

An Ethnographic Comparison of Wet Markets and Supermarkets in Hong Kong

LUI Sze-ki

Introduction

What is a Wet Market?

The origin of wet market is rooted in the periodic-marketing system in China, a significant feature of China's domestic trade studied by G. William Skinner (Eastman 1988). Peasants in traditional agrarian Chinese society were largely self-sufficient in producing food and immediate necessities. To satisfy a variety of other specialized needs, they had to go directly to the location for exchange. By meeting at special locale on specific dates, travel distance could be cut down. Then, standard markets emerged, usually along the main street or in a temple courtyard, and "opened only periodically, typically, for a few hours in the morning once every three to five days" (p.115). Peasants assembled in a market on market days "to sell a chicken or duck, surplus eggs, such grains or vegetables as could be spared" (p.115) and to buy food or other goods that they needed but did not produce.

Present wet markets in Hong Kong are evolved from the periodic-marketing system. Gao (1994) detailed the distribution of period markets in Hong Kong. The earliest record dates back to the Ming dynasty in the sixteenth century when the name "Yuen Long periodic market" was in use. During the nineteenth century, there were several more officially permitted periodic markets in Tai Po, Sheuk Wu, Cheung Chau and other informal periodic markets in Sha Tau Kok, Tai O, Grass Island, etc. Periodic markets continued to grow in areas such as Kowloon City, Sham Shui Po and Tuen Wan. Towards the twentieth century, permanent markets without market schedules were established and gradually took over periodic markets. I shall use the term "wet markets" to refer to these markets so as to make a distinction from periodic markets. There were mainly two forms of wet markets: outdoor and indoor. For those in open areas, some sellers shouldered their merchandise on tote poles or pushing it along in carts, and laid out the merchandise on the ground while some got merchandise from wholesalers and sold it in fixed stalls on the street. At the same time, the government started to build more organized and formal wet markets housed in buildings, for example, former Tsim Sha Tsui Wet Market in 1911, former Sheung Wan Market in 1913, Wanchai Wet Market in 1934 and former Central Wet Market in 1939 (Hong Kong Place 2000). In the 1980s and 1990s, city development prompted the government to incorporate wet markets into its agenda for city planning, moving them into Municipal Services Buildings. Examples include Kwun Chung Municipal Market, Fa Yuen Street Municipal Market, Tai Po Wet Market housed in Tai Po Municipal Services Building (Hong Kong Place 2000).

Lui Sze-ki received her undergraduate degree in 2007 at the Department of Anthropology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. She can be contacted at szeki308@yahoo.com.hk.

What is a Supermarket?

A “supermarket” is defined as “a large self-service store selling foods and household goods” (The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English 2006). The first self-service supermarket was founded in the United States in mid-1910s. Now, this American innovation has swept the globe and the word “supermarket” has become a household word in Hong Kong. It is intimately incorporated into our daily life associating with necessity and routine (Bowly 2001: 8).

Gan (1995) delineates the development of supermarkets in Hong Kong into three phases: introduction, growth and maturity. The first phase is from 1960 to 1971 when the concept of supermarket was brought into Hong Kong. Dairy Farm commenced Dairy Lane Supermarket in 1960 and acquired Wellcome Supermarket in 1964. But the self-service retailing model was not adopted until 1968. At that time, there were a few other supermarkets such as *Yuh Gwong* (裕光) Supermarket and *Woh Pehng* (和平) Supermarket. These supermarkets had not yet appealed to the public masses because of their foreignness (self-service, frozen food, canned food and other western commodities), expansiveness and limited access.

When entering the second phase from 1972 to 1982, supermarkets embarked on expanding their business. Geographically, there was a dramatic numerical increase from 62 in 1974 to 322 in 1982 (Gan 1995: 45). Economically, rising affluence and standard of living in the 1970s changed consumer behaviour, stimulating consumption of non-necessities and foreign commodities and adding weights to quality (the product itself and the shopping environment) over price. Politically, rice monopoly was eliminated in 1974. Supermarkets began to retail rice in hygienic and convenient packing: sealed plastic bags of 5.9kg each at a lower price (Gan 1995: 51). More consumers came to see supermarkets as a possible option for routine shopping.

From 1983 up until now accounted for the third phase. The supermarket market industry has become progressively competitive. A notable example is the two price wars between the Wellcome Supermarket and Park’n Shop, which resulted in popularizing supermarkets as a preferable alternative to wet markets. China Resources Vanguard (CRVanguard Store) (formerly known as China Resources Supermarket) was established in 1984 as the third largest corporate supermarket chain. In the mid-1990s, Carrefour and City’super emerged, combining the concept of supermarket and departmental store into a new retailing mode- superstores - where “*sap fo*” (literally means wet products and refers to fresh produces; 濕貨) is placed under the same roof alongside with “*gon fo*” (literally means dry products; 乾貨) like canned food, drinks and biscuits. Park’n Shop initiated its first Superstore in 1996 and Megastore (an expanded superstore) in 2002 (A.S. Watson Group 2007). Wellcome Supermarket opened its first Superstore in 2001 and foreran an on-line supermarket in 1996 and a 24-hour supermarket in 1997 (Wellcome Supermarket 2006). On the whole, various forms of payments are allowed in supermarkets: credit cards, Easy-Pay System, octopus cards and vouchers in addition to cash.

Objectives

Consider the following scenarios.

Scenario One: It is nine o'clock in the morning on a hot summer day. A middle-aged housewife is walking around the wet market, covered in sweat and holding heavy plastic bags in her hands. A fish has jumped out of the fish tank; tiny pieces of vegetables are scattered here and there; a kid is brushed by other customers. Crowing chickens, peddling sellers and customers who are asking for weighing together create cacophony. Fishy smell and chicken smell all come to your nose right away.

Scenario Two: On the same day in a supermarket nearby, a young lady is pushing a shopping cart and her little boy sitting on it. She is leisurely passing through the aisles, picking up a pack of soup ingredients, a pack of beef and a pack of carrot and then put them on the cart. The floor is clean and aisles are wide. Soft music is playing, in chorus with the “*dou*” “*dou*” sound of the bar code scanning system at checkout counters. Unpleasant smell is absent.

I begin with these scenarios because, at a general level, they illustrate nicely typical scenes of household shopping in Hong Kong. Wet markets and supermarkets generate polarized physical experience: “dirty” versus “clean”, “unpleasant” versus “comfortable” and so forth. In recent years, concern over the monopoly of the two large supermarket chains, Park'n Shop and Wellcome Supermarket, has stirred up a great deal of controversy. Arguments are made in line with those pairs of opposite categories relating to the retailing environment. Regardless of the poor environment, there is a constant group of clientele who keep going to wet markets. Why is there such an interesting phenomenon? What is the mind-set of these consumers? Furthermore, patronage is rarely exclusive. That means consumers always move between the choice of wet markets and supermarkets. Why do some people prefer shopping in wet markets and other prefer shopping in supermarkets? How do they decide where to shop and what to be bought?

In this paper, I offer a multifaceted perspective into the dynamism in relation to wet markets and supermarkets under which consumers make their shopping choices. In addition, I incorporate the intra-relations between wet markets and between supermarket chains to present a more thorough understanding. I start from exploring the symbolic meanings of grocery shopping. Next, I take into consideration the competition between wet markets and supermarkets. Then, I discuss the prospect of wet markets and supermarkets in the framework of tradition and modernity. Finally, I encourage a new conceptual understanding of shopping experience. Developing a synthesized understanding of these issues will offer a better grasp of shopping from an integrated vision.

Methodology

Before embarking on this journey, it is important to reveal the research design of this paper. For the purposes of this paper, I narrowly refer the term “supermarkets” to the three largest supermarket chains in Hong Kong, namely, Park'n Shop, Wellcome Supermarket and CRVanguard Store. I also used it generally to incorporate superstores. This paper is primarily based on firsthand data collected from qualitative research, from September 2006 to mid-February 2007. I located Tsing Yi as a field site where I

carried out on-going observation in the major wet markets (Tsing Yi Municipal Market, Cheung Fat Market and Chung Mei Lo Uk Village Market) and major supermarket chains (Park'n Superstore in Maritime Square, Wellcome Supermarket in Tsing Yi Estate and CRVanguard Store in Cheung Fat Shopping Centre).

Tsing Yi is chosen for two reasons. First, I have lived in Tsing Yi for 15 years. Long period of residence has developed my familiarity with the environment and allowed me to experience the changing retailing landscape over years. Second, Tsing Yi is a typical residential area where its population comes predominated from the working class and the middle class, making it distinctive from Sham Shui Po and Central (a high concentration of lower class residents and upper class residents respectively).

Also, I carried out in-depth interviews with consumers from different age groups and social class, in semi-structured fashion including open-ended questions. Individual sellers in wet markets are my informants, too. I engaged in informal conversations with a larger sample of informants. As interviews and informal conversations were conducted in Cantonese, I translated the transcripts to English using words as close as possible to that of informants to minimize distortion. Specific words and terms were cited in Yale Romanization and the Chinese characters are provided for reference. Pseudonyms were used to ensure privacy.

There are six key informants in total. Mrs. Lau and Rachel are full-time housewives. Mrs. Lau is in mid-fifties from the working class whereas Rachel is in earlier thirties the middle class. Jessica and Ada are university students in earlier twenties; both come from the working class. Priscilla is in mid-twenties and is single; she comes from the middle class. They are all residents of Tsing Yi except Priscilla who lives in Kowloon. Mr. Lam operates a seafood stall in Cheung Fat Market with two partners. They constitute the backbone of the interviewing data throughout the paper. I will provide the background information of other informants whom I initiated informal conversations with when presenting their perspectives.

Additionally, written and audio materials are complementary. I made reference to literature discussing shopping and supermarkets. Further, I analyzed supermarket advertisements and obtained data from some locally produced video programs. These secondary sources can furnish comprehensive coverage of aspects of everyday life in the setting in question more than primary field data alone can through an examination for parallels and perspectives.

Meanings of Shopping in Wet Markets and Supermarkets

Shopping Experience: From Novelty to Familiarity

“Shopping means different things to different people at different times” (Underhill 1999: 95). The mid-1990s astonished customers by the introduction of superstores in Hong Kong. Tina was impressed by her first few visits to superstores. She said,

I was astonished by their newness and the greater variety of goods. A superstore was something more than a supermarket. It's just like a Japanese departmental store. There're furniture and electronic appliances in addition to food and daily commodities available for sale. Much more merchandise is

with foreign brand names or imported from places other than China. Also, there are promotion counters where customers can taste the promoted products.

Ada also recalled her experience of going to the superstore during the period of inception. She said,

When I was small, the idea of selling fresh foodstuff in a supermarket wasn't popular. There was only one Park'n Superstore in Tsing Yi; it's in Cheung Fat. You could find vegetables, fish and meat there and this made it special. My family liked going there during weekends, enjoying the same shopping experience in a shopping mall instead of intending to buy fresh foodstuff.

