

ORGANIZATION

Society for Community Organization

CAUSE

Housing for the Urban Poor

CAGED

in the

CITY



Aerial view of a sub-divided flat where a family of four live in cramped quarters.



A man occupies the lowest bunk of caged homes stacked atop each other.



Ho Hei Wah (center, in white T-shirt) facilitating a discussion with Leung Chun Ying on housing issues at a public forum organized by SoCO in March 2012.

When he was only 18, Ho Hei Wah already had a desire to do something different with his life. The capitalistic world in Hong Kong did not interest him. Behind the city's glamour and glitz, he saw a hidden world, one where the poor lived like caged animals in wrought iron cages and coffin cubicles.

In land-scarce Hong Kong, where demand has outstripped supply, skyrocketing property prices have forced the urban poor to seek indecent housing options. Nearly 20 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, their plight further exacerbated by the widening income disparity between the rich and the poor. Regarded as one of the wealthiest countries in the world, Hong Kong also has the dubious honor of having the highest Gini coefficient¹ in Asia and among developed countries.

Ho was a young volunteer when he had his first eye-opening experience with caged dwellers. Now, a veteran social activist, he leads as the Director of the Society of Community Organization (SoCO), advocating for the rights of the urban poor.



LAB RATS IN THE CITY

It was a sweltering summer in June 1978. Ho Hei Wah, then a young social worker,² stepped into a dingy room in Sham Shui Po, one of the poorest districts in Hong Kong.³

He was hit immediately by a wave of suffocating heat. The temperature inside the room was at least 2-3°C higher than it was outside. Although all the windows were wide open, there was no breeze. The smell of stale sweat, mixed with the putrid stink of unclean clothes, permeated the room. Around 20 floor-to-ceiling metal mesh cages lined whatever space there was in the cramped and fetid room, each stacked atop another, sometimes three cages high.

This was not a zoo, where animals were kept in cages. Instead, it was an apartment where the urban poor lived in the caged homes. Ho had heard about these rented bedspaces,⁴ but he never imagined that the living conditions would be so appalling. The inhabitants reminded him of rats caged in a laboratory, except this was no experiment. The residents were not subjected to any tests or trials but, like lab rats, they were “trapped,” with little or no choice but to remain where they were.

An old gentleman, clad only in his underpants, sat smoking. Ho ventured to ask him why he continued to stay in such atrocious, roach-infested living conditions. The old man wiped a trickle of sweat from his brow. “What choice do I have? This is all that I can afford. Yes, it is hot and smelly, but it’s better than sleeping on the street. I tried to apply for public housing years ago, but I’ve given up hope. I’ve been waiting more than five years already, but I’ll probably move from this cage to my coffin before I get to the front of the queue for public housing.”

The old man’s despairing demeanor, the stench of stale human sweat and the cramped cages remain etched in Ho’s memory. This poignant encounter with the “caged populace” in Hong Kong opened his eyes to a world of which he was previously ignorant.

It made him feel ashamed and reinforced his fervor to fight for the rights of the poor.⁵

That was more than 30 years ago. Ho, now Director of SoCO, continues his fight for the “unseen” and “unheard” in Hong Kong.

THE HIDDEN HONG KONG

Hong Kong, glitzy and glamorous, is home to the rich and famous in Asia. According to a recent Citibank survey, one in every 10 local residents is a millionaire.⁶ Hong Kong ranks third in Asia, after heavyweights China and India, as having the highest number of billionaires.⁷ With the mega-rich making this landlocked island their playground, it is no wonder that property prices and rents have been pushed to stratospheric heights in recent years.⁸

Beneath the gilded affluence, the city has a darker, hidden side—a side no one likes to talk about, one that many hope remains unseen. Hong Kong’s caged homes, sometimes referred to as “coffin homes,” have created a housing scandal in Hong Kong.⁹ They are where the poor live—in the older, shabbier housing districts of Sham Shui Po, Wan Chai, and Tai Kok Tsui, far from the plush malls and six star hotels. In a country that boasts more Louis Vuitton shops than Paris, it seems unthinkable that such inhuman, squalid accommodation exists.¹⁰ But it does.

The Hong Kong government’s Office of Licensing Authority categorizes caged and coffin homes as “bedspaces” and both come under the Bedspace Apartment Ordinance. According to this ordinance, a landowner may partition his flat to create a “bedspace apartment” and lease 12 or more bedspaces under individual rental agreements. The landowner will need to comply with the lease conditions and safety requirements in order to receive an approved license. What this means is that the Hong Kong government, by controlling the number of bedspace apartment licenses, has direct control over the supply side of the caged homes equation.

