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## Fiery crucible of a society



THE POINT: anthropologist **Sidney Cheung**, in Hong Kong's oldest public estate in Shekkipmei. Hong Kong habits began here, he says. Photo: Dustin Shum

The oldest public estates in Hong Kong are in Shekkipmei district. Trees and grass are long gone from nearby hillsides, covered over by concrete and punctured symmetrically by long rows of drainage holes.

Tourist books gloss over the district, and few people visit it.

The depressing concrete landscape is home to about 25,000 people, who for census and electoral purposes, are counted as part of the 376,000 population of Shamshuipo. The area does not even have its own District Board.

Yet, by accident of history, the place has exerted an influence on Hong Kong's social life since the end of World War II. It is an influence entirely disproportionate to its marginalized status.

From how we live to what we eat, many of the changing social habits of Hong Kong people can be traced to the district.

"It's a peculiar place. You can't tell the story of Hong Kong without mentioning Shekkipmei," says Chinese University anthropologist Sidney Cheung Chin-hung.

"The great fire of 1953 in the district which dated the colonial government's housing policy is an obvious example. But the various social repercussions of the fire are only beginning to be investigated."

Mr Cheung recently completed a study of the first Hakka restaurants in the district and their far-reaching influence on local cuisine and people's eating habits over four decades.

Another paper of his is about to go into print, investigating our sense of privacy and living space as shaped by the Government's housing policy since 1953.

His work, as well as an official collection of essays on housing history to celebrate the 45th anniversary of the Housing Authority this year, is putting the district back in the limelight.

Unlike neighbouring Shamshuipo, a vibrant gambling and entertainment district during the Japanese occupation, Shekipmei was largely uninhabited, with only a few scattered farming communities until the 1940s. The farms are long gone but their names persist to this day. Woh Chai and Tai Po have become street names, and Shekkipmei and Pak Tin the names of public estates.

"There was really not much out there before the mid-1940s. Its history can be dated to the mass migration from the mainland during that period," says local historian Ko Tim-keung.



The massive flight of refugees from the Chinese civil war and subsequent communist liberation meant about 60,000 people crowded into the area by the early 1950s.

The hills were populated with squatter huts, Hakka food stalls and ramshackle factories making rubber footwear, toys, torches, soaps and other goods.

On Christmas day in 1953, a huge blaze swept across the settlements, making more than 53,000 people homeless.

In a move unprecedented by its speed and scale, the Government built the first public estate in the British colony in less than 12 months.

"The decision to resettle the squatters by building multi-storey estates brought direct influences on family structures, living environments, job opportunities and lifestyles," Mr Cheung says.

Not the least of these was a radical change in our eating habits.

Hakka food, already available in the district, began to bloom, catering to thousands of construction workers pouring in to help build eight seven-storey public housing blocks.

The workers travelled long distances to work and did not have time to go home for lunch.

"For the first time in Hong Kong, a large number of people regularly ate outside of home," Mr Cheung says. " And a specific class of restaurants catered to their needs, offering cheap food rich with meat and proteins.

"Most people, then and before, ate mostly vegetables and fish at home."

As the French historian Fernand Braudel once remarked, a people that changes its dietary habit over a short period may undergo a more profound long-term change than violent social upheavals.

According to Mr Cheung, the meat-heavy Hakka dishes catered well to the physically demanding jobs of construction workers and coolies, and they were cheap.

"It is mainly because of the great fire that Hakka restaurants spread out to different parts of Hong Kong," he says.

"It was cheap eating out in Hakka places and the dishes complemented Cantonese cooking and rice."

These stalls, usually run by Hakka people from Xingning in Guangdong province, could be considered the first generation of Hakka restaurants.

"Their cuisine in Hong Kong should probably be called East River cuisine, as it was well developed in Guangzhou before it became popular in Hong Kong," says Mr Cheung.

It was during this time that Hakka dishes such as salt-baked chicken, pork stewed with preserved vegetables, beef marrow with vegetables, fried intestines, mixed bean curd soup, and beef balls became staple.

The cuisine bloomed during the 1960s and early 70s, leading a new wave of Cantonese and Western restaurants in its wake.

At its peak in the 60s, Mr Cheung estimated there were 87 Hakka restaurants across Hong Kong.

