

9 From Street Hawkers to Public Markets

Modernity and Sanitization Made in Hong Kong

Maurizio Marinelli

Abstract

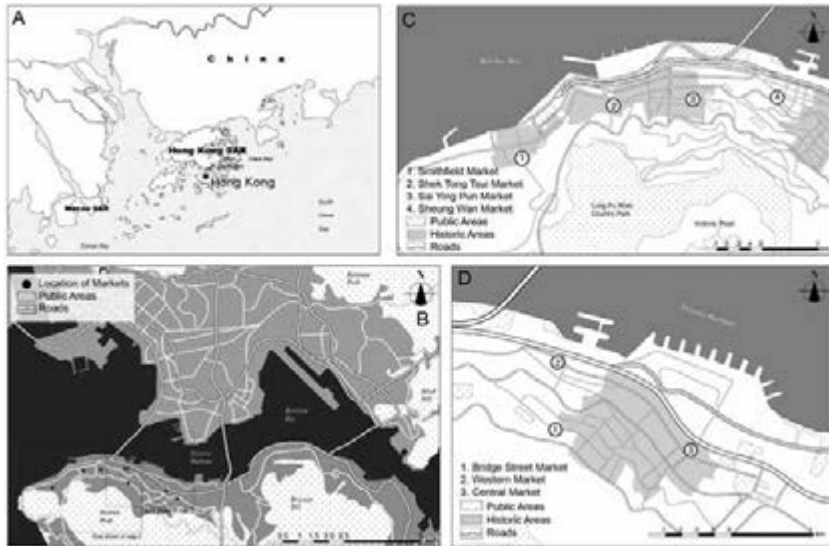
Historically, street hawkers and street markets originated, all over the world, as the real first form of retailing. Today we still use the term 'street markets' to refer to outdoor spaces that are made up of a set of implicit and explicit traditions and cultural practices, but these are also spaces of sociality and connection (Watson 2009; Watson and Studdert 2006). Although street markets are primarily studied as sites for the exchange of economic goods and tradable products, they play a crucial role in the policies of urban regeneration, tangible and intangible heritage, place-making, healthy eating, social sustainability, environmental impact, social and community cohesion, and economic innovation (Shepherd 2009; Stillerman 2006; Watson and Wells 2005). Based on the premise that street hawking and street markets are part of a wider socioeconomic and political system, this essay concentrates on the transition from street hawkers to public markets in Hong Kong, and analyses this historical transformation and their consequences within the framework of Hong Kong Government's strategy to create a modern and sanitized city.

Keywords: hawkers, public market, urban regeneration, neighbourhood, Hong Kong

1 The Semantics of Marketplaces

This chapter concentrates on the socio-spatial politics of land redevelopment and displacement in Hong Kong's Western and Central Districts, with

Figure 9.1 Maps of (a) Hong Kong, (b) location of markets, (c) Smithfield, Shek Tong Tsui, Sai Ying Pun, and Sheung Wan markets, (d) Bridge Street, Western and Central Markets



Source: Ariel Shepherd

particular attention to the transition of street hawkers and street markets to indoor public markets. This piece of writing is part of a larger research project focusing on the crucial role that street hawkers and street markets play in the policies of urban regeneration, living heritage, place- and people-making, healthy eating, sustainability from below, environmental impact, social and community cohesion, and economic innovation. I argue that the rationale for the transformation of street markets into indoor public markets derives from Hong Kong Government's hegemonic discourse of sanitizing public space, maximizing land's exchange value, and therefore privileging ultra-modern shopping complexes. The collateral damage is the progressive annihilation of street community living in the name of 'modernity' and 'urban regeneration', deliberately forgetting that the vibrancy of the street markets is a constitutive element of Hong Kong's historical development, and street markets offer alternative spaces in the city, which contribute to human flourishing and collective well-being, since they reflect a city by and for the people as opposed to a city just for profit.

The concept of the marketplace is often associated with the idea of people coming together in a specific space. In Greek, the marketplace is called *laiki agora* (λαϊκή αγορά); the term *agora* evokes the idea of people congregating,

often in a square. For centuries, the association of these two elements has been the main characteristic of marketplaces in many cities and towns all over the world: a community of people in a public space. (Shepherd 2009, Stillerman, 2006) In Hong Kong, the need to modernize and sanitize the global city has implied a persistent tendency to move outdoor hawkers into indoor public markets.

Etymologically, the essence of the Chinese term *shìchǎng* (市场, 'market') is merely economic, although its juxtaposition with other words makes it possible to appreciate a broader semantic range that intersects with social forms of common life. In Hong Kong, markets are traditionally called 街市街市; the same two characters are pronounced *jiēshì* in Mandarin and *gaai si* in Cantonese. This is actually a very literal translation of 'street market'. This essay concentrates on two pivotal forms of historical, socio-political, and semantic structure of markets in Hong Kong: hawkers, and *gōnggòng shìchǎng* (公共市场, 'indoor public markets'). The complexity of the human, socioeconomic, and legal status of the street hawkers is embedded in the multiple Chinese translations of the term 'hawker'. The simplest is *xiǎofàn* (小贩小贩), which indicates a small business. Also common is the English loan word term hawker as *huòkè* (霍克). However, there are two more terms which more explicitly refer to reveal, more explicitly, the legal and social nature of this profession. One of them is *wúzhèng xiǎofàn* (无证小贩无证小贩), which literally means 'unlicensed hawker', and the other one is *huòláng* (货郎货郎), which means 'itinerant peddler'.

2 Public Markets in Hong Kong

Outdoor street markets and indoor public markets in Hong Kong have played an integral part in shaping the landscape for population growth and urban development. Not only do they serve as localized and more cost-effective alternatives to supermarkets for fresh produce, but they also provide their local customers with the chance to interact directly with producers and distributors. In this sense, markets are spaces of social inclusion and, I would argue, testing grounds for collective experiences of public space—and in some cases bottom-up practices of democratization.

In a city-state like the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), where locals have grown accustomed to having access to everything from clothing retailers and restaurants to community centres within a ten-minute walk, and where families practically live on top of each other due to the scarcity of land (Ng 2014) and the high property prices and rents, public

markets maintain this tradition of close proximity to the most fundamental of life's necessities. But this necessary, community-serving business has gone through a significant change over the last half century, as the government takes an active role in controlling public markets for the sake of public health and the development of modern and more *hygienic* urban spaces. The traditional profession of hawking wares on the street fell out of favour as Hong Kong's aim of becoming a 'global city' began to take shape, starting with more restrictive public policies in the 1960s. The partial restrictions on hawkers' activities were followed, during the following decade, by the government's final decision to curb this traditional business from further expansion (Ho 1991, 3). By doing so, the British Colonial Government set a mandate for Hong Kong's wildly variant and constricted terrain to become a more *orderly* and *cleaner* city that would be more accessible to vehicles and the general public. This was part of the colonial global¹ project of urban governmentality and modernity: mapping and re-ordering the urban space to guarantee social stability and economic expansion (cf. Foucault 1997, 2007 and 2008). The Hong Kong government's solution for modernizing the street markets was to expand the public works project that was already under way to include the development of designated market buildings. These market spaces became a way for the government to control hawking and improve public health concerns, while still providing the communities of the city-state with accessible produce at the local level.

