

Hong Kong Food Culture, Obesity, and Resolutions

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### **Methodology:**

My research began by looking at the rising trends of overweight and obesity within adolescents. The rising trend of overweight and obesity is predominately attributed to unhealthy dietary habits, availability, and access to high fat and sugary foods, lack of physical activity, and largely sedentary lifestyles. Due to time constraints and logistical difficulties in working with children, my research focus shifted to how this issue connects to broader Hong Kong population trends. Using information from the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, I began scanning demographic data to look for increases or decreases in obesity and overweight populations within the past two decades. After noticing a spike in deaths and discharges for non-communicable during the 2008-2012 period, I searched for explanations which led me to exploring the economic disparity within Hong Kong. I relied on previous reports to learn about the development of Hong Kong's current food industry and its state of dependence on importation.

HKUST Professors Arthur Lau and Alex Lam helped me to theorize possible explanations also referred me to individuals and organizations I could talk to about policy shifts and alternative food networks. Email correspondence with the Sustainable Ecological Ethical Development Foundation (SEED) led me to begin visiting various farmers' markets and wet stalls around Hong Kong. At each location, I interviewed available farmers and business owners to gauge market operations, frequency of selling locations, and customer trends. Using their responses, I was able to generalize that farmers' market locations were predominately accessed and utilized in particular regions within Hong Kong. Comparing this information to the trends of

economic disparity with Hong Kong resulted in the conclusion that the organic, local, and sustainable food movement was used by predominately affluent populations.

### **Introduction:**

Food, the basis of life, is a fundamental human right because all people should be able to have access to a healthy, sufficient and environmental responsible supply. Beyond fulfilling dietary needs, food plays a crucial role of almost every culture. Hong Kong is home to over seven million people and over the course of a diverse and expansive history, it has grown to be one of the business and entrepreneurial capitals of the world. The fusions of cultures that have impacted Hong Kong have left a lasting legacy molding the city into somewhat of a food haven. Yet, like any modern cosmopolitan, diversification also introduces fast food chains, industrialized and heavily processed foods, and the comforts of largely sedentary lifestyles that opens the door to increases in overweight and obesity and non-communicable diseases. This research paper seeks to explore the history of Hong Kong's diversification, the current state of obesity and overweight and its connection to cosmopolitanism, and the alternative food sources that seek to maintain tradition or counter unappealing dietary trends. By focusing on these aspects individually, it is possible to see how they intersect and how certain populations are more at risk to adversity than others.

### **Background:**

Setting up the scene for Hong Kong's current food culture requires a brief history of several key periods within the last 50 years of the area's history. During this period, massive changes of diverse populations and cultures through immigration and technological and

industrial growth shaped Hong Kong into the cosmopolitan city and diverse food scene of today. It's also important in understanding how this history has created a culture of resources that has allowed for the rising numbers of obesity and overweight among Hong Kong adults and more alarmingly among adolescents.

The period of 1949-1969 marks the beginning of Hong Kong's rise of cosmopolitanism. Mass immigration and refugees after World War II and throughout the Korean War affected regional and class developments, bringing in new chefs, cuisines, and restaurants led to initial changes in the food scene. This population increase created a spark of new entrepreneurship and a more stable industrial economy allowing the emergence of a middle class and permanent labour force.<sup>1</sup> Another result of the stable economy was exposure to opportunities for social mobility. Though already a centre for international trade, this period sparked a remarkable diversification in Hong Kong society through massive immigration from nearby regions, notably Europe and China, allowing the city to flourish with new culture and become a cosmopolitan center.<sup>2</sup>

During the next few decades, Hong Kong continued to flourish under an economic boom. This period from the 70s to mid-80s can be seen as an era of globalized conspicuous consumption marked by fast food shops, self-service, and the growing popularity of "western-style" meals (both faster and fine dining options) becoming deeply woven into the ideas and icons of cosmopolitanism. For example, the local popular Maxim's was introduced and then

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<sup>1</sup> Sea-ling Cheng, "Food and distinction in Hong Kong families," (master's thesis, University of Hong Kong, 1996), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 23.

