Hong Kong

Hong Kong's economic prosperity and inclusive environment has attracted millions of migrants since the 1960s. More than 40 percent of the current population was born in Mainland China, and around 40,000 people are still migrating annually. Because of the One Way permit, most of these migrants are family members of Hong Kong residents: females, children, the elderly, and a small number of middle-aged males. Normally from lower socio-economic backgrounds, they lack social networks in Hong Kong and tend to settle in districts where the cost of living is more affordable and where they can find jobs (this is something we also see in You Wu's paper, “The Death and Life of Amsterdam's Chinatown”). Hong Kong's decaying central areas are popular, with mid-rise (five- to eight-storey) buildings constructed between the 1920s to the 1950s being cheap to rent. But they lack proper maintenance and the housing quality is poor, with out-of-date living facilities, sanitation, internet access, and the like.

Sham Shui Po is a typical migrant district, with almost 50 percent of its population born outside Hong Kong (Fig. 1). This is the highest rate in Hong Kong and is predicted to go up to 65 percent by 2028. Areas like this do not only accommodate newcomers; they also help them integrate into Hong Kong. Since 1990, more than 50 percent of Sham Shui Po migrants achieved higher social status and moved out. The area they leave behind, however, remains poor and rundown. Sham Shui Po is considered one of the most problematic districts in Hong Kong by the authorities. It has the second lowest median income in the city and the most aged community. Buildings are also in poor condition, with more than 1200 of them older than 40 years and lacking proper maintenance. Since 2011, a number of urban regeneration projects began to take place, driven by the Urban Renewal Authority (URA), the government operator of Hong Kong's urban renewal, also to integrate or densify areas to promote social mobility, and to continue to accommodate low-income migrants. Public facilities, like sport and education, are also a mandatory requirement for re-developers. However, as these projects proceed, local migrant communities are torn apart. The population of Mainland Chinese migrants in Sham Shui Po was reduced by around 3000 people between 2011 and 2016, and this is expected to continue as more regeneration projects get underway.

Regeneration claims to improve citizens' environment, health, and safety. In part through the removal of illegally subdivided houses. However, migrants' satisfaction rates are also generally lower than the average population as a result of these regenerations' so-called improvements, as we will show. The goal of integrating Mainland Chinese migrants into Sham Shui Po through regeneration has failed due to the dramatic demolition and gentrification resulting from the current property-led urban renewal, which is expensive, and migrants are likely to lose their networks. However, these flexible, multi-functional spaces are being transformed into monotonous public space for the middle class, damaging the migrants' community identity.

Migrants' integration

Migrant communities have a very different perspective on Sham Shui Po. They see this neighbourhood as an Arrival City with a community that helps their integration. Mainland migrants' problems are special because they have only limited skills and social resources. In order to achieve economic and social integration, a number of specific things are required: (1) Capital accumulation: migrants' median income is lower than the Hong Kong average. It leads to discrimination by locals and feelings of isolation. Income improvement is a significant part of migrants' integration and has a close relationship with elements such as occupation, work experience, networks, and capital accumulation, all of which require investment in education and real estate. (2) Affordability: high-priced public transport and accommodation, limits their choices. Ideally, they need to be close to work. Housing in central areas is expensive, and migrants are likely to live in small apartments with expensive square-metre rentals. The average housing area per migrant is 17 square metres, lower than Hong Kong's average of 32.7 square metres, and much lower than Shenzhen's 45.2 square metres. These apartments are so small that they hardly meet migrants' basic living requirements, which means less life satisfaction. (3) Social networks: social networks are crucial for migrants' integration and go hand in hand with their social networks, which assist in their integration and also contribute to their financial improvement. Migrants are more likely to find financial support, family, neighbourhood, and public services. (4) Identity establishment: this can help build confidence. Events and community organizations play important roles here. For example, Chiuchow community's Yulan Festival is an annual ethnic event where the members of the community gather and new migrants are able to meet established ones. These events also help keep community identity alive. These events are open to everyone and act as a platform to showcase culture, social activities, which in turn contributes to their social networks. The spatial characteristics of migrant settlement have a close relationship with these social activities, which in turn contribute to their social networks. Doug Saunders describes four elements helping migrants' integration: high density, commercial, with mixed-use streets and pedestrian connection to the city center, and affordable accommodation. Having these elements improves the economic and social status of migrants. Saunders also discusses political elements, such as open citizenship, welfare, health, and education, some of which are specifically spatial, like schools.

Hong Kong's urban renewal projects

Hong Kong set up the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) in 2001. Its task is to steer urban renewal processes in more socially oriented ways, and it is supported by local academics who research the social impact of communities. The URA insists on more socially oriented clauses in contracts with developers in order to achieve their aims – namely, the 4Fs: Redevelopment, Rehabilitation, Preservation, and Revitalization. Redevelopment is at the core of these urban renewal projects. It means demolition of dilapidated buildings and reconstruction of new (always higher) ones. This is accompanied by the rehabilitation of less dilapidated buildings, the revitalization of streets and open spaces (with gentrified shops and improvements to pavements), and the preservation of heritage as an anchor to preserve local culture. However, in reality, these interventions are less likely to be realised than straightforward building redevelopment because they contribute less to profit.