A caged home is typically a metal cage, measuring 16 square feet, just sufficient for a single body to lie in.¹¹ It is impossible to stand within such a cage unless one has rented the topmost cage, which has more vertical space, but is also the most costly. In this narrowly confined space, most residents prefer to sleep on thin linoleum sheets or bamboo mats placed on top of wooden planks. Mattresses take up too much space and are easy breeding ground for bedbugs. There is no additional personal storage space; residents keep all their belongings within the confines of their metal home.

A variation of these metal cage abodes is the coffin home.¹² Similar in dimensions to its namesake, it is an opaque wooden box that can fit a single body. But unlike the cage, it includes a lateral sliding door to allow its resident to slide in for the night's rest. Coffin homes are sometimes marketed as being better than metal cage homes because they offer more privacy. However, some find the coffin home claustrophobic and unbearable to live in especially during the humid summer months. Whether cage or coffin, the demand for such housing exists. In fact, over the years, it has progressively increased.

The need for this type of alternative housing began in the 1950s when Hong Kong was inundated with mainland Chinese migrant laborers. This, coupled with a surge in the local birth rate, exacerbated the demand for housing. The Hong Kong government started building public housing, but this was insufficient. As a result, entrepreneurial homeowners began to subdivide their rooms, providing cheap bedspace rentals to meet the mushrooming demand.

These migrant workers, typically single males, came to Hong Kong to work as coolies.¹³ With few or no possessions, they had no need for personal storage space. The caged home was ideal because all they wanted was a cheap place in which to sleep and rest before the next day's work. Communal toilets and kitchens

were also not an issue for them. As there was a confluence of low wage unskilled laborers in the older urban districts, this type of low cost accommodation tended to sprout in these areas.

In time, the situational demand for caged homes should have disappeared, or else possibly been legislated out of existence. However, due to the skyrocketing cost of accommodation and the continued lack of affordable public housing, the demand for caged houses has persisted. Today, the new faces of the caged residents are the unemployed, new immigrants, aged sick, mentally ill or disabled, ex-offenders, and other marginalized groups in society.

Exorbitant property and rental rates have made caged homes the only viable housing option for the urban poor. With the country's Gini coefficient at an all-time high, the rich-poor divide has reached unhealthy levels in Hong Kong.

GINI OUT OF THE BOTTLE

The Gini coefficient is commonly used to measure income disparity between the rich and the poor. It plots the proportion of the total income of the population that is cumulatively earned against the bottom income of the population.

The value of the coefficient is between "0" and "1." A country with a coefficient of "0" has perfect income equality, with everyone having exactly the same income; whereas a nation with a coefficient of "1" has the greatest inequality where one person earns everything and while everyone else has no income. A coefficient of 0.4 is regarded by statisticians as warning signal for dangerous levels of inequality, potentially leading to social unrest.¹⁴

According to the World Factbook,¹⁵ Scandinavian countries such as Sweden (0.23), Denmark (0.25), and Norway (0.25) have the lowest income disparities. At the top end of the scale, African nations rank the highest on the Gini Index with Lesotho, South Africa, and Botswana topping the inequality charts at 0.63. What comes as a surprise is that Hong Kong has the highest Gini (0.54)

of all developed countries in the world, higher than the US (0.45), UK (0.32), and Australia (0.30).

In the Asian context, Hong Kong leads the Gini pack, ahead of Thailand (0.54) and Sri Lanka (0.49). Singapore, Hong Kong's long-time rival in both wealth and poverty, trails slightly behind with a coefficient of 0.48.¹⁶

Historically, Hong Kong's Gini has been above the 0.4 high watermark ever since the government began tracking this data in the early 1970s. The inaugural reading of the coefficient reported by the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD) in 1971 was already at a high of 0.43. However, what worries the government's statisticians is that the Gini has continued on an upward trend over the past four decades. In 1996, the Gini breached the 0.5 mark at 0.513 and has remained above this ever since, peaking at a high of 0.54 in 2012.¹⁷ It seems that ever since Hong Kong's Gini was let out of the bottle, it has been hard to rein in.