McDonald's, the infamous chain and mark of modernity was introduced to Hong Kong in 1974.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, this period marks the internationalization of the Hong Kong food scene. Beyond the interest of cheap and fast options, a mix of high and low cuisine hailing from nations around the world entered the Hong Kong market.

Following this spurt of market diversification, the rise in other economic centers and increases in costs for food and rent made it difficult for most people to commonly indulge in high quality food, making chain and fast food restaurants that provided exotic tastes but at cheap prices rise in popularity during the late 80s and through the 90s. As these food sources rose in popularity, there was also a rise of global concern for health and eating with restraint.<sup>4</sup> Media and industry promotion of "natural" and "healthy" ways of eating to maintaining "slimmer" body figures sparked the other side of the food scene during this period demanding alternative food options. Those with more affluence opted for the healthier, western options over the cheaper fast foods that dominated previous decades.

Interestingly, Hong Kong has a unique colonial experience. Rather than emerging from colonialism with new independence and autonomy, the area experienced a transfer of sovereign power from the British to the Chinese in 1997. This process affected the culture and therefore shaped the food culture in Hong Kong by the complex social population composition, resources and production, and economic activities.<sup>5</sup> As a result, today, Hong Kong is internationally known as a food hub and overtime, different foods and cuisines have become associated social and political messages that transcend ethnic, class, and gender boundaries. For example, Lan Kwai

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 31.

Fong is a district in Hong Kong that epitomizes the cosmopolitanism of the area. The streets of Central throughout Lan Kwai Fong and SoHo are flanked with masses of expatriates, Chinese professionals, tourists, and trend-setters. Restaurants and bars hailing from an international assortment line the streets.

Despite Hong Kong's status as an internationally food culture hub there is a daunting reality to the food consumption chain: today, around 90% of the total food supply in Hong Kong is imported food. A 2013 study found that mainland China supplies 94% of pork, 100% of beef, 92% of vegetables and 66% of eggs, while fresh fruits are almost exclusively imported from the U.S., the Philippines, and Thailand.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing the dependence on importing is crucial to understanding the network of factors that influence Hong Kong buyers and the market. Most importantly, the food issues of major import countries affect and influence the food issues within Hong Kong.

### **Overweight, Obesity, and food sourcing/healthy lifestyles:**

Healthy eating and exercise continues to be the most crucial factors in the long term prevention of obesity and overweight and the plethora of chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart diseases associated with them. However, in Hong Kong, like many places in the world, diversification and the resources of a cosmopolitan city have had adverse effects on physical activity and levels of overweight and obesity. Unhealthy behaviors such as poor eating habits, physical inactivity, and biomedical risk factors such as overweight, obesity, and high blood pressure are common in the local Hong Kong population and contribute the the

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<sup>6</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions on Food Supply of Hong Kong," [fhb.gov.hk](http://www.fhb.gov.hk), last modified June 16, 2013, [http://www.fhb.gov.hk/download/press\\_and\\_publications/otherinfo/110318\\_food\\_supply\\_faq/e\\_food\\_supply\\_faq.pdf](http://www.fhb.gov.hk/download/press_and_publications/otherinfo/110318_food_supply_faq/e_food_supply_faq.pdf).

rise in non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes mellitus, and chronic respiratory disease.<sup>7</sup>

Non-communicable diseases are simply defined as chronic diseases that are not passed from person to person. Annually, they are the cause of over 38 million people each year, with about 28 million of these deaths being people of lower and middle income.<sup>8</sup> By understanding that health status goes beyond simply the presence or absence of disease and is instead the broader field including physical, psychological, and social well-being, it's possible to see how these risk factors work together to predispose individuals and contribute to the rise of these diseases. By targeting the modifiable behavioral risk factors of physical inactivity and unhealthy diet, the risks of NCDs can be further prevented and controlled.

