Being together in the Hong Kong Cooked Food Centre: Rhythm, co-presence and permanence in an urban public space

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Abstract

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the Smithfield and Shek Tong Tsui Cooked Food Centres in Hong Kong. It aims to understand the significance of both public spaces for their respective neighbourhoods through an exploration of rhythm, social encounters and cultural continuity. In an urban context where public spaces are rare, this dissertation sheds light on the importance of spaces of consumption that simultaneously act as public spaces. This is achieved

by using a mixed-method ethnography over two months in June and July 2023 with semi-structured interviews, sketches and photographs as complementary methods to ethnographic observations. Through these methods, I was able to recognize the significance of Cooked Food Centres in the everyday lives of neighbourhood residents; these CFCs maintain regular social interactions, slow down the pace of life, and more broadly, serve as spaces of cultural continuity and permanence in a city known for its persistent urban renewal.

Acknowledgments

Had it not been for my mum who came to visit me in Hong Kong and helped me get over my initial fear of interviewing, this dissertation would not have amounted to what it is now. Thank you for pushing me when I needed it and for being there with me at the start, even though we couldn't find a vegetarian dish…

Christine, thank you for all of the time and work you poured into this project with me, I truly could not have done it without you. I felt lucky to have built a friendship with you at the same time.

I would like to extend my gratitude towards all of my interviewees and the people I met in the Cooked Food Centres. You have been an invaluable way for me to understand these places better and for that I am immensely grateful. A special thank you goes to Erick – I hope to see you again in the Shek Tong Tsui Cooked Food Centre and I hope to never see it change.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my supervisor Fabien, who I cannot thank enough, for listening to my field site anecdotes and encouraging me to include all of them. Thank you for helping me advocate for the importance of this research and for ethnography which is certainly not an "easy" research method. I felt very lucky to leave every dissertation meeting feeling excited and inspired to continue.

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CFC – Cooked Food Centre

Preface

In the final months of my second year at UCL, I was euphoric at the prospect of going to Hong Kong on my year abroad. It felt simultaneously intuitive to choose to do my dissertation project there and foolish to pass this research opportunity by. I researched the city of Hong Kong back to front before coming, including and most importantly the street food. Yet, I was still left feeling mesmerized at all the iterations of street food (the odd street stall, wet markets and Cooked Food Centres) and their atmospheres unique to Hong Kong.

This project initially started as I wanted to look into street food as a way for me to delve academically into my interests in food and the city. In the context of Hong Kong, this research idea led me to discover both *dai pai dongs* and Cooked Food Centres. So, this project began by making a comparison of both of these iterations of street food, and eventually, after realising the volume of this initial proposal and the significance in the CFCs alone, I settled for a study of Hong Kong's Cooked Food Centres. The existing literature on hawker centres in Singapore and the many tales I had heard of them made me wonder why Hong Kong's CFCs had not yet been explored given that they resemble hawker centres in a multitude of ways.

With ethnography being a research method I knew I would enjoy, my field work has been a pleasure to undertake and I have felt lucky to walk away with memorable anecdotes.

Chapter 1: Introduction

My first time stepping into a Cooked Food Centre in Hong Kong to "test the waters" for what was to come of this research was terrifying. So much so that I delayed the interviewing process for several months, convincing myself that I had time, and that observation was more important anyway.. Having only spent a few weeks living in Hong Kong at the time, I felt like a complete stranger to my neighbourhood and therefore felt wrong to be stepping foot into the Smithfield Cooked Food Centre.

I went in the evening, when the Smithfield CFC has hotpot bubbling on every table and people eating shoulder to shoulder. Coming up the escalator with no one but myself to eat hotpot (clearly unaware of the social practice of hotpot), I walked past each table and took in my surroundings only to retreat home shortly after with an empty stomach. My fear came mostly from excitement – my glimpse into the Cooked Food Centre overwhelmed me with questions that I did not yet know how to answer.

Figure 1. Ethnographic vignette [Smithfield Cooked Food Centre, 30/07/2023].

It is unlikely that a tourist in Hong Kong will stumble across a Cooked Food Centre. Usually resting on the second or third floor of a municipal services building, sandwiched between a fruit and vegetable market and various recreational facilities, this public space appears to be invisible to everyone but its regulars. These centres operate at a particularly local level, with most neighbourhoods in Hong Kong having a Cooked Food Centre (CFC) (Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, 2023). The buildings they reside in appear nondescript, their entrances sometimes being inconspicuous. Figure 2 is a photograph of the building the Smithfield CFC resides in, showing how mundane these buildings are. Despite all of them having a similar atmosphere and appearance, they each vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood with some of them being known for various reasons, for example the Mui Wo Cooked Food Market on Lantau Island known for its delicious seafood or the Queen's Road CFC for its Western-style food stalls (Hamill, no date). Operating in public government-owned buildings, these CFCs exist as public markets, which raises interesting questions about public space in the city. Serving local food and attracting a local neighbourhood crowd for many years

now, these public spaces provoke themes surrounding community, cultural continuity, and permanence. Before probing these issues further, it is necessary to zoom out and look at both the historical background of these CFCs in Hong Kong and the current context of Hong Kong.

Figure 2. Smithfield Municipal Services Building (pink and white building) from far away.

These centres emerged as an outcome of the literal and metaphorical government clean-up of the city and therefore meant that they, in many ways, continued the dining experience of the previous outdoor *dai pai dong* (Marinelli, 2018). *Dai pai dongs* are open-air food stalls that existed in the streets of Hong Kong before their move into indoor government-owned buildings. *Dai pai dongs* typically resemble an unassuming collection of tables and chairs outdoors, with a crowded street food stall full of pots and pans. At night, they come alive with tables spilling

out of their agreed space and filling the street with the smell of food and the clatter of dishes amongst laughter and conversation (Jeffrey and Day, 2005). The Cooked Food Centres in each neighbourhood of Hong Kong therefore are in some ways reminders of the history of hawking in the city and simultaneously are something of their own. These culturally and socially layered public spaces are precisely the public spaces that I aim to explore.

These changes to hawking in the city have become common in a city that is growing and modernising at an unprecedented rate. Hong Kong is a fast-moving city where construction and demolition are constant and where a certain culture of disappearance has crept in over the years (Abbas, 1997). Hong Kong has been growing and modernising rapidly since the 1970s and throughout the 1980s and experienced the handover to China in 1997, all together stimulating major changes to the city. This growth and change are tangible in the built environment as new skyscrapers have emerged, favouring newer architecture and eradicating older, traditional buildings in an effort of Hong Kong to rank as a global city (Abbas, 1997 and McDonogh and Wong, 2005). A remarkable instance of this rapid urban renewal was the demolition and reconstruction of Hong Kong's airport shortly after the handover, with the intention of contributing to the city's journey towards becoming a global city (Clarke, 2007). This came at the detriment of more ordinary spaces or even cultural spaces of the city that did not make the cut to the aesthetic of a global city in comparison to the shiny and towering skyscrapers (Yung and Leung, 2019). The removal of *dai pai dongs*[1] and the relocation of hawkers in government owned public buildings in the 1970s sit within this context and was thus part of the extensive urban renewal that Hong Kong underwent over the last two (4 or 5?) decades (Marinelli, 2018).

Public spaces of food consumption much like the Hong Kong Cooked Food Centres have been extensively studied from various angles. Ranging from marketplaces across Europe and Asia, questions of community, public space and socialising with food at the centre of this? have been answered but questions are yet to be asked about these neighbourhood CFCs in Hong Kong (Blake, 2013, Duruz, *et al* ,2011, Radomskaya and Bhati, 2022, and Tam, 2017). Not too far removed from the city of Hong Kong, Singapore's well-known hawker centres have broken into academic literature having previously been confined to travel guides and foodie blogs

[1] *Dai Pai Dong (spoken Cantonese pronunciation)*, simplified Chinese: 大牌档, literally meaning 'big license stall'

(Chua, 2015; Wang, 2024; and Radomskaya and Bhati, 2022). This dissertation aspires to do the same for Hong Kong's Cooked Food Centres with the aim of understanding their cultural and social layers ethnographically and situating them amongst Hong Kong's climate of disappearance (Abbas, 1997).

From this contextual understanding of both the CFCs and Hong Kong, the following objectives and research questions have emerged from my research.

Objectives

1. To understand the importance of both Cooked Food Centres as neighbourhood public spaces of consumption in the context of Hong Kong's urban environment.
2. To explore how social interactions are initiated and enacted in the Cooked Food Centres.

Research questions

RQ1. *In what ways are CFC's important as public spaces in their respective neighbourhoods?*

RQ2. *Which tangible and intangible elements of these spaces foster and encourage forms of sociability between their users?*

RQ3. *How do users situate and understand the CFCs amongst Hong Kong's culture of disappearance?*

I reached these research questions through my ethnographical presence in the CFCs. Experiencing the daily rhythms, becoming a regular for a brief period of time and understanding the broader context of Hong Kong allowed me to extract these themes and make sense of them individually and simultaneously. I aim to answer these research questions precisely in this way, by dissecting them one by one and by making connections between them to render the complex layers of these Cooked Food Centres visible.

