

Rethinking Sanitation Workers in Hong Kong

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Abstract: Taking up one of the least paid and recognized jobs in Hong Kong, sanitation workers are placed at the lowest social stratum. Poor working conditions, exploitation, discrimination, and lack of labour rights all seem to be closely associated with them. The research project tries to explain the causes behind such picture by looking at the impact of neoliberalism and the stigmatization of waste. With the accounts of the workers, it seeks to understand their agency in taking up the work and how they negotiate with themselves. In the workers' eyes, sanitation work may not be as negative as we assume. Their accounts thus help to suggest how the existing picture of sanitation workers can be re-conceptualized.

Introduction

On the night of Christmas Eve, a young man decided he would not go to party at Lan Kwai Fong, but for the first time in his life, took up a broom in Tsim Sha Tsui to experience the work as a street cleaner. During his six hours of work, the biggest difficulty was to find a useable toilet. He was rejected by the security guards of shopping malls, who dismissed him because of the uniform he wore. The sense of inferiority struck him, and he was furious. He decided to write his experience down as a tribute to the workers, who, in his eyes, “sacrifice their self-esteem” in order to make a living (Apple Daily 2013b).

This personal account appeals to us with its sentimentality. It calls for our immediate sympathy, and demands our respect for the actual street cleaners without much critical thought.

Reviewing the newspapers in the second half of the year 2013 alone, we see reports of sanitation workers protesting against cleaning companies for unpaid severance payments (Apple Daily 2013a). Some workers were reported as being forced to change their clothes in public due to the absence of changing rooms (Sharp Daily 2013). Survey results revealed the lack of resting places for workers at workplace (Headline Daily 2013). In addition to the young man’s experience above, they all seem to present an identical picture: poor working conditions, exploitation, discrimination, and lack of labour rights. However, do they really constitute the whole picture of the working life of sanitation workers? Or do they serve to confirm our perceptions of such image? More importantly, how do the sanitation workers themselves view the matter?

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What contributes to the low status of sanitation workers?
2. Why do they do what they do if such work is so negatively viewed? Do they have a choice?
3. What is the negotiating process when workers engage in their work?
4. What might the possible new conceptions of sanitation work be?

By “sanitation worker”, this paper is interested in those workers who handle trash in their everyday work. They are also commonly called as “cleaner”, “garbage man”, or “sanitary worker”.

Many studies have been conducted on sanitation workers across the world, with various approaches and focuses. From 1969 to 1972, the sociologist Edward Walsh worked part-time as a garbage man in Michigan in order to examine the influence of sanitation work on the workers’ self-esteem (Walsh 1974). A more recent ethnographic work was conducted by Robin Nagle, an anthropologist in residence in the Sanitation Department in New York. She took up the job as a sanitation woman so that she could have a fuller understanding of the life of the sanitation workers as well as the sanitation system in New York (Nagle 2014).

This paper is inspired by their works. There is a lack of ethnographic accounts of sanitation

workers in Hong Kong. Publications by unions tend to focus on the objective working conditions of the workers, such as the potential physical danger for outsourced workers in the public housing estates, and the chemical hazards and occupational health in the workplace (see Hong Kong Women Workers' Association and Occupational Safety and Health Council 2003; Cleaning Workers Union and Hong Kong Workers Health Centre 2010). Therefore, a more detailed account of the insiders' view in the context of Hong Kong will be insightful.

Introduction to the Fieldsites and the Sanitation Workers

For the collection of the ethnographic data, participant observation and interviews were conducted at two sites. The first one is at a street station in Wan Chai District. The second one is in a public housing estate in the Southern District. Cleaning services are outsourced in these two areas. There are differences in the work organization and job nature between the two places, and thus the study of these areas can contribute to a more diverse if not comprehensive picture of the sanitation workers in Hong Kong. In addition, the two cases allow us to have a glimpse of how the cleaning sector is actually at work in Hong Kong.

Before the analysis is unfolded, the two research sites and the major interviewees will be briefly introduced here.

Street Cleansing in Wan Chai District

My first visit to the workstation in Wan Chai District was in November 2013.

Mr. Ng used to work as a general manager in one of the largest contract cleaning companies in Hong Kong. He quitted his job 2 years ago to work in other sectors. Back then he was in charge of 1,100 staff from several large districts, and the Wan Chai District was one of them. He introduced me to the workstation and Mr. Kan. Mr. Kan is in his 60s. He has been a contractor (判頭) in the Wan Chai District since 2003, and he has been in the cleaning industry since 1997. Through both Mr. Ng and Mr. Kan, I was given a more precise picture of the running of street cleansing.

The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) is responsible for the public cleansing services, such as street cleansing, waste collection, gully cleansing and the management of public toilets. Some of these services are contracted out to cleaning contractors (Food and Environmental Hygiene Department 2014). Street cleansing in particular is arranged and outsourced on the basis of different districts. In the Wan Chai District alone, there are around 200 sanitation staff working under a single contract cleaning company. Cleansing over a large district is organized systematically. For instance, in the Wan Chai District, it is further divided into multiple small areas. Each area has a workstation where the workers take

attendance, store tools and rest. Some of the workstations are public refuse collection points (公眾垃圾收集站). Some are temporarily constructed. Each area is headed by a contractor, and under him there are the sanitation workers. Each worker is assigned a specific route, or “beat”, as they call it using the police terminology. These routes do not overlap. The workers are responsible for sweeping the streets, littering the bins, and removing posters that are on their beat. When designing the routes, contractors’ decisions are made based on the factors like how busy and how dirty the streets are; how much time it takes to finish a beat; and the number of workers in a team.

Every sanitation worker is required to wear uniform and staff identity card during work. Contractors need to transfer the related information of the employed workers to FEHD. As the department is responsible for monitoring the cleansing work and handling complaints, all the workers should be identifiable.

The workstation I visited is a temporary construction under a highway bridge. It is situated amidst the high-rise commercial buildings. An area is enclosed with wooden boards, wires and bamboo sticks. The inside is rather spacious, storing all sorts of tools. There are also several chairs to sit on. Not many pedestrians pass by the area. Only the busy traffic causes much noise.

Comparing with other busy parts of the Wan Chai District, the area that this workstation is responsible for is considered cleaner and easier to handle. The buildings nearby are mostly for commercial use. The trash dumped by people is largely trivial stuff. However, when getting closer to the Lockhart Road and Hennessy Road, the types of waste become more diversified. The Wan Chai District is a packed district with shops, bars, commercial and residential buildings. Household waste and construction materials can often be found dumped on the streets. Sanitation workers would then need more effort to handle them.

