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Poverty in the midst of Plenty

Some people will tell you that living in a first-world city means luxury – if not wealth, then at least some measure of financial security. But big cities are often contradictions of the most mocking and ironical sort. These are conflicts between the traditional and the modern, the poor and the rich. These cities are layer upon layer of inconsistencies: the massive airports that are the tourists' first sight, in comparison to the rickety old trams that crawl through the streets; the gleaming glass-and-chrome of the looming skyscrapers and the flimsy tin sheds illegally built on the roofs of buildings as homes for the poor. In short, cities are irrational. They are places where the rich, with their nannies and maids, reside not so far away from the families living paycheck-to-paycheck, provided that they even have jobs.

This is poverty, and what makes it worse is that this is poverty in a city where there is a permanent façade of perfection and equality. Some will say that poverty in a place like Hong Kong is nothing like poverty in Zimbabwe or Haiti, or even poverty in Mainland China or Brazil. If you look at the incomes of these people or their living conditions, then this is irrefutably true. But poverty in Hong Kong is harsh because it seems so unreal, and this type of poverty makes Hong Kong look like two worlds, with not so much as a bridge between them. Hong Kong is one of the richest cities in the world, rivaling places like Singapore and London. And yet in Hong Kong, you see a welfare system that doesn't work, a government that does little to change anything and homes that are little larger than prison cells. Do Hong Kong people suffer that much, then? Not really, but comparing what they endure to the experiences of poor people in other rich nations and cities, comparing their poverty with the wealth of Hong Kong's elite, and this idea of "poverty", here and now, becomes bitter and particularly unfair.

Last year, the government, for the first time, admitted that poverty was a problem in Hong Kong. With reference to the newly-drawn poverty line, nearly 20% of Hong Kong's population can be classified as "poor". This number, apparently, ranks favourably compared to Britain, the USA and France, and is only worse than countries like the incomparable South Korea. This "good news" rankles when you take a step back and realize that Hong Kong is far smaller and richer than these countries, that it's not laden with billions of dollars of debt and doesn't have political opposition and filibustering with every new government policy. The irony is extended further when you realize that the government doesn't even have a policy to deal with this widespread poverty, that it seems to be determined to close its eyes and wish away the problems. Hong Kong isn't just a typical rich city with inequality problems: the root of the existence of this problem lies in the greed and blindness of everyday citizens and the government, and this is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Cage homes in places like Sham Shui Po attracted the ire of media organisations across the world last year. The phenomenon has been said to be unique to Hong Kong. Where else in the world would people live in grimy cages stacked on top of one another? The elderly, having outlived their use, are abandoned there by disgusted and moderately wealthy sons and daughters, and ignored by the government. These victims of elder neglect are living proof of poverty born of the greed of their own kin. The government makes token gestures of help, but this "help" is so meagre that it does next to nothing. Criticism has abounded of the government's welfare handouts, which, if it were your only source of

income, would enable you to buy little more than a loaf of bread per day after paying your rent. If eighty-year-old men living in dog-like cages is not a sign of poverty or at least rich world poverty, then is “true” poverty these old men and women dying for want of food? On the other end of the spectrum, there are government ministers owning subdivided flats, which are slightly superior equivalents of cage homes. The controversy made many call for the minister’s dismissal, but at the end of the day, little happened to change the situation. Cage homes and subdivided flats are against the law, but what has the government done? Poverty is exacerbated by the government’s inaction in a city well-known for its wealth and lack of corruption. Where has this wealth gone, then? Why can’t the government do anything to help the people who need it? Where did the concepts of income redistribution and social equality go?

Looking at Rufina Wu and Stefan Canham’s winning set of photographs, it becomes evident that in Hong Kong, the poor and the rich live, quite literally, side by side. But the differences in their lives are indescribable, and their geographical closeness is merely mockery of these differences. These are people that have suffered at the hands of society, trapped in a metaphorical cage of human indifference and government ineptitude, living in rambling tin sheds that the government threatens to pull down, without offering them the means to start a new life and prevent the same poverty from trapping their children.

Is there poverty in Hong Kong? The answer, simply put, is yes. Hong Kong is a rich city, an incredible place that is home to well-heeled professionals and some of the world’s richest people, who made their fortunes from other people’s poverty. There is poverty everywhere, but Hong Kong takes it to new extremes: it’s a ten-minute car drive from Central to Sham Shui Po, but one is home to the upper classes of Hong Kong, and the other is reserved for the people who only have enough money to pay for a rabbit hutch.