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Shared Space? Social Mix or Social Tectonics in Contemporary Hong Kong

Ray Forrest and Yip Ngai-ming

City University of Hong Kong

Email: sayip@cityu.edu.hk

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Introduction

Hong Kong is an odd and apparently contradictory place in a variety of ways. Simon Winchester (1985), describing a city moving towards the end of its colonial period, observed that it was “almost impossibly rich and varied, its elements so often in theory repugnant to one another, the potential for explosion enormous. And yet, it works....” (p.174).

What are some of these potentially explosive and contradictory elements? For example, Hong Kong has a relatively high GDP per capita, usually in the top ten countries, but it has an extremely skewed income structure. Indeed it has a level of income inequality-measured at .533 after social security transfers (By-census, 2006)-which is at a level only comparable to cities of the global south. The highly skewed income structure is evident in the fact that only a third of earners pay any income tax. Similarly, a UNCHS (1996) study which looked at the relationship between average GDP and space standards, identified Hong Kong as an extreme outlier. Space standards were comparable to cities in poorer nations such as Harare, Karachi and Bogota. Admittedly, space standards have continued to improve but it is still the case that Hong Kong people live in extremely cramped conditions when compared to most other major world cities. Moreover, the overwhelming image of Hong Kong is of a freewheeling dog-eat-dog city with everyone scrambling to make their way in an aggressive, brutally capitalistic environment. In his account of Patten`s last governship, Dimbleby (1997) remarked that “If this city has any culture, it is that of the marketplace-a free-for-all world in which the pursuit of profit is unashamed and the possession of wealth is admired, not envied.”

Now these kinds of ingredients would suggest an urban environment of stress, conflict and divide. Yet, the reality is quite the contrary. Statistically it is an extremely safe city with very low levels of street crime and one of the world`s lowest homicide rates. It is also a city of enviable longevity. In 2007, male and female life expectancy figures were third and second in the world respectively. Part of the explanation for this lies in another contradictory aspect of the city. It may be an icon of the success of unbridled capitalism but the reality is rather more complex. Furthest removed from the free market image is

the fact that the government owns the freehold of land. And it is also far from a free market in education, health and notably housing. Half of all households live in subsidized public housing and around a third of all households live in public rental housing (the remainder are in low cost home ownership housing). There is therefore a substantial social wage even though social security is minimal-consistent with the model of East Asian productivism (Holliday, 2002). Despite its global/international city status it is also, and always has been, an overwhelmingly Chinese city. There are some 500,000 foreign residents, encompassing both extremely high paid professionals and extremely low paid maids, but over 94 per cent of the population is Chinese (BY-Census, 2006). With increased immigration from the Mainland, the social profile of that Chinese population has changed over the years. Nevertheless, it is certainly a long way from being a New York or London as regards multinationalism and multiculturalism.

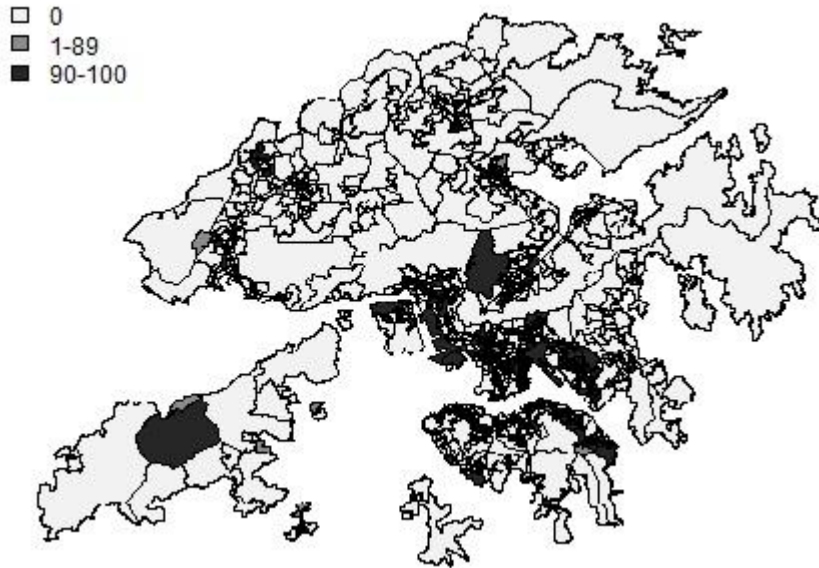
The other key element of Hong Kong's urban morphology is also its most distinctive. Not only is it a very high density city, it is also very high rise. And this is an important dimension of the discussion in this paper. Hong Kong is very much a vertical, some would say 'compact', city. It is also a city of public transport and not cars. It has all the usual problems of congestion and traffic pollution with long queues of frustrated and impatient drivers, often in extremely expensive cars. But car ownership is very much a minority status.

