

**Trading Trash and Creating Destinies:
Pakistani Community in a Second-hand Market
in Hong Kong**

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Abstract

This thesis examines a Pakistani community which is engaged in the second-hand market in a poor neighborhood in Hong Kong. It provides ethnographic details of how the Pakistanis make a living by collecting and trading used electrical items through co-ethnic networks within their group and through inter-ethnic networks among different groups. This thesis argues that the Pakistani community, rather than being disadvantaged as generally perceived, is in fact a very resourceful community which has formed a self-reliant ethnic economy to support the livelihoods of many country fellows, including those who are locally born, immigrants, businesspeople, “tourists”, asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. The second-hand market serves as an epitome of contemporary migration and transnationalism. Social actors from different ethnic backgrounds and with different migration statuses converge in this translocal site to help each other to make a living. Unlike traditional immigrants, many Pakistanis in this market are neither totally uprooted from their homelands nor incorporated into the Hong Kong society. The statuses of many of them are ambiguous and their migration trajectories are closely tied with global politics. Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of translocalities in many metropolises. By studying the everyday social interactions of Pakistanis in the market, this thesis will enhance our understanding of the social dynamics of minority groups in Hong Kong and also offer a glimpse on a spectrum of migration and transnational issues.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Being a global metropolis and a developed society, Hong Kong is famous for its economic prosperity. Nevertheless, Hong Kong is also well-known for its enlarging gap between the rich and the poor. While a group of people is enjoying the prosperity and living in extravagance, the lower strata of the society are struggling for survival. Sham Shui Po, the poorest district¹ in Hong Kong (Census and Statistic Department 2009), is well-known for being a centre of dwelling and livelihood for the grassroots. There is a large second-hand economy in which people collect used items such as electrical appliances, electronic goods and even clothing and shoes discarded by Hong Kong people, and resell them to other poor people in Hong Kong or export them to the less developed countries. Such a “trash” economy has been supporting the livelihoods of a large number of grassroots populations, including local Chinese as well as the minorities. Not only are local citizens working in this second-hand market, a large number of migrants, “tourists”, “transient migrants” and overseas businesspeople are also attracted to this market to look for jobs and business opportunities. This research studies a group of Pakistanis who are working in the second-hand electrical appliances market in Sham Shui Po. In this market, there are

¹ Historically, Sham Shui Po is one of the oldest urban centres in Hong Kong. In the early last century, many squatters were already built in the region. After the World War II, a large influx of refugees from mainland China came to Hong Kong and settled in Sham Shui Po. Since then, it has attracted many lower class groups to dwell in. To make a living, many of the old Sham Shui Po settlers started to engage in informal economic activities, such as street hawking, for a living. These economic activities still continue nowadays. The relatively shabby and old buildings in Sham Shui Po provide cheaper accommodations and the relatively flexible streets utilization provides more spaces for informal economies. This explains why Sham Shui Po still attracts lower class groups to dwell in and work.

Pakistani bosses, workers, traders and used items collectors, who can be local-born Pakistanis, immigrants, businesspeople on business visa, tourists on tourist visa or those who overstay their visas, asylum seekers, and even illegal immigrants. This research examines how this whole spectrum of Pakistanis makes a living through collecting and trading second-hand items, and enhancing their business through co-ethnic and inter-ethnic networks.

Pakistani is one of the South Asian ethnic groups in Hong Kong. An ethnic group is a group comprised of members who consider themselves and are considered by others as culturally distinctive (Eriksen 2002). Ethnic minorities, in a broad sense, refer to any ethnic group which forms less than half of the population of a society (Schermerhorn 1996; Eriksen 2002). Hong Kong has a population of over seven million and about 95% of it is Chinese. Although the minorities only constitute a small portion of the whole population, its figures have been increasing. Major groups are South and Southeast Asian including Filipinos, Indonesians, Indians, Pakistanis and Nepalese which accounts for 83.4 per cent of the whole ethnic minorities population, while Caucasians account for 10.6 per cent only (Census and Statistics Department 2007). Among them, South Asians have often been perceived as underprivileged in Hong Kong. A body of researches has centred on South Asians. Some examine their education situations (Loper 2004; Ku, Chan and Sandhu 2005); some focus on social exclusion and adaptation of South Asians (Sandhu 2005; South Asians Support Alliance 2007) while some others are concerned with their employment problems (Ku, Chan and Sandhu 2006). In short, most of the previous researches have stressed the South Asians' difficulties in social integration and adaptation, and recommended ways to assist them, such as providing more social

services and welfare. My research studies one of the South Asian groups, the Pakistani, from a different angle. Instead of assuming that the Pakistanis are underprivileged and need help from others to integrate, this research examines their work life and everyday interactions with the others, including the Pakistani country fellows, Hong Kong Chinese, mainland Chinese as well as people from other countries such as the Africans. This study is an ethnographic research on their everyday life in a natural setting which produces realistic and holistic data of this specific community.

Indeed, this neighbourhood in Sham Shui Po can be described as an “ethnic hub” since people from different ethnic backgrounds and with different migration statuses integrate and work together. Contrarily to the traditional point of view that migrants are those who uproot themselves from homelands and strive to incorporate into the receiving societies, the statuses of many social actors in the market are rather ambiguous. They come to Hong Kong through a myriad of channels - some through proper ways of immigration while others came with tourist visas and extend the visas for multiple times. There are also quite a number of them sneaked into Hong Kong and sought asylum protection upon arrival. This wide spectrum of migrants with regular or irregular status all converge into this market to find a living, mingle with one another, nourish their migration dream, and provide both financial and emotional support to each other. Although they live their everyday life in a poor locality in Hong Kong, socially they live in a very active transnational space. Constant phone-calls back home and to overseas business partners and exportation of second-hand goods elsewhere in the world have made this market a vibrant transnational social and cultural economy which is made possible through co-ethnic and inter-ethnic networks.

These close-knit networks involved Pakistanis who were locally born, regular immigrants who set up business, workers (on tourist visas) and asylum seekers who provide cheap labour, and traders who export the used items back to Pakistan. Studying this fluid community will shed light on future studies of other minority groups as well as transnational communities.

1.2 Research Objectives

This research examines the second-hand electrical appliances market in Sham Shui Po and the Pakistanis who are involved in this market. This thesis aims to serve two main purposes. First, it aims to enhance our understanding of Pakistanis, one of the stigmatized South Asian groups in Hong Kong, by providing an ethnographic study of their everyday interactions within the group and with other ethnic groups in the market. Second, it hopes to explore into the contested themes of contemporary migration and grassroots transnationalism by showing how a group of lower strata Pakistani minority work together in a “trash” economy which connects them transnationally back to their home country as well as elsewhere in the developing world. It also intends to enhance our understanding of the emerging varieties of translocalities and the social dynamics among Hong Kong’s multi-ethnic communities.

1.3 Research Questions

This research will tap the following questions: i) Who are the active actors in the second-hand market? ii) Who compose the Pakistani group in the market and what are their roles? iii) How do the Pakistanis interact with their co-ethnics and maneuver their ethnic resources? iv) How do the Pakistanis interact with actors from other groups? v) What are the future plans and thoughts of the transient migrants?

1.4 Significance of Research

The significance of this research is threefold. First, this research will enhance our understanding of the minority in Hong Kong by looking in depth into the livelihoods and everyday interactions of the Pakistanis. As to be shown in Chapter 4, the employments of South Asians, especially Pakistanis, are always associated with negative stereotypes. This study shows another dimension of the Pakistanis by examining a specific Pakistani community which is resourceful and self-reliant. Second, this thesis will provide a glimpse into the complexity of contemporary migration which features many “unsettled migrants” and “potential migrants”.

Third, in such a poor district in Hong Kong, I have found an extremely ethnically diverse, socially dynamic, and economically active community. The second-hand market in Sham Shui Po is a very culturally diverse neighbourhood which comprises people from different places and with different migration statuses. It can be likened to the ethnic enclaves in the inner city of New York or London (Mathews 2007). Many of these social outcasts have been conducting very active economic life and living in transnational social space and communications. Globalization and transnationalism do not happen only through big corporations and frequent air travel; they are also often intensively done through cheap ways by active grassroots migrant groups. This study finds it extremely interesting and insightful, and hopes to shed light on future studies of transnationalism, globalization and translocal minority groups.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This thesis is about a “lower” sector of ethnic groups which makes a living in the second-hand market in a poor neighbourhood in Hong Kong. They make use of their ethnic resources and social networks to provide a livelihood for a large group of country fellows. In the area of ethnic studies, many have discussed this form of ethnic economy. In the subsequent sections, I will elaborate why and how ethnic minorities come to self employment as well as its features. I will then briefly review the literatures on migration, and also look into the theories of transnationalism in order to provide a better understanding of contemporary ethnic minorities.

2.1 Ethnic Economy, Informal Economy, Ethnic Resources and Networks

Before reviewing the literatures, it is necessary to conceptualize some often used terminologies in ethnic studies. Very often the terms “ethnic minority”, “immigrant” and “migrant” are used interchangeably. However, their definitions are contestable. For instance, the term “immigrant” is commonly used in the United States to refer to foreign-born citizens, while in Denmark the terms “ethnic minority” and “migrant” are used interchangeably to refer to person who is from a visibly different ethnic group (Zegers de Beijl 2000). Yet, it should be noted that ethnic minorities are not always immigrants (Herring, De Valk, Spaan, Huisman and Van der Erf 2002). For example, the second or third generations of immigrants are not themselves immigrants but may still be considered as “ethnic minority”. Similarly, many people sojourning in other countries are yet to have a legal immigrant status but may also be considered as “ethnic minority”. In view of the complexity of this phenomenon, the term “ethnic

minority” is used in this thesis to cover people who are “racially and culturally different” from the populace regardless of their migration statuses (Romanucci-Ross, De Vos and Tsuda 2006:157). The following sections review the literatures on the general situation faced by ethnic minorities in the labour market, their participation in self-employment and informal economies, and ethnic resources and networking.

2.1.1 Ethnic Minorities in Labour Market

One of the most common theories in explaining the relationship between ethnic minorities and the labour market is the *disadvantage theory*. According to Aldrich, Jones and McEvoy (1984), ethnic distinctiveness is traditionally treated as a disadvantage and a barrier to participation in the larger society. The *disadvantage theory* argues that ethnic minorities and immigrants “have significant disadvantages hampering them upon arrival” because “they lack human capital such as language skills, education and experience, which prevent them from obtaining salary jobs” (Fregetto 2004 cited in Volery 2007:30). Light (2004) has distinguished two forms of disadvantage, i.e. *labour market disadvantage* and *resource disadvantage*. *Labour market disadvantage* refers to “when workers cannot obtain wage or salary employment that reaches the prevailing market return on their productivity” while *resource disadvantage* refers to when members “enter the labour market with fewer resources than others” such as human capital, good health, networks, and self-esteem (Light 2004:6). In their research on immigrants in Denmark and Sweden, Andresson and Wadensjö (2004:1) point out that “[i]mmigrants have a weak position in the labour market in most European countries...many have to rely on social transfer payments including social assistance”. However, some scholars point out that disadvantage and discrimination could push ethnic minorities and immigrants to self-

employment (Light 1972, 1979, 1984; Li 1976, 1979; Fregetto 2004). Discrimination and the lack of language skills as well as education make self-employment the only choice for survival.

A body of theories has centred on the relationship between ethnicity and economy. *Ethnic economy* refers to the “business structure created by an ethnic group within a locality, usually a metropolitan area” (Light and Karageorgies 1994; Portes and Jensen, 1989 cited in James 1999). Light and Karageorgies (1994) further defined ethnic economy as an income generating structure which consists of “the ethnic self-employed and employers, their unpaid family workers, and their co-ethnic employees”. A decade later, Light (2005:650) re-defined this concept as the combination of *ethnic ownership economy* and *ethnic controlled economy*. It is an economy which is owned and controlled by ethnic groups. In short, ethnic economy is different from the mainstream economy in the sense that its boundaries are shaped by ethnic group membership (Light and Karageorgies 1994).

Various theories and approaches try to explain how ethnic minorities become self-employed in the host societies. Some of the popular ones include *middleman minorities theory*, *ethnic enclave approach* and *cultural theory*. Edna Bonacich (1973) has developed the middleman concept to explain the effect of ethnicity in economies. The *middleman minorities theory* describes a group of ethnic minorities which usually engages in marginal trading businesses on the foundation of group solidarity. Their businesses are usually extensive enough to provide “a major source of livelihood for group members” (Aldrich et al. 1984:192). Bonacich (1973) argues that the sojourning orientation of ethnic group and the hostility of host society perpetuate the

reluctance of the ethnic group to assimilate completely to the host societies. Aldrich et al. (1984:192) added that even “in cases where return migration is unlikely, the sojourner mentality continues to influence the actions of group members”. Hence, ethnic minorities form a separated community due to social hostility. An example used by Bonacich (1973) is the Jews in New York who are engaged in clothing business. The *middleman minorities theory* is one of the most important theories in explaining ethnic businesses (Waldinger 1990). However, Waldinger (1990:400) criticizes the *middleman minorities theory* for presuming a “simple interaction between minority solidarity and host society antagonism” since the responses of the ethnic minorities and the host societies to each other vary. This theory has also been criticized for ignoring the social interactions among co-ethnics (Greve and Salaff 2005).

Alejandro Portes, his colleagues and students (Wilson and Portes 1980; Portes and Bach 1985; Portes and Manning 1986; Portes and Rumbaut 1990) develop the *ethnic enclave approach*. According to Portes and Bach (1985:203), ethnic enclave refers to a “distinctive economic formation, characterized by the spatial concentration of immigrants who organize a variety of enterprises to serve their own ethnic market and the general population”. Portes (1995:27) further defines ethnic enclaves as “spatially clustered networks of businesses owned by members of the same minority”. Different from the middleman minorities, ethnic enclave economy is diversified, spatial clustering and sectoral specialized. The *ethnic enclave approach* is rooted from the *segmented labour market theory* which suggests that there are two separate labour markets, i.e. primary labour market of good jobs and the secondary labour market of unskilled jobs (Heisler 2000). Ethnic enclave provides immigrants and ethnic

minorities an alternative to the secondary labour market. In their study of Cuban enclave in Miami, Portes and Bach (1985) find that the mass arrivals from Cuba to Miami provide the Cuban entrepreneurs in Miami with access to low-wage labour and consumer markets. Nevertheless, the *ethnic enclave approach* is not without criticisms. Greve and Salaff (2005) criticized this approach for only emphasizing social relations which are based on shared cultures but ignoring social interactions in other contexts. They also criticized this approach for tying the “ethnic boundaries to a locality” (2005:10).