A mixed method ethnographic lens will be applied to this dissertation with the use of sketches, photographs, ethnographic vignettes, and interview extracts to situate the reader in the CFCs. The following chapter will establish this dissertation academically through a literature review and *Chapter* 3 will outline the methodology undertaken in depth. *Chapters 4, 5 and 6* on rhythm,

social interactions and permanence can be expected to follow with connections made between them. Finally, I will conclude on the findings and implications of this research, both in context and more generally.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This literature review begins with an overview of the literature on urban marketplaces as public spaces that hold layers of cultural, social, and historical meaning in their local urban context. Drawing from literature on social interactions, rhythm and belonging in marketplaces, this first section aims to provide a concise overview of the literature on urban marketplaces with food at its centre. The literature review then moves on to examine the social environment in more depth and picks out conceptualisations of sociality in public spaces and marketplaces that help to frame the ones present in the Cooked Food Centres. Finally, it ends with a closer look at Hong Kong, and the literature on hawking, including some historical background on the Cooked Food Centres.

2.1 Marketplaces and their dynamics in an urban context

Marketplaces across the world have been studied as public places of conviviality, meeting and food exchange. Food marketplaces exist in many different iterations in different urban contexts, and they condense the historical, cultural and social dynamics of the city in one space. In this way, marketplaces are key sites in urban environments for the making of social connections, for connecting to a place through food and for being together in a food microcosm, often removed from outside urban dynamics of rapid modernisation (Mele, *et al,* 2014 and Watson, 2009).

Watson (2009) gives a detailed ethnography of eight marketplaces across the UK, exploring the links between the markets, food and their social atmospheres. Watson outlines how unique these social encounters are given how they are situated in marketplaces that have local and contextual dynamics. Watson's conceptualisations of social interaction in the marketplace will be explored in the following section. The sociality of a marketplace has also been explored in Hong Kong's wet markets by Lou (2017) using a walking ethnography. Through this methodology, social interactions are re-enacted in detail, depicting a valuable relationship between food and social encounters in a marketplace environment. This paper also nods to the significance of regularity in marketplaces, with descriptions of the interlocutors coming to the wet market frequently and therefore adding layers of familiarity over time. Radomskaya and

Bhati (2022) add to this literature on marketplaces and sociality by discussing Singapore's hawker centres and their role as social and cultural hubs of the city. Hawker centres can be thought of as another iteration of a marketplace, albeit slightly more established as a place of consumption because of their restaurant-like seating. These are therefore another fascinating account of a public place with a specific and local sociality based on the cultural heritage of Singapore (Radomskaya and Bhati, 2022).

An interesting lens to illustrate marketplaces is through their rhythm. Lyon (2016) uses audio-visual methods to capture the rhythms of Billingsgate Fish Market in London to say something about its atmosphere and the everyday life of the market. This rhythm analysis therefore allows for a rich understanding of the marketplace and is useful for dissecting its local context and environment. Gilbert-Flutre (2021) takes on a similar approach of rhythm analysis to a marketplace in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam from a more political point of view. Through an analysis of the daily rhythms of vendors and local actors, this research is able to shed light on power dynamics at play within this marketplace.

Moving away from the more tangible, everyday elements of the marketplace, Duruz, *et al* (2011) look through the lens of food marketplaces and other more ad hoc spaces of consumption in Southeast Asia such as the hawker centre, street stalls and food halls to ask questions about the relationship between food, belonging and identity in these spaces. Viewing these spaces as vignettes of cosmopolitanism, Duruz, *et al* (2011) bring these spaces to life by highlighting their diversity, their unique social interactions and the significance they have for creating feelings of belonging and citizenship for their users through food. By acknowledging how these food spaces are undervalued in urban studies, Duruz, *et al,* (2011) provide a fascinating account of the meanings these spaces have in urban contexts, socially, culturally, and historically.

Extending from the Duruz, *et al's* (2011) paper on belonging and citizenship in the food marketplace, Mele *et* al (2014) give a rich analysis of Singapore's wet markets by acknowledging the importance of local dynamics. By situating these wet markets amongst wider urban changes in Singapore where modernisation is taking over, Mele *et* al's (2014) paper offers a holistic understanding of the wider environment at play. It is through this approach that they frame the appreciation Singaporeans have towards these wet markets.

Having looked at the literature on marketplaces and a glimpse into some of their dynamics in their individual urban contexts, this next section will open up a discussion of the conceptualisations of sociality in marketplaces and public spaces that have been used to frame the subsequent discussion on Hong Kong's Cooked Food Centres.

2.2 Conceptualisations of sociability in the marketplace

Social infrastructures

The literature on social infrastructures is a useful starting point for understanding social interactions in public places because of its recognition of sociality in often neglected public places. Looking at social infrastructures therefore validates the types of sociality that can happen in a public place. Latham and Layton (2019) discuss the types of public places that don't necessarily get noticed as important spaces in an urban context. This outlook is noteworthy because it looks into the ordinary and supposedly more mundane public infrastructures and highlights their worth in the urban environment (Latham and Layton, 2019). This mode of thinking coupled with Amin's (2008) discussion on the importance of the layout of public spaces as catalysts for social interaction and overall civic culture provides an in-depth and rich perspective on these so-called ordinary public spaces which in fact are full of cultural and social meaning (Amin, 2008).

Rubbing along and encountering

Sociality in the marketplace context has been analysed through the concept of encounters. Watson (2009) has informed much of this body of research and particularly in the context of the food market. The idea of 'rubbing along' with other people in these spaces in small, every day and informal ways is precisely the type of sociality that forms over time, according to the rhythms of the users of a space (Watson, 2009, p.1581). Additionally, Watson (2009) touches on the same idea as Amin (2008) in her own way; the layout of the marketplace is conducive to a particular kind of sociality and encountering; being able to sit down is an important infrastructural element for creating space for social encounters to occur. These kinds of encounters have also been described as creating 'weak ties' between people who regularly or

even semi-regularly see each other in their neighbourhood public space, eventually creating a sense of public familiarity over time (Ferreira, Ferreira and Bos, 2021, p.22). Morrill and Snow (2006) describe how this familiarity in public spaces is shaped by the degree of these encounters – the brief and weak nature of them allows for a potentially stronger tie to form or one that solely rests on small gestures and reciprocated acknowledgment of each other. Throughout the literature on encounters, it is constantly re-affirmed that these fleeting encounters between users of a public space are not necessarily irrelevant or insignificant to them and indeed can hold great social meaning especially when formed over long periods of time (Morrill and Snow, 2006).

Alone together and co-presence

At the nexus of the literature on encounters is the literature on co-presence and being 'alone together' in a public place. Richaud's work (2018) is also an important part of this field on urban encounters in public spaces and undertook ethnographic research in different public parks in Beijing and noted that 'maintaining encounters in open, public places can be viewed as a management of both proximity and distance, a means to preserve the pleasure withdrawn from being with others without knowing too much of them' (Richaud, 2018, n.p.). This research illustrates how public places can create meaningful encounters which do not require a significant amount of interaction but rather exist in the sharing of the space itself. Shapira and Navon (1991) write about this by using the term 'alone together' to conceptualise how these can often blur into each other and the ways in which both of these feelings can be felt at the same time: 'The "alone" and the "together" are confused in the cafe and the boundaries between them amorphous' (Shapira and Navon, 1991, p.122). This has also been conceptualised as 'public solitude' in the neighbourhood café environment where people visit alone but enjoy being in a space with others (Henriksen, *et al*, 2013, p.94).

2.3 Hong Kong context

Change, disappearance and temporality

Hong Kong's history as a growing city has been turbulent and constantly narrated by change. From being under the control of the British to eventually returning to China in 1997, citizens of Hong Kong have in many ways struggled to find their way and forge an independent Hong Kongese culture (Abbas, 1997). This is categorized by Abbas as 'a culture of disappearance'; Hong Kong culture exists under this story of constant change and disappearance, creating a unique Hong Kong identity grounded in uncertainty and temporality (Abbas, 1997, p.7). This troubling culture and identity have been discussed academically in the context of the built environment of the city constantly being built and rebuilt as a product of the push for economic success (Abbas, 1997). Law (2002) writes more specifically about the continual disappearance and renewal of public spaces in Hong Kong's Central District such as Statue Square, arguing that 'Hong Kong is a city known through the *cliché* of frenetic rebuilding, where the old is swiftly demolished to make room for the new' (Law, 2002, p.1627). Moreover, Law (2002) highlights how the sociality that exists in these urban public spaces is subsequently negatively affected by the frequent upheaval that occurs for public space in Hong Kong.

Indeed, it is widely recognized that public space in Hong Kong is often small, neglected and sometimes barely even noticeable as a public space at all. Pryor (2022) discusses the density and lack of adequate public space in Hong Kong through an analysis of the innovative ways in which space in Hong Kong is being used in diverse ways by the community. As a consequence of having undervalued public spaces, these areas of the city often become multi-purpose as a means to utilise the space productively; for example, using service spaces at night and weekends for social gatherings. Pryor (2022) therefore demonstrates the complicated relationship that Hongkongers face with space and the city through these examples of the city's use of public space. A connection can be drawn from this side of the literature on public space to Law's (2002) understanding of public space in Hong Kong feeling temporary and fleeting; there is a certain uncertainty to the way in which public space is experienced when one space is simultaneously another. Law highlights how many public spaces in Hong Kong feel rather ambiguous in their publicness and are left feeling like not much of a public space at all.

History of food hawking

Street vending has long been a common form of selling and consuming food in Hong Kong, and is still a significant part of its foodscape today but in a different form. Food vending has existed throughout Hong Kong's iterations: as a fishing village, an aspiring global city and an established one. Particular scholarly attention has been brought to food vending (or hawking) as a response to the unprecedented changes it went through in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Hong Kong. Marinelli (2018) has been a key figure in the literature on the changes that food hawking underwent and some of the motivations behind it. Marinelli outlines the ways in which the city's Urban Council imposed a policy (which eventually became law in 1971) halting all new hawker licenses dispensations; an act that was part of a wider strategy aiming towards the modernisation of the city.

