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BY HKBU JOURNALISM STUDENTS

THE WORKING POOR

A fast-growing percentage of Hong Kongers
are falling below the poverty line
and struggling to survive



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Editor's note

Thousands of Hong Kong's families are finding that they can barely make it from month to month even with both parents working as hard as they possibly can. For quite a number of them, home is a partitioned room. Less euphemistically, some of these spaces are known as cage houses that are coined as "Hong Kong's humiliation" by social commentators.

Hong Kong is obviously stratified, at least with a permanent underclass. Social mobility exemplified by our rags-to-riches elites is a thing of the past. With restricted access to quality education and employment opportunities, children born into lower income or grassroots families start with a handicap. It is not that they cannot climb the social ladder or make a better living than their parents. But with so much stacked against them, they must strive extra hard.

It is lucky that our administration is not turning a deaf ear to the problem and sitting on its hands. Kick-started by the then Commission on Poverty, the Child Development Fund aims at ushering longer-term personal development for children from a disadvantaged background. With the newly-elected chief executive at the helm, we are looking forward to seeing more relief measures taken by the government to put the kibosh on inter-generational poverty.

Deputy Chief Editor
Thomas Chan Chun-wai

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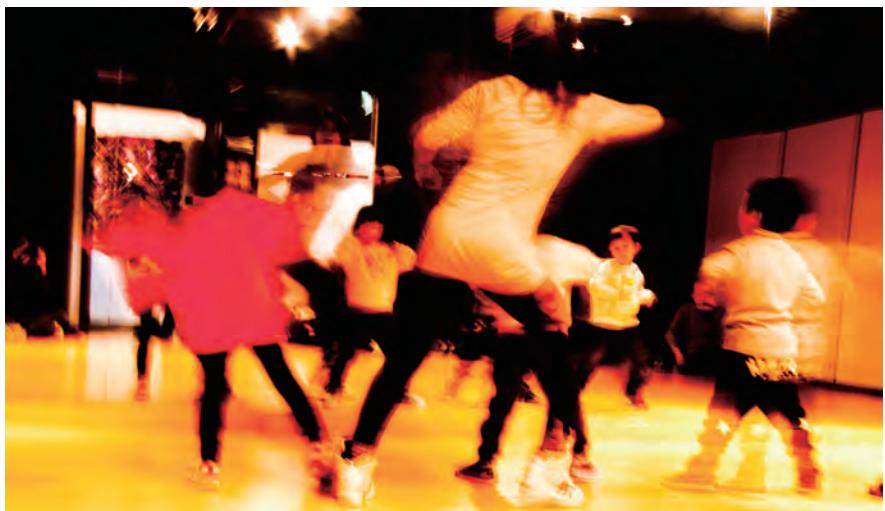
Lawmakers dislike the replacement mechanism for those who resign

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United States varsity students put on Broadway-quality performances



WEDDING SHOPS TURN CREATIVE IN FACE OF DROP IN MARRIAGE RATE

Bridal retailers move into the travel business as more Hong Kongers tie the knot overseas



Vivi Bride presenting their wedding services to potential customers in an exhibition

With fewer and fewer people getting married nowadays, some bridal shops in Hong Kong are trying to maintain their business by attracting customers to wedding exhibitions and giving services to take photos overseas.

According to the 2011 population census, the never-married population aged from 20 to 49 has increased by 7.5 per cent for men and 4.9 per cent for women since 2001. Over the decade, some bridal shops found it difficult to survive and closed down.

But Star Avenue Wedding is an exception. In spite of the harsh economic environment, it found a way to make profit every year. Its owners do not think that such decrease has caused much impact on their business.

"There must be people who are getting married every year. We only see a trend that many couples prefer getting married overseas to preparing a feast for their wedding," said Ms Chen Hsiu-ling, one of the owners of Star Avenue Wedding. "So our main service is to take bridal photos overseas for our customers."

It costs from around HK\$10,000 to about HK \$40,000 to take a set of bridal

photos overseas, and all packages are tailor-made for its customers once they have picked the destination. Ms Chen said "romantic" places like Taiwan, Japan, Paris, Greece and Italy were hot picks for newlyweds.

Ms Chen said that Hong Kong people were always in a hurry and they tended to do many things at the same time. "For the couples, it would then be good to take bridal photos during their honeymoon," said Ms Chen.

"We only see a trend that many couples prefer getting married overseas than preparing a feast for their wedding."

Ms Chen Hsiu-ling, Star Avenue Wedding

Not only have Star Avenue Weddings brought Hong Kong couples overseas, they have also brought people from abroad to Hong Kong. Ms Chen said their company also participated in wedding exhibitions in cities in Asia like Guangzhou, Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan.

Vivi Bride, a Taiwan-based bridal shop

that entered Hong Kong's market in the early 2000s, has witnessed an even more dramatic plunge in the wedding industry in these two years. Mr Chang Tefu, chief executive officer of Vivi Bride, agreed that there was the need for new marketing strategies.

According to the Mr Chang, the company sold around 150 wedding packages per month during the years before 2009. But since 2010, sales slashed for 40 per cent. The company, on average, has sold only 80 packages per month in the previous two years and more than half of those packages were sold during wedding exhibitions.

The company has switched their focus to selling overseas packages now. Mr Chang says Hong Kong couples were more open to taking bridal photos overseas compared to those in the mainland and in Taiwan as Hongkongers are more international-minded. He said that it was like killing three birds with one stone: taking memorable photos, getting married and enjoying the honeymoon.

Mr Chang said they now adopt a more pro-active strategy to attract more customers. Sometimes they would persuade couples to take bridal photos even before they have planned their wedding..