Another popular theory explains ethnic economy from a cultural perspective. The *cultural theory* argues that ethnic groups or immigrants engage in entrepreneurial behaviours because of “particular cultural characteristics” (Light 1972; Waldinger 1986; Light and Bonacich 1988; Light and Rosenstein 1995; Li 1992, 1997 cited in Teixeira 2001:2057). This perspective emphasizes the contribution of cultures and values (Robichaud 1999 cited in Menzies, Brenner and Filion 2003). Ethnic groups equipped with “culturally determined features” such as dedication to hard work and acceptance of risk could facilitate ethnic entrepreneurship (Masurel, Nijkamp and Vindigni 2004 cited in Volery 2007). According to the *cultural theory*, particular traditional values and culture can explain the different self-employment rates among different ethnic minority groups (Teixeira 2001). One of the often cited examples is the hardworking and family/group mutual support characteristics of Chinese immigrants which facilitate Chinese ethnic businesses (Li 1992 cited in Teixeira 2001). The *cultural theory* is criticized for stereotyping certain ethnic groups and failing to explain the different self-employed rates of the same ethnic group in different societies (Chan and Cheung 1985:145 cited in Oliveira 2007).

The above theories and approaches could be generally categorized into structural and cultural perspectives. The structural perspective sees ethnic economy and entrepreneurship as an escape of discrimination while the cultural perspective sees cultural value as the main contribution. Some scholars point out that “there is insufficient emphasis placed on individual agency and decision-making in these models” (Brettell and Alstatt 2007:384). According to Barnes (2000), having agency is to possess internal powers and capacities which turn an individual to become an active entity when encountering ongoing events. Although social reality may constrain life chances, individuals can still oppose structures if they are endowed with agency (Musolf 2003). Using this concept, ethnic minorities are active agents who could take control of their lives.

2.1.2 Ethnic Minorities and Informal Economy

The livelihoods of ethnic minorities are closely related to informal economy. The concept of *informal economy* originally derives from the studies on urban labour markets in developing countries (Portes and Haller 2005). Geertz first introduced the term “bazaar-economy” to describe the economic activities of a group of population which are not absorbed into the modern capitalist sector; this group of people created their own employment system with survival as the main goal (Renooy 1990). During the 1970s, Hart coined the term “informal economy” (Hart 1973 cited in Portes and Haller 2005). For Kloosterman and Rath (2002), informal economy is any activities which aim at generating income but do not meet the requirement of legislation and regulations applicable to these activities. Despite the origin of the phenomenon in developing countries, informal economies also take place in the developed economic systems since the late 1970s (Renooy 1990).

Many ethnic businesses in the developed economic systems are involved with informal economy. In the research on the metropolises in the United States, most workers work under informal work arrangements are immigrants (Portes, Castells and Benton 1989; Portes and Sassen-Koob 1987; Sassen-Koob 1988, 1989 cited in Losby et al. 2002). According to Peberdy and Rogerson (2003), most of the immigrants who are engaged in the informal sector are involved in buying and selling, particularly on the street. In the informal sector, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers can often be found (Peberdy and Rogerson 2003). According to Kloosterman and Rath (2002:27), informal economies “provide immigrants – many of whom have difficulties getting access to regular jobs – with better economic opportunities”. Ethnic minorities and immigrants who lack educational qualifications and financial capitals are not able to find jobs in the formal sector. Therefore, they enter the informal sector due to its low entry barriers in terms of outlays of capital and level of education required (Kloosterman and Rath 2002). Some theorists believe that informal economy serves as a safety net for the poor (Ferman, Henry and Hoyman 1987 cited in Losby et al. 2002). For these theorists, the marginalized people participate in the informal economy as a survival strategy (Losby et al. 2002).

2.1.3 Resources and Social Networking for Ethnic Business

This section reviews literatures on how ethnic minorities employ ethnic resources which are embedded in their networks. Light (1984) distinguishes ethnic resources from class resources. Class resources such as means of production are available to only a segment of the group, while ethnic resources are available to all members of an ethnic group (Light 1984; Mobasher 2004). In other words, ethnic resources “endow an entire group, not just its bourgeois class (Light and Bonacich 1988). Light (1984:201) further defines ethnic resources as the “sociocultural features of the whole

group which co-ethnic entrepreneurs utilize in business or from which their business benefits”. Ethnic resources are used in all aspects of a business ranging “from raising capital, to recruiting labour, to dealing with customers and clients” (Mobasher 2004:298). The followings are some manifestations of ethnic resources:

Co-ethnic employees: The employment of co-ethnic employees could benefit ethnic businesses. In ethnic economy, employers may use “ethnic background as a screening factor” (Greve and Salaff 2005:9). According to Menzies et al. (2003:131), some advantages of using co-ethnic employees are that “they speak the same language, are part of the same culture and, if the customers are mainly drawn from the same ethnic group, can relate well to customers”. The use of co-ethnic employees can also enforce trust and safeguard business norms (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993 cited in Greve and Salaff 2005). Family is one of the co-ethnic resources. For overseas Chinese businesses, family linkages are often used (Perry 1999). It is because in Chinese society, trust and personal networks are believed to be the basis for business survival. Overseas Chinese businesses tend to employ family members to monitor the firms (Perry 1999). In his study of ethnic economies in Toronto, Teixeira (2001) also finds that both Black and Portuguese entrepreneurs rely heavily on family members to run the businesses.

Co-ethnic clients: Before the businesses grow to a certain size which can serve the wider market, co-ethnic clients provide a protected market for the businesses. Sharing similar characteristics such as language and cultural background could be an important factor to attract co-ethnic clients (Teixeira 2001). Teixeira (2001) finds that more than 50% of the clients of most of the black entrepreneurs in Toronto are from

their own ethnic backgrounds.

Co-ethnic financial sources: Personal and family members are the major financing sources for most of the ethnic entrepreneurs (Butler and Greene 1997). Because of having difficulties in borrowing loans from banks, such as lacking collateral, many ethnic minorities rely on informal financial sources (Menzies, et al 2003). In the research on Tunisians in Europe, Boubakri (1999 cited in Menzies, et al. 2003) finds that Tunisians have access to ethnically based commerce funds. Ethnic minorities often have “access to capital that is not available to non-members of the ethnic minority” (Menzies, et al 2003:134).

Yet, it should be noted that ethnic resources are embedded in a complex range of social networks. Greve and Salaff (2005) argue that ethnic resources may not be mobilized because of culture similarity but network structures. They explain that “we more readily trust the friend of a friend than we do an unconnected stranger, even if we seem to be of the same ethnic background” (Greve and Salaff 2005:11). Therefore, the studies of social networks in ethnic economies should not be limited to the social ties which are based on the same ethnic background but should extend to the ties with social actors from other ethnic backgrounds. Greve and Salaff (2005) suggest using a *social network approach* to understand ethnic economies. This approach argues that ethnic economy not only is a spatial concept but is also a set of social networks with different social and economic relations intersecting with each other. This thesis will base on this perspective to study the social networks of the Pakistani community in Sham Shui Po.

2.2 Migration and Transnationalism

As Romanucci-Ross, De Vos and Tsuda (2006) point out that international migration is responsible for the creation of many ethnic minorities in the contemporary world, it is necessary to review the literatures on migration in order to have a better understanding of ethnic minorities. As mentioned, nowadays the ethnic minorities have a myriad of migration statuses because they go to the other countries with different channels, including both regular and irregular channels. This section reviews the general phenomenon of migration, introduces the complexity of migration patterns and looks into the theories related to transnationalism. It will allow us to have a basic understanding of the Pakistanis to be studied.

2.2.1 Migration Pattern and Causes

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there are about 214 million international migrants nowadays (IOM 2010). However, migration pattern is more complex than this. Since many governments have enacted stringent immigration laws against migration in the contemporary world, migrants who have “dreams of a better life” may need to travel on irregular networks (Lupini 2006). “Irregular migration” is also known as illegal migration (IOM, 2008). However, some researchers like Koser (2005) argue that “illegality” connotes “criminality”, but migrants should not be regarded as criminals no matter how they enter a country. The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) estimates that there are 2 to 4.5 million irregular migrants per year which account for one third to one half of the world’s migrants annually (ICMPD 2004 cited in Koser 2005:9) while the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that irregular migrants account for 10 to 15 per cent of total migrants (ILO 2004 cited in IOM 2008:209). Furthermore,

refugees and asylum seekers are also migrants (Riera 2006). Apart from the “genuine” protection seekers, the lack of legal migration channels also causes some people to present themselves as asylum seekers when going to other countries (Pécoud and de Guchteneire 2006). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are about 377,000 new asylum applications annually in recent years (UNCHR 2010).

The causes for both regular and irregular migrations are similar (IOM 2008). Various models have been used to address the causes, including the neo-classical economic equilibrium approach, migration system theory (Sary 2007) and globalization approach (Marshall 2001). In regard to the neo-classical economic equilibrium model, the “push and pull” model is often referenced (Sary 2007). It suggests that migration is caused by push factors in countries of origin including poverty and lack of job opportunities, and pull factors in destination countries including higher wages. For irregular migration, migrants are often pushed by absolute poverty at home. Other people may leave their countries because of political instability (Joint Council for Welfare of Immigrants [JCWI] 2006).

Some literatures suggest the migration system and stress the linkages between sending and receiving countries (Sary 2007). This model puts that migration is the result of “historical relations between the sending and receiving countries, whether of a political, economic or cultural nature” (Snel and Staring 2001:17). Research shows that little migration, in particular the irregular one, can take place without social networks with families and friends because these networks provide necessary information for migrants (IOM 2008).

Other literatures suggest that globalization and migration are inseparable nowadays (Marshall 2001). Since globalization is distinguished by competitive markets which create inequality in the globe, globalization may alleviate “absolute poverty” but not “relative poverty” (Marshall 2001:6). The inequality and disparity that globalization creates shape international migration (Marshall 2001:6). The UN Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) puts that migration is inevitable as long as there is imbalance in wealth between the developed world and the developing world (GCIM 2005 cited in JCWI 2006:13). The complexity of contemporary migration and the advancement in technology have somehow strengthened the linkages between sending and receiving countries. This social phenomenon has given rise to the emergence of transnationalism.

2.2.2 *Transnationalism and Translocality*

Traditionally, migration has been perceived as a process of “permanent rupture, of the uprooted, the abandonment of old patterns and the painful learning of new language and new culture” (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 2004:213). However, with the intensification of global interconnection, transnationalism is emerging. Transnationalism appears, for the most part, due to the social and economic forces unleashed by contemporary global capitalist system (Glick Schiller, et al. 2004; Portes 2004). The global capitalist system has “structure[d] the flows of international migration” and structured “migrants’ responses to these forces and their strategies of survival, cultural practices and identities within the world-wide historical context of differential power and inequality” (Glick Schiller, et al. 2004:218).

Transnationalism refers to the “processes by which immigrants build social fields that

link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992 cited in Light 2007:5). Vertovec (2009:i) defines transnationalism as “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states”. Although “old” migrants also maintained linkages with their home countries in the past, contemporary transnationalism is not a replica of the old one (Vertovec 2009). Vertovec (2009) has pointed out some characteristics of contemporary transnationalism. For example, the extent and intensity of international contacts are profoundly influenced by technology nowadays, and the increasing reliance on remittances of many countries for development. Transnationalism can also be distinguished into “transnational from above” and “transnational from below” (Guarnizo and Smith 1998:3). Apart from transnational capital, global media and international institutions brought by the “transnationalism from above”, transnationalism also arrives from below through informal economy, transmigrants and grassroots activism (Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Light 2007).

According to Glick Schiller, Bash and Blanc-Szanton (1999:73), transmigrants are “immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders...” On one hand, these migrants are sort of incorporated into the localities of host societies; on the other hand, they are engaged elsewhere with various connections. Glick Schiller (1999) gives an example of transmigrant with the story of a Haitian woman who was living in New York. While living in New York, this woman had to pay for the weddings and funerals of her relatives in Haiti. Although she and her family strived to incorporate into New York, she was still a person of influence for her networks in Haiti. However, Glick Schiller (1999:96) also reminds us that transnationalism is not simply the “longings that immigrants may feel

for home, if these sentiments are not translated into systematic participation in networks that cross borders”. One distinctive characteristic of transmigrants is that their statuses are difficult to capture. Brettell (2003) points out that some migrants may not have the intention to settle permanently in the host countries, but their entanglements with the host countries are increasing; in other cases, many may have the intention to return to home countries but they may never return. In Bailey, Wright, Mountz and Miyares (2002)’s words, transmigrants live in a form of “permanent temporariness” in which their uncertain status penetrates all aspects of their daily lives.

Transnationalism has also given rise to many “translocalities” nowadays. “Translocality” was first coined by Appadurai (1995) to capture the influences of transnationalism on specific localities. “Localities” which are used to be “life-worlds constituted by...stable associations...and shared histories” are now at odd due to the increasing human mobility (Appadurai 2003:338). According to Appadurai (2003:339), many locations nowadays “create complex condition for the production and reproduction of locality, in which ties of marriage, work, business, and leisure weave together various circulating populations with various kinds of locals”. Unlike Appadurai who places more emphasis on people’s mobility, Sinatti (2008) places greater emphasis on the local aspect. This perspective sees translocalities as “places in which mobile subjects are locally grounded” (Smith 2001, 2005 cited in Sinatti 2008:62). According to Sinatti (2008:62-63), translocality is a “setting for interaction, where people are brought together in bodily co-presence” while connecting to other distant places through transnational flows. Hence, translocalities are not “simply places of origin or of destination”, but are “significant and meaningful stops along people’s many and diverse transnational routes” (Sinatti 2008:63). Appadurai (2003)

points out that translocalities come in many forms; border zones, refugee camps, migrant hostels and neighbourhoods of immigrants could also be a translocality. Ricco (2006 cited in Sinatti 2008:74) puts that “being a transmigrant is not synonymous with being a nomad: the first does not automatically lead to the latter, as migrants and their networks still remain strongly emplaced”. This thesis will also employ a transnational perspective to examine the social interactions of a group of Pakistanis in a locality in Hong Kong.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Methodology

3.1 Methodology

This research is mainly based on the qualitative data collected from ethnographic fieldworks. Statistical data from the Hong Kong Government is also used to supplement the study. In the following, I will introduce my research methods, including library research and ethnography.

3.1.1 *Library Research*

To have a better understanding of the theoretical concepts concerning my thesis and to develop my analytical framework, I have reviewed related literatures from academic books and journals. I have also reviewed documents and archives on Sham Shui Po District provided by the District Council to have a better understanding of the historical and demographic background of my field site. Statistical data such as the census and those about the second-hand economy in Hong Kong provided by governmental units such as the Census and Statistic Department and the Environment Bureau have been used to obtain a general understanding of the ethnic minorities as well as the second-hand economy in Hong Kong.

3.1.2 *Ethnography*

This study is an ethnographic research which aims at examining how a group of Pakistanis creates a living in the second-hand market in Sham Shui Po. I have spent an extensive period of four months on actual fieldwork. Data were collected by various methods including observation and interviews.

i. What is Ethnography?

This research is qualitative in nature in which an ethnographic approach was employed. Fetterman (1998:1) puts that ethnography is the “art and science of describing a group or culture”. It is a way to gain a deep understanding of people’s everyday lives (Geertz 1973). When describing the characteristics of ethnographic research, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:3) put that ethnography involves “the ethnographer participating...in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions...collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research”. In other words, its essence is to learn from people and to seek understanding of their meanings of actions by observation, participation and inquiries (Spradley 1979). In a nutshell, ethnographers seek to understand the everyday life experiences and culture from the perspectives of those who are being studied.

ii. Why Ethnography?

