

Down and Out in Sham Shui Po

Right on cue, there is a “pop” sound and the floodlight switches off. This means it is 8 p.m. The scent of brewing Vietnamese tea mingles with the stench from the rubbish station and the smog from West Kowloon Corridor overhead hangs in the air. A group of homeless people chitchat, gamble and unwind after another tough day.

This scene plays out every day in front of the Jade Market in Sham Shui Po. It is less than a home but at least it is a refuge to a community of street-sleepers.

The area became a hub for street people in the early 2000s after their previous spots in Yau Ma Tei and Mongkok were cleared for redevelopment.

Street sleepers in Hong Kong can be generally divided into three categories, people with mental health problems, drug users, and the jobless elderly. Their family members have abandoned them for various reasons and with no other alternatives, sleeping on the street is their last resort. The majority are men who mainly fall into the first two categories but there is also a community of Vietnamese former asylum-seekers.

“For some, Hong Kong is a blessed place,” says Fung, a street sleeper in his 50s. Looking out from the footbridge he sleeps on, Olympic City and the new and fancy West Kowloon residential developments are just a stone’s throw away.

When *Varsity* visited him, Fung had been sleeping there for one week. Before he settled on the street, he used to rent a sub-divided unit in Sham Shui Po. He recalls that the space was the size of a single bed. The fleas and the odour due to high humidity and poor ventilation made it unbearable to stay any longer.

Life is simple. During the daytime, street sleepers stroll around to find their friends, go to the library to read newspapers and listen to groups of the elderly singing in the park – Chinese opera on weekdays and old pop songs at weekends. They usually stay within walking distance as they cannot afford public transport.

But life is not completely free on the streets. There are certain hidden rules Fung feels obliged to follow. For instance, street sleepers usually put their important personal belongings on or near to

their mattress. Everyone's mattress marks their own "territory". He explains he never sits on others' mattresses, for fear of being accused of thievery. Also, he only sleeps beside someone he knows.

"This is not a hotel. You cannot sleep wherever you want," he says.

Fung was introduced to the place by a friend. Without any objections from other street sleepers, he joined the community.

While Fung admits that some street sleepers are quiet and unwilling to say much about themselves, some of them are talkative. A woman, known to the community as Man Nui is not a street sleeper but has befriended them. She considers herself a member of the Jade Market street sleepers' community.

"Admittedly Sham Shui Po is a slum," Man Nui says, "but I am not afraid as I grew up here." Man Nui goes to a nearby clinic for her arthritis twice a week and dropping by and chatting with the street sleepers on her way there has become part of her routine.

She lives in a public estate nearby and cares for her brother who has suffered a stroke. Man Nui is distressed by the changes in her beloved Sham Shui Po over the years. She cherishes the memories of the old estates, now demolished.

"We occupied the corridor with our beds and snoozed with our doors wide open. In the new estates, even when you greet people they will just ignore you," she sighs.

She is not the only one to recognise the sense of community here. "They stay together and help each other in some ways," says Nisu Sou Lai-sim, a volunteer from Equal Share Action.

"Therefore some of them cannot get used to the environment after they are granted a public estate flat. They cannot build the bonds they had with their neighbours as they could on the street."

Sou says society marginalises the street sleepers. The government excludes them in urban planning and legislators do not show them any support since most of them do not have a vote because they have no fixed address.

The Equal Share Action was founded in October last year and became better known after an abrupt clean-up operation in Tung Chau Street on February 15 this year, a joint action by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, the Home Affairs Bureau, and the police. The officials cleared the area by confiscating street sleepers' mattresses and belongings.

With the help of social workers, 19 of the victims took legal action and sued the government for HK\$3,000 each for property they said was unlawfully confiscated, including identity cards, travel permits and bank books.

On November 6, the government agreed to pay them HK\$2,000 each but stopped short of apologising. Most of those involved welcomed the judgement but some of the other street-sleepers had reservations about bringing the case in the first place.

Chu, who used to live with the cluster of street sleepers in front of the Jade Market but has now moved onto the footbridge across Yen Chow Street West says the case will bring nothing but trouble.

A government win would have meant the disposal of their property was justified, he says. While a victory for the street-sleepers could create chaos as others may also sue.

Among the homeless on the footbridge, Chu is known as the "captain". He helps direct volunteers to the footbridge when they distribute food and clothes to the street sleepers near the Jade Market because those on the footbridge are sometimes overlooked. "Besides, I will wake my neighbours up to share the food given by the volunteers," Chu says.

This is how Chu came to be regarded as the "captain" of the area. Even though he no longer sleeps in front of the Jade Market, street sleepers there also show him respect.