In 2002, the total number of in-patient discharges and deaths in Hong Kong by diabetes mellitus, coronary heart diseases and cerebrovascular diseases was 69,093 (17,964; 24,071; 27,063, respectively).<sup>9</sup> Comparatively, in 2013, the total was 68,188 with only 12,942 from diabetes. The graph in Figure 1 shows the numbers of deaths and discharges by non-communicable diseases from the period of 2002 to 2013. There is a visible spike in non-communicable diseases during the 2009 and 2010 years, likely attributable to the 2008 global financial crisis. Some theorists express the concern that non-communicable are connected to

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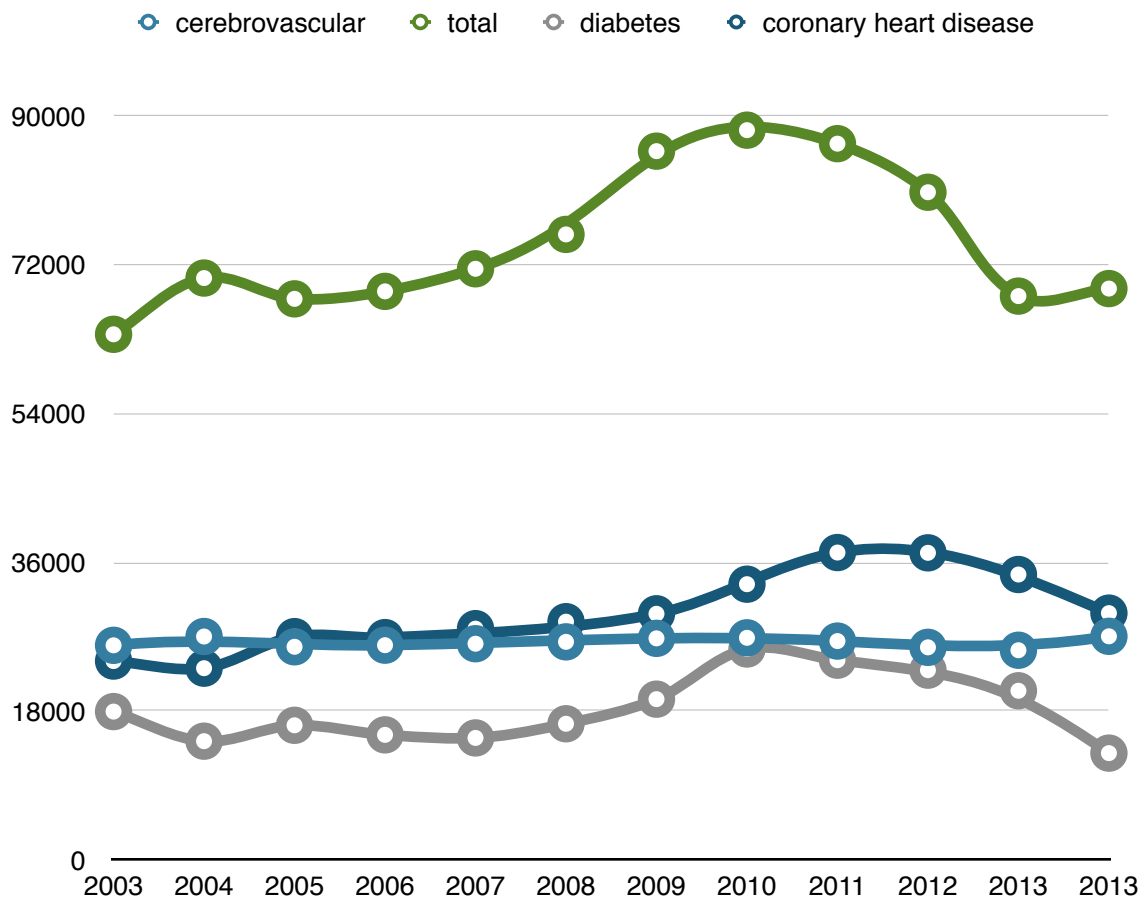
<sup>7</sup> “Promoting Health in Hong Kong: A Strategic Framework for Prevention and Control of Non-communicable diseases,” *Department of Health*, 60, last modified June 2, 2013, [http://www.change4health.gov.hk/filemanager/common/image/strategic\\_framework/promoting\\_health/promoting\\_health\\_e.pdf](http://www.change4health.gov.hk/filemanager/common/image/strategic_framework/promoting_health/promoting_health_e.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> “Noncommunicable diseases,” *who.int*, last modified January 2015, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs355/en/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Number of In-Patient Discharges and Deaths in Hospitals by Diabetes Mellitus, Coronary Heart Disease, and Cerebrovascular Diseases, 2012,” [healthyhk.gov.hk](http://www.healthyhk.gov.hk), last modified October 23, 2013, [http://www.healthyhk.gov.hk/phisweb/en/health\\_info/non\\_comm\\_dis/comm\\_ncd/report.html](http://www.healthyhk.gov.hk/phisweb/en/health_info/non_comm_dis/comm_ncd/report.html).