At the time of my visit, six sanitation workers of the above mentioned workstation were working under Mr. Kan on the morning shift from 6:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Mr. Kan was also responsible for the management of sanitation workers in the nearby public toilets. However, since their job stays separate from that of street cleansing, it will not be closely examined in this paper.

Among the six workers of the workstation, one is Chinese, one is Thai and the other four are all Nepalese. In the past decade, Mr. Kan experienced increasing difficulties in hiring people. He commented that fewer and fewer local Chinese people are willing to take up the job except for those who have passed the retiring age and are still in need of making a living. The positions are gradually filled by people from different ethnic minority groups: first by the Thai and now increasingly by the Nepalese. These people usually do not speak Cantonese and therefore cannot find other jobs that demand a certain degree of proficiency in the language. Sanitation work is one of the limited choices for them since it is largely a lone job and communication is not essential.

On 16 February 2014, I was invited by Mr. Kan to visit them during the Standard

Chartered Hong Kong Marathon. It is an annual big event. The running route starts from Kowloon. It crosses the Western Harbour Tunnel, passing the Central and Western District and Wan Chai, and ends at Victoria Park in Causeway Bay. On that day, most of the sanitation workers in Wan Chai District were given special duty to standby at the water station. Not only the workers led by Mr. Kan, other workstations also sent workers to the water station. There were about 15 workers when I was there. Their job was to clear away any trash or paper cups on the route, but it only took a few workers to do it. The rest was left idle. However, their major job duty did not really start until the Marathon was over. They had to clear the streets in a short time so that they could be reopened to traffic.

There are some other special events like the Marathon, such as the annual firework show during the Chinese New Year, and the demonstrations that usually start in Causeway Bay and pass through Wan Chai to the government offices in Central. On such occasions, the sanitation workers need to standby and clear up after the events.

Mr. Chan: “We Outsourced Workers Don’t Have Power”

I interviewed Mr. Chan, who is the only Chinese worker during my first visit. He is in his 70s and is the oldest among his colleagues. He used to work as a contractor in the construction industry. He changed his job because he could no longer acquire a license from the insurance company due to his old age. He then started to work as a sanitation worker through the introduction of Mr. Kan. He was first stationed in a public toilet and later turned to street cleansing. It is now his 4th year in the cleaning sector. Mr. Chan’s contract is slightly different from his colleagues, for his working hour ends 1.5 hour earlier. This arrangement was made out of the consideration of his age and lack of stamina. At the time of the interview, the government was consulting the public on the waste charging policy. Mr. Chan was eager to share with me his opinions on the issue. He believed the policy would only lead to more waste on the streets, as people may dispose their trash in public places in order to avoid being charged. In addition to the policy, he also complained about the lack of power of the outsourced workers to enforce the law. To him, this is a cause for environmental pollution, as the workers cannot stop the people from littering. Mr. Chan in general was concerned with government policies. However, he did not think he was in a position to change or voice out anything. His role as a sanitation worker was rather passive. He focused more on getting his own work done.

Juni: “We Nepalese Love to Clean”

During my second visit in February 2014, I was able to interview Juni, a Nepalese sanitation worker in her 30s. She speaks fluent English and very basic Cantonese. Therefore, the interview was conducted in English. Juni is a cheerful woman who has been living in Hong

Kong for 8 years. She is a Hong Kong permanent resident and her husband is a local Hong Kong man. She has a 14-year-old child. Juni had been a sanitation worker for more than a year at the time of the interview. Before that, she worked as a cook in an Italian restaurant. In her previous job, she earned HKD15, 000 a month, which was much higher than she is earning now. But she disliked the stress the job brought her. She earns about HKD9, 000 as a morning-shift sanitation worker, which is not enough to support her life in Hong Kong. The rent already costs her HKD8, 000 per month. Therefore, like her co-workers, she has a second cleaning job. She cleans in the Central District at night, which is just next to the Wan Chai District, and thus is more convenient. Juni was first introduced to the job by her Nepalese friends who are also her colleagues now. She is devoted to her work, and she finds satisfaction in seeing the places clean. She feels pitiful that other people especially the local Chinese are reluctant to do the cleaning work. She said that someone has to help keep the places clean. Surely there are difficulties. The cleaning work is hard and tiring, and she has to cope with the changes of the weather. Some people are also rude, who addressed her as “garbage woman”. However, she dismisses them by thinking that despite being insulted, it does not mean that her heart is made of garbage. There were moments that she wanted to quit her job, but her liking for cleaning always made her change her mind.

The Public Housing Estate in the Southern District

The cleaning service of public housing estates is categorized by the Hong Kong Housing Authority as part of the property management. For 60% of housing estates, the cleaning service is contracted out to property services agents alongside other property management duties (Hong Kong Housing Authority and Housing Department 2014). Shek Pai Wan Estate is one of these estates. It was established in 2007 and has a total of 8 blocks. About 60 sanitation workers were employed by the contractor to work here.

On the first Sunday of November 2013, I was arranged to meet with Mrs. Qin at noon during her lunch break from work. She alone for her shift was responsible for the cleaning of one of the blocks. Her job duties included clearing the trash from the garbage room on each floor of the building, mostly by dumping it through the garbage chute. For the trash that is too large to pass through the chute like furniture, she used a cart to carry it downstairs. Also, she was responsible for cleaning and sweeping the public areas such as the lobby and the lifts. Some other sanitation workers in the estate had different duties, such as cleaning the park, public toilets and loading the waste to the refuse collection vehicles.

On the ground floor of each of the block was a large garbage room. It was used for collecting trash, as well as serving as a storeroom for tools and a resting area for the workers. Sanitation workers take their attendance at the property management office several times of the day: start of a day’s work, end of the lunch break and end of a day’s work. For most of the time,

workers who are responsible for a block perform their duties alone.

I was given the chance to enter and to have a look at the garbage room in the block that Mrs. Qin was working. It was generally locked to prevent outsiders. The room was of considerable size. Huge garbage carts were placed at one end. The garbage chute that stretched vertically through the 40-floor building ended here. The end point of the chute hung in mid air. A garbage cart was placed underneath it to carry any trash that was dropped down the chute. The garbage room was largely organized. One corner stored the cleaning tools while the other was dedicated to all sorts of recyclable materials, including large hard paper boxes and newspapers. Mrs. Qin later told me that these materials were stored to be sold to the dealer from recycling company who comes twice a week to the public estate. In the middle of the room were chairs and a table for rest. There was a fridge, several fans and a washing machine near the entrance. These electrical appliances were discarded by the residents and then collected by Mrs. Qin. Mrs. Qin did her personal laundry here. Her clothes were hung to dry by the running fans. A slight stench permeated the room but it was not disturbing. After a while one got used to the smell.