Prior to the contemporary take-off stage, superstores in Hong Kong were very limited in number. This made a superstore comparable to a Japanese departmental store or a shopping mall; shopping was a symbol of leisure instead of necessity-motivated. Selling fresh foodstuff in a supermarket was novel at one end of the continuum, and alien on the other end. The majority of customers was not accustomed to this innovative retailing style and had little incentive to buy fresh foodstuff from superstores. Every new idea needs a period of accommodation. Shopping in superstores was once a non-routine activity. But repeated visits enhance familiarity with the sale of fresh foodstuff in superstores. Together with the increasing availability of packed fresh foodstuff in certain supermarkets, this kind of one-stop-shopping for both *sap fo* and *gon fo* has lost its exoticness as shopping malls but an alternative to wet markets as an integral and routine feature of ordinary life.

Social Relations

At first glance, shopping is merely a simple sequential act of “grab, pay and go”. But on closer examination, it is symbolically meaningful. It communicates a critical social function- weaving and maintaining social relations. Wet markets and supermarkets provide a social space for social interaction, ultimately fostering a solid networking and recalling a sense of communal belonging. There is a complex web of social relations, which I delineate into four types of social relations.

1. Seller-Buyer Relationships

There are different levels of social relations. The most obvious one is the seller-buyer relationships, which is intimately linked to the provision of customer service. Considerable emphasis has been attached to customer service these days. Even the government acknowledges it seriously. The Information Services Department (2007) has produced a TV announcement on hospitality performed by artist Andy Lau. The famous statement addressed in the announcement, “Services like this just isn't good enough”, has been widely circulated since then. And the ending message “Success Starts With Quality Service” is influential and inspires a redefinition of customer service with an additional element- value added service. What is meant by “quality customer service”? It is founded on the provision of basic service that necessitates the completion of a deal but is more than that.

Value added service offers customers a satisfactory experience of being attended and cared in a comfortable environment, forming the basis of good seller-buyer relationships. Ada presented a general point of view towards seller-buyer relationships as follows,

Supermarket staff seems to be friendlier than sellers in wet markets. After all, they are working for big corporations. Still, I think seller-buyer relationships in wet markets are principally warmer than that of in supermarkets. I distinguish the term “friendly” and “warm” based on the degree of intimacy of the relationship. A warm relationship is somehow at a deeper level than the friendly one. It is the responsibility of supermarket staff to treat customers friendly and politely. But this does not mean they can give you the feeling of warmth. The friendly appeal just gives customers a more “comfortable” feeling in raising questions. Actually, many sellers are rude, but they are friendly to their regular customers and treat them as friends.

The warm relationship Ada described is known as *yahn chihng meih* (loosely equivalent to being considerate and showing concerns; 人情味). Some sellers in wet markets also realize that *yahn chihng meih* is of great value. Asked how was his relationships with customers, Mr. Lam said,

When you do business for a certain period of time, you must have established relations with a group of frequent customers. The maintenance of good relationships with customers is what makes your business survive. Regardless of how brief the conversation is, maybe three sentences at maximum, and how mundane the content is, relationships can still be built on this causal chatting.

Interaction is a key to consolidate relationships with customers so as to flourish business afterward. *Yahn chihng meih* is normally developed out of daily conversation and the subsequent in-depth interaction going beyond transactions. It personalizes what might otherwise be a purely business transaction in which both sellers and customers come to know each other better. Sellers enthusiastically show solicitude and are increasingly sensitive to the habit, preference or health concern of each frequent customer. Customers, on the other hand, can befriend with sellers. Both parties relish the special attention they received and value the good personal feelings and the long-term, mutually beneficial relationships.

In an afternoon in Cheung Fat Market, I observed an occasion that help to explain *yahn chihng meih* between sellers and customers. In a seafood stall, a frequent customer asked the seller, “Have you had lunch already?” This simple greeting exemplifies Malinowski’s concept of phatic communion- “a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words” (Malinowski 1999: 303). It is totally deprived of the context of the situation and aimless in conveying information. The act of greeting is small, its purposes invisible, its ultimate value vast. The communion of words symbolically creates an atmosphere of sociability, fellowship and companionship which human beings quest for. When the customer was deciding what to buy, the seller suggested her to buy oysters because he remembered that she had had fish the day before. This incidence demonstrates that the customer showed concern for the seller the same way as we treat our friends. The seller was able to tailor-make suggestion to the customer because he was familiar with her consumption

pattern out of other non-frequent customers. To attract attention of passers-by, many sellers ask, “What do you want to have for dinner?” in a familiar voice uttered by someone you know fairly well.

The motivation of phatic communion is variable, so too is consumer response to it. Some sellers enthusiastically take it to establish friendship with customers while some deliberate invite conversation for the sake of commercial interest. While Ada seems to appreciate phatic communion, Jessica was lukewarm to it. Jessica said,

When sellers in wet markets may ask “What do you want to have?” and supermarket staff may mechanically say “Hello” or “Please come next time”, I sometimes respond by a smile to show courtesy without any verbal feedbacks.

Regardless of consumer response, wet markets have a greater potential for phatic communion to initiate. Individual stalls in a wet market are just small business without bureaucratic rules and strict regulations on the behaviour of those working in the stall who enjoy a high degree of freedom in expressing the “true” self. Once the self is allowed to participate, sellers and workers can show concern and establish relationships with customers. Phatic communion and conversations are then in diverse and creative forms, leaving much room for interaction to take place and for *yahn chihng meih* to develop.

Why is it harder to have phatic communion in supermarkets? In opposition to the whole-hearted expression in wet markets, supermarkets employ a pragmatic strategy in presenting a friendly retailing environment to customers: emotional management, yet at the same time suppressing phatic communion. From Van Maanen’s analysis of Disneyland, emotional management is a corporate control of employee demeanor (Van Maanen 199: 74). In Erving Goffman’s terminology, the strategy is known as “The Presentation of Self” through “Impression Management”. I modify this concept to narrowing fit into the context of large supermarket chains instead of broadly discuss its application in every detail of life. Under corporate-controlled impression management, supermarket staff consciously devotes substantial efforts to present a nice self when they are “on-stage”, playing the role of as courteous service provider. The standardized and patterned form of “conversations” (perhaps it is inappropriate to use the term “conversations” since in many cases the staff is the only one who is speaking) symbolizes a loss of voice among the staff. What it means is not a total silence, but a loss of personality and personal feelings in conversations. The articulation of the specialized and tape-recording-like voice weeds out the self and is strictly pragmatic. The preservation of intimate relationships is divorced from the impersonal and public performance of the conformist and rule-following behaviour (Brown 1997: 743). It is inappropriate for supermarket staff to initiate phatic communion, let alone deeper interaction, with customers when they are on-stage. They are disciplined to committee to their role in the corporation and to present themselves in a predictable manner in order to keep the business functioning properly and efficiently. Their private social world is separated from the public visible role when exercising official duties (Brown 1997: 743). Therefore, the relationships with customers therefore remain at a rather shallow level. Another example of this detachment of relationships is the availability of written information for each item in which it is hard to catch a human voice in it at all, to say nothing of phatic communion.

On the face of it, supermarkets perform better in providing quality customer service. When we think more carefully, supermarket staff is trained in such a robot-like way that their services seem to be artificially constructed. They automatically utter the already memorized list of stock phrases in dealing with customers in a strictly-governed manner. Even the simple and mundane greeting and thankful expressions, for example “Hello” or “Please come next time”, do not appear to be conveying personalized messages. Supermarket staff purely gives a false sense of attentiveness and consideration to customers through the pretended display of cordiality, congeniality, amiability and hospitality that did not figure in the intentions of customer services. Quality customer service is overridingly pivotal in the retailing industry, for the goodness of customers as well as sellers. Yet, when it becomes increasingly commercialized, the reverse will be the outcome. It is essential to maintain a middle ground between self-expression and demands for nice presentation of self.

Good seller-buyer relationships can hardly ever be established overnight. Instead, it takes time to build up the relationships. In two informants’ words,

Rachel: In a wet market, “*si naai*” (typical housewives with years of rich household shopping experience, who knows very well matters like where to buy the cheapest products of the best quality; 師奶) and sellers may know each other better because of frequent visits.

Priscilla: Sellers in wet markets are always the same person. So, there are more chances to deal with the same seller.

In wet markets, there are typically two to three persons working in a stall who are constantly the same persons. This forms a stable basis for extensive contact with customers. Stability also correlates a high level of “professional knowledge”. Rachel gave an example,

If I buy Chinese herbal tea in the wet market, I will ask the seller how to make it. Sellers are enthusiastic in giving advice and they’re familiar with their products.

“Professional knowledge” is not essentially to be understood in a grand sense, as in fields like medicine and engineering. It encompasses knowledge in specific areas of ordinary life as well. When we talk of wet markets or supermarkets, there is professional knowledge of fish, of meat, of vegetables, of fruits, and so forth. According to conventional wisdom, sellers in wet markets possess much knowledge of their goods and customers can ask them directly for information. Professional knowledge plays an important role in bringing closer sellers and customers.

As long as long-term relationships and specialized knowledge, the case in supermarkets is exactly the opposite of wet markets. In two informants’ words,

Rachel: In Park’n Shop, even though you may chat with the cashier one time, you don’t deliberately choose to queue up in his/her counter next time. You just choose the faster line to queue up.

Priscilla: Supermarkets employ temporary staff and work is shift-based. You may meet different staff at different times. Therefore, you are not familiar

with them and the relationships are not as close as that of in wet markets.

The seller-buyer relationships in supermarkets are more transient. As Rachel said, there are a number of checkout counters in a supermarket such that the probability of dealing with the same cashier is reduced. Pricilla also suggested the higher turnover rate of supermarket staff destabilizes the relationships. In addition, customers rarely raised the question “What is good and fresh today?” in supermarkets. Rachel explained,

I don't expect supermarket staff to have the same degree of familiarity and knowledge as sellers in wet markets do. They may simply be responsible for weighing and packing.

Rachel assumed that supermarket staff are less professional; hence, little information or even advice is available from them. Likewise, customers in general maintain a minimum level of contact with them. Upon observation in Park'n Superstore in Maritime Square, written language substitutes for spoken form of giving professional knowledge of the products and advice. In the Meat Section, there is information board about pork (Figure 1.1), showing the name of each part of a pig, the origin, the characteristics, the storage period, and suggested cooking instructions. Even packed fresh food has a label containing product information. For example, the label on a pack of soup ingredients provides information in Chinese and English about the name of each kind of ingredient, the nutrition value, the expiry date, the weight, and the price. Providing “professional knowledge” in written form is an attempt to eliminate consumer need for verbal inquiry.

