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# Ordinary Food Places in a Global City: Hong Kong

**Megan Kathleen Blake**

## **Abstract**

This photo-essay focuses on the everyday spaces of Hong Kong. In particular it views an alternative landscape of Hong Kong peopled by poor who seek to make-do and get on with few resources. The focus is on hawking and market space. The photo-essay seeks to reveal the vibrancy in spaces that are not dominated by neoliberal ideologies. In doing so, it also seeks to illustrate the violence that is done to urban space and to the poor in particular when neoliberal ideologies are given full reign.

This photo essay is based on photo-ethnographic research I conducted in Hong Kong around the wet markets. These are market spaces, either in purpose-built, managed sites or out in the streets of the city where food is bought and sold. They are called wet markets because of the water that is used to either keep the fish alive, or to keep the fruits and vegetables looking clean and fresh. I was interested in the markets because of the way that they are spaces that are contrary to the hyper-globalized world city that Hong Kong strives to be. At the same, in their ordinariness, they enable the neoliberal ideology that supports that world city status.

As a global port circulating goods between China and the rest of the world, Hong Kong is a key shipping node in the world economy. It is also an important city in the net that is global finance as 61 of the world's largest banks have offices in the SAR. Hong Kong also houses the seventh largest stock market<sup>1</sup> in the world. While not always recognized as such, the food markets are also participants in globalization as the food sold within them is largely imported. According to the Food and Health Bureau (FHB)<sup>2</sup> of Hong Kong, domestic food production in the SAR accounts for about ten per cent of the city-region's food requirements. Live animals for slaughter (e.g., pigs, cows, and chickens) are primarily from China, while live marine fish come largely from the waters south of Hong Kong near the Indonesia, Thailand, and The Philippines. Hong Kong supplies just eight per cent of its own fresh vegetables, with the remainder coming primarily from the mainland. The largest supplier of fresh fruit is the United States.

Because the markets do not export, nor is their primary purpose to bring outside money into the region, they are constructed as being "parasitic" and outside of the global city<sup>3</sup>. Yet, as Josephine Smart<sup>4</sup> points out in her ethnographic account of street hawkers in Hong Kong, the small scale vending that market traders do provides an economic safety net for those who are

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<sup>1</sup> World Federation of Exchanges. (2012) *Market Highlights for the First Half Year 2012*. World Federation of Exchanges. Available online at [www.world-exchanges.org](http://www.world-exchanges.org). Accessed 15/01/2013.

<sup>2</sup> Food and Health Bureau. (2010) *Frequently Asked Questions on Food Supply of Hong Kong*. The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Available online at [www.fhb.gov.hk/download/press\\_and\\_publications/otherinfo/110318\\_food\\_supply\\_faq/e\\_foods\\_supply\\_faq.pdf](http://www.fhb.gov.hk/download/press_and_publications/otherinfo/110318_food_supply_faq/e_foods_supply_faq.pdf). Accessed 15/01/2013.

<sup>3</sup> Cross, John C. and Alphonso Morales. (2007) *Street Entrepreneurs: People, Place and Politics in Local and Global Perspective*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Smart, Josephine. (1989) *The Political Economy of Street Hawkers in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong.

unable to find employment in other economic sectors. Moreover, for many traders, this activity offers a living wage. Looking from the perspective of consumption, this form of trading also enables access to fresh, unprocessed, raw food that is affordable to many low-income residents of the city. The fact that fresh food remains part of the diet for lower-income Hong Kongers is an unrecognized public health success. This access is contrary to trends experienced by countries where food systems are supermarketized. Finally, these ordinary market sites offer a glimpse at urban values that extend beyond that of profit to include community, interconnection, and support for ones fellow humans. As such they are sites, which as Marcus<sup>5</sup> argues, are a force of multi-dimensionality working against a neoliberal tide driven by greed. It is these aspects of the market spaces that are illustrated in the photographs presented in this photo essay.

