has spent most of his life here on the streets where he was born, and had lived here together with his parents and 10 other brothers and sisters. He knows everyone on the streets. There are fewer and fewer street stalls; the business area is shrinking. Louie remembers hearing the news that Bruce Lee had died as he ate breakfast with his father in a local restaurant. He considers the street his home, and he feels very happy living in this area. In his own words: This is my Happy Garden of Joy.



## 7 Brother Ming the Food Angel

Born in 1952, Brother Ming is a media star in terms of his charity of providing food for poor and homeless people, known as: Brother Ming Food Delivery. He opened his restaurant in Pei Ho Street in 1983. Initially his idea was to invite poor people to eat in his restaurant for free. It received a positive response from volunteers and school students. Since 2010, every weekend they bring food to the elderly people who live on the upper floors of the taller buildings and to the living spaces under the bridge where the homeless people live. (*page 96-97*) Brother Ming's wish is to set up his own foundation. After each weekend meal, he holds a talk and discussion with the students involved in his restaurant. It's become an extended classroom. People can either donate money to the restaurant, or simply buy a HK\$22 voucher and give it to any person on the street, who can then eat a meal for free in Brother Ming's restaurant.



## 8 Ms Chan and Her Electronic Devices

Ms Chan's family runs a shop repairing and selling used second-hand electronic devices, TVs, refrigerators, recorders and audio players. Her customers are mostly African buyers. They collect the devices and load them onto trucks. Later these goods will be transported and shipped to Africa. The second-hand devices still function, and after some necessary repairs many of them are as good as new. There are also collectors who come and look for special pieces from specific eras. Ms Chan hopes that one of her daughters will want to take over the family business in the future.





## 9 The Shoe Seller with Her Limited Street Policy

Ms Wong is a shoe seller who came from the Mainland China years ago. In summer, temperatures can reach up to 40 degrees under her metal covered stall. She acquired the stall officially from the government and can operate it providing she adheres to all the regulations: not an inch more or less than her allocated boundary, nor to block the walkway, when displaying the shoes for both kids and adults. The stall here occupies between two and six square metres. Each year she pays HK\$4700 for license dues. There is no electricity supply to the street stall. There are regular controls: if any rules are broken, the inspectors will take pictures and report the license holder. Ms Wong's products come directly from a factory in Mainland China. Her teenage daughter is very talented at the piano and she therefore hopes her daughter will be able to pursue this and not have to sell shoes on the street in the future.



## 10 SoCO Spokesperson and His Many Visions

Mr Ng Wai Tung manages the SoCO office, Society for Community Organization, an incorporated, non-profit-making and non-governmental community organisation which was formed in 1972 by people from the Catholic and the Protestant churches under the ecumenical movement. Their services are targeted to caged lodgers, tenants with financial difficulties who live in appalling conditions, aged singletons, street-sleepers, ex-offenders, mental patients, ethnic minorities, non-documented mothers of split families, families made up of new immigrants, patients and their families, Hong Kong residents being detained in Mainland China, etc. SoCO stands squarely behind the grassroots communities, supporting them in their fight for their rights and social justice (*page 158-169*). They regularly hold exhibitions focused on topics like: The Homeless and Invisible Poor. Mr Ng runs a really busy office, actively pursuing many different tasks and organising numerous projects, from community events to an international soccer cup for homeless people.



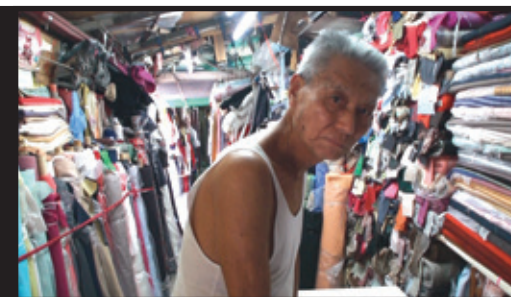
## 11 Retired Man in His Sub-divided Flat

Mr Chou is retired. He lives alone in a sub-divided apartment of 6.7 square metres with a bed and only a fan for ventilation. In the same apartment there are eight other people living together. Because it's too hot in the room — 34 degrees with the ventilaton in summer — he spends a lot of time in McDonalds which is cooled by air conditioners. He has his daily routine: a cold shower in the apartment, then breakfast of chicken feet and rice for about HK\$7.8 in an old local restaurant, then a walk in the park. At around midday, he either reads a newspaper in McDonalds or in the public library. In the evening he sleeps under a bridge where it's much cooler than his room in the apartment. During the day, he does not really stay in his apartment, except for taking a quick shower. For lunch and dinner he can eat with 50 other people in the church activity room for HK\$10 each meal.