macroeconomics.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, changes to labour supply, capital accumulation, and GDP will have an impact on developing countries and vulnerable populations. Additionally, financial burdens placed on populations due to the financial crisis restrict the ability to seek health care, further increasing the number of discharges and deaths.<sup>11</sup> The classifications of these diseases and causes of death are based on the International Statistical Classifications of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD).

**Figure 1:**  
**In Patient Discharges and Deaths In Hong Kong Non-communicable Diseases**



<sup>10</sup> Alex Tam, (HKUST professor) in discussion with author, August 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Alex Tam, (HKUST professor) in discussion with author, August 2015.



Health is strongly associated with the socio-economic environment. In areas of poverty or among certain underprivileged populations, it tends to be worse. Previous reports have shown that the less equitable the income distribution in a country, the less equitable the health outcome and also that higher levels of educations, which is generally a reflection of economic privilege, are associated with healthier diets.<sup>12</sup> In Hong Kong, a generally high-income location, families from lower socio-economic households are at a higher risk of becoming obese due to a combination of reliance on cheaper fast food options and growing preference of western foods. Without moderation, their diets are often high is saturated fat and carbohydrates. This diet combined with largely sedentary lifestyles and less physical exercise are major contributing factors to high numbers of overweight and obesity. Additionally, vulnerable and socially disadvantaged people are more likely to have higher non-communicable disease mortality rates because of more exposer to harmful products and limited access to health services.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 2:  
Hong Kong Gini Coefficient<sup>14</sup>**

<b>Year</b>	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011
<b>Indicator</b>	0.45	0.45	0.48	0.52	0.53	0.53	0.54

The Gini coefficient of income distribution measures the income inequality of a country or region considering original income, post tax household income, and post tax post social transfer household income. The United Nations determines that a Gini coefficient of 0.4-0.5

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<sup>12</sup> “Promoting Health in Hong Kong: A Strategic Framework for Prevention and Control of Non-communicable diseases,” *Department of Health*, 40, last modified June 2, 2013, [http://www.change4health.gov.hk/filemanager/common/image/strategic\\_framework/promoting\\_health/promoting\\_health\\_e.pdf](http://www.change4health.gov.hk/filemanager/common/image/strategic_framework/promoting_health/promoting_health_e.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> “Noncommunicable diseases,” *who.int*, last modified January 2015, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs355/en/>.

<sup>14</sup> “Gini Coefficient,” *Social Indicators of Hong Kong*, accessed September 25, 2015, <http://www.socialindicators.org.hk/en/indicators/economy/11.6>.

signifies a relative disparity in income distribution and  $>0.6$  indicates huge income disparity.<sup>15</sup>

Using the above chart, it is apparent Hong Kong falls within these boundaries: economic dispersion is large, but more importantly, is rising.

