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The Comparative Study on the Management Mode of the Street Vending in Hong Kong and Singapore

Ying Chiu¹ Hanxu Zhang^{2*#}

1. Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

2. Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong, China

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ABSTRACT

Street vending, one of the crucial livelihoods of poorer sections, persists in all cities; meanwhile, it brings increased social costs, like traffic congestion and public health, which becomes one of the main challenges of urban public space management. Adopted by the desk-and-computer research method, this paper would analyze the management measures of hawkers in Hong Kong and Singapore from a comparative perspective. It, therefore, suggests that city administrations need to safeguard the rights of hawkers and adopt a more people-oriented management style, so as to pursue a more inclusive urban ecology.

1. Introduction

Street vending refers to an economic form that obtains income sources by setting up ground stalls, which is an important part of urban informal economy^[1]. On the one hand, it provides an important income-generating avenue for people with very low social capital^[2] and a source of relatively inexpensive goods and services for urban residents^[3]; On the other hand, it causes hidden dangers of food safety and affects the spatial order of a city^[4].

Therefore, based on the conflict between the government's demand for maintaining the image of the city and the daily life requirement of disadvantaged people, hawkers are regarded as the difficulty of urban management^[5].

The hawker centers, which accompanied the HDB scheme launched by the Singapore Government in 1965, are the current effective model of hawker management. In December 2020, the 15th session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage was held, and 42 items including Singapore's

*Corresponding Author:

Hanxu Zhang,

Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong, China;

Email: s1239386@hkmu.edu.hk

#Co-first author

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hawker culture were listed on the World Intangible Cultural Heritage List, which also confirmed the positive image of its excellent hawker management among the world's people. As a former British colony and an important port in the world, Hong Kong, the Special Administrative Region of China, has the same historical background with Singapore, and its management of street hawkers has similarities and differences with it. Based on this, this paper summarizes and studies the management measures of hawkers in Singapore and Hong Kong, so as to bring enlightenment to the future development of street vending in Hong Kong.

2. Background

2.1 Singapore

Street vending come as a custom of Singapore and are inherited through generations. Before the 1960s, hawkers sell various products on the street, which is detrimental to the implementation of regulation and hygiene maintenance^[6]. After 1968, the government set up hawker centers to centralize transactions and regulate the hawkers with licenses afterward. Subsequently, it becomes a symbol of the national culture and gains popularity among the visitors and locals, where even the prime minister of Singapore has shown up. Though it witnessed a diminishing quantity of hawkers, the government's confidence in this originally unruly industry is still stable. Many policies of subsidy and reducing rents have been implemented to handle the market recession. Economic benefits are significant, and it provides around 5 percent of employment to less educated people.

2.2 Hong Kong

Similar to Singapore, in order to alleviate the hygiene, noise and street congestion problems caused by hawkers, Hong Kong has brought hawkers under government control since 1950s. At that time, the government gradually arranged for street hawkers to move to the market to operate, and asked unlicensed hawkers to apply for licenses to operate in the areas designated by the government. Subsequently, the government took a negative attitude towards the development of hawker industry. Specifically, in 1973, the former Urban Council passed a resolution not to issue new hawker licenses (including cooked food hawker licenses). In order to further reduce the number of street hawkers, the Hong Kong government launched the voluntary surrender of hawker licenses scheme in 2002, which used financial compensation measures to encourage hawkers on Hong

Kong Island and Kowloon to surrender their licenses voluntarily. In 2013, the government launched a similar scheme again, hoping that the owners of the green tin stall (commonly known as "Home Ownership Scheme") or the Huang Gaizai stall (also known as "night tongs demolition") would voluntarily surrender their licenses, and those who surrender their licenses would receive compensation of HK \$120,000.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a desk-and-computer research method, with emphasis on the practices of hawker management in Singapore and Hong Kong. The study is involved in collecting primary sources from governmental websites or data and Legislative Council of Hong Kong (LegCo) papers. Since the information is edited and opened to the public by the governments, the sources are dependable and confirmed, which are vital for the examination of the management approach and policies towards hawkers in two different places.

Moreover, this research also relies on secondary sources from academic journals, books, newspapers, and articles. Newspaper reporting and articles are reliable evidence of the social and spiritual values of the communities, and academic journals and books could make substantial references for comparing the hawker management approaches of Singapore and Hong Kong.