This essay's main objectives are: first, to provide an analytical survey of the indoor public markets in the Central and Western districts of Hong Kong Island; and second, to evaluate how these public markets have responded to the Government's intention of modernizing and sanitizing the areas where the street markets were originally located, while also meeting the local demand for fresh produce. The study will also engage with the ongoing annihilation of street-hawking and the government's attempts to control the practice.

From the 1970s through the 1980s, the scholarly literature reveals a strong interest in hawkers and street markets in Hong Kong (e.g., McGee 1973; Smart 1989). As Josephine Smart (1989, 52) poignantly observed:

With the advent of industrialization and increased urbanization since 1950, the conflict between the government and street hawkers over the use of public space has deepened, the government has intensified its intervention in street hawking in an attempt to gain greater control over

1 Anthony King (2000) argues that colonial cities are the precursors of global cities.

the management of public space. It is now widely recognized within the government apparatus that any attempt at eradicating street hawking is unrealistic; instead, increased enforcement actions are channelled into controlling street hawkers' access to public space for economic activity.

Smart emphasizes the connection between the government's intentions of controlling street hawkers (normativizing their activities and *modus operandi*) and gaining full control of public space. This intuition seems to echo David Harvey's (1978, 21) remark on capitalist accumulation by dispossession: 'the urban process implies the creation of a material physical infrastructure for production, circulation, exchange and consumption. [...] Capital represents itself in the form of a physical landscape created in its own image.' Hong Kong has one of the highest Gini coefficients (a measure of income disparity and therefore socioeconomic inequality based on household income) in the world (Chiu and Lui 2004; Forrest, La Grange, and Yip 2004).

One of the first systematic studies on the relevance of street markets in relation to urban planning was done by Chiu Fan Ho, a Hong Kong University Master's student in Urban Planning (1991). The thesis concentrates on the planning of market complexes, and discusses whether there were enough stalls, and more importantly, occupied stalls, within the various public markets to meet the demands and needs of the local residents. Ho offered recommendations on preserving street hawking, making existing markets more efficient, and guaranteeing better forms of development in future projects (1991). Building on the previous studies, one of the objectives of this chapter is to shed light on the current situation of Hong Kong's government-run public markets and evaluate whether those recommendations have been partially and/or completely implemented—and to what extent they have been successful.

3 Street Hawkers: The Fulcrum of the Public Markets

At first glance, street markets in Hong Kong can easily be regarded as nothing more than a place to buy food, cooked or uncooked. However, when carefully studied, they hold a number of significant socio-economic aspects that can contribute to the future development of Hong Kong, while preserving a centuries-old tradition of sociality and community living.

In Hong Kong, government-recognized hawkers have operated in public street markets for over two centuries. By legal definition, hawkers are

licensed (as opposed to unlicensed) individuals or families who have the right to sell various products in open stalls on public streets. These products include everything from raw meat, live animals, vegetables, and cooked foods to clothes, toys, appliances, and newspapers. Both historically and from the point of view of the public policy development, the latter group of goods—classified as ‘dry goods’—has never been much of a problem compared to fresh food, which is an essential component of Hong Kong culture and livelihoods. One of the key issues is that raw meat and fish, in particular, are highly susceptible to spoiling quickly and spreading diseases in public street markets. Without the aid of proper refrigeration and defined hygienic measures, such markets can quickly become hazardous zones. In addition to these public health concerns, public street markets that sell these goods have been accused of causing severe disturbances to public works (Ho 1991, 1–4). Specifically, hawkers have been blamed for the obstruction and deterioration of the public roads they occupy.

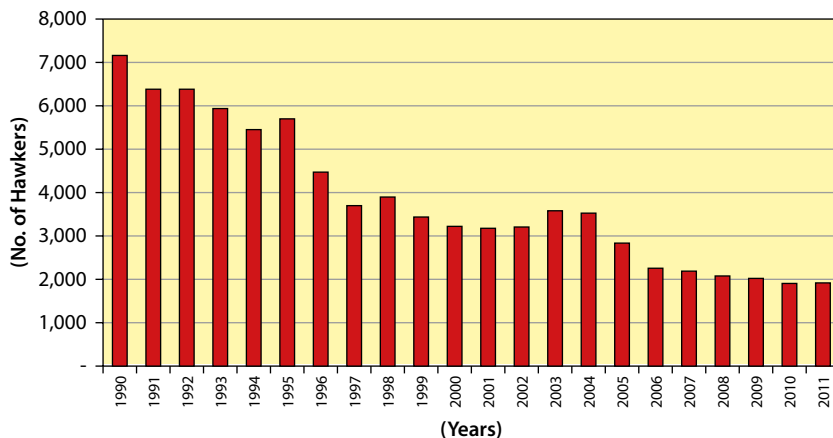
The Cantonese term *gaai si* (‘street market’) is commonly associated with ‘wet markets’, which are extremely popular in Hong Kong. Therefore, *gaai si* is used to describe these types of public markets that sell fresh produce, a practice which derives from the hawking profession. The use of the qualifying adjective ‘wet’ refers to the extensive use of water, which is used to keep the fruit and vegetables fresh, the fish and shellfish alive, and to wash excess animal parts, blood, and other waste from the streets (Wordie 2002).²

In 1969, after lengthy study and debate, the Urban Council (the government body in charge of monitoring hawkers at the time) proposed stopping the issuance of new hawker licenses within the territory. In 1971, the government officially endorsed this policy, and it became law. This ordinance had no effect on pre-existing licenses, and made sure that licenses could be transferred from one generation to the next within the same family. However, it signified the end of any possible expansion of the number of hawkers, while clearly aiming at the progressive reduction, if not disappearance, of the profession due to the complexities of the intergenerational transfer of the licenses. Controversial as it was, the ordinance was clearly an initial step towards controlling hawking practices