Uncle Fai, a homeless man who sleeps in front of the market says: "He really takes good care of the place. He has good order. He does not allow theft. Otherwise he will beat us up. The place is very clean in his hands."

Uncle Fai is in his 60s and used to be a construction worker. His life changed after he started using drugs in 2000. He quit his job and eventually ended up on the street. "At that time, sleeping in the open area outside the Jade Market was forbidden. We slept in the park instead," he says.

He is still using now and says the drug problem here has got worse over the years. “Everyone living here is a drug addict,” he says, adding that on the week of Varsity’s visit, two street sleepers had died of overdoses. “Just two days ago, a man passed out on the street after injecting heroin. He didn’t even have his pants on, and he was still holding a syringe in his hand,” says Uncle Fai.

The body was cleared away by the Food and Hygiene Department.

“If one of us dies, the government just equates it with the death of a cockroach or an ant. They will not regard it as the death of a human being,” he says, “We see ourselves as rubbish. We are old and we are just a burden on society.”

Regarding themselves as marginal beings, street sleepers do not dare to enter the Jade Market. There is a clear demarcation between the inside’ and outside of the market. Shopkeepers grumble about the presence of street sleepers, who scare away their customers “If you give food to these drug users, you are not helping them. What you are doing is worsening society,” says Lin, one of the shopkeepers near the entrance of the market.

Apart from the community on the footbridge and the one in front of the Jade Market, there is also a community of around 30 Vietnamese ex-asylum-seekers who gather outside the Tung Chau Street Temporary Market.

However, not all of them are street sleepers. Some of them are able to rent a sub-divided unit in Sham Shui Po, but they visit their friends on the street once or twice a week. They gather around a small table with stools and a cassette radio to chat and smoke and drink tea, which they invited Varsity to share in a friendly exchange.

But these are just some of the street sleepers’ communities in Sham Shui Po. According to Father Franco Mella, who visits the street sleepers at the Jade Market every week, there are around 3000 street sleepers in the area. The exact number is hard to pinpoint because it is a transient population.

“It depends on which place is available...like the guerrillas they move from one place they go to another place until they find a proper place to stay in,” says Mella.

He believes temporary assistance is not the answer to the problem of street sleepers. “The street sleepers should not be the object of our charity work, of our interest, of our deep concern, of our help,” he says. “The street sleepers should move on and we should support them, walk with them. They are not the object. They are the subject.”

He says there is an urgent need for more singleton flats in public estates. Because most homeless people have been abandoned by their families, they have to apply as single people and the application for a new flat takes eight years or more. Mella believes housing is the vital step for them to regain their dignity and a normal life.

“These people should be given a chance when they are young, even when they are old they should not be considered like rubbish,” says Father Mella. “They are human beings.”

譯本：

窮愁潦倒深水埗

每晚八點正，玉石市場前的探射燈準時熄滅。空氣中瀰漫著越南茶香，垃圾房傳來的臭氣，還有來自西九龍走廊的廢氣。一班露宿者聚起來聊天，賭博，共渡艱難苦澀的另一天。

這一幕每天都在深水埗玉石市場前上演。這裡或未算是一個家，但至少是個露宿者的避難所。在油尖旺一帶因重建項目而被掃蕩之後，這社區在二十年代起成為露宿者的共居地。

在港露宿者一般能被區分成三類：精神病患者、毒品使用者、無業老人。他們的家人因各種原因遺棄他們，窮途末路裡他們流落街頭。多數街友屬於頭兩類，當中也不乏滯港越南船民。

「對一些人來說，香港是個福地。」五十歲的馮先生說。身處在欽州街天橋上，奧海城和其他新建的西九龍豪宅近在咫尺。

當 **Varsity** 採訪馮先生時，他剛剛在街頭露宿了一星期。在此之前，他住在深水埗區的劏房。那單位就只有一張單人床的大小，潮濕的天氣加上空氣不流通，跳蚤和臭味令單位成了人間煉獄。

街上生活很簡單。街友白天三五成群或獨自散步，到圖書館讀報，到公園聽人唱歌，平日有粵曲，週末有老流行曲。他們通常只留在步行範圍內，因為他們無錢乘搭公共交通。

不過，街上生活亦不是全然自由，群體有著各種潛規則，例如，街友通常把貴重物品放在床鋪旁邊，而各人的床鋪就是自己的「地盤」。馮先生說他絕對不會坐在他人的床鋪上，不然會被指控偷竊。他亦只會睡在熟人旁邊。