Mrs. Qin: "Housewives need to care for their family first"

Mrs. Qin was in her 50s and she had been a sanitation worker for 10 years. Before that she worked as a construction worker. She changed her job so that she could look after her daughter who was in kindergarten back then. According to her, cleaning work was more flexible despite the low wages. It was not an ideal job for her but she persisted because of her family. She first worked in a housing estate that was under the Home Ownership Scheme (HOS). The estate was under the Hong Kong Housing Authority but managed by the owner's corporation. The cleaning services were out-sourced. She used to earn \$4,500 a month for working 8 to 10 hours a day. Following the enforcement of the minimum wage law in 2011 and later the raising of the minimum wage in 2013, her earnings also increased gradually. She felt great about the pay rise as she could spend more on her daughter's education.

Mrs. Qin also lived in Shek Pai Wan Estate. She found her current job in 2007 when she first moved in. At the time of the interview, she earned a little more than HK\$7,000 a month. On top of that, the job allowed her to gather recyclable materials like hard paper boxes and scrap metals. The selling of those materials gave her an extra income of around HK\$1,000 per month.

During her work she had encountered some disrespectful residents, such as those who refused to take the elevator with her because she was considered dirty and stinky. She did not really care about others' opinions of her, but commented that only those who had worked in

the industry would understand their difficulties as sanitation workers. Overall, she was still content with her job.

Mrs. Wang: "This Job Suits Me Best"

Mrs. Wang, a friend of Mrs. Qin, was also living and working in the same public housing estate. She had been a sanitation worker for nearly 7 years, starting with the establishment of the estate in 2007. This was her first full time position as a sanitation worker. Before that she worked temporary cleaning jobs like cleaning glasses and stairs and the job duties changed constantly. When she moved in, she saw the job advertisement and applied for it. The greatest advantage of the job to her was convenience. Being near to work could save her travel time and expenses. Mrs. Wang did not use love or hatred to describe her work. She emphasized that this job suited her. It suited her with its convenient location, friendly colleagues and familiar working environment despite it was hard and tiring. "If you would like to take up the job, then there is nothing bad about it". By that she meant that she would not complain about the job. She did not necessarily love or hate her work as a sanitation worker, and would not confine herself to the cleaning sector. She would take other opportunities placed in front of her that suit her best, including other jobs. She only concerned about herself and what suited her best, despite of others' opinions.

Neoliberalism and Contract Cleaning in Hong Kong

According to David Harvey, since the 1960s, neoliberal ideals that stress the hegemony of market and free trade have started to be held in high esteem and eventually overturned authoritarianism. Markets are deemed to be able to best regulate and utilize resources. In order to make the market function most efficiently, state intervention should thus be kept at minimum. Such mentality has led to "the financialization of everything" (Harvey 2007:33).

Britain under the rule of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s witnessed a large scale of privatization of public service. Such practice became a trend and has been practiced not only by governments, but also commonly by corporations in the form of outsourcing. It is under such circumstance that cleaning service is affected.

As cleaning is a subsidiary, non-profit-making activity that is relatively insignificant, it is contracted out to the third parties "with the goal of reducing labor costs both directly in terms of wages but also indirectly in terms of pension obligations and the outlay for other benefits" (Aguiar and Herod 2006:4). With outsourcing, cleaning services have been switched from being provided by employees of the firms to being supplied by outside parties.

In the edited volume of *The Dirty Work of Neoliberalism: Cleaners in the Global Economy* by Aguilar and Herod, the articles exemplify how neoliberalism has restructured sanitation work

in different countries. The common results are the “immiseration of workers” and “intensification of their work”, in other words, the ostensible creation of an increasingly vulnerable workforce (Aguiar and Herod 2006:4). As Aguiar describes in his study on Canada, cleaning work is being entrenched by the neoliberalized state into sweatshop work. As work organization is transformed from the Fordist model to neoliberalism, “economic and social risks of employment are more and more assumed by the individual worker” instead of by employers and the state (Aguiar and Herod 2006:12-13). Consequently, the economic and social positions of workers are worsened.

Sanitation Work in Hong Kong

The contract cleaning business has a long history in Hong Kong. It first started in the post WWII era when a large number of multi-storey buildings emerged for the growing demand of housing. This sparked a new demand for more systematic cleaning services. Small community-based businesses were set up for the new commercial opportunity. In the 1960s and 1970s, the continuous establishment of commercial buildings and the introduction of foreign cleaning companies in Hong Kong gradually led to the expansion and professionalization of the local cleaning industry. In recent decades, the contract cleaning business became more mature. Scales of companies range from big corporations to self-employed small businesses (Yan 2003:1-2).

As stated in the name, the provision of services of contract cleaning is centered on contracts. These contracts can be generally divided into five different types: commercial building contracts; residential building contracts; industrial contracts; government contracts; and household services (Yan 2003:6-7). The first four types can all be considered as outsourcing. The development and flourishing of the contract cleaning industry in fact is closely related to the trend of neoliberalism, which created a greater demand for outsourced cleaning services. This was most evident when the Hong Kong government had also started contracting out its services in the 1980s, embracing neoliberal discourse.

The Housing Authority was the first government department engaged in outsourcing. It started contracting out its sanitation and repairing services in 1987. Other departments followed shortly afterwards.

Records of the outsourcing of government cleaning services can be found in the record of a Legislative Council meeting in 1992. As stated in the record, one of the recommended improvement measures by the Secretary for the Treasury was “improvement to methods and procedures for street-cleansing in both Urban Services Department and Regional Services Department and proposals to contract out street-cleansing leading to significant increase in productivity” (Hong Kong Legislative Council 1992).

The Hong Kong government has always been proud of its core principle of “Big Market,

Small Government”. Hence, it is not difficult to understand the adoption of outsourcing and the neoliberal discourse in government’s policies. From a more recent government document by the Panel on Public Service, it can be seen how the government champions the benefits of outsourcing. As it states (Hong Kong Legislative Council 2011):

Local and international experience demonstrates that well prepared, implemented and monitored projects using the private sector can bring significant benefits to the Government and the community, including:

- enhanced service quality and value for money;
- increased capacity in the provision of new or expanded public services;
- strengthened civil service management focus on core services and effective resource utilization; and
- development of the wider economy, with the promotion of private sector job creation and development of experience and expertise.