2 Recently, wet markets have witnessed a radical transformation of end-users: traditionally used by the lower-income, older generation of Hong Kongers and their domestic helpers, they have recently become an attraction for tourists who want to experience the ‘real’ old Hong Kong. Property investment companies have stepped in and now own the wet market buildings, renting out stalls to the retailers who sell their products (cf. PD 2009).

in Hong Kong. The next steps were building facilities that could house some of the traditional hawker stalls and thereby remove them from the public streets. In reality, such facilities already existed in several areas across the territory in the Central, Sheung Wan, Wan Chai, and Mong Kok districts prior to the ordinance. Terry McGee (1973, 176–82) observed that Hong Kong's policies towards street hawkers had been geared towards four main outcomes: stabilizing their business in a fixed area; relocating them to allegedly more suitable areas; implementing structural measures aimed at controlling every aspect of the trade; and creating situations and incentives that would reduce the number of hawkers. I would add that these measures, implemented in the name of food safety, public hygiene, and modernity, were in line with the city-state's priority of ordering the society for economic development and expansion. Significantly, McGee and Yeung (1973, 1977) came to the conclusion that, while the Government considered hawkers to be hindrances to economic development, in reality, hawkers played an important role in contributing to urban economic growth. The fact that the hawkers were occupying the lower circuit economic model, which consisted of non-capital-intensive industrial activities, services, and trading, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that this occupational sector is less productive than others. On the contrary, one could argue that hawkers are complementary to other economic activities, and this is a good reason for them to be adequately supported by the government policies.

Street markets are barometers of social change and well-being. In her work on street markets in the United Kingdom, Sophie Watson (2009, 1584) has poignantly argued that the marketplace represents 'a significant public and social space for different groups in the locality as a site of vibrant social encounters, for social inclusion and the care of others, for "rubbing along" and for mediating differences.' From an economic point of view, hawkers offer the possibility of providing cheaper goods to local residents, helping to lower their living expenses and maintain sociality, thus avoiding the withering away of what is common to the community (Ranci re 2009). Hawking also offers the possibility of 'absorb[ing] excess labour during uncertain employment conditions and hon[ing] entrepreneurial skills useful for economic development' (McGee and Yeung 1977, 47). McGee and Yeung advocated the adoption of indigenous planning policies that could provide support (as opposed to obstacles) for the co-existence of the hawking profession with the progressive development of the city, since—in their opinion—economic advancement and hawking could actually complement each other and

Figure 9.2 Number of unlicensed hawkers, 1990-2011

Source: FEHD n.d.

encourage greater productivity. Smart also emphasized that Hong Kong's stable and strong economic performance in the 1980s demonstrated that the persistence of street hawking was actually disconnected from unemployment and underdevelopment.

Rather, Smart (1989) argued, street hawking had a crucial functional importance vis-à-vis the overall retailing structure. Due to the relatively slow growth of wages in the 1980s (which were pegged to the supply and demand mechanisms of the labour market), the more flexible hawking profession had the potential to become a high-income profession in some cases. There were also personal advantages, such as the possibility of being one's own boss and carrying on the family business, combining the historical tradition with the economic basis for self-sustainment. Depending on their specific location, some hawkers were also able to establish contacts and mutual dependence networks with the adjacent shops: a strategy which allowed them to survive in spite of the competition that modern shopping complexes have created for them. The scholars working on this topic in the period between 1970 and 1989 concluded that the persistence of the hawking profession, which determined changes in the traditional economy, complemented the rapid economic modernization processes ongoing in the society at large. This raises questions about the necessity of a government-led strategy to control public space and create a *modern* city. In the following sections, I analyse some specific examples of marketplaces located in Hong Kong Central and Western Districts.

4 Three Historical Markets

Over the last three decades, Hong Kong's Central and Western Districts have undergone a dramatic rise in property values and the concomitant displacement of long-term low-income residents. These two districts contain three historical markets: two that originated in the late nineteenth century, and one that was developed after World War II. The current buildings of the Western, Central, and Bridges Street Markets were built in 1906, 1939, and 1953, respectively.

In 1858, to facilitate the growing population of Sheung Wan and greater Hong Kong Island, the government built the Western Market on the site of a former street market that had first been established in 1844 on Queen's Road Central. Over the next 40 years, as demand grew with an expanding population, the government formulated plans to extend the market into a second building. The North Block—originally constructed as the government's Harbour Office—became the second market facility. Des Voeux Road, Morrison Street, and Connaught Road Central physically bound the building. Historical information on North Block is very limited.³ Built in 1906 in the grand Edwardian style, the North Block building features a combination of red bricks and granite for the base and the band. With over 2240 m² of internal space located on two floors, the building operated as a successful public market for fresh produce, dry goods, and cooked food for 83 years, until 1989. The North Block seems to have operated alongside the South Block: the two buildings were actually known as 'The Western Market'. In 1981, the government decided to demolish the South Block and, on the same site, built a temporary facility that became known as the Sheung Wan Complex, leaving the North Block to carry the title of Western Market by itself. By 1989, the Land Development Corporation (LDC) and the Urban Council completed the construction of a permanent structure at the Sheung Wan complex, which incorporated the public market within the municipal services building complex at 345 Queen's Road. At that point, the government seemed to have lost interest in the socio-economic function of the Western Market. However, the North Block building, now identified as the Western Market, was declared a monument with preservation status soon after by the LDC and the Urban Council.

3 Cf. in particular: 'Research File Western Market (North Block) = 舊上環街市 (北座)', AM77-0025, Hong Kong: Heritage Discovery Centre Library of the Antiquity and Monuments Office; Land Development Corporation, *Western Market*. Hong Kong: Land Development Corporation, 1991.

After it was given preservation status, the LDC spent the next two years conducting a full renovation and preservation project of the site. In 1991, after spending approximately HK\$ 55 million, the Western Market was reopened as a centre for arts and crafts merchants and various local dry goods businesses (URA 1991). In 2002, The Lifestyle Group—a firm established in 1981 and focussing on lifestyle, hospitality, and leisure businesses in Hong Kong—bought the rights to open a banquet hall in the Western Market's top floor, as well as manage the entire building. In 2003, the Lifestyle Group set out to renovate the building and attract a more diverse array of business owners. Currently, the market is divided into four levels. The ground floor is home to nineteen merchants, while the first floor houses only textile shops. The remaining second and third floors are home to the Lifestyle Group's Grand Stage restaurant. The demographics of Western Market's customers has changed greatly with the renovations. With the emphasis more on upscale dry goods merchants, the market now primarily serves tourists rather than the local residents and could fall under the category of reconfigured heritage (Staiff 2013, 42).