豬肉名稱/部位	特異	保存期	建議食用烹調方法	
免治豬肉	中國	脂肪中等	1-2日	蒸肉餅, 包餃子
豬腩肉	中國	脂肪較多, 肉味較濃, 爽口	2日	切片蒸, 炸咕嚕肉, 或製肥叉燒
豬筒肉	中國	肉質爽口, 彈牙	2日	切片炒, 火鑪或放湯, 放湯食用特別有口感
豬霖肉	中國	脂肪少, 肉質嫩滑	2日	可蒸, 炒, 放湯, 煲湯, 用作煲湯較清淡

Figure 1.1 Information board about pork sold in Park'n Superstore in Maritime Square

The lengthier the contact between a particular seller/staff and a particular customer, the better their relationship is. The relative stable personnel in wet markets pave the way for the seed of seller-buyer relationships to germinate and blossom. Intensive interaction derived from phatic communion or advice-seeking is always an invitation to carry on the relationships. The seed may be sowed at a given time with a

particular supermarket staff, but the operation mechanism of supermarkets limits the possibility for it to germinate. When one buys something in a supermarket, the transaction is over once the payment is settled and walks out with the merchandise. While wet markets allow much room for communication between sellers and buyers to take place, supermarkets squeeze out any space for drawing customers and the staff closer.

Cost-saving and efficiency mentality in the supermarket industry brutally devalue seller-buyer relationships. For all that time and labour are saved in providing product information verbally, elder people are frequently excluded from this new channel of access to information owing to low literacy level. It is not uncommon to see elder customers asking other younger customers for product information. For example, when I was doing shopping in Park'n Superstore in Maritime Square in a morning, an old lady asked me to check the price of a pack of frozen dim sum for her because she was unable to see clearly the small characters printed on the price tag and was confused with other price tags placing side-by-side. Elderly regularly encounter these problems in supermarkets and they prefer to ask consumers passing by for help instead of to look for the staff who are busy with their own duties. The heavy reliance on written information is somehow exclusive.

2. Family Relationships

Shopping for mundane necessities is traditionally viewed as a predominantly female activity and is conceived to be lonely, monotonous and bringing no particular pleasure. Ada and Jessica confirmed the image of loneliness: their mothers are unaccompanied when they do routine household shopping because other family members either go to work or go to school during daytime on weekdays. Although this view carries some weight, shopping nonetheless has a communal dimension. There are mainly two aspects: first, family relationships; and second, friendships and neighbourhood, which I will come to later.

Medhurst (2000) refutes grocery shopping as just a part of household chores shouldered entirely by the lonely housewife. It can be undertaken by all members of the household. "Born out of practical necessity though this may be, it also provides a shared family time, full of predictable, often comfortable tensions and opportunities to engage in family conversations (Medhurst 2000: 84). Ada and Jessica verify this argument,

Ada: I usually go to Wellcome Supermarket with my sister and my mom, either before dinner or after dinner. It's happier to shop with them because we can discuss what to buy so that I can have my favourite goods. Sometimes, we go together to do shopping for foodstuff in Tsuen Wan on Sundays.

Jessica: We go to supermarkets together as a causal family activity during weekends and holidays, perhaps without a specific purpose. It is a moment when the whole family can be brought together.

However limited the time is, family members do participate in household shopping. It has been said that family members these days lack mutual

communication. During daytime, the husband-father goes to work; the wife-mother stays alone at home; the children go to school. At night, they all sit on the sofa and watch television without conversation. This pattern repeats days after days. Shopping together is probably an enjoyable activity for each family member to escape from the tedious private world. As Watson (1997) writes, "East Asian peoples probably associate eating more with kinship than do peoples in Europe and the United States" (p. 192). This is applicable to the field of shopping too, which is neatly associated with family relationships and commitment to family matters. It is not exaggerated to say that wet markets and supermarkets serve as a desirable realm to engage family members in dynamic interaction. Compared to wet markets, supermarkets on the whole are a more popular public arena for the purpose of private life in fostering harmony and solidarity in a family. While Ada's family goes to wet markets every Sunday, shopping together in supermarkets is possible everyday. This shopping pattern suggests a much more frequent usage of supermarkets as a site for family gathering. More importantly, neither Ada nor Jessica goes shopping in wet markets as a family activity. And I rarely observed consumers going to wet markets as a family unit.

Family members are drawn closer in doing shopping together. Conversation is initiated basically surrounding purchase decisions. On one occasion in Park'n Superstore in Maritime Square, I observed a mother asking if her little daughter wanted to have Yakult. The daughter said yes. But the mother decided to buy two packs instead of one pack because there was discount for buying two packs. The incidence has a significant implication on contemporary family relationships: children as decision makers. There is a reversal of power relations in a family where adults traditionally exercise power over children. The changing family values and attitude towards children is depicted in James L. Watson's analysis of children as consumers in McDonald's in Hong Kong. Today, children are indulged to be independent decision makers making their preferences known in public and to exercise "increasing influence over the spending habits of their parents" (Watson ed. 1997: 100; 199). In a supermarket, children cherish the hands-on style of display in supermarkets in which they can take snacks, drinks and anything they like by themselves and put into the shopping cart (Underhill 1999: 143). It is not rare to see parents compromising to the decisions of their children.

However, decision-making is not idealistically collective-based and negotiation is not always satisfactory to all family members. The balance of domestic power over household chores is still in the hands of the wife/mother, who exercises ultimate authority to make the final decision in most cases. In the example, the little girl would be delighted to her mother's decision. However, in some other cases, kids probably whine when their demands are rejected. This is a typical episode in supermarkets.

3. Friendships and Neighborhood

Apart from family relationships, friendships and neighbourhood constitute another aspect of communal belonging that can be obtained from household shopping. No doubt, household shopping as a family activity is basically possible during weekends or holidays. Yet, women continue to dominate the scenario of household purchase

even during weekdays and they are not always alone. According to Mr. Lam, there are two phases of peak hours in Cheung Fat Market, one is from eight to eleven in the morning and the other one is from four to six in the afternoon. The timing is more or less the same in supermarkets based on my observation. The first phase is the time when mothers have sent their children to school and when elder people have finished morning exercise or *yumcha*. A complex network of friendships is naturally emerged within these two groups from these daily routine communal activities. Those mothers often go to wet markets or supermarkets in groups of two to four, so do those elder people. In the second phase, the social networking is continued among those mothers who have picked up their children from school and who then go shopping with other mothers. Elder people seldom go shopping with friends in the afternoon because there are no such communal activities as afternoon excises or they show little preference for afternoon tea. Alongside these two major niches of cliental, there are groups of neighbours and of foreign maids.

Underhill (1995) remarks the use of shopping as a means of socializing for which women “like to shop with friends, egging each other on and rescuing each other from ill-advised purchases” (p. 115). This argument is applicable to elderly people as well. During my observation, for those going for grocery shopping with friends, their content of conversation is broad. They exchange information concerning price, recipe, household chores, children and other immediate relevant matters and experience. Consumer behaviour also suggests clues for the dynamic interaction among customers. For instance, they help each other to choose the best items. Conversation and consumer behaviour may seem mundane and may have had been taken for granted as a normal part of ordinary social life. Nevertheless, the stress upon sociality and the symbolic value is definitely “in here”. Shopping as a socializing activity, particularly for women, is nothing new under the sun. In the past, wet markets constituted the most prominent socializing place for female shoppers underlying the mutual accommodations of friendship. Today, consumers are given the alternative of supermarkets to pour old wine into new bottles. It is just that many of us are marginally aware of the additional motive for shopping together - the maintenance of friendship or a sense of neighbourhood.

4. Relationships between Employers and Employees

In general, employer-employee relationships are more intimate in wet markets. This argument can be supported by my observation in wet markets. During lunch hour, some of the stalls are closed for lunch since there are very few customers. The boss and the employees have lunch together and share food from the same table. The food is mostly prepared in the stall by them. This is a valuable time when they all can take a break and engage in causal conversation. Having lunch together and sharing food is a kind of communal activity symbolically creating a boundary and communicating solidarity and commensality within the boundary. The practice is a mainstay of forming the bonds of social relationships between employers and employees in wet markets.

Sense of communal belonging is less likely to be cultivated in supermarkets. As Priscilla mentioned in the earlier discussion of Seller-buyer relationships, some of the staff are employed on temporary basis. Built on an intense sense of insecurity, the

employer-employee relationships are transient and simply characterized by monetary term. On the other hand, it is not easy for regular staff to develop a sense of belonging to the supermarket they are working for, notwithstanding their lengthier involvement. The management of a supermarket has in many features adopted the “rational” McDonaldized systems of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, a phenomenon known as McDonaldization (Ritzer 2001). Employees are trained to provide efficient services in a scripted and predictable manner, to accomplish the bulk of tasks for relative low pay, and to toe the line that replaces human labour with technologies. Ritzer (2001) points out, something more profound is at issue: the irrationality of rationality. The high amount of managerial control makes light of good relationships with employees, keeping their morale low.

If a business is a gear wheel, then employees are the small nails that make the gear wheel work. Good relationships and rapport with employees are the momentums that encourage them to immerse into the work and enables their potential to be fully be released, to the benefit of the business. In wet markets, human relations are highly emphasized and those working in a stall are likely to devote fullest effort to achieve impressive sale performance. Conversely, working in a dehumanizing supermarket setting, supermarket staff becomes dispassionate and feel themselves as nothing but a part of an assembly line or reduced to cogs of machine. There is little wonder that their sense of affiliation towards the supermarket is fragile. The employer-employee relationships are scarified in the face of the hypothetical rational management. The two kinds of polarized working experience may lead us to reevaluate the hegemonic supermarket management and possibly, to learn from the active involvement of individuals in wet markets.

The Competitive Retailing Scene: A Multilevel Perspective

The term “competition” is broad. On a macro scale, conceptualizing the relationship between wet markets and supermarkets as a two-piece jigsaw puzzle misleads us to lose sight of the bigger and multidimensional picture. There are multiple layers of arena taking place simultaneously and the consequences are linked together. The complexity of competition transcends the simple conceptualization of wet markets versus supermarkets by paying equal attention to the competition within the supermarket industry and among wet markets, which articulates contemporary retailing scene.

The competition between wet markets and supermarkets has caught a lot of media attention. There are local TV programmes discussing this hot topic such as *Jie shi dou chao shi* (街市鬥超市) filmed by Asia Television Limited in 2003 and *Shi bu ke dang?* (勢不可擋?) produced by Television Broadcasts Limited News and Public Affairs Department in 2002. However, it is never a one-directional hegemonic challenge from supermarkets to wet markets depicted in prevailing media discourses. Understanding the contest requires embedding consumption preference within four interlocking aspects: availability, price, quality and retailing style. These are really just convenient and arbitrary categories for lumping together particular preferences of consumption choices for the sake of comparing them.