In recent years, the burgeoning gap between rich and poor has become a political flashpoint for the government.¹⁸ The past Chief Executive, Donald Tsang, acknowledged that he had failed to adequately address the city's wealth gap. To his credit, Tsang did establish the Commission of Poverty (CoP) in 2005 to avert a poverty crisis. However, his government's piecemeal implementation of the Commission's recommendations,¹⁹ his tight purse strings,²⁰ and his belief that welfare would drain the coffers led to the CoP being shut down after just two years.

In his defence, Tsang said he was guided by the principle of trickle-down economics: "making the economy grow, making the pie grow bigger—and through the trickle-down effect, every level of society benefits." Regrettably, Tsang learned the hard way that "practice and theory aren't the same thing."²¹ By focusing on the growing the top line, he may have lost sight of the bottom line: the welfare of the people who had voted him into office in the first place.²²

WHAT'S IN A LINE

Another line that Donald Tsang staunchly resisted was the poverty line. While many developed countries have defined national poverty lines, some countries such as Canada, Singapore, and South Korea have not. There is, however, a general acceptance of the World Bank's definition of the poverty threshold of US\$1.25 per day.²³

Prior to 2012, there was no official quantitative measurement of poverty in Hong Kong. Unlike his predecessor, the current Chief Executive, Leung Chun Ying, has made concerted efforts to address the issue. One of the first things he did when he came into office was to reinstate the CoP and task it to help the government better understand the real poverty situation in Hong Kong.²⁴

On September 28, 2013, the CoP announced Hong Kong's first official poverty line, defining it as "half of the median monthly household income of all domestic households in Hong Kong, prior to government intervention like tax and social benefits transfers."²⁵ For 2012, this translated to HK\$3,600 (US\$464) for a single person, HK\$14,300 (US\$1,844) for a mid-size four-person family, and HK\$15,800 (US\$2,036) for a family of six and above.²⁶

By firmly drawing the poverty line in the sand, the CoP was able to quantitatively report that approximately 1.3 million people, or 19.6 percent of the population, lived below the poverty line in 2012. This number falls to 1.01 million or 15.2 percent after government welfare interventions such as the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance are factored in.²⁷ The CoP report also revealed that over 50 percent of the poor population comprises economically active households, with at least one full-time worker within each family. This indicates that the poor in Hong Kong are not sitting idle, simply living off welfare handouts. Yet, despite their efforts to be gainfully employed, they remain, systemically, unable to make ends meet.

At the same time as the cost of living has continued to rise in Hong Kong and the economy has boomed, low-wage income has stagnated. A large portion, almost 30 percent, of their income goes towards paying for housing. After deducting costs for accommodation, transport, and daily living expenses, there is little or nothing left for savings.

Before he entered office, Leung visited some of the poorest communities in Hong Kong. According to Ho, who had helped to organize some of these walkabouts, Leung seemed genuinely concerned about the plight of the poor. During his maiden public address as the new Chief Executive, Leung articulated his commitment to work towards the alleviation of the poverty. He reaffirmed his pledge to focus on two key areas, namely the high cost of property, and the lack of public housing to meet the rising demand by Hong Kong's poor.

HOUSING HONG KONG'S POOR

According to SoCO, close to 100,000 continue to live in Hong Kong's caged homes²⁸ and the figure more than doubles if other sub-standard housing such as roof-top squatters, illegal industrial building tenants, sub-divided flats, and cubicle units are taken into account.

Rent is notoriously high, even though these dwellings are small and cramped. It is not uncommon for a tenant to pay HK\$1,500 (US\$193) a month for his metal cage. For slightly more space, rental is 30 percent more or HK\$2,000 (US\$258) per month for a roof-top shanty, or HK\$2,700 (US\$348) for space within an old factory building. Those with families typically need more room—they typically fork out HK\$3,000 (US\$387) for a sub-divided flat. Measuring four by seven feet, approximately double the space of an iron cage, this is usually shared by a family of at least three members. Beds double up as benches for meals as well as tables for schoolwork.

Hong Kong is the most expensive place in the world to rent a luxury apartment, with an average unfurnished 3,900-square-foot, three-bedroom apartment in a popular part of the city costing HK\$88,759 (US\$11,440) per month.²⁹ This works out to approximately HK\$23 (US\$3) per square foot.