The history of the Central Market is very different. It was built in 1939 with over 200 stalls across three levels of floor space. In 1967, during the governorship of Sir David Trench (1964–1971), it was dubbed the largest meat market in Southeast Asia. In a city like Hong Kong, where land is scarce, particularly on the island, the Central Market's space encompasses a large portion of the associated district. The market is surrounded by Queen's Road Central, Des Voeux Road Central, Jubilee, and Queen Victoria Streets, and occupies 4150 m² of land. A team of British architects utilized the popular Bauhaus design form of the time to build the market; this architectural style was guided by the idea that 'form follows function', which essentially meant that the design of the building had to be guided by the nature of its intended use. By incorporating a linear curtain wall of windows and an open atrium of approximately 10x54 m in the centre of the building, the market intended to make maximum use of daylight to provide interior illumination. During the 1960s–1980s, when the majority of the Central district was populated by working-class Chinese families and the adjoining neighbourhood of mid-levels was home to most of Hong Kong's expatriate community, the Central Market was home to a wide range of hawkers. These hawkers sold their wares not only to local residents, but also to the many restaurants and catering businesses within the area. As the Central district's landscape began to change in the mid-1970s, however, the government decided that it was time to change this historic market.

In 1976, the Hong Kong Legislative Council (LegCo) decided that a change to the urban planning of the neighbourhood was required to deal with the rapid commercialization of the Central district. Hundreds of residential properties across Queen's Road Central, Des Voeux Road Central, and neighbouring side streets were re-zoned as commercial property. The public bus system was boosted with new routes to accommodate the new influx of workers commuting to the Central district. With the onset of a larger public transport system, a need for facilities to house the vehicles and act as a final drop-off point for passengers emerged. Due to its location, the Central Market was chosen as the ideal spot to house both a new bus terminal and a commercial office building. Unlike residential property—which only had one major hurdle for the government to worry about (e.g., the landlords)—the Central Market had an entire bureaucratic arm of Hong Kong's government to ensure its best interests (Kwok 1999).

The Urban Council was a 100 year old government department that was responsible for the development and maintenance of public facilities and outdoor venues across Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. The council was founded in 1883, with the declared objective of championing arts, culture, and public health initiatives aimed at improving the living conditions of the Hong Kong community. It was also responsible for overseeing public market facilities and public street markets. All government policies on public market development, reconstruction, or demolition had to be approved by the council in order to proceed.

When the LegCo decided in 1976 to demolish the Central Market to modernize the Central district, the Urban Council refused to approve the plan. Their reasoning was that the government could not demolish the Central Market without providing equally acceptable facilities for the hawkers, who were currently operating inside the market, to be able to work within the same vicinity. Begrudgingly, the LegCo agreed and decided to reconvene at a later date. Over the following 20 years, the government did little to nothing in pushing forward the relocation of the Central Market. However, in the 1980s, as property prices climbed to astronomic heights in Hong Kong, various corporate groups, including property developers and retail business owners, advocated for the government to put the Central Market's land up for sale, which meant privatization. The lucrative potential of the Central Market became even more apparent in 1987 when the old Central Fire Station, occupying 2,200 m² of land and located directly across the street from the Central Market on Des Voeux Road Central, was sold to Hang Seng Bank for HK\$ 840 million (Kwok 1999).

During the two decade-long heated discussion between the Urban Council and the LegCo, the business activities at the market began to change dramatically (Fellman 1995; Hughes 1996; Moy 1996). Due to the relocation of residents away from Central and the parallel growth of supermarkets within the district, the Central Market changed from a retail centre to a wholesale market. Hawkers within the market increasingly started to sell their goods to local restaurants and catering companies within the area.

By the mid-1990s LegCo's demand for the 'regeneration' of the Central Market grew stronger. To accommodate the stall owners who still wanted to operate within the area, LegCo offered to convert a section of the former Central Police Station headquarters on Hollywood Road into a market space. However, this proposal was met by strong opposition from the Urban Council due to the accessibility of the site. The Urban Council demanded the guarantee of thirty or more parking spaces to be built in the area to accommodate delivery vehicles, as well as a pedestrian link to Central. LegCo rejected these improvements and offered an alternative with only a handful of parking spaces and minimal public access, which the Urban Council immediately rejected (Cheung 1997). Negotiations with the Urban Council continued well past the handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China on 1 July 1997.

By 1998, LegCo was demanding that the Urban Council remove all stall owners at Central Market by May 1999 and relocate them to the old Police Headquarters on Hollywood Road (Lannin 1998). This led to a stalemate and, due to stubbornness on both sides, the hawkers within the market were never relocated to Hollywood Road. What happened instead was that the businesses inside the Central Market either closed for good or relocated to outdoor spaces or indoor public markets within the vicinity, primarily the Lockhart Road Market in Wan Chai and the Sheung Wan Market. LegCo subsequently dissolved the Urban Council in 1999, with the declared aim of diversifying the Council's responsibilities for better efficiency (Loo 1999). In its place, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department was created to manage public markets. By March 2003, the Central Market was officially shut down. LegCo again considered its initial plans to demolish Central Market and sell the area, but by 2009 the government's tone changed from commercialization to conservation. LegCo entrusted the Urban Renewal Authority (URA)⁴ with redeveloping the building into a recreational space

4 The URA was created in May 2001 by the Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance. URA is the government department tasked with the development and revitalization of various streets and buildings across Hong Kong. Therefore, it is often presented as the 'heritage arm' of the LDC.

for the public and a new home for retail businesses, working with the building's historic façade. The Central Market, which currently operates as a passageway to and from Central Escalator, was slated to reopen in 2015, but this did not happen.

The third important historical market is the Bridges Street Market. As Hong Kong's population grew after World War II, public markets were progressively built across neighbourhoods within the Central and Western districts according to the Urban Council's development plan. The Bridge Street market was the first of the seven markets built within the district (FEHD 2013).

The majority of wet markets across the streets of Caine, Robinson, Conduit, and Hollywood roads were destroyed during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong during World War II. Bridges Street Market was constructed in 1953 to replace the old markets and meet the demands of the rising population in this area. The market sits on the corner of Bridges Street and Shing Wong Street. Like the Central Market, Bridges Street Market was built according to the Bauhaus style. The two markets' asymmetrical styles play on the use of natural sunlight to illuminate the entire space during the day—a feature that is hard to grasp these days with so many high-rises encircling and literally suffocating the two market buildings. The interior of Bridges Street market contains 950 m² of floor space, separated into three stories. The ground and second floors contain 26 stalls each, varying in size from 5.2 m² to 9.36 m². The first floor—which originally contained 33 stalls for the sale of meat, fruits, and vegetables—was converted into an indoor children's playground in 1969 to combat the lack of public spaces for children in the neighbourhood. Once converted, the first floor's access was separated from the rest of the market via a walking bridge behind the building on Wing Lee Street, parallel to Bridges Street. While the official business hours of the market and public space are 6 a.m.–9 p.m., the market is now only in operation between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. for fish, poultry, and vegetable hawkers. This is similar to Beijing and other major Chinese cities, where the street markets have progressively disappeared but the *zaoshi* (早市, 'morning markets') can still operate between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. This restriction is meant to satisfy local residents' needs for fresh produce, while guaranteeing the showcase of a modern and sanitized image of the cityscape.