## 12 The Vanishing Textile Bazaar Trader Lee's Livelihood and Social Place

The Yen Chow Street Hawker Bazaar comprises a group of 40 fabric hawkers. It opened in 1977 when the fabric businesses first started to relocate from Yu Chau Street to Yen Chow Street. This fabric market has not only established a good reputation for its wide ranging and specialty fabrics, but it also conveys dozens of heartfelt stories by the hawkers who have traded here since its inception. The government is planning to close down the bazaar, which threatens the survival of these grassroots people and their livelihoods. Art students and volunteers have been supporting the hawkers in their quest for their businesses to remain at the present location. Support has also come from the Yen Chow Street Hawker Bazaar Concern Group. The core member is Mr Lee, who moved to the bazaar in 1978 and has run his business together with his younger brother ever since.

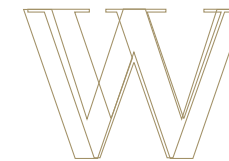
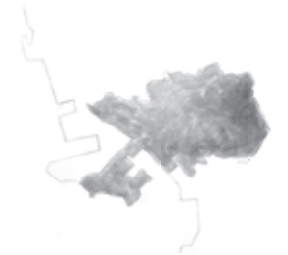




# Private and Public from a Foreign Eye

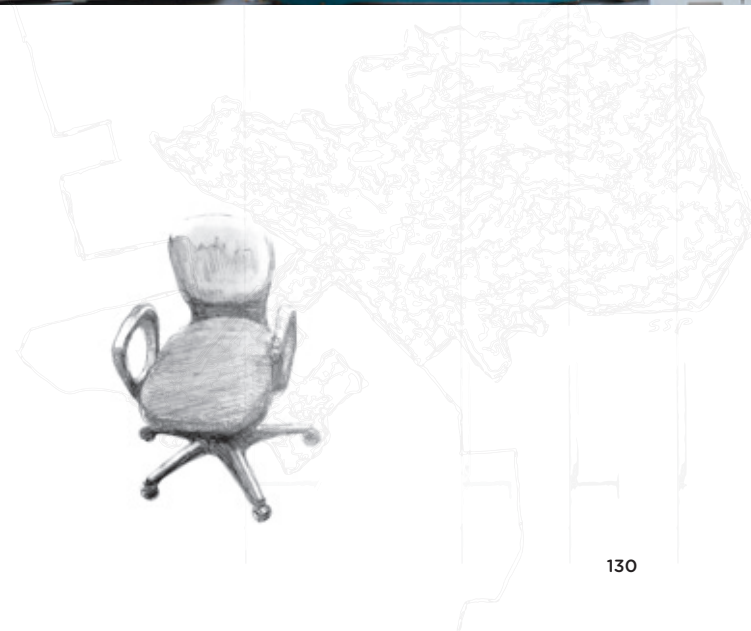


Marc Latzel



What seems to us to be a clear demarcation of a territory, such as a garden post, a trimmed hedge, or barrier tape, is, like all gestures of civilisation, highly culturally coded. In Eastern Europe, barriers are often created by braiding living shrubs; in Southern Europe boulders are often placed to prevent wayward parking on private grounds; while in some upscale, villa-filled neighbourhoods, every corner is surveilled by cameras.

From a European perspective, Hong Kong is a completely different world, where the separation between inside and outside, private and public, functions entirely differently. A person may only need a tarpaulin to safeguard one's possessions. From a Northern European perspective, the depositories created between the kerb and the workshops are fascinating — they are certainly not expecting any abrupt changes of weather. Even when goods are not secured with a chain, they are not in danger of being stolen, even at night. One can find, however, in the narrow alleyways between two buildings small work and storage rooms. These tight spaces bridge the gap between buildings, connecting left and right just as this very dense city mixes old and new, inside and outside, or private and public and creates something both foreign and at times fascinating. In observing this situation, it becomes clear once again that while cultural anthropology searches for foreignness in the self, ethnology finds the familiar in that which is foreign. ■