The two cases examined in this paper are both relevant to the outsourcing by the government departments. Street cleansing services are contracted out by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD). On the department’s website it says, “The Department has continued to contract out street cleansing services for greater efficiency and cost-saving” (Food and Environmental Hygiene Department 2014).

As for the property management of public housing estates in which cleaning is inclusive, it is said on the website of Hong Kong Housing Authority and Housing Department that “Given the magnitude of our PRH (public rental housing) stock, we have to outsource the property management of some of our PRH estates to property services agents (PSAs) in a bid to enhance service quality and cost effectiveness” (Hong Kong Housing Authority and Housing Department 2014).

From the descriptions, it can be observed that the two government departments resonate on the benefits of quality, efficiency and cost effectiveness.

With outsourcing, government departments can reduce the number of hired civil servants, subsequently lowering the related expenses such as pension and paid annual leave. However, the reduction in cost is bore by the outsourced workers. As the profit-oriented contractors try to keep operational costs at minimum, job positions are changed from permanent to short-term to reduce labour related expenses. This means a decline in the working terms of workers, yet the government has already shifted the responsibility to the private sectors and can no longer be accounted for.

Because of such negative effects, there are voices criticizing outsourcing as a tool of capitalists to exploit the workers. A survey conducted by the Women Workers' Association in 1998 showed that sub-contract cleaning workers were mainly made up of immigrants, elder

people, and housewives who had few job alternatives. One of their limited options was to take up the cleaning work to earn the meager income (Chan 2004, 45). This evidently shows their lack of bargaining power, and it made them become more vulnerable in the labour market. The same survey also disclosed that the average wage of these workers was lower than the average ordinary level by HK\$1,000, with no statutory rest day and paid holidays (ibid.), which was undeniably an illustration of exploitation.

Comparing to the current situation, it can be observed that sanitation work is still mainly taken up by immigrants, elderly people and housewives. On the other hand, the working conditions have improved. A major objective of the introduction of the minimum wage in 1 May 2011 was to ensure the low-paid workers including the sanitation workers to get a reasonable wage. Before the drawing of the wage level at \$28 per hour, many workers were earning way below the level barely sufficient to feed themselves. However, even after the enforcement of the minimum wage law, they were still struggling for paid meal breaks and rest days by launching protests and demonstrations but to no avail (RTHK 2011). This shows the sweatshop nature of the sanitation work in Hong Kong.

Perceptions of Waste and the Status of the Workers

Sanitation workers and waste are closely associated with each other. Therefore, the understanding of how and why waste is produced, and how it is conceptualized and conceived, has a direct impact on the people who are responsible for handling them.

In her work *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas interpreted dirt as “matter out of place”. She argued that dirt is a cultural construction and a highly relative concept. How it is defined and classified is in fact associated with social relationships and the cosmic order. The manifestation of dirt makes visible and maintains the system of order (Douglas 1966). By extension, by examining waste in the specific context of modern capitalist society also illuminates the system of order in which waste is embedded. This is the system largely shaped by capitalist mode of production, consumerism and commoditization, as well as other cultural ideological factors.

Drawing on Karl Marx’s theory, the problem with the capitalist world is that people perceive the value of things from exchange, treating commodities as “fetishes” as if they contain intrinsic value, but concealing and distorting the value of labour behind. This is what he termed Fetishism. Increasingly the status of men is reduced to producers of commodities. The purpose of production is to earn profits through exchange. Subsequently the profit orientation leads to the problem of overproduction (Marx 1971). The modern society has developed ways to cope with overproduction: increasing commoditization and consumerism.

The two anthropologists Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai proposed that there is a “social life” to things, and that their value is culturally mediated and changes in different stages

of life. Commodity is one of the stages. Each thing can be a commodity or non-commodity at different times and in different states. Appadurai described this change of status from commodity to non-commodity or vice versa as a movement in and out of the “commodity phase in the social life of a thing” (Appadurai 1986:13). What is characteristic of the modern capitalist culture is that the commoditization process has expanded and accelerated (Appadurai 1986:15). In other words, there are more commodities in the market, and new commodities can be continually found.

Kopytoff commented: “In all contemporary industrial societies, whatever their ideologies, commoditization and monetization tend to invade almost every aspect of existence [...]” (Kopytoff 1986:88). In fact, what industrial societies have in common is nothing but their industrial, capitalist mode of production. This refers back to Marx’s theory of overproduction. Although different perspectives were adopted, it can nonetheless be ascertained that there is a close connection between overproduction and expanded commoditization. What they ultimately lead to is the increased consumption of commodities.

Susan Strasser in her book *Waste and Want* outlined the linear capitalist production system in which goods are continuously produced, distributed, consumed and ultimately disposed of. Waste is the endpoint to the consuming cycle. It serves to rejuvenate the cycle by stimulating new desires for new commodities after the old ones are discarded. As Strasser said, “Economic growth during the twentieth century has been fueled by waste”, which “made ‘perfectly good’ objects obsolete and created markets for replacements” (Strasser 1999:15).

To summarize, the drive to profit making has conjoined the mode of production with consumerism. Industrial production helps to spark off consumerist behaviour, in turn such behaviour fuels production. Waste is the final product, and a representation of the downside of the described linear system.

We are living in a time shaped not only by the consumer culture, but also by a disposable culture. Since we worship commodities like fetishes, when an object is withdrawn from the commodity phase, it can be easily rendered as worthless, and thus disposable, despite its remaining utility.

Strasser argues that disposability as a positive quality started to sprang out with paper collars since the 1860s. Disposable products came to represent convenience, cleanliness and labour savings. These qualities in turn are related to the ideal of America democracy. Disposable products contrast the old fashioned life with the life of efficient modernity, assuring people of abundance and freedom (Strasser 1999:268-269).

Gay Hawkins provided other dimension of how the disposable culture is manifested through the human-object relation. He channelled Karl Marx’s idea of Fetishism. Because human beings are alienated from the production of commodities, they are also disinterested about the life of commodities after they are finished with them. “The magical qualities of the commodity obliterate its origin *and* its final destination” (Hawkins 2006, 28-29). In other words,

we are alienated not only from the production, but also the disposal process of commodities. To be more precise, our waste habits in general are informed by the ethos of “distance, denial and disposability” (Hawkins 2006, 16). When a thing is deemed disposable and thrown out by a person, the relation between the thing and the person is then rejected and turned distant. The idiom “out of sight, out of mind” may describe the situation. Behind the waste habits is also the assumption that waste would be naturally taken care of. Once trash is disposed of it is no longer our business. In light of this, an effective and invisible sanitation system backs up the consumerist and disposable culture, for our ignorance of waste supports our continuous consumption.