In other words, the poor pay a great deal more on a unit basis for their accommodation compared to the rich. The rental of HK\$1,500 (US\$193) for a caged home works out to approximately HK\$93(US\$12) per square foot rental, or four times the rate of the luxury apartment. Although it may be accepted in property circles that smaller properties command higher rentals on a per square foot basis, when the rental rate difference is four times more for substandard accommodation, and rent for the poor makes up some 40 percent of the income of the cage dweller, the inequity becomes that much more stark.

The Hong Kong Housing Authority (HKHA) estimates that around 2.09 million people (approximately 30 percent of the population) currently live in the 766,300 units available within the Public Rental Housing (PRH) stock of flats.³⁰ As at March 31, 2014, the PRH waiting list contained 248,100 persons, with an official expected waiting time of three years for general applicants and 1.6 years for elderly one-person applicants.³¹ However, the official expected waiting time does not match up to the experiences of the man on the street, as many of those who are aged above 40 have been waiting over 20 years.

The lack of supply of public housing to meet rapidly increasing demand is often cited as one of the key factors for the prolonged waiting time. Though Leung had indicated his commitment to address the housing supply issues, supply remains limited. In the 2014 budget, he announced plans to build 470,000 new units over the next 10 years. While this is a turnaround from the previous government's approach, many remain skeptical. Property observers foresee infrastructure and policy challenges

ahead and anticipate that results will not be evident before 2020 at the earliest.³²

On the demand side of the equation, the wait time for public housing is sometimes prolonged because of the complexity of the application process. Eligibility for public housing is strictly controlled by criteria set by the HKHA. There are also different housing schemes and a plethora of requirements against which each applicant is ranked according to HKHA's scoring system. While information on the public housing system is readily available through the HKHA website and offices, it is often not understood or misunderstood simply because the target public housing applicant is largely illiterate. Many of those who qualify for public housing are ignorant of their eligibility, unaware of their benefits entitlement, or simply oblivious to their housing rights.

In this respect, SoCO has long been working at the grassroots level to help people understand the laws and their corresponding rights. While the organization advocates for equal rights for all people in general, a large proportion of its work is in the area of housing since housing issues loom large in the lives of the Hong Kong poor. For decades, SoCO has not only lent a listening ear, it has also played a significant role in fighting for the rights of the underprivileged to be served.

FIGHT FOR EQUAL RIGHTS

SoCO was established in 1971 by a group of clergymen and lay people concerned about the rights of the poor and the underprivileged.³³ At that time, Hong Kong was experiencing an unprecedented economic boom and the then colonial government grappled with the influx of immigrants—boat people, resettlement residents, and squatters—all hoping to carve out a better life, only to find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty.

From the start, SoCO fought for equal rights for all people and campaigned for a fair and just social system. The early pioneer

members advocated respect for human dignity and endeavored to give voice to the needs of the poor and destitute. This thrust continues to guide SoCO's work today.

As a nonprofit and non-governmental community organization, SoCO's primary focus is to ensure that people—especially the uneducated and illiterate—understand their basic rights. It established a Civic Rights Education Center that disseminates information on the right to work, to vote, to have access to education, to family reunion, and to apply for public housing and welfare benefits. But beyond this basic remit, SoCO supports the underdog, those forgotten or even shunned by society such as prisoners, the mentally ill, boat dwellers, and even mainland Chinese brides.

SoCO creates awareness of their plight and provides platforms where their voices can be heard. "Awareness," Ho affirms, "is the first and necessary step towards understanding and empathy." One of its most visible campaigns is the annual photo-exhibition on Hong Kong's poor housing that is held in conjunction with Hong Kong's Artwalk charity event.³⁴ The plight of cage and cubicle dwellers, captured visually in photographs, has helped to focus public conscience on the harsh reality of the housing issue.

SoCO's strength has always been its work at the grassroots levels to build a sense of civic responsibility within the community, and for the community. Over the years, it has assisted over 1,000 low-income cage home residents to obtain public housing allocations, and successfully lobbied for priority allocation for elderly cage home residents as well as a relaxation of the urban housing allocations.

But beyond housing, SoCO has also made significant contributions in other human rights areas, including lobbying for free education for underprivileged mainland children and for prisoners to have the right to vote. One of its most noteworthy achievements is the recent "win" against the residency requirement for welfare benefits.