4. Management Mode of the Street Vending

4.1 Licensing of Hawkers

To facilitate the management of hawkers, the Hong Kong and the Singapore government have established hawker licensing systems which are explained in detail below.

4.1.1 Hong Kong

According to the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance, unless a hawker licence is issued by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, no one is allowed to peddle in the street. Offenders will be prosecuted, with a maximum fine of HK\$ 5,000 and imprisonment for one month.

The Hawker Regulations, Cap. 132AI, stipulates that hawker licenses shall not be issued to persons under the age of 18 or who already hold valid licenses. Hong Kong implements the "one family, one licence" policy and each household (including parents, spouses and children) can only be issued one hawker licence.

Figure 1 shows the change in the number of licensed hawkers from 2000 to 2018. To sum up, due to the government’s lack of support for hawker development and the strengthening of hawker supervision, the number of licensed hawkers shows a downward trend.

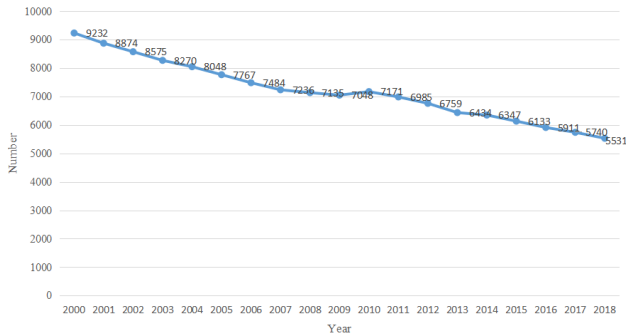


Figure 1. Statistics on changes in the number of valid hawker licences in Hong Kong [7]

4.1.2 Singapore

According to the Environment and Public Health Law, hawkers who engage in any sales activities in any public places are obliged to hold a hawker license. Hawker licenses are issued by the National Environment Agency. Anyone found guilty of the offence faces a fine of up to S\$5,000 (HK \$30,900) under Section 41A of the Environmental Public Health Act. A second or subsequent offence is punishable by a fine of up to S\$10,000 (HK \$61,800) or imprisonment for up to three months, or both.

Any Singaporean citizen or permanent resident who has reached the age of 21 may apply for a hawker licence. The hawker licence application of sole proprietorship, partnership or company will not be accepted, and the owner must apply in his personal capacity. In addition, hawkers must strictly implement the government’s Environmental Public Health (Hawkers) Regulations and Environment and Health Law in their business activities, or they will face the penalty of revoking their licenses.

Figure 2 shows the changes of the number of hawkers licensed by the National Environment Agency in Singapore from 2000 to 2020. On 1 April 2004, all hawkers were placed under the supervision of the National Environment Agency. Thus the number of licensed hawkers increased dramatically to 15862. With the exception of 2004, the data indicates that the number of licensed hawkers in Singapore has stabilized under the government’s management, and the number of itinerant street hawkers has gradually decreased.

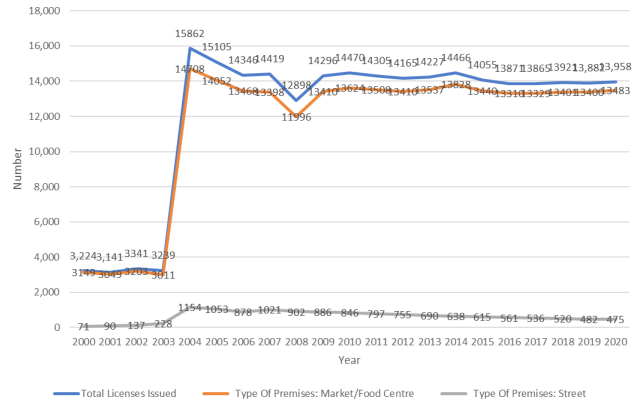


Figure 2. Statistics on changes in the number of valid hawker licenses in Singapore [8]

4.2 Management of Bazaars

There is no exact definition of bazaar, but the general idea of it is a place where street hawkers sell goods to other people; Bazaars exist in different forms and operating modes such as (a). government-built markets and hawker centers (or “hawker centers” for short) selling a variety of cooked food and sundry goods in Singapore (b). district-led bazaars (or as public markets or hawker fixed pitches) [9] in Hong Kong. The below studies differences in management on bazaars in Singapore and Hong Kong in terms of responsible management authority and its main responsibilities.