As a final note on the methodology, this project started in the winter of 2010 when I moved to Hong Kong from the United Kingdom. I had little direct experience with the city and began trying to get to know it by walking in as many places as I could find. While my prior research primarily drew on interviews and written field notes, the decision to use photographs to document these encounters with Hong Kong is largely the result of my inability to make sense of what is being said by those around me, as I do not speak Cantonese or Putonghua, the primary languages of the market traders. The fact that I could not make sense of the auditory experience meant that I had to rely more heavily on my other senses to decode the city. As there is no technology to capture and disseminate smell, this leaves me with the visual and the haptic. As a result, photography and a field diary became my medium. The majority of the photographs were taken with the camera on an iPhone. Because this form of camera is small and unobtrusive, it allowed me to “bump” into and document food spaces within the city as I walked through and came to know it. Smartphone usage in the street is so ubiquitous in Hong Kong that it allowed me to blend into the background, at least as much as any *gweipor* can.

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<sup>5</sup> Marcus, Peter. (2012) “Whose Rights to What City?” In Brenner, Neil, Peter Marcuse and Margit Mayer (eds.) *Cities for People, Not for Profit*. New York. p. 26.

**1: A view of Hong Kong Island from the inside the Ocean City Mall.**



This view from the inside a large and very upscale shopping mall located at the tip of Kowloon where the cruise liners dock, is a metaphor for the landscape view that Hong Kong wishes to present to the world. Within the mall all the global luxury brands are represented. Indeed, here one can buy handbags that cost more than many Hong Kongers earn in a year.<sup>6</sup> The fact of ostentatious wealth goes hand in hand with the pride that the city takes in being identified as the most “free” economy in the world by neoliberal think-tanks<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The median household income in Hong Kong is just over HK\$20.5 thousand per month (approximately \$2,600 US). Nearly a quarter of households earn less than HK\$10,000 per month (approximately US\$1,289). Census Statistics Department. (2012) *2011 Population Census*. Interactive Data Dissemination Service, The Government of Hong Kong Special Administration Region. Available online at <http://itable.censtatd.gov.hk/>. Accessed 16/01/2013.

<sup>7</sup> Hong Kong has ranked number one in the Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom every year since 1995 ([www.heritage.org](http://www.heritage.org)).

## 2: Sui Wo Court Public Housing Estate, Fo Tan, Shatin, NT



Hong Kong has some of the highest rents in the world. Nearly one third of the population lives in public housing estates such as this one in Fo Tan in the New Territories<sup>8</sup>. The waiting list for a flat is currently estimated to be about 5 years. Flats in public housing are small, about 30 square meters for a family of 3 or 4<sup>9</sup>, but private options are often considerably smaller. Nearly 100,000 people in Hong Kong live in what are locally referred to as cage homes, cubicle apartments, and subdivided units. Cage homes are, on average only 18 square feet<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> To qualify for public housing, households composition must be greater than fifty percent Hong Kong residents and have a household income of not more than \$21,800 per month. Hong Kong Housing Authority (2012). *Information for Applicants*. Document Number HD273A.pdf. Housing Department, Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Available online at [www.housingauthority.gov.hk](http://www.housingauthority.gov.hk). Accessed 15/1/2013.

<sup>9</sup> Legislative Council Press Office. (2011) *Press Release Concerning a Question Posed by the Honorable Emily Lau and addressed by Eva Chang, Secretary for Transport and Housing*. Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Available online at <http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201104/13/P201104130138.htm>. Accessed 16/1/2013.

<sup>10</sup> Society for Community Organization. (2009) *Cage Homes, Board Room and Suite Rental Research Report*. Hong Kong: SOCO. Available online at [http://www.soco.org.hk/publication/publication\\_index.htm#four](http://www.soco.org.hk/publication/publication_index.htm#four). Accessed 17/1/2013.

### 3: Hawker market on Hong Kong Island



Street trading is referred to as Hawking in Hong Kong. Almost since it had a government, those with political power within the city have considered hawking a problem. According to McGee (1973) there were ordinances as early as 1845 granting the authorities the option to impose significant fines on people selling on the street. These laws sought to territorialize hawking into certain areas of the city and away from other places, namely those areas that were “European” and therefore more wealthy<sup>11</sup>. For those operating in the permitted areas, a license was issued. Today, some street hawkers still hold licenses to sell in Hawker Permitted Places, such as the one above. However, the government stopped issuing Hawker permits in the 1970’s. Consequently many hawkers in the city work illegally<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> The fine was £5. McGee, T.G. (1973) *Hawkers in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Central Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong. p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> According to the 2011 Hong Kong Census there are just over 15,000 people working as hawkers in Hong Kong, yet according to Food and Environmental Hygiene department statistics, there are just under 7000 hawkers with licenses. Food and Environmental Hygiene Department. (2-11) *Pleasant Environment Statistics 2008-1011*. Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Available online at [http://www.fehd.gov.hk/english/statistics/pleasant\\_environment/statistienh\\_2008\\_2011.html](http://www.fehd.gov.hk/english/statistics/pleasant_environment/statistienh_2008_2011.html). Accessed 16/1/2013.