A government edict had mandated that immigrants had to be resident in Hong Kong for seven years before they were entitled to welfare benefits. It did not matter whether they had been actively employed and contributing to the Hong Kong economy before that time. During this period, a new migrant would have had to seek other options to survive and live until he or she received a Hong Kong identity card.³⁵

SoCO's fight on this front has been controversial as there is a strong sentiment against the "invasion" of mainland Chinese. A SoCO staff reports receiving death threats and abusive online insults for his work.³⁶ In a landmark ruling in April 2014, the Court of Appeal in Hong Kong overturned the "seven-year residency requirement" as being unconstitutional, declaring that the requirement was in breach of Article 36 of the Basic Law, which guarantees that every citizen shall have the right to social welfare under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme.³⁷

After advocating on this front for so many years, Ho feels enormously vindicated.³⁸

VOICE FOR THE POOR

Dubbed the "Voice of the Poor," Ho has, through the years, campaigned tirelessly for the underprivileged in Hong Kong. Although he was born into an affluent family, he lived through a period when he was desperately poor.

As a teenager, he apprenticed at his family's jade factory, but quickly realized that he had no interest in inheriting his family's jewellery business. He found the courage to voice his aspirations. However, after a disagreement with his father, he left home, supporting himself with odd jobs, working as a construction labourer, a waiter, and as a dishwasher to make ends meet. These experiences opened his eyes to the hardship and helplessness faced by the destitute. It challenged him to fight for equal rights for all in society.

When Ho started with SoCO, he began at the lowest rungs of the organization, learning the ropes and working his way up slowly. He spent hours at the grassroots level, understanding the social issues impacting the poor in the community. These early years enabled Ho to be well connected with the people. As a result, he is respected for his authentic understanding of the Hong Kong social landscape. Now, as he serves as SoCO's director, he brings to the table not only a solid empathy for the poor, but also a strong connection with the government and the press, which often look to him for perspectives on the real situation on the ground. This has certainly helped his advocacy work. Under his leadership, SoCO has proven to be a vigilant watchdog on government policies, while providing research and data to effect social change.

On housing rights, SoCO shares surveys and analyses, providing data on rentals, cage dwellers, coffin cubicles, cock-lofts, and sub-divided flats. Control measures and interventions to address the issue of inadequate housing, however, are slow. The government, which also controls bedspace apartment licences, appears reluctant to implement immediate measures to realign in the skewed property market.

Ho recognizes that the issue of poor housing in Hong Kong is multi-faceted and not easy to resolve, even as he and SoCO continue to fight. It remains to be seen whether Leung's government will deliver on its promises.³⁹

"I HAVE A DREAM"

A quintessential characteristic of visionaries is their ability to inspire, arouse and motivate the people with their dreams. In 2012, Ho was asked to imagine a Hong Kong 15 years hence. This is what he shared:

I have a dream that all cage homes will have disappeared into the dustbin of history. No more reports about cage homes will be carried on the front pages of international media. Those living...

in inadequate housing will be housed with dignity and humanity. The waiting time for public housing will be shortened...

I have a dream that no more old people will stretch out their hands begging for newspapers from the passengers near the turnstiles at MTR stations, no old people will have to kowtow for a coin from strangers, no old person will have to hang around on the streets or in an alley searching for cardboard to earn a living, and that all the elderly in Hong Kong will enjoy universal retirement protection...and no one will have to worry about his living after retirement.

I have a dream that no parents of mentally retarded people need be frustrated about the care of their children after they pass away. The government will respect the rights of the disabled...

I have a dream that all old people in the final stage of their lives will stay in a clean, secure living environment with good ventilation, privacy, and no foul odours filling their rooms. Our neighbourhoods will respect the disabled and the elderly with love and care as a civilized society.

I also dream that the enthusiasm of Hong Kong citizens for democracy and human rights will remain unchanged and that they will show even more concern about the human rights situation on the mainland.⁴⁰

Ho went on to address the challenges of education for the next generation, and the ageing population. In particular, he urged professionals and government officials to maintain “their professionalism and integrity in the course of serving the community.”

He ended by affirming his love and commitment to Hong Kong. “Hong Kong is the place where I grew up and where most of my family members are living. My memories are here. The underprivileged that I serve are also here. As we are all in the same boat, I have never thought about leaving Hong Kong.”