To make a quick summary, the study of waste illuminates the system of consumerism and the linear cycle of production in which it is embedded. It also reflects a culture shaped by the ethos of disposability. A few points can be inferred from this background. First, we are producing a lot of waste at our times. Second, the assumption that waste would be taken care of is pointing to the invisible nature of sanitation work.

The field study by Mikael Drackner in Tacna, Peru offers a more empirical perspective to how waste is perceived. He argues that the concept of waste is a highly subjective notion. It is not solely dirty and filthy as normally held by most people, but can be viewed differently by different parties. He points out five different perceptions of waste. First, waste is seen as a risk to human health and environment. Second, waste is a social contagion which with its negative qualities also helps stigmatize nearby people and surroundings. Third, it is believed that garbage should belong to dirty places. Fourth, waste is viewed as an asset with economic value. Fifth, waste is regarded as someone else's problem. People easily shift the responsibility of trash management and its associated problems to others (Drackner 2005).

The above theoretical framework and different perceptions of waste are crucial to our understanding of sanitation work and subsequently sanitation workers. The negative connotation would especially be highlighted, and the attention would be put in Hong Kong.

From the broader level of sanitation work and waste management, one can note that the different perceptions of waste are at work in the context of Hong Kong. The issues surrounding waste management are repeatedly discussed in society in recent years, including the landfill extension and the waste charging policy under consultation. As outlined in A Policy Framework for the Management of Municipal Solid Waste (2005-2014) issued in 2005, the landfills will be full in the near future between 2011 and 2015 (Environmental Protection Department 2005). Waste in general is acknowledged by the government as a problem that needs to be solved, and hence the above two solutions were proposed. However, when the issue reached the public, different opinions were incited. While the public agrees with the acknowledgement of waste as a problem, this does not stop the generation of heated opposition in particular for the proposal of landfill extension from the affected residents.

Echoing Drackner's summary, the opposition is rooted in the views that waste is a risk to

health and environment; a social contagion; a thing that belongs to dirty places; and a problem of someone else's. The negative connotations of waste have caused people to be reluctant to share responsibility for the city's waste management. This is a central paradox revolving around the issue of waste. While most agree that the issue of waste needs to be solved, individual interests are put prior to the solutions. When the issue does not surface, people seem to be oblivious of it.

The situation on the individual level of sanitation workers is likewise. While waste is a thing that belongs elsewhere, it seems that it is also where the sanitation workers belong. Robin Nagle describes her New York co-workers in the sanitation department as the invisibles (Baker 2013). It seems that sanitation workers are entangled with displacement, their presence regarded as surreal or non-existent. Being part of the sanitation system, sanitation workers and their work are also fused with the character of invisibility. What they do is taken for granted by most citizens, leaving their work unrecognized and unappreciated.

What is worse than non-recognition is discrimination. Sanitation workers are stigmatized by waste. They are stereotypically called in Hong Kong as "the garbage man" (垃圾佬) or "garbage woman" (垃圾婆). These are not respectful terms, and they demonstrate the close association of sanitation workers with waste. Waste as a social contagion also marks those who are deeply engaged with it as unwanted, dirty and contagious.

All of the sanitation workers that I interviewed recounted experiences of being discriminated against by other people. Discriminations can be externalized verbally or through physical behaviour. For instance, Mrs Qin encountered some disrespectful residents in the housing estate, such as those who refused to take the elevator with her because she was considered dirty and stinky. Some used their hands to cover their noses even though Mrs Qin might not really smell.

Another example is from Mr Chan. He had come across contemptuous people in his work. For example, when he tried to persuade people not to litter on the streets, he met with scornful remarks, claiming that it was none of his business. In addition, some think that since clearing trash is the responsibility of the workers, they then have the freedom to litter the streets. This is a clear exemplification of the idea that waste is someone else's problem. Similar unpleasant experiences were shared by other interviewees as well.

Those people who hold a disdainful attitude towards sanitation workers often prejudice the workers by assuming that a proper person would never take up the job as a sanitation worker. They thus think that the workers are all indecent people. Mrs Qin had heard this comment of "好做唔做做執垃圾" spoken at her face. It means that doing sanitation is doing what one should not do instead of doing what one can do.

All of these illuminate the low status of sanitation workers in Hong Kong. They handle the large amount of waste that we produce every day. But since we are alienated from the disposal process, sanitation workers and their work are oblivious to us. Moreover, the negative

qualities of waste are transferred to the people. Waste is valueless, unwanted dirty, and so are these workers. Waste is invisible, and so are the workers.

However, as shown from all the interviewees' accounts, they have all normalized the discrimination and non-recognition experienced in work. They thought those negative feelings are also included in their wages. Both Mrs Qin and Mr Chan quoted a Cantonese phrase to summarize what they meant: “食得鹹魚抵得渴”. The literal translation is “those who eat salted fish must put up with the thirst”. In other words, discrimination and the low social status are the inescapable downsides one must bear as a sanitation worker.

Why Do They Choose Sanitation Work?

Under the negative influences of neoliberalism and the stigmatized status, the work as sanitation workers seems to be gloomy. At the beginning of this paper, I have proposed the following questions: Why do sanitation workers do what they do if such work is so negative and repulsive? Are they being pressured because they have no other options, or do they have a choice? What are we overlooking in generalizing and stereotyping their work?

Based on the interview results, I will try to argue that to the sanitation workers, there is in fact a negotiation process when they decide to join the industry and to stay in their positions. Such process is neglected by the outsiders and the general public at large.

It is problematic to examine the workers as they are completely subject to the neoliberal force, since this point of view neglects and undermines their agency. The counterargument to this view follows two lines of thought. First, contradictions exist within the criticism of neoliberalism. Although it is seemingly negative to the workers, in reality it may not constitute the whole picture. Second, there are other positive pulling factors at work alongside the neoliberal force that serve as incentives for people to start or continue working as sanitation workers.

The Real Scene Behind the Neoliberalism

Jesook Song in her research tried to capture the convergence of socialism and neoliberalism among the single leftist independent women in South Korea. Under neoliberalism, a labour market that has “the features of insecurity and flexibility” is created. These features become points of criticism for the independent women. On the other hand, these women are able to pursue a desired flexible lifestyle inside the labour market that they criticize. Song argues that it is more than a simple contradiction. She suggests that neoliberalism is difficult to be identified in daily life, as “the liberal ethos of pursuing individual freedom” is camouflaged by the “neoliberal logic of ‘plasticizing’ individuals to fit into unstable job markets” (Song 2009).