# “It’s a Night Show” says Sadiq

at the Markets in the Sham Shui Po Area

Akram Mohamed



I n times when democracy is questioned in its essence and manifestations, there is renewed interest and fascination with public space. Globalisation dynamics and the use of new communication technologies have conveyed the issue of interconnectedness of spaces — symbolic but also physical — in a new light. If spaces are able to span countries and cultures, tensions and incompatibilities are pointed out by some analysts and exploited by politics. It goes without saying that “space” brings with it a great potential for misunderstanding as well as a great potential for intellectually challenging views. If space has a normative function in a person’s integration into broader society in Habermas’ terms, it is also the arena in which power relations and representations are played out. It is with these thoughts<sup>1</sup> that I approached the spatial organisation of Sham Shui Po. ➔



The space I consider in this contribution is the market space south of Sham Shui Po MTR station. The question underlying my research is: How is space perceived and practised in Sham Shui Po? I shall try to point out some aspects which might be interesting in considering Sham Shui Po. Firstly we should consider space as an expression of society: public space — and in this particular case — is a place of socialisation. It is clearly evident that the streets I consider in these examples below are a space where intense economic exchange is carried out. This is combined with intense social interaction between all actors active in this space, be it locals living in the neighbourhood, customers, sellers and traders in the market and shops (see map 02 on page 116-117).

Public space — the streets — is an accessible 'manifestation' of social interaction. It would nonetheless be a mistake to assume these manifestations are easily intelligible. Hong Kong is known for suffering from the shortage of space, and this results in private activities overflowing into public space. Clothes hang outside on the streets, chairs and tables are set up on walkways in residential areas and in general, there is a strong presence of public space. It is true that these activities mark the way space is perceived. Customs and practices in one society most likely vary — even if only subtly so — in different social contexts. Great attention has been focused on different manifestations, practices and power manifestations across a range of social contexts.

Sham Shui Po hosts a sizable and visible Pakistani community, being attracted there by low rents, 'ethnic' shops and an already established Pakistani community. The possibility of engaging in economic activity is eased by the presence of co-nationals. This presence is rendered particularly visible by the Pakistani hawkers present in the area (fig 1).





## Lower Sham Shui Po

The area of Sham Shui Po I consider in this contribution, can be roughly differentiated into two (commercial) areas separated by Lai Chi Kok Road in the south-west and delimited in the upper part (north-east) by Sham Shui Po MTR Station and by the elevated highway, the West Kowloon Corridor, in the lower part.

Across Lai Chi Kok Road, in the lower part, is a concentration of shops selling used electronic appliances (see map 03 on page 118-119). These are mostly collected in Hong Kong and sold on the international market to buyers coming primarily from Nigeria and Pakistan. These businessmen buy goods in bulk and then ship them to Africa, the Middle-East (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran) and Southern Asia for sale. Sham Shui Po is not the only place to buy electronic appliances. In most neighbourhoods of Hong Kong, one can find shops selling and repairing appliances, nonetheless Sham Shui Po sells them in large quantities, and they are mostly stored on the streets for sale. The goods change every two to four days and it is common to see pallets on the streets loaded with goods wrapped in plastic, ready to be loaded on trucks for the container port.

## Second-Hand Electronic Appliances

Pakistani men engaged in this business are mostly mediating between Hong Kong Chinese shop owners and African clients. Khaled is one of them, I met him in September 2015 in Sham Shui Po in a *cha chaan teng*.

The space he looks after is usually defined and does not tend to vary, as no other occupant has claimed this area. The relatively quick turnover in the selling and acquisition of goods makes it difficult to trace and the Hawker Control Teams do not seem to bother much with cleaning up the streets. Most of the shops are owned by residents. They deal in second-hand appliances and use the streets as an extension of their shop footprint. The hierarchical relationships between these shops and the sellers on the streets are established so

that conflicts rarely break out in the open.

The shops selling flat screen TVs and computers occupy a surface in front of their over-filled shops. The workshop is the walkway and neighbouring street. That is the space where goods are checked and defective ones are taken apart to recover scrap materials. Power cables connected from inside the shop run across to the walkway where goods are checked. On the street, parking places see the frantic coming and going of truck loaders and workers disassembling appliances, using the walkway to sit and hammer off the plastic enclosures to get to the precious components from the inside, goods are checked, making it difficult for pedestrians to walk by. Encroaching a bit further into the street, vans stop to load TVs or sell a few pieces of equipment. The shop owner often sits on a small plastic chair on the walkway, at the entrance of the shop. With an apparent air of indifference, he oversees the operations.