4.2.1 Singapore

The National Environmental Agency (NEA), under the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment, takes a leading role in managing and regulating hawker centers. Its Hawker Centers Group (HCG) attempts to “enhance Singaporean hawker centers as clean and vibrant social spaces that bond the community, ensure the availability of affordable and accessible food options for Singaporeans, and safeguard the local hawker culture” [10]. To attain the ends, the HCG is accountable for the regulation and management of tenancies and operators of hawker centers, and the formulation, enactment and review of hawker-related policies (Figure 3). As of January 2022, there were 114 existing and new markets and hawker centers under management of the NEA [11]. Besides, hawkers of each center form their own hawker’s association to represent their interests, and the NEA maintains a regular liaison with the associations to address the problems faced by the centers.

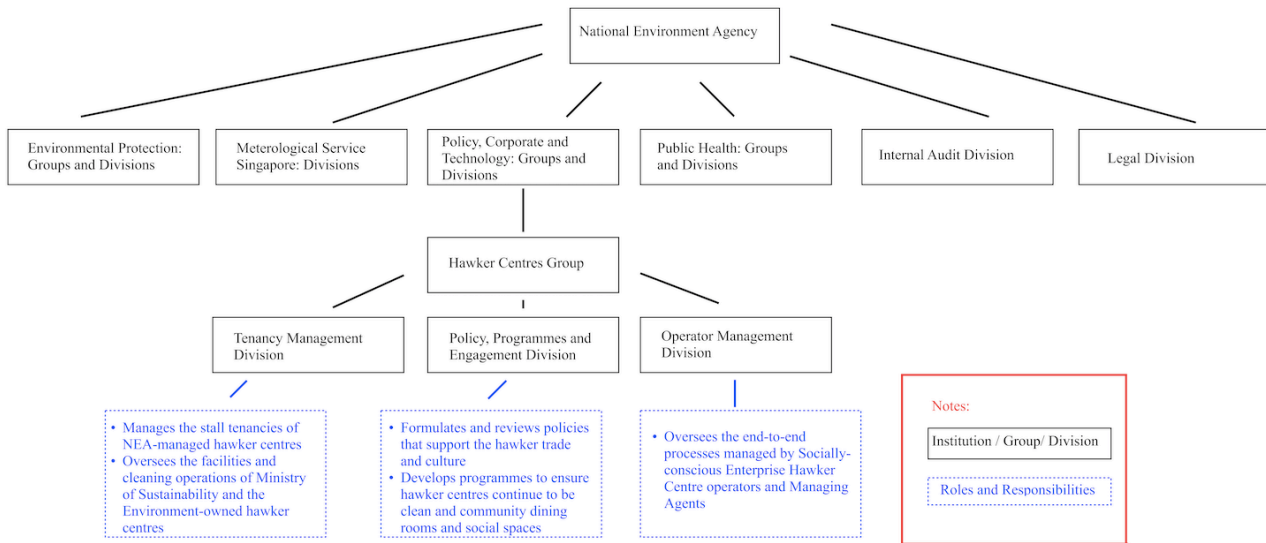


Figure 3. Organization Chart of the National Environment Agency and the Hawker Centers Group ^[12]

4.2.2 Hong Kong

From the 1970s to the early 2000s, no new hawker license was issued. All licensed hawkers on the street should move to bazaars to conduct their business, as provided by government regulations. The Environmental Hygiene Branch, under the Food and Environment Hygiene Department (FEHD), is accountable for the management of public markets, hawkers and licensing, and

delivers other environment-related services. The FEHD undertakes the Market Management and Hawker Control Programme, which aims to “provide public market facilities at suitable locations, enhance the viability of and maintain a clean hygienic environment in existing public markets, and control on-street hawking activities” ^[13] (Figure 4). As of January 2022, there were 97 public markets and cooked food markets or centres, under management of the FEHD ^[14].