1. Availability

There are many threads and layers of meaning of availability. The first understanding that comes to the mind is whether a particular item is available for sales in a particular place. There is no point going to a shop in search for an item that is not there. Prior to the establishment of superstores in Hong Kong, *sap fo* was unambiguously available in wet markets and *gon fo* in supermarkets. When one-stop-shopping superstores emerged a decade ago, the availability of *sap fo* has become an overlapping area for wet markets and supermarkets. In spite of a blurring line, the image of *sap fo* being available in wet markets has gone unchallenged. This is reflected in Ada's family consumption pattern,

My family usually buys bread, frozen dim sum and instant noodles for breakfast from supermarkets, and fresh foodstuff like vegetables, meats and seafood from wet markets.

We can see that the subjective categorization has not yet uplifted. The lengthy history of *sap fo* available exclusively in wet markets and the predominant availability of *gon fo* in supermarkets keep reinforcing the conventional assumption, creating a specialization in consumption.

The deep-rooted association of wet markets to *sap fo* and supermarkets to *gon fo* is casually related to the diversity of merchandizes in each retailing setting. When asked how she decided to choose between wet markets and supermarkets, Priscilla elaborated on diversity as a criterion,

There is diversity within particular kinds of goods in wet markets and supermarkets correspondingly. Take wet markets for instance. It specializes in retailing fresh produces; hence, offers greater diversity of fresh produces.

To understand the idea "diversity within particular kinds of goods", we may consider a concrete example of vegetables. In wet markets, consumers can find vegetables such as matrimony vines, water cresses, lotus roots, kudzu, in addition to those familiar ones available in supermarkets like flowering cabbages, white cabbages, European lectures, carrots, potatoes and tomatoes. The different extent of diversity is more noticeable when speaking of water caltrops, a type of vegetables specifically for the Mid-Autumn Festival, which is available in wet markets only.

In a similar vein, Rachel and Ada favoured the greater diversity in wet markets but interpreted "diversity" in another ways,

Rachel: In a wet market, there're several stalls selling the same kind of fresh produces instead of one small section for vegetables, one for meat and one for seafood in a superstore.

Ada: For each kind of fresh produces, there are more on display in wet markets than in supermarkets where goods are displayed in a small quantity while the remaining are kept in stock.

Rachel's interpretation of diversity makes sense with regard to the number of retailers in the same food category. Wet markets usually have more than one retailer of a particular kind of goods. This invites comparisons in price and within the same type of goods. Provided that there are multiple retailers, consumers are exposed to a

wider set of alternative in making consumption decisions. Ada defined diversity as a large quantity on display. Individual stalls in wet markets are not as spacious as supermarkets. To tackle spatial limitation, sellers display all their goods. Some goods like sweet potatoes and gingers are filled in separate big square-bottomed baskets. It is common to “extend” the mass display to the front side of the stall or the aisles (Figure 1.2). Thus, consumers are given a bulk of readily available goods to opt for even in a tiny stall. The availability of merchandises and of diversity is not just a matter of fact influencing consumer preference. It entangles with the historically constructed consumer perception towards the respective area that wet markets and supermarkets specialize in. These factors mutually condition each other, not separate, in inducing consumer preference of wet markets over supermarkets.



Figure 1.2 A fruit stall in Cheung Fat Market. Boxes of fruits are occupying the aisle.

The availability of diversified goods is a fluid interpretation depending on the position one holds. Individual consumers interpret diversity in their own terms, so do individual sellers. Generally, consumers like Priscilla, Rachel and Ada take it to mean an appeal of wet markets. By contrast, sellers like Mr. Lam ascribed diversity to be an appeal of supermarkets,

They don't sell one single kind of item. Even if one kind of item is unpopular or a low price is set for a particular kind of goods, they can still profit from other kinds of goods. Seafood is our only source of income. There is no competing with them in that way.

Individual sellers in wet markets, whose small-scale investment is concentrated in a particular kind of goods, are rather defenseless, especially to macro forces relating to food safety. The 1997 outbreak of H5N1 Avian Influenza (bird flu) in Hong Kong, to cite a notable example, has provoked a mass slaughter of chickens.

Government policies and actions tremendously affected daily life and more importantly hurt economic survival of poultry sellers whose well-being depended solely on the availability of poultry for sales. The immediate impact was a halt in the supply of chickens. A more deadly and long-term economic impact was a dissipation of confidence in consuming poultry. It had taken a period of time to rebuild consumer confidence within which poultry sellers had to eke out a living.

Supermarkets are more advantageous than individual retailers in wet markets for the diverse kinds of merchandises available. With a firm capital base, supermarkets are able to afford losses or trivial profit margins due to the strategy to sell certain kinds of goods at a low price. More importantly, they have a greater elasticity in responding to social changes that impinge on supply and demand. Underperformance in the sale of one kind of products can be compensated by the sale of other kinds of products. Diversification diffuses risk and losses.

Having discussed availability in relation to diversity, we now delve into another way of explanation. “Availability” has an equivalent translation of “accessibility”. It is defined in two dimensions: spatial and temporal. The spatial dimension refers to the location of retailers. Rachel compared the extent to which the available shopping choices were accessible,

People coming off work by Mass Transit Railway (MTR) can go straightly to Park’n Superstore in Maritime Square where Tsing Yi Station is in, instead of go to the wet markets, which is farer.

The location of Park’n Superstore deserves much attention. It is situated in the same complex of Tsing Yi MTR Station. MTR facilitates a massive flow of people, whether for transportation or for shopping. If passengers use the gate on the 3rd floor for exit, they must pass Park’n Superstore, which is on the same floor, on their way home. While the nearest wet market, either Cheung Fat Market or Tsing Yi Market, requires a ten-minute walk from Tsing Yi Station, Park’n Superstore that can be reached within minutes stands out as a readily available shopping choice that is of immediate accessibility. It is an irresistible temptation for tired passengers just coming off work who hastily want earlier availability of purchases and then return home. For working people, food shopping is a matter of efficiency and time-saving, and a task to be finished as rapidly as possible. The location and business hours make supermarkets a better available option for the time poor, cash rich consumers.

Convenience in spatial accessibility plays a somewhat secondary role to temporal accessibility that has a direct effect on consumption preference. Temporal accessibility refers to the business hours. Generally speaking, wet markets operate from 6am to 7pm, supermarkets from 8am to 10am and superstores from 7am to 11am. The availability of goods is very much determined by the business hours. It is especially true for fresh produces. Rachel portrayed the scene in Park’n Superstore after seven o’clock at night:

Many fresh produces have been out of stock at around 7pm and 8pm, in Park’n Superstore. For example, there’re only a few packs of pork left. But there’re still many people coming off work who need to buy foodstuff for dinner.

For full-time housewives or retired people, business hours may not count as

weighty as for those who go to work because of their flexibility in doing shopping throughout the day. During weekdays, consumers coming off work is constrained to do shopping in late evening. It is a time when sellers in wet markets are packing up the things. Superstores, in the meantime, still have some, not many, options available.

On the one side, there is indeed a deep relationship between working hours of shoppers and the temporal accessibility or availability of goods. On the other side, elements of Chinese culture are useful in understanding the reason behind the decision on when to have the stalls shuttered. Some stalls in wet markets are shuttered for a few days following major traditional Chinese festivals, such as Mid-Autumn Festivals and Winter Solstice Festival. Mrs. Ho, an old lady, summarized this phenomenon in the Chinese expression of *yat jit daahm saam heui* (一節淡三墟),

Chinese celebrate great festivals by getting together members of the family to have a rich meal. This practice is called *jouh jit* (做節). Business flourishes on those particular days but then slackens in the following days. It is because in many households, there are much left over from the rich meal, diminishing the need for new purchase on the subsequent few days. So, sellers in wet markets simply take a rest for a few days.

There is a more universal practice that most of the stalls are shuttered for a consecutive days during Chinese New Year, a paramount traditional Chinese festival (Figure 1.3). For instance, upon observation in Tsing Yi Municipal Market on the third day of the Lunar New Year, only half of the vegetables stalls were opened and no fruit stalls were opened at all. Visiting relatives, also known as *baai nihh* (拜年), is a hallmark of celebrating the festival with the function of reinforcing family relations and coherence. Shuttering the stalls means no goods would be available for sales; hence, no income would be generated. But sellers do so on special days involving special occasions like wedding and great Chinese festivals. Social values embedded



Figure 1.3 A vegetable stall in Tsing Yi Municipal Market. It was closed during Lunar New Year until the sixth day of the Lunar Calendar.

are highly prized such that the gain in social relations offsets the loss in profit. Since business in wet markets is virtually individual business, it is more flexible for individual sellers to decide on business hours.

Supermarkets are big corporations with rigidly defined business hours and only profit-driven adjustments are possible. And these adjustments normally mean lengthening business hours, which is in essence depersonalizing. Recent years have witnessed a growing number of supermarkets operating on the first day of the New Year. This phenomenon would have been seemed strange ten years ago where most of them were shuttered on that day. Consumers benefit from a higher degree of availability at the expense of supermarket staff who are abstain from celebration with their family members. The pursuit of profit above social and human values as a result of the increasing temporal availability is becoming a dominant feature of the supermarket industry.

Trading in wet markets is not only entwined with Chinese culture, but also with politics and public health. Reeling from the H5N1 nightmare in 1997, the government has introduced a “Monthly Market Cleansing Day” in November 2003 to check another massive outbreak in the future (Team Clean 2004). Under the measures, poultry sellers in public wet markets should have cleaned their stall thoroughly on the 25th of each month. In response to the massive outbreak of bird flu in Southeast Asia in 2006, the government has moved towards declaring an extra cleansing day on the 10th of each month (The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. 2006). In other words, lived poultry is unavailable in wet markets on the two Monthly Market Cleansing Days but chilled and quick frozen chickens are still available in supermarkets. In short, the availability of goods has a lot to do with government policies.

2. Price

Price is one of the decisive factors in making consumption. There is a tendency for consumers to compare the price between the same kinds of goods from two or more retailers before making purchase decisions. Price comparison quantifies the relationship between wet markets and supermarkets in a pair of opposition: cheap versus expensive. Rachel witnessed a noticeable change in the price level deepening the division between wet markets and supermarkets,

The general price level in supermarkets has sharply escalated. In wet markets, it has been adjusted reasonably instead. Goods in wet markets are still relatively cheaper.

In a competition study by Consumer Council (2003), there had been an upward price trend at supermarket chains even when discount is taken into account. The price level had an average increase of 3.6 percents from 1993 to 2003, despite a significantly deflated economy. Statistics offers objective evidence to support Rachel’s observation. This bifurcation can be subjective as well. When asked her impression and the appeal of wet markets, Jessica had the following to say,

Wet markets are traditionally associated with an image that their goods are cheaper than supermarkets. This is a strong appeal to customers.

Obsessed with the traditional assumption that goods are cheaper in wet markets, consumers do not necessarily need to check the price in the first place. Wet markets are anyhow considered as more economical alternatives to supermarkets.