Because of its historic status, Bridges Street Market is completely different from other public markets within the Central and Western districts. The building does not serve any purpose other than the indoor public playground and morning market. Its location in an increasingly expensive residential neighbourhood has rendered this limited use a serious issue for both the

residents and the government, especially compared with the more modern public markets that are housed in multi-purpose buildings and occupied by municipal services and recreational centres for the locals.

In 2008, the URA announced that the Bridges Street Market and the Chinese tenement houses located behind the market on Wing Lee Street, would be earmarked for preservation (Chen 2008). This decision was a result of demands from the local community to prevent the redevelopment of the area with skyscraper residences and was aimed at preserving the historical significance of the area. An important part of this decision was the history of the site before the market's development in 1953, when it was partially occupied by the American Congregational Preaching Hall where one of China's most prominent historical figures—the Father of the Republic, Sun Yat-sen—was baptized (CRHKH 2012).

The new plans call for all new buildings within the surrounding area to be no taller than twenty-five storeys (DB 2011). As of 2012, when I conducted my ethnographic work, plans were still being considered for the future use of Bridges Street Market. I asked a few local residents if they had any idea about the possible uses of the building. Mr. Lee, the 81-year-old owner of the Bridges Street Market shop Wai Che Printing Co.—a business he had started in the mid-1950s, soon after the market opened—was very eager to share his views, both on the history of the market and its possible future use. Mr. Lee remembered that when he started the printing company the local area was very diverse: 'Expatriates occupied the main street-ways [Caine, Robinson, Seymour Road, Conduit] of mid-levels, while mostly local Chinese and new immigrants from the mainland lived in *tong lau*⁵ along the side streets and Hollywood road' (interview by the author, 10 May 2012). He also remembered how lively the market was, providing the locals with easier access to fresh produce than Central Market could, but then he added: 'By the 1970s, when supermarkets like Wellcome and Park n' Shop began to open across the neighbourhood, the Bridges Street Market started becoming less and less popular'. One reason for this was the lack of air-conditioning: 'One had to avoid products like fish by the end of the day, if it was a hot and humid summer day'. With regard to heritage preservation, Mr. Lee believed that the government was doing 'a good job by protecting the building and the local area'. He added: 'There is so much history here. I

5 The term *tong lau* (or *tang lou* in pinyin, 唐楼) refers to the 2–4 storey tenement buildings which were built from the late-nineteenth century until 1964 to accommodate the Chinese residents of Hong Kong. They were designed for both residential (upper floors) and commercial uses (ground floor, mostly for food vendors).

think one way to make good use of the space is to turn it into an historical exhibition centre, so they can provide information to tourists and locals about the area's history. Then the government should convert some of the old residential buildings into commercial shops like coffee and souvenir shops'. Other proposals for the repurposing of the market building are as follows: 1) the creation of an information centre focussing on the Central and Western districts; 2) conversion into a recreational facility for live performances; and 3) functional adaptation into retail shops and visitors' information centre (Ng 2012).

While the future of Bridges Street Market is an object of debate, most nearby residents have all but forgotten the market space. During my fieldwork in 2012, both children and the elderly frequented the communal playground during the day—but with modern supermarkets just a block or two away, the morning-hour market primarily catered to restaurants in the vicinity and had become a wholesale business.

5 Modern Day Public Markets in Central and Western Districts

In this section, I present the results of my ethnographic work in the following contemporary public market complexes: the Sheung Wan, Sai Ying Pun, and Shek Tong Tsui public markets, and the Smithfield market in Kennedy Town.

After the demolition of the temporary Sheung Wan Complex, the permanent structure of the Sheung Wan Market was built, opening to the public in 1989. This market is still one of the most successful uses of public space by the Hong Kong government. The market is housed within the government's municipal services building. In a total of thirteen floors, the building houses a range of government services, including the Food and Hygiene Department's offices for the Central and Western district, a sport and leisure entertainment facility, and a number of other social welfare services for the local community. The public market on the first three floors of the building is set up in typical Hong Kong fashion: fish and poultry stalls on the ground floor; meat, vegetable, and dry goods sellers on the first; and a cooked food centre on the second floor. According to the Food and Hygiene Department, there are a total of 226 stalls in the market, ranging in size from 3.6 m² to 13.65 m², including 20 stalls for cooked food vendors on the top floor. Twenty of the fresh produce stalls were vacant in 2013 (FEHD n.d.b). The Queens Street Cooked Food Centre was built as an extension of Sheung Wan Market's cooked food floor. Demand was so high

for food stalls from both vendors and local residents that the government decided to provide an additional space. The centre is located on Des Voeux Road, just a few blocks from Sheung Wan Market. Currently, all thirteen stalls at this market are occupied by restaurants, with an average size of 15.1 m² per stall.

During my visits to the market, I conducted a few interviews. Mr. Chip Lee-Mok, who has owned and operated a poultry stall in the market for nearly ten years, shared his experiences with me. He emphasized, in particular, the significant changes that have occurred in the distribution-consumption network: 'Business has considerably changed. It is very different from the time when I started. At that time, I would say that 70 per cent of the business was directed to local residents and 30 per cent to restaurants and catering companies at wholesale. Nowadays, I would say that I do more wholesale business than retail' (interview by the author, 15 May 2012). One reason for this was the competition: 'Most vendors at the market source their chickens, ducks, and geese from the same sources now, with just about the same quality. Therefore, it is impossible to offer very competitive prices, compared to the other vendors'. Fierce competition also comes from the supermarkets that have been built in the area. There are also specific historical circumstances that affect the businesses. Mr. Chip told me:

I started getting into the poultry business around 2002, right after the bird flu outbreak in Hong Kong. Most people thought I was totally crazy! But I inherited this business from my family and did not have many other options. When the bird flu was finally brought under control and the government sanctioned central slaughterhouses to control meat distribution in the city, people started trusting supermarkets more since a lot of them worked closely with the government's slaughterhouses. (interview by the author, 15 May 2012)⁶