"Some couples go to exhibitions just because they are curious. We will persuade them to take bridal photos as a collection," said Mr Chang. "Once they have taken bridal photos, the thought of getting married will start to pop up in their minds." ■

STORY / KRIS LUI
EDITED BY / SAI AUNG THEIN

GOVERNMENT FACES UPHILL TASK IN PROPOSAL ON RULES FOR RESIGNING LEGISLATORS

Pan-democrats say the new plan is a threat to Hong Kong democracy

Not too long after 220,000 Hong Kong people marched across the city and forced the government to abandon the proposed replacement mechanism for resigning legislator in July last year, an amendment has been put up to remedy public discontent. But lawmakers still find the proposal unacceptable and say it "imposes threats to Hong Kong democracy".

The original proposed mechanism would ban by-elections if lawmakers resign from their posts. This came after the 2010 "Five Constituencies Referendum" where one pan-democratic legislator resigned from each of the five geographical constituencies, triggering a by-elections in which all Hong Kong citizens could participate.

The recent adjustment, based on the results of a public consultation, will prohibit Legislative Council (LegCo) members who resign due to sickness or other reasons from having a re-election in the same term within six months of their resignations.

"It is ridiculous that after the replacement mechanism that led to so much anger, the government still tried to irritate people by depriving them their



Dr Margaret Ng Ngai-yee said the replacement mechanism was "ridiculous".

political right," said Mr Raymond Wong Yuk-man, a LegCo member from People Power and one of the five lawmakers who resigned during 2010.

But Mr Ray Lau Kong-wah, a LegCo member from the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), said the loopholes in the current system needed to be plugged. He said the referendum not only wasted our public funds, but have also disappointed people about their selected councilors, who were expected to work for the public for the whole term of four years.

220,000

The number of people who took to the street on 1 July last year to force the government to abandon the proposed Replacement Mechanism

According to the referendum report, only 17.19 per cent or 500,000 eligible residents had voted, which was the lowest voting rate in the history of Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the expense for the by-election was enormously high, about \$126 million.

However, Mr Wong, who insists on maintaining the status-quo, said the concern of wasting public funds was unreasonable.

"At least there are 500,000 people who used their votes to show the money

spent for the movement was worthy. If the movement was a waste of public fund, I will say the salary paid for Steven Lam Sui-lun (Hong Kong's Chief Secretary) is not worthy at all," he said.

Dr Margaret Ng Ngai-yee, barrister and LegCo member from the Civic Party, also thought the new arrangement was "ridiculous" in the context of depriving people right to vote and the right to stand for election.

She pointed out that people could still choose whether to trust the resigned LegCo member in by-election under the current system, but the new system would leave them with no options whether to cast out or to support the LegCo members at all.

"I do not understand why the government has to punish the LegCo members who resign for a solemn reason to let people reflect on their opinions in the by-election. I think this new arrangement is absurd," she said.

According to a polling conducted by the University of Hong Kong, 57 per cent of respondents agreed the loophole should be plugged by legislative measure, while those who suggest maintaining the status quo amounted 31 per cent.

The six-month prohibition on seeking re-election for legislators who have resigned is supported by 14 per cent of those respondents who agree to plug the loophole.

"I didn't see that there is main-stream opinion supporting the amendment as if you count the percentage, only 14 per cent over 57 per cent of people are in favour of the new arrangement – How can they call it mainstream?" Dr Ng said. ■

STORY/BETH LIU
EDITED BY/PEARLIE YIU

NEW HOUSING SCHEME FOR THE ELDERLY "TOO LUXURIOUS"

Potential tenants say "Joyous Living" is way too costly to live in

The Hong Kong Housing Society has launched a new luxurious housing scheme for senior applicants. But the scheme did not seem to appeal to anyone in need.

"Joyous Living" was proposed by the Hong Kong Housing Society (HKHS), aiming at providing quality retirement living, which includes one-stop household, recreational and wellness centers as well as health care services. Units will be built between 500 and 1,000 square feet in size.

Tenants are required to pay the full rent or "entry contribution" before they move in. They also have to pay the bill for extra maintenance fees at the end of each month. HKHS estimated that each 500-square feet unit would cost approximately HK\$3 million.

Ms Lui Chun-yip, 58, said this scheme was too expensive for her. "I actually don't care what the scheme is. I just

know that I won't have the money for that," she said.

Ms Lui lives in Hung Hom in a 400-square-feet apartment with her son and the daughter-in-law. She said that if she had millions of dollars to spend, she wouldn't mind to live in a larger space. But she did not have the money.

Even if they could afford the sum of money, some potential tenants still chose not to rent a flat under the scheme. Mr. Suen Lap-ming, 72, shares an apartment with his daughter in Kowloon City. His daughter suggested applying for a unit in 'Joyous Living' so that Mr. Suen could live more comfortably, but he rejected the offer.

"I prefer to stay where I am -where my friends are," Mr. Suen explained. "I believe that it is difficult at my age to adapt to new environments like this. Besides, the location is quite inconvenient for me."

The scheme comprises two projects at Tanner Hill in North Point and Wetland Park Road in Tin Shui Wai.

In 2003, the Housing Society built two senior residences for the middle class. However, the two residences, known as Cheerful Court and Jolly Place respectively, have seen in a loss of HK\$25 million.

Mr Ho Wai-man, Executive Director for the Federation of Public Housing Estates, said "Joyous Living" is different. "The Housing Society may be losing money on the previous schemes. But "Joyous Living" is definitely profitable, as it will charge each tenant at least HK\$3 million for entry contribution."

The entry contribution for Cheerful Court and Jolly Place ranged from HK\$292,000 to HK\$650,000, with monthly management charge from HK\$1,000 to HK\$2,000. The highest entry contribution and monthly charge cost only a fifth of that for "Joyous Living".

Mr Ho agreed that the rent and monthly charges would both be too high. "The Federation held no objection to the Housing Society building units for well-off seniors, but the monthly fee should be waived or heavily subsidized," he said.

Ms. Leung Man-Ching is one of the residents living in Cheerful Court. She was appalled by the high prices of "Joyous Living".

"Everything is basically the same as other senior homes, but somehow the price of living there is ten times higher. I really don't understand how the Housing Society came up with that," she said.



