

# *Heaven and Hell on Hong Kong's Rooftops*

Hong Kong's rooftop dwellers face eviction and an uncertain future  
By Vanessa Cheung, Charlene Kwan and Jeffrey Wong



Each step is getting harder as Mrs Wong and her five-year-old son climb up nine floors of stairs to their rooftop home. She came to Hong Kong from Fujian five years ago with her son and bought an illegal rooftop hut in a To Kwa Wan tenement for more than HK\$ 20,000.

However, she and more than 100 other residents of rooftop huts in the area are now being evicted from their homes by the Buildings Department.

It is hard to know exactly how many people live in rooftop huts. The last government census of rooftop huts was 31 years ago. However, the Society for Community Organisation estimates there were over 100,000 people living in substandard old

people's homes, bed spaces, cubicles, subdivided units, cocklofts and rooftop huts in 2010. Due to their transient residency patterns and illegal status, rooftop huts receive the least attention.

Living on a rooftop is cheaper than renting any other accommodation in the urban area but it is not easy to put up with the living conditions, especially with a preschooler and a baby. Mrs Wong says the unhygienic environment of the old building, and the lack of building management, have turned her rooftop into a breeding ground for rats, cockroaches and other insects.

"When can we live in a pretty house? It is dirty here," asks Mrs Wong's five-year-old son. His legs are covered in scratches



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and insect bites. Mrs Wong is sad. "There is nothing we can do. It's the environment. We can't change it."

While pests are a major annoyance, there is a more fundamental problem – the huts are constructed out of iron sheets and are too flimsy to provide proper shelter. On a rainy day, water seeps in from rooftops; on a sunny day, the huts are so hot that inhabitants cannot bear to stay indoors.

When a typhoon struck in August, Mrs Wong says sand and rain were blown into the room and she could not sleep. "We

needed to keep scooping the water out with buckets the whole night long," she recalls.

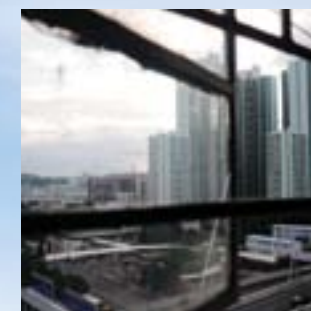
The eviction deadline has passed and Mrs Wong and her children may be evicted at any time. However, as they have not fulfilled the seven year residency requirements, they do not qualify for emergency public housing support.

"My only wish is to live in a public housing estate where I can have a more stable and secure life," Mrs Wong laments. She hopes her sons can grow up in a better environment, in a building with lifts. "My

son did not want to come back when we went to visit our hometown," she says. "He cried because his legs were in too much pain having to climb nine storeys."

But while many experience life on the rooftops as a hardship, some long-time residents have built their own urban oases on the roof and refuse to leave.

Grandma Wong (no relation to Mrs Wong), is 70 and has been living in rooftop huts in Mong Kok with her husband for 20 years. They have planted a herb and vegetables garden in the little space outside their





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huts and managed to make a comfortable home where they live with their children and grandchildren.

"I would have got a public housing flat long ago if I had applied, but I didn't leave so that I can plant vegetables here every year," she says firmly.

She is happy about living on the rooftop as most of her neighbours come from the same town. Every afternoon, children in the rooftop neighbourhood play and ride bicycles together along the corridor. "We know everyone here. We greet each other and share our food all the time," adds Grandma Wong.

Grandma Wong faces eviction too as her building is slated for redevelopment in urban renewal plans. She is reluctant to leave because she would have to pay more than \$1,000 in rent every month.

"A thousand dollars is enough for me to live on for 10 days. I don't have any income or benefits except fruit money. If I have to use half of it for my rent, how would I live?" she asks.

Some other residents insist on staying because they are dissatisfied with the relocation settlement being offered to them. Mr Wong (no relation to Mrs Wong and Grandma Wong), who has two daughters, says he will fight against the eviction order until the last minute.

Although he paid to buy his rooftop hut in Sham Shui Po five years ago, the contract he signed is legally worthless and the government does not recognise his ownership and will not compensate him. The rooftop dwellers in Mr Wong's neighbourhood took the matter to court to try to establish ownership. They ended up losing not just the case but also ran up huge debts because of legal fees.

Mr Wong has recently been offered a public housing flat in Tin Shui Wai after waiting for six years. However, as neither of his daughters have managed to get a school place





there, he is refusing to accept the arrangement.

“I am willing to move if my daughters can move to a new school there. But who would take care of my girls if we move to Tin Shui Wai? Who will take care of them when they are going to school in Sham Shui Po?” he asks.

Wai Woon-nam, the district councillor who has been following Mr Wong’s case for three years says the government is in an awkward position when it comes to offering support for the rooftop dwellers because their homes are illegal constructions.

“Most of these people spent tens of thousands of dollars of their savings on these flats, in the hope of having a haven. But it turned out to be a mistake. All of their blood and sweat has been spent in vain,” says Wai. He says the chances of every resident being offered public housing are slim.

The issue has become a hot potato, Wai adds, and none of the government departments are willing to handle it. Living precariously on the roof of the city, neither those who are desperate to leave their squalid surroundings nor those who want to hold on to their rooftop sanctuaries, know where they are going to end up or when they will finally have to leave. 🗣️

**Edited by Amy Leung**