Ethnographic approach is considered to be the most appropriate for this research. First, the livelihoods of Pakistanis involve many strategies and complex decision-making process. Quantitative methods are limited in revealing the “native’s perspective of reality” and the experiences that humans encounter (Fetterman 1998:20). Ethnography can help find out how people view their world. Second, ethnographic approach enables me to be in a natural setting to contextualize the data. The social interactions of my informants cannot be understood if they are detached from the setting. My field site, the second-hand electrical appliances market in Sham Shui Po, is the natural setting where my informants work, gather, and socialize. For example, my informants would greet different actors, such as suppliers, neighbours

and traders, in different ways as a strategy to build up a familiar atmosphere. The meanings of these greetings could only be understood in the setting. Ethnographic approach allows researcher to study people “given all the real-world incentives and constraints” (Fetterman 1998:31). Third, how much data the informants are willing to disclose depends on the rapport between the researcher and informants (O’Reilly 2009). Building rapport requires “mutual trust and understanding” that can be earned over time (O’Reilly 2009:174). Being in the field site for a relatively longer period allows me to build friendship with my informants. It is extremely important in sensitive researches like mine one which will be explained in later section. Ethnographic approach allows me to collect data which may not be easily obtained through quantitative survey or one-off interview.

iii. The Fieldworks

My fieldworks were mainly conducted in the evenings between January 2010 and April 2010. The following sections provide an overview of my fieldwork schedule, methods of selecting informants as well as collecting data.

(a) Fieldwork Schedule

I have conducted a total of twelve fieldworks since April 2009. Among them, eleven fieldworks were conducted between January 2010 and April 2010. Each fieldwork lasted from about one hour up to four hours. The following table summarizes my fieldworks and briefly explains my main activities in the field site.

Date	Major activities
1 April 2009 (Wed)	First visited the field site with class AIS5009. Learnt the basic features of the market and talked to Chinese shop owners as well as Pakistani workers including asylum seekers.
23 January 2010 (Sat)	Visited the field site with my thesis supervisor. Re-assessed the feasibility of the research. Identified a group of Pakistanis who are engaged in the market. Got to know a Pakistani boss and be in touch again with a Pakistani trader whom I met in the field visit in 2009.
12 February 2010 (Fri)	Observed the relationship between the Pakistani used items collector and the Pakistani stall. Talked to the Pakistani boss and trader, and learnt more about their backgrounds.
13 February 2010 (Sat)	Had lunch with a Pakistani trader. Conducted semi-structured interviews with him. Got to know more about his background, personal experiences, purchasing pattern, and his relationship with the Pakistani stalls.
27 February 2010 (Sat)	Observed the operation of the stall, the happenings around and the interaction among the actors. Followed the Pakistani trader to purchase televisions at different Pakistani stalls. Got to know more Pakistani bosses and workers who work in other stalls and shops, and know more about the interaction within the traders' circles.
2 March 2010 (Tue)	Observed the operation of various Pakistani stalls. Observed and asked about the interactions between the Pakistani stall and its Chinese neighbours.
6 March 2010 (Sat)	Mainly talked to the Pakistani workers at the stall and observed how the workers interact with local people and traders.
7 March 2010 (Sun)	Had lunch with the Pakistani boss and his family from which I learnt his family background and migration history.
12 March 2010 (Fri)	Conducted a short fieldwork. Observed the co-ethnic interactions of a large group of Pakistanis at the stall.
4 April 2010 (Sun)	Conducted semi-structured interviews with the Pakistani boss. Learnt more about the relationship between he and his Chinese neighbours, as well as his business strategies.
17 April 2010 (Sat)	Visited the field site with my supervisor. Talked to the business partner of the stall, traders as well as workers. Observed how the Pakistani stall interacts with police, African trader and Chinese neighbours.
27 April 2010 (Tue)	Got to know more relatives of the Pakistani boss and got to know more about their family backgrounds and personal experiences.

(b) Selection of Informants

In January 2010, I went to the field site with my supervisor. In that evening, we identified a group of Pakistanis who was sitting at one of the streets in the market in

Sham Shui Po. We knew that they were working in the second-hand electrical appliances trade because there were a few pieces of television sets at their location. We introduced ourselves and identified one among them, *Sam*, who was the boss among the group. From then on, I got to identify other informants through the introduction of *Sam* at his stall. After getting to know a handful of informants, I began to narrow down my targets and select my core informants based on judgmental sampling. *Judgemental sampling* is when researcher selects the units to be studied according to researcher's own judgement and knowledge about which ones will be the most useful (Babbie 2004). The criteria of my selection were people who can clearly express their ideas, provide detailed information about the market and know about the interpersonal relationships among different actors. Moreover, I have also employed snowball method in this research. *Snowball method* is when members of the target population provide information for locating other research subjects (Babbie 2004). This method is appropriate when the target population is difficult to locate. As I had limited information about the other Pakistani stalls in the beginning, I went to purchase televisions with one of my informants who is a trader. This allowed me to know the locations of more Pakistani stalls and have a better understanding of their characteristics.

(c) Data Collection

I have used various methods for collecting data, including observation and interviews. Using various methods not only allows me to generate more data, but also to cross-check the data. I collected most of the data at the street stalls of my informants. I also observed the happenings in the surrounding. Some data were collected away from the street stalls, for instance, when I had drinks or meals with my informants. I

will introduce my data collection methods in the following:

- Observation: Participant observation is a good tool to obtain a holistic understanding of the lives of the subjects and allow researchers to be immersed in the natural setting. Observational method is more than simply going out to the field to watch people; it involves different techniques as well as various levels of participation. The essence of participant observation is “experiencing in naturally occurring events” (Wolcott 1999:46). Different levels of observations along the continuum between non-participant observation and participant observation (such as being more active in participating in their activities) were employed in this research.

At the early stage of my fieldwork, I observed unobtrusively with relatively less participation because my aim was to learn the basic features of the market. After being more familiar with the people, I conducted participant observation which involves more participation in the daily activities of my informants. Since it was not viable for me to be a complete participant-observer by working in the street stalls, I participated in their activities such as following the trader to buy televisions. I have also taught some of my informants Cantonese in small group at the stall, and they have also taught me their languages. These helped me build up rapport with my informants. In my fieldwork observation, I mainly collected data on the social networking and interactions of my informants with other social actors.

- Interview: Interview is another important data collection method for

ethnography. I have employed both informal and more formal interviews in different circumstances. At the early stage of my fieldwork, I started with informal interview. Since informal interview is like a casual conversation, it helped break the ice with informants. By asking questions informally, I learnt basic information of the market. More formal interviews were conducted starting from the middle stage of my fieldwork when core informants were identified. These interviews are more structured in nature. I explained my interview purpose and ensure the confidentiality of data. Semi-structured questions were used in interviews since it “takes shape as it progresses” (Wolcott 1999:53). It is suitable for my study since it involves personal experiences in which structured or standardized questions would be difficult to be applied on everyone.

- *Field notes*: Data collected from both observations and interviews were kept in field notes immediately after each fieldwork. Scratch notes were first written as mnemonic materials and were then extended into longer descriptions. I also wrote down the happenings in the market as much as possible. Regarding interviews, not only what my informants said was jotted down, their expressions were also noted because different interpretations may be generated when words are said with different expressions.

iv. Reflections on Conducting Sensitive Research

When conducting sensitive research, researcher should take extra caution as the research subjects may be uneasy with the research which may put the researcher in ethical dilemma. Sensitive research is a study that “requires disclosure of behaviours or attitudes which would normally be kept private” and which might “lead to social

censure or disapproval, and/or which might cause the respondent discomfort to express” (Wellings, Branigan and Mitchell 2000:256). My research is a sensitive one in the sense that many Pakistanis in my field site are engaging in some sorts of “unlawful” activities - the Pakistani bosses of the street stalls are doing “unlawful business” as they are not licensed; these bosses may involve in the employment of illegal workers; some workers do not have a legal status to work, and some are even illegal immigrants. Although many sensitive researches are conducted covertly, it was not feasible for me to hide my identity and purpose as I am ethnically (being a Chinese in a Pakistani community) different from my research subjects. Being accepted by and building rapport with my informants were indeed a big challenge. Here are some reflections that I would like to share from my experience:

- *Rapport Building*: Rapport is a mutual trust relationship with informants. As mentioned, it can be established over time. In the beginning of my fieldwork, I have explained about my research purpose by saying that I found this market very interesting and I would like to know how it operates and how people from different countries work together. I have also ensured them that all the information I collected would be kept confidential, including their names and locations. Even so, I sensed that my informants were still suspicious of me and were very careful when talking to me. For example, in the beginning when I knew a Pakistani worker, he told me “*no, no, I am not working! I am just helping!*” However, after we became more familiar with each other, he revealed to me that he was actually a tourist visa holder and was working in this market. Doing fieldworks is definitely a trust building process. I have employed various strategies to help build rapport. For example, I realized that “document” was a

very important thing for the Pakistanis, so I showed them my student card. They were very curious with my student card and started asking me about the Hong Kong education system. By doing so, my Pakistani informants started believing that I was really a student and started talking to me more freely. I also tried to mingle with them by asking them to teach me their language. Many Pakistani workers were very keen on teaching me. Not only did this help building rapport among us, it also gave the Pakistanis a sense of “satisfaction”.

I found that the relationships between the researcher and informants in sensitive research could be very fragile, and that fieldworks might become a psychological burden for both the researcher and informants if not handled properly. Social interactions in the field are “fluid, unpredictable and fragile” because they are shaped by “unforeseen circumstances” (O’Brien 2006 cited in Li 2008:109). I have an unforgettable experience regarding this. I was conducting fieldworks and getting to know my informants better day after day and I thought that everything was going smoothly.

In one evening, *Sam* (the boss of a stall) came back from buying televisions somewhere and saw me at his stall. He looked tired, and suddenly asked me in a very serious tone, “*Madam, what do you want actually? If you have questions, just ask me! Why do you need so much time to study? Are you from the Immigration?*” I tried to explain and explain about my purpose but it seemed that he still could not understand why I needed to do fieldworks. I was very frustrated as I felt that my rapport with him was at the edge of breaking down. Interestingly, later he called me and “confessed” that the data he told me earlier

in my fieldworks was not true². *Sam* would like me to meet his family before I proceeded with further fieldworks. So the day after, I had lunch with *Sam* with his wife and daughters. His wife explained that it was not common for a female (me) to visit a married Muslim male (*Sam*) according to their culture. *Sam* actually felt bad for not telling me the truth in the beginning. Luckily, our rapport got repaired and I considered this incident as a breakthrough since I got to know the family of *Sam* and also eased the discomfort he had before. This incident shows that conducting ethnographic fieldworks is a trust building process with informants. After this incident, I have adjusted my fieldwork strategies, for example, conducting shorter fieldworks and being less “aggressive” when asking questions.

- *Gender Issue*: Gender did matter in my fieldwork. Being a female researcher in a Pakistani male community was an “obstacle”. In the early stage of my fieldwork, many Pakistanis were curious about my presence. The first thing that most of them asked me was, “*Are you married?*” Later I found that this is actually closely related to their “migration dreams”. Many Pakistanis who do not have a legal residence status in Hong Kong are very eager to find a Hong Kong wife. One of my informants who is a Pakistani trader has actually tried to “woo” me because he was interested in getting married with me in order to get a resident status in Hong Kong. When this happened, I clarified to him that I was only a student, that I am not looking for romantic relationship here and that I would be very happy if we could be friends. After my clarification, he did not take further action. Later on, my informants became more accustomed to my

² For example, in the beginning *Sam* told me that he was born in Hong Kong and is single. After this incident, he told me that he actually came to Hong Kong 10 years ago and is married with a Hong Kong woman.

presence and thus were less curious about me being a female alone in their community. Although being a female was an obstacle for my fieldwork, it somehow allowed me to get first-hand experience about how Pakistanis cherish every hope to obtain a chance to get a Hong Kong residence status.

In summary, my fieldwork experience confirms that ethnographic approach was appropriate in this research. Without spending time in the field site and without building rapport with my informants, they would not have told me the “truth” about their lives. Moreover, I also find it extremely important for ethnographers to be psychologically prepared for challenges in fieldworks and to be flexible to adjust the fieldwork strategies when problems arose. After all, ethnographers are embedded in a set of social interactions which are full of uncertainties.

3.2 The Field Site

3.2.1 Introduction to Second-hand Electrical Appliances Market

Re-selling second-hand electrical items is a common economic activity for the lower class groups in Hong Kong. Second-hand economic activity indeed has a long history. About a century ago, the second-hand economic activities only involved clothing, jades, hardware and others daily necessities (Zheng, Zhou and Li 2010). Since the industrialization of Hong Kong during the 1960s – 1970s, more and more people started possessing electrical appliances. Since then, second-hand electrical appliances trading began to appear. The locations of these markets in Hong Kong are not well documented. Nevertheless, I have tried to locate seven markets or places in which second-hand electrical appliances trading are agglomerated. They have been discussed in the media or are known by the public. **Map 1** shows the locations of these places.