The final outcome of this law was to move both the wet markets and street food markets into government-owned buildings as an attempt to confine and monitor them more closely. It is important to note that this was not solely for food hawkers but also for other types of street sellers (Smart and Smart, 2017 and Kinoshita, 2001). This change and the political and social repercussions of the change have been touched on by Marinelli (2018) and Smart and Smart (2017). Interestingly, Marinelli (2018) noted that 'although hawkers have often moved into public markets, they have simultaneously resisted the normalization of their behaviour. Instead, the hawkers have reproduced in the public market the same kind of apparently chaotic appearance that the government bodies would have liked to control (Marinelli, 2018, p.251). Marinelli's paper gives an insight into the significant loss that this change to street vending in Hong Kong causes for vendors and the wider public socially and culturally. This struggle for space and identity for Hong Kong's hawkers is also discussed in Smart and Smart's paper with a specific focus on the government's push to end informal practices of hawking in the city.

Overall, the literature on hawkers and hawking in Hong Kong is limited yet detailed. Moreover, some efforts have been made by Marinelli (2018) and Kinoshita (2001) to cover the importance that food hawking holds for the population of Hong Kong on a social and cultural basis. Unsurprisingly, the writing on hawking and the changes it underwent reflects the literature previously mentioned about Hong Kong on a wider scale and its pattern of constant renewal and reconstruction (Abbas, 1997).

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction to ethnographic methodology

This chapter justifies the methodology I used for this dissertation and its relevance in the context of the CFCs. This includes an outline of the data collection and analysis.

I chose a mixed-method qualitative ethnographic methodology to explore the Hong Kong Cooked Food Centres over June and July 2023. Ethnography is the crux of this methodology with semi-structured interviews, photographs and sketches acting as auxiliary methods, not because they are less important but rather because they fall under the umbrella of ethnography. This methodology was chosen for its ability to look at the field with eyes wide open, by being there and taking part in it (Shah, 2017). This methodology is relevant therefore for studying CFCs in Hong Kong because as an outsider, it is necessary for me to experience immersion and to look at the field holistically through different methods, all of which are done open-mindedly and with attention to detail, or in other words, ethnographically. In addition, doing ethnography and participant observation allows for new understandings of the field from being in it myself (Shah, 2017).

Ethnographic research is therefore what I lead with, making sure to be attentive to detail through rich observation across all of my methods. These methods were carried out simultaneously to immerse myself in the field and allow for each method to inform the other with the purpose of telling a story. Researching ethnographically using this mix of methods was, as Gobo and Molle (2017) describe it, like assembling puzzle pieces together. Each method had individual stories to tell and together, made a complete puzzle. At times, it was challenging to envision how they might fit together yet this was made simpler over time the more I gathered my pieces of the puzzle.

3.2 Field sites

I intended for my field visits to become a part of my daily routine to match the rhythm of many regulars and therefore chose CFCs that were located close to my place of residence and university (Smithfield CFC and Shek Tong Tsui CFC). This meant that I was able to visit them with little prior notice, sometimes even spontaneously when my appetite called for it.

Regularity and familiarity are central to these CFCs therefore this felt like an obvious choice.

Figure 3. Google Maps screenshots of walking distance between the two Cooked Food Centres on Hong Kong Island from two perspectives.

I was keen to conduct research in two CFCs for two reasons. I was aware that CFCs across Hong Kong differ slightly from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and therefore wanted to be representative in my research. Secondly, because of the limits of my time in Hong Kong and the nature of the dissertation itself, two field sites felt like a reasonable choice that would allow me to go in depth and demonstrate a certain level of comparison. Located a fifteen-minute walk

from each other, the Kennedy Town and Shek Tong Tsui CFCs are located in some of the quieter and more residential neighbourhoods on Hong Kong Island. Figure 3 situates them on Hong Kong Island using two perspectives with the first one being in Kennedy Town and the other in Shek Tong Tsui (the MTR station of this latter area is called HKU). The following chapter will dissect the methodological system implemented in these two months of ethnographic fieldwork. It will also discuss the reasons behind this system, its limitations, the ethics of the methodology, and finally, my positionality as a researcher.

3.3 *In the field: A mixed method ethnography*

One of the perks of ethnography is its 'multi-instrument' approach that allows ethnographers to not only see the field holistically but also see it in depth (Wolcott, 1999, p.44). In this way, ethnography manages to fill in gaps of knowledge using different methods whilst retaining an ethnographic lens (Jones, 2020). This ethnographic lens is attentive to detail and is open to understanding and seeing things from a different perspective. Being present in the field therefore allows this to happen by immersing oneself and experiencing the field for oneself (Shah, 2017).

Participant observation

My first ethnographic method was participant observation. Jones (2020) situates this method within parochial realm ethnographies – ethnography done in public spaces where co-presence and familiarity are present – and encourages the researcher to take part in common activities in these spaces to produce thicker and richer understandings of the field. This is exactly what I did, at first as a singular method and then weaved into other methods. I would come to the market, choose a different seat each time (but eventually had my favourite spots, see Figure 4, 5, and 6), have a meal and observe the CFC. The participation aspect involved ordering my meal, speaking to the waiter and doing activities like reading a book, being on my phone and observing my surroundings, all of which were activities that everyone else was doing too. Blending in, to a certain extent, was therefore rather simple in the CFCs. Judging what was deemed as being right or wrong and common practice in the CFCs was a crucial element of observation (Coffey, 2018).

Documenting through photographs

An additional layer was to take photographs to complement the data during participant observation (Coffey, 2018). Whilst still part of the larger ethnographic process, this method was auxiliary and used as a consolidation of some of the patterns emerging from the ethnography and interviews, adding depth to them (van den Scott, 2018).

Sketching and fieldnotes

'Sketching forces you to linger with what is in front of you, whether it is a familiar scene or something completely new, and invites the mind to wander and wonder. In that mode of lingering, musing and sitting with scenes, sketching is deep noticing while deferring explanation—letting the explanation emerge over time'

(Thieme, 2024, p.4)

As part of my fieldnotes, sketching the market was another form of observation. Thieme's (2024) quotation above is reminiscent of my experience with sketching. This method often granted me the time to linger over an area of the CFC in a different and richer way than taking notes did. Sketching felt organic for me to do in a setting where lingering and observation was warranted. Fieldnotes would also be written in my field notebook on observations I made, snippets of conversations I had, the rhythms of the market at different times of the day and days of the week. I rarely felt out of place taking notes as this was done rather casually, and writing was generally not uncommon here. Although this was participant observation, this kind of ethnographic research was rather passive in comparison to the second mode of ethnography that I undertook. Indeed, observations and note-taking would often inform this other ethnographic method (Watson and Till, 2009). Figure 4, 5, and 6 depict areas of the CFC where I particularly enjoyed taking notes and drawing sketches from.

Figure 4. Regular observation spot in Smithfield CFC.

A. Near the entrance/exit.
B. At Erick's, with a view on the solo visitors.
C. At Leo's stall with a view on the front of the market
D. At the solo seating next to escalator.

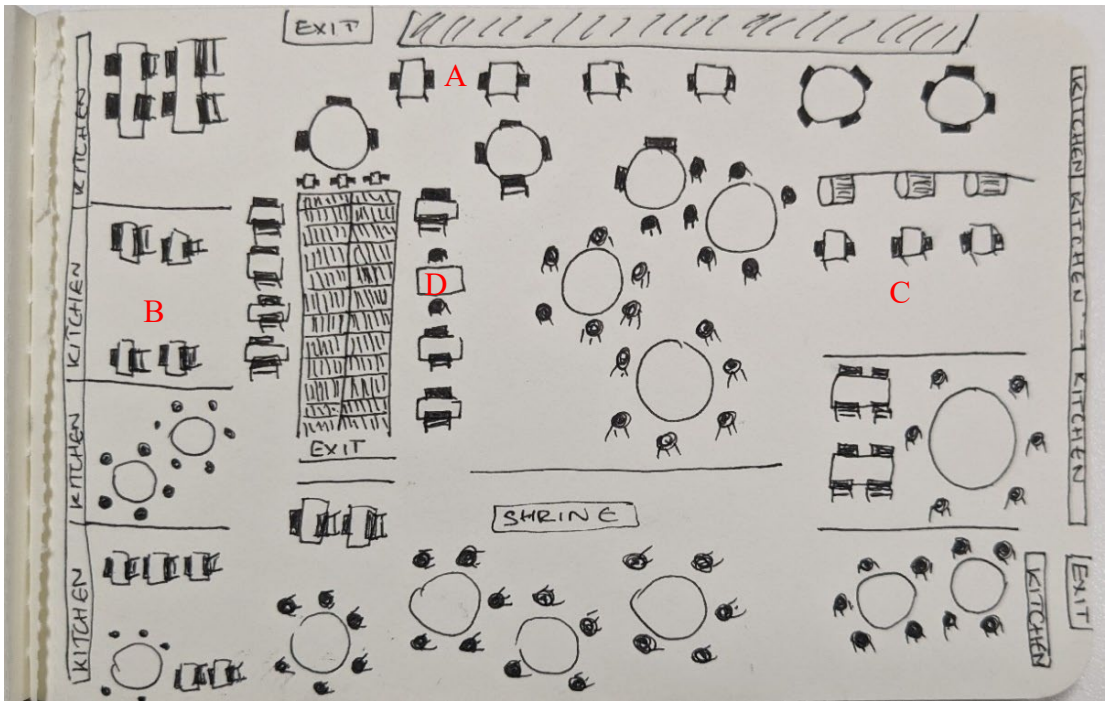

Figure 5. Sketch of the Shek Tong Tsui CFC and my observation spots.

