

# **Taking Back the Economy of Hong Kong?!**

## **1. Introduction and Background**

### ***1.1 Introduction***

The global hegemony power of capitalism has been problematic issue for a comprehensive human development (Velicu, 2014). A specific type of hegemony power is dominating the economy of Hong Kong. According to a survey done by Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies of CUHK (2011), about 50% of respondents (404 of 832) agreed that the problem of property-developer hegemony is severe. Property-developer hegemony has led to homogeneous landscape in the urban environment, diminishing of local shops which are being replaced by global chain stores, with gentrification of shopping malls to fit the taste of middle-upper end customers. People are able to satisfy all their needs in a shopping mall, from chained supermarkets such as Taste and Marketplace as well as from other global chain stores. People do not have choice. In the recent years, the situation of Hong Kong reaches its threshold, the number of anti-property-developer hegemony protests increase. People started to realize the importance and the value of street markets, and seem that this is the way for us to take back the economy. In the following, I will focus on the case of Fa Yuen Street Market, to investigate how hawking activities can take back the economy of Hong Kong.

### ***1.2 Background***

#### ***1.2.1 History of hawking development***

Since the nineteenth century, hawking has been a way for people to strive for a living. In order to maintain the order of the society, the colonial government had set up the very first hawker license system in 1847 (Hawkers Alliance, 2013). The Sanitary Board was established in 1883 to manage the issues and policies about hawkers (Hawkers Alliance, 2013). The Sanitary Board was then renamed as the Urban Council in 1936, the scope of work of it had also increased. It is the first public institution with members elected by the public involving in the decision making process. This was very important as citizens were empowered and could affect the government decision of issues closely related to the people. In 1921, the hawker license has been divided into two categories, namely the fixed-pitch license and the itinerant license (Hawkers Alliance, 2013), which are still in use nowadays. In 1960, the Hawker Control Team was established, so as to have a more specific management towards hawkers. In 1972, the colonial government had stopped issuing all kinds of hawker licenses. Hawker licenses could be inherited or transferred to “immediate family members (parent, spouse, son or daughter)” upon

the death of hawker licensees, surrenders or other cancellations (Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, 2013). In recent years, however, only a single time of proposal of this kind of inherits or transfers is allowed (Hawkers Alliance, 2013). As most of the licensees are very old, most of them either inherited or transferred the licenses to their sons or daughters, or employed assistants with identifications to take care of the stalls. 1987 was the latest time for a comprehensive consultation on policy for hawkers (Hawkers Alliance, 2013). This makes people worry about is the policy up to date to suit the needs of the society. In 2000, the Urban Council fated, the policy for hawkers is then passed to the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department for management. This has lead to a more rigid management as it is solely run by the government officials.

### *1.2.2 Current Events*

In the case I am focusing on, Fa Yuen Street Market, there was two fire broke out in the recent years, which brought in public concerns of the safety and the lives of hawkers. On 6 December 2010, a no. 3 alarm fire broke out, more that 50 stalls were destroyed and 7 were slightly injured. On 30 November 2011, a no. 4 alarm fire broke out, over 100 stalls were destroyed, leading to 9 death and 34 injuries. These fire events has lead to reconsiderations of the Legislative Council to set up stricter regulations towards the hawkers so as to due with the issue of fire safety, especially in the Fa Yuen Street Market. The two fire events at Fa Yuen Street Market had unveiled that irregularities including overnight storage of commodities beyond the stall area, street obstruction by commodities and oversized stall canopies are the reasons that aggravate causing the fires (Legislative Council, 2012). The Legislative Council has set up a policy of "dismantling the stalls after trading hours" (Legislative Council, 2012), which requires hawkers to remove all the goods including the metal frame out of the stalls. The law enforcement is especially strict in Fa Yuen Street.