One of the most controversial topics of debate both among the urban planners and the vendors is the necessity, or likelihood, of future expansion of the Sheung Wan Market. In the same interview, Mr. Chip argued against it, saying: 'the market is already very well developed. The government did a good job with building the market. And there is no real need to expand since Sai Ying Pun Market is so close by'. Other vendors who joined our conversation seemed to agree with Mr. Chip. On the contrary, most vendors believed that local residents would use the market less in the coming years. Mr. Yip,

6 On the bird-flu outbreak in Hong Kong, see Li 2001.

another vendor, added: 'I do not think Sheung Wan Market will become like Central Market though. The reason that place went out of business was because the neighbourhood became more and more gentrified and became a white-collar commercial district. Sheung Wan as a neighbourhood is changing too, but it is just becoming more upscale' (interview by the author, 15 May 2012). Other vendors agreed with Mr. Chip and Mr. Yip that the area continues to be both residential and administrative, but the type of people who live there are changing very fast. Mr. Chip added:

Significantly, the kind of customers one usually finds in Sheung Wan Market are housewives, grandmothers, and housekeepers; all looking for a bargain because they either do not trust the quality at the supermarkets and prefer fresh produce, or they think supermarkets' food is too expensive. However, that group of people, including their families, are finding it harder and harder to live in this neighbourhood and are moving more west of Hong Kong Island or over to the Kowloon/New Territories area. So, I think that in the future, Sheung Wan Market will become more of a wholesale market since we stand a chance to compete with the bigger wholesalers who are primarily located in Kowloon and the New Territories.

During my last visit to Sheung Wan in 2017, a major redevelopment was under way on Des Voeux Road Central and many small shops were closing down. The progressive gentrification of the neighbourhood will most certainly have an impact on the Sheung Wan Market.

Continuing to the west of Sheung Wan, the neighbourhood of Sai Ying Pun is technically home to one of the largest public markets in Hong Kong, or, more precisely, two public markets that are connected via a public bridge: Centre Street Market and Sai Ying Pun Market, built in 1976 and 1999 respectively. The Centre Street Market is the closest to the harbour and contains 47 stalls, ranging in size from 5.4 m² to 21 m². For over twenty years, the market housed fresh produce stalls on the ground floor and a range of dry goods and cooked food stalls on the first floor. However, by the end of the 1990s all fresh produce operators were relocated to the newly built Sai Ying Pun Market. This new market was built due to the rapid increase of Sai Yin Pun's population. Upon completion, Sai Ying Pun market added 102 stalls to the neighbourhood's available market business. Compared to the other public markets in the Central and Western District, Sai Ying Pun and Centre Street markets have one of the lowest levels of stall vacancies—only 10 stalls across the 149-stall complex are unoccupied.

I interviewed a few vendors as well as some frequent visitors about their experiences. Vegetable hawker Ms. Louisa Tsang told me that she had previously operated out of the Centre Street Market before moving to Sai Ying Pun Market. Her family has been involved in vending since 1991. She recalled: 'I was a teenager at the time and would come to manage the two stalls we operated near each other at the original Centre Street Market' (interview by the author, 20 May 2012). When the government completed Sai Ying Pun market in 1999, they were relocated to the new building: 'By that year [1999], our business grew since we started a family farm on Lamma Island, allowing us to set our own prices on produce and gain more profits. When my parents retired, my brother did not have any interest in continuing the business, but I did not want the family to lose it. So I hired a few full-time farmers for the Lamma Island land and continued with the business we currently have'. She also emphasized the changes she had experienced: 'When we first started at the Centre Street Market in 1991, business was thriving mainly because, at the time, many working-class families were relocating further west from Central'. The population of Sai Ying Pun exploded in the 1990s: where there used to be maybe 1000 or so families in the 1980s, by the 1990s it had increased to 10,000 or more. When asked about her business now (2012), Ms. Tsang stated:

These days, business is still very good for us. The government has spent a lot of resources in the new market hall, and it shows. We have a quality facility for business and residents still come here frequently. I think when they finish the new outdoor escalator to connect Queens Road West and Bonham Road via Centre Street, business will continue to do well since people will be more willing to stop by the market.

According to Ms. Tsang, the Sai Ying Pun Market complex is the busiest of all markets in the Central and Western districts. This is due, in part, to the local demographic: most of the Sai Ying Pun area's residents are working class Chinese families. All the vendors that I interviewed shared the same positive opinion about the government's intention to complete a new public escalator, which will connect the Centre Street Market to the mid-levels on Bonham Road, providing even easier access to the neighbourhood and the market.⁷ In response to my question about her own personal future, Ms. Tsang added:

7 When I visited Hong Kong in December 2014, I noticed that the elevator has been completed.

I do not think I will stay until retirement. I live in Sai Ying Pun, but I have become very tired from all the years of working as a fruit and vegetable seller. My kids are growing up and they do not seem interested in continuing the business at the market. What I want to do is move to Lamma Island and work more on managing the farm. I think that is what I will do in a few years' time. This way, I can still keep the family business alive by only selling our produce to other hawkers at the market.

The interconnectedness between production and distribution, which characterises the activities of many old vendors of fruit and vegetables in particular, and contributes to the investment in a collective sense of community living and well-being will be progressively lost.

Shek Tong Tsui market, located at the mid-point between Sai Ying Pun and Kennedy Town, was built in 1991 to serve a relatively small neighbourhood and provide easier access than the Sai Ying Market complexes. The market is located towards the end of Queen's Road West and is modelled in a similar fashion to the Sheung Wan Market complex. With the market occupying the lower four storeys of the building, the government built a public library and sporting facility on the upper four floors. There are 153 stalls within the market, ranging in size from 5 m² to 30 m². The dry goods stalls are located on the ground floor and the meat stalls are on the mezzanine, while the vegetable and fish stalls are on the first floor. Of 153 total stalls, fifteen are reserved for a cooked food centre on the top floor of the market.