These shops are rarely inspected by officers and generally operate legally. The goods are sold and transferred to warehouses and when a container is full it is then loaded and shipped. Storage on the streets is more ambiguous: it is difficult to know who is the owner but if anybody shows interest in any goods, people suddenly appear asking if you are interested. These are generally Pakistani men who sit in strategic positions on street corners and watch over the goods. They usually act as the middleman and can put customers in touch with the owners or whoever is accountable for the goods on sale there. Khaled tells me that as they are bulky goods, it is unlikely they will disappear unnoticed, so keeping them on the roads makes sense. I was told that some sort of collective control is maintained there. It was impossible for me to dig deeper into understanding what kind of "collective" this was, and I assume this to be interest groups managing the space.

A more accessible though complex situation and occupancy dynamic exists in the upper part of Sham Shui Po, closer to the MTR station. These two areas and the respective people who

populate them do not appear to mix. A few, such as Ali, have business connections on both sides of Lai Chi Kok Road. Ali acquires some of his goods from the electronic appliance traders he knows. When there are only few pieces available or they are difficult to sell, shopkeepers and middlemen keep these goods for contacts like Ali who then sell them in the night market.

## Upper Sham Shui Po

In the upper part of Sham Shui Po the interactions are more complex. This is articulated by the activities carried out there, which change throughout the day. From the daily market whose products span from electronic and mobile phone accessories to food and antiques, the range changes at night when the second-hand market takes over the same - closed - stalls used in the day market. The transition is usually smooth but tensions between sellers, scavengers and sometimes authorities can break out in particular situations. People hang out there in the evenings as most of the sellers and hawkers live in the neighbourhood.

## Hawkers

The popularity of street hawking in Hong Kong is deemed by some as part of the city's cultural heritage. Sham Shui Po is one Hong Kong neighbourhood where street hawking is still tolerated and this location remains popular all over Hong Kong. Hawkers there sell garments or mobile phones, some sell furniture and mattresses, others, kitchen tools or other small objects (fig 2). They are mostly stationed on the streets in the central part of

Sham Shui Po, around the wet-market municipal building. The day-time stationery and licensed market is organised into small stalls — not much bigger than a phone box when closed — which are used by vendors to store and sell their goods. These stalls are often extended with custom-made metal boxes for the display and storage of goods. This market closes around 8pm (officially 10pm) depending on clientele, weather conditions and season. From 8pm onwards, mobile hawkers start occupying the very same spots that the market occupies. It is at this moment that a particular area is temporarily claimed





as private in this public space. The "territory" is marked by hawkers through objects — stones, plastic sheets, boxes, chairs, plants in pots throughout the day, and claimed at night. This 'occupation' and the activities carried out here function as an expression of power relations that allow different people to claim ownership of a certain place. These power relations extend to different social domains and are played out in different spaces far beyond the simple streets in which these 'landmark objects' are placed. To understand how power intervenes and is expressed into this space, it is crucial to be aware of one's positionality in addressing and reading these practices.

Goods are displayed either on the metal boxes or on plastic sheets laid on the ground. Hawkers mostly have good relations with the official vendors of the stalls, greeting the stall owners when they arrive. In fact, owners sometimes keep their territory for those mobile hawkers they know, and conversely the owners entrust the latter with their closed stall to ensure there is no damage at closing times. Hawkers usually take good care of the closed stalls in order to protect their continued activities. Shop owners, on the other hand, often complain to local authorities and urban officials, arguing that illegal hawkers disrupt their businesses and impede access to their shops.

### The Street

The street corner started getting busy as usual, with people surveilling their 'landmarks' on the ground just beside the walkway. The Hawker Control official was standing there watching the time, indicating that he was not staying there any longer than usual. The space on the street, close to the walkways, is occupied by plastic sheets, boxes and luggage bags. The people on the street are already sitting with their closed bags full of goods beside them. Some are standing and chatting.

When the officers left, the chatter of voices increased. Negotiations started — defining precise boundaries and arrangements with neighbours. Goods appear out of the big 'redwhiteblue' bags.

All settled. Satisfied, Ali sat on his chair, chatted with friends, and drank tea.