**Figure 3:**  
**Gini coefficient of selected developed countries<sup>16</sup>**

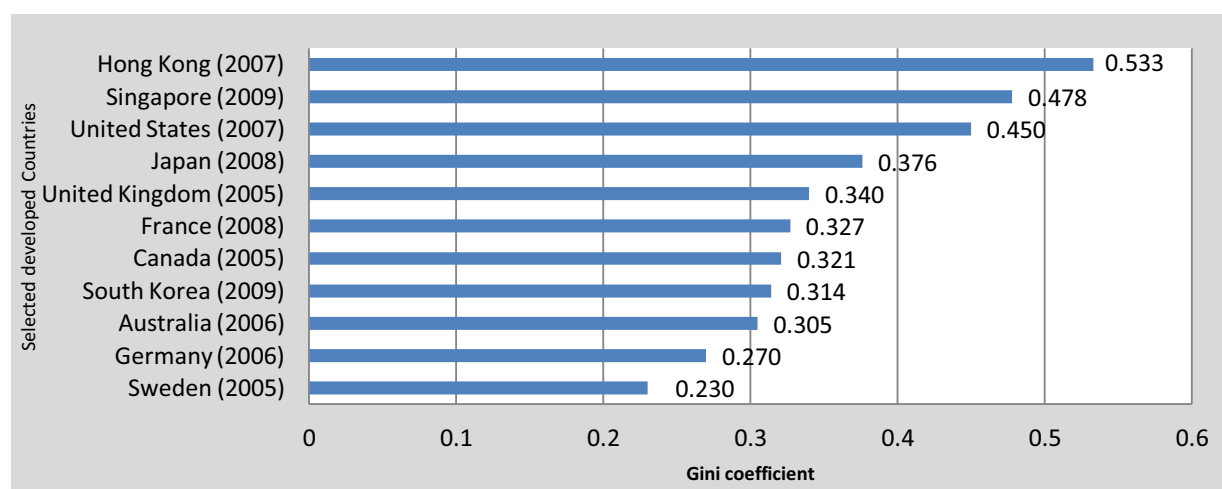


Figure 3 shows a comparison of Gini coefficients for household income among several developed nations within a four year time span. With Hong Kong having the highest Gini coefficient, the figure shows that income inequality is especially serious in the area.

Another major behavioral risk factor that contribute the rise in non-communicable diseases is a lack of adequate physical activity. The Department of Health reports, based off the World Health Organizations recommendations, which suggest 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week, or at least 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity throughout the week, or a combination. Yet, of people between the ages of 18

<sup>15</sup> Chui Lap, Leung Shong Tung, and Yip Chun Hin, "Income Inequality In Hong Kong," 2012, [http://www.hkss.org.hk/images/SPC/2011\\_12/PDF/S11-12-DP4.pdf](http://www.hkss.org.hk/images/SPC/2011_12/PDF/S11-12-DP4.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Chui Lap, Leung Shong Tung, and Yip Chun Hin, "Income Inequality In Hong Kong," 2012, [http://www.hkss.org.hk/images/SPC/2011\\_12/PDF/S11-12-DP4.pdf](http://www.hkss.org.hk/images/SPC/2011_12/PDF/S11-12-DP4.pdf)

and 64 in Hong Kong, 62.5% have inadequate physical activity.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, 81.0% of adults eat fewer than 5 servings of fruit and vegetables per day, therefore also have inadequate diet intake. These contributing factors help to account for the 39.0% of adults who are overweight or obese (49.6% of men and 29.5% of women).<sup>18</sup> These insufficiencies help to show where the average Hong Kong citizen stands and provide data for future studies to explore how or if physical activity and healthy food intakes increase over time.

### **Resolutions/Alternative Food Networks:**

Although the high number of imports allows Hong Kong residents to enjoy foods that cannot be grown inside the area because of land restrictions and an already pressing limitation to housing, it places the city in a vulnerable position of food insecurity. When, for example, there are food restraints in the importing nations, Hong Kong is drastically impacted. During the last decade, a series of food scares in China impacted Hong Kong. Though China does have tight food safety rules, there is weak enforcement, therefore allowing a fractured agricultural supply chain to produce food for millions of people.

In the wake of these concerns of food sourcing and cheap, unhealthy restaurants, many urban residents and people can afford to do so have sought out alternative food sources.

Agricultural production in Hong Kong takes place predominately in the New Territories and urban outlines. In December 2014, the Food and Health Bureau hosted a public consultation to

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<sup>17</sup> “Health Facts of Hong Kong,” [dh.gov.hk](http://www.dh.gov.hk), last modified May 11, 2015, [http://www.dh.gov.hk/english/statistics/statistics\\_hs/files/Health\\_Statistics\\_pamphlet\\_E.pdf](http://www.dh.gov.hk/english/statistics/statistics_hs/files/Health_Statistics_pamphlet_E.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

review Hong Kong's agricultural policy.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, the consultation recognized market pressure for more health conscious, fresher, and safer food. Comparisons to Singapore and Greater London, which both are economically and geographically similar, provide the Hong Kong government with examples of new policy to adopt and how urban cities can achieve balanced and sustainable development. The projected future policy will strive to update existing problems of modernization and sustainable development through supportive measurements: exploring the feasibility of establishing an Agricultural Park, establishing a Sustainable Agricultural Development Fund, strengthening support of current farmers, and promoting educational activities for the public and students.<sup>20</sup>