Although the case of sanitation workers in Hong Kong is drastically different from that of the independent women in South Korea, strikingly a similar overlap of neoliberal and liberal discourses is present. The accounts of the sanitation workers do reflect trends and impacts of neoliberalism, but they also shed light on the paradox within neoliberalism as illuminated by Song's study. The labour market under neoliberalism is fused with insecurity and fluctuations. However, it has become an ideal place for some to pursue a flexible or more desirable working life.

It is true that the job of sanitation worker requires low educational and technological level. It is also one of the lowest paid jobs in Hong Kong, hence making the positions easily replaceable. On the other hand, however, this can be put to the workers' advantage in reality, given the current environment in the labour market.

As the Hong Kong society is becoming increasingly intellectualized, fewer people are willing to take up the "lowly" jobs. Many industries are experiencing difficulties in hiring people to take up the vacancies. To people with limited educational and technological background, although they may not be able to advance upwardly in society and therefore are constrained to work in these jobs, they can actually choose to work at any one of these jobs.

The replaceable nature of the sanitation job also means it is not difficult to find job openings. To Mr. Kan, Mr. Chan and Mrs. Qin who all previously worked in construction sites, the cleaning industry was another possible but not the only option that could tolerate their aging bodies and declining stamina. Mrs. Qin expressed that she could have worked in a Chinese restaurant, but instead she had chosen not to because she did not want to work long hours. Mr. Chan also had a security guard license but he decided to settle as a sanitation worker. As a contractor himself, Mr. Kan observed this unique situation. He welcomed any people to apply for the job disregarding their previous job experiences. At the same time, he could not be certain that his workers would stay loyal to the job. He said that many of his previous workers had switched to the catering industry to wash dishes for higher salaries.

Apart from the choices across industries, workers also have choices regarding what position or where in the cleaning industry they would like to work. As Mr. Kan said, as a contractor he tried to be nice to his workers. No one wants to work under a rude and exploitative boss. If the workers dislike the boss they could just leave the job and easily find another one, since there are many job openings for sanitation worker.

Simply put, the advantage of the fluctuating labour market is that workers can easily come and go, choose the job they like or suits them best. They have choices across industries as well as within the cleaning industry.

One may question how the situation is different for the workers of ethnic minorities. The field site in Wan Chai is in fact an exemplification of the impact of global migration in Hong Kong. The kinds of jobs at the lowest stratum of the society that the local Hong Kong people would not do are filled up by ethnic minorities. Although the wage level is among the lowest

in Hong Kong, it may still be considered high comparing to what they can earn in their home countries. This constitutes a form of unfairness at a broader national level. However, how do the workers themselves view it? In terms of the salary, Juni's case is a unique example of downward mobility that she quitted her job as an Italian cook to be a sanitation worker. Yet, Juni did not view it this way. Sanitation worker to her was just like any other proper jobs. "We Nepalese love to clean". She felt pitiful that the local Hong Kong people would not do the job. She also held no regret for quitting her previous job as a cook.

It is a general belief that outsourcing helps to exploit the workers, displacing them from permanent jobs. The workers are employed by contracts that need to be renewed once every few years, which is linked to the larger contract between government departments and contracting companies.

For Mrs. Qin and Mrs. Wang, the contracting company had changed for several times during their 7 years of work in the public housing estate. The current contract that they were having would also terminate shortly. The contracting company had already told the workers that it would not tender for the next service contract due to the increasing operational costs. This means that Mrs. Qin and Mrs. Wang will experience another change of contracting company. But at the time of the interview, which was 2 months before the end of contract, they were still uninformed of the future. Despite that, they were not worried, since it is the common practice for new contracting companies to continue employing the existing workers.

The situation was the same in Wan Chai. Mr. Kan recounted several changes of contracting companies throughout his time in the Wan Chai District. When Mr. Ng was working for the cleaning company as general manager, one of his major responsibilities was to help draft and fill in the tender documents. He remarked that the competition in tendering was fierce. With the enforcement of the minimum wage law, the wage level of sanitation workers is now guaranteed. The cleaning companies then need to reduce expenses in other aspects when preparing for the tender. This shows that the minimum wage law has certain effectiveness in protecting the workers from exploitation. In addition, because of the law, the terms for the employment are not much different from one company to another. They all pay the workers near the minimum level. This serves as a stabilizing factor for the workers when the contracting company changes. It explains why Mrs. Qin and Mrs. Wang were not deeply concerned about the change.

Another important result from the examination of the sanitation workers' work is the notion of flexibility.

The contract of the workers is in fact negotiable, though it is only to a very limited extent and dependent largely on the needs of the contracting companies. To exemplify, Mr. Chan worked 1.5 hour less than Juni and the other 4 colleagues in the workstation. This was due to his old age. His work content was also adjusted accordingly with his beat being shorter and consuming less time than the others. In the case of housing estate, Mrs. Wang worked an hour

less than Mrs. Qin daily. This was related to the height of the blocks that they each were responsible for. Mrs. Wang's block has 30 floors whereas Mrs. Qin's is 40-storey high. Logically speaking, Mrs. Qin needed more time in getting her work completed and hence she had longer working hours. It may be possible for them to decide which contract they prefer when vacancies are available. Both Mr. Chan and Mrs. Qin championed the notion of freedom and flexibility in their daily cleaning work. When making such claim, they were comparing with their previous work as construction worker, which had a more rigid working schedule and longer working hours. Mr. Chan at the time of research was especially glad that he was able to finish work early and thus get the chance to rest afterwards. The factor of working hours can be considered the first level of flexibility.

The second level is associated with the independent nature and the more precise job duties of the sanitation work. Sanitation workers are mostly on their own, with no one constantly monitoring or guiding their work. This in reality allows them to arrange their own work. In the housing estate, it was the duties of Mrs. Qin and Mrs. Wang to clear the garbage room on every floor of the block and clean the public areas. There is no fixed time schedule for different duties. They exercised flexibility in how to get their work done within a working shift.

Street cleaning is largely similar. Every worker is required to complete a beat once in the morning and once in the afternoon. The workers are actually given more time than they really need in completing a beat. They can thus decide how to allocate and use their time. From what I observed, the workers preferred to complete their work early and used the remaining time for resting, having lunch or socializing with others back at the workstation. In the afternoon session, they often had completed their duties for the whole day but needed to wait until the official off time to end a day's work. An interesting episode related to this happened during my visit. I was talking to a Nepalese female worker about her lunch break. With her limited Cantonese, she managed to tell me that she had a two-hour lunch break. Mr. Ng besides me immediately jumped in and corrected her, warning her to be careful when disclosing such information. According to the contract, all workers only have an hour for lunch break. The female worker was probably too used to the extra time and got mixed up. This also exemplifies the freedom and flexibility enjoyed by the sanitation workers.