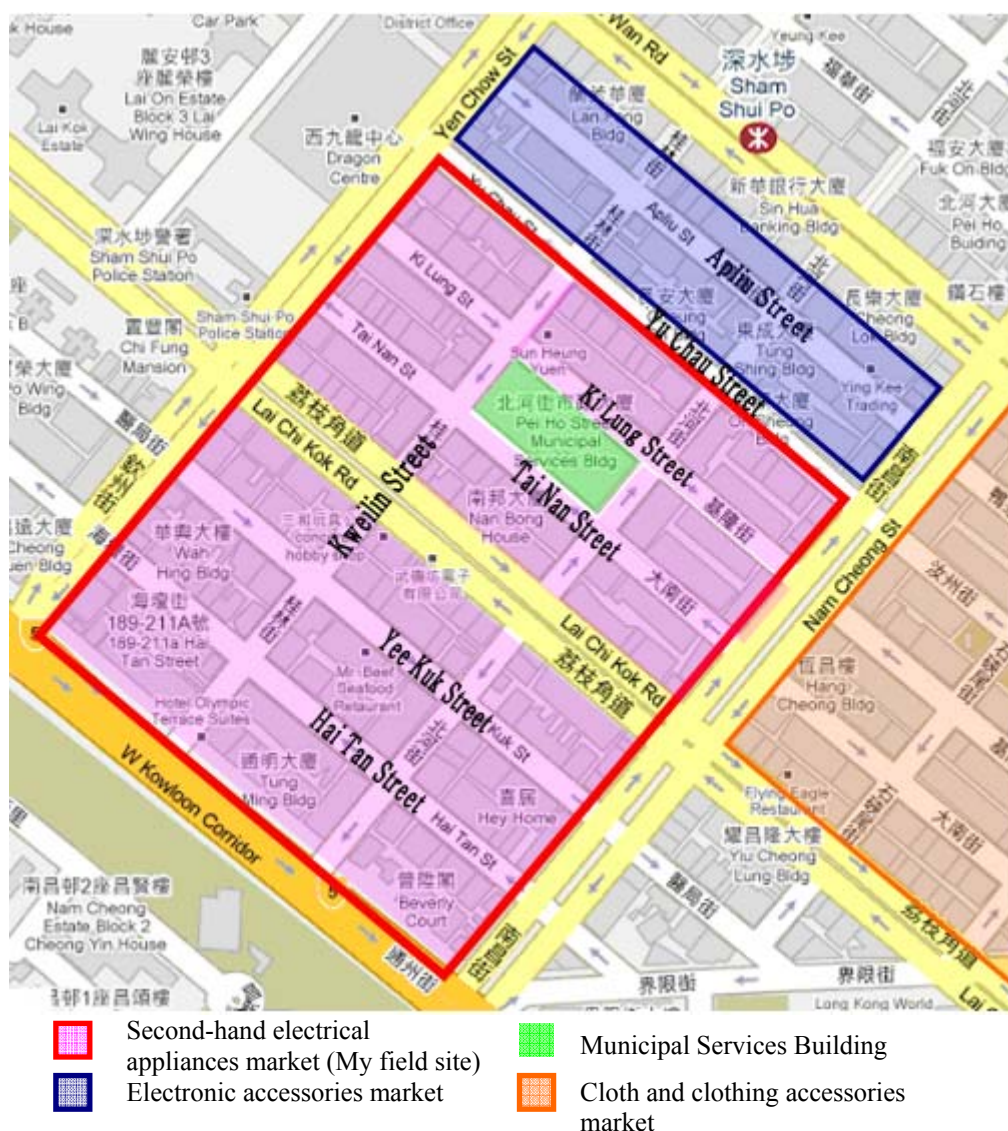


Map 1 Locations of different second-hand electrical appliances markets in Hong Kong

Among them, the market in Sham Shui Po, where my field site is located, is of the biggest scale and longest history. Most of these markets are located around the residential areas in the older urban districts. These markets usually consist of shops and informal stalls scattering on the streets. The operations of these markets are sometimes quasi-illegal in the sense that the sellers may occupy public space “unlawfully” for placing the appliances or may involve in the employment of illegal workers. Most of the street stalls in these markets are unlawful in nature as they are not registered. Yet, the long existence of second-hand market has become a special feature of the places. Such popular image has allowed the market to continue without too much interference from the authority. People move the appliances along the streets and put their products here and there on the streets. From my fieldwork observation, I found that the police seldom interfered with the activities of these businesses. Only when some big trucks or vans obstruct the roads would the policemen ask the drivers to drive the vehicles away.

3.2.2 Sham Shui Po Second-hand Electrical Appliances Market

My field site is located on two streets in the second-hand electrical appliances market in Sham Shui Po. As Sham Shui Po is the poorest district in Hong Kong, it is a popular area for lower class groups, immigrants and the lower strata of ethnic minorities to dwell in. It is also well-known for its diversity of low-budget economic activities, including a number of second-hand electrical appliances market, electronic accessories market, food market, clothing market, etc. **Map 2** shows the location of my field site and its vicinity.

Map 2 Location of the second-hand electrical appliances market in Sham Shui Po and its vicinity

The second-hand electrical appliances market is located across four parallel streets in Sham Shui Po spreading on both sides of Lai Chi Kok Road, with shops and stalls scattering around Ki Lung Street, Tai Nan Street, Yee Kuk Street and Hai Tan Street. The market is shaded in red in **Map 2**. There are about forty shops trading second-hand electrical appliances. My research focuses on two of the streets in this market³. This region is also characterized by a bustling food market and arrays of hawking activities in daytime. Local men and women selling and buying food, clothes and

³ Due to the sensitivity of data, the street names of my research focus and the streets where the Pakistani stalls are located would not be disclosed in the thesis.

accessories can be found. **Figures 1 and 2** show the street views of this region during the day. The second-hand electrical appliances market begins at about 3 pm every day. Trucks loaded with electrical appliances begin to come in and out of the market. However, their businesses are rather quiet during this period. When the hawking activities close at around 6 pm, second-hand activities start getting busier. People carrying different “treasures” gather on the streets. They are mainly middle-aged Chinese men; sometimes there are South Asians and Africans too. They sell used items ranging from shoes, watches, mobile phones, jades, furniture to guitars. Many workers in the electrical appliances market also buy their daily necessities here. For instance, my informant *Peter* was wearing a pair of Nike sport shoes which is worth hundreds of Hong Kong dollars for a brand-new pair. But *Peter* said, “*It is second-hand stuff! I bought this pair of shoes on Tai Nan Street. It was only thirty dollars!*”



From left: **Figure 1** Hawking activities in the market in daytime (Photo by Doris Ho) **Figure 2** Street view of the market in daytime (Photo by Doris Ho)

At about 5 pm, a group of Pakistanis starts setting up the informal stalls in Sham Shui Po. The market is most vibrant between 7 pm and 10 pm every night. Traders from South Asia, Africa and mainland China purchase products here and there, and workers carry electrical appliances across the streets with trolleys and move them onto the

trucks which are waiting for these goods. As mentioned, the police control in this area is relatively “lenient” and so the workers of the shops and street stalls simply put the appliances on the pedestrian and vehicular streets. **Figures 3 and 4** show the scenes of the second-hand electrical appliances market in Sham Shui Po. More details and figures of the market will be provided in subsequent chapters.



From left: **Figure 3** Workers loading second-hand electrical appliances onto the truck in the market (Photo by Doris Ho) **Figure 4** Truck loaded with second-hand electrical appliances in the market (Photo by Doris Ho)

CHAPTER FOUR

Overview: Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong

Hong Kong has a diversified group of ethnic minorities. According to the Government, there are about 342,198 ethnic minorities which constitutes 5% of the whole Hong Kong population (Census and Statistics Department 2007). Among them, more than 80 per cent are from South and Southeast Asians countries. It is also these groups of ethnic minorities that have received the most attention from the academic field as well as the public as they are often perceived as underprivileged. In the following, I will give an overview of the South and Southeast Asians in Hong Kong.

4.1 Historical Background of South and Southeast Asians in Hong Kong

Before reviewing the historical background of ethnic minorities, let us take a look at their current population sizes in Hong Kong. **Table 1** shows the population of the major ethnic groups from South and Southeast Asia. The ethnic group with the largest population in Hong Kong is Filipino; second largest is Indonesian, followed by Indian, Nepalese and Pakistani.

Table 1 Population of ethnic minorities from South and Southeast Asia in Hong Kong by ethnicity, 2006

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage (%)
Filipino	112 453	32.9
Indonesian	87 840	25.7
Indian	20 444	6
Nepalese	15 950	4.7
Pakistani	11 111	3.2

Source: Census and Statistics Department, HKSAR (2007)

Yet, White (1994) reminds us that the Census may not be able to cover all the ethnic

minorities in Hong Kong, such as those on tourist visas. For instance, the Census listed that there were 14,329 people with Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan nationalities in total in 1991. However, White (1994) points out that there should have an estimated of 23,000 Indians and 15,000 Pakistanis at that time. Still, the Census can serve as a reference of the background of ethnic minorities. Different ethnic groups have a different historical background in Hong Kong. Indians and Pakistanis are the earliest groups to settle down here.

South Asians in Hong Kong

Indians and Pakistanis

Historically, any person from the “Indian subcontinent” was referred to as “Indian” (Vaid 1972; White 1994; Bosco 2004) because the modern political borders of this region only came into existence after the partition of India in 1947 by the British. The Indian subcontinent covers more or less the regions of today India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. Hence, when talking about the history before 1947, the term “Indian” here is referred to people from the Indian subcontinent but *not* limited to today’s India.

Tracing back to history, early Indian presence in Hong Kong dates back to the pre-colonial period. Since the mid-18th century, British had set their feet in the India subcontinent and controlled the trading of the area. Along with the opium and other trades, Indians began to do business in Hong Kong (Vaid 1972). Some other Indians also came to Hong Kong as seamen with the East India Company from today Attock⁴,

⁴ Attock is located at northern border of the Punjab province in today Pakistan.

Abbottabad⁵, Lahore⁶ and Gujarat⁷, and as traders and contractors (Weiss 1991). Others came to Hong Kong as provisioners of foods and products (White 1994).

The closer relationship of Indians with Hong Kong commenced since the very first day Hong Kong became a British colony. British employed Indians as soldiers, in particular males from the Punjab region, as they are physically stronger. Hiring Indians as military, police and guards was a custom of the colonial government in Hong Kong. In the 1950s, the colonial government recruited Pakistanis to serve in the Hong Kong police force (Weiss 1991). Many other Pakistanis also came to Hong Kong to work as watchmen during this period or to seek new opportunities.⁸ This historical background explains why there are still many Indians and Pakistanis working as watchmen and security guards in Hong Kong nowadays.

The Hong Kong Government has tightened the immigration law since 1969 and this made it more difficult for those Indians or Pakistanis without relatives in Hong Kong to enter the territory legally (Bosco 2004). Since then, Indians and Pakistanis coming to Hong Kong via irregular channels such as overstaying, people smuggling and using false documents, began to emerge. For instance, according to the Government, 779 illegal immigrants from Pakistan were intercepted in the first eleven months in 2007 (Legislative Council 2008). Some of these illegal immigrants were also protection seekers which will be explained in later section.

⁵ Abbottabad is located at Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in today Pakistan.

⁶ Lahore is the capital of Punjab in today Pakistan.

⁷ Gujarat is a state in today India.

⁸ According to Weiss (1991:436), many Pakistanis had been working as watchmen in China and Vietnam. However, they stopped working in China since 1949 because of political instability while other Pakistanis left Vietnam when the fighting broke out against French. Hence, many Pakistanis watchmen came to Hong Kong to seek new opportunities.

Nepalese

Besides Indians and Pakistanis, another large group of South Asian minorities is Nepalese. The history of Nepalese in Hong Kong is also closely tied with the colonial government but is relatively shorter comparing to the Indians and Pakistanis. Nepalese, mainly Gurkhas, were incorporated into the army in Hong Kong after the World War II.⁹ After the 1967 riot in Hong Kong, the Gurkhas took over the Pakistani responsibilities in the Emergency Unit in the police force (Weiss 1991). In 1970, about 8,000 Gurkha soldiers were deployed to patrol at the border to block illegal immigrants from mainland China (Yamanaka 1999; Bosco 2004). In 1980s, the colonial government granted citizenships to about 7,000 children of the Gurkhas and granted residency to their dependents in which following this, an estimated of 20,000 Nepalese came to Hong Kong to work as unskilled labours (Yamanaka 1999). The Nepalese in Hong Kong nowadays are mainly retired army and their relatives. Some Nepalese also came to Hong Kong via irregular channels. For example, 177 illegal immigrants from Nepal were intercepted in the first eleven months in 2007 (Legislative Council 2008).

Protection Seekers and South Asians

A recent development of South Asians in Hong Kong is the increasing number of protection seekers¹⁰, i.e. both asylum seekers and torture claimants. According to the UNHCR's Hong Kong sub-office, there were about 1,700 asylum seekers as at 2008

⁹ The British were defeated in the Anglo-Nepalese War in 1814-1816. They were impressed by the skill of Gurkhas and were convinced that the recruitment of Gurkhas was important for their military supremacy in Asia (Yamanaka 1999:487).

¹⁰ Currently, there are two separate mechanisms in which people may apply for protection in Hong Kong, i.e. "asylum" and "torture" claims. The asylum claims are made according to the Refugee Convention. Since the Refugee Convention is not applicable to Hong Kong, the asylum screening is handled by the UNHCR's Hong Kong sub-office and is independent from the Hong Kong government. Another mechanism, the torture claims, is made according to the "Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment" and is handled by the Immigration Department of the government.

June (Hong Kong Human Right Monitor 2009). According to the Hong Kong Government, there are respectively 2902 illegal immigrants and 3804 overstayers who lodged torture claims to the Immigration Department between 2006 and 2009 (Security Bureau 2009). A majority of them are from South Asian countries such as Pakistan. The screening processes of asylum applications and torture claims are long. According to the Government, screening process for the completed torture claims takes about 14 months (Security Bureau 2009). Regarding asylum applications, the Hong Kong UNHCR's Hong Kong sub-office claims that the screening process for each asylum case takes 2 to 8 months. However, it was disclosed that these data do not include the pending cases (Hong Kong Human Right Monitor 2009) and that the screening for many cases takes about 5 years and may be even up to 10 years (Apple Daily 2009). Protection seekers would be given temporary permits¹¹ which allow them to stay in Hong Kong, but they are not allowed to work.

Southeast Asians in Hong Kong

Filipinos, Indonesians and Thais

Southeast Asian is the largest group of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong today. Most of them are working as domestic helpers. They are mainly from the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. Hong Kong Government began to allow importing domestic helpers from neighbouring countries since 1970s (Tam 1999). The labour import is governed by the foreign domestic helpers' regulation under the Immigration Department. The largest Southeast Asian nationality among the domestic helpers in Hong Kong is Filipinos because of their high competency of English. Indonesians make up the second largest group of domestic helpers as well as ethnic minority in

¹¹ Temporary Permit is also known as "going-out pass" (commonly known as "行街纸" in Chinese).

Hong Kong. Domestic helpers are under special working visa restrictions and they cannot obtain Hong Kong residency regardless of the length they work here (Bosco 2004). The livelihoods of Southeast Asian domestic helpers have been fully documented by numerous scholars (see French 1986; Tam 1999; Lowe 2000; Chiu and Asian Migrant Centre 2005; Constable 2007).

4.2 Employment Situation of South Asians

As mentioned, most of the Southeast Asians come to Hong Kong to work as domestic helpers. Their employments are usually confined to a particular industry and their employment contracts are usually signed prior to their arrivals. Hence, they do not face the same employment situation that the South Asians are facing. Among the South Asians, Pakistanis and Nepalese are the most “underprivileged” groups mainly due to racial discrimination and social exclusion (Ku, Chan, Chan and Lee 2003). This section will provide an overview of the employment situation of South Asians in Hong Kong.

Generally, the majority of South Asians including Indians, Nepalese and Pakistanis works in the trading industry (Census and Statistics Department 2007). Some other South Asians work in the service industry such as working as security guards and watchmen. Among all the South Asians, Nepalese has the highest proportion of participation in the construction sector comparing with other ethnic groups. This is mainly due to the large influx of unskilled migrants from Nepal to Hong Kong in the 1980s (White 1994).

Some statistical data shows that South Asians are in a “disadvantaged” position in the labour market in Hong Kong. An earlier research conducted by the Government finds that the unemployment rate of South Asians is significantly higher, as shown in **Table 2**. Among the South Asians, Pakistanis has the highest unemployment rate which was 29 per cent, followed by Nepalese which was 14.3 per cent and Indians which was 11.8 per cent, while at that time being, the unemployment rate of the overall Hong Kong population was 6 per cent (Home Affairs Bureau and Census and Statistics

Department 2000).