Organic food and local foods have risen in popularity as a safer and healthier option. Yet, it's also important to note that these options are not realities for most average-income families. As of March, 2015, 138 businesses in Hong Kong have organic certification in crop production; five are certified in processing and handling and five in aquaculture.<sup>21</sup> In 2012 surveys from the Hong Kong Baptist University's Hong Kong Organic Resource Centre found that of 616 people, 30% purchased some organic produces at least once a week. Moreover, consumers spending over 500HKD monthly on organic foods increased from 9% in 2008 to 16.2% in 2012.<sup>22</sup> These statistics indicate a likely continued increase in consumer money going into the organic market

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<sup>19</sup> "The New Agricultural Policy: Sustainable Agricultural Development in Hong Kong," [fhb.gov.hk](http://www.fhb.gov.hk), last modified December 2014, [http://www.fhb.gov.hk/download/press\\_and\\_publications/consultation/141229\\_f\\_agricultural/e\\_consultation\\_document.pdf](http://www.fhb.gov.hk/download/press_and_publications/consultation/141229_f_agricultural/e_consultation_document.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Duggan, "China's middle class turns to organics after food safety scares," *The Guardian*, May 14, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/may/14/china-middle-class-organics-food-safety-scares>.

<sup>22</sup> "40% citizens identified organic products by product claims only," *Hong Kong Organic Resource Centre*, last modified March 6, 2012, [http://www.hkorc.org/tc/img\\_activities/2012/20120311/en\\_20120306.pdf](http://www.hkorc.org/tc/img_activities/2012/20120311/en_20120306.pdf).

which will reflect a need for more government involvement with organic businesses and certification processes.

One business seeking to change the consumer market is Homegrown Foods. The company was started in 2010 with the goal of reversing the fast-food trend and providing alternative clean food that was sustainably responsible. Today, Homegrown Foods partners with a number of farmers in the northern New Territories and southern Mainland and delivers to the doors of Hong Kong citizens across the islands. Homegrown Foods is one of the few farm businesses that is able to achieve a connectivity between Hong Kong farms and urban areas. Yet, the tradeoff is higher prices of produce and groceries. For example, based on prices taken from Homegrown Foods website and numbers gathered in a Hong Kong grocery store, twelve eggs cost 25.04 HKD while six eggs from Homegrown Foods cost \$38.00 HKD. Yet, locally produced vegetables only accounted for two percent of the Hong Kong market and 0.1 percent of the GDP in 2013.<sup>23</sup> While most businesses do not see agriculture in Hong Kong as a desirable investment due to a thriving and highly profitable real estate market, others believe having a larger agricultural presence can help Hong Kong residents reclaim a relationship with food and where it comes from.

One way supporters and modern-day farmers have circumvented decreases in agriculture is through rooftop farming and gardening. Using unused rooftop spaces, these urban farmers grow crops and many give back to the community through providing educational opportunities about their garden spaces.<sup>24</sup> Figure 4 shows one of the rooftop gardens in Hong Kong. Located

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Rachel Young, (Oxy student, Luce Grant participant summer 2014), in discussion with author July 2015.

on the roof of Peak Mall, the garden grows various types of Chinese and western lettuce and herbs. Within close proximity of Victoria's Peak, one of Hong Kong's largest tourist locations, the garden inadvertently and strategically serves to raise awareness about sustainability and the ability to transform every the busiest of locations into a contribution to the community.