Such view of price as an influential concern is quite commonplace; indeed, in a wide-ranging set of interviews, only Rachel expressed an alternative view,

I still choose to shop in Park'n Superstore even though goods are more expansive than wet markets. Convenience takes precedence to price. My mother-in-law had grumbled several times for my inappropriate use of money. It is a generational gap.

The grumbling mother-in-law and the convenience-more-important daughter-in-law suggest a generational difference of emphasis on money matters. The idea of worthiness is not static and frozen in time. Different upbringing experience each generation has gone through engenders a different interpretation of it. Growing up in abundance, many people of the younger generation are eager to pay more for convenience, unlike the older generation who had grown up in times of hardship cautiously and appropriately spending every dollar. Although Rachel's mother-in-law has become much better off, she has kept her frugal habits, which are products of her times. Values are grounded on the definition of convenience as a necessity or a luxury. This dichotomy is in part a generation issue. There is a horizontal dimension as well: social class difference. Accessibility to economic capital is unequal. Rachel comes from the middle class, possessing affluent economic capital to afford a high standard of living. Convenience is an integral part of the middle-class lifestyle while it is an extravagance for members of working class and of lower class. In short, social and economic differences can yield distinctive consumption concerns over what is "a best price" in exchange for goods and services.

Price should not be taken at face value alone. The listed price may not be the amount one ends up to pay. From a TV programme filmed by Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) in 2003, *Jie shi feng qing hua* (街市風情畫), cheating about weight was widely practice prior to the introduction of decimal system in the 1980s. There are several typical ways of cheating in order to pressure customers to buy more and charge more: to round up the price, to add other things to the intended purchase, and to weight in a quantity more than the intended one. These practices have persisted even up to today though in a less acute way, since sellers in wet markets are still using traditional weighing machines that require them to read the weighs for customers.

Cheating is more unreasonably practiced during important traditional Chinese festivals. Mrs. Lau told furiously her experience in buying clams from a seafood stall at Yeung Uk Road Market in Tsuen Wan on Mid-Autumn Festival,

It was listed \$18 per catty and I asked for one catty. On usual days, the seller may only round up the price to \$20. But this time, the seller gave me significantly more than one catty and charged me for \$25. It's totally unacceptable.

The over-practicing of cheating during particular festivals, Mid-Autumn Festival in this case, could be comprehensible. It is the day when the moon is the fullest and brightest. The full moon is a symbol of togetherness. Having dinner together with the whole family is a customary practice to celebrate the festival. Allowed me to make a

bold speculation, the seller might want his goods to be sold out as soon as possible and to return home earlier for the reunion dinner. Mrs. So who is a mid-forties housewife presented another balancing view to explain this economic behavior,

Every businessman wants to maximize profit. The appeal of cheapness increases sales. At the same time, the lower the selling price, the smaller the profit margin. Sellers have no way but to cheat as a means of compensation for the low listed price.

Akin to my Mid-Autumn Festival explanation, Mrs. So tried to understand why sellers cheat in their own terms. The competitive retailing landscape poses challenges to the profit-making nature of business, driving sellers to develop cheating as a cultural strategy for adaptation. Still, empathy is with limits. Cheating in an unreasonable extent stirs up discontent of customers and the transaction suffers. It is a heavy blow to the goodwill of a business. Mrs. Lau was so enraged that she halted the deal and went away. She even swore that she would never patronize that stall. Despite cheating can upset shopping experience in wet markets, customers usually concede as long as it is in a mild form and is tolerable. Not all sellers in wet markets are exploitative, however. It is fair not to make generalization that all of them are money-mad. Some of them do have their honest side, especially in dealing with long-term customers.

The practice of rounding the price is not all negative. It leaves a niche for bargaining to take place. It can be taken in the form of price reduction, but can also in the form of giving additional merchandiser, for example, free-of-charge green onions are usually given for every purchase of vegetables. The second form is almost universal in wet markets while the first form varies from wet markets to wet markets and from sellers to sellers. Mrs. Lau had successfully bargained for rounding down the price a number of times in Tsing Yi Municipal Market,

Unlike sellers in Yeung Uk Road Market, those in Tsing Yi Municipal Market do not worry about every cents and are more easy-going. I can bargain for paying \$10 if the goods turn out to be \$11; I can pay exactly \$3.8 instead of being forced to pay \$4; I can buy only third fourths catty of prawns rather than being required to buy one catty.

By conceding to a bargain, the seller is rewarded with one more deal. Concession is multifunctional. It has decided economic ends as well as symbolic value in reinforcing the tie between consumers and retailers without participants' knowledge, enmeshing with each other in shaping consumption preference. Mr. Lam did not make any concession to bargaining but he suggested a different appeal of wet markets over supermarkets. He said,

Our price is more flexible; we can change it at any time. But for supermarkets, their price is fixed and it's impossible to make an abrupt change in price throughout the day.

In wet markets, owners set the price themselves, which is handwritten on a card placing behind each respective kind of the goods. Since there is not any systematically computerization, any changes in price can be done right away by writing a new one. In supermarkets, the price of every item is computerized and recorded in the cash registers. It remains unchanged for the whole week from Friday to Thursday. To view

it in negative terms, the pre-programming of price is rigid. Large supermarket chains are making effort to be more flexible and create surprises to customers. At present, Park'n Shop is promoting a few different kinds of goods at a discounted price everyday. These special offers are renewed in the cash registers on a daily basic. Adjustment in price is still unfeasible in supermarkets within a day.

Flexibility can be painted in dark as well as in bright. In the first condition, it is manipulated to cheat customers, for example, by rounding up the price. In the second condition, it serves the interest of customers by means of bargaining for rounding down the price and for additional merchandizes. The use of cash registers and electronic weighing machines in supermarkets squeezes this flexibility to take place, no matter for good or for bad. It eliminates the reliance on sellers to read the weights and calculate the total amount of payment, plugging the loophole for cheating and guaranteeing exactness. Customers widely appreciated the honesty of supermarkets in doing business in this respect, in contrast to a general image of cunning sellers in wet markets. As Mrs. Lee, a housewife in mid-forties, told, "I like patronizing supermarkets because goods are accurately weighted." Through scanning the bar code on each purchased item, the total amount of purchases will automatically be added up in the pre-programmed cash register. Moreover, for items that require measurement with the use of electronic weighing machines, the exact weight is printed on a label for consumer reference. Customers take ample advantages from the use of advanced technologies in supermarkets.

Bargaining and flexibility are not all impossible to take place in supermarkets, but in a way different from those in wet markets. They are obvious in promotion counters in a supermarket. There is an example from my observation of a noodles promotion counter in Park'n Superstore in Maritime Square. The counter was promoting a special offer: a free gift is given for purchases of that brand of noodles for an amount of \$30 or more. A customer intended to buy 2 packs of noodles, which cost \$29.8 in total. She asked the saleslady to offer an exemption for bestowing her the gift, as her purchase was only \$0.2 less the required amount and she did not want an extra pack of noodles. The saleslady did so even though the amount of total purchase did not meet the requirement. In this case, the saleslady was flexible in dealing with consumer demands and the customer succeeded in bargaining for an exemption. Promotion counters are typical arenas for negotiation in a supermarket. Salespersons are paid in basic salary plus commission. The more the deals, the more the commissions are. Compromise can be made as long as it will not cause a huge loss in a transaction. In the end, it is a win-win situation where the salesperson is rewarded with a larger amount of commission and the customer gets the gift with the purchase is made in her desired quantity. There is a different extent of flexibility and bargaining in wet markets and supermarkets, which entails individual variations and is situational.

3. Quality

Murphy (1989) argues, "purchases are made because the price is right, but they are also made because the individual is under some social compulsion to choose one items rather than another" (p. 148). To modify, there are calculations other than pure economic terms to make purchases in wet markets, not supermarkets, and vice versa.

Quality is a case in point. It can be understood in two senses: freshness and health concern. All of my informants arrived at the same conclusion that freshness is a foremost appeal of wet markets. This is a general perception among consumers as well as among sellers in wet markets. What exactly does the term “freshness” mean to each of them?

“Freshness” is an abstract concept. At one time, there are no objective criteria and universal yardsticks. Each individual begins from very different assumptions and ideas about the essential nature of freshness. There are many layers of meaning and possible interpretations about the quality of fresh produces. At other times, certain prevailing cultural beliefs on freshness in our society are encoded in these individual interpretations. Here, we devote special attention to vegetables, meat and seafood for their sharp distinction of perceived freshness between wet markets and supermarkets. The whole category of fruits is excluded either because it is unmentioned by informants when interpreting freshness or it is perceived as equally fresh in both places. The following is how Ada associated freshness with vegetables in wet markets,

Sellers in wet markets regularly spray water on leafy vegetables to give an impression of freshness. In supermarkets, the practice of pre-packaging easily makes leafy vegetables turn yellow.

Ada’s idea of freshness is based on the unique retailing practice in wet markets and supermarkets. In the first part, she established a link between sellers’ behaviour and freshness. Spraying water on leafy vegetables is a common practice among sellers. A skeptical explanation suggests that it is an intrigue to add weight on vegetables, resulting in customers having to pay more. Another way to justify it lies in the practical function of slowing down the process of dehydration of leafy vegetables so as to prolong the state of freshness. Sometimes, there is a combination of both. The practice of spraying water on leafy vegetables is prohibited in supermarkets, lest it should wet the floor and cause injury.

In the second part, Ada stressed packaging as bad to the preservation of freshness. Leafy vegetables are sold in individual packages in supermarkets. Sealed packaging hastens the decline in quality of fresh vegetables in which exposure to air is crucial in maintaining freshness. Worse still, transparent plastic bags unveil the exact condition of the goods. Any small clues of inferior quality are readily identified. The yellow colour, for instance, is a colour signifying the deterioration in freshness for leafy vegetables. This indicator of poor quality undoubtedly reduces the intention for purchases.

The interpretation of freshness on meat is somewhat visual-oriented. When asked the difference between meat sold in wet markets and in supermarkets, Rachel replied,

Pork and beef are hanged in meat stalls. It seems that they’re freshly slaughtered. In supermarkets, they’re either put in basins or pre-packed.

Rachel formulated her understanding of freshness in relation to how the goods are displayed. Hanging pork and beef is a traditional image of meat stalls in wet markets. Given the long-established mental equation between freshness and wet markets, pork and beef displayed in conventional way are confirmed as being fresh. There are no homogeneous goods in real world. Different retailing settings have

different ways of food display and produce different conceptualization of freshness. A piece of pork in a wet market is never identical to another piece in a supermarket, which is of the same weight and is concurrently slashed from the same pig. Notwithstanding pork and beef are hanged in Park'n Superstore in Maritime Square, the traditional image of fresh meat in wet markets hold insurmountable sway.

Much along the same vein, Ada and Rachel interpret freshness through the visual channel, whether through the behaviour of sellers, packaging or display of goods. The visual impact they have had in supermarkets is far less convincing about the freshness of vegetables, pork and beef.