「這裡不是酒店，你不可任意選擇睡在哪。」他說。

馮先生是透過朋友介紹，沒有鄰居反對，才住到較舒適的欽州街天橋上。

有些街友比較孤僻，有些則口若懸河。雯女每天在市場外過日辰，但她是個上了公屋的人，她卻視自己為通州街露宿社群的一員。

「無可否認深水埗是個貧民窟。」雯女說。「但我不怕他們，因為我在這區長大。」她一週兩天到附近的診所治理風濕關節炎，路過這裡就會停下與露宿者聊天，已成了她的日常。

她與中過風的弟弟住在附近的公共屋邨，她慨嘆深水埗這社區在年月的變遷，往時的木屋的生活依然記憶猶新。

「我們就在走廊擺放摺床打瞌睡，我們的家門永遠打開。在新屋邨裡，就算是與鄰居迎頭碰面，他們也不會向你打招呼。」

街上露宿的社區，喚起了雯女舊日的鄰里回憶。「他們守在一起，互相依靠。」參與平等分享行動的義工仇小姐說道，「所以有些朋友上樓後會不習慣新的環境，他們在那裡找不到在街上的鄰舍情誼。」

仇小姐指社會持續邊緣化露宿者，政府與立法會議員在城市規劃的過程中亦長期忽視他們，他們沒有住址，也因此沒有選票。

平等分享行動在上年十月成立，並在今年二月十五日政府部門掃蕩通州街露宿者後為人知曉。在那次清場，食環署、民政署與警方聯合行動，清除及沒收露宿者的床鋪與家當。

透過社工介入，十九名受害人訴諸法律行動，向政府申索三千港元，賠償身分證、旅行證件、銀行賬簿等財物損失。

在十一月六日，政府同意向入稟人賠償二千港元，但並不願意道歉。多數露宿者歡迎裁決，但有其他露宿者質疑入稟一事。

朱先生，認為向政府追討只會帶來麻煩，他說：「一旦政府贏了，那即是說他們充供我們的財物是合法合理的；如果街友贏了，那就天下大亂，因為所有其他人都會衝去告政府。」

在其他露宿者口中，朱先生是「隊長」，他會指揮義工們派發食物和衣物，確保住在暗角的人也得到物資。「當有人派食物時，我會叫醒其他人去排隊領取。」在橋上或市場前，無人不識「隊長」，眾人對他尊敬有加。

住在市場前的輝叔說：「他很珍惜這個地方，搞得很有秩序，他絕不容許盜竊，不然他會把我們打到落花流水，他把這社區打理井井有條。」

年過六十的輝叔以前是建築工人，自從二千年代開始吸毒後一蹶不振，他失去了工作並流落街頭。「那時候，睡在玉石市場門前是被禁止的，我們睡在通州街公園裡。」他憶道。

他至今仍有使用毒品，而這社群的毒品使用情況日益嚴重。「所有睡在這裡的人都是癮君子。」他述說，在 *Varsity* 採訪這段期間，已有兩名街友濫藥身亡。「就在兩天前，有個朋友當街注射海洛英，他還不及拉上褲子，手裡還拿著針筒，就這樣昏了去。」

那遺體被食環署黑箱車運走。

「當我們死去，政府只當死了一隻蟑螂或螞蟻，他們不會覺得我們是人。」他說道，「我們也不得不視自己為垃圾，我們只是老去的人，是社會的負擔。」

他們雖然住在市場前，但絕不敢踏入玉石市場半步，市場內外的界線分明，店主都為露宿者的存在大感不滿，影響他們的生意。「如果你們把食品給予癮君子，你們不是在幫助他們，你們只遺禍社會。」商店接近入口的檔主林先生說道。

除了本地的露宿圈子，通州街市場旁邊還有個近三十人的越南船民圈子，但不是所有船民都是露宿者。他們有些能負擔附近的深水埗劏房，但他們也定期來探望住在街上的同鄉。

他們晚上會圍圈，中間擺放著小桌子，聽著越南語收音機，喝著茶抽著煙，分享生活上的各種鎖事。

這橋底只是深水埗露宿社群的一部分，根據每週來訪的甘浩望神父所說，全區大概有三千名街友，真實的數字難以被確認，因為這是正在流動的人口。

「他們隨處擇地而居，像游擊隊一樣，他們從一個角落移往另一個角度，直到他們找到適合的棲息地。」甘神父說。

神父認為短暫的援助並非露宿街頭的答案。「街友不應是慈善的受眾，我們的興趣、關注、幫助…」他續指：「街友前行，我們伴隨。他們不應是被關注的他者，他們是這議題的主體。」

他說現在有急切需要興建單身人士公共房屋，因為大部分街友都被家庭遺棄，他們以單身人士申請公屋動輒用上八年以上，甘神父認為房屋是重要的一步，重建他們正常生活與自尊。

「他們年輕時，就應該得到重新做人的機會，而就算他們現在已經年老，也不應被視為垃圾，他們是有血有肉的人。」