**Figure 4**



Additionally, the organic and local movement has caused the rise of Farmers' Markets across Hong Kong to serve as another source of organic or locally produced fruits, vegetables, and crafts. While some local farms invite customers to buy directly at their farms, many of these types of markets take place once a week. Though there are currently no municipally supported markets, they are planned by established organizations untied to promoting healthy living such as the Sustainable Ecological Ethical Development Foundation (SEED), Handmade Hong Kong, and the YMCA. For example, SEED manages a market with a handful of venders at the Central

Star Ferry Pier on Sunday afternoons while Kadoorie Farms sponsors a larger market of around ten vendors at the same location on Wednesdays. These organizations seek to enter into the discussion of food sourcing and create a more self-sufficient Hong Kong.<sup>25</sup> After the food scares of the past decade, the work of these organizations is to provide a bottom-up pressure to change ecumenic patterns and promote sustainability.

**Figure 5**



*One of the Hong Kong Farmer's Markets located by the Central Star Ferry Pier. Farmers sell only fresh local organic vegetables twice each week throughout the year at this location.*

“Wet Markets” and “dai pai dongs” are other food sources that continue to incorporate tradition into the Hong Kong food scene. Wet markets are fresh-produce markets that are located along the street-sides or as municipal markets. Though once the only places available for fresh

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<sup>25</sup> Lam Chi Kwong (SEED CSA Advocator) e-mail message to author July 20, 2015.



produce, today, wet markets continue to suffer from a continued decline. Concerns about hygiene and comfort and the convenience of “one-stop-shopping” markets have contributed to their decline. As well, most food in wet markets is purchased from street hawkers or the wholesale market rather than brought in by the farmers themselves.



*Pictured above is fish sold in one of the wet market stalls in Tai O. Tai O is one of the few remaining fishing villages in Hong Kong. Though it used to be one of the most important fishing ports of the city because of its shallow waters with high amounts salts for preservation, the decline of the fishing industry and rise in importing has drastically changed the village overtime.*

Another traditional, but increasing controversial source of food are Hong Kong’s Dai Pai Dongs. Dai Pai Dongs are iconic Hong Kong street food vendors that rose to popularity in the 1950s. Nicknamed the “poor people’s nightclub” because of the highly social characteristics of the restaurants, the government stopped issuing new license and began buying existing ones back in 1983.<sup>26</sup> In the past few decades, the Hong Kong government has stopped issuing new licenses for ownership of these open-air food stall type of food vending and non-trans-generational licenses have caused the number of Dai Pai Dongs to rapidly reduce; today, only 28 are

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<sup>26</sup> Kate Whitehead, “Dai pai dong an endangered species in Hong Kong,” *South China Morning Post*, last modified July 21, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/food-wine/article/1556158/dai-pai-dong-endangered-species-hong-kong>.



recognized by the Hong Kong Food and Environmental hygiene Department).<sup>27</sup> Despite complaint of the dirty, crowded, and unhygienic qualities of Dai Pai Dongs, locals are optimistic that their historical connection to “old Hong Kong” will pressure the government to preserve the food stalls. Dai Pai Dongs serve as a representation of affordable and balanced meals.



*Pictured is a Tai Pai Dong style vender selling street food in Mong Kok.*

### **Conclusion:**

Hong Kong has flourished historically and continues to flourish today as a hub of diverse cultures. It's food scene is internationally recognized and its economy thrives as one of the most successful in the world. Despite all its success, Hong Kong, too, is weighed down by the public health consequences increased by urbanization and diversification. Within the region, alternative food networks have emerged to combat unhealthy eating trends, however, there is an apparent gap in access to these networks. While middle and upper class families are more likely exposed to healthy and responsibly grown foods and have the option to purchase organic produce, lower

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

income families face economic restrictions and are more vulnerable to being impacted by unhealthy diets. Whether it's the organic movement or farmers' markets, within Hong Kong exists a movement to create a sustainable food scene, but as it currently exists, this movement is segregated by socioeconomic class privilege. Access to healthy foods for those with less income are limited and almost always force these communities to completely depend on imported fruits and vegetables. They face more health risks when there are food scares, but are also more likely to depend on trending western type fast food sourcing that is connected to obesity and overweight. As the economic gap between the richest and poorest in Hong Kong continues to widen, there is a growing need to ensure food security. Moving forward, this right to clean food, based off an individuals accessibility to healthy, responsibly produced and affordable sourcing, will be further challenged. In order to implement policy and cultural changes, it is essential to understand the intersection of non-communicable diseases and public health, economic disparity, and food justice.

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