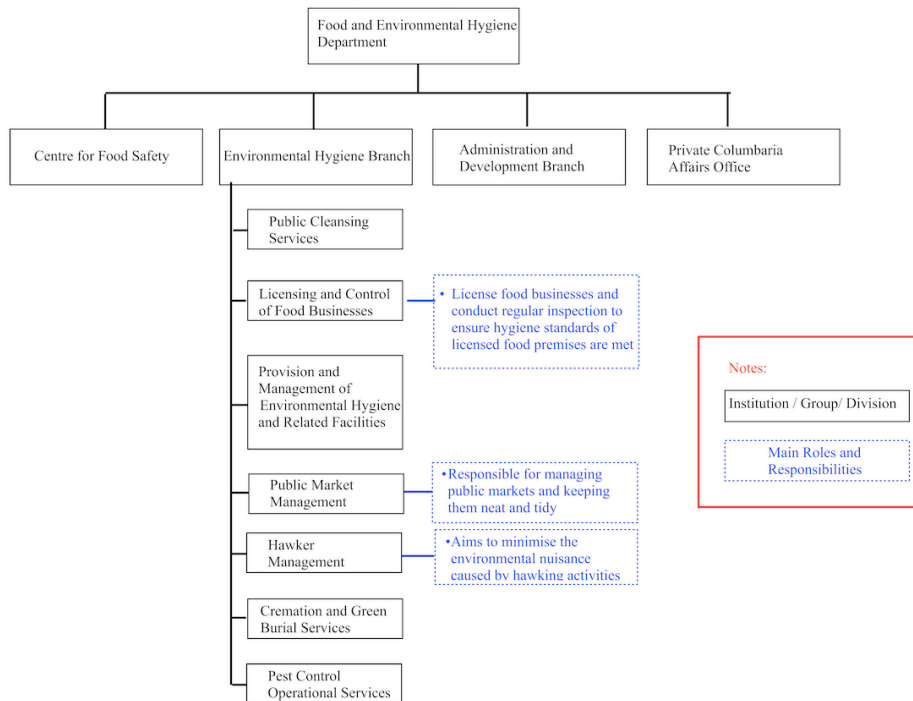


Figure 4. Organization Chart of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and the Environmental Hygiene Branch ^[15]

Different from the NEA in Singapore, The FEHD is apt to have an intrinsic bias towards confining hawker activities. The name of the responsible management authority in Hong Kong, the FEHD, indeed considers hawkers as a public health issue, as it define its mission “to ensure that food is fit for human consumption and to maintain a clean and hygienic living environment for the people of Hong Kong”^[16].

4.3 Hygiene Regulations for Cooked Food Stalls

Whether in Hong Kong’s district-led bazaars or Singapore’s hawker centers, cooked food stalls have been listed as management priorities by the government because of their close relationship with residents’ diet health. The following introduces the hygiene regulation of cooked food stalls in the two places respectively.

4.3.1 Hong Kong

The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department has introduced the Demerit Points System to urge cooked food hawkers to strictly follow Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance. The number of points deducted depends on the seriousness of the offence. Under the demerit system amended in 2001, hawkers will lose their licenses if they accumulate 45 demerit points over a 36-month period.

4.3.2 Singapore

The Singapore government is highly interventionist in the management of cooked food stalls. The National Environmental Health Agency has implemented a series of measures to ensure that cooked food sold by these hawkers meets food safety and hygiene standards. First, since 1990, the government has made it mandatory for all food handlers to take a basic food hygiene course and pass a written test. In addition, all hawkers must be vaccinated against typhoid fever.

In the second place, the National Environment Agency introduced the Points Demerit System in September 1987 to punish hawkers who commit public health offences. Similar to China’s vehicle points system, licensed hawkers will have their licenses suspended for two weeks if they accumulate up to 12 demerit points within a year. The second suspension will last four weeks. A third violation will result in permanent revocation of the license. The government classifies violations as A and B. Category A is a serious violation, which will result in deduction of 6 points, including selling unsanitary food, while Category B leads to deduction of 4 points, including improper food storage.

In addition, a food stall classification system was launched in June 1997 to enable the public to understand the hygiene conditions of the cooked food that they often purchase. Every year, all cooked food stalls are divided into four classes: A (excellent), B (good), C (fair) and D (poor) based on assessment criteria such as hawker hygiene and food delivery. Such permits must be displayed in conspicuous and easily accessible business premises, otherwise fines and points will be deducted.

The government has also conducted various evaluation activities to enhance the professional honor of hawkers. For example, the National Environmental Agency and the Health Promotion Board work together on the City Hawker Food Hunt to find and reward healthy and authentic hawker cooked food. In addition, the government also launched an interactive web portal that allows registered users to recommend and review food stalls in 2010.

Table 1 is the survey result of International Journal of Hospitality Management on tourists’ perception of hygiene and food safety of cooked food stalls in Singapore in 2012. According to statistics, most tourists are satisfied with the hygienic quality of cooked food, and about 60% of them say they prefer to taste A-class food.