Table 2 Unemployment rate of South Asians aged 15 and over in Hong Kong, 2000

Ethnic Groups	Unemployment Rate
Indians	11.8%
Nepalese	14.3%
Pakistanis	29.0%

Source: Home Affairs Bureau and Census and Statistics Department, HKSAR (2000)

Table 3 shows the distribution of occupations of South Asians in the labour market. Nepalese and Pakistanis have the highest proportion of populations working in elementary occupations; the proportions are 42 per cent and 31.1 per cent respectively (Census and Statistic Department 2007). The proportion of Indians working in elementary occupations is 19.3 per cent and it is close to that of the whole Hong Kong population which was 18.8 per cent.

Table 3 Proportion of South Asians by occupation in Hong Kong, 2006

Ethnic Groups	Managers and Administrators	Professionals / Associate Professionals	Clerks / Service Workers and Shop Sales Workers	Craft and Related Workers / Plant and Machine Operators and Assemblers	Elementary Occupations	Skilled Agricultural and Fishery Workers; and Occupations Not Classifiable
Indian	32.0	26.4	18.5	3.5	19.3	0.4
Nepalese	7.1	10.4	25.3	13.9	42.0	0.3
Pakistani	15.6	13.9	22.7	16.7	31.1	-

Source: Census and Statistics Department, HKSAR (2007)

After having an overview of the employment situation of South Asians in Hong Kong, let us take a look at what studies have been done about them.

4.3 Studies of South Asians in Hong Kong

A body of researches has been conducted on the employment situations of South Asians. Most of these researches examine whether the South Asians can integrate into the Hong Kong's labour market. I summarize their findings in the followings:

First, the employments of South Asians have always been associated with unemployment, language problem and the lack of skills. In their research on the employment of South Asians in Hong Kong, Ku et al. (2006) find that South Asians often face difficulties in the labour market. The South Asians are reported to have unemployment problems and difficulties in understanding Chinese job advertisements as well as being discriminated. According to this research, 57.1 per cent of South Asians have experienced unemployment in the past two years prior to the research and 35.1 per cent of them were unemployed for 3 to 6 months while 27.3 per cent were unemployed for 7 to 12 months. Among the South Asian ethnic groups which this research studies, Pakistanis have the highest rate of finding it "very difficult" to search for a job in Hong Kong. Ku et al. (2006) report that the South Asians have a high vulnerability of unemployment.

In another research on life experiences of Pakistanis in Hong Kong, it is found that many Pakistanis encounter great difficulties concerning employment (Ku et al. 2003). According to this research, one-third of the respondents were rejected in labour market because of their Pakistani nationality (Ku et al. 2003). The research also reports that "almost one in every two Pakistanis finds it difficult to live in Hong Kong" and that the working Pakistanis is "probably the most disadvantaged group" in Hong Kong (Ku et al. 2003:4). It is pointed out that their employment problems are

mainly due to language barriers as well as racial discrimination. Another research on South Asians youth in Hong Kong also asserts that South Asians face great difficulties in the labour market and that their chances and choices of employment are limited (Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service [YMMSS] 2002). This research points out that South Asians may be “unable to put their knowledge into practical use and hard to develop their expertise” (YMMSS 2002:68).

Second, most of these researches stress the social welfare for South Asians. These researches recommend ways for the Government and society to help the South Asians to integrate into our labour market. For example, many recommend the Hong Kong Government to provide South Asians with employment services, translation services, language courses, vocational training, and counselling (Ku et al. 2003, Ku et al. 2006, YMMSS 2002). Some suggest that the Government should help eliminate racial discrimination and promote multiculturalism with a view to assist the South Asians (Ku et al. 2003, Ku et al. 2006). Others put that we also need to help the South Asians to raise their self-esteem and confidence (YMMSS 2002).

While the above findings on South Asians may be true, I find that these researches lack a dynamic perspective. Moreover, the previous researches usually focus on South Asians who are legal Hong Kong residents but do not cover those with “unclear” statuses such as the “tourists” and asylum seekers. My study will offer a holistic picture for understanding the South Asians.

CHAPTER FIVE

Creating Destinies: Pakistanis in the Trash Economy

This research studies the Pakistanis who are engaged in the “trash economy”¹² in Hong Kong. They are all making a livelihood in the second-hand electrical appliances market in Sham Shui Po. This chapter provides a holistic picture of this community by examining how a broad spectrum of Pakistanis, whether they are stall owners, workers, traders or asylum seekers, makes a living together. These Pakistanis have different migration statuses, but somehow they all converge in this neighbourhood to try out their luck and try to make their dreams possible. This chapter also provides a thick description by unravelling how the Pakistanis socialize with actors from other ethnic backgrounds and how they turn Sham Shui Po a vibrant place for livelihood and mutual help.

5.1 Profile of Core Informants

I have visited the field site for eleven times since early this year. After identifying a group of Pakistanis who are working in the second-hand electrical appliances business, I mingled with them and got to know the boss of this group, *Sam*¹³, quite well. In the following, I will provide details of the background of my core informants. They are all Pakistanis and are currently engaged in the second-hand electrical appliances market in Sham Shui Po. *Sam*, the boss of an informal street stall; *David*, a worker; *Nicky*, a trader and *Michael* who is the business partner of *Sam*, are my core informants. Besides them, I will also give a brief introduction of other informants

¹² “Trash economy” here does not connote any negativity but imply how the lower strata of the society make use of what are available to them to create a low-budget business with little capitals.

¹³ The names of all my six informants in this research are pseudonyms.

including *Billy* and *Peter* as they have also provided me with valuable data. All these Pakistanis play a different role in the market and are all trying to make their livings here. Their endeavors and perseverances turn this market an energetic place.

Sam – The Boss

Sam is the boss of an informal street stall in the second-hand electrical appliances market in Sham Shui Po. He is 38 years old and has migrated to Hong Kong for 10 years. Sam is from Punjab of Pakistan which is located in the Eastern part of the country, bordering India. Prior to his migration, some relatives such as the cousin and nephew of Sam were already living in Hong Kong. Seeking to pursue a better livelihood, Sam came to Hong Kong when he was 28. Sam has been doing in the second-hand electrical appliances business for 6 years after working as a waged labour for some years. In the beginning, Sam worked as a coolie in the cloth market in Sham Shui Po. Later he found that his employer cheated him of his Mandatory Provident Fund¹⁴. After that, Sam decided to start his own business of trading second-hand electrical appliances in Sham Shui Po with some relatives. When describing how he started the business, he explained, *“You observe how the others make money, and then you learn how to copy their ways of operations.”* I was told that it was very difficult to set up business in the beginning, in particular to get the current location as the stall, because many people in the market saw them as competitors. They had to quarrel and fight with others to get this location. Yet, Sam said, *“It’s better to be your own boss. You don’t have to bear others’ temper!”* About the personal life of Sam, he got married with a Hong Kong Chinese woman through the introduction of his friends in Sham Shui Po. This allowed Sam to stay in Hong Kong. They now have two

¹⁴ Mandatory Provident Fund is a compulsory saving scheme established in December 2000 in Hong Kong for retirement in which both employees and employers are required to contribute to this Scheme monthly.

daughters aged 6 and 7. They live in a public housing estate in the Sham Shui Po district. Sam has no plan to return to Pakistan to live. He will continue living in Hong Kong, and if possible, explore new business opportunities.

David – Worker

David is working in Sam's stall. He is 27 years old and is characterized by his cheerful character. Two years ago, David came to Hong Kong as a "tourist" to try out his luck. Same as Sam, David also came from Punjab. Before coming to Hong Kong, David worked in a factory in Punjab. He said that the living in Pakistan was very harsh and that Pakistan was not very safe to live due to social and political instability. He said, "*If you wear a necklace on the street, you would be killed!*" Having contacts of friends in Hong Kong, he saved some money and came to Hong Kong to start a new life. After coming to Hong Kong, David rented a room in Sham Shui Po and has been working as coolie. When I first met David, he did not admit that he was working. After being more familiar with me, he told me that he could stay in Hong Kong because he extended and extended his tourist visa. His tourist visa allows him to stay in Hong Kong for some months. When his visa expires, he goes to Macau or Shenzhen and re-enters Hong Kong. David's family is in Pakistan and he has to send remittances back. David's dream is to learn the business skills and start up his own business in Hong Kong. David thinks that he has changed a lot after coming here, for example, he said that he has become more open-minded with the idea of gender equality. He likes Hong Kong because it is a very safe place to live in comparison with Pakistan. However, David is still not sure how long he will stay in Hong Kong because he finds it not easy to set up business here.

Nicky – Trader

Nicky is a trader from Peshawar of Pakistan which is located in the Northern part of the country, bordering Afghanistan. He is 26 years old and has been buying second-hand electrical appliances in Hong Kong for 7 years. Nicky's father has a television business in Pakistan. Hence, Nicky buys second hand television sets from Hong Kong and sends them back to his father. Nicky started coming to Hong Kong to buy television sets since 2003, and his elder brother started in 2001. Nicky comes to Hong Kong on business visa with a maximum stay of 3 months each time. Nicky and his brother take turn to come to Hong Kong to collect the television sets. When he goes back to Pakistan to renew his visa, his brother comes to Hong Kong to continue the business. Nicky spends about 6 - 7 months in Hong Kong every year. He rents a flat in the vicinity on Lai Chi Kok Road. When he or his brother comes to Hong Kong, they stay there. Nicky has also been looking for marriage in Hong Kong. Nicky likes the living in Hong Kong and would like to settle down here. Therefore, he has been looking for marriage with Hong Kong people so that he can get a residency.

Michael – Business Partner

Michael is 34 years old and was born and grown up in Hong Kong. He is the cousin of Sam and his parents are also Punjabis. He studied at the Delia Memorial School in Kwun Tong of Hong Kong and quitted study at Form 3 level. Michael is the business partner of Sam. He helped Sam with setting up the second-hand electrical appliances business 6 years ago. However, Michael does not work in Sham Shui Po all the time. He lives in Yuen Long, and he himself owns another business – second-hand cars trading. Whenever Sam is away, for example, on visitation to Pakistan, Michael

would be in charge of the operation of the business. Unlike Sam who is usually gentle and speaks softly, Michael is apparently more hot-tempered. He is also more fluent in Cantonese than Sam and speaks a lot of foul language. Being successful in his own business and having assisted Sam in this business, he seems to have a “higher” status among the country fellows.

Besides the above core informants who I most often talked to during my field works, I had also made acquaintances with a number of other Pakistanis in the streets nearby. For example, I got to know Billy, another Pakistani boss of an informal stall in the market, when I followed Nicky to purchase televisions in an evening. Billy is 35 years old and has lived in Hong Kong for 8 years. He came to Hong Kong in 2002 to seek a better livelihood. He did not detail his way of getting here and how he obtained his residence in Hong Kong. What I know is that at the beginning he worked as a coolie in Sham Shui Po and saved up money. After six years, he gathered enough resources and started his own business of trading second-hand electrical appliances. Unlike Sam, Billy’s family is in Pakistan. But he has no plan to go back to Pakistan to live yet because he has a better livelihood here comparing to that in Pakistan.

Another interesting informant is a 25 year-old worker called Peter who works as a coolie in a shop in the second-hand electrical appliances market. Instead of working for his co-ethnics, Peter works in a shop opened by mainland Chinese. Same as Sam and David, Peter is also from Punjab and has been living in Hong Kong for 4 years. He told me that he had saved money for a long time before coming to Hong Kong. However, he did not tell me how he came here, how he stayed behind, and whether he

had a legal status right now. Since he did not admit that he was working in the beginning, I guess he was probably working unlawfully in the market. I asked Peter why he worked for Chinese instead of Pakistani fellows. He just told me that he also likes Chinese people. From my observation, since there are many Pakistanis in this neighbourhood but only a few Pakistani stalls, he may not be able to be employed “formally” by a Pakistani stall. Even so, he goes to Sam’s stall to chat and to assist with moving the electrical appliances whenever he has free time. From this, he could get some informal benefits.

The informants introduced above represent a wide spectrum of Pakistanis which can be found in the market in Sham Shui Po. Apart from them, I have also met protection seekers in the market. However, they do not dare to work so obviously since protection seekers are not allowed to work in Hong Kong. These people reveal the diversity of ethnic migrants in Hong Kong. They may be born locally, immigrants, tourists, businessman, asylum seekers or illegal immigrants. This market somehow is a congregation of all these types of people, allowing them to make a living and pursue their dreams. In the next section, I will explain how this market operates and introduce the major actors in the market.

5.2 Operation of the Trash Economy

Hong Kong, being an affluent society, people always throws away things such as television sets, computers, and other electronic products which are still in good condition and replace them with newer and trendier models. These “trashes” may still be useful for people who live elsewhere. Every year, Hong Kong people produce a huge amount of electrical and electronic trash. As shown in **Table 4**, Hong Kong produces about 70,000 tonnes of electrical and electronic appliances wastes annually (Environment Bureau 2010).

Table 4 Electrical and electronic wastes in Hong Kong, 2005 - 2008

Year	Recycled (‘000 Tonnes)	Disposed (‘000 Tonnes)	Total (‘000 Tonnes)
2005	53.0	14.2	67.2
2006	58.0	10.6	68.6
2007	59.0	11.1	70.1
2008	58.8	12.6	71.4

Source: Environment Bureau, HKSAR (2010)

Table 5 shows the breakdown of the electrical and electronic waste generated in Hong Kong in 2008. The largest category of waste are bulky household appliances including television sets, washing machines, refrigerators and air conditioners; followed by computer products including personal computers, laptops, printers, scanners and monitors (Environment Bureau 2010)

Table 5 Breakdown of electrical and electronic waste generated in Hong Kong in 2008

Major Categories	Weight (‘000 Tonnes)	Weight (%)
Bulky Household Appliances	47.1	66
Computer Products	14.1	20
Other Household Appliances	10.2	14

Source: Environment Bureau, HKSAR (2010)

More than 80 per cent of these electrical and electronic trashes are recycled and a majority of them are sold to the less developed countries for re-use. Due to the uneven economic development between the developed and less developed worlds, many people from the less developed countries cannot afford brand-new products. Second-hand electrical and electronic products abandoned by those in developed places find a big market in the developing world. In explaining why he buys second-hand televisions from Hong Kong, Nicky said, “*Only Hong Kong people throw away things which are so new and are still in good condition! You just need to repair them a bit, you can use them again.*” The unequal material wealth between the developed and less developed countries thus gives rise to an international trash economy. Now, let us see how these abandoned items are absorbed into the “trash” economy.