Reference images of the proposed Tanner Hill Project



STORY / COCO ZHENG

EDITED BY / JACKAUNG

PHOTO CREDITS / HKHS JOYOUS LIVING WEBSITE



WHEN THE FISH ARE GONE, THE TOURIST

Residents of Tai O village on Lantau are finding new ways to make their own living

STORY/VIVIAN LI

EDITED BY/JASMIN YIU

Tai O, a small area in Lantau Island, has been living and proofed Hong Kong's history as a fishing town. In March 2012, with the intention of attracting tourists, the Planning Department announced the opening of Old Tai O Police Station as a Heritage Hotel. The original landmarks of shrimp pastes factories, stilt houses and salted fish seem to be vanishing.

"Boat trips to see the Chinese White Dolphins, only \$20!" A group of men and women in simple village clothing shout and show advertisements with dolphin images at the bus terminal of Tai O.

These people are residents of Tai O formerly, the most famous fishing town in Hong Kong, and used to be fishermen. But now, their main career is tourism. They hope to catch visitors getting off the bus and persuade them to see one of Tai O's attractions, the

near-extinct dolphins. If they don't do that, there is plenty more.

Walking through Tai O Market and past the stilt houses, which have symbolized Tai O for centuries, tourists can experience the "Venice of Hong Kong". However, compared to the past, Tai O's features in tourists' eyes have been dramatically changing with modern development. For one thing, fishing has died out as fisheries become threatened but Tai O people aren't happy with that.

"The residents are unwilling to switch from fishing to other jobs," said Mr Lou Cheuk-wing, first vice chairman of Tai O Rural Committee. "They earned more when they fished before, but now the government has set some limits on fishing, and more people are moving to the city."

"Many of the younger generation are

working in the city now," said Mrs Wong, a 60-year-old whose two daughters have jobs in town. "Who would like to work as a fisherman forever when they can be a businessman?"

Along with the population outflow, locals have faced increasing fuel prices, and have no allowances from the government. So Tai O residents have to find a way to earn a living by themselves.

"The fishing industry is disappearing and the salt industry and agriculture have already faded away," said Mr Lou. "With different elements and restrictions, Tai O should face them by developing itself."

Miss Joy Lam Chui Yin helps her family in their store, selling grilled and barbecued snacks to tourists. She said the store has been open for only two months, and they just want to try a small business to take advantage of more and



S COME...

more tourists visiting Tai O.

The government is committed to enhancing the appeal of Lantau, including Tai O. In 2002, the Planning Department proposed improvement works at Tai O, to preserve the cultural heritage and natural attributes. The revitalization project was supposed to take five years.

Then in 2009, a strong typhoon caused serious flooding in Tai O, and aroused public awareness of the problem the village faces. Flooding of the main streets occurs every rainy season, which brings not only inconvenience to locals, but also affects the number of tourists.

According to Mr Lou, the revitalization project has focused on the prevention of flooding. But recently, the reopening of the old Tai O Police Station as a heritage hotel has been an added

attraction for tourists.

"The effect of the project is not obvious at the moment," said Mr Wong Kwong-chuen, the 66-year-old owner of a dried seafood shop. "The project is not comprehensive enough. The recommendation to construct a road between Tung Chung and Tai O ten years ago to lessen the traveling time for tourists has not been done!" At present villagers going to the nearest town, Tung Chung, must use a circuitous route across the mountains.

But they are happy with whatever the government has to offer. "As long as the government is willing to put resources into improving facilities without destroying and changing the original culture of Tai O, people here welcome the project," said Mr Lou.

However, both Mr Lou and Mr Wong think that the government should put

more effort into tourism in Tai O, making it a centre of the historic fishing culture of old Hong Kong.

"The government doesn't invest and give weight to tourism development in Tai O," added Mr Lou. "There are only three thousand people living in Tai O, and the government will not invest more for us because of the lack of economic return."

Compared to other Hong Kong citizens, residents in Tai O had a simpler and more leisurely life in the days of fishing. But with the trend of modern development in Hong Kong, the fishing industry is no longer their main income source and more Tai O people are switching from casting for fish to casting for tourists. Without much help from the government, they need to have more ideas on attracting tourists by themselves. ■

Inflation is bearing down on poor families and they are having to cut down on food costs, causing concern about malnutrition.

198,000 HOUSEHOLDS LIVE IN PENURY

Tiny cubicle homes and sparse meals are the reality for Hong Kong's poor families. Surging rents and food costs are eating up their wages, leaving them barely scraping by.

STORY / CLARIE LEE, JOE ZHU, KRISTINE BASILIO, SOPHIA FU
EDITED BY / AMANDA MUNKSGAARD, CECILIA CHAN, WINNIE YIU

Ah Mui and her 10-year-old daughter have lived in a cubicle of less than 100 square feet in Sham Shui Po for over three years. Working six hours a day, six days per week, Ah Mui, who wishes to remain anonymous, has a very tight budget. Out of her \$6000 monthly salary, half goes to rental payment, \$1000 is saved for her daughter's tutorial class fee and the rest goes to transportation and meals.

"I need to be very careful with my money. The price of food has gone up a lot. One catty of vegetables now can cost as much as \$25 in the Sham Shui Po wet market."

Like other, among the 198,000 poor families, Ah Mui fears that life is getting tougher despite the fact that the economy is rebounding.

Fuelled by drastic climbs in food prices and rent, the surging inflation rate is bearing down on the poorest households like Ah Mui's. In January inflation stood high at 6.7 per cent,

which is almost two times the 3.5 per cent from a year earlier.

With living costs constantly rising, employment no longer guarantees people can make ends meet by round-the-clock laboring. Even the government has set the statutory minimum wage at \$28, which came into effect in May 1, 2011. But the rise in wages for low-income earners still fails to keep up with the spiraling inflation rate.

The number of households living in poverty with at least one person being employed, according to Oxfam Hong Kong's Policy Officer, Mr Charles Ho, has dropped by 0.9 per cent during the period from June to August last year.