When I visited in May 2012, one instantly noticeable characteristic of Shek Tong Tsui market was the number of vacant market stalls: 40 in total. I asked the director of the Food and Hygiene Department, Mr. Wesley Y. H. Tang (interview by the author, 15 May 2012), why such a large number of stalls were vacant. His response was that there was just not enough demand from vendors: the government had made efforts to price vacant stalls at competitive rates, but there was little to no interest. When I spoke to some current vendors in the market, they offered more insight into the reasons for the vacancies. Ms. Sarwa Mookjai, who along with her husband immigrated to Hong Kong many years ago, has owned and operated a Thai restaurant within the cooked food hall for more than eight years. Ms. Mookjai argued:

There are a lot of vacant stalls at the market because there is a lack of business when compared to Sai Ying Pun Market and Kennedy Town's Smithfield Market. It does not really make sense to have so many hawkers in this market. The cooked food hall does excellent business, but I think that's because so many people who live in the neighbourhood eat out for

at least two of their meals every day. I think the government is better off blocking off a whole section of the market and converting it into some other kind of public space. Leaving so many stalls vacant for so long does not make sense. (interview by the author, 20 May 2012)

When asked about the Shek Tong Tsui public market's future, she added:

I think the market will definitely stay around for a while. Like the Sai Ying Pun area, Shek Tong Tsui is a working-class neighbourhood; it is also located directly at the bottom of the hill from Hong Kong University. Therefore, the residents still need this market. But I think that the government should cut the number of fresh produce markets, and maybe convert them into cooked food stalls. Business is very good for all the cooked food vendors. I think more vendors would help the market, but I am sure it will also force current businesses like mine to be more competitive.

Another important market in this area is the Smithfield Market, located in Kennedy Town on Smithfield Street. The Smithfield Market was opened in 1996, at the time when the residents of Hong Kong Island began moving westward in search of cheaper rents. Kennedy Town, whose name derives from Hong Kong's seventh British governor Arthur Edward Kennedy (1872–1877), was a working-class neighbourhood.⁸ Like the Sheung Wan and Shek Tong Tsui markets, this market is housed in a multi-purpose municipal services building. There are 218 stalls in total, with sizes ranging from 3.5 m² to 37.5 m². In May 2012, at the time of my fieldwork, there were fewer than ten vacant stalls in the building. Similar to the Sai Ying Pun and Centre Street markets, Smithfield Market's low vacancy is due to the neighbourhood's demographics: Kennedy Town is primarily a residential neighbourhood for middle-class to lower middle-class workers.

I interviewed a few Filipina housekeepers, who represent a significant number of the customers of the market. One, Gloria,⁹ had been living in Hong Kong for ten years. For eight of those years she was with the same employer, a mid-30's Chinese couple with two grade-school children. Her main reasons

8 Things have changed in the last few years, especially after the HK \$18.5 billion Mass Transit Railway (MTR) project was launched in 2010. The MTR was completed and opened on 28 December 2014, with mixed reactions from both old-time residents and businesses (cf. Sung and Cheung 2014).

9 Gloria declined to provide her last name.

to shop at the Smithfield Market, as opposed to chain supermarkets, relate to her current employers:

They are a family of four, and both the mother and father work all day. The reason for coming to the market is mainly because of my budget. The family gives me between HK \$100–150 a day to buy food to cook lunch and/or dinner for the whole day. I prepare lunch for the kids on occasion, and I usually cook dinner for the whole family, but sometimes I simply buy groceries for the mother to cook dinner for the family. The market is still cheaper than the supermarkets. I usually only go to the supermarket if I am looking for a particular spice or seasoning, or anything else imported. (interview by the author, 21 May 2012)

Gloria explained that she visited the market twice every day, and the customers were different in the morning and afternoon:

In the morning, one finds more elderly people at the market, together with some restaurant owners. Usually, the elderly like to go in the morning, because they can get the grocery shopping out of the way early in the day. The restaurant owners go at that time to buy their various goods for their dinner hours. In the afternoon, one usually sees housekeepers and stay-at-home mothers. I personally prefer to go in the afternoon, since I have a chance to see a lot of my old friends.

When asked about the products she purchases, Gloria added: 'I buy everything from pork to chicken, as well as vegetables and fruits. Sometimes in the afternoon, when I have finished most of the house chores early, I will meet my friends for lunch at the cooked food centre on the top floor'.

My ethnographic exploration of these markets reinforces Watson's conceptualization of the market as a space of sociality and a place of 'rubbing along' (Watson, 2009). This indicates that the market is not only 'a form of limited encounter between social subjects where recognition of different others through a glance or a gaze, seeing and being seen, sharing embodied spaces, in talk or silence, has the potential to militate against the withdrawal into the self or the private realm' (Watson 2009, 1581), but also a space where a collective identity is negotiated and emerges (Watson and Studdert 2006, Watson and Wells 2005).

When asked about her personal future, Gloria stated: 'My employer treats me well. I like the work, but I am becoming tired of Hong Kong. I think I will stay for 3–4 more years until the children are in college. Then I will go

back to the Philippines to be with my own family full-time. Hong Kong is nice, but it is a very expensive city' (interview by the author, 25 May 2012). Gloria's final thoughts were that she firmly believed the Smithfield Market would stay around for a long time. The fact that fewer than ten stalls were vacant in the market seemed to support her belief.

Other Filipina housekeepers responded with worry when I asked them, 'What do they think would happen if Smithfield Market ever closed?' Maria¹⁰ immediately stated:

It would be a serious problem for the neighbourhood. I know Central Market was very popular many years ago, and it is no longer in business, and that's because the neighbourhood changed. I do not think the government will close down this [Smithfield] market until that [commercialization] happens to Kennedy Town. There are too many poor and middle-class families in the area that need this market. (interview by the author, 25 May 2012)

6 Concluding Remarks

As previously mentioned, Hong Kong has one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world (Chiu and Lui 2004). Something that went unnoticed in the 2014 autumn of discontent, when the eyes of the world were attracted by the media on the streets of Hong Kong where the 'Occupy Hong Kong with Peace and Love' movement was unravelling, is that that movement was not only about the request for universal suffrage. In recent years Hong Kong residents have faced increasing socioeconomic inequality. Income disparities has widened and quality of life has declined for the city of seven million residents: the top 1 per cent is getting richer, while 1.3 million residents (20 per cent of the population) live below the poverty line. The situation has deteriorated even more since 2007, ten years after the handover of Hong Kong from the British rule back to the 'embrace of the motherland' (Chu 2013, 2).

The study of the transition from street markets to public market complexes offers an angle for analysing the human stories of adaptation, resistance, survival, and metamorphosis. These stories are inscribed within the framework of Hong Kong's project of urban governmentality, sanitization, and modernity: the re-ordering of urban space to guarantee social stability and

10 Maria declined to provide her last name.

economic expansion is inevitably intertwined with gentrification-induced displacement and marginalization (Forrest, La Grange, and Yip, 2004).

The first conclusion to be drawn from the markets analysed in this essay is that, although hawkers have often moved into public markets, they have simultaneously resisted the normativization of their behaviour. Instead, the hawkers have reproduced in the public market the same kind of apparently chaotic appearance that the government bodies would have liked to control and normativize.

The second conclusion is that public markets still play a pivotal role in the lives of the local residents. Especially for lower- and middle-class families, public markets provide not only a cheaper option for daily food needs, but also offer them a sense of community in daily life. In this sense, markets play a prominent role as spaces of social inclusion and contribute to the group cohesion in a specific neighbourhood.