It takes courage to publicly articulate such a lofty vision and even greater fortitude to pursue it. Ho continues to inspire others

not just with his dream but in working alongside the poor and underprivileged, as he and SoCO seek to build a better, more caring, and equal Hong Kong. ■

BRIEF FACTS

HO HEI WAH

- 1970 Left the family's jade business, worked odd jobs and volunteered with the Christian Industrial Committee fighting for laborer rights
- 1978 Worked as personal assistant to Dr Ding Lik Kiu
- 1981 Joined SoCO as a staff member
- 1988 Appointed Executive Director of SoCO
- 2005 Appointed member of the first Commission of Poverty
- 2013 Reappointed as member of the revived Commission of Poverty

AWARDS & RECOGNITION

- 1997 *TIME* Magazine's 25 Most Influential People in Hong Kong
- 1998 Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Honors Bronze Bauhinia Star Medal

HONG KONG AT A GLANCE

LAND AREA	1,108 sq km or 428 sq miles
POPULATION	7 million
GDP	US\$290.9 billion or US\$40,169 per capita
ETHNIC GROUPS	Chinese 93.6%, Filipino 1.9%, Indonesian 1.9%, Others 2.6%
RELIGIONS	Eclectic mixture of local religions 90%, Christian 10%
LANGUAGES	Cantonese, English, Mandarin, other Chinese dialects, Others
GOVERNMENT	Limited democracy
CAPITAL	Hong Kong

ENDNOTES

- 1 Also known as the Gini Index or Gini Ratio, the coefficient was named after its inventor, the Italian statistician Corrado Gini.
- 2 Ho Hei Wah's first encounter with the caged populace was part of his work for Dr Ding Lik Kiu, the then Chairman of the Society for Community Organization (SoCO). Dr Ding tasked Ho to investigate the rights and welfare of elderly cage dwellers who were about to be evicted from their homes. His work for Dr Ding later led him to join SoCO as a permanent member of its staff. For details on SoCO, refer to <http://www.soco.org.hk>.
- 3 This quotation, together with other anecdotes in this chapter, has been adapted from discussions with Ho Hei Wah.
- 4 A "bedspace" refers to "any floor space, bed, bunk or sleeping facility used or intended to be used as sleeping accommodation for an individual." This definition is taken from the "Bedspace Apartment Ordinance" developed by the Hong Kong Office of the Licensing Authority, <http://www.hadla.gov.hk/en/bedspace/>.
- 5 Ho's foray into human rights advocacy began in the late 1970s when he was a volunteer with the Christian Industrial Committee (CIC), helping casual workers understand their labor rights. At that time, riots led to curbs on labor unions and workers were not well organized, and ignorant of their rights.
- 6 According to the Citibank's "Hong Kong Millionaire Survey," Hong Kong had a record 732,000 millionaires in 2013. This is based on the number of people with HK\$1 million or more in liquid assets in the form of deposits and mutual fund investments, stocks and bonds. If property and other fixed assets were included, the 732,000 millionaires would each have an average net worth of HK\$12 million. See Imogene Wong, "Number of HK Millionaires Hits High," *Standard*, March 19, 2014, http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?art_id=143579&con_type=1.
- 7 China has 157 billionaires with a total net worth of \$384 billion, India has 103 billionaires whose net worth is \$180 billion, while Hong Kong has 75 billionaires whose total net worth stands at \$224 billion. See "Top 10 Countries With the Most Billionaires," Rediff Business, November 7, 2013, <http://www.rediff.com/business/slide-show/slide-show-1-top-10-countries-with-most-billionaires/20131107.htm#8>.
- 8 According to the World Records Academy, the most expensive luxurious property sold to-date is a five-bedroom duplex flat on the "68th floor" of the 46-storey apartment building that sold for HK\$439 million (US\$57m), equating to US\$9,200 per square foot. See "Most Expensive Apartment—Hong Kong Flat Sets World Record," World Records Academy, October 21, 2009, http://www.worldrecordacademy.com/business/most_expensive_apartment-Hong_Kong_flat_sets_world_record_90382.htm.
- 9 Caged and coffin homes are defined as rental "bedspaces" by Hong Kong's Office of Licensing Authority. Bedspaces are typically the "housing

of choice” for the urban poor in Hong Kong because they are most economical to rent. There are various other types of accommodation such as cocklofts, cubicles and sub-divided flats (for families). For the purpose of this chapter, the metal caged homes are used to represent the range of very low cost housing options since it is the lowest, cheapest option available to the urban poor in Hong Kong.