A. Next to the busier area.
B. Great view on most of market.
C. More secluded, great for sketching.

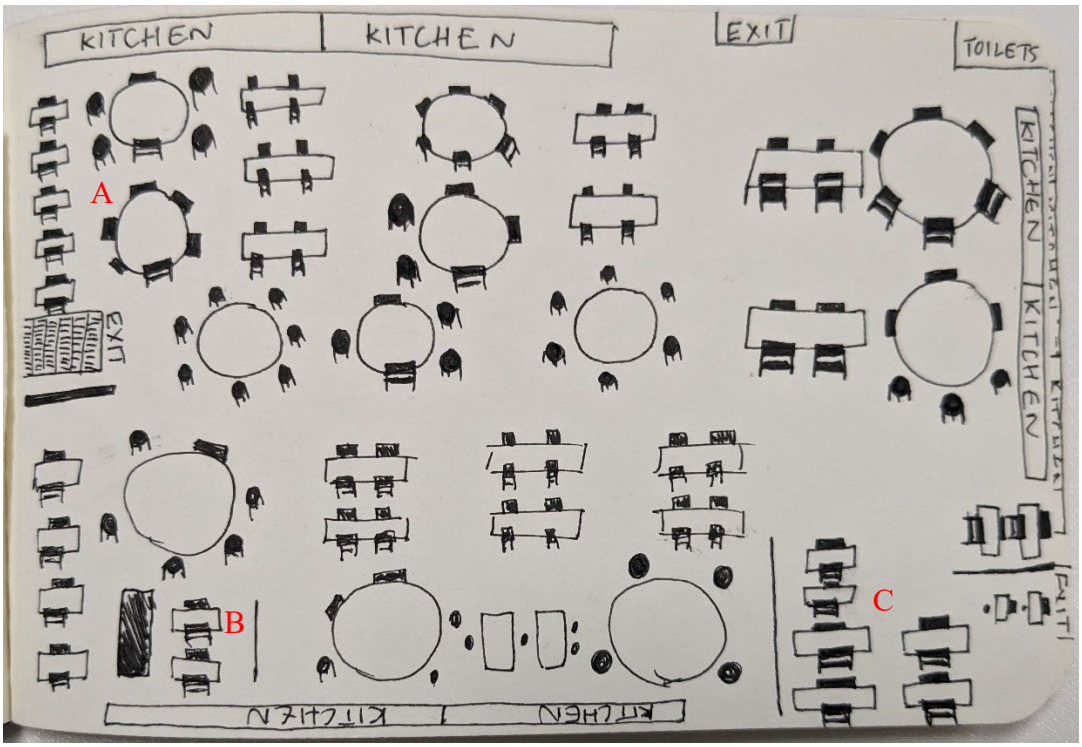

Figure 6. Sketch of the Smithfield CFC and my observation spots.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were an excellent way to bridge the gap between my participant observation (and therefore my understanding of these spaces) and the experiences of regulars, general visitors and workers in both CFCs (Hay and Cope, 2021).

I recruited 28 people for semi-structured interviews, all varying in length (see Appendix V and VI). During the first month of research these interviews were done by myself in the Smithfield CFC. My lack of fluency in Cantonese was manageable for this first month but then warranted a translator for me to be able to get a more representative sample and to engage with the customers fully. Christine[2] therefore helped me in the interview and transcription process for the second month (in both CFCs) and was remunerated. For this recruitment I used purposive

[2] Christine (Chinese name: Fung Hoi Wing). Christine and I met during an internship in Hong Kong and was in one of my modules at HKU. We quickly became friends, and she was keen to help me on my project out of curiosity but also to learn more about these spaces because she took interest in urban public spaces herself.

sampling to gather people from different backgrounds and age groups. I made sure to present myself as a researcher and my participation information sheet which was also translated into traditional Chinese characters (Appendix II). If one agreed to being interviewed, I then presented my consent form to get written permission for the interview and for an audio recording of the interview (Appendix I). I avoided taking too many notes during the interview to not distract the interlocutor or make them feel uncomfortable (Hay and Cope, 2021).

These interviews were semi-structured in nature to allow for a more natural conversation to flow both for me and my interlocutors. I prepared a set of questions (Appendix III) to allow for direction and purpose during the interview but simultaneously let the conversation flow naturally and casually. I found that some interviewees struggled to relate their experience and degree of connection back to me whereas others were eager to share their thoughts. I made sure not to point them in a direction that was favourable to my understanding of the CFCs and instead let them define these spaces for themselves by prompting them with my set of questions (Hay and Cope, 2021*)*. I also took brief fieldnotes during interviews on small details that I thought were worth keeping a record of. These often were about interactions that my interlocutors would have with others during the course of my interview with them. These observations were significant to me because although they may not feature explicitly in this dissertation, they are part of the wider ethnographic lens that I took.

3.4 Beyond the field: Reflection and analysis

The second part of my ethnography was separate from the field site and took place at home. This involved collecting note sketches, photographs and interviews to write more extensive notes on what I had observed that day. This process allowed for a slowing down of my thought process, much like Watson and Till (2009) describe. In this way my notes acted as 'aide memoires, to prompt the transformation of our observations into rich and detailed description' and to ultimately assemble all of the information together (Coffey, 2018, p.48.). Ethnographic vignettes included at the beginning of chapters were drafted during these moments. It also avoided any confusion happening towards the end of my ethnographic fieldwork and allowed for more organised and detailed notes to look back on when writing (Coffey, 2018). This process was especially useful when my notetaking in the field was very limited for various

reasons (many interviews going on, feeling too observed). Additionally, this continued ethnographic writing at home was primarily to digitalise my notes for safe-keeping reasons and to ensure that my observations were organised in chronological order on my computer rather than in a field notebook which can quickly become disorganised (Coffey, 2018).

I then coded this collection of fieldnotes. This was done manually by reading through all of the field site writing extracts and pulling out words and phrases that fit under a theme, much like the technique described by Watson and Till (2009). These themes were later compared to the themes pulled from the interview transcripts and eventually became indicators for the empirical section of this dissertation. A useful way to think about this analytical process was by interpreting it as a simplification of the data I already had through specific themes (Coffey, 2018). This was a helpful reminder when coding given the extent of the observations that I jotted down over two months of field visits.

I transcribed interview recordings ideally the same day not only because this was the most accurate way to transcribe them, but it also allowed me to plunge back into the soundscape of the CFCs when writing up these more extensive ethnographic fieldnotes with the recording of the interviews. Transcribing the same day as the interviews meant that non-verbal observations could be typed up with more accuracy and detail. These transcriptions took a long time given they were done by hand (Hay and Cope, 2021). The interviews conducted in Cantonese by Christine were transcribed by her using the same hand-typed method. Interlocutors who wished to receive their transcripts via email would recieve them as soon as they were finished.

Coding the interviews was done the same way that the ethnographic field notes were coded: sentence by sentence. Repeated words, themes and phrases would be highlighted and categorized for further inspection, reflection and analysis (Watson and Till, 2009).

3.5 Ethics

Participants were given extensive information on the project (see Appendix II) and were given a consent form to sign where they were given the possibility to withdraw at any time and not answer questions whilst remaining anonymous (see Appendix I) (Silverman, 2002). Occasionally, participants remained unsure as to the nature of the research despite being given

all of the information. In these cases, I also explained my research orally as best as possible and offered to show them the interview questions I intended on asking.

A question of ethics arises when taking photographs of the CFCs and of people, to which I have no clear answer but behaved in a way that I believed to be ethical and considerate of the people around me. When taking direct photos of people, consent was given and received.

3.6 Weaknesses

The main weakness of this methodology was the language barrier between me and my interlocutors. Despite having Christine's invaluable help, my lack of fluency in Cantonese restricted me from being able to ask questions during the interview. There were many times where I noticed in the transcripts instances where I could have prompted interlocutors further with *"What do you mean by that?"* or simply, *"Why?"*. Yet this was not a major issue when Christine was already there to interview people that I did not have access to in the first place.

3.7 Positionality as a researcher

Stating my positionality as a researcher in these spaces was crucial to avoid forming unnecessary relationships that then might become complicated or awkward to detangle myself from (Coffey, 2018). This was part of the reasoning behind choosing two field sites and therefore knowing when to leave – I knew I would eventually move onto the next after a month (Jones, 2020 and Coffey, 2018).

As a white woman who only knows a few words in Cantonese, I was aware that my regular presence often appeared as strange. Indeed, my presence and research were occasionally frowned upon by workers being sceptical of the nature of my research or interlocutors not understanding my interest in the place they come to eat in every day. These were all issues I was aware of and did my best to explain using my information sheets and with the occasional help of Christine. My presence as a woman was felt on many occasions when men would offer me a drink or make an inappropriate comment. During these moments I understood my ethnographic research as an 'embodied practice' where my positionality was tangibly experienced (Orrico, 2015, p.474). Additionally, my lack of fluency in Cantonese meant that

some of my interactions with the interlocutors at first were limited to greetings. This is something I reflected on and subsequently mitigated against with the help I received from Christine. Writing about these in my field notes helped for reflection all throughout my research (Catungal and Dowling, 2021).