Several restaurants from before the great fire still operate in Shekkipmei, such as Wing Yuen Mau on Pak Tin Street. It has moved several times within the district. Today it is run by Lei Ut-fun, her husband and his brother, whose father first opened it in the early 1950s.

"Our customers are still mainly construction workers and neighbours," Ms Lei says.

"The dishes are still pretty much the same, though we serve more Cantonese dishes nowadays."

But by the mid-70s, according to Mr Cheung, more trendy restaurants catering to the rise of the middle class and its consumerism, higher living standards, and international tourism began to displace the more traditional Hakka variety.

Just as Hakka cuisine, spreading from Shekkipmei created the first wave of labourer-customers eating outside of home in the 50s, so the housing policy

started in the district expanded across the territory in order to satisfy the demands of urbanisation.

For decades, colonial propaganda had portrayed the mass public housing programme as one of the key benefits of British rule in Hong Kong.

Repeating the party line, former Governor Chris Patten wrote in a 1993 Housing Authority publication: "The programme was begun to meet the needs not just of the 53,000 people made homeless by the Shekkipmei fire, but also to provide reasonable and affordable accommodation to hundreds of thousands of people with low incomes who were living in unsafe and unhealthy conditions."

Nothing could be further from the minds of the original planners such as the then governor Alexander Grantham, who started the programme, according to Leung Mei-yee, adjunct professor of general education at the Chinese University. The policy was originally conceived not to provide cheap housing to squatters, but to clear unauthorised settlements to urbanise the city, she said.

"It wasn't a humanitarian act. Squatter areas were scattered across Kowloon and Hong Kong Island during the 1950s, inhibiting the Government's attempt to urbanise the city," she says.

"If you look at the original documents, at the time the Government's intention was very clear: it was to develop land."

Ms Leung is the principal researcher for the Housing Authority's upcoming anniversary volume.

Denis Bray, a top government official at the time, seemed to support this view when, years later, he wrote: "The resettlement programme of the fifties was not a housing programme for the poor. It was a means to clear land for development.

"You couldn't apply for a resettlement flat. You were offered one if your hut was about to be pulled down."

What was offered was not much, though still better than the squatter wooden huts prone to destruction by the elements.

Mr Bray went on to describe the original tiny public flats: "A concrete box allowing twenty-four square feet a head, in a seven-storey structure with no lifts, no windows but wooden shutters, no water, but access to communal kitchens and bathrooms. If this sounds dreadful, it was."

The size of 24 square feet in fact violated the Buildings Ordinance's minimal requirement of 35 square feet person.

Mr Cheung refers to the 1954 Hong Kong Annual Report, which said if the Government were to follow the law, 350,000 people living in tenements and public flats would have to be rehoused. In the early years of the housing policy, space and privacy played little part in its formulation.

The architecture of the H-shaped blocks in Shekkipmei was instructive: it was modelled, Mr Cheung points out, on prison structures in Australia, making activities around the block visible from the centre.

"Why Australian prison architecture was adopted was not clear, but the design did not go well with privacy," he says.

In his new study, he traces our changing expectations of privacy and living space from the 1950s to the present.

Given the scarcity of land from the policy's inception, it is not surprising that the end of our evolving expectations would be putting a premium on space and privacy, leading to their commercialization by property developers.

Home sales and rental advertisements give a good idea of what we expected from our living quarters over the years, Mr Cheung says.

In the 60s, such advertisements usually emphasised utilities like good lighting, and telephone, and in the 70s, interior quality began to be advertised.

"By the 1980s, space and privacy became selling points for property developments," Mr Cheung says.

"And in the 90s, space was positively aestheticised and further commodified.

"Prestigious designers and architects were hired to provide interior and exterior design packages for home purchasers."

All of these, one can argue, are inevitable, given the lack of land and the high population in Hong Kong.

But our expectation of space and quality of living, Mr Cheung argues, are highly conditioned by government policy, property developers and their advertising.

"People may be 'taught' through being subjected to the housing policy and be manipulated by advertisements in the form of idealised lifestyles. There is a history to all this," Mr Cheung says.

The purpose of his twin studies is to retrace the steps that led to our social habits and expectations, from eating to living.

And it turns out this history has to be traced back to the estate blocks of Shekkipmei.

As rather ugly monuments from the past, they stand as a testament to our present social life.