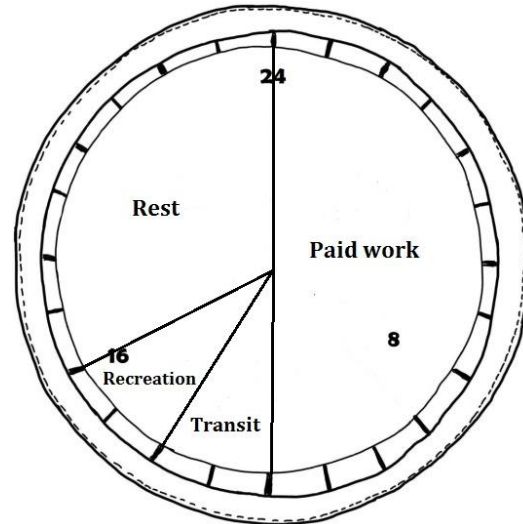
## **2. Taking Back Hawking**

Section Two "Taking Back Hawking" is related to the section of "Take Back Work – Surviving Well" in *Take Back the Economy*.

### **2.1 The Story**

Hawking was most popular in the 60s to 70s, more than 300 thousands people made a living through hawking, which was about 20% of the working population (Hong Kong Economic Journal, 2015). Hawking was an important job occupation in those days, helping many families to survive well in the society. However, after 2000, when hawkers policy was being under the Food and Environment Hygiene Department (FEHD), hawking no longer being considered as a business or a job occupation, but rather just an management project under FEHD.

Let's have a look of the hawkers' Twenty-Four-Hour Clock in the right. Hawkers open stalls at around 11am, before that, about one hour is needed to set up the stalls and display the goods (which I called "transit" in the graph). They usually work until 11pm and pack up until midnight (which I called "transit" in the graph). Eight hours of sleep until eight in the morning, having around two hours of recreational time, then they have to start the set up work again. This is the daily routine of a fixed-pitch hawker. It is still favorable as the time for work and time for life is at about the balance.



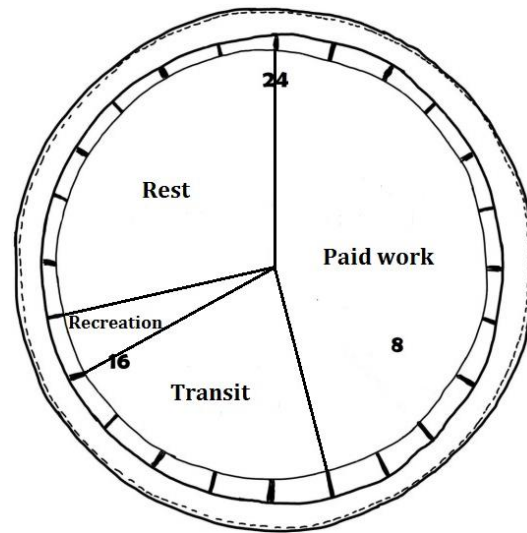
HAWKERS' WELL-BEING	1 poor	2 sufficient	3 excellent
Material		✓	
Occupational			✓
Social			✓
Community			✓
Physical		✓	

Let's have a look how the life of hawkers contributes to their well-being from the Hawkers' Well-being Scoreboard. Materially, the hawkers score 2 as most of them can make some profits that are sufficient for their basic needs. They are able to find their own way of

survival, such as adjusting the goods that they sell in different times in the year to fit the need and taste of customers. Obtained from *Stories of Stall Hawkers* (Hawkers Alliance, 2013), a hawker Chiu Gor specialized in selling gloves, but he will also sell other kinds of items in different seasons. Occupationally, the hawkers score 3 as most of the them enjoy their jobs as they find dignity through being a hawker and do not need to seek for government assistance and can be self-reliant. Socially, the hawkers score 3 as most of them have good relationship with one another. Especially after the fires, they helped one another to renovate etc. They also have good relationship with customers as they see their customers as friends. Some customers even purchase from the same hawker for decades and generations. For the community well-being, the hawkers score 3 as they are being involved in the community, they are always a part of the local community, interacting with people of different socio-economic status and of different ethnic groups. At last, physically, the hawkers score 2 as they have to work for long hours, paid work plus transit time in total 14 hours. Their working environment is also not that safe from fire.