Chapter 4: "We don't rush here": Slowing down and lingering in the Cooked Food Centre

"Some of my favourite visits to the Shek Tong Tsui Cooked Food Centre have been on the hottest summer days, in the middle of the afternoon when most of the service is reduced and some of the restaurant stalls are starting to close down. Workers are sleeping, smoking or having a leisurely late lunch with the company of customers who have now been lingering for a couple of hours. During some of these mid-afternoon visits I had the chance to speak to a restaurant owner. His stall was tucked away to the side and grew larger in the evening when tables would spill out of the margins of his stall to accommodate to large groups of men demanding roast pork and beer. He would offer me an iced lemon tea to apologize for the lack of air-conditioning and our conversation would easily shift from small talk to something more meaningful like the importance of this market to him and his wife as a symbol of the Hong Kong they have always known. In these moments I felt the joy and calm of lingering after lunch; the possibility of opening up to one another in the market and enjoying each other's company. Eventually, I found myself having spent more time than expected sitting down, listening and sipping on my cold drink. I suppose this is what it feels like to linger here."

Figure 7. Ethnographic vignette [Shek Tong Tsui Cooked Food Centre, 23/07/2023].

4.1 Introduction to chapter

Consuming food and eating out in Hong Kong is typically encouraged to be an expeditious activity because of the lack of space in restaurants and therefore the need to filter through customers quickly. In contrast, the Cooked Food Centres benefit from having an entire floor to themselves which immediately alleviates the concerns over space and dining. This difference is a significant reason for the CFCs' popularity in the city: they offer a space for customers to enjoy their meal with the luxury of lingering as they please. This is arguably unique to these CFCs or at least to a greater extent than in the previous *dai pai dongs* where one is likely to be more rushed from being outdoors rather than in a more relaxed indoors environment.

So, it is with this in mind that I discuss the rhythms of both CFCs in this chapter, using their layout as a framework to understand how they facilitate and encourage customers to slow down.

Amin's (2008) claim that public spaces and their layout are inextricably linked to the subsequent social relations and culture that emanate from them is a useful point of entry to this argument. Slowing down and lingering is becoming rare in Hong Kong and therefore symbolises permanence and continuity in a disappearing city (Abbas, 1997).

4.2 Space and slower rhythms

The Shek Tong Tsui CFC is rather unique in its layout in comparison to the Smithfield CFC and others because it is open on one side of the market (see Figure 8, 9, and 10). This feature allows a lot of Hong Kong's heat and humidity to enter the CFC which, coupled with the lack of air conditioning, creates a warm atmosphere and encourages one to become lazy after their meal. As seen in Figures 8, 9, and 10, seating is available alongside the edge of the CFC where it is open. Sitting on these tables allows the customers to feel both indoors and outdoors which incites many of them to linger after their meal to continue observing the surroundings outside. This seating area of the CFC invites smokers because of its outdoor feature which naturally encourages customers to linger while smoking a cigarette. Finally, this area is also used as an entry and exit point, meaning that customers sitting at these tables have a favourable view onto the visitors of the CFCs, allowing for their curiosity to let them observe. The warm and sunny atmosphere in this section of the CFC naturally allows for a slowing down to occur for customers sitting here and invites them to observe and linger in the heat.

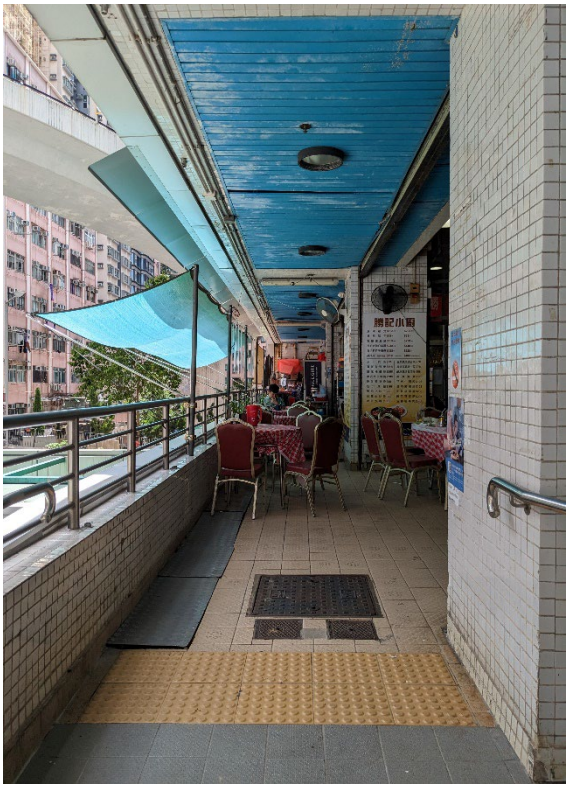

Figure 8. Entrance/exit to Shek Tong Tsui CFC and indoor/outdoor feature.

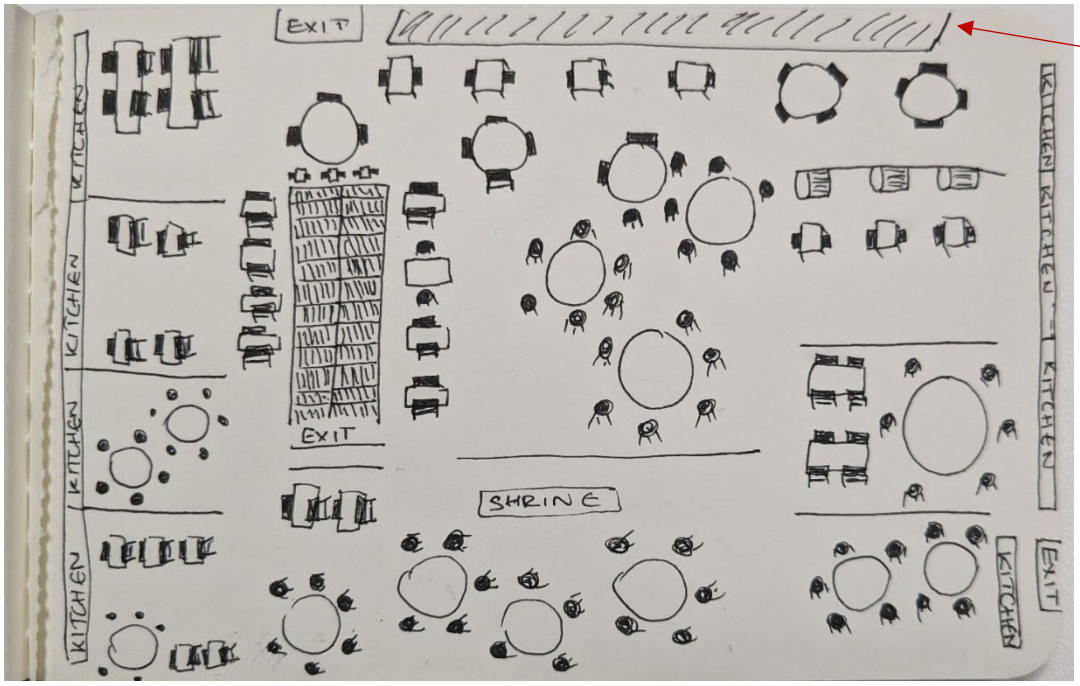

Figure 9. Sketch of Shek Tong Tsui Cooked Food Centre from above.

Figure 10. Shek Tong Tsui CFC in July, shot on film showing indoor/outdoor feature.

The open-air seating at the back of the photograph (Figure 10) shows the indoor/outdoor feature that is drawn in Figure 9. To the left of Figure 10 is one of the CFC's exits.

Another feature of the Shek Tong Tsui CFC influencing the slower rhythms at play is the individual seating which typically invites solo visitors of the Cooked Food Centre. This seating is on both sides of the escalator (as well as in the indoor/outdoor area of the CFC) and is shown in Figure 9. These seats allow both a view onto the people travelling up the escalators of the building (Figure 11) and onto the right side of the Cooked Food Centre (Figure 12). As seen in Figure 12, these seats were mostly used by people who came alone to the market and who typically stayed and lingered on after their meal with a view onto people coming in and out using the escalator and onto other tables. Sitting at these tables invites the customer to linger and observe and with this the permission to slow down. With the CFC on the third floor and these tables being more secluded in the space, it is easy to lose track of time here.

Figure 12. Solo seating from angle further away.

Figure 11. Solo/two-person seating in Shek Tong Tsui CFC.

The Smithfield Cooked Food Centre is both different and similar to the Shek Tong Tsui one in terms of rhythm. From my ethnographic observations, this CFC has a slightly busier feel to it, most likely because of its more open space. This CFC is also known for serving hotpot in the evening, a dish that is all about commensality and socialising making its atmosphere busier than the Shek Tong Tsui CFC. However, it still has pockets within the space that feel more sheltered and invite a slower pace of life. It is precisely in these areas that I noticed noteworthy instances of lingering and slowing down, most likely because of their sheltered distance from the slightly more crowded areas of the market. The layout of this CFC is sketched out in Figure 14 and has annotations showing where regulars tended to sit.

Christine and I had the pleasure to interview two people sitting at one of these more secluded tables one evening. We heard music coming from the back of the CFC which we remarked was unusual. The music in fact came from two men who had brought their own speaker here and were enjoying an eclectic mix of roast pork and Guinness from the nearby food stall, a bag of shelled peanuts from home, cigarettes, and a lollipop for the interlocutor's son. These men had planned to come to the Smithfield CFC to listen to music, enjoy the food on offer and go through a packet of cigarettes while the child was entertained with food and video games. Figure 13 is a photograph of their table, showing how they have made themselves comfortable here in this corner. When speaking to one of the men on the table, he explained to us what they enjoyed doing here: 'We drink beer, we chat. We drink and relieve stress' (Interview 13, 23/06/23). These pockets of shelter in the CFC encourage people to linger, make themselves comfortable and enjoy slower rhythms that they are used to outside of the market. It is actually rather simple what these spaces offer for the customers: a place to relax and unwind whilst enjoying a meal and its lingering effects.