But he said the decrease was by no means proving the living standards of these families had been lifted.

"Food prices and rents are hitting the ceiling so fast that salary increases are lagging far behind," said Mr Ho.

To cope with this, many workers'

families like Ah Mui's are cutting back on food so as to pay the rent and other miscellaneous expenses such as children's education fees.

Ah Mui has only \$35 to spend on meals every day. The usual diet includes some vegetables and little meat.

"We seldom dine out. It's very expensive. Even though my daughter might sometimes ask me if I can buy her fast food, I just tell her we have no extra money," said the 31-year-old mother.

"I have to save every buck," she added.

Rising food prices are forcing poor parents to adopt some undesirable ways to survive the tide. Oxfam's report on impact of soaring food prices on poor households 2011 has revealed that that majority of these parents choose not to consume meats and to generally eat less to save food for the children. Some even buy almost expired food to cut down costs.

Dieticians have warned that a



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decrease in daily food intake or an imbalanced diet can lead to malnutrition and is especially detrimental to children's growth during puberty.

Ah Mui said sometimes she was worried about her daughter's health.

"I have no choice. It's a matter of money," she said.

For the last couple of years Ah Mui has been receiving food assistance from the non-governmental organisation Tung Wah Group of Hospitals.

The food bank project was initiated by the government in 2009 to provide short-term assistance that lasts up to six months for people who have difficulties in coping with daily food expenditure.

Ms Lau Kimm Wung, supervisor of the Tai Kok Tsui Integrated Service Centre of Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, said the number of families applying for food assistance in Sham Shui Po district had

rocketed to an average of 800 to 1000 per month in 2011, compared to 500 in 2009.

"A surge in world food prices has pushed up local food costs. These low-income earners find it harder to maintain subsistence," said Ms Lau.

Seeing the urgent need to alleviate poor families' financial burden in purchasing food, the group has launched charity bazaars every three months to give away commodities to families and offer goods below the market price.

The charity organisation also provides recipients with fresh food vouchers to buy fresh meat and vegetables at the market in addition to distributing canned food.

While the burden of food costs is alleviated with the aid from NGOs, grassroots families still have to fret over their high rent.

The overheated property market coupled with the decline in flat supply in old districts due to redevelopment projects has led to a drastic jump in

rent. Low-income workers living in subdivided units, bedspaces or cage houses bear the brunt, with rental per square rising to as much as that of a luxury apartment.

Reports from the Society for Community Organization on housing rent for low-income people puts the figure of people living in poor housing at 100,000 as of 2011.

Many of these households were in fact queuing up for the Public Rental Housing but had yet to receive any offer, said Mr Ho.

Although the Housing Authority pledges to keep the average waiting time for public housing at around three years, many have waited for allocation of house far more than this period.

In 2008, Ah Mui submitted her PRH application and hoped to move out from the small and unhygienic cubicle soon. However, until now the authority has not allocated any housing to her. ■

HELPING THE YOUNG GENERATION MOVE

The government's Child Development Fund aims to give youngsters from poor families the chance to move forward



Food assistance include oil, seasonings, laundry supplies, food and snacks. Some companies donate their products as well.

Disadvantaged families in poor districts struggle for subsistence with limited necessities. They strive to live on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), and food assistance from voluntary groups. Poverty is increasingly prominent in the ever-prosperous Hong Kong, and prevails over the younger generation.

Thirteen per cent of current low-income households are poorer and have a lower educational level than previous generations, according to the Hong Kong Church Network for the Poor. The next generation will be deprived of equal opportunities and resources.

"My family is not able to support my extra curricular classes," HX Huang, 16, said. She believes her family's disadvantaged economic status will "absolutely" affect her future.

She is one of the 0.2 million children and teens among 1.28 million people who live under the poverty line, according

to the figures provided by Dr Choi Yuen-wan, former executive member of the Commission on Poverty.

Mrs Chan, who prefers to stay anonymous, feels worried about poverty. "I am afraid that I don't have enough resources to support my children's education," says the mother of two.

Low-income families need a lift from this vicious cycle of poverty. All eyes are on government in relaxing poverty in society. In 2008, the Labour and Welfare Bureau launched the Child Development Fund, to tackle and soothe poverty starting from the younger generation, to provide children with sustainable development opportunities.

The CDF allocates funds to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to run projects for youth development. Until now it has supported 38 projects and each has catered to 100 to 120 children aged between 10 and 16.

The children served are from families

whose incomes are below the median income of Hong Kong families with the same number of people, that is \$3,450 for a one-person family, \$7,500 for two-person, \$10,575 for three and \$12,875 for four and above.

Apart from the family income criteria, each participating family needs to pay HK\$200 every month to the NGO for its children to join the programme. The organization then reward them with an additional HK\$200; the total amount of HK\$400 is kept and saved by the NGO every month.

When the children succeed in saving all the money required in the first two years, they get all the savings back from the NGO and in addition to that they receive a lump sum of \$3000 from the government as a reward for finishing the programme.

In total, every participating child will have \$12,600 by the third year. The children can use the money to develop their interests and talents, or to further

GET THEMSELVES OUT OF POVERTY

opportunity to save for the future

their studies and improve their skills.

"The programme helps the children to find a right path and enhance their vocational skills," said Mr Ho Kwok-kit, the Programme Planning Director of the Hong Kong Church Network for the Poor. He also said that the programme teaches children to manage their money efficiently.

Mrs Chan said she would like to join the programme, "It is beneficial for children, so every parent will try their best to manage it," she said. But she admitted \$200 is a little bit difficult for low-income families.

"Our economic status does not allow us to join," she says. "Two hundred dollars matters a lot to my family." Mrs Ho, 50, says she won't let her two children join the programme even if they are qualified. "Our income is limited so we have to be careful about every cent," Mrs Ho says. She would rather use the \$200 to buy something practical for her family.