The main objectives of this study were to analyse the transformation of street hawkers and street markets into public marketplaces, and to evaluate the efficiency of the public markets and cooked-food centres on the Hong Kong Island. Individually, markets meet the needs of the individuals who frequent them. But statistically, as a whole, the available data tells a different story. Hong Kong contains a total of 77 public markets and 25 independently operated cooked-food centres. On Hong Kong Island alone, there are 29 markets and cooked-food centres. The following table graphs have been created based on population density and the operations of public markets at the district level:

Table 9.1 Population and Market Stalls: Demand, Supply and Shortage

District	Population estimate (a)	Demand of Market Stalls (b)	Supply of Market Stalls (c)	Shortage of stalls (d)	Percentage of stalls shortage (e)
Central & Western	251,519	1,131	786	345	30.50%
Wanchai	152,608	686	615	71	10.35%
Eastern	588,094	2,646	1,482	1,164	44%
Southern	278,655	1,254	806	448	35.50%
Total	1,270,876	5,717	3,689	2,025	35.42%

(a) Population data by district from Hong Kong 2011 Census

(b) Demand of market stalls based on Hong Kong Planning Standard & Guidelines 1989 (Note: the guidelines have not been updated by the government) of 45 stalls for every 10,000 members of population

(c) Supply of market stalls based on data from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

(d) = (b) – (c)

(e) = (d) ÷ (b) x 100%

Table 9.2 Population and Market Stalls: Change in Demand

District	Popula- tion in 2001 (a)	Popula- tion in 2011 (b)	% of Population change (c)	Net change demand of market stalls due to popula- tion change (d)	(d) in % of stall demand in 2011 (e)
Central & Western	261,884	251,519	-4.0%	-46	-13.33%
Wanchai	167,146	152,608	-8.7%	-65	-91.54%
Eastern	616,199	588,094	-4.6%	-126	-10.82%
Southern	290,240	278,655	-4.0%	-52	-11.60%
Total	1,335,469	1,270,876	-4.84%	-289	-14.27%

(a), (b) Population data by district from Hong Kong 2001 and 2011 Census

(c) = (b) - (a) / (a) 100%

(d) = (b) - (a) / 10,000 x 45 stalls

(e) = (d) ÷ (d) of table 1 x 100%

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that there is a significant shortfall in the ratio of public stalls compared to the population in all four official districts of Hong Kong Island (PCDD 2001; 2006; 2011). The issue partially found a physiological solution: the pressure was relieved in the past decade, as the population of each district on Hong Kong Island has decreased. However, even with the decrease, there is still a deficiency in the number of public markets required to meet local demand. According to the statistical data of all official districts within Hong Kong, the majority of districts within Kowloon and the New Territories have increased while Hong Kong Island decreased in population. One could argue that this occurred because more individuals and families moved to the outer areas of the city. The displacement of long-term low-income residents is strictly associated with the dramatic rise in property value and rent in the Central and Western districts. On the other hand, one could argue that the influx of supermarkets across Hong Kong more than makes up for the amount of public markets necessary for the population. There are several supermarket brands within Hong Kong. The two most popular and abundant ones though are Wellcome and Park N' Shop.

Table 3 shows how many markets are present in each district.

The most scientific method for calculating the effectiveness of each market would be to measure the average square footage of the supermarkets and compare to the average size of the stalls within public markets to arrive at an approximate amount of stalls that could fit within a supermarket's usable space. However, obtaining such a number is nearly impossible. This is due to the fact that supermarkets in Hong Kong range in size from 550 m² to as high as 4,000 m². As one can see from the information about the

Table 9.3 Number of supermarkets

District	Wellcome Supermarket	Park N' Shop Supermarket	Total supermarkets
Central & Western	15	11	27
Wanchai	6	4	10
Eastern	18	20	38
Southern	10	11	21
Total	49	46	96

Source: author

public markets provided above, every public market has a different range of stall sizes.

Even with all of these analytical limitations, one can still infer from the number of available supermarkets that they do fill a large portion of the gap between the local population and the amount of markets necessary. With the increasing infiltration of quality supermarkets, ranging in items from the basic necessities to the higher-end versions that provide all imported goods, the daily grocery needs of Hong Kong's residents seem to be well met. Public markets and even the hawkers who operate in street markets have modernized to meet the needs of today's residents of Hong Kong. From the young to the old, the markets and associated municipal service buildings provide greater access to government services to the local residents. The government is still adamant about decreasing the number of street hawkers with licenses, and the laws set forth decades ago to prevent the issuance of new licenses are still in effect.

According to the Food and Hygiene Department, hawkers who seem to be the biggest concern—since they are fresh produce sellers—have for the most part been resettled to the various public markets on Hong Kong Island. This analysis of Hong Kong's public market system seems to reveal that the system, as it stands today, is not so dramatically different, from a functional point of view, from the one that goes back to the nineteenth century. At the core, markets today still serve the same purpose as they did more than hundred years ago: they offer a cheap and central location for working-class residents to gain access to fresh produce. The individuals interviewed for this essay all believed their respective markets were there to stay in their neighbourhoods for quite some time. The price of property rapidly increases as one moves west on Hong Kong Island, but even if prices were to reach astronomical heights the residents believe that the public markets would still remain open. Unlike Central and to a lesser extent

Sheung Wan, Sai Ying Pun, Shek Tong Tsui, and Kennedy Town are all primarily residential neighbourhoods. As residents like Gloria explained, public markets offer a range of products and services that make life easier for residents. Without them, life for Hong Kong's residents, the majority of whom live on an average of HK \$10,382–14,354¹¹ (i.e., US \$1337–1848), would become much more challenging.

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11 These figures indicate the minimum (2005) and maximum (2014) (Trading Economics 2015).

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About the author

Maurizio Marinelli is Associate Professor in East Asian History and Co-Director of the Asia Centre at Sussex University. He is also a Visiting Senior Research Associate at the UCL Institute for Global Prosperity. The focus of his research is located at the crossroads of Chinese history, politics, and society, connecting socio-spatial transformations in China to wider themes of colonialism and globalization, territoriality, identity formation, citizenship construction, and the impact of gentrification. Marinelli has worked for a number of years on the port city of Tianjin, from the foreign concessions era (1860-1945) to the present. On this topic, he has recently co-edited a volume titled *China: An Historical Geography of the Urban* (2017, Palgrave). He is now writing a single-author manuscript entitled *Hong Kong: Markets, Street Hawkers and the Fight against Gentrification* (2019, Zed Books).