Table 1. Statistics Chart of Tourists’ Perception of Hygiene and Food Safety of Cooked Food Stalls in Singapore^[17]

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Hygienic food preparation	3	3	28	54	13
Satisfactory cleaning up	2	7	30	47	14
Satisfactory cleanliness	2	6	26	53	14
Choice affected by grade	6	15	25	33	20
Favouring of A stalls	5	12	23	26	33

4.4 Rental Policy in Hawker Centers

4.4.1 Hong Kong

There is no uniform standard for rental fees in Hong Kong. And the government doesn’t investigate the tenant’s financial situation in advance. It depends on where the hawkers are located and whether they are fixed or mobile. For the fixed stalls, the rental fees are in proportion to

the real estate prices. 80% of the hawkers pay less than the amount recommended by the government. And the government revises the original principles every few years to make sure it come up with the pace of inflation. For the mobile ones, many stalls aren't required to pay rent in places such as the Ladies' Street. In many districts, the hawkers do not pay rent to the government or urban management department but make some payment to the market for protection which will not appear on government's reports. According to the latest revision of Hong Kong's Public Health and Municipal Services (Fees) Regulations ^[18], the annual license fees and usage fees for fixed booths vary from about HK\$2,500 to HK\$187,000, depending on the area and industry.

4.4.2 Singapore

Rental Expenses

The Singapore government charges rent for street hawkers depending on the type of hawkers, which includes subsidized stalls and non-subsidized ones. According to the National Environment Agency of Singapore, the stalls are obligated to pay at least S\$ 56 to cover the rental of market stalls. As for the cooked food stalls, it will be double that amount because of higher profit in finished product sales (Table 2).

Table 2. Rental Expenses of Different Types of Stalls ^[19]

Type of hawkers	Subsidized stalls		Non-subsidized stalls	
	Market stalls	Cooked food stalls	Market stalls	Cooked food stalls
Monthly fees	S\$56-S\$184	S\$160-S\$320	S\$85-S\$3600	S\$300-S\$4900

Stall Ownership

Trade of ownership of stalls in the secondary market is not recommended because it increases the administrative burden on the government. Thereby, after the trade, the stall will turn into non-subsidized ones, of which the expense will become extremely high. In most cases, owners of the stalls wishing to withdraw from the market had better return the stall to the National Environment Agency for redistribution, or at least they are supposed to carry out the transition under the agency's monitor. The rent needs to be renegotiated after the end of the tenancy.

5. Discussion

5.1 Economic-oriented Analysis

This comparison is based on the outcome of the policy judging by some economic index and concepts. Due to the restriction of pandemic, most data are from the Internet which means the statistics may be not up-to-date

and the conclusion are inferential which may have some deviations from the reality. It will compare three basic aspects of the policy, including rationality of rent price, market structure and overall economic benefits.

The rent of stalls in these two regions along with the consequence it results in shows a great difference. The recommended rent for hawkers in Hong Kong can reach HK \$2500 per month, while in Singapore, the average value is around HK\$1250^[20]. According to the data from World Bank, the GDP of Singapore in 2019 was 0.37 trillion dollars, and the number of Hong Kong is 0.1571 trillion (World Bank). Adjusting their GDP and deflating the CPI level (trading economics), the real price of the rental in Hong Kong is 4.7 times that in Singapore. Treating other conditions as the same, a relatively higher expense will hinder the entrepreneur from embracing the vendor economy. And the quantity of hawkers in Hong Kong shows a diminishing tendency, which gives testimony to the decreasing incentive in this industry confronted with the overall economy in recession. The Singapore government offers a subsidy to over 60% of the vendors, which boosts their confidence in the industry's perspective. It shows a left-handed shift in the supply curve and reaches an equilibrium of higher quantity and lower cost. This can serve as a one-time payment that appears on the contract rather than a gradual welfare payment that has a diminishing willingness after the amount accumulates.

The policies demonstrated in the former part contribute to differentiated market structure. From an investor's point of view, the variance of Hong Kong rents is too large, the ceiling can reach HK \$76000, but the minimum one is only less than HK \$200 ^[21]. The price is not determined by the government but by the real estate market, of which the uncertainty can crackdown on optimism about returns. Most of the hawkers enter the market without primitive accumulation of capital. Thereby, they tend to be risk-averse. Hong Kong's current model is too market-oriented; thus, it is nearly impossible to protect some small traders. Certain hawkers can grow on a large scale and, to a great extent, curb the development of other merchants of the same type, resulting in a monopoly situation in a sense. In contrast, centralized hawker centers will promote competition, making it difficult for a particular stall to be in a powerful leading position, and impeding the emergence of monopoly power. Also, the potential return is more foreseeable because of the stable cost and the previous experience, which caters to some self-employed households.