What Else Are Good About Sanitation Work?

To the interviewees, there are other positive factors associated with their work, and these factors can only be understood by the workers themselves. These factors are not unique to sanitation work, and to a large extent are varied according to different individuals' perspectives. However, they help to show that sanitation work is just like any other work, with its positive side and not just the negative side that is generally viewed by the public. The positive factors according to the interviewees' accounts are summarized below.

The first factor is proximity. The place of work being near to where one lives is an important consideration, especially for the workers who are earning only the minimum wage level. They try to reduce travelling expenses as much as they can. The working places of Mr. Chan, Mrs. Qin and Mrs. Wang were all within walking distance from their homes and they went to work by foot. Convenience is a quality they all championed. Mrs. Qin especially emphasized the importance of convenience to her. Her biggest concern was her daughter and this was what encouraged her to start working as a sanitation worker. She was able to go back home during lunch break to have a look at her daughter or prepare food for her. As she said, “a woman’s first priority is her family”. Apart from Mrs. Qin and Mrs. Wang, most of their colleagues also lived in the same housing estate or somewhere nearby. For the street cleaners, Mr. Chan himself lived in Wan Chai. But his Nepalese colleagues all lived in Jordan, where they made up a Nepalese neighborhood. Hence, proximity was an advantage only to Mr. Chan.

The second factor is good human relations. Just like other workers from other fields, sanitation workers can build up their own social networks within their working communities. One of the reasons Juni liked her job is that it enables her to be around her Nepalese friends. They could not speak English or Cantonese. Her presence therefore offered them much help. Juni also had good relations with other colleagues including Mr. Kan. Mr. Kan was tolerant if his foreign workers are simultaneously holding other jobs. He thought it was hard for them to leave their homeland to come to Hong Kong and strive to earn as much money as they can. Juni was grateful to have a nice and tolerant boss. She and her Nepalese co-workers even invited Mr. Kan to travel to Nepal and offered to be his hosts and guides. Mr. Chan was also close with Mr. Kan. Not only do they both speak Cantonese, but Mr. Kan has always been considerate about Mr. Chan’s old age and physical pains incurred during the long years of working.

Mrs. Qin and Mrs. Wang had also built up good relations with their co-workers. As Mrs. Wang put it, everyday when she went to work she greeted her colleagues and residents of the housing estate. The environment and the people had become familiar to her during the past 7 years. She had also built good friendships with her colleagues and she felt great that she was not bullied. In other words, if she ever decided to change her job, she would have to say goodbye to her friends. Although they work alone for most of the time, they could meet up and chat while taking attendance and during lunch breaks. Mrs. Qin remarked on her relations with the residents. Some of them were friendly and had grown familiar with her. When they had unused electrical appliances or recyclable materials, they would offer them to Mrs. Qin, who then willingly accepted.

These social bonding of sanitation workers with their colleagues, superiors and residents constitutes a form of social capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. He described social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”

(Bourdieu 1986:248). The membership as a sanitation worker and the networks it involve can bring material resources as in Mrs. Qin's case, and immaterial ones like the concerns and considerations Mr. Chan got.

The third factor is related to stress. Like flexibility stress is a relative concept and the interviewees were making conclusions with comparison to their previous work. Juni especially highlighted being free from pressure in sanitation work. She thought her previous job as an Italian cook was too stressful despite the salary was high. The customers had all sorts of complaints. She felt more at ease with her current job, which was not customer-oriented. She only needed to focus on getting her individual duties done and there was no tight time constraint or people to constantly pressurize her. This view was shared by Mrs. Qin. She thought she could do her duties in her own way and there was no pressure from her superior.

However, as a contractor Mr. Kan's situation was more complex. In his position, he needed to communicate and negotiate with the staff of the contracting company and officers from FEHD. If anyone filed any complaints about hygiene to FEHD, FEHD would then pressurize the contracting company or Mr. Kueng directly, who was responsible for ensuring a clean environment. In addition, the district council members and residents of the district may also have opinions on the cleanliness of the area. They constitute other sources of pressure. Despite these, Mr. Kan had his ways to handle them from his 17 years of experience. For instance, he taught his workers to focus on sweeping all kinds of trash but fallen leaves on streets. If anyone complained, he could explain that the leaves fallen again after the workers cleared the earlier ones. This is a tactful way to reduce the pressure of work.

On my visit to the Wan Chai water station during the Marathon, there are some interesting details. Most of the Chinese workers who were standing by were chatting, resting, or listening to the radio. But Juni and her Nepalese friends seemed particularly excited about the event. They clapped and cheered for the contestants. They seemed to be glad to have special events like this one to temporarily free them from the usual monotonous routine of work. Juni later confirmed this to me when recounting her experiences in clearing up after the firework show over the Victoria Harbour.

I also talked to Mr. Kan and other workers. They were discussing about the Marathon in previous year. Boxes of chocolates and bananas were left unwanted at the water station after the race was over. So the workers distributed them among themselves. Some workers also took a large pile of unused paper cups to sell to recycling companies. The workers were curious as to what kinds of materials they would find this year. These two instances are both examples of finding positive sides in a seemingly negative work.

Individual Negotiation and Resistance

The above analysis does not prove that sanitation work is wholly good, but nor is it

inherently bad as outsiders often think. It should be reminded that the workers also perceive negative sides to their jobs, namely the low wages, discrimination, having to work outdoors in hot summer and cold winter and under extreme weather conditions, handling unpleasant trash, physical exhaustion, and possible occupational diseases caused by long period of work, despite the fact that these has been largely normalized by the workers. Such normalization is both good and bad. On one hand, the negative sides seem to be rationalized and this in turn makes the workers less likely to resist. On the other hand, as Walsh discovered from his research on the garbage-men in Michigan, although sanitation work might be “dehumanizing”, “the human spirit is more resourceful and resilient than many academics think” (Walsh 1974, 181). Normalization is thus a way of self-protection.

The sanitation workers when taking up their work weighed the benefits against the shortcomings. For example, to Juni her friendships with her Nepalese co-workers compensated for the low wages. Or to Mrs. Qin, being able to take care of her family was more important than anything else. Every worker undergoes this individual negotiating process, taking the factors they believe are important to help them make the appropriate decision. They may choose to be sanitation workers, or work in the construction or catering industries instead. These are all decisions made after the negotiation process.