Mr. Ho admitted that it is normal for some children to drop out of the programme. "We try to maintain contact with participating children and encourage them to carry on," he said.

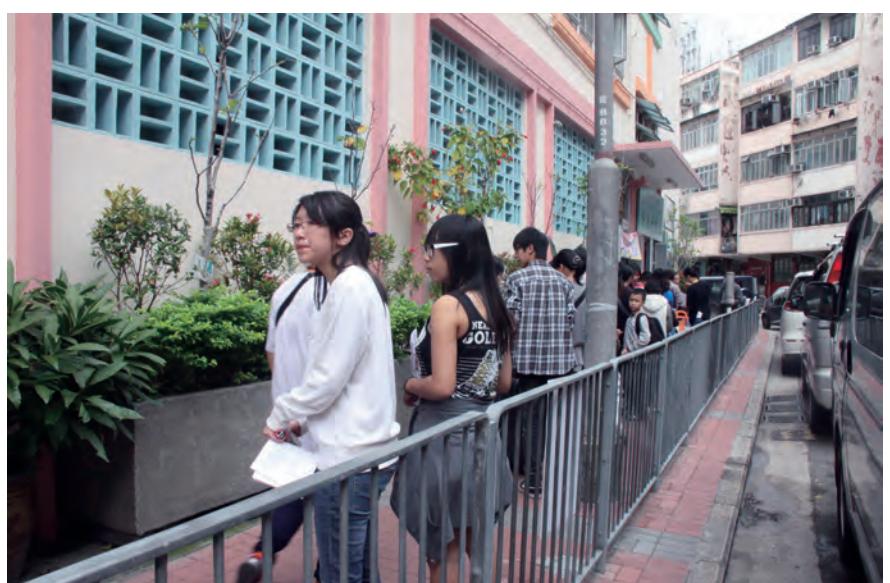
"It is stressful for children in the project to save for the matching fund every month," Mr. Ho said. "When they really can't hand in the \$200, we will use our reserved funds to help them temporarily," he explained.

Mr Ho pointed that the duration of the programme is "too short". He suggested that the government should allow children to join the programme at birth, and extend the programme to children to engage in different training and advanced studies until 18.

"If poverty is what money can solve, then it is not a problem," he said. "It is important to change the big social environment," Dr Choi said. "The Hong Kong government should do more," he said. ■



Children growing up in poor families face many challenges that children from more advantaged families do not. The schools they attend are less well funded, and the neighborhoods they live in are more disadvantaged.



Low-income family members are queuing up for "love market", which sells low-priced commodities for working poor.

WORKING FULL-TIME BUT STILL POOR

Grassroots people are struggling extremely hard just to make both ends meet



A lot of poor people live in sub-divided flats in old buildings



Cheap clothings are available at markets.

The cost of living in this day and age is at a constant rise and the fluctuating economy is taking a toll on the unemployment line. Being unemployed means having no source of income and only income provides food, clothing and shelters.

But what if these basic needs are barely met even with the possession of a job? This story features people who have full-time jobs but are still struggling to make ends meet.

In a motion to solve this issue, a Legislative Council subcommittee has laid out three concepts of poverty in a 2005-06 study on the subject of combating poverty: subsistence, basic needs and relative deprivation.

Subsistence interprets human needs primarily as physical needs (i.e. food, shelter and clothing) and does not include social needs.

The report says that the basic needs include basic household expenditure and essential community services, such as public transport, health, education and cultural facilities.

The concept of relative poverty was developed to accommodate the changing needs over time and the variations in different economies.

People are considered relatively deprived if they cannot obtain the conditions of life, such as basic diet, amenities, standards and services, which allow them to participate in relationships and follow customs expected of them by virtue of their membership of society.

Today's standard of living has altered society's view of "basic needs". It is important not only to have food, clothing and shelters, but also good education, proper amenities and social inclusion.

People suffering poverty experience multiple disadvantages if their income and resources lack the ability to provide a standard of living acceptable in today's society. These disadvantages include unemployment, low income, poor housing, inadequate health care, and barriers to lifelong learning and recreation.

So who are the working poor? A study conducted by the Hong Kong Government

Commission on Poverty (CoP), they gives the following an indicator on low-income employees in Hong Kong: persons working 35 hours or above per week and with monthly employment earnings less than 50% of the median.

The study found that there were 213,600 such full-time low-income employed persons in 2006, representing 8% of total full-time workers aged 15-59.

The Hong Kong government's efforts to alleviate poverty may be effective as the number of working poor households have been decreasing in recent years, according to the study.

The Census and Statistics Department says that as of January this year (2012) the number of employed people aged 25-44 is 1.9 million, the largest of all the age groups. The age group of 15-24 stands at 315,000, which is 36.4 per cent of the total labour force.

Although it has been more or less the same since 2008, the percentage of young people in the labour force is quite big for a society with a booming economy and genuine concerns for social welfare.

The unemployment rate as of the beginning of 2012 is 3 per cent, the lowest since 2008.

Another factor that comes to light is employment qualifications. Since a number of the working poor are young people who barely finished high school, their work choices are very limited. An average person who has only finished high school could land a job as a general office clerk, making on average \$11,000 a month. Can that amount of money sustain a household?

There are a lot of different scenarios that define working poor in Hong Kong today. In fact, there are way too many and they are way too different to all be documented.

It could be the lack of better qualifications, or it could be the obligation to leave school early to help the family earn an income. This story collaboration will attempt to give you a sense of what the working poor households struggle with, and what they look forward to in their future. ■

NEVER THE WORST OF TIME

According to statistics collected by Census and Statistics Department, the Composite Consumer Price Index (CCPI) increased 5.3 per cent last year compare to that in 2009, but the real wage index increased by 3.9 per cent last year over a year earlier. People are running against prices. However, today's young still keep faith pursuing their dreams. To all of the young below, neither money concerns nor one's education level can stop them from striving for a better future.

What do you want to be in the future?