The hawkers in Singapore who have worked in the industry over a particular time will gain an advantage,

which reduces liquidity and uncertainty. The expected earning of hawkers is 2000 Singapore dollars, according to Yu, a local stall owner ^[20], which is acceptable for the old after deducting the operation cost, which usually takes up 15 percent of the sales. But for the younger, they have to make more and set their unique competitive advantage other than a lower price. In that way, the market can attract more customers and gradually increase customer retention rate though they may change their preference of certain stalls. However, in Hong Kong, the varied charge of rent leads to different price of similar commodities in different places, which puts them in a relatively disadvantaged position in the fierce competition. Since the city is not big enough for one hawker to geographically isolate from each other, a competitive disadvantage will lead to their lack of confidence, which in turn contributes to a shrinking market.

To put in a nutshell, the economic benefits of Singapore's policy outweigh that of Hong Kong. In addition, the price of rent and market structure are proved to be more reasonable.

5.2 Spatial Political Economy

5.2.1 The Nature of Space: Politics and Economy

“Space is not simply inherited from nature, or passed on by the dead hand of the past, or autonomously determined by ‘laws’ of spatial geometry as per conventional location theory; Space is produced and reproduced through human intentions, even if unanticipated consequences also develop, and even as space constrains and influences those producing it.” ^[22] According to Huang ^[23], the government implements different street-hawker management approaches based on the development purpose of a specific historical period. The final decision made by the government to expel hawkers merely depends on whether the existence of hawkers can match with the government's political and economic goals, a point to which would explain the different management situations in current Singapore and Hong Kong below.

5.2.2 Singapore

While Singapore faces challenges and issues regarding the sustainability of the street-vendor industry, the authority exerts every effort to preserve the unique hawker culture ^[24], which is noticed in the last section “Policy Comparison”. In fact, there are political and economic factors advancing the government's efforts. The primary feature of Singapore's political institution is its hegemonic party stability - the People's Action Party (PAP) has become the leading party and won the majority of votes in all general

elections to date, since assuming power in 1959. Under the parliamentary system of multiparty democracy, it is pragmatic politically and economically for the PAP to do its utmost to manage the hawker activities.

Politics

Mass political support is vital to the stable ruling status of the PAP. The scholars from the National University of Singapore ^[25] underline that “multiparty politics in the years leading up to self-government in 1959 had taught the PAP pioneers the value of securing mass political appeal. The grassroots sector has helped the PAP to maintain its political dominance, contributing to and extending the party's ideological hegemony that would simultaneously secure a national will to succeed, a lasting mandate to rule”. One part of the grassroots is hawkers and their customers, while most of them support the PAP ^[26].

Besides, for a country with fifty-seven years of short history, hawker food is one of the building blocks for connecting people and building a sense of national identity; hence, hawker centers assume an approvingly vital social function of uniting a multicultural society ^[27]. It is vital for the PAP to manage hawker centers efficiently and upgrade facilities, as a tool for social cohesion and stability.

Economy : Help Citizens to Manage the Rising Costs

Like other cities, Singapore is suffering higher inflation that prices rose by 2.9% between July and November 2021, based on the CPI ^[28]. It is vital for the government to help its people to manage the soaring daily expenses, while supporting the development of hawker industry is one of the good ways. The price of hawker food is usually lower than those sold in the formal sector due to the lower overheads; therefore, the services lower the cost of living of Singaporeans, particularly those poorer sections.

5.2.3 Hong Kong

Though large enterprises and property developers are influential lobby groups in any city, they play a major role in the current political-economic structure in Hong Kong and affect the government decisions, which is critiqued by Yung Yingtai, the former Cultural Minister of Chinese Taipei: “In Hong Kong, economic efficiency is the core value of all decision-making, and development is the only ideology” ^[29]. Due to the structure of government revenue, the government would inevitably have a bias in favor of property and infrastructure development in advancing economy. From the Table 3, profit taxes^①, stamp duties^②

① Profit tax include corporations and unincorporated businesses .

② Stamp duties include sale or transfer of property, lease property, and stock trade.

and land premiums account for 53 to 61% of total government revenues between 2018-2022.