#### 4: Indoor Public Market in Shatin.



Despite their desire to rid the streets of the “hawker problem” those in charge of governing the city realized that the poor were highly dependent upon the markets for both their food and as a source of income (both in young and old age). One part of the solution was to establish fixed pitch hawker bazaars, such as the one pictured in Photo 3, and by moving hawkers into purpose built public markets, such as the one pictured here.



### 5: To market, to market, to buy a fat pig



Both the indoor and street markets offer a wide range of fresh foods for sale including fruits, vegetables, fresh meat and live fish. In the west, supermarketization has meant that only those parts of animals for which there is a high demand are sold to consumers, and the rest is wasted or shipped to become animal feed. Here, however, because of the small volume being sold combined with a customer base that still has knowledge about how to use the less “popular” parts, the whole animal is available for purchase. Indeed the animal carcasses are brought to the market stall in the morning and butchered on premises. This means that there is little that is wasted from each animal. Moreover, because there is less packaging, domestic waste from market shoppers is also less than is the case for those who buy exclusively from supermarkets.

## 6: Social Values in the Market



Stall owners in the markets make suggestions regarding how to prepare the food and ask after the family members of their regular customers. Some provide charity to the elderly and very poor by giving away vegetable trimmings for soup or bits of fat for cooking. I have received impromptu Cantonese lessons on how to ask for the pronunciation of the names of different foods available in the market from other shoppers as well as from the traders. These are spaces of engagement, rather than isolating and individualizing spaces of commerce.

## 7: Boxes waiting for collection



Vegetable and fruit sellers receive their goods in cardboard boxes. The boxes, while necessary for transporting the food from the wholesale market, become waste once their contents are put on display. Waste paper and cardboard boxes can be sold to recycling firms at about 70 cents (HK) a kilo<sup>13</sup>. Many of the market traders leave the boxes along the street, and away from where the rubbish is collected, for the elderly who take them to earn money for food. This informal social welfare system operates within the markets in ways that large scale supermarket dominated urban food systems do not.

<sup>13</sup> Wallis, Keith and Jennifer Cheng. (2012) "Falling Price of Waste Paper Hits Scavengers." *South China Morning Post*. Available online at <http://www.scmp.com/article/1004852/falling-price-waste-paper-hits-scavengers> Accessed 17/1/2013.

## 8: Indoor Public Market Sheung Wan



While western cities are only just beginning to recognize the market benefits of street and market trading, Hong Kong continues to try to eliminate it. To some degree they are doing a good job. The indoor markets are less desirable to those who market trade because the buildings are dark, hot, and dirty. Many have had only minimal upkeep and limited modernization since they were built. They are multi-storied, and therefore difficult to use for both shoppers and for sellers. The internal design is not one that easily facilitates pedestrian flow, as a street or square does. The market pictured here is on Hong Kong Island and has a high vacancy rate and limited use. Other similar markets in the city have been closed through lack of use. Their demise is used to justify the reduction in provision of publically funded market spaces. It is not that people don't want to shop from hawkers and market traders. There remains an illegal "hawker problem" in the city and many of the outside hawker permitted places are thriving. Indeed the Graham Street Market, one of the oldest remaining outside street markets in Hong Kong is just a few blocks away from the public market pictured here. People just don't want to shop from a space configured like this.

### **About the author**

Megan Kathleen Blake is an established researcher with over 20 research publications in high impact English language academic journals and books and a proven record of success in grant capture. Her research publications focus on the role of Place in shaping Food Cultures, Everyday Life Practices of Families, and Value Arrangements. She is primarily interested in Food related projects particularly concerning food consumption and food waste. She is currently working to establish the DaTong Centre at HKBU. The center aims to facilitate and promote interdisciplinary learning, research and public engagement. Prior to taking up this post I was a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Sheffield in the UK.

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