

CUS 510J Workshop in Cultural Practices
Harvesting the Future: Farming and Food Movement
Agriculture in Hong Kong – Post-war and after
Sept 11, 2015

1. What is farming?

The practices of growing crops can happen in a wide range of contexts:

- subsistence/market oriented
- government subsidy/protection/free market/speculation
- manual/mechanical
- soil/oil/chemical/ecological
- staples/field crops/fodders/vegetables/fruits
- monoculture/polyculture
- corporate/family farm
- part-time/full-time
- peasant/farmer
- owner-cultivators/farmer wage labour/slave

What has been the practices and related social organizations in Hong Kong?

2. Farming in Hong Kong: paddy cultivation and vegetable gardening



2.1 Paddy cultivation:

- 9,466 hectares of rice land in the total 13,644 hectares in 1954
- 1-2 crops per years
- the schedule of each crops corresponds closely with cyclical and ritual calendar such as "Ching Ming" and "Chung Yeung" (Aijmer 1980)
- Paddy field was almost the exchange medium the ancestors and the alive
- ample space with relatively less physical labour
- basically self-subsistence with low pressure on cash, rent was paid in kind
- a collective activity: reclamation, construction and maintenance of irrigation system, transplant and harvest, e.g. the brackish paddy field in San Tin (Watson 1965)
- "Lineage" as the basic unit; ancestral estates became the organization and material foci of the various branches of the lineage

Agricultural land utilisation 1946 – 2013 (in hectares)						
Year	Fresh water paddy	Brackish water paddy	Market garden crops	Field Crop	Abandoned/fallow	Total
1955	8,171	1178	913	1,408	1,098	13,255
1960	7,478	1175	1,793	1,464	857	13,686
1965	4,876	906	3,278	1,356	1,971	13,670
1970	4,913	690*	3,950	862	1,538	13,488
1975	1,113	n/a	4,974	375	3,585	12,250
1980	30	n/a	3,090	80	4,300	9,970
1985	10	n/a	2,720	50	4,150	9,550
1990	0	n/a	2,090	50	4,040	8,420
1995	0	n/a	1,350	50	4,200	7,830
2000	n/a	n/a	800	40	4,250	6,960
2005	n/a	n/a	520	30	4,160	6,030
2010	n/a	n/a	450	20	4,096	5,926
2013	n/a	n/a	435	28	3,794	4,523

(source: Hong Kong Yearbooks and AFD Yearbooks)

2.2 Vegetable gardening: businessman's enterprise disguised as a rustic farmstead

- first reclaiming un-cultivated land in local villages, later taking up paddy fields
- requiring less acreage for more monetary return than paddy cultivation (1.5 acres of rice field v.s. 0.3 acres of vegetable garden to support a 5-people family, Watson, 1972)
- production cycle independent of traditional festivals or rituals
- requiring year-round of continuous attention and backbreaking labour (up to 8 crops of greens, instead of 2 crops of rice per year)
- production totally oriented to the (perhaps unpredictable) urban market
- larger capital investment than paddy cultivation: pump/well, fertilizers, seeds
- a means of livelihood taken up by immigrants, who are otherwise probably jobless and even susceptible for communist infiltration
- allowing a generation of immigrants to establish a life and family on their own
- ways of marketing: VMO (more in lecture 3), “black market” and adjacent market towns

3. The “Vegetable revolution”: modernization of N.T. reconsidered

- by the end of the 19th century, vegetable production in Kowloon was even greater than that in the N.T., e.g. Sai Yueng Choi Street, Tung Choi Street
- in early 1930s, N.T. accounted for 13% (around 100,000) of the total population of 774,501 (Airriess, 2005)

- by 1961, migrants accounted for 52% (1.64 millions) of Hong Kong's 3.13 millions population, where N.T. population increased to approx. 410,000 and 670,000 in 1971. 88,000 were farmers or fishermen (Fan, 1974)
- the dualism of rice v.s. vegetables: civility/lineage/piety v.s. greed/risk/rough/individualistic
- from subsistent rice farmers with relatively low cash pressure, to business entrepreneurs integrated fully with urban markets
- "The indigenous villagers remained in their traditional rice world by giving up rice cultivation ... (and) converted the traditional two rice crops into two "crops" of cash" (Aijmer 1980)
- "immigrant market gardeners ... are urbanites exploiting the countryside, and they constitute one example of many of an "overspill" of the city area into the rural landscape" (ibid)
- alongside with other consumers goods, N.T. began to be infiltrated with official operation (cooperative societies), urban market networks and entrepreneurial spirits