Table 3. Government Revenue by Item (HK\$ billion) ^[30]

	2018-2019 (Actual)	2019-2020 (Actual)	2020-2021 (Revised Estimate)	2021-2022 (Budget Estimate)
Profits tax	166.6 (27.8%)	155.9 (26.4%)	131.0 (24.1%)	126.7 (21.4%)
Stamp duties	80.0 (13.3%)	67.2 (11.4%)	79.0 (14.5%)	92.0 (15.6%)
Salaries tax	60.1 (10.0%)	50.4 (8.5%)	72.0 (13.2%)	64.4 (10.9%)
General rates	17.2 (2.9%)	21.0 (3.6%)	18.7 (3.4%)	19.1 (3.2%)
Other operating revenue	130.5 (21.8%)	139.4 (23.6%)	139.6 (25.7%)	168.1 (28.4%)
Operating revenue	454.4 (75.8%)	433.9 (73.4%)	440.4 (81.0%)	470.3 (79.6%)
Land premium	116.9 (19.5%)	141.7 (24.0%)	87.0 (16.0%)	97.6 (16.5%)
Other capital revenue	28.5 (4.8%)	15.3 (2.6%)	16.1 (3.0%)	23.3 (3.9%)
Capital revenue	145.4 (24.2%)	157.1 (26.6%)	103.1 (19.0%)	120.8 (20.4%)
Government revenue	599.8 (100%)	590.9 (100%)	543.5 (100%)	591.1 (100%)

Current policy and institution frameworks do not view hawking as a part of the modern economy bona fide. It seems paradoxical that salespeople from telecommunication companies promote their products can be found anywhere on the street, causing the impassibility of the road in hustling districts like Mong Kok, while the FEHD is difficult to prosecute them directly according to the law. Meanwhile, hawkers are prohibited from conducting their on-street business, which is fully discussed in the last section “Policy Comparison”.

According to Hong Kong Baptist University Journalism Student Publication Archive ^[31], the government prohibits any person from selling in public places without permission. However, it only restricts commercial activities carried out on the street, including on-site transactions of goods and money between buyers and sellers. As for broadband, telecommunications and bank companies, they only sign contracts, and the buyers and sellers do not exchange goods and money on the spot; hence, it is “legal” to conduct business promotional activities on the street for the large corporations.

5.3 Brief Summary

Street vending is often associated with unemployment

and poverty, and the emergence of informal economy can be attributed to the lack of social inclusiveness ^[5]. Therefore, no matter from the top-down perspective of government management or the bottom-up perspective of the disadvantaged people’s demands, the street vending should not be marginalized by a city.

Compared with Hong Kong, Singapore’s government has shown more tolerance for urban hawkers, which is embodied in the government’s investment in the transformation of hawker centers and subsidies to hawkers according to actual conditions. Although the data shows that the number of hawkers in Singapore is declining due to the aging of hawker population and other factors, the government is currently actively taking measures to change the status quo, such as building the image of hawker entrepreneurs through Michelin ranking ^[32].

The Hong Kong government should show a more positive attitude towards the development of hawker industry from the perspective of serving the people, instead of regarding hawkers as negative products of urban development. From the economic point of view, the Hong Kong government can follow Singapore’s practice of collecting rents from hawkers according to the types of stalls, and put forward more targeted hawker management policies, for example, granting appropriate subsidies to stalls with lower economic benefits, so as to safeguard the interests of the disadvantaged people, instead of letting stall rents be controlled by the market.

6. Conclusions

In the context of the enormous negative impact of the epidemic on the global economy, the street vending economy shows a new dynamism, which gives testimony to its role as a new direction of development. Singapore and Hong Kong have promoted it for a long time. However, due to differences in policy towards hawkers, the current situation of the hawker economy is superior to that in Hong Kong. It is focused on four main parts of the policy, including licensing, management of bazaars, food hygiene regulations, and rental policy. And this research makes a comparison from the perspective of economy and spatial political economy, which both demonstrate Singapore’s policy is more conducive to development than Hong Kong’s.

This research shows some advantages of Singapore’s policy which can be integrated with current Hong Kong’s. The purpose of the research is to give some insights into the drawbacks of the Hong Kong model, which may contribute to further improvement. Due to the problematic pandemic situation, some field investigations and interviews cannot be conducted, so the research is based

on existing data. And the angles of the comparison are a little bit narrow, which leaves space for further research to explore.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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