Ancy 20 University Student

Majoring in Journalism, Ancy says today's youngsters have more freedom to do what they want.

“I want to work in the media industry with an expected starting monthly salary of \$10,000 to \$15,000. It is my interest and I believe in social responsibility.”



Mr Wong 21 Mong Kok grocery worker

Although his pay is not very high, he is very determined to be a boss in the future.

“I never stop learning. I want to set up my own business in the future, so now I should work with patience. After all, making a living is tough.”



Kinye 18 Form 5 Student

Kinye is going to attend the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) next year and she is confused about her future.

“In case I couldn't get into university, I think I'll work to relieve the burden of my family. I hope to work in the medical industry with a monthly salary of \$10,000.”



Mr Wu 23 Hong Kong Cancer Fund Staff

Although he is a university graduate, he does not mind standing under the sun for the whole, calling on the public to pay heed to the disease.

“I want to devote myself to the social welfare services. People should have a better understanding of the deadly disease.”



Mr Tse 23 IVE Student

Mr Tse is a final year student studying Engineering Management at Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (Chai Wan). He works as a part-time helper at various exhibitions occasionally.

“Salary is not my major concern. I've got an offer which matches my major already and I think it is good to work on what I'm interested in.”



Mr Fong 17 F4 Student

Mr Fong says charming personalities are more important than good academic results in job-hunting. He is confident he can afford his own flat in the near future as long as he works hard.

“I want to get a job in the financial industry because it is the most mature one in Hong Kong.”



CHILDREN CATCH THE HIP-HOP

Parents are taking their young kids to learn trendy hip-hop dance

Once the music started, the toddlers began their dance routine with fancy footwork in the play room. Feeling the strong beat, the kids bounced, punched the air and span in good hip-hop style.

Parents and dance tutor were watching over the kids' performances. One little girl fell over, but she quickly rebounded and joined the others until the end of the dance.

The dancing kids were a group of kindergarten students. Instead of going to numerous tutorial classes and studying textbooks like most Hong Kong kids, their parents take them to dance every Sunday. Most of them have learnt hip-hop dance for more than a year, and they were promoted from elementary hip-hop class.

Ms Sa Mok, a dance tutor at Infinity Dance Studio, said they offered hip-hop classes in different levels.

Classes last for an hour, in which the kids would warm-up, do stretching, learn the steps and practice, each part taking up 15 minutes.

"Young kids can only concentrate for 20 to 30 minutes so I have to split the routine into parts for them to learn," said Ms Mok, who is also a full time

kindergarten teacher.

Ms Mok said she wanted to train children's beat sensitivity and muscle coordination by stretching and repeated dance steps. Children have to follow the tutor's instructions and control their bodies during practice.

Parents find this new trendy class effective. "I want my daughter to learn more types of sports, which enhance body coordination, brain development and self-discipline," said Ms Whitney Chan, parent of a four-year-old girl.

"People can build confidence through dancing, and I think girls who can dance are more attractive," she added.

Ms Chan said some kids who used to be isolated got involved after a few lessons. She believed one would become more optimistic and positive after learning hip-hop dance.

Another parent, Mr Mok, stayed outside of the classroom but kept looking at his three-year-old daughter through the glass door. He wanted her to learn to concentrate.

"I showed her around here once and she said she wanted to learn hip-hop. That's why I brought her here," said Mr Mok, who has taken his daughter to



HOP TREAD

ence instead of traditional ballet and Chinese dance

hip-hop class for four months.

But for the kindergarten students, learning hip-hop is not as enjoyable as their parents thought. Many of them encountered difficulties and failures from time to time.

Kristen Tam, a four-year-old girl, nodded silently when she was asked if stretching was painful or not, but then said that she was happy about stretching.

One of her classmates, Bernice Hui, could not agree more—she kept nodding when she was taking a rest next to Kristen. “It is very painful,” she said.

Ms Mok said she would encourage the children but she would not force students to stretch if they really could not flex their tendons.

Apart from stretching, memorizing dance steps was another great challenge for the kids. Bernice said it was hard for her to do so.

Ms Mok encouraged parents to record the dance routine so that children can practice at home with reference to the videos.

“If there’s a showcase, the kids will practise because their parents are nervous about that,” she said. A summer showcase and an annual performance

will be held in late August this year and January 2013 respectively. Another mini performance will also be held in the coming May.

Ms Mok said the kids would spend two to three months on choreography. Most of the kids were enthusiastic about the upcoming performances.

“If there are public exams for street dance, just like ballet and Chinese dance, the trend will be boosted,” said Ms Mok.

After taking P1 to P6 classes, students are free to opt for general hip-hop classes that are open to adults.

The number of students’ in each lesson fluctuates a lot. Ms Mok said kids also try other activities to develop their interests. Some students quit the dance class after one or two months because they are not interested in hip-hop.

Recently more and more kindergartens have started to provide street dance classes as extra-curricular activities for students. Ms Mok believed this would encourage parents to look for hip-hop classes for their children. ■

STORY / JOYCE CHEUNG
EDITED BY / GINANG





DRIVEN TO STOP LONDON'S BUS BUNCH

London has yet to find a solution to its transport system problems ahead of the 2012 Olympic Games in August.

STORY / ALAN WONG IN LONDON
EDITED BY / LEIGH FERGUSON

On London's coldest day of the year, you find yourself waiting a painfully long time for your bus home. Your ears, nose and fingers are detached from your sensory and motor circuit, as opposed to your mouth, which may be passionately scolding the transport system, gaining sympathetic chuckles from the other fed-up passengers. When you are just about to give up, assuming your bus will never come, three buses arrive at the same time.

The phenomenon of buses arriving in threes, commonly known as bunching, has plagued bus operations in many cities around the world, including London, Toronto, New York and Singapore. In more professional terms,

bunching is known as an 'equal headway instability phenomenon'. But why? "Perhaps they're lonely," says Paul Arendt, a frequent public transport traveler in London.