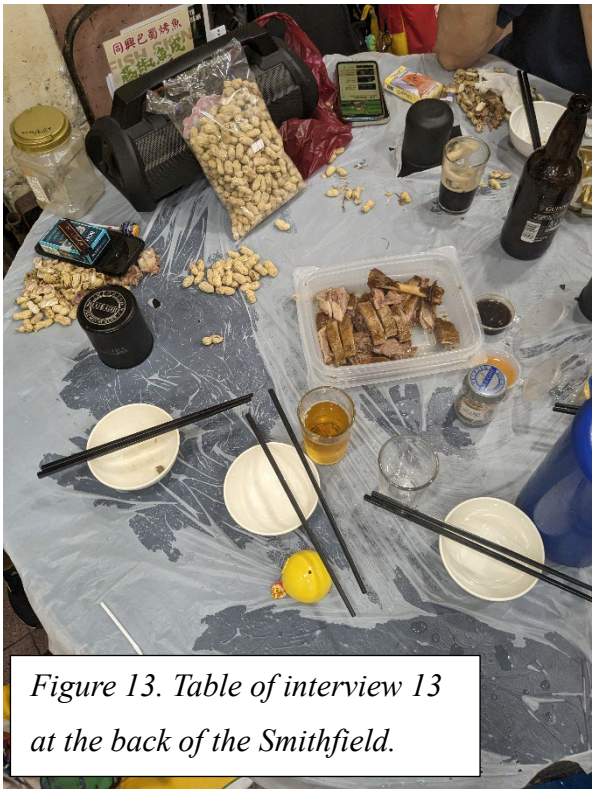

Figure 13. Table of interview 13 at the back of the Smithfield.

The following interview extract illustrates this notion quite simply:

C: Do you have anything you would like to add?

1: No. It is actually fairly simple. It is relaxing here.

(Extract 3. Interview 9, 21/06/23.)

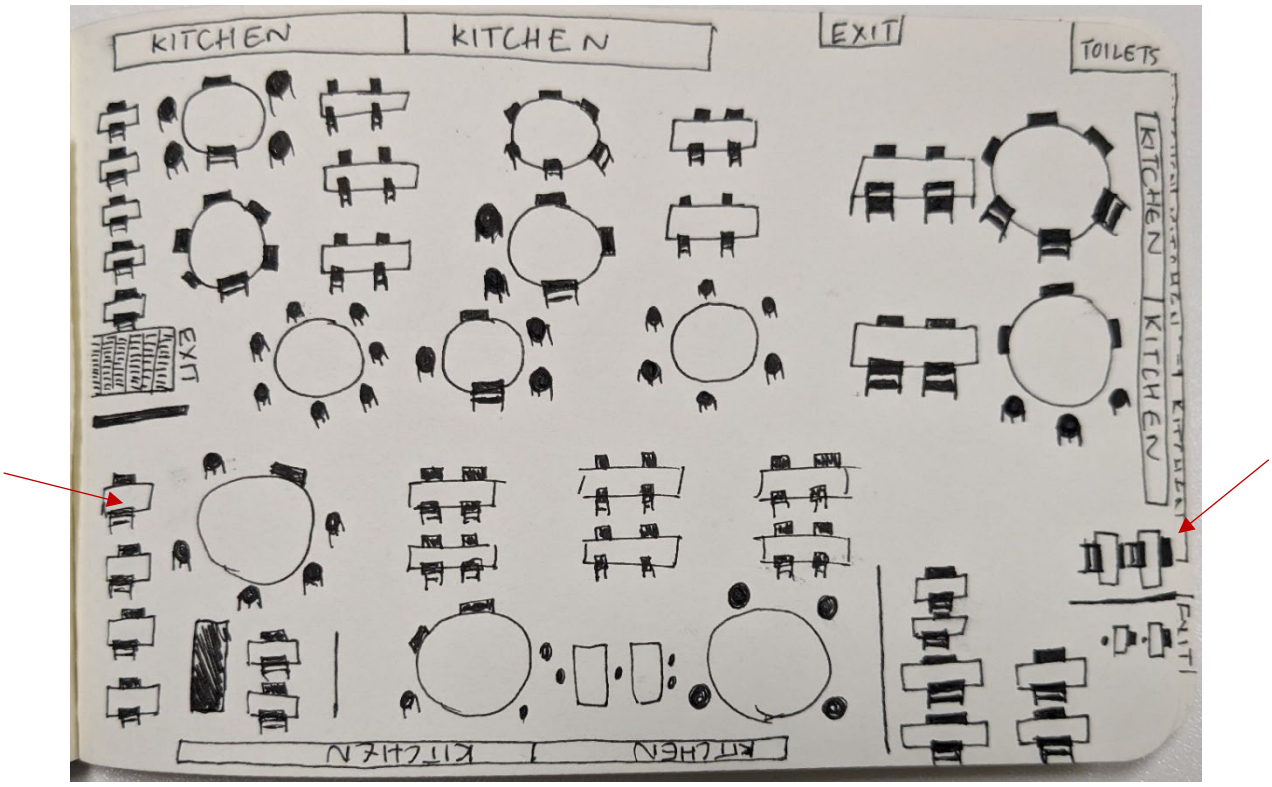

Figure 14. Sketch of Smithfield Cooked Food Centre from above.

Similar to the Shek Tong Tsui CFC, the Smithfield one has infrastructural elements that add to the narratives of slowing down which are no longer as prominent in Hong Kong. Slowing down, enjoying a traditional Hong Kongese meal and lingering after it is a routine that has existed in both Cooked Food Centres for over 30 years now. These spaces are permanent markers of a Hong Kong culture that is disappearing in other parts of the city but remains tangible in these Cooked Food Centres.

Chapter 5: Being familiar strangers to each other: Social interactions in the Cooked Food Centre

5.1 Introduction to chapter

Extending from the previous chapter on slowing down, in this section I will explore the kinds of sociality that are present in the Cooked Food Centres and that are in many ways influenced by their slower rhythms. Social interactions in the CFCs are encouraged by the spaces themselves and tend to be rather discreet. Sociality is of course not the primary function of the CFCs, but observing the degrees of sociality that occur in these neighbourhood public spaces allows for valuable insights into the ways in which these historically and culturally charged CFCs can encourage particular kinds of sociality.

Social relations in the CFCs, however big or small, were not often highlighted by my interlocutors. Rather, it was during my ethnographic fieldwork that I noticed remarkable instances of social interactions. It was unsurprisingly therefore that I understood that these moments were not explicitly shared during the interviews given their discreet and quiet nature. The fieldnotes made over several hours of observation are therefore what has rendered these glimpses of sociality visible, due to the detail-oriented essence of ethnography. This chapter aims to highlight these fleeting moments of social friction as core components of the CFCs.

This chapter will touch on notions of being "alone together", being co-present and of public familiarity. Identifying these conceptualisations as singular and simultaneously interlinked, this chapter aims to point to these types of sociality and understand the role that the Cooked Food Centre plays in fostering and encouraging them.

5.2 Alone or alone together?

It is not a strange sight to observe someone enter the CFC alone, enjoy a meal and leave after having very little interaction besides the necessary exchange to order a meal. Having observed such instances repeatedly in two CFCs over two months, there is something to say about these solo visitors and their role in the social landscape of these spaces. An interesting reflection on both of these public spaces is their ability to accommodate visitors who enjoy a certain solitude

in the experience of the CFC and others who intend to enjoy the social aspect that they have to offer. Additionally, it caters to a third group; visitors who come alone and simultaneously look forward to seeing a familiar face.

Although many users of the CFCs enjoy coming alone, it remains a public space, meaning that one can assume that these types of visitors still enjoy the feeling of being in public whilst enjoying spending time with themselves. This is something that has been termed as 'public solitude' (Henriksen, *et al*, 2013, p.96). One interlocutor interviewed at the Smithfield CFC described his habit of coming here every day alone since the day he moved into the neighbourhood. Christine and I noticed him in one of the corners of the CFC drinking beer early on in the day and observing the rest of the market. Here is an extended extract of Mike's interview:

C: I see.. So are you friends with the staff here ?
1: Of course! I am close with many of them. I have been coming here for 10 years.
C: Ahhh.. You know them well already.
1: I know the staff from every single store
C: Wow! Every single store. Which one do you visit the most?
1: This one
C: Yuen Sing Hing?
1: Yes.
C: Why?
1: There are seats in the corner area. There is beer and food. Both Chinese and Western food. Better than the ones opposite of the street. ***But mostly because this corner place is a good alone space.***
...
C: So will you chat with other strangers?
1: Yes of course! I know most of the customers from other tables. Sometimes they will come by and strike a conversation. Then we chat. That is why we are closer here. We won't chat in normal restaurants or Chinese restaurants. ***One by one... I nearly know all of the people***

Extract 4. Interview 15, 28/06/2023.

Mike's interview shows a need to be in a more isolated corner of the market whilst still being able to entertain short conversations with people. This is exactly what we understood Mike to be doing in the CFC on the day that we interviewed him: he was removed from the noise of the main seating area and had an approachable and comfortable attitude suggesting that this was routine for him. The CFC infrastructurally plays a role in welcoming these types of visitors into the space. The corners of the Smithfield CFC seem to naturally attract solo visitors, most

likely because the remainder of the market feels rather open and exposed for someone looking for a certain level of solitude. Mike pointed to this directly when he said, ‘this corner place is a good alone space’ (Interview 15, 28/06/2023). So, these corners are spaces that are experienced as more private areas of the CFC, giving ‘customers the possibility of being alone and together at the same time’ (Shapira and Navon, 1991, p.108).