2. Present situation: dependence in the guise of abundance

2.1 Vegetables self-sufficiency of Hong Kong

Year	Vegetable		average population ('000)	Self-sufficiency ratio
	quantity (tonne)	Value (\$'000)		Vegetables
1950	36,817	n/a	1974	72.7%
1955	72,346	20,001	2490	91.0%
1960	102,841	43,481	3075	n/a
1965	149,030	71,929	3692	41.9%
1970	181,618	159,106	2942	47.3%
1975	170,490	251,257	4396	41.8%
1980	192,090	413,383	5039	39.9%
1985	151,000	356,360	5456	33.8%
1990	112,000	286,578	5704	30.1%
1995	88,000	309,475	6206	17.1%
2000	42,500	119,000	6675	6.6%
2005	24,600	78,340	6818	4.5%
2010	16,000	77,502	7024	2.5%
2013	16,300	100,055	7187	2.0%

(source: Hong Kong Yearbooks and AFD Yearbooks)

2.2 A glimpse of present Hong Kong food industry

- the great decline of local food production coincided with late transition period, and kept failing to the level of almost non-existence with the HKSAR era.
- local production accounts for 1.9% of fresh vegetables, 59.5% of live poultry, 7.1% of pig and 0% of beef
- The supermarket's share in terms of retail sales rose from 44 percent of total sales in 1995 to 57.3 percent in 2013
- in 2013, for the lower half of all households in Hong Kong food, 33.68% of their expenditure goes to food (c.f. 32.19% goes to housing) and plays a determining role for inflation rate

資料匣 2 Box 2		選定食品的平均零售價 Average retail prices of selected food items	
		2012	2013
上等牛肉 (每公斤)	Best quality beef (per kg)	\$127.4	\$155.7
白菜 (每公斤)	Cabbage, white (per kg)	\$17.6	\$20.2
橙 (每個)	Orange (each)	\$3.7	\$4.1

(Source: Annual Report on the Consumer Price Index 2013)

2.3 Matter of choice? a problem of food sovereignty (instead of mere food safety)

- world top food importer (food import equivalent to 4.4% of GDP)
- the 4th largest U.S. market of high value food and beverages
- China (16%) and U.S. (18%) account for 1/3 of Hong Kong agricultural and food import
- ranks 9th in the “Nomura Food Vulnerability Index” 2010

(source: Coming Surge in Food Price, Nomura)

3. Concluding remarks:

- reconsideration of the temporal sequence of economic development of Hong Kong
- instead of an esthetic and subjective preference, the choice of farming modes is deeply embedded in the extent of urbanization, regional market integration, status/power relation in social relation, availability of source of capital and even current international relations
- in other words, the “decline” of agriculture, or the symbolic capital of agriculture, resembles closely a result of dynamics of the factors above, instead of a natural inevitability of “development”

Reference:

Figure 27. Nomura's Food Vulnerability Index (NFVI) and its sub-components

Rank	Country	NFVI	GDP per capita Current prices US\$	Household spending on food % of total consumption	Net food exports (% of GDP)	Rank	Country
1	Bangladesh	101.5	497	53.8	-3.3	41	Colombia
2	Morocco	101.3	2769	63.0	-2.1	42	South Africa
3	Algeria	101.3	4845	53.0	-2.8	43	Serbia
4	Nigeria	101.2	1370	73.0	-0.9	44	Czech Republic
5	Lebanon	101.2	6978	34.0	-3.9	45	Lithuania
6	Egypt	101.0	1991	48.1	-2.1	46	Guatemala
7	Sri Lanka	101.0	2013	39.6	-2.7	47	Slovakia
8	Sudan	100.9	1353	52.9	-1.3	48	Poland
9	Hong Kong	100.9	30863	25.8	-4.4	49	Singapore
10	Azerbaijan	100.8	5315	60.2	-0.6	50	Kuwait
11	Angola	100.8	4714	46.1	-1.4	51	UK
12	Romania	100.7	9300	49.4	-1.1	52	Israel
13	Philippines	100.7	1847	45.6	-1.0	53	Japan
14	Kenya	100.7	783	45.8	-0.8	54	Italy
15	Pakistan	100.6	991	47.6	-0.4	55	Thailand
16	Libya	100.6	14802	37.2	-1.7	56	Hungary
17	Dominican Rep	100.6	4576	38.3	-1.1	57	Sweden
18	Tunisia	100.5	3903	36.0	-1.1	58	Finland
19	Bulgaria	100.5	6546	49.5	-0.1	59	Germany
20	Ukraine	100.5	3899	61.0	0.9	60	Spain

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