5.2.1 Main Actors in the Trash Economy

The second-hand economy works through a complex chain involving a diversified group of actors. All the second-hand electrical appliances go through a chain since the moment when they are discarded by Hong Kong people, until they reach the product users in the less developed countries. There are a number of active actors involved in this chain in Sham Shui Po:

- Used items collectors (*sāu máaih lóu*)

Used items collectors, known as *sāu máaih lóu*¹⁵ (收買佬) in Cantonese, are those who collect or buy used items from households, and resell them to other parties. *Sāu máaih lóu* could be considered as the first layer of the trash cycle’s

¹⁵ The Cantonese term “*sāu máaih lóu*” will be used throughout this thesis since there are many types of used items collectors. I find “*sāu máaih lóu*” a more specific term to refer to the first layer of used items collectors.

chain as they usually get the used items directly from the people who discard them. *Sāu máaih lóu* usually work individually or in pairs and drive a van around different districts in Hong Kong to collect used items and sell these items to shops or stalls in second-hand markets. In the past, *sāu máaih lóu* are usually middle to old aged men. Since the second-hand business is a big business in Sham Shui Po, I have spotted quite a number of young aged *sāu máaih lóu*, as well as women. There are Hong Kong Chinese, mainland Chinese, and even Pakistanis *sāu máaih lóu* in Sham Shui Po. After collecting the items, they resell them to the second-hand market. Some individual *sāu máaih lóu* move one or two items a time to the market with trolleys, while those with vans sell a bulk of items to the market every time. **Figure 5** shows a *sāu máaih lóu* carrying the collected items including television sets and microwave ovens with trolley in Sham Shui Po.



Figure 5 *Sāu máaih lóu* taking the collected items to the second-hand market in Sham Shui Po (Photo by Doris Ho)

- Street stalls in the market

Street stalls in the second-hand market in Sham Shui Po are mainly owned by Pakistanis and mainland Chinese. These stalls are a form of informal street

trading as the owners are not licensed hawkers. Stalls' owners put the electrical appliances onto the pedestrian paths as well as the sides of vehicular paths. As introduced in Section 3.2.2, this neighbourhood in Sham Shui Po is traditionally more flexible with its streets utilization and so illegal hawkers find more spaces to survive. In a way, these street stalls are also used items collectors. However, their nature is different from the *sāu máaih lóu* mentioned above. Street stalls seldom have direct contact with the households which discard the items. They usually get the items from *sāu máaih lóu* and resell them to international traders. The *sāu máaih lóu* mentioned above usually do not have international networks, but the street stalls have a wide international network for business. The Pakistanis in my research make use of the "inconspicuous" public spaces as their stalls to do business in a "low-profile" manner. **Figures 6 and 7** show the stall of a Pakistani. He makes use of the "hidden" space beneath an escalator of a building in Sham Shui Po. **Figure 8** shows how another group of Pakistanis make use of a corner of an old building in Sham Shui Po as their stall. The pillars of this old building somehow help shade the appliances from the attention of the authority.



Figure 6 and 7 A Pakistani stall beneath an escalator of a building in the market (Photos by Doris Ho)



Figure 8 Pakistanis making use of the corner of an old building as their stall (Photo by Doris Ho)

- Second-hand shops in the market

The shops in this market are all owned by Hong Kong Chinese and mainland Chinese. Their business nature is similar to that of the street stalls, but their businesses are formally registered. They also get the used items from *sāu máaih lóu* and resell them to international traders. Yet, the shops are of larger scale and

have more stocks of items comparing to the informal street stalls. Sometimes the street stalls may also buy from the shops when they do not have enough items to satisfy customers' demands. Small shops and street stalls also tend to help each other to ensure smooth operation of the business which will be examined in the subsequent sections. **Figure 9** shows a shop owned by mainland Chinese in the market.



Figure 9 A shop owned by Mainland Chinese in the market (Photo by Doris Ho)

- Traders

Traders who buy second-hand electrical appliances from the street stalls or shops in the market are another active actors. They are mainly South Asians, Africans (such as Pakistanis and Nigerians who come to Hong Kong on business visas), as well as mainland Chinese (such as the Teochiu¹⁶ people from Guangdong province) who come to Hong Kong on two-way permits. **Figure 10** shows some African traders in the market. International traders seldom buy all the appliances

¹⁶ Teochiu, also known as “Chiu Chow” in Cantonese, is a city in the Guangdong province. Teochiu people are highly visible in Hong Kong and can be found in all sectors at all socio-economic levels (Sparks 1976).

they need at one time. They usually buy dozens of appliances everyday and send them to the container port at night. They gather the products every day, and when the stock is large enough to fill a container, they send the bulk off to their countries. For example, *Nicky* told me that he bought around 20 containers in 3 months. These traders usually do not buy directly from *sāu máaih lóu* although they know that the price would be much lower. One night, *Nicky* was at *Sam's* stall while a *sāu máaih lóu* was selling a television to *Sam*. *Sam* bought the television at HK\$20 from the *sāu máaih lóu* and later he re-sold it to *Nicky* at HK\$100. I asked *Nicky* why he did not buy from the *sāu máaih lóu* directly as it would be much cheaper, he said, “*I know, but we [the traders] don't do this [buying directly from sāu máaih lóu], this is a rule.*” By “rule”, *Nicky* meant the socially agreed norm in the market.

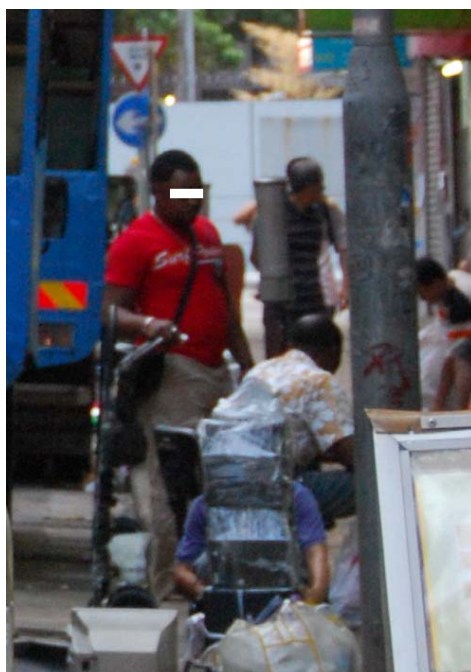


Figure 10 African traders in the market (Photo by Doris Ho)

- Workers

Both shops and street stalls employ workers as coolies. Most of the workers are South Asians, such as Pakistanis, Nepalese and Sri Lankans. Among them, the

Pakistanis are the biggest group. Workers from mainland China and Hong Kong can also be spotted, but this is less common. All the Pakistani stalls only employ Pakistani workers. Although of the same ethnic group, they are from a diverse background. For example, *David*, a worker in *Sam's* stall, is actually a “tourist” who is not supposed to work. This is why when I first came to know him, he did not tell me that he was working but only told me that he was helping a friend. Most of the South Asian workers who do not have a “formal” residence status do not admit that they are working. Another worker at *Sam's* stall is the Pakistani driver who migrated to Hong Kong and has been living in Hong Kong for more than 20 years. There is also a Pakistani worker at *Sam's* stall who was born and grown up in Hong Kong. This worker told me that he found it more comfortable to work in this market than being a waged labour in other industries because of the cultural familiarity here. **Figure 11** shows a South Asian worker in the market.



Figure 11 South Asian worker in the market (Photo by Doris Ho)

5.2.2 The Trash Cycle

The second-hand market begins at about 3 pm every day. Some shops start collecting used items from *sāu máaih lóu*, unloading and loading the items onto the trucks. The street stalls start setting up at about 5 pm. I observed that the peak hour of the market starts from about 7 pm every night with international traders going around the market to look for potential products. When the traders are interested in any items, they simply use a white marker to draw the abbreviations of their names or their nicknames on the appliances. The traders seldom test the appliances. They usually do not care much unless the appliances are more expensive. The overseas traders rely on mobile phones to communicate with their customers back home. These traders usually have more than one mobile phone. Different phones serve different purposes, such as for calling sellers in Hong Kong, calling customers in their home countries, and calling local friends. Once I have observed a Pakistani trader taking photographs of a speaker with his phone. He wanted to send the photographs to his potential customer in Pakistan via the phone to see if his customer was interested. At around 10 pm, workers from the shops and the street stalls or the drivers from the logistic companies would drive the appliances to the Kwai Chung Container Port for packing and shipping or to the container yards in Yuen Long¹⁷ for storage.

The chain of the trash economy does not end here. After the electrical appliances arrive to the less developed countries, the traders do not repair the appliances by themselves. These traders are like the concentration point of second-hand electrical appliances in their countries. They wholesale these items to the factories which do the repair and repaint works. After that, distributors from different areas would buy

¹⁷ Yuen Long is a district situated at the Northern Hong Kong near to the Hong Kong-Mainland China border.

the repaired and repainted items from these factories and put the items into markets. Most of the traders import the appliances back to their home countries, but some of them expand their markets and import the appliances to other countries too. For example, a trader from Islamabad of Pakistan told me that he also sold the products to South Africa. These traders might have created networks with people from other countries through the acquaintances made in Sham Shui Po. The international network of *Sam* is also not limited to Pakistan, but expands to Africa as well as the Islamic community overseas. I observed that *Sam* has frequent contact with Nigerian traders as well as Pakistani traders who live in the U.K. These people are all active actors engaging in international import-export trade and liaising with customers from a wide range of countries. The “trash” economy is indeed a complex chain in which a diversified group of people from different ethnic backgrounds are involved. After seeing how the trash economy operates, let us see what electrical appliances can be found in market in Sham Shui Po.

5.2.3 The Value of Trash

In the following table, I summarize the various types of electrical appliances which can be found in the market as well as their prices. They are all abandoned by Hong Kong people as “trash”; yet, they all become valuable in the trash economy.

Table 6 Items sold in the second-hand electrical appliances market in Sham Shui Po

Major Categories	Appliances
Audio & visual	Televisions (CRT ¹⁸ televisions and LCD ¹⁹ televisions), DVD players, DVD recorders, VCD players, hi-fis, speakers, video cassette recorders, cassette recorder, amplifiers, radio
Household items	Refrigerators, washing machines, microwave ovens, air conditioners (window-type and split-type), drying machines, dehumidifiers, rice cookers, vacuum cleaners, fans
Computer products	Computer monitors (CRT monitors and LCD monitors), desktops, laptops, printers, webcams

The street stalls and shops get these items at a very low cost from *sāu máaih lóu* and then re-sell them to traders at a higher price. I observed that the Pakistani stalls usually focus on selling more household items such as CRT televisions of old model and refrigerators while the shops opened by Chinese people focus on LCD televisions and hi-fis. Prices of the products vary depending on the models and the brands; usually *Sony* is the most expensive brand. **Table 7** lists out the approximate prices of some items in which the Pakistani stall purchases from *sāu máaih lóu* and re-sold to international traders or other parties:

Table 7 Approximate prices of second-hand electrical appliances purchased and re-sold by a Pakistani stall

Electrical Appliances	Purchasing Price (approximate in HKD)	Re-selling Price (approximate in HKD)
CRT Television (size 14" - 17", old model)	below \$20	\$100
CRT Television (size 20" - 21", old model)	\$20	\$200
CRT Television (size 20" - 21", newer model)	unknown	\$450
CRT Television (size 25" - 34", newer model)	\$650	\$750
DVD player	\$20	\$80
Video cassette recorders	\$15	unknown
Microwave oven	\$20	\$100
Dehumidifier	\$20	\$300

¹⁸ CRT refers to cathode ray tube. Screens with CRT have a bigger body behind.

¹⁹ LCD refers to liquid-crystal display. Screens with LCD are flat, thin and lighter.

The most common television sets found in the Pakistani stalls is the medium size (approximately 20” - 21”) CRT televisions of older model. I was told that they are the easiest to be sold in the developing countries. The prices of the second-hand products also vary depending on the seasonal trend. For example, there was a dehumidifier at *Sam*'s stall which he bought from a *sāu máaih lóu*. *Sam* told me that he bought it at HK\$20. One night, a Hong Kong Chinese man was interested in the dehumidifier and he asked *Sam* about the price. *Sam* told him HK\$300. The Chinese man counter bargained and proposed HK\$250. *Sam* rejected because he believed that the dehumidifier was worth higher price in such a humid climate during springtime in Hong Kong. Refrigerator is another popular item sourced by the Pakistani stalls. Interestingly, the overseas traders prefer 2-door refrigerators than the more advanced 3-door refrigerators. *Sam* explained that 2-door refrigerators are more popular in South Asian and African countries and that the 2-door refrigerators are also easier for transportation. These “trashes” also have added value along the trash economy chain. *Nicky* told me that for a television which he bought at HK\$200 in Sham Shui Po, he would sell it at about HK\$250 to his customer who has factory in Pakistan. His customer will then repair and repaint the television and re-sell it to the distributor at about HK\$350.

5.3 Pakistanis in the Trash Economy

The second-hand electrical appliances market in Sham Shui Po is not only a centre of an international “trash” business, but is also a centre of livelihood for a large group of people from different ethnic backgrounds. The South Asians in this market may be local born, immigrants, workers on tourist visas, traders on business visas, or even asylum seekers trying to seek protection. This market is a place for them to make a living, to gather, to exchange information, to interact with country fellows, other national groups, as well as local Chinese people. Their networks make up an ethnic hub which provides a large group of the minorities with chances for self-reliance. In the following sections, I will examine this closely knitted network by examining the social interactions in the market.

5.3.1 Co-ethnic Interactions and Ethnic Resources

The Pakistanis in my study make use of their ethnic resources and networks to make a living. As introduced in Section 2.13, ethnic resources are the sociocultural features which ethnic entrepreneurs employ in business or from which their business benefits (Light 1984). Many have pointed out the importance of the role of family. Light (2005) finds that about two-thirds of the personnel in ethnic economy involved unpaid family members. For example, Perry (1999:64) puts that family labours give “the employer a trusted window”. In their study of Korean ethnic economy in Los Angeles, Light and Bonacich (1988) find that 90 percent of the interviewees report the use of unpaid family labour in their ethnic business. The Pakistanis in my study also draw on family resources but usually from the extended family network. For example, *Sam* has sought support from *Michael* who is his cousin in the start-up process of the business. *Michael* is familiar with the business environment in Hong Kong as he was

born here and has been engaged in various second-hand import-export trades. Partnership with *Michael* facilitated a smoother start-up of *Sam*'s business.

Apart from family resources, co-ethnic clientele is another important ethnic resource for the Pakistani stalls. Some decades ago when this market had just developed, its clientele was mainly Chinese from the mainland China. Since the last decade, the major part of the clientele of this market has shifted from mainland China to South Asian and African countries. This change has provided a niche for the Pakistanis to make a living in the market because of having the advantage in attracting co-ethnic clients. For bosses like *Sam*, a Pakistani, it is not difficult for him to find traders from his home country and keep good relationships. He and his clients speak their own language when they are doing business. In an evening, I went to buy televisions with *Nicky*. *Nicky* first bought televisions at *Sam*'s stall. Then, he went to *Billy*'s stall on another street and bought 15 televisions there. After that, *Nicky* went to another Pakistani stall, and bought 19 more televisions. After buying from three Pakistani stalls, *Nicky* returned back to the Chinese shop near to *Sam*'s stall and bought some additional televisions. When explaining about this purchasing pattern, *Nicky* said,

"I'm not friend with Chinese people. I'm only friend with Pakistan people. I go to the shops of Pakistan people first. If they don't have enough televisions, I go back to the shops of Chinese people."