It is not supermarkets, which condone visual stimulation as an essential variable in producing the impression of freshness. It is rather that wet markets play the game miles better than supermarkets. Mr. Lam tried to explain why supermarkets fail to make a twist. He said,

Even though supermarkets use fish tanks and put fish on ices too (Figure 1.4), they can't compete with us in terms of freshness; they don't have the technique as we do.

In other words, supermarkets are technically lagging behind wet markets in maintaining the same level of freshness, let alone achieving a higher level. This seems a little bit vague as Mr. Lam excused revealing the precise technical know-how that is unintelligible to a layperson like me. Still, his explanation tells us something about how freshness of fish is culturally constructed. Again, it is a matching game of food quality and food display in which confidence in a product and its value comes only from hard evidence. Fish tanks are transparent apparatus enabling consumers to know the condition of lived fish. The movement of swimming typically attests to the quality of being full of life. The energetic picture projected in fish tanks is a solid visual proof of the abstract concept of freshness. To emulate wet markets in the provision of lived and fresh fish, supermarkets have attempted to reproduce that symbolic connection by using fish tanks, yet have fallen short of their aim, according to Mr. Lam.

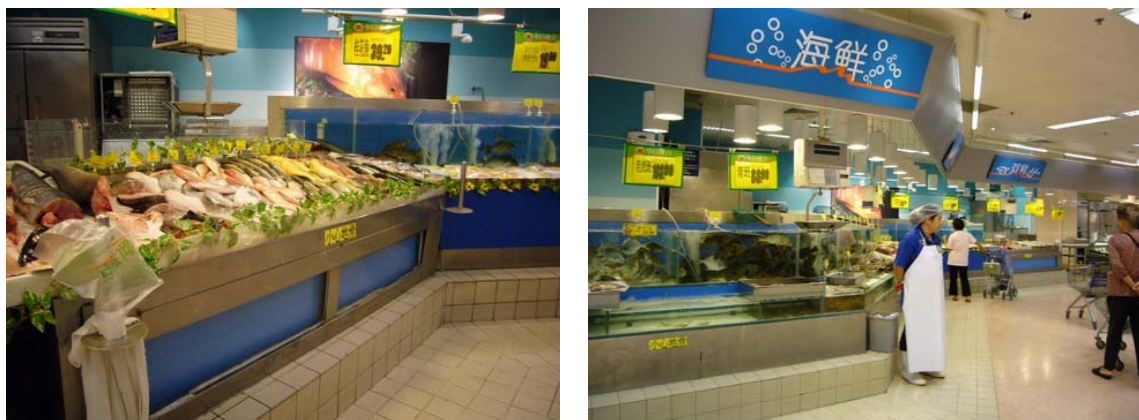


Figure 1.4 In Park'n Superstore in Maritime Square, fish either is put on ices (left) or kept in fish tanks (right).

Taste is a less patent and direct marker of quality than visual effect. Our taste buds are a powerful indicator discriminating stale goods against fresh ones. While

lived chickens are available in wet markets, supermarkets offer already-possessed chickens in quick frozen form and in chilled form. This pair of opposition-life versus death- often molds consumer decisionmaking. Priscilla described the taste of chickens based on the life/death distinction. She said,

Frozen chickens have a “frozen flavour” and are flabby. Chilled chickens are slightly better than frozen ones but inferior to freshly slaughtered ones. Lived chickens have a “chicken flavour” and the meat is firm and smooth.

Lived chickens in wet markets are judged as the freshest by their finest quality in taste and in texture as well. The “chicken flavour” is the most natural, pure, and original flavour of what a “fresh” chicken is believed to have, so is the firm-and-smooth texture. On the contrary, flabby chickens with “frozen flavour” sold in supermarkets signify the loss of freshness in the process of quick freezing and chilling; hence, are qualified as inferior. Texture is a more explicit clue than taste. Any differences can be recognized through the taste buds, as well as through the visual channel. While taste is highly oblique, subjective and personal, the “chicken flavour” is persuasive in constructing a common perception of freshness in which all of my informants agreed with. Just as the activity of fish as a way of measuring the freshness is widely accepted, the “chicken flavour” and the firm-and-smooth texture are virtually two culturally constructed standards in evaluating the freshness of chickens.

The second approach to analyze quality is to position it in the framework of health concern. Indeed, converge on health concern is extensive and we will concentrate on two major aspects: hygiene and food safety. The two is delineated roughly to refer to the retailing environment and the food itself respectively. The physical environment strikes consumers as an initial impression about its hygienic condition. Jessica portrayed a contrasting representation of wet markets and supermarkets,

Supermarkets impress me as being clean, tidy, illuminated and comfortable to do shopping. Wet markets, however, are fraught with negative impressions of being wet, dirty and fishy.

“Cleanliness”, “tidiness” and “illumination” are indicators of good hygiene. Cleanliness is defined in relation to wetness. In a wet market, the floor is all wet around seafood stalls. Small pieces of leafy vegetables are everywhere around vegetables stalls. Consumers step on the water spilt from fish tanks and the scattered pieces of vegetables, dirtying the wet market by walking around. They may be affected too, for example, being splashed by the smelly swimming fish. Such a typical, dirty and nasty scene of wet markets unavoidably evokes an unhygienic connotation. Although the environment in wet markets has been improved over years, it is still burdened by these stereotyping labels.

The attitude towards hygiene moves on with the times. “Hygiene” was unfamiliar and remote to earlier generations. Traditional wet markets were the only choice available and affordable to the majority of people living at subsistence level who had to ignore unhygienic conditions in wet markets. Watson (1997) writes, there is a “rising expectations among East Asian consumers... [in] high standards of public hygiene” over the past few decades (p. 33). Rachel compared the attitude of parents from different generations towards hygiene,

Hygienic is now more than ever a concern to those who shop with their kids. When I go to Park'n Superstore with my baby boy, I try to avoid getting close to the meat section and the seafood section. In the past, parents rarely took hygiene as a serious matter for their children.

Certain shifts of emphasis on hygiene awareness are locked into and produced at different periods, which are products of broader social and cultural discursive shifts. Raising affluence in Hong Kong has given impetus to the emergent preoccupation of hygiene, an awareness that parallels improved living standard and the rise of consumerism. Higher literacy level and wider access to information spawn a mass of well-informed and sensitive consumers who are in search for a hygienic shopping environment.

The new emphasis on hygienic shopping environment has a two-fold implication to wet markets. It is positive to some that are able to progress with time while it is devastating to some that are failed to measure up to neither large supermarket chains nor Municipal Markets (wet markets housed in Municipal Services Buildings). Mrs. Wong has operated a vegetable stall in Tsing Yi Estate Market for more than 10 years. She pessimistically explained,

Customers of young generations prefer to go to clean supermarkets; middle-aged or older customers are turning to patronize air-conditioned Tsing Yi Municipal Market. Here, poor facilities and the absence of air-conditioning hardly draw *yahn hei* (meaning a substantial flow of people; 人氣), something this wet market badly lacks.

In Tsing Yi Estate Market, the continuous outflow of customers is an alarm of its apparent inferiority and double forces of competition has trapped it in a time of adversity. There is currently one vegetable stall, two fruits stalls and two meat stalls but no seafood stalls and poultry stalls at all in it. The vying for *yahn hei* is a zero sum game: supermarkets and Tsing Yi Municipal Market are gaining *yahn hei* at the expense of Tsing Yi Estate Market.

It is far too complacent to claim that consumer demand for a hygienic shopping environment is universal. Chung Mei Market (a folk term referring to an assemblage



Figure 1.5 Wet market at Chung Mei Lo Uk Aillage

of shops opened on the ground floors of houses in Chung Mei Lo Uk Village; Figure 1.5) is a unique kind of wet market that has a more unpleasant, crowded and unhygienic environment than Tsing Yi Municipal Market and supermarkets, but is by and large welcomed. Mrs. Yip, Jessica's mother residing in Cheung Hong Estate, preferred Chung Mei Market to Cheung Hong Estate Market and supermarkets for the reason that goods are of better quality and are fresher but also sold at a lower price. Chung Mei Market is a very exceptional case. In general, a nice physical retailing environment does account for significant weights, directing the flow of customers from wet markets, particularly those in public housing estates, to supermarkets.

The improvement of retailing environment in supermarkets is a by-product of intense competition within the industry since the 1980s. Park'n Shop has always been a prominent rival of Wellcome Supermarket. Zhang (1991) reels that Park'n Shop initiated a price war in 1984 and in 1988 in an attempt to take over Wellcome Supermarket's role of Price Leader, resulting in a fiasco. Realizing its incapacity, Park'n Shop worked on improving its retailing setting as its own comparative advantage. This is of far-reaching consequence in the growing disparity between wet markets and supermarkets in terms of physical environment: crowded versus spacious, dirty versus clean.

From then on, the three large supermarket chains have made enormous effort to build up the image of hygiene purveyors. The management of the environment is closely monitored: the floor is dry and clean with no garbage; goods are tidily displayed; any unhygienic clues are immediately spotted under bright illumination; good ventilation exhausts the fishy smell. Corporate standards of cleanliness are applied to the physical environment in addition to food display and food preparation. Prepared food sold in supermarkets is displayed behind glass walls (Figure 1.6), in contrast to open display of barbecued pork or cooked food in wet markets. While it is compulsory for supermarket staff involving directly in food preparation to wear a mask, no single barbecued pork seller in all wet markets being observed wear a mask. The practice of mask wearing is in particular a legacy of the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, also known as Atypical Pneumonia) in 2003, a contagious disease that can be transmitted through bodily fluids such as saliva.



Figure 1.6 Glass walls are used in the Barbecue Pork Section (left) and in the Cooked Food Section (right) and mask-wearing is practiced (right).

Wearing masks and keeping prepared food away from customers minimize the chance of food contamination and the spread of SARS. This long-established pleasant image has constructed supermarkets as a hygienic shopping alternative to “unhygienic” wet markets.

On the whole, providing hygienic services is a plus for consumers. It is precisely in the domain of hygiene that some wet markets have failed to perform in compliance with consumer expectation on modern standards, watching their customers go to the rivals. Ada speculated the outcome of the struggle,

In long run, Municipal Markets will be the only kind of wet markets remain competitive and survive alongside with supermarkets because of the nice retailing environment.

Allowed me to venture one step further and pose a question: if the future scene of grocery shopping left only supermarkets and Municipal Markets, would diversity be scarified? Or, would customers be suffered from the uniformity and homogeneity of wet markets?

A hygienic retailing environment boosts confidence in consumption, so does the quality of the food itself that entwines with food safety. In what ways are consumer decisions molded by the issue of food safety? First, we will look at the category of *gon fo*, to specify, canned food and sauces, that are available in wet markets in addition to supermarkets. Priscilla showed confidence in consuming these kinds of merchandise in supermarkets,

Purchases of these items are only made in supermarkets where the quality is under guarantee. The higher turnover rate, the clearly printed expiry date and the ascertained place of origin reduce the chance of getting expired and/ or counterfeit products, as it occasionally happens in wet markets.