- 10 Michelle FlorCruz, “Hong Kong’s ‘Shoebbox’ Apartments: Slums, But More Expensive Than New York,” *International Business Times*, December 18, 2012, <http://www.ibtimes.com/hong-kongs-shoebbox-apartments-slums-more-expensive-new-york-photos-948926>.
- 11 The height of a caged home varies on whether the tenant has rented a bottom, middle or top cage. The bottom and middle cages are usually three feet in height, allowing the inhabitant to sit up within the cage. The top cage, which is also the most expensive, will reach up to the ceiling.
- 12 The size of a standard coffin is 84 inches long, 28 inches wide, and 23 inches deep, which would typically fit an average person’s body which is about 60 inches (6 feet) long, 18 inches wide, and 6 inches high.
- 13 The term “coolie” refers to a low wage daily paid worker, typically unskilled, who is engaged to perform manual tasks. The term has connotations of a racial slur against people of Asian descent who provide cheap labor.
- 14 “Social Harmony Part 2,” UNHabitat, http://www.unhabitat.org/jo/en/inp/Upload/105655_part%20two%201-2.pdf.
- 15 “The World Factbook,” Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2172rank.html>.
- 16 Like Hong Kong, Singapore has had a Gini coefficient above 0.4 ever since it started monitoring this data. In 2007, Singapore’s Gini peaked at 0.482, but it has never breached the 0.5 mark. In subsequent years, there has been a downward trend with the Gini tracking along a 0.47+ mark. However, there was a significant drop in Singapore’s Gini from 0.478 in 2012 to 0.463 in 2013. After government transfers are factored, Singapore’s Gini is further reduced to 0.412 based on 2013 data. The marked drop in the Gini may be attributed to various interventions by both government and the social sector agencies, such as, institutionalizing minimum wages, jobs creation initiatives, changes to housing policies, and social security savings (Central Provident Fund) utilizations as well as leveraging social agencies to provide subsidized goods and services for the poor in Singapore. See Statistics Singapore, “Key Household Income Trends, 2013,” http://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/publications_and_papers/household_income_and_expenditure/pp-s20.pdf.
- 17 “The Gini Coefficient of Hong Kong: Trends and interpretations,” GovHK, Half Yearly Economic Report 2012, <http://www.hkeconomy.gov.hk/en/pdf/box-12q2-5-2.pdf>.
- 18 The Umbrella Movement and Occupy Central civil disobedience campaign in 2014 are some examples of social unrest that has recently shaken Hong

- Kong. While both were triggered by a call for universal suffrage and electoral reform, some have commented that the underlying factors are linked to dissatisfaction with the government.
- 19 “Position Paper on the Reinstatement of the Commission of Poverty,” Oxfam Hong Kong, August 14, 2012, http://www.oxfam.org/hk/en/news_1920.aspx.
 - 20 Olivia Chung, “Tsang Keeps Purse Strings Tight,” *Asia Times Online*, October 16, 2009, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China_Business/KJ16Cb02.html.
 - 21 Te-Ping Chen, “Tsang’s Exit in Hong Kong Marred by Scandal,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303836404577474313122249478>.
 - 22 Donald Tsang was unpopular for his anti-welfare stance. One observer went as far as to comment that Tsang “hates poor people.” His problems were compounded when scandals about lavish indulgences broke four months before the end of his second term as Chief Executive. Tsang had allegedly taken pleasure trips on private yachts and planes owned by tycoons, enjoyed free stays in luxury hotels, and secured a sweetheart rental deal for his retirement apartment at a fraction of the fair market value. The Legislative Council charged him with serious dereliction of duty for accepting advantages or extravagant entertainment without making any declaration. Tsang refused to resign, but ended his term under a cloud of investigation by the Independent Commission Against Corruption, and was barred from seeking a third term.
 - 23 The World Bank defined the global poverty line as being \$1.01 per day in 1990, based on 1985 purchasing power parity (PPP). The PPP corrects for exchange rate distortions to calculate the amount in goods and services that money buys in each country. This threshold was revised upwards to \$1.25 in 2008 based on 2005 PPP. However, based on the latest calculations of PPP, the number of people living below the \$1.25 a day is dramatically reduced from 1.2 billion people in the developing world to fewer than 600 million. These results have prompted the World Bank to consider revising its global poverty line from \$1.25 to \$1.75, the biggest increase in two decades.