Nicky's preference for the Pakistani stalls can be understood as a kind of ethnic solidarity. Ethnic solidarity is a "conscious identification with (and loyalty to) a particular race or ethnic population" (Olzak 2006:36). I argue that whether buying from the co-ethnic stalls is driven by self-interest or not, an "altruistic component based on solidarity with one's in-group" of the Pakistani traders is obvious (Portes 1995:29).

Along with the co-ethnic clientele, co-ethnic suppliers are another manifestation of ethnic resources. Having the same ethnic background, the Pakistani stalls have a network with Pakistani *sāu máaih lóu*. I was told that some of them are asylum seekers and are not able to find a job in Hong Kong. So they collect abandoned appliances around Sham Shui Po and sell to the stalls for generating petty cash. Besides co-ethnic *sāu máaih lóu*, Pakistani stalls also have a stable source of supply from Chinese *sāu máaih lóu*. I asked *Sam* how he could attract Chinese *sāu máaih lóu*. *Sam* said, during the Chinese New Year week²⁰,

“Chinese people sell products to us because we work every day. You see, the Chinese shops are all closed on holidays and they don’t work every day. We Pakis²¹ don’t celebrate these festivals. People can find us here all the time!”

Interestingly, not being Chinese somehow brings the Pakistanis an indirect advantage in attracting Chinese *sāu máaih lóu*. Their hard working characteristic earns them a good name among the Chinese *sāu máaih lóu*. Menzies et al. (2003:131) point out that people from the same ethnic group bring obvious advantages in that they speak the same language, are part of the same culture and, can relate well to the customers if the customers are mainly of the same ethnic background. The Pakistanis in my study only employ co-ethnic workers in their stalls. For example, *Sam*’s stall has 4 Pakistani workers. *Billy*’s stall has 2 Pakistani workers and another Pakistani stall has 3 Pakistani workers from my observation. Having similar cultural background and being able to speak Urdu which is the national language of Pakistan, these workers can interact well with the customers from Pakistan and the region around, such as

²⁰ The Chinese stores were closed during the Chinese New Year holidays. Many of them were opened only after the 8th or 9th Lunar Day. Many Chinese stores were also closed for a few days on other Chinese festivals such as the Ching Ming Festival in April.

²¹ “Paki” is a nickname commonly used by Pakistanis to refer to their fellow countrymen.

Afghanistan. Although not being the same language, I was told that many people from the region around Pakistan could understand basic Urdu. Moreover, most of the workers of *Sam* are from the same hometown - Punjab of Pakistan. I find that having workers from the same hometown can bring even more advantages to the business. *Sam* and his workers can speak Punjabi which is the local language of the Punjab province. When *Sam* and his workers want to talk about some business “secrets”, they speak in Punjabi instead of Urdu because the trader customers, like *Nicky*, would not understand Punjabi language.

Another interesting finding is that a strong sense of “brotherhood” among the Pakistani fellows has created a kind of mutual help within the Pakistani community. For example, *Peter*, a Pakistani worker in a Chinese shop, always helps at *Sam*’s stall whenever he has free time. During the Ching Ming festival, the Chinese shop where *Peter* works for was closed. *Peter*’s bosses went back to mainland China for a few days. *Peter* then spent his free time at *Sam*’s stall and helped working when other workers were busy. In other evenings, when the shop where *Peter* works closed earlier, *Peter* also came to *Sam*’s stall to help. He usually helped moving the appliances onto the trucks. When asked *Peter* why he did so, he said, “*No problem! Pakistan people help Pakistan people!*” I have asked *Peter* why he worked for Chinese people instead of Pakistanis, he just told me, “*Well, I like Chinese people too!*” Although whether he really prefers working for Chinese to Pakistanis is hard to know, it is obvious that he always tries to help *Sam* whenever he can. *Sam* would once in a while give *Peter* some petty cash as well as nonmonetary benefits such as meals and drinks. Indeed, many other Pakistani fellows also “work” informally at *Sam*’s stall. For instance, during the course of my fieldworks, another Pakistani

always came to *Sam's* stall to chat and offered help when necessary. Later this Pakistani revealed to me that he was an asylum seeker and has been waiting for a refugee status for 7 years. He always comes to *Sam's* stall and offers help during peak hours. Regarding this, *Sam* said, "Yes, many brothers help me here." By brothers, *Sam* refers to the country fellows whom he has a sense of "brotherhood" with. *Sam* and his business partner *Michael* often provide these country fellows with nonmonetary benefits such as offering them with meals or drinks, and sometimes give them a few tens or a few hundred Hong Kong dollars casually whenever the country fellows need. This kind of brotherhood not only provides *Sam's* stall with informal labours, but also provides a group of country fellows, including asylum seekers, a livelihood. Although *Sam* is not able to employ all these country fellows formally, quite a number of Pakistani asylum seekers can make a living and establish their social circle by helping *Sam* and by coming to the stall for a chat with other country fellows. It is evidenced in this case that co-ethnic networks provide a kind of reciprocal obligations to actors from the same ethnic background or to people whom there is a "cultural similarity".

5.3.2 *Inter-ethnic Interactions and Mutual Assistance*

Having said that the Pakistanis depend a lot on their co-ethnic resources, connections and labour sources, I do not mean that there is a lack of inter-ethnic interaction and collaboration. In the market, I have observed a strong community spirit characterized of mutual help. This community spirit does not only exist among the Pakistanis, but also between the Pakistanis and Chinese people which consist of both Hong Kong Chinese and Mainland Chinese. This is evidenced by the interactions between the Pakistani stalls and the Chinese shops in the neighbourhood. *Sam's* stall sometimes

did not have enough products to satisfy customers' demand. Then *Sam* and his workers would buy more products from the Chinese shops. Sometimes *Sam* buys televisions from the shops opened by Mainland Chinese on Hai Tan Street, and sometimes from the shops opened by Hong Kong Chinese on Ki Lung Street. These shops actually sell televisions to *Sam* at a relatively lower price comparing to the price in which they can directly sell to their own customers. In fact, these Chinese shops could keep the televisions for themselves and sell the televisions to their own customers at a higher price. However, they cherish the spirit of mutual help. One evening, I met a Hong Kong woman who has a shop on Ki Lung Street. I asked her why she preferred selling the televisions at a lower price to *Sam*, she said,

“That’s fine. They [Sam’s team] have their own customers; I just let them sell it. Sometimes I also buy from Sam and re-sell to my customers.”

When *Sam*'s stall has some items which are more suitable for the customers of the Hong Kong woman, *Sam* would sell the items to her so that she can re-sell them. They do not mind earning a bit less when helping each other. This sort of mutual help enhance their business since they supplement each other. They are both sellers in the market and are supposed to be “competitors”, but in this market their relationship is more like “collaborators”.

The mutualistic relationship of the Pakistani and the Chinese shops is also evidenced by the interaction of *Sam* and a young Hong Kong woman whose parents have a second-hand electrical appliances shop in the neighbourhood. One night, *Sam* introduced her to me and said,

“She is like my daughter! We are like a family. Their shop is on the next street.”

This girl interrupted *Sam* as if she had something very important to say,

“Hey! Let me help you out! I am serious. Let’s share the container tonight. I will help you. Don’t worry!”

Later I asked this young woman about what happened, she explained,

“Sometimes they [Sam’s team] only sell a few televisions a day. It is not enough for fitting a container. It will be very expensive. Our shop sells more. So we can put Sam’s televisions to our containers. My parents have known Sam for many years. He always helps us.”

Hence, when *Sam*’s business is not good, he can seek help from the neighbours. He has been backed up by a closely tied network. The relationships based on mutual help allow the trash economy to operate smoothly and allow a big group of people to earn a living.

Sam has also built up very good relationship with the Chinese *sāu máaih lóu*. Sometimes he does not mind earning less to maintain a good relationship with his suppliers. In an evening, a Hong Kong *sāu máaih lóu* couple came to *Sam*’s stall. I was told that this couple collects used appliances around Prince Edward²². The *sāu máaih lóu* couple sold three video cassette recorders to *Sam*. *Sam* gave them HK\$40 which is a standard price. And then the woman said, *“Hey come on, round it up! Give me ten dollars more and make it fifty. I will reserve the good stuff for you next time!”* *Sam* gave them an extra of HK\$10 right away. After the couple left, I asked *Sam* why he was willing to pay more, he said, *“No problem to earn ten dollars less. They are my good friends!”*

²² Prince Edward is an area right next to Sham Shui Po.

I once observed another incident in which *Sam* did not mind earning less but to benefit his country fellow. In an evening, a Pakistani *sāu máaih lóu* sold two DVD players to *Sam*. After 15 minutes, the same Pakistani *sāu máaih lóu* came again and sold two more DVD players to *Sam*. After a while, he came again with another two DVD players. I asked *Sam* why this Pakistani *sāu máaih lóu* could collect so many DVD players in such a short time. *Sam* explained,

“An old woman sold these stuffs to him. He has contacts with some old women who collect these stuffs.”

Then I asked *Sam* why he did not buy directly from the old women because it would be cheaper if he skipped the Pakistani *sāu máaih lóu*. *Sam* said,

“If these old women sell the DVD players to me directly, I wouldn't buy them! It's good to earn less but to create one more job for a Paki²³, isn't it good?”

Werbner (1984:166) points out that the “individual gains approach” which is based on profitability is not appropriate in assessing ethnic businesses and it is a “mistake to overemphasize the importance of gains that are specific for individuals” in ethnic business. Instead, she suggests that we should focus on how the ethnic minorities connect their businesses and to generate a wide range of jobs for the actors who are intermeshed in the trade. Echoing with Werbner, I also find that the main concern of the actors in the Sham Shui Po market is not profit maximization or profitability, but to benefit others with a view to maintain a smooth business, good social relationships and social networks. Later I was told that this Pakistani *sāu máaih lóu* was an asylum seeker. He is not able to work but he can generate petty cash by collecting and selling the used items through his network with the old woman and *Sam*.

²³ “Paki” is a nickname commonly used by Pakistanis to refer to their fellow countrymen.

Moreover, I have also observed an interesting interaction among the Pakistani traders. These traders come to Hong Kong on business visa for 3 months. When their visas expire, they go back to Pakistan for about 2 to 3 months to renew it. They spend more than half a year living in Hong Kong every year, and hence establishing good network with people is important to facilitate their stays and businesses. I find that their relationships with the other traders are collaborative. As mentioned in section 5.3.1, the Pakistani traders buy at the Pakistani stalls first. However, there is usually not a huge stock of televisions at the stalls. I asked *Nicky* whether the traders try to purchase at the stalls as early as possible to ensure that they could purchase enough items before other traders arrive. *Nicky* told me an interesting interaction, he said,

“We [the inner Pakistani traders’ circle] call each other first before we start our purchases every day. We ask where each other will buy the items, and ask how many items each other need to buy. So that we all can buy what we need.”

The Pakistani traders do not purchase all the items which they are interested but leave enough items for other traders to buy. This collaborative strategy of the Pakistani traders can ensure that the trading will run smoothly in a long run and that vicious competition among traders could be avoided. Unlike other businesses in which self-interest is always the main concern, in this market the traders put mutual help as first priority. Since they all spend months and months, years and years, in this market, establishing a good relationship with others is very important.

Besides being a workplace, the second-hand market is also a social space for the Pakistanis to socialize with each other. Most of my informants live in the Sham Shui Po district. Every day they congregate together in this neighbourhood to work, to

exchange information, to chat and to get emotional support. During the non-peak hours, my informants would gather at the stalls to socialize with country fellows and local people. Bosses like *Sam*, or some older country fellows would sit on the plastic chairs while the younger workers would sit on the television sets. They always share milk tea²⁴ together and talk about the news back home. In one evening, some Pakistani fellows were gathering at *Sam*'s stall while having milk tea. Among them, there were Pakistani who was locally born in Hong Kong, Pakistani who migrated to Hong Kong long time ago, Pakistani "tourist", Pakistani trader, Pakistani asylum seekers and some other Pakistanis whom I did not know their migration statuses. *Sam* told me that they were sharing the worries with each other because there were three bomb attacks recently in Punjab. They were exchanging information about what they have heard and got comfort from each other.

Besides interacting with fellow countrymen, the Pakistanis also employ different strategies and language skills to interact with people from other ethnic backgrounds, such as the African traders. For example, *Sam* and his workers greet the African traders and Chinese traders differently according to different culture in order to create a sense of familiarity. These greetings are "tailor-made". When the African trader was approaching, *David* went ahead and say loudly "*Hello, my friend!*" followed by hand shaking and back patting with the African trader. However, they greeted Chinese people in another way. When there are Chinese traders and *sāu máaih lóu*, the Pakistanis would greet them by saying phrases like "sìhk jó faahn meih?" ("食咗飯未?") It literally means "have you eaten yet?" which is commonly used as a greeting phrase in Cantonese). Although South Asians in Hong Kong like the Pakistanis have

²⁴ I was told that the hot milk tea in Hong Kong is very similar to the traditional milk tea in Pakistan. This is why the Pakistanis always drink hot milk tea at the stalls.

always been perceived as lacking language skill, I find that they are actually very culturally sensitive and are able to employ different language skills to interact with people from different ethnic backgrounds.

The market is also a place for the Pakistanis to make local friends and to learn Hong Kong culture. One night, a middle-aged Hong Kong man who is a driver from the logistic company came to *Sam*'s stall. This Hong Kong man greeted *David* by saying "Kya haal hai?" (کیا حال ہے), meaning "how are you?" in Urdu language, and *David* replied by saying "néih hou ma?" (你好嗎?) which means "how are you?" in Cantonese. I was surprised to see the Hong Kong man to speak in Urdu and I asked *David* why. *David* said,

"It was our deal! I taught him to speak my language and he taught me to speak his language. So he says to me in Urdu and I say to him in Chinese!"

This market thus also becomes a site for "cultural exchange". The Pakistani stalls have also built up good relationships with neighbours based on a sense of mutual help. For instance, *Sam*'s stall is right in front of a shop which is opened by an old Hong Kong Chinese couple. I asked *Sam* why this old couple would allow him to set up an informal stall right in front of their shop, *Sam* said,

"Because we always help them and we don't bring troubles! Now we are good friends. I have a very good relationship with this old lady."

Their good relationship is based on reciprocal obligations and mutual help. *Sam* and his workers always help this old couple to move the heavy cardboard boxes and this old couple would sometimes offer *Sam* and his workers drinks and fruits. Other examples which show the close bonds between the Pakistani stall and its neighbours

is that when I was conducting fieldworks at *Sam*'s stall, a few *Sam*'s neighbours have "warned" *Sam* that I might be from the Immigration Department who was looking for illegal workers. One night, a Hong Kong woman came to *Sam*'s stall and talked to *Sam* in a low voice while looking at me with suspicion. Then *Sam* replied her,

"She [referring to me] is just a student from the City University. She said she was studying about this market."