Against this background this paper offers an initial exploration of the extent to which Hong Kong space can be appropriately described as shared space. To what extent is the experience of different social groups in the city an integrated social and cultural experience, or in Robson and Butler's terms, does the appearance of social mixing conceal a more 'tectonic aspect'? Do "social groups or 'plates' overlap or run parallel to one another without much in the way of an integrated experience"? (Robson and Butler, 2001, p.78; and see Slater, 2005, for a more general discussion). The paper will suggest that there are particular features of Hong Kong's social and economic trajectory, its spatial structure, built environment and its housing tenurial structure and history which may combine to produce a more shared urban experience among diverse social groups.

Shared Space?

An initial consideration is the spatial distribution of housing tenure in Hong Kong since tenurial divisions and the displacement effects of gentrification are central elements of the social mix debate. There are a number of dimensions to this. First, there is the sheer size of the public rental sector. It still houses a substantial section of the population – around 30 per cent. Second, and contrary to trends in many other cities, public rental housing has become more dispersed across the city as new town development, which was public housing-led, expanded to the fringe of the city in the 1980s and 1990s (figure 1). And in the old inner city areas, urban regeneration has involved smaller plot sizes and small scale public rental development. Thus, although public rental housing is highly concentrated in only 10% of census tract areas, these concentrations are more dispersed now than they were previously. Third, there are the very distinctive ways in which gentrification type processes combine with Hong Kong's land use policy, high density, topography and big developer hegemony (See Fung and Forrest, 20??) The major developers have responded to an expanding and more affluent middle class by building more upscale apartments. In the older inner city areas, this has involved the demolition of decaying, lower rise apartments and their replacement by more expensive, high rise tower blocks. This process of revalorisation and gentrification typically displaces the previous residents to public rental housing, often on the urban periphery, but has also injected an apparently high degree of 'social mix' across poorer, inner area neighbourhoods (See Yip, forthcoming for a longer discussion) In other words, at certain spatial scales, social area analysis reveals more social mix in relation to tenure, occupation and income. And it is true that rich and poor are living side by side. In the older central areas, where much of the literature on social mix and social tectonics is typically focused, there can be single adjacent blocks of private and public housing.-monotenurial rather than mixed tenure development. But in the compact city, tenure segregation is compressed and compacted into vertical space.

Figure 1 spatial distribution of public rental housing



The segregation of the rich

It is not the poor which are spatially concentrated and segregated in Hong Kong. It is the rich. This is not a new phenomenon but is a continuity across the colonial and postcolonial eras. This concentration of the most affluent households is apparent in the 2006 census in which there are evident high concentration of top income decile households in areas which were already enclaves of the elite class in the Colonial era around Victoria Peak and Mid-levels, along scenic beaches in the South of Hong Kong Island or in Kowloon Tong on Kowloon Peninsula.

By contrast, poorer households do not seem to be concentrated spatially. Those census tract areas (LSBGs) with disproportionately high percentages of lowest decile households are typically located in remote areas of the New Territories where there are few inhabitants, most of whom are elderly people. There were only seven such areas in the urban areas, six of them are old public housing estates built in the 1950s and 1960s.