Buses start to bunch when one bus is delayed, shortening the gap between it and the one behind it. More passengers accumulate at the bus stops down the road. The next bus after the late one will in turn have progressively fewer passengers to pick up at each stop, and so will gradually become more and more ahead of schedule, catching up on the delayed bus. The cycle repeats and intensifies—and then the two buses finally meet.

About ten years ago, Ken Livingstone,

the then mayor of London, noticed the problem of bunching and proposed a few solutions. One of them was called the BusPlus scheme. The mayor added new bus lanes for 70 routes amid a rise in the number of passengers. But even policies like this did not help people to cope with busbunching.

London's £140 million iBus system, which was implemented in 2009, was a very successful approach to the problem. It allows passengers to use the internet on their phones to track over 8,000 buses via a geographical positioning system (GPS), and adjust their route accordingly if they see delays occurring.

"There are apps on my iPhone that really help me get around in London,"



ING

regular passenger Ms Forrest said. "Although bunching still happens, it helps a great deal."

On Appstore, Apple's online mobile online mobile application store, there are more than one hundred Apps that make use of the GPS tracked data of London buses, some of which are free of charge. One particularly popular among London commuters-winning the title of the best selling travel App-is "Next Bus London".

The mobile application, also available as web version, allows users to select the closest bus stop to them (or any one they want), and get the live arrival information of buses of their selected bus routes.

"I live just a stone's throw away from the bus stop where I take the bus to work,

and I always leave the house just seconds before the bus arrives," Ms Forrest says. "The app saves me a lot of time waiting for the bus in the cold wind."

Perhaps London could get some ideas from researchers at the National Autonomy University of Mexico, who have built a mathematical model to provide possible solutions to the problem.

Researcher Mr Carlos Gerhenson suggests that bus companies should not add buses to routes if these are not regulated to maintain an equal headway, contrary to popular belief that more buses mean better service. He also says that bus drivers aren't the only ones to blame, and gives recommendations for what passengers

could do to ease bunching.

"Inside a crowded vehicle, give space to ascending and descending people and make your way to the doors not too long before exiting," said Mr Gerhenson. "Do not board the first crowded vehicle, because it is probable there are others behind it."

However, it seems there's a long way to go until London's transport users begin practicing 'bus-etiquette'.

"I don't understand why bunching happens," said Ms Lilly Beamon, a commuter who took bus 19 to work on a Wednesday morning. "But I doubt if anyone would choose to board the bus behind if there's one right in front of them." ■

SINGING THE DREAM

"All-University Sing" serves as a platform for students to perform on stage

STORY / ALVINA HUNG IN WACO, TEXAS
EDITED BY / GOOSIE CHAN

Americans who feel Broadway tickets are too pricey for them have a much more affordable -- and equally professional--alternative. The "All-University Sing" organized by Baylor University offers you the same musical experience in a four-hour journey that comes with a much cheaper price.

Launched back in 1953, "All University Sing", more commonly known as "Sing", has become a tradition for the university over the past 60 years. Held annually, it has transformed from an

eight-people singing performance to a musical competition that over 1300 students participate in.

This year, more than 1400 students from different Fraternity (Boys) and Sorority (Girls) clubs present their acts to 30,000 audiences. The winner of 2012 was Bienvenus á la Mascarade, an act that describes a formal engagement.

As "Sing" has changed its form, its goal has also turned from "a showcase to entertain" to serve as an "avenue for them (students) to reach Fine Arts, enjoy themselves involved in an act," says Mr Keith Frazee, the producer of "Sing".

Having produced the show for four years and as a former performer, Mr Frazee says other than allowing non-Fine Arts major students to get involved, "Sing" also creates a platform for students, especially student leaders, or "Sing Chairs", to develop



leadership, conflict management skills and of course, to put on a great show.

Mr Frazee says he is proud to see the growth of performers after the show. "They look so much different. They are more mature, much more confident, and are able to communicate more effectively."

But Mr Frazee says students still need to learn about the mismatch of expectations, as all of them want to win so badly. After all, only one team can be the winner.

Ms Amy Surplus, a "Sing Chair" and a senior, agrees with Keith. "I learnt to compromise and be patient, as sometimes people did not show up, or people did not learn the moves as fast as I thought," she says.

As a "Sing Chair", she and the others started preparing the whole act of their own Sorority a year ago. During the preparation period, they decided the whole theme of their performance,

designed the costumes, painted the backdrop and made all the props. Sometimes, they stayed up until 4 am and had to skip a few classes in order to make the whole thing perfect. The whole process for "Sing" is very time-consuming.

Same as Ms Surplus, both Mr Todd Leitgeb, a junior, and Ms Rebecca Malzahn, a sophomore (a student in the second year of study at high school or university), think that they have transformed the same way as Amy, but have gained different insight.

"I enjoy the brotherhood. I manage my time a lot better and I am closer to my Fraternity as we share same good memories," Mr Leitgeb says.

He even thinks that "Sing" provides a fun opportunity for boys to show off their talent on stage as musical seems a little bit girly. He thinks boys can be as good as girls.

Ms Malzahn met a lot of new guys as

her Sorority cooperates with one Fraternity to put on the winning act Bienvenus à la Mascarade.

"It is important to be a part of something other than academics," she says. "'Sing' is a good place to form relations with people."