The image of wet markets is polarized as a purveyor of fresh produces and as a site for expired and counterfeit products. While consumers generally demonstrate much confidence in the freshness of *sap fo*, they have equal amount of reservations in those *gon fo* of food. There are some groceries in wet markets that do not import canned goods and sauces through proper authorized agents. Some of these goods are pretended to be famous brands of the same kind so as to mislead consumers. Underneath the nearly indistinguishable packaging design is a different manufacturer and place of origin. It is possible that the production is unlicensed and thus unmonitored by corresponding government officials. In other words, the quality of the products is skeptical and consumers’ health is at risk. Conversely, large supermarket chains are entitled with higher credibility. The corporate image entitles their products, which are of identifiable and legal sources, to be consumed safely. Place of origin can be a surface geographical difference, a variable affecting taste and texture, or even a cause for food poisoning in unfortunate cases. Admittedly, the sales of expired items in a number of major supermarkets had also been reported in January 2006. On average, the risk of buying these items is still much higher in wet markets. It is in part a long-standing stereotype that is hard to be divorced from. But it should be noted that stereotypes of deception in quality does not apply to sellers in wet markets as a group.

The quest for assurance in quality and food safety cannot be understood in isolation from recent events. Public panic was erupted in late November 2006 when a

series of food-related health scares about carcinogenic toxin found in daily-consumed items that are imported from the mainland: saltwater fish had been traced cancer-causing industrial dye malachite green; chicken eggs and duck eggs were tainted with carcinogenic Red Sudan IV dye; bean-curd sheets were found to contain formaldehyde and boric acid. Symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhea arising from the intake of fake or expired goods, most of the times, are relatively mild in affecting health, which do not put life in jeopardy, and can be treated right away. What arouses greater unease is the continuous intake of life-threatening tainted food as exposed in the media. Adulteration and food contamination of sorts had hit the headlines of major Chinese newspapers on consecutive days and had continued to be at the forefront of public attention.

The competition between wet markets and supermarkets has gotten heated in the wake of media exposure of toxic food. Consumers are disturbed due to the series of food scandals and in this context their “unsettled hearts” will drive them to seek a “shelter” where they can make consumption safely. Mrs. Leung, a middle-aged housewife, was alert of making purchases of chicken eggs,

Some sellers in wet markets claim that they offer American eggs instead of Chinese eggs. But I doubt their honesty. How do they deal with the remaining stocks of Chinese eggs? It would be a huge loss to throw them away. I'd rather buy American eggs from supermarkets where I'm sure that they're really imported from the United States.

Confidence is shattered in purchasing high-risk categories of food from individual retailers in wet markets. Negative perceptions towards the sales of fake or expired canned food and sauces have been extended to recently sensitive food such as chicken eggs, in such a way that Mrs. Leung imagined deceitful sellers, who cleared the stocks to minimize loss, offering Chinese eggs under the name of American eggs. Such suspicious imagery prompted her not to risk her life to patronize wet markets for chicken eggs. In general, the aggravating erosion of confidence has swayed consumers from purchasing those kinds of high-risk items from wet markets. On the other hand, the credibility of supermarkets was shaken when tainted duck eggs were detected in a Park'n Supermarket in Shatin (Staff Reporters 2006b). That Park'n Supermarket had no hesitation to retrieve consumer confidence, promising a refund on returned purchases of duck eggs. In this weave of food scares, the corporation also channeled substantial resources to assure food safety in consumption in order to maintain goodwill for the business. For instance, the non-Mainland origin of chicken eggs was highlighted in its advertisements, with the name of imported countries (such as the United States, New Zealand and Malaysia) bolded (Figure 1.7). Park'n Shop has also launched the “Fresh Check” Programme that guarantees customers the highest possible level of food safety. These actions would be absolutely impossible to be taken by individual sellers in wet markets. First, large supermarket chains are more visible in the limelight because of corporate ethics of social responsibility, whereas individual business in wet markets is less burdened by the public image. Second, individual sellers in wet markets lack sound capital to refund on purchased goods or to regain public confidence via advertising. Third, it is difficult to validate where the returned goods are from since no receipts are issued for any transactions in wet markets. As a result, the high visibility of supermarkets in attending to the imminent issue of food safety has constructed them as more promising and more reliable

retailers guaranteeing confidence in light of fear, anxiety and uncertainty in food consumption.



Figure 1.7 Park'n Shop guaranteed the quality of its imported fresh eggs on its advertisement.

The competition between wet markets and supermarkets over the issue of quality is taking place in two arenas simultaneously. On the one side, freshness constitutes a site of contestation to engage wet markets and supermarkets in the game of manipulation. Success or failure depends on how well each performs in manipulating the image of freshness in each round of the game. Supermarkets are the loser in all rounds of the game. On the other side, rising awareness of health concern facilitates supermarkets to regain the lost ground. Social changes play an important role in constructing the image of wet markets and supermarkets respectively. While wet markets are less adaptive and responsive to social changes, being suffused in prevailing negative stereotypes, supermarkets have initiated a broad converge on the changing consumer demand on hygiene and on addressing the recent mass food panic, showing their determination to build and secure a positive representation.

4. Retailing style

Provision of services is a fundamental watershed between wet markets and supermarkets. In wet markets, customers place their orders to sellers who then serve them in accordance, while in supermarkets they pick the products and queue up to pay at checkout counters. These two kinds of services provision can shape shopping experience in an opposite way. Ada was annoyed by the retailing style in wet markets,

It's stressful to shop in wet markets. There's a strong feeling of being under surveillance by sellers. If you've been selecting the goods in a stall for a

long time but eventually you don't make any purchases, the seller will scold you for making a mess of the goods. Also, it's *mah faahn* (meaning annoying and causing inconvenience and difficulty; 麻煩) to ask sellers to serve me. By contrast, I'm allowed to help myself in supermarkets.

Running a stall on their own, individual sellers have to manage transactions and keep an eye on shoplifting simultaneously. In a crowded and open retailing environment, it is understandable that they are alert of any suspicious acts of customers in their stalls, yet at the risk of giving pressure and uncomfortable feeling to customers. The concept of self-services in supermarkets is extraordinarily advantageous to customers who are anxious in dealing personally with sellers in wet markets. Mrs. Fung is an immigrant from Beijing in her late thirties living in Cheung Fat Estate. Having settled in Hong Kong for 5 years, she had hardly ever patronized Cheung Fat Market or any other wet markets,

I can't speak Cantonese fluently. It's heavily in Beijing accent. I found it embarrassing when sellers in wet markets didn't understand what I'd asked for. I'd rather go to Park'n Superstore where I don't need to utter even a word.

The idea of self-services in nature minimizes human contact and avoids communication. Still, it is such attributes that determine consumer preference of supermarkets over wet markets. For Ada, the provision of self-services constructs an atmosphere of freedom and independence in shopping. For Mrs. Fung, it eases the concern for language barrier in face-to-face communication. In both cases, it eradicates the need to ask for help. The "impersonal" atmosphere under the practice of self-services creates an independent shopper on the one hand, and a lonely shopper on the other hand (Bowby 2001: 37). Different people have different preferences on whether to be independent or to be lonely for different reasons.

Different retailing styles permit different consumer behaviour. The concept of self-services empowers customers in doing shopping in supermarkets who are granted the right of selection. For example, it is a conventional wisdom to pat a watermelon to see whether it is good or bad. The act of patting is more than an examination of quality. It feeds our desire for tactile and audio stimulation. Underhill (1999) proposes that shoppers are relish having a high level of "involvement" in the merchandizes,

Virtually all unplanned purchases – and many planned ones, too – come as a result of the shopper seeing, touching, smelling or tasting something that promises pleasure, if not total fulfillment (p.162)

Consumer expectation for sensory involvement is transformed into a consumer right under the emphasis on customer-orientation in the supermarket industry. The self-services retailing style is a good way to settle the insatiable appetite for sensory stimulation so that it is "not just a trip to the supermarket" but "a sensualist's journey" (Underhill 1999: 163). Sellers in wet markets, however, have a dislike of that take-for-granted consumer right. Mr. Chow, a fruit stall owner in Tsing Yi Municipal Market, gave an example in a disgruntled tone,

A customer in a supermarket can ask for opening as many durians as they like until they find a ripe one. He/she is allowed to give up purchase even after choosing the goods. He/she simply leaves the goods aside and goes

away. You can never do that in a wet market.

If it were happened in wet markets, the seller would have yelled at that customer severely as Ada expected. Sellers' perception of such consumer right tends to swirl around the extreme case of abusing self-services and the resultant interruptive consumer behaviour. To rephrase Ada's words, sellers worry about messing up the things if giving a free hand to customers. For instance, customers may drop the intended purchases anywhere and sellers have to place them back; patting the goods may cause damages and diminish the sales value. Sellers usually take this freedom as a burden in augmenting their workload and operation cost; hence, retain strict control over consumer behaviour, and explicitly give vent to their discontent for any disturbance customers made.

Consumption decisions are very much molded by retailing style. Wet markets and supermarkets allow consumer different degrees of autonomy and individuality. By the self-services concept, initiative is taken on the part of customers whose demands on quality and quantity are recognized. Mrs. Wu is in her fifties. Living alone, she favoured the lack of restrictions on purchases in supermarkets,

It's quite difficult to prepare meals in one-person portion. Sellers in wet markets usually refuse to make the deal if I ask for a small quantity of purchase. At the vegetable section or meat section in Park'n Superstore, the staff in won't express discontent, at least when serving me, and will conform to my needs.

Self-services do not exclude the need of being served in section of vegetables, of seafood and of meat where the staff is responsible for weighing, preliminary processing and attaching price labels to the goods. In supermarkets, customers are more likely to be treated similarly and on equal footing, regardless of what and how much they buy. It is egalitarian. Non-discriminatory services are essential to perpetuate consumer commitment for patronage. In this respect, supermarkets have demonstrated a greater capacity in embracing a diverse consumption pattern.

The idea of self-services cannot be realized without the sale of pre-packed goods in supermarkets, which reduce customers to passive, not active, shoppers. This can be explained in Ada's example,

If I'm going to make soup, I won't buy soup packages from supermarkets, which consist all the required ingredients (Figure 1.8). Individual packages confine the quality I want exactly. It's better to mix and match the ingredients yourself in wet markets. Not only can you adjust the quantity, you can also choose the ingredients you want. There's a greater degree of freedom.