On this street corner hawkers are mainly of Pakistani and mainland Chinese origins, mainly asylum seekers and illegals. Observing the hawkers in waiting, the embodiment of hierarchy can be seen: this space is contended among illegals, those with a lower and more precarious status that have to 'fight' in getting a spot to sell their goods. In some other parts of the street, landmark objects lie on the ground for the whole day without anybody displacing them. The hawkers show up just before the day market closes and set up their stalls with very few objections.

Hawker Control officials patrol the streets telling sellers to pick up their merchandise and close their sales. Hawkers politely say 'ok, ok' and start packing their goods back in the big plastic bags, as though they intend to leave. The officials then stop at the crossroads and take pictures of the partially clean streets to record the effect of their actions. Once they are at a distance, the hawkers unpack and empty their bags again. This tidal movement as officials patrol the street becomes less and less frequent as the night advances. The streets start to get crowded with people visiting the night market and by around 11.30pm, the officials assume a more relaxed attitude as their superiors are less likely to come and visit.

Many of the officials talk to the hawkers on a daily basis: it is easier for them to convey their authority in a friendly way. "They [the officials] are not against us, you know. [...] They understand we have to eat [...] Yesterday they told me they will have to conduct stricter controls today because the bosses are visiting. So tonight I have just come to meet people. It's too much hassle [to set up a stall to sell items]." (Shah, April 2016)

### The Merchant and the Street

The night market is well known all over Hong Kong. Besides local people, many Indonesian, Filipino, African, Pakistani and





Mainland Chinese people come to buy cheap garments, used mobile phones and tablets, shoes, used kitchen tools, and other small objects. Clients are often regulars and know the sellers, and the atmosphere is generally relaxed. Drug addicts roam around searching for any good opportunity and sometimes steal from some stalls to resell in others. The trading continues for as long as there are people on the streets. In summer this can be until 1 or 2am. Often it is only the repeated interventions by the officials that compel the market to close for the night.

"When I arrived I spent a month or so just watching. I was proud and refused to engage in this dirty work: sitting on the street all day. When I started to [run short of money] I started to watch things differently. I spent another month observing, who, how and what goods were sold there. Then I jumped in." (Ali, April 2016)

Ali is a middle-aged Pakistani citizen and has lived in Hong Kong since 2013. He arrived via Mainland China from Rawal Pindi. He obtained a visa for Hong Kong in Pakistan through an agent. He travelled alone and took a flight from Islamabad to Guangzhou and then a bus to Shenzhen. When he crossed into Hong Kong, he went straight to Sham Shui Po where he had some acquaintances. Ali overstayed his visa and later made a claim for asylum, like many other Pakistani migrants in Hong Kong.

Ali has a family of five in Pakistan. He is alone in Hong Kong and regularly sends money back to support his wife and his parents. Ali, as an asylum seeker, is not allowed to work or sell goods. The neighbourhood is packed with people in a similar situation. Their business is on the streets. I know where to meet Ali — I stop at Babur to buy some milk-tea and bring a cup to this 'shop'. Sitting on the street on a small chair, he buys and sells electronic devices — mainly cellphones and tablets. He sits there from 4pm to seven or eight in the evening, on the same street corner at the entrance of a small alley — his 'shop'. People

come by there in the late afternoons to sell him electronic appliances, mobile phones, computers. He then changes place once the officers are gone and when the day market is closing. He moves closer to the MTR station where the other sellers are. He puts a white plastic lid on the ground next to his luggage trolley.

He tells me, "I have many contacts, mostly with locals. I like this work, it gives me the opportunity to meet new people. I meet girls. I have a girlfriend I met here last year. I hope we can marry so I get [my Hong Kong residency] ID. She is nice. She used to come every night and we started to meet during the day when I was free." The Hong Kong Chinese know Ali well. They make jokes and buy peanuts, which they share while chatting with him. Other stall owners ask him to watch their goods while they have to leave the shop for a commission nearby. Ali himself borrows a chair from the shop next door and hands it back when the shop closes, sometimes helping the owner to lift the bags or close the door.

Conflicts emerge from time to time in the market. They are mostly over the position and landmarks one lays on the ground, or regarding some goods that have been sold on behalf of other people in their absence. These conflicts can escalate to the point where the police intervene. I once spoke with Shah — a Pakistani shoe seller; he told me he had to move because he got into an argument with a Hong Kong Chinese vendor in the stall next to him. He was afraid they would call the police and have his goods confiscated. This attitude is feared by many asylum seekers and illegals. The more one is embedded and knows people, the less likely such interventions will happen. A few weeks later, Shah started working on construction sites and abandoned the hawker scene. He told me he needed a regular income. He had met a local woman for marriage and he had to pay "quite a lot of money".