## 2.2 The Tension

After the two fire incidents, the hawkers' Twenty-Four-Hour Clock has some changes. As the government implemented the regulation of "dismantling the stalls after trading hours", the transit time has largely increased which at the same time reduces the time for paid work, rest and recreation as seen from the graph. Hawkers have to transit the goods as well as the metal frame to the storage units nearby. As the storage units usually are located in the old tenement buildings, which do not have elevators, the transiting process takes up a lot of time and also is very exhausting. However, the regulation "dismantling the stalls after trading hours" does also have some positive effects on the safety of the hawkers' working environment. Therefore, the new regulation has created some tensions for the well-being of hawkers. The new regulation can ensure the safety with decreased chance of having severe fire events. In the other hand, it has largely increased the transit work for the hawkers, making them physically exhausted. The tradeoff between work and safety affected their physical well-being. According to some of the stories from *Stories of Stalls Hawkers*, including Zhen Jie, Lan Jie and Mrs. Yeung, and King Gor (Hawkers Alliance, 2013), they all signed that it is such a hard work to accommodate this regulation, they believed that as long as they remove all the goods and the wooden pieces on the metal frame, they can have much less transit work, at the same time maintaining the fire safety.



## 3. Taking Back Street Markets

Section Three "Taking Back Street Markets" is related to the section of "Take Back the Market – Encountering others" in *Take Back the Economy*.

### 3.1 The Story

Before 1970s, Hong Kong was the territory of small shopkeepers and hawkers (Lam, 1996). Starting from the 70s, the form of shopping has gradually changed to shopping centres because of the changes occurred in the economy and population of Hong Kong (Lam, 1996). Until nowadays, there are less and less small shops and street markets, and people are used to shop in shopping malls and buy stuffs from chain stores with homogeneous landscape and goods.

The form of small shops and street markets actually has many advantages that the form of shopping malls does not have. From the field visit to Fa Yuen Street Market, I observed three things that how “taking back street markets” can help “take back the economy” of Hong Kong. Firstly, it is about the diversity of economic activities



in the street market. Along the Fa Yuen Street Market, there are over 200 stalls selling over 40 different kinds of products. As seen from the pictures above, various types of economic activities are shown, including selling wigs, pictures, daily utilities, head wears, phone cases, artificial flowers, jades and traditional grocery.



Secondly, the products that are sold in the Fa Yuen Street Market are very specific, cheap and popular. There was one shop that only sells sweet potatoes and nothing else. This made my very surprised. On that day of field visit, I also participated as a customer, buying a phone case. I was searching for a phone case in a shopping mall in Ma On Shan, the price of it was around \$100. There are many stalls in Fa Yuen Street selling

phone cases, and it is only \$38 each! The goods that are sold in Fa Yuen Street are very popular, there are also a lot of different tastes for the same type of products. Thirdly, I observed that there are a lot of face-to-face interactions between hawkers and customers. There are many conversations between them, not only about the business, but also care about the daily lives of one another. They are friends and thus we can see human touch between them, which cannot be seen in the chain stores and online shopping.

### **3.2 The Tension**

It seems that street markets are very good: goods are cheap and diverse, and face-to-face interactions are encouraged. However, there is also a tension. When buying products from the stalls, we usually do not know the source of the goods. As contrast with the chain stores, with the labeling system, we usually have some idea



where the products come from. As we are ignorant when buying goods from the hawkers, this creates some tensions as to us as a customer. On one hand, we love face-to-face interactions that the hawkers can bring to us. On the other hand, as an ethical customer, knowing the source of the products is very important, so as to reduce the chance of obtaining raw materials from unethical source. So how do we choose with this tension?

#### 4. Taking Back the Street

Section Four “Taking Back the Street” is related to the section of “Take Back Property – Commoning” in *Take Back the Economy*.

##### 4.1 The Story

Nowadays, people always see streets only as conduits, which allow vehicles to pass through. Yes, this obviously is the purpose of streets, however, this is not the only purpose for streets. According to *The Charter of the New Urbanism*, “A street was not just a conduit for moving cars and trolleys through, but also a place in its own right for socializing, entertainment, commerce, and for civic expression” (Dover, 2013).

Streets are also places for people to socialize and interact with others, for people to entertain and have some rest or fun, for people to carry out transactions, for people to express their ideas.

Streets are public spaces. In the case of Fa Yuen Street, interactions generated within and between hawkers and customers, they are just like neighbors and chatting with each other. There are some random stools and chairs in the corners of the street for people to have some rests, just like the picture in the right. There are also over 200 stalls for people to carry out transactions. Streets are urban commons, and they are the “most plentiful and visible parts of the urban commons” (CityLab, 2013), which should be owned by every single citizens.