Due to Hong Kong's limited land resources, 100-metre-high residential buildings ("pencil towers") are widely used in urban renewal. They normally comprise the following three components: (1) Car-oriented streets: wide roads (14-metre wide) with narrow pedestrian pavements (three to four metres). Sometimes, because of a building's setback, the pedestrian area will be wider (5 metres or more), but walking spaces is limited and in shadow; (2) Commercial podium: the bottom of the building normally has significant commercial value, so accessible floors are essential to property developers. Normally, the bottom three to five levels will be completed, commercial, with the top of the podium housing services for residents or other facilities for the community; (3) Residential towers: to make full use of height restrictions and to create more flats, high-rise residential towers are designed as simple columns, with four to six apartments on each floor, making the façade more一边 to boost efficiency in its use of the built floor area.
Sham Shui Po’s migrant community

In order to understand Sham Shui Po, this research examined the spatial characteristics of the area and its migrant communities’ daily lives (Fig. 2). Most people are on the street in the morning and again in the afternoon. These are the best times for meeting each other because they usually do not have much time for social life. Three elements in particular were examined: (1) Housing: Sham Shui Po’s dense urban environment and high number of rentals result in shared space with little privacy. Apartments are subdivided and accommodate several families (Fig. 3). Each family has a small room (c.15 square metres), but the toilet, bathroom, and kitchen are shared in common. A lot of activities are done in the apartment’s public space, like the corridor, living room, and kitchen, which provides living space for more people and makes them more affordable. Interviews with residents show that they accept this situation. (2) Local streets: these have highly mixed commercial spaces, with shops facing covered pavements that provide shelter from the weather and which are comfortable to stay in. There are also temporary shops and stalls selling small commodities, like toothbrushes, sometimes located in the narrow lanes. Mobile containers are rented from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department. Rent is low, and tenants can easily move. After shops close, stalls open selling even cheaper items, like second-hand books and phones. They occupy these structures without paying any rent and are gone before dawn. The streets function 24 hours a day but to serve different groups. Migrants can buy affordable things, but they can also start their own small businesses. This neighbourhood commerce not only serves locals but also the wholesale clothing and electronics industries located in the empty industrial buildings nearby, where they rent space for their activities and do not require highly skilled workers. (2) Public services: weekends are more flexible than weekdays and are used for more public activities. These can be found on the third and fourth floors of buildings and include civic organizations, community service centers, mini-schools, and even churches. They share staircases with the residential floors above. Hometown Organizations are important. These are organizations of migrants from the same place. Led and sponsored by older, successful migrants, they help the new migrants, unfamiliar with the city, to adapt. Supported by the Cultural Department and District Council, some industry associations also give subsidies and make good use of their influence. The hometown community in Sham Shui Po is from Guangdong Province and dates from the 22nd century. With work stations and branches in each neighbourhood, they provide voluntary life assistance to residents. Social workers also visit to give help and have daily contact with disadvantaged migrants. Generally, community service stations can be found in the center of the neighbourhoods and are non-profit, aiming to help residents with education and health care (including mental health). They are more active than other organizations because they know more information about the residents and are able to visit people’s homes. They are also usually branches of a larger organization that provides knowledge and training. Because they can directly contact residents, the Welfare Department and real estate agencies benefit from their information and, in turn, give them advice and sometimes financial assistance. Research Institutes, like Hong Kong University, also rely on these social networks to maintain contact with migrants for their research.

Urban renewal in Sham Shui Po

The Urban Renewal Authority began a number of projects in Sham Shui Po in 2009. Located between Tung Chau Street, Tai Po Road, Boundary Street, and Yen Chow Street, the major interventions were in the southern part, at Hai Tan Street, where three blocks of old buildings were demolished and replaced by new high-rise residential towers and a commercial pod. This project starts with rebuilding – and providing space for – the forgotten local ferry heritage.

Other revitalization projects were dispersed throughout the neighbourhood. Led by property owners and financed by the government, these projects included better quality and had less history. Property owners, satisfied with their own buildings, were willing to repair them instead of letting them fall into disuse as government demolish and replace them. Most of the newly developed residential buildings succeeded in the residential-market but failed in the commercial market. One example of this is the new development at Hai Tan Street, where three blocks of old buildings were demolished and replaced by high-rise residential towers and a commercial pod. Not all of the shops in these buildings have reopened, although the building has been in use for a number of years. In addition to failing to attract shop owners, the shops that have opened over previous buildings have also hindered their opening (as can be seen by barriers outside the building).

In terms of Sham Shui Po’s street revitalization, less has been implemented. In 2013, the Jade Market was relocated to Tai Po Road in Sham Shui Po. The final section of this renewal has yet to be seen (Fig. 4). But we can see how four elements of Sham Shui Po’s street revitalization project assess them: (1) Housing and commercial renewal: these projects were all renewed from poor-size apartments, turning them into towers of more than 35 stories. The old buildings were completely torn down, replaced by new buildings composed of housing towers with a commercial podium. Public facilities (e.g., swimming pools, library, and clinics) are located underground or inside these podiums. However, when comparing residential data, we can see that these buildings are not designed for the Sham Shui Po migrant community. Projects follow the self-financing principle of urban renewal, which means that developers maximize income from the site, resulting in larger scale units sold at higher prices (and lower construction costs). Despite housing stock increases above 100%, only one third, residential units under 400 square metres have reduced by more than half. The predicted number increases from less than one third, residential units under 400 square metres have reduced by more than half. The predicted number increases from less than one third, residential units under 400 square metres have reduced by more than half. The predicted number increases from less than one third, residential units under 400 square metres have reduced by more than half.

Among New Mainland Chinese Immigrants to Hong Kong: A Longitudinal Study.”

Discrimination on the Quality of Life among New Mainland Chinese Immigrants to Hong Kong.”

Notes

1. Document issued by the People’s Republic of China allowing their residents to settle permanently in Hong Kong.