Ali once told me, "I try not to get into fights. I am still on the streets so ... I like it and I do not want to get involved with bigger deals. I have my contacts

and this is enough for me. Big is dangerous, you get more attention and get controlled."

### The Goods

Most goods are gathered locally in Sham Shui Po — people collect garbage and resell the more valuable objects to hawkers to make some extra cash. Ali nonetheless affirmed that the best deals are made when goods are purchased in other districts and then sold in Sham Shui Po. Sadiq — a garment seller with Hong Kong residency — spends his nights at the night market and during the day goes to his contacts on Hong Kong Island, collecting second-hand clothes. He owns a shop where he sells the best quality garments and brings any remaining lower quality or unsold ones back to Sham Shui Po to sell.

### Conclusion

The night market in which many Pakistani migrants work is a form of spatial appropriation that has much to do with the nature of their economic activity. This space has nonetheless a strong identitarian value to the people who engage with it. The potential for so many migrants to interact with different social groups and populations has played a role in their integration and their personal learning of Hong Kong society and rules. This space represents the opportunity to learn the language and engage in social exchanges; at the same time it enables them to stage their own visible presence in public.

The areas less strongly controlled by the authorities often show a great potential for social change and experimentation. This applies to the area of Sham Shui Po, which is marginal to the development that 'the city' constantly pushes forward. Real estate prices and living costs are rising in most of the central, easily accessible areas. Sham Shui Po has resisted this trend. Nonetheless signs of change are appearing and the area will probably undergo radical redevelopment in the next few years. The presence of a so-called informal sector like the hawker's market together with access to public space that is still relatively

free, captures the interest of many actors of social change. Artists and tourists in search of cheap accommodation and 'authenticity' have begun to invest in the neighbourhood with their presence and activities. Nonetheless, with the arrival of wealthier residents, the 'liberties' that have allowed for the kind of practices described here, will eventually be 'revoked' in the quest for a 'cleaner and safer neighbourhood.'

These are some of the factors contributing to the present complexity of the Sham Shui Po public spaces. These circumstances are the product of a prevailing grassroots dynamic, and yet they are destined to change into something else under the current redevelopment scheme. Ultimately though, such dynamism will become more prominent than its fruits. ■

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, just recently a whole issue of the Swiss Ethnological Society journal *Tsantsa*, was dedicated to this topic. *Tsantsa* no.21 2016, titled "*Espace public, cohabitation et marginalités*".



## Postscript

# Another Obituary for Another Old Hong Kong

Mathias Woo

This book is another obituary to old Hong Kong. This Hong Kong way of living is disappearing: morning dim sum, street markets, small shops, crafts ... in 10 to 20 years' time, these might have disappeared. A city is the product of collective conscience; the physical form of a city is the product of collective perceptions, feelings, and the present moment of actions.

Hong Kong is a city of "Obituaries". Every year, the Hong Kong Tourism Board or the Hong Kong government produce promotional videos that feature the obituaries of certain Hong Kong objects or cultural heritage. Most places and shops featured in the 1997 edition of this video, for instance, are gone; we find the same thing in other Hong Kong government public promotional videos about the city. It is like the kiss of death: any objects or aspects of culture that the Hong Kong establishment try to promote is destined to disappear under the overriding forces of real estate development and soaring rents, and the non-existence of a Hong Kong urban planning strategy. The Hong Kong government have never planned Hong Kong from an urban-culture development perspective, it is only a matter of financial return for the government. The promotional videos were each created for that moment in time, they never suggested that Hong Kong was serious about preserving its identity.