“Taking back the street” does not only take back the urban common, but also taking back the cultural common. According to a famous cultural critic Lewis Hyde, cultural commons are the “vast store of unowned ideas, inventions and works of art that we have inherited from the past and that we continue to create” (Hyde, n.d.). Although the streets are owned by the government, they should not be owned by anyone, or say it in another way: streets should be owned by everyone. Street markets are people’s own inventions: from a person’s idea of selling some simple goods on the street in order to make a living and benefit his neighbors, gradually more and more people do the same thing throughout years, finally forming street markets. Street

markets is a collective and an unowned invention, which is “inherited from the past” (from the nineteenth century) and people “continue to create” and add on new ideas nowadays. Street market is a form of street culture, a culture of how Hong Kong people use the streets. Street culture is a form of cultural common, which should not be owned by anyone and should be owned by everyone.



#### **4.2 The Tension**

Even though in the case of Fa Yuen Street, seems that it is performing the activities that an urban and a cultural common should have, the government regulations and the current development mode are undermined it gradually. According to the book *Rebel Cities* from David Harvey, “[t]he recent revival of emphasis upon the supposed loss of urban commonalities reflects the seemingly profound impacts of the recent wave of privatizations, enclosures, spatial controls, policing, and surveillance” (Harvey, 2012). The spatial control of the stalls through policing and surveillance restricted the size of the stalls and the area for hawking. This is a process of uncommoning through over-management. In the other hand, privatization is also uncommoning the streets. Property developers building enclosure structures including indoor shopping malls and footbridges prevent people from walking on the streets, instead, encouraging people walking above the ground and in the air. Thus, there is a tension between commoning and uncommoning. A common is being uncommoned in some ways. However, the ways of uncommoning are how the society works and develop. There is also a purpose for government and property developers to uncommon: to have a clean and neat city, separating people and vehicles, ensuring the right of drivers to use the streets and roads. With the two faces of commoning and uncommoning, how do you want your city to be like?

### **5. Policy Implications / Recommendations**

Very recently, there were some events happening leading to the public concerns of the hawkers’ policy. On the 18 February 2015, the Chinese New Year’s Eve, the officers from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department suppressed the temporary hawkers’ night market in Kweilin Street (Coconuts HK, 2015) which happened every year during this time. Although the market is illegal, people usually think that officers should deal with it with tolerance, thus aroused anger of people. Just one week after, on 25 February, the Financial Secretary John Tsang released the 2015-16 Budget Proposal, it claimed that the government will set up more outdoor

restaurants and introduce food trucks into Hong Kong (Hong Kong government, 2015). What the government does and what the government says are contradicting each other, which aroused heated discussion from the society. And just one more week later, on 2 March, Ko Wing Man the Secretary of Food and Health Bureau suggested five proposals in the Legislative Council Meeting of Subcommittee on Hawker Policy. The five proposals include reviewing the need of issuing new fixed-pitched stalls licenses, improving current operating environment of hawkers' areas, considering issuing new cooked food or light refreshment fixed-pitch stalls licenses, renovating current public wet markets with low occupancy rate into cooked food centres, and establishing community-led night markets and outdoor markets (Legislative Council, 2015). When suggesting these five proposals, Ko Wig Man emphasized on "bottom-up" and "community-led" of hawkers' development, he also said that this can encourage diverse economy of Hong Kong (Legislative Council, 2015).

From my point of view, I agree and appreciate the five proposals on hawkers' policy that the government suggested. The proposals are feasible and fitting the context of Hong Kong, unlike the food trucks which certainly do not fit Hong Kong. I can see that in the proposal the government is supporting hawking, just that it has to be in a neat way. I believe that if the government really implements the proposals, it can really help to take back hawking (the lives of hawkers to survive well), take back street markets (the form of market by encountering others), and take back the street (the urban and cultural commons of Hong Kong people), finally take back the economy of Hong Kong. However, the government should really do what she talks and talks what she does. Also, she should speed up the time of implementing the policies, especially the policies which can really benefit the people.

## **6. Conclusion**

We can see the beginning of the Hong Kong government willing to do well in the hawkers' policy. By studying the case of Fa Yuen Street Market and the hearings from the government, I can see the hope in Hong Kong's economy. I hope that the economy of Hong Kong can be more community-led and bottom-up, at the same time less property-developers hegemony. By taking back the three things, I believe that the case of Fa Yuen Street Market does contribute to a more sustainable and equitable form of development of Hong Kong.



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