A more subtle observation of being “alone together” was between visitors who would come in pairs and yet searched for some solitude. This was a surprising observation but one that I understood over time to make perfect sense in the broader social landscape of the CFCs. Figure 15 depicts two men who came into the market together and shared a meal in complete silence and lingered after the meal, both either on their phones or observing their surroundings. As they left, I could see them resuming their conversation from before, having enjoyed a moment “alone together” in the Shek Tong Tsui CFC. The CFC appears to allow for a certain calm to settle for some of its visitors upon entering, allowing them to easily slip into periods of silence between them, free of judgement. Perhaps something can also be said about the placement of the people in Figure 15 in the market – they are tucked away which may have granted them the freedom to sit still together without feeling conscious of others.

The apparent lack of sociability that comes from visiting the CFC alone therefore hides much deeper levels of connection and comfortability that have been built over time. It is important to note that these patterns of coming alone, sitting at more “private” tables, and enjoying time with others have been built over time, since their opening.

Figure 11. Solo/two-person seating in Shek Tong Tsui CFC.

5.3 Co-presence

Another dimension of social interaction that is felt in the CFC is co-presence. This can be understood as an extension of the notion "alone together", because it suggests a level of being more "together" on the spectrum of being "alone together". Co-presence rests on the idea of experiencing something collectively whilst not necessarily socialising with others (Richaud, 2018).

A manifestation of this collective presence in the CFCs is the use of large circular tables. In both the Smithfield and Shek Tong Tsui CFCs these types of tables dominate the space (see sketches) and are used either by large parties visiting the CFCs or by lots of different strangers when space becomes an issue. This results in people who do not know each other sitting at the same table. This is very common in Hong Kong, not just in the CFC but in other traditional restaurants. Therefore, a certain co-presence can be felt between the people sitting at the table, collectively enjoying a meal while still maintaining a social distance (Richaud, 2018). On top of eating together at the table, this layout allows these strangers to then linger together. Drawing from the literature on hawker centres in Singapore, they have been described as public spaces

where people ‘can be engaged in a calculated copresence’, (Radomskaya and Bhati, 2022, p.170). The lingering that happens after a meal at the CFC on a communal table can therefore be understood through this lens of calculated copresence where the customers choose to stay longer and linger together. Figure 16 is an example of this happening – the man in the yellow shirt is sharing a table with two other people and has a relaxed posture, looking out onto the street on the side where the Shek Tong Tsui CFC is open. The other two people are either observing or on their phones, also relaxing and lingering after their meal. There is an atmosphere of nonchalance, of stillness in this act of being at the same table together. None of them appear to be bothered by the others, and none of them are pressed to leave; a theme that I have discussed previously in the previous chapter.

This is not to say that people sitting at the more secluded tables do not feel this co-presence. In fact, it is hard to settle on one feeling – co-presence and being “alone together” are not too far removed from each other but rather can be viewed on a spectrum. It can be assumed however that the physical closeness of sharing a table brings about stronger feelings of co-presence than? it does of feeling both alone and together with others.

Figure 16. Image evoking "co-presence" in the Shek Tong Tsui market.

5.4 Public familiarity and encountering others

Having already looked at the micro-levels of social interaction that exist in the CFC, it is important to broaden the focus onto the social dimensions happening at the level of the entire public space. The CFC has been an element of each neighbourhood for many years now and with the previous social conceptualisations in mind, a certain 'public familiarity' has been instilled in these spaces over time (Ferreira, *et al,* 2021, p.21). Sharing space with others, bumping into people who follow the same rhythm as you and recognising the face of a stranger – these are all moments of friction with others that allow for a layer of familiarity to build up.

An important familiarity exists between customers and workers in the CFCs. This familiarity was felt on multiple occasions during interviews conducted with both workers and customers who would interrupt the interview to greet either a customer or a worker: *'Good morning Miss Chan, sit inside it is cooler there!'* (Interview 19, 03/07/2023). Acknowledging each other clearly plays a significant role in being a regular at the CFC and, despite sometimes being the

only interaction one may have here, its significance is no less small. Additionally, bouts of familiarity between a customer and a worker happen between the table and the kitchen which in many cases in the CFCs is a rather intimate space. Figure 17 shows a restaurant stall in the Shek Tong Tsui CFC and the proximity between the tables and the kitchen. Having spent many hours sitting at these tables, I was able to overhear conversations between the customers and the workers at this stall. These would start as customers ordering the dish they wanted that day and would drift into small talk, with the cook and waiter talking loudly from the kitchen and the customer watching them and responding from their table. Watson (2009, p.1582) has described these social interactions as 'rubbing along' whereby small moments of social friction between people contribute to the feeling of public familiarity. Moments observed at the stall shown in Figure 17 were intimate and public at the same time with both the customer, the workers and other customers around them benefitting from these moments of socialising which over time translates into a familiarity with the CFC. The layout of the market here is crucial for these encounters to happen, much like what Watson (2009) argues for.

Beyond the customer-worker relationship, public familiarity is also felt strongly amongst the customers. Visiting the CFC in tune with someone else's rhythm plays a significant role in the familiarity that is created by the customers themselves (Ferreira, *et al,* 2021). These overlapping rhythms allow customers to bump into each other over and over again, allowing familiarity between them to build up over time and rather easily. So, even though people with similar rhythms may remain strangers even after years of 'rubbing along' with each other, they are never fully a stranger to begin with because of the familiarity that has built up between them and because of the broader public familiarity that exists in the CFCs simply as a result of them residing in neighbourhoods. The following interview extract nods to this customer familiarity particularly well.

C: Then do you chat with the other customers sitting nearby?

1: This is very normal. Hong Kong is small; it is the same people everywhere. I may not know him today, or tomorrow, but someday we will say" It is you again" and we chat.

(Extract 2. Interview 14, 27/06/23.)

Figure 17. Leo standing in front of his stall in Shek Tong Tsui CFC with his coworker in the background. Both consented to this picture being taken.

Sociality in the CFC is made and encouraged through regularity, time, and the layout of the space. A general feeling of familiarity has been built over the years in both neighbourhoods, with each interaction and moment of friction adding a layer to it. With this familiarity, feelings of co-presence and being "alone together" are able to settle more comfortably among the customers which, in turn, add more ease and familiarity? to the public space. Despite the CFC not being intended as a social space to begin with, it has, over time, adopted a particular social landscape shaped by its customers and the market itself.

Chapter 6: "Static in time": Permanence in a disappearing city

"After a long day of walking around the city full to the brim with people and noise, the Cooked Food Centre feels like a hidden safe haven. I have found myself walking in more often than not in the in between hours of a meal where the space is mostly empty. A handful of customers are spread across the space, still sat at the table where they had their meal a couple of hours ago. Workers are either taking a smoke break, having a nap or preparing for the evening rush of customers for dinner. Everything feels simpler here. No shiny lights, skyscrapers, or freezing cold air conditioning in your face. A slower and simpler way of life seems to be collectively enjoyed with little notion of what time it is or where to head to next. There is a kind of mutual understanding that we come here to enjoy traditional food and relax in a familiar neighbourhood environment. I have learnt to enjoy these spaces the same way that other people do. In here I take a break from the city life and get a taste of the past Hong Kong."

Figure 18. Ethnographic vignette from fieldnotes [Shek Tong Tsui Cooked Food Centre, 19/07/2023]

6.1 Introduction to chapter

This chapter will examine some elements of both Cooked Food Centres that instil a sense of permanence in these spaces which stands in opposition to the disappearance of Hong Kong's older buildings. Situated within a built environment that is subject to relentless demolition and reconstruction with modernisation and globalisation targets in mind, the Smithfield and Shek Tong Tsui Cooked Food Centres act as retreats amidst the chaos (Abbas, 1997).

The Cooked Food Centres being an extension of Hong Kong's *dai pai dongs* albeit with a slightly more modern and supposedly hygienic twist to them, instinctively brings a certain atmosphere of permanence and cultural continuity (Mele, *et al*, 2014). They carry with them remnants of the city's culture which is now under threat and therefore pull together themes of permanence and temporality through their atmospheres, their food, and their visitors. Aesthetically, the separate restaurant stalls in the CFCs resemble a typical *dai pai dong* and in fact are sometimes called *dai pai dongs* themselves by their users. Figure 19 and 20 depict this

similarity with the only noticeable changes in the newer replica being the indoor component to the CFCs and the elements that come with this (air conditioning, sturdier seating in some cases). These characteristics bring about feelings of nostalgia and continuity which can be understood as a reason as to why these CFCs attract a large elderly population in Hong Kong. The following quote and interview extract hint at this: 'In a world of rapid change, visual and tangible evidence of the past is valued for the sense of place and continuity it conveys' (Carmona, *et al,* 2003, p.199).

L: Yeah, ok. And do you think that's what other people like about this place?

2: Yeah! You know uh, there's lots of like grandfathers or grandmothers, yeah old people come here often. I think it's because it reminds them of their childhood, yeah..

(Extract 1. Interview 5, 20/06/2023.)