The neon street signs are a recent example. The M+ Museum mounted an exhibition of Hong Kong-style neon signs, yet made no comment





on recent Hong Kong government regulations to remove all neon street signs, giving the excuse of “public safety”. “SAFETY” is a magic word in Hong Kong that allows the government to destroy anything without justification. The recent building code for street neon is a classic example of over-control. The code is like over-safe sex, a code that forces you to wear five condoms to have sex, and then when wearing condoms is no longer enough, the ultimate objective is to physically force everyone not to have sex. That is why most Hong Kong buildings impart no pleasure. Hong Kong architecture under this building code has no imagination — the buildings are all the same. This makes Hong Kong become a city with no feelings, no happiness.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were many journalists, architects, architecture students, and researchers who visited Hong Kong; one of their key “interests” being the Kowloon Walled City, which was a true piece of deconstructivist architecture. There was no master plan, there was no single architectural blueprint, buildings were built on top of each other and not based on so-called modern building logic — what mattered was the building connections. The history of Kowloon Walled City is easy to find via Google, but simply put, it was a process of three-dimensional expansion and urban growth without any government regulation. This accidental architectural wonder was torn down and turned into a park, as the British decided they wanted no trace of this uncontrolled area. When the date was confirmed, photographers, architects, and students from Japan and Europe began visiting

and documenting this architectural wonder. These photos and books became a collective obituary of the Walled City. Like the Kowloon Walled City, Sham Shui Po is one of the most original Hong Kong-style mixed-use living and working spaces. It is the total opposite of Western-style well-planned compartmentation: living, working, shopping, eating, and making, all interacting and integrated there. But now, like the Walled City, the Hong Kong SAR Government is planning “urban renewal” for Sham Shui Po, which in Hong Kong means one thing: destroy all old buildings and neighbourhoods, and build expensive flats and luxury shopping. The Hong Kong SAR Government has no intention of conserving or enhancing the organic fabric of the old Hong Kong work/life shop-mix model.

Hong Kong is a city of non-stop destruction, construction, and transformation, dating back to the beginning of its urban formation 150 years ago, and continuing until now. The Hong Kong urban context continues changing without any form of preservation or logic of urban renewal. Unlike in London, the British never established a heritage or preservation policy in Hong Kong, as it was living on “borrowed time and in borrowed space”. The singular purpose of Britain’s existence in Hong Kong was to survive and make money, while preservation is a complex and sophisticated operation that requires many professionals and talents to sustain, which the Hong Kong establishment does not believe Hong Kong can afford. If we look at historic pictures, the city’s urban landscape has changed consistently every 20 years: buildings are torn down, new buildings

come up. The transformation of Hong Kong’s cityscape is never based on cultural identity or civil rights, it is only based on commercial and financial decisions.

Hong Kong is a city of no memory. None of the universities in Hong Kong have any long-term research agendas or institutes to explore and study Hong Kong history, especially Hong Kong city planning and architecture. Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Design is a classic example, there is no long term research into Hong Kong’s rich design heritage. It is just another European-led design institution with no roots in Hong Kong’s east meets west culture, students cannot even handle basic Chinese typography!

It is always institutions outside Hong Kong that seek to study its unique urban landscape and architecture. I always wonder why the city is only a subject of interest for people outside Hong Kong? Why is it always institutions outside Hong Kong that like to study Hong Kong? Why is it that local research institutions have no resources or long-term platforms for studying Hong Kong? When young people talk about the “local”, do they know what they are talking about? When did West Kowloon’s M+ Museum ditch the idea of focusing on Hong Kong Visual Culture and turn into a Western Modern/Contemporary Art museum with a Swiss donation of contemporary art from the 80s/90s in Beijing, collecting things that are not from Hong Kong? Why is the establishment so ashamed of retaining a local identity? Why is Hong Kong spending one billion

US dollars to build M+ Museum which has no roots in Hong Kong?

The original idea behind M+ was for a new concept of a museum based on the unique east meets west visual culture of Hong Kong, but the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority changed it into another Tate Modern type museum which has no Hong Kong character. Why has M+ spent 14 million Hong Kong Dollars to acquire a Sushi Bar from the 1970s? Why is Hong Kong collecting art that has no connection to Hong Kong? M+ has become a publicly funded private collectors club; the senior staff at M+ only appeal to the international fashion media and never go to their local community to do research and learn about Hong Kong. Senior M+ staff are ‘collectables’ of the Hong Kong establishment — they never explore the real Hong Kong, or express their views about what Hong Kong culture might be. They are servants of the community of super rich global collectors. Funnily enough, M+ is occupied by the Swiss collector and this Sham Shui Po book is a product of collaboration between Hong Kong and Swiss academics. This book occupies the other end of the Hong Kong concept, like those researchers who visited Kowloon Walled City in the 90s. They are just interested in the city itself and want to learn from it, they do this purely for academic and architectural interests, there is no boss, no government ... no arts investors ... or collectors.

This is a book of Hong Kong memory collection from post-1997 to 2017. ■