Later *Sam* introduced me to this young woman. *Sam* said,

"They [this woman and her family] have a shop on Tai Nan Street. They sell bags. I watched her grow up!"

Establishing a close social bond and mutualistic relation with neighbours allows *Sam* to operate his business, though "unlawful", in a smoother way. Because of a mutual help spirit, the social actors in this market help and "protect" each other. By working in this market, the Pakistanis have built up their social circles. Social actors with different ethnic backgrounds get along with each other. Social relationships which are supposed to be competitive are somehow collaborative in this market due to a sense of reciprocal obligations. This kind of closely knitted networking based on mutual help facilitate the smooth operation of the "trash economy" in Sham Shui Po. While everyone tries to make a living in the market, they also help the other people to make a living too, whether they are owners, workers, traders, or just fellow countrymen, and regardless they are ethnic minorities or Chinese. Based on the above data, I will discuss some new perspectives for understanding Hong Kong's ethnic minorities in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion: Ethnic Minorities, Regional and Global Political Economy, Transnationalism

In the previous chapters we have seen how an international “trash” economy operates in a “poor” neighbourhood in Hong Kong, linking up a locality of the metropolis and the less developed countries through a business chain. We have also seen how the Pakistanis in this market actively maintain the social networks among themselves as well as with other ethnic groups which support the livelihoods of a whole spectrum of social actors from different classes, from Hong Kong grassroots to international traders. So, what new understanding can this research bring to the study of ethnic minorities? How can we understand this community from both a micro and macro perspectives? The following sections will discuss the implications of this research at the social, global and transnational level.

6.1 Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong

Ethnic minorities are often depicted as an underclass group which faces many problems in lives. Schierup, Hansen and Castles (2006:100) point out that ethnic minorities and immigrants have been described as “unemployed or welfare-dependent” in the U.K. In New York, ethnic minorities are usually depicted as being associated with “crime, drug abuse, joblessness and other social ills” (Model 1993:161). This kind of perspective looking at the ethnic minorities can be understood with the *disadvantage theory*. This theory sees ethnic distinctiveness as a disadvantage and a barrier for ethnic minorities to participate in the larger society (Aldrich et al. 1984). According to this theory, the employment opportunities and

development of the ethnic minorities are blocked due to racial discrimination and their lack of resources. For example, Walker (1998 cited in Kaplan and House-Soremekun 2006) argues that the institutional racism in the U.S. destroys the attempts of the African blacks whenever they try to participate in the commercial life. Similarly, the ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, especially the South Asians, are also depicted as a lower class group and a problematic group.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the researches on South Asians in Hong Kong are largely conducted from social work and social welfare perspectives, focusing on how to create betterment for these groups in the labour market, education, and other opportunities. For example, in their research on South Asian youth, YMMSS (2002) points out that the South Asian youth are suffering from limited opportunities in employment and education due to their inability to communicate in Chinese. This research recommends the Government to provide trainings for the South Asians (YMMSS 2002). Similarly, other studies also point out that language and discrimination are the major barriers for South Asians, and recommend the Government to provide more services and assistances (Ku et al, 2003; Ku et al. 2006). These researches seem to have an underlying assumption that the South Asians are in lack of resources and are at a disadvantaged position because of language barrier and discrimination. Although these findings can be true, these researches lack a more dynamic understanding of ethnic groups and neglect their resourceful sides.

The Pakistanis in my study have successfully utilized their ethnic resources to create a living in the second-hand market in Sham Shui Po. Not only are they self-dependent, they are also able to provide mutual support for each other. According to Valdez

(2007), the ethnic solidarity and reciprocal obligations that are attached to an ethnic group facilitate ethnic entrepreneurship by providing both economic and non-economic support to co-ethnic members. The boss of ethnic stall was willing to earn less in order to provide job opportunities for Pakistani *sāu máaih lóu*. The Pakistanis give out money to their fellows casually because of a sense of “brotherhood”. Having the same ethnic background, they feel that they have an obligation to help each other. They are not as “poor in resources” as being perceived conventionally. They are actually very resourceful in the sense that they can draw on the advantages of their co-ethnic networks to maintain a business which not only supports the livelihood of oneself, but also supports the livelihoods of their country fellows.

Yet, my research finds that the social networking of the Pakistanis is beyond what the *ethnic enclave* concept covers. Sometimes we trust a friend’s friend who is not from the same ethnic background more than a stranger who is from the same ethnic background (Greve and Salaff 2005). Therefore, Greve and Salaff (2005) suggest that ethnic economy should also be viewed from the *social network perspective* which focuses on the multiplex social and economic ties of ethnic minorities. In my study, the Pakistanis actively link themselves to the social actors of other ethnic backgrounds. The relationships between the Pakistani stalls and their “competitors” are not agonistic. My research finds that their vision is not limited by profit maximization. My informants are willing to earn less in order to maintain a mutualistic and reciprocal relationship with the others. These closely knitted networks create a self-reliant hub which benefits all the social actors involved. Not only can the Pakistanis make a living in this market, they can also intermingle and integrate with the local people here. Ethnic distinctiveness is not always a disadvantage like what previous

researches have depicted. We cannot determine whether belonging to a specific ethnic group is a disadvantage. I argue that whether an ethnic distinctiveness is an advantage or not depends not on a specific ethnicity, but rather on how an ethnic group maneuvers the resources within their ethnic networks and across the inter-ethnic networks

6.2 Regional and Global Political Economy

While the above analysis focuses on the potentials and resources of minority groups, we should not neglect that their livelihoods in the Sham Shui Po market are also closely tied to the global political economy. The trash economy in Sham Shui Po would not have existed without the rich and poor gap as well as the inequality generated by global capitalism. Being one of the most affluent cities in the world, Hong Kong people spend a lot on consuming trendy electrical and electronic goods. As illustrated in Section 5.2, consumption is an important part of Hong Kong people's lives. Hong Kong people often throw away things which are still in good condition and replace them with newer ones. However, many people from the less developed countries are not able to afford first-hand and brand new goods. They can only buy the products which are abandoned by the more developed countries. Hence, the imbalance of wealth between the rich and the poor worlds has given rise to a big international market for "trash". It is this global inequality which creates a niche for the Pakistanis in my research to make a living.

The trash economy takes place within the framework of globalization. Globalization is characterized by its "time-space compression" (Harvey 1989), such that "distance and time no longer appear to be major constraints on the organization of human activity" and that social life is stretched across time and space (Inda and Rosaldo 2002:6-8). Globalization has allowed corporations, enterprises, investors, entrepreneurs and capitals to go global. Although economic globalization has "promised" that the world will be without national barriers and that everyone will be better off, "globalization from above" has been proven to have brought more discontents and poverty than we expected (Brecher, Costello and Smith 2002; Stiglitz

2003). Many people from the grassroots and from the less developed countries have been left behind during the globalization process. They are those who are least benefited from the globalization of world production. Top world products are enjoyed by those who can pay high prices, while many people from the less developed world can only afford to pay for cheaper products and second hand products. For example, many less developed countries import plenty of low quality and cheap products from China. My study also reveals that they import items which are abandoned by affluent Hong Kong people. The trash economy shows an alternative form of globalization. This form of globalization is made possible neither by multinational corporations nor gigantic enterprises, but by a lower sector in Hong Kong which is composed of both ethnic minorities and local Chinese who make use of their transnational ethnic resources and networks to conduct business. The trash economy studied in my research takes place in the poorest district, Sham Shui Po, which has formed the most economically active ethnic hub in Hong Kong and which has provided chances for many minorities to make a living.

Mathews (2007) has studied the “low-end globalization” of Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong. Chung King Mansions is a shabby building located at the tourist centre of Hong Kong which is now famous for its ethnic diversity and low budget businesses. “Low-end globalization”, as defined by Mathews, is the “transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, sometimes quasi-legal or illegal transactions, commonly associated within the developing world” (Mathews 2007:170). Mathews applies Appadurai’s theory of “scapes” of globalization to analyze the microscopic process of globalization. In Chungking Mansions, there are thousands of traders, tourists, illegal workers and asylum seekers

from the less developed countries seeking their fortunes. Many traders are from the Sub-Saharan Africa who look for manufactured goods while most of the shopkeepers and workers are from South Asia or mainland China. The trades in Chungking Mansions involve smaller amounts of capital as comparing with formal businesses. Mathews shows how low-end global business has been conducted through the interactions on a human-to-human scale by a large group of ethnic minorities from the less developed countries. My research has studied the “low-end globalization” in another locality in Hong Kong. It reveals how the Sham Shui Po’s trash economy has provided a livelihood to a whole spectrum of ethnic groups at the lower strata of Hong Kong society.

In Sham Shui Po, traders simply communicate with their overseas business partners through mobile phones. They usually have more than one mobile phone with them. Different phones are used to call different parties. When they see interesting products, they take photographs of the products and send them back to the potential customers back home via the phone. Time and space are compressed in a very “basic” way in the market. However, unlike Chungking Mansions in which traders from the less developed countries look for manufactured products in Hong Kong, traders in the market in Sham Shui Po look for “trash”, i.e. the things abandoned by Hong Kong people. This “trash” will then be sent to neighboring places such as Guangdong, and other provinces in China, or to countries in South Asia as well as Africa. The hierarchical global order of economy and the material gap between developed and less developed countries are succinctly embedded in the trash business in Sham Shui Po.

6.3 Transnational Migration

This research also sheds new light on the study of transnational migration. As mentioned in the literature review, migration has been traditionally perceived as a process in which people uprooting themselves from their homelands to move to new places to settle. Contrary to this, I find that the “ethnic hub” in Sham Shui Po, rather than having only migrants and settlers, is composed of people from different places and of different migration statuses.

The Pakistanis in my study came to Hong Kong through different connections and channels. Some of them migrated to Hong Kong through family connections, while others came in the name of “travelling”. However, they are in Hong Kong not for leisure but for making a better living. *David* is a “tourist” who has lived in Hong Kong for 2 years. He would like to stay in Hong Kong if business opportunities arise, but he might also go back to Pakistan anytime if he feels hopeless. Like many other traders, *Nicky* comes to Hong Kong on business visa. In the name of “doing business”, *Nicky* has established his living and social networks in Hong Kong. He spends more than six months every year in Hong Kong and has cherished the hope to obtain a Hong Kong residence permit. There are also many asylum seekers in the market who are yearning to have a settlement or resettlement opportunity. One Pakistani asylum seeker whom I came across in my fieldwork has already been living in Hong Kong for 7 years. He lives his life in Sham Shui Po and hopes to go to Canada one day. Unlike the conventional migrants, many of these Pakistanis are yet to have a formal status. While making a living in the second-hand market, they have to try out their luck to see if they could obtain a chance to “stay” in Hong Kong. Getting married with a local person is the quickest way for such purpose. They are a

kind of “transient migrants” with a “not-yet-ended” migration trajectory. As Bailey et al. (2002) put it, they are living their lives in a form of “permanent temporariness”.

The Pakistanis in the second-hand market are also living in a very dynamic transnational social field. Transnational social field, as defined by Levitt (2001), is a social space which is created by the continuous interchanges between sending and receiving communities and it is a space which enables individuals to function in both places at the same time. The “social field” here is not referring to a geographic concept but a set of interlocking networks of social relationships in which ideas, practices and resources are organized (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994). Similarly, the social relationships of the Pakistanis in the market in Sham Shui Po are also not bounded by national borders.

Although my informants physically spend their everyday lives in a poor locality in Hong Kong, socially they live in a transnational social field. Sitting in a street in a poor neighbourhood, *Sam* constantly communicates with people in Africa, South Asia and the Islamic traders living in the U.K. The phone list of *Sam* is probably more “international” than many of the so called “westernized” people who always travel around. Enjoying tea on the street, the Pakistanis talk about the politics of their hometown. Being an illegal worker, *David* sends remittances back to Pakistan which supports the living of a group of people miles away. Having lived in Hong Kong for 2 years, *David* has changed his idea on gender issues. Their statuses, cultural values as well as social and economic relationships are constantly evolving in the transnational social field.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

This thesis seeks to make a contribution to the study of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. It also tries to urge for more attention to the rise of transnational localities around us. With ethnographic details of everyday social interactions of a group of Pakistanis with their co-ethnic and inter-ethnic networks in a poor neighbourhood in Hong Kong, this thesis offers an instructive perspective for understanding the minorities. Unlike most previous researches that have focused on the problematic sides of ethnic minorities, this research shows that the ethnic minorities in fact take an active role to create their livelihoods. In Sham Shui Po, the poorest yet ethnically diverse and economically vibrant district, the Pakistani community gets along very well with actors from different ethnic backgrounds based on the spirits of mutual help instead of profit maximization and self-interest. Although the Pakistani stalls cannot afford employing many “formal” workers, they allow a large group of country fellows which include quite a number of asylum seekers to help out “informally”. This kind of “informal” employment has supported the livelihoods of a large group of Pakistanis who may be otherwise poor and vulnerable. Although the Pakistanis in my research also lack Chinese reading and writing skills as depicted in previous research, they are actually very culturally sensitive and are able to employ different strategies and oral language skills to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Rather than being disadvantaged and underprivileged as generally perceived, it is indeed a resourceful, active and self-reliant community.

The “trash” market in Sham Shui Po is an epitome of transnationalism and global migration. In this locality, we can see how transnational communications and globalization are made possible not by multinational corporations but by a whole spectrum of national groups from the less developed places, including the Pakistanis and Afghans from South Asia, Nigerians from Africa and Teochiu Chinese from Mainland China. Unlike traditional migrants, many social actors in this locality are neither totally uprooted from their homelands nor completely incorporated into Hong Kong society. The ambiguity and variety of the migration statuses of the Pakistanis provide a glimpse into the complexity of contemporary migration. Some of them see Hong Kong as a dream place for settlement; some see Hong Kong as a passage; some see it as a point of departure for next journey; and some manage to stay in Hong Kong for many years though without a resident permit. Somehow they all flock into this neighbourhood to try out their luck, to help each other, and to try to create their destinies. Their different migration trajectories and different roles in the market turn this neighbourhood an economically active and culturally diverse site. However, most of the previous researches or relevant literatures may not be sufficient to capture the dynamics of these communities which are closely tied to local, regional and global political economy.

For future studies on minority groups, I propose the following agenda. First, to help enhance our understanding of minority groups and to reduce social stigmatization on them, researches should focus on the social networks of the minorities in order to explore the dynamics, the mutual help and self-reliant spirits among them. Second, as most researches in Hong Kong so far are largely focused on those who are legal residents, I urge our attention on a large group of ethnic minorities who are yet to

have a clear status. With the intensification of transnationalism, more and more people are living in the transnational social field. Future researches should adopt a transnational approach and think beyond national borders. Only by doing so can we generate a holistic picture of a large group of ethnic minorities whose lives are closely tied to transnationalism but not bound by a territory. More studies should examine Government's policy on transmigrants and asylum seekers, which is beyond the scope of this research. Although somehow "invisible" in our society, these "migrants" are having an increasing impact on our urban landscape as well as social and economic relationships.

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