Schooling

Education is a key part of the dynamics of the social churning in central London described by Robson and Butler (2001). Middle class households manoeuvre around the property market to ensure a privileged niche in the schooling circuit, And education is critical to class formation and “intergenerational cultural reproduction” (Robson and Butler, p.80). Here again, Hong Kong`s compact nature and shifts in school policy, create a rather different set of dynamics. There are various elements to this and the overall effect is to dampen the kind of middle class incursions into working class areas for reasons of schooling. First, there are a number of expensive and prestigious private schools in Hong Kong. Many were originally created to educate the sons and daughters of the British colonists and the related expatriate elite. Increasingly, however, they have become favoured by a rising Hong Kong Chinese middle class keen to escape the rote learning mode of the local school and to enhance their children`s English language abilities. Second, whilst a catchment school system does operate and in the past residential mobility was influenced by school rankings and reputations, privatisation policies in education have released an increasing number of top state school from this constraint. They can now recruit from across the city. Third, the investment in schooling, extra schooling and a myriad of evening and weekend lessons by the Hong Kong Chinese middle class is on a scale which dwarfs similar activities by parents in European cities. However, and crucially, there is much less need to move residence for schooling reasons- either to be near a satisfactory private school or a high ranked local school. The high rise, high density features of the city combined with its extensive, efficient integrated transport system means that geographical distance is rarely a problem. Thus, the middle class can stay in their established enclaves rather than intrude on less familiar, older inner city areas. The schooling dynamic which drives the middle class into a “ necessary close spatial proximity to other urban groups”(Robson and Butler, p.84) is thus much less evident in Hong Kong.

Shared lived experiences

To our knowledge there has not been any detailed recent ethnographic research in Hong Kong on patterns of social interaction among different social groups or classes. Indeed, the extent to which it is meaningful to talk of social classes as having distinct cultural milieu, habits and aspirations in Hong Kong is a matter of continuing debate.. The evident and wide disparities in income and wealth are crosscut by ethnic groupings, the existence of a non Chinese and multinational professional and commercial elite, the increasing number of low income migrants and a local/non-local (ie Mainland Chinese/Hong Kong Chinese) distinction which creates a rather ambiguous and contingent social hierarchy. And the relatively rapid pace of social and economic change has also meant that class distinctions have not had time to become clearly embedded in the social fabric. Moreover, the differences between generations may be substantial in relation to lifestyles, social aspirations and trajectories but there are strong common links in relation to lived experiences. For example, the social status division between home owners and public tenants which is often stark in other cities is not so evident in Hong Kong. Home owners and public tenants, by and large, are not two distinct groups but strongly overlap. A middle generation of home owners were often brought up in public rental housing. Their parents may still live in public rental housing. There is little, if any, stigma attached to living in public rental housing. Indeed, it is most likely that a majority of the governing and business elite of Hong Kong were brought up in public rental housing.

This cross tenure connection is evident from a Housing Histories survey in 2002 as well as from a recent survey in 2011. Over forty percent of private homeowners in the former survey and a third in the recent survey revealed that they had experience of living in public rental housing. It should also be noted that this figure excludes those currently living in state subsidised, home ownership schemes flats or sitting tenant purchasers. Tenure conversion via sitting tenant purchase has had very limited impact in Hong Kong- unlike the impact of the Right to Buy in somewhere like the UK. It has not been a significant route into home ownership for lower income households. Moreover, as regards tenurial social status, the most common view is of ‘feeling the same as other

people' rather than one of social inferiority or superiority. In answer to the question, do you think people who are not public rental tenants regard them as having higher social status, lower social status or being roughly the same as everyone else?-some 85 per cent opted for 'same as everyone else'. Among private home owners, a fifth regarded public tenants as having lower social status. But perhaps surprisingly, 7 per cent of home owners thought they had higher social status. Perceptions of position on a notional housing ladder are also revealing. Among private owners, the vast majority cluster in the middle with only 9 per cent placing themselves in the top three rungs. Conversely, more than 12 per cent see themselves on the bottom three rungs. Perhaps surprisingly, public rental tenants, distribute themselves more widely across the rungs with relatively fewer on the middle rungs and relatively more at either end.