In light of this, it would be too simplistic to perceive the sanitation workers as powerless subjects under neoliberalism, although they are undeniably subjected to its influence. In fact, the close examination of the workers’ work discloses a trace of what James Scott calls “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985). When collective actions and organized measures such as strikes seem unlikely, workers can still engage in “everyday resistance” on an individual level. For example, how Mr. Kan articulated about evading sweeping the fallen leaves, the workers arranging time to create an extra hour for lunch, Mrs. Qin and Mrs. Wang using the working hours to collect recyclable materials for sale, and Mrs. Qin doing her personal laundry in the garbage room are all individual resistance. It would be impossible for workers to follow entirely every term in their contracts and every guideline by their boss. They have their own will and they try to maximize their benefits when they could. However, it is unlikely that these actions can change the structural problems.

Rethinking Sanitation Workers

While it may be the workers’ active choices to work as a sanitation worker, this does not hide the existential problems inhering in the work at our time. As illustrated in previous chapters, the sweatshop characteristic and low status of sanitation work in general are related to the neoliberalism inspired outsourcing and our perception of waste. These are structural economic and ideological problems, and they are interrelated. The major concern is how the value of work of sanitation workers can be properly recognized, both economically and

ideologically.

Sanitation workers are getting the minimum reward for their effort. The mechanism of the neoliberal market represses their wages to the minimum level, withdrawing from them welfare and benefits as these are non-existent to contract based jobs, and ultimately keeping them from prospering. Drawing on Marx, these sanitation workers are the manual labourers that do not profit from their work (Marx 1971). Their labour is exploited by other classes and even by the society at large for prosperity. For without their contribution, Hong Kong would be in chaos.

Massive and large-scale collective resistances are often the most effective way to press for changes and bargain for better conditions. However, in the current context of Hong Kong, the collective power is fragmented and diminished due to the difficulties in unifying and rallying the people. What is more pressing is that some workers have normalized their work and do not believe in their ability to bring changes. The prospects for a bottom-up resistance are thus dim. Unless these workers can be aroused, the structural economic problems can hardly be tackled.

Moreover, for a successful movement the support from the public is also crucial. While it is generally acknowledged that sanitation work is sweatshop work, not all agree that the reward for sweatshop effort should be increased. It is a complex problem that involves not only the interests of sanitation workers, but also businessmen and workers from other sectors. On top of that, it is an issue of power relations between classes, and a challenge to the existing market-oriented system. To overcome these problems and to convince the public of the salient need for a reasonable repay to sweatshop work, is pointing to the importance of a general ideological change in society to increase the status of sanitation work.

The value of work is not only quantifiable as reflected by the wage level. On another dimension, it is also symbolic and is linked to the general recognition of the public. We often take for granted our clean environment, with little consideration for the workers behind. This indifferent attitude renders the workers invisible. Furthermore, even though sanitation work is regarded as a low skill job, people forget that even a seemingly simple job can be fairly professional. The perseverance and stamina sanitation work requires especially are not possessed by all.

The case of Shi Chuanxiang (時傳祥) may be able to offer us some insights. As a night-soil collector who had hands on experience with the filthiest of stuff, he was selected as a model worker in communist China in 1959. Shi Chuanxiang became a household name after he was received by Liu Shaoqi, the then Chinese President. Liu told him: “For the work you do as a night-soil collector you are a true servant of the people. And as the state president, I’m also a servant of the people. This is just a difference in the division of labour in the revolution” (你掏大糞是人民勤務員，我當主席也是人民勤務員，這只是革命分工不同。)(Xinhua 1999). This not only is a public recognition of the significance and value of “dirty jobs”, it also renders “dirty jobs” as equally proper and honourable as any other jobs.

In 1990s, RTHK has a series of programs that documented people with different jobs. One episode was named “The Forgotten Group” (被遺忘的一群), featuring a pest controller, a sanitation worker and a night-soil collector. The theme was “respecting and enjoying work” (敬業樂業). The tone of the show was light and it conveyed positive messages, suggesting that the contribution of these people should be acknowledged, and to be able to stand what others cannot is indeed a profession (RTHK 1994). It is saddened to see that such messages have been proposed 20 years ago, but the situation is largely unchanged. Sanitation workers are still lowly regarded.

Perhaps new stimulants are needed to challenge our usual conceptions, and the ethnography of sanitation workers could illuminate what they are.

Within the domain of flexibility, some cleaning workers have chosen to engage in the recycling activity. It refers to the collection of recyclable materials and selling them off for small profits. Some studies on recycling practice have suggested it to be a challenge on neoliberal capitalism partly because of its formation of a new labour and a new class, and partly that recycling lies outside of the usual linear mode of capitalist production (Miller 2008). Drackner’s categories of the conceptions of waste can be applied here. Recyclable waste here is seen as an asset and a resource (Drackner 2008). The new value creates room for discarded objects to be re-conceptualized. Consequently the people involved in this new creation of value, such as the sanitation workers, may also be re-conceptualized.

For instance, Mrs. Qin and Mrs. Wang are eager in collecting recyclable materials. They consider it to be an environmental friendly practice. At the same time, they are contented by the extra earning recycling brings them. During my visit I heard them discussing about selling off several discarded second hand bikes which Mrs Qin found at work. They always exchange information about this “subsidiary business”. While they are responsible for clearing away garbage, they also have another self-imposed role in discovering value in unwanted trash. The meandering between the two roles challenges our usual conception of sanitation workers.

Indeed, sanitation workers are largely stigmatized by waste. We have a negative attitude towards the workers because we have a negative attitude towards waste. The division between those who dump waste and those who handle waste is so clear-cut in modern society because of the high degree of division of labour. Sanitation workers are those who handle our most unwanted and despicable stuff. What if the relations between workers and waste are transformed, and the roles of workers are redefined? The above case of recycling shows that workers can discover value in trash. They can also offer positive advices and solutions to reducing waste as Mr. Chan’s sharing of his views on the government policies showed. With their experience and expertise, they can be the consultants of the city’s waste management problem, but not passive machines that collect trash according to orders. Or they can be as simple as Juni, an ordinary worker who loved her job and found delight in it. Waste does not define her as a person.

In conclusion, how sanitation workers are perceived and treated in society is linked to the broader economic and ideological structures. It is unlikely that they can be easily shattered in the current context of Hong Kong. It is hoped that this study can provide a more detailed insider point of view to the issue to illuminate possible new conceptions, so as to bring changes.

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