The CFCs have become the space for their users to share a sense of cultural continuity together as Hongkongers and to carry traditions of the *dai pai dongs* into the CFCs given that it is both the appearance and the people that create this 'tangible evidence of the past' (Carmona, *et al,* 2003, p.199). This is not to say that the CFCs are identical replicas of the *dai pai dongs* that existed before them, yet they retain components of the past which appear to be regarded as precious in Hong Kong's current atmosphere of urban renewal. Indeed, interlocutors often referred to these spaces as symbols of what Hong Kong used to be and 'represents something in the Hongkongers' culture since it's been here for so long' (Interview 7, 20/06/23). Interestingly, the Shek Tong Tsui CFC has been described as a kind of time capsule with a narrative of being 'static in time', oblivious to the exterior change of the city (Interview 28, 21/07/23). Much like Mele *et al.'* (2014) paper on wet markets in Singapore, the CFCs are a form of cultural heritage amongst a rapid environment of urban renewal and therefore are appreciated and valued by locals as permanent spaces of Hong Kong's culture. The following quote from Mele *et al* (2014) illustrates this despite being in the context of wet markets:

'The attachment to wet markets is a collective, social response to an ongoing process in which the present, itself, is being erased by a shifting urban landscape, a concomitant disappearance of unregulated community space, and the pervasiveness of normative consumerism.'

(Mele, *et al*, 2014, p.105).

Figure 19. Google Maps (2023).

Figure 20. Hong Kong French toast and Hong Kong-style milk tea at Shek Tong Tsui CFC.

6.2 An unassuming, ordinary place

The notion of permanence in both Cooked Food Centres manifests itself through the unassuming nature of these spaces which was also characteristic of the *dai pai dongs.* This similarity in the appearance of both spaces is depicted in Figure 19 and 20. Not only have these spaces retained their character despite their relocation, they also are simple, ordinary and modest spaces where visitors can relax for as long as they please. Therefore, they display permanence through this simplicity; the CFCs carry this way of living and consuming from the past into the present in Hong Kong. So, a certain permanence in line with Hong Kong's culture can therefore be felt through the simple and ordinary nature of these spaces as a contrast to the rest of the city which appears to be in a constant churn of renewal (Law, 2002 and Mele *et al*, 2014). Instead of looking for modern interiors in new and trendy restaurants, interlocutors in the interviews were concerned with enjoying the atmosphere of the space which in the case of the CFCs, has a certain air of Hong Kong's past floating about it: *"it's.. the atmosphere.. you can feel that it's much more better instead of going to somewhere like indoor shopping malls"* (here referring to restaurants in shopping malls) (Interview 6, 20/06/2023). It is not surprising given the city's gradual cultural disappearance that spaces that still uphold elements of the past

and therefore a sense of continuity are sought after and appreciated (Abbas, 1997 and Mele, *et al,* 2014).

It is important to note that through this, their importance is not diminished by simplicity; in fact, it is layered and consequential. Rather, they are simple in their outlook and appearance, the plastic chairs and stools, the simple and modest façade of the cooked food stalls and the often-handwritten food menus. This is precisely their charm; they appear to be nothing more than a place to sit and eat and yet yield significant social and cultural meaning that is invaluable in the context of Hong Kong today. It should also be pointed out that since the relocation of *dai pai dongs* into these public government-owned buildings where the CFCs reside, not only were their characteristic elements carried with this move but they have also remained untouched since the relocation. The following interview extract reveals this quite clearly:

C: How would you describe this Cooked Food Centre?
1: It has not changed a bit. It stayed the same since I was a child. (laughs with a kind of fondness)

(Extract 2. Interview 2, 17/06/2023.)

This interview extract is remarkable for how the interlocutor responds to a descriptive question about the CFC by noting how it hasn't changed at all. The CFC here can be understood therefore as a kind of tangible 'repository' in the built environment where cultural continuity and permanence is made sense of through the space and its appearance (Carmona, *et al,* 2003, p.199). The endurance of the practice of *dai pai dong* eating in the CFCs is a significant part of the unique character of these public spaces. The practice and routine of enjoying a local Hong Kong meal in these communal spaces that are unpretentious and fairly mundane (at least on the surface) is an invaluable manifestation of permanence in Hong Kong (Mele, *et al,* 2014). The Cooked Food Centres allow for this practice to be continued and for this sense of permanence amongst Hongkongers to be felt tangibly through the CFCs and what they have to offer.

6.3 A permanent character in the Cooked Food Centre

The Cooked Food Centres have quite clearly been framed as spaces of permanence in Hong Kong and more specifically in their respective neighbourhoods by their visitors through routine. During ethnographic observation, regularity and routine were noticed from visitors of both CFCs, adding to the atmosphere of permanence that was already being felt through the nostalgic appearance of the food stalls and the dishes they served. A memorable instance of regularity came from a woman in the Smithfield Cooked Food Centre who was present during every single one of my ethnographic visits. I would notice her in the same corner of the CFC, always reading the newspaper and taking small bites out of her buttered toast. In fact, I never saw her leave; Claudia was a remarkable example of permanence in this CFC and strangely appeared (at least to me) as a permanent element of the Smithfield CFC. Indeed, looking back at my ethnographic fieldnotes for this CFC, Claudia was present more often than not in fieldnotes referenced as "the mystery newspaper lady". Eventually, with Christine as a translator, we approached her for an interview which she agreed to with her head still in her newspaper and from which she barely looked up from. Unsurprisingly, we quickly learnt that Claudia is a creature of habit and has enjoyed coming for breakfast every morning since she moved to the neighbourhood of Kennedy Town which she vaguely noted was close to the opening of the Smithfield CFC. Claudia described the centre as comfortable and laidback and an environment where she can read her newspaper and order the same breakfast every day, free of judgement. Permanence in the CFCs is therefore significantly felt through the presence of regulars.

Conclusion

The Smithfield and Shek Tong Tsui Cooked Food Centres have been shown to be public spaces with remarkable social, cultural, and historical significance within Hong Kong's built environment. Looking through the lens of ethnography, and therefore being able to gaze and linger on details, I have found these spaces to hold many layers of significance, camouflaged behind their simple and ordinary appearance. My three empirical chapters provide a journey through the Cooked Food Centres, beginning with a close look at the rhythms of these spaces, then moving onto the kinds of social interactions that happen here and finally situating the CFCs more widely as spaces of cultural continuity and permanence in Hong Kong's urban environment.

In *Chapter 4* the rhythms of both Cooked Food Centres were scrutinized by spending extensive amounts of time in the CFCs and being there ethnographically. The rhythm in these spaces was of course found to increase during mealtimes when larger numbers of visitors would come to the CFCs and yet there remained a slower pace at all times. I examined the slower rhythms that exist in these spaces using Amin's (2008) emphasis on the importance of spatial layout to encourage certain repetitive rhythms and to foster feelings of trust and ease. I found this slower pace to be incredibly meaningful to its users and, over time, to myself given how fast-paced the rest of Hong Kong is experienced. Therefore, this analysis in the first empirical chapter informed my first research question (*In what ways are both CFCs important as public spaces in their respective neighbourhoods?)* as well as nodding to my third research question *(How do the users situate and understand the CFCs amongst Hong Kong's culture of disappearance?)*, making a link between *Chapter 4* and *6.*

Along a similar vein as seen in *Chapter 4, Chapter 5* delves into how social interactions are fostered and encouraged by some infrastructural elements of the Cooked Food Centres and some more intangible components in these spaces. Using pre-existing conceptualisations of social interactions in public space to frame the kinds of social encounters I observed in the CFCs, this chapter aims to illustrate their social landscape. The conceptualisations of "alone together", co-presence and public familiarity are discussed separately but understood to collectively showcase the social world of these two Cooked Food Centres. Through this

discussion, I answer my second research question *(What tangible and intangible elements of these spaces foster and encourage forms of sociability between its users?)* and briefly touch on my first research question too (*In what ways are both CFCs important as public spaces in their respective neighbourhoods?).*

The final empirical chapter frames the Cooked Food Centres as public spaces of permanence and cultural continuity in Hong Kong. With a close reading of Mele, et al's (2014) paper on wet markets in Singapore as spaces of continuity in a rapidly changing city, this chapter argues for its relevance in the context of Hong Kong's Cooked Food Centres with the addition of local specificities. Diving into Hong Kong's past mostly through interviews, this final chapter adds a wider lens to this dissertation. Despite cultural continuity and permanence being wider dynamics at play in these spaces, this is very much felt through rhythm and social interactions as well, which have been built over time and promote a certain slowing down in tune with Hong Kong's past.

The implications of this dissertation are twofold. It has demonstrated the extent to which the Smithfield and Shek Tong Tsui Cooked Food Centres are significant to their respective neighbourhoods and users as public spaces in a city where public space is seemingly unimportant. I have illustrated this through exploring the atmosphere of public familiarity they permeate and the ways in which they encourage users to linger for as long as they please. Secondly, on top of highlighting their importance as spaces of consumption, this dissertation has more importantly explored the value they hold as spaces of cultural continuity and permanence in Hong Kong. This cultural permanence and continuity have shown to manifest itself in the way the Cooked Food Centres encourage users to slow down and observe, forging a special enclave with its own dynamics and social atmosphere. The Cooked Food Centres move away from the fast-moving streets of Hong Kong, instead encouraging users to linger and be familiar strangers, oblivious to the outside noise.

Auto-critique

Pushing and advocating for these spaces as both unique and singular is perhaps a limitation of this dissertation. There is a certain risk in setting these Cooked Food Centres apart when they probably in many ways resemble other public spaces of food consumption. My ethnographic approach to this research therefore could have included a more comparative element to it, although this would likely have been outside of the limits of a dissertation.

Given that the methodology was done over an intensive period of two months in the summer of 2023, this could have been started earlier. Doing this would have allowed for field work to happen more occasionally and across a longer period of time, allowing for research to happen not exclusively in the summer months but at other times of the year too.

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