Travelling Companions

As indicated earlier, there is a high degree of spatial tenure segregation, albeit in a vertical and compact form. Therefore although at some spatial scales it appears that different social groups are closely intertwined, close contact between different occupational classes is not necessarily a strong feature of residential settings. But, as we have argued elsewhere, in the high density city, private and public space is more thoroughly intertwined than in the sprawling, suburban city (Forrest, La Grange and Yip, 2002). Low residential space standards and cultural norms of public conviviality, mean that social life spills onto the streets and shopping malls. To be sure, there are the high end stores, boutique specialist shops and exclusive hotels frequented by the superrich minority. But the vast majority of people share common social settings and experiences in terms of where they shop, where they eat and perhaps critically, how they get there. As stated earlier this is a city where the vast majority are public transport users-on buses, mass transit railways, trams and ferries. Even taxis have low fares by international standards and are essentially part of the public transport system, and used as such. This is not a city with highly segregated travel modes and circuits. It is not a city in which social class distinctions are mirrored in public/private divisions in transport. Again, there is an elite rich whose lifestyles, including how they move around the city, have few points of

contact with the majority-closer to Stiglitz's conception of the '1% society' (Stiglitz, 2011) than a mainstream social cleavage. But some 90 per cent of the city's 11 million daily trips are by public transport and in 2002 only 13 per cent of domestic households had a private car available for use (Transport Department, 2002). According to the 2006 Census, only 7 per cent of journeys to work and only 4 per cent of journeys to a place of study were by private car (Census and Statistics Department, 2007). The ubiquitous 'school run' with the procession of 4X4s, so evident in many inner London neighbourhoods, is not a feature of Hong Kong. What is more striking perhaps is the absence of mothers at the school gates of the international schools as the Filipino and Indonesian maids wait for the middle class offspring to appear.

Discussion

The main aim of this paper was to question whether the idea of tectonic social structures has resonance in a city like Hong Kong. In the absence of detailed qualitative work, it is not possible to fully address this issue. However, we can point to various factors which would cast doubt on the extent to which Hong Kong's current social dynamics can be appropriately conceived of as one of 'parallel lives'. At the outset of this short essay, we pointed to Hong Kong's contradictory elements. We return to them here because to address this core question involves an appreciation of a complicated mix of factors. Also, there is a distinction to be made between 'social mix', a concept normally applied to a residential setting and 'social interaction' which may or may not involve such a setting. Social mix does not assume social interaction. Indeed, the concept of social tectonics is precisely one of groups ostensibly sharing residential space but little else-of spatial but not social propinquity. Policy initiatives, however, often tend to assume erroneously that social mix leads inexorably to social interaction. Housing tenure is usually central to residential social mix strategies.

In Hong Kong, social mix has not been an important element of housing and social policy. However, at some spatial scales, there appears to be a considerable tenurial and income mix. Moreover, this mix appears to have increased due to the recent history of pepperpotted rather than comprehensive redevelopment in the older urban areas.

However, seen through a more finely grained lens, housing tenures are in fact highly

segregated. It is, however, compacted vertical segregation rather than sprawling, horizontal segregation.

This compact, high rise form, in the case of Hong Kong, is also associated with a highly integrated and widely used public transport system. Also, different residential settings (in terms of income/tenure) share other public/private facilities-notably, Hong Kong's ubiquitous shopping malls in which (unlike many shopping centres in the UK or the USA), private consumption and public facilities and activities are closely and ambiguously interrelated.

An additional part of the argument related to schooling. Essentially it is argued that again because of Hong Kong compact/public transport dominated urban fabric (and policy changes), school related residential decisions involving gentrification type processes are not significant. The overall picture then is this. Households in Hong Kong do live side by side, but in vertical space. There is limited tenure mix within tower blocks. But these tenure segregated populations spill out into commonly experienced neighbourhoods and transport systems. Apart from an elite minority, daily life paths contain many common ingredients and experiences.

A final element is the effect of rapid economic change. There is a substantial generational difference in relation to living standard and aspirations, most clearly seen in relation to housing tenure. A baby boomer generation have become middle class, home owners but most were brought up in public rental housing. Their parents were, and many still are, public rental tenants. Ownership may have become a common middle class aspiration but there is no stigma attached to public housing. Hong Kong's highly compressed period of social and economic change has therefore produced striking generational differences, and indeed more differentiated social trajectories within younger generations. But these apparent differences actually conceal binding and shared experiences and attitudes. Some caution is, of course, in order here to guard against offering a rather romanticized view of social interaction in Hong Kong. The city is changing with new population influxes and with the development of a more established middle class. However, some of the key elements which produce the 'tectonic' type social relations in other cities would seem at present to be relatively weak in Hong Kong.

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