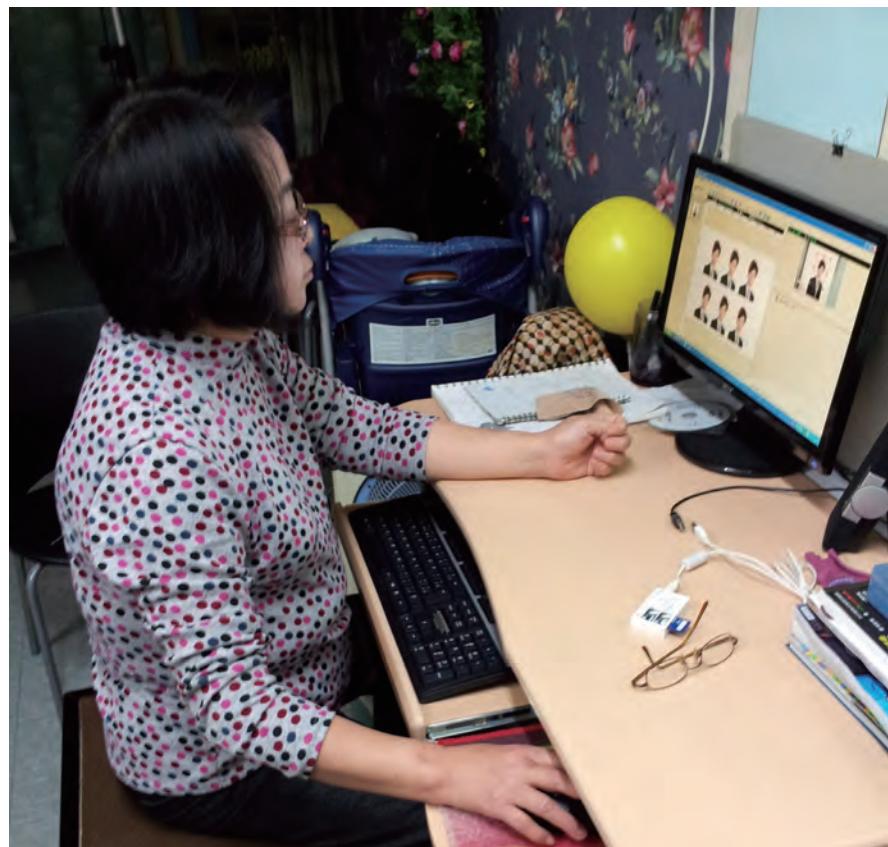
Frustrating moments were also part of their experiences. Ms Malzahn gets most upset when her companions skip the rehearsals for various reasons like tests and studies.

"If you commit to 'Sing', you commit a hundred per cent. If you can't, just don't do it," she says. She thinks that every one has to deal with tests and studies, and one should balance his or her time well.

Despite the unwishful moments, the performers say they are going to take part in next year's "Sing".

Mr Frazee believes that performers should treat having fun as their ultimate goal. □





Ms Ho Ng Wing-ching uses Photoshop to edit photos because it is faster.



Many customers like having family and graduation photos taken in portraiture studios.

DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL PORTRAIT STUDIOS

With advanced technology, fewer people are having their photos taken professionally and the business is fading away

STORY / JOHNNY LO
EDITED BY / SIMON YUEN

A scent of history sneaks into my nose when I walk upstairs to Cheung Hung Studio. I am not sure where it comes from -- it could be the wooden staircases, the old bricks on the wall or the carefully-preserved floorings.

The studio has been running over 40 years in a tenement building in Tai Kok Tsui. It is one of the few portrait studios remaining in Hong Kong now.

Portrait studios were popular in 1970s, when people liked to have their family and graduation photos taken there. However, since the 1990s, portrait studios have been facing fierce competition because digital cameras became popular. People do not bother to go to a studio and pay for photo-shoots when they can afford to take it by themselves. As a result, a lot of studios have closed down. In addition, the rise of instant photo printing in the same era



ait studios



Mr Ho Chun-hung uses a writing brush to edit a photo, which takes about two hours.

edged portrait studios out as it took almost a week for studios to print photos, which was considered lengthy.

However, Cheung Hung Studio's owner Mr Ho Chun-hung kept his studio despite the difficulties because he thought taking photos is more than just a business. "Photography is a kind of art," Mr Ho said. He said light could make photos more three-dimensional. The contour of customers' faces can easily stand out if light is properly projected. Hair lights can enhance hair texture and provide separation from the background.

Since editing photos is time consuming, most portrait studios do not go through the process for customers unless at their request and of course, they have to pay more. Portrait studios, on the other hand, edit every photo without extra costs although it takes time and effort.

Mrs Ho Ng Wing-ching, wife of Mr Ho, uses computer software Photoshop to edit. She said that the computer helps reduce time and money on the editing process but editing is not solely done by Photoshop. After Mrs Ho retouches the photos, Mr Ho uses a writing brush to cover the flaws on the printed version. He spends two hours on average to edit one photo. Both of them regard photo-editing as essential since they think that photos capture best moments.

The studio takes eight to ten photos and lets customers choose before printing.

The couple has no choice but to send the photos to a photography laboratory to print instead of a traditional darkroom in face of the decreasing number of customers. On the other hand, dyeing liquid, one of the main components on darkroom photos, oxidizes if it is over-exposed in the air. If

dyeing liquid is not powerful enough, the colour will turn dull and fade eventually. Photography labs overcome these problems, and they also provide a better colour tone and photo paper.

Taking photos in Cheung Hung Studio was not as expensive as I had imagined. Mrs Ho said making money is not the couple's top priority. She said it is the enthusiasm for photo-taking that keeps them running the studio.

To make photos more beautiful, Mr Ho spends time teaching his customers how to sit and pose. I saw him make a little girl giggle with a baby's rattle before taking photos of her. He then gave her a chocolate stick after the photo-shoot.

That gesture convinced me that Mr Ho runs his studio with passion and he just wants to enjoy himself taking photos for the others. Making money out of it? It is just a bonus to him. ■





FACES IN THE WET MARKET

Wet markets are places very familiar to normal Hong Kong people. They are smelly, fishy and sometimes bloody, but they offer a real slice of Hong Kong life.

Graham Street in Central owns Hong Kong's oldest street market, which has been around for nearly 160 years. Chun Yeung Street, North Point, brags about a tram line that runs through its narrow street on both sides of which stand numerous traditional stores.

No matter how fast the outside world changes, the faces of wet markets seldom change.

PHOTOS / ADA YEUNG
EDITED BY / CARLOS CHENG

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