Shawn Donnan, “World Bank Eyes Biggest Global Poverty Line Increase in Decades,” *Financial Times*, May 9, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/091808e0-d6da-11e3-b95e-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3AcOJ8ZOj>.
 - 24 Observers say that Leung had little choice in this matter. His move to approve the poverty line was a political compromise in the wake of growing tensions.
 - 25 “Hong Kong’s First Official Poverty Line—Purpose and Value,” GovHK, http://www.povertyrelief.gov.hk/eng/pdf/20130930_article.pdf.
 - 26 For a two-person household it is US\$993 (HK\$7,700), US\$1,844 (HK\$14,300) for a family of four and US\$2,036 (HK\$15,800) for a family

of six and above. The poverty line has limitations since personal assets and liabilities were not taken into account when drawing the poverty line.

The Commission of Poverty (CoP) made a conscious decision to define the poverty line based on relative poverty rather than absolute poverty as expressed in terms of basic subsistence. The CoP believes that poverty in HK cannot be understood merely by the lack of ability to afford minimum subsistence. Relative poverty acknowledges that the definition of poverty should move with the times and change with general living standards.

- 27 Compared to other countries which use the same poverty line formula, HK ranks favorably at 19.6 percent against the UK, the US, France and Korea. However, after welfare payments come into the equation, HK does not fare so well, with only the US (17.4 percent) topping the 15.2 percent indicating that HK's benefits are making little impact to alleviate the poverty situation. See Jennifer Ngo, "1.3 million Hongkongers Live in Poverty," *South China Morning Post*, September 28, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1319984/hong-kong-draws-poverty-line-13-million-living-below-it?page=all>.
- 28 "What is a Caged Home?" Society for Community Organization, http://www.soco.org.hk/cagehome2008/cage_bkg.htm#history.
- 29 Julie Zeveloff, "The 20 Most Expensive Places to Rent a Luxury Apartment," *Business Insider*, March 6, 2014 <http://www.businessinsider.com/luxury-apartment-costs-2014-3>.
- 30 "Housing," GovHK, <http://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/factsheets/docs/housing.pdf>.
- 31 The waiting time refers to the time taken between registration and first flat offer, excluding any frozen period during the application period. Examples of frozen periods are: when the applicant has not yet fulfilled the residence requirement; the applicant has asked to put the application on hold pending arrival of family members for family reunion; the applicant is imprisoned etc. See "Number of Applications and Average Waiting Time for Public Rental Housing," Hong Kong Housing Authority, <http://www.housingauthority.gov.hk/en/about-us/publications-and-statistics/prh-applications-average-waiting-time/index.html>.
- 32 "Hong Kong Government Promises Flood of New Housing Supply," *World Property Channel*, January 16, 2014, <http://www.worldpropertychannel.com/asia-pacific-residential-news/hong-kong-government-greater-supply-of-homes-home-prices-7891.php>.
- 33 SoCO was formally incorporated as a nonprofit, non-governmental community organization in 1972. It is independent from political parties and not funded by large corporations. It is funded by overseas churches, the Hong Kong government and Community Chest and individual donors.
- 34 Artwalk is Hong Kong's biggest annual charity art event where galleries all over Hong Kong open their doors and invite the public to come and

- admire their art works while enjoying free food and wine. Proceeds from the sale of tickets for the event as well as from the sales of the artworks are donated to charity.
- 35 “Cage Homes, Boardrooms and Suites Rented Research Report 2008,” Society for Community Organization, http://www.soco.org.hk/publication/publication_index.htm.
 - 36 Sijia Jiang, “Death Threats After Migrant Welfare Ruling,” *South China Morning Post*, January 18, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1407812/death-threats-after-migrant-welfare-ruling>.
 - 37 Eddy Luk, “New Migrants Win Welfare Battle,” *Standard*, December 18, 2013, http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?pp_cat=30&art_id=140706&sid=41156165&con_type=1.
 - 38 Ho also commented that the ruling might lead to an annual increase of 5,000 to 7,000 claims from new immigrants, adding HK\$750 million or 3.5 percent to the Hong Kong government’s annual welfare benefits bill.
 - 39 Emily Tsang, “Fight Never Over for Ho Hei Wah, ‘Voice of the Poor,’” *South China Morning Post*, October 8 2012, <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1056044/fight-never-over-ho-hei-wah-voice-poor>.
 - 40 “SCMP Debate,” *South China Morning Post*, June 25, 2012, <http://www.scmp.com/article/1004929/scmp-debate>. This article is a weekly series as part of the build-up to the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong. In this installment, Ho Hei Wah, along with four other long-time residents of Hong Kong, was asked to look ahead another 15 years into the future of the city.