Ada attributed the competitiveness of wet markets to the "free" retailing style. It is cosmetic to say that consumers are endowed with much more power over purchases in supermarkets than in wet markets. This is no more than an illusion of self-will allowed by supermarkets, which intervene with an invisible hand, exposing every consumer to the same array of choices in the first place, in the case of soup packages. As Ada highlighted, free will in consumption in supermarkets is enmeshed within the pre-assigned and identical choices. In this respect, wet markets function as a site for contestation to shake off the homogeneous consumption path and to reassert agency

over consumption in accordance to individual variations and preferences.



Figure 1.8 Soup packages available in Park'n Superstore in Maritime Square.

In terms of promotion strategy, wet markets are passive while supermarkets are extremely active in reaching to as many consumers as possible. We are bombarded by supermarket advertisements everyday, through print media (Table 1.1) and television broadcasting. Rachel explained how consumers are gullible to intensive advertising advertisements,

There's always something that you haven't thought of buying until you find on newspaper advertisements that it's discounted and you're motivated to do so.

Not only are these advertisements pervasive and visible, they are also aggressive in blurring needs and wants. While needs can be fulfilled through attainment, wants can never be satisfied (Easterbrook 2003: 171). Advertising constructs desires for us

	Number of pages of advertisements in Section A (Total pages: 56)	Percentage of advertisements in Section A	Number of pages of advertisements in Section C (Total pages: 80)	Percentage of advertisements in Section C	Total pages of advertisements
Park'n Shop	17	30%	11	14%	28
Wellcome Supermarket	5	9%	12	15%	17
CRVanguard Store	1	2%	5	6%	6

Table 1.1 Advertisement of the three largest supermarket chains in Hong Kong on The Sun's News on January 26 2007, Friday. Section A is news section and Section C is entertainment section.

in the masquerade of “needs”. It is a powerful means of persuasion and justification to those “needs” invented. Advertising widens exposure of merchandize in supermarkets to the greatest number of consumers and invite consideration, whereas discount has an added effect for which the cost of consuming unfamiliar items is lessened. This opens up new consumption opportunity out of routine consumption pattern, for example, boosting consumption of non-necessity items such as snacks and soft drinks. Consumers are persuaded that they can save up by purchasing those weekly specials, without realizing their usefulness and immediate necessity, and the fact that they actually have to pay for the “savings” in return..

Numerous pages of newspaper advertisements “remind” consumers of their “needs”. At the same time, the content of advertisements guides readers’ perception. Park’n Shop highlights “Red Hot Deal” (破抵價) and “The Lowest Price in Town” (全城至抵價); Wellcome Supermarket emphasizes “Drastic Price Reduction for the Year of Pig” (豬年勁減); and CRVanguard Store uses the adjective “Low-Priced” (抵) (Figure 1.9). Linguistically, the brilliant and direct slogan design has an overwhelming visual impact and hidden compulsion that feeds the psychological impulse for savings from consuming discounted products.



Figure 1.9 Language usage in newspaper advertising of Park’n Shop, Wellcome Supermarket and CRVanguard (from left to right).

Apart from that, Saussure’s study of signs (Berger 1984: 9) helps us understand the ideological content beneath the presented images. Park’n Shop’s corporate philosophy of “We Make Your Day” (meaning in accord with one’s wishes; 百佳令你日日稱心) is reappearing on newspaper advertisements and television commercials. “Advocacy of consuming material goods is not balanced by advocacy of thrift or of work” (Hayakawa 1990: 192), but by advocacy of gratification and well-being obtained through consumption. Alongside the listing of discounted goods, Park’n Shop has created on its advertisements an image of a typical four-person Hong Kong household (consisting of father, mother, elder brother and younger sister) patronizing Park’n Shop. This household signifies satisfactory, happy, and harmonious family life, family unity and good family relationships that can be built on the family activity of shopping in Park’n Shop. Rather than sticking to the traditional and straightforward way of informing consumers on discount, Park’n repacks it for the reason that a typical family representation is far legitimizing than the corporation that speaks for itself.

“Advertising agencies do plenty of research, by which we can assume that they don’t select their tactics arbitrarily” (Miller 1988: 48). To what extent a reader interprets the subtle signs encoded in an advertisement in very specific ways as expected? In fact, none of my informants take notice of any of these signs. Berger (1984) writes, “the power of people to ‘read’ signs is what is important, though we must not neglect the ability people have to misread signs” (p. 79). We must not neglect as well the ability people have to see signs as transparent at all.

Recently, the campaign for winning customers from rival supermarket chains and from wet markets has taken in an additional form: membership programme (Table 1.2). Wellcome Supermarket pioneered membership programme in the industry but it is Park’n Shop that stirs up a “craze” triggering a massive wave of application for membership. When I re-approached my five key consumer informants in early February, Mrs. Lau, Ada, Rachel and Priscilla have become members of the programme. But none of them have joined the Wellcome Supermarket’s programme so far; CRVanguard’s programme was unheard of (due to the lack of advertising) except Jessica who accidentally found it from a visit to CRVanguard Store.

	Membership Programme	Launching year	Benefits
Park’n Supermarket	MoneyBack Rewards Programme	2005	Every spending of \$5 accounts for 1 point and 500 points can be redeemed for \$10 cash voucher.
Wellcome Supermarket	Octopus Rewards Programme	January 2007	Get 1 point for every \$200 spends that is equivalent to 1 cash rewards.
CRVanguard Store	Fun Fun Card Membership Programme	January 2007	1 point can be earned for every \$2 spends and 400 points for \$50 cash voucher.

Table 1.2 Membership programmes of the three largest supermarket chains.

In what aspects Park’n Shop are outstandingly powerful in driving consumers to register as its members? The application form provides the answer.

First, MoneyBack Rewards Programme allows the whole family (four at maximum) to earn points under one account. A Main MoneyBack Card is issued for the applicant and three Mini Cards for his/her family members so that it is “four times faster” to accumulate points for “shared family rewards”. The system enhances the participation of every family member in supermarket shopping. Second, fabulous “Exclusive Member Price” and additional offers are showed on the shelves and renewed everyday. This induces customer-members to make daily visit and walk through every aisle for fear of missing the benefits and privileges, who may pass through unnecessary paths and be attracted to products they have no intention of buying. Providing extra points on selected items at exclusive member price forms double persuasion. The combined effect further stimulates unnecessary consumption.

Third, “Personalized Shopping List with special offers just for you” is provided to members. In practice, it is random and shows an illusion of uniqueness. Customers are led to believe that it is tailored to individual shopping habits and patterns and special offers are for no one else. Perception about the benefit they can get from Park’n Shop’s care and respect for individual shopping preference is manipulated to boost consumption.

Membership programme directs a new trend in the supermarket industry. What do they reveal about the soul of corporate strategy? Economic benefits generated from being a member are powerful symbolic persuasion to get people to stick to patronize one particular supermarket chain. MoneyBack Rewards Programme has a slogan, “make the MoneyBack Rewards Card part of your everyday life”. The compelling message is to “make Park’n Shop part of everyday household shopping”. This sense of “aggressiveness” is embodied in each membership programme, with a hidden agenda of carving an exclusive and a clear-cut niche of devoted customers. Endeavor to establish dominance is made through the control of customers by means of forging long-term commitment and attachment; imposing a single shopping choice; creating more and more wants. At this moment, stronger and stronger incentive of making purchase in supermarkets is identified. But it takes time to see how the retailing landscape as a whole will be transformed in long term.

The Winner?

Consumers do not respond mechanically to price differentials, nor are they homogeneous with respect to availability, quality and retailing style. Recognition of individual variations leads us to identify the specific social and economic dimensions underlying the context within which consumption decisions are motivated and made. I demarcate the competition between wet markets and supermarkets into the above four themes just for the convenience of analysis. In real life, we rarely make consumption decisions according to these themes separately. Most of us live in the messy gray areas in between. As a product of balancing these variables, we end up in complex and textured decisions in real situations. We should not be satisfied in understanding how we make decisions, but why we make a choice between alternatives, whether it is historical consequences, socioeconomic circumstance, individual experience, cultural beliefs and capitalism at work.

The Future of Wet Markets and Supermarkets

Tradition versus Modernity?

Up to this point, a significant proportion of the discussion offers a multicoloured spectrum into the contradictions between wet markets and supermarkets, for example, imprecise weight reading as opposed to the use of sophisticated apparatus, insanitation condition against modern sensitivity of hygiene. It appears if it is a tension between tradition and modernity. Much along the same vein of public discourses, the success of supermarkets is viewed as a corollary to the failure of wet markets. Are wet markets and supermarkets necessarily exclusive? How is the issue placed in the framework of tradition in relation to modernity?

What is the future of wet markets and supermarkets? My key informants took diverse paths to answer the question. Priscilla made the following speculation,

More and more goods that are available only in wet markets would also be found in supermarkets. People would increasingly turn to patronize supermarkets, which would substitute wet markets by providing identical and ultimately surpassing functions.

Pricilla argued that supermarkets would be a perfect substitution to wet markets. Beneath her speculation is a binary view of development- supermarkets would develop themselves in a multi-functional way, whereas wet markets would remain intact, stagnant and do nothing to improve competitiveness. The expanding market share of supermarkets is revealed in a report by Consumer Council (2003),

whilst wet markets currently have a significant share of the fresh food sector, there are indications of a gradual decline in consumer patronage due to a concern with the shopping environment, in terms of cleanliness and comfort.

Mr. Chan's response to competitions from supermarkets manifested Pricilla's sense of helplessness towards wet markets,

We can do nothing. Individual sellers in a market are like a sheet of loose sand. There is no way to improve the standard of cleanliness in wet markets unless fish is not possessed here.

The future of wet markets is gloomy and dooms to be evaporated, alongside with outmoded and obsolete tradition which is to be discarded in the progress of development for modernity.

In Hong Kong, the retailing landscape has changed very rapidly. While people celebrate rapid modernization in the supermarket industry, they simultaneously express anxieties about a break with traditional wet markets. Such ambivalence is imprinted on the minds. Unlike Pricilla who believed in a radical break, Jessica, Ada and Mr. Chan sought another way out of the ambivalence,

Jessica: Each one has pros and cons. Wet markets provide fresher goods and supermarkets provide a cleaner environment. They would continue to be complementary.

Ada: Supermarkets would still be unsatisfying in terms of freshness. The government would throw its weights behind markets to strive a balance so that supermarkets couldn't assert monopoly.

Mr. Chan: Wet markets wouldn't be replaced by supermarkets as long as freshness in markets is valued. But business would be tougher and caught in a dilemma: shrinking clientele and high rent, without any government subsidies.

Jessica, Ada and Mr. Chan shared the view of the capacity of wet markets in satisfying consumer demand on freshness and resolved the ambivalence such that wet markets and supermarkets would coexist in the future. Nevertheless, they hold different attitude towards the situation of coexistence. Jessica's idea of complement is pragmatically selective. That is to say, consumption is simplified to a kind of

specialization according to the respective strength of wet markets and supermarkets. To put it differently, some elements of tradition are emphasized and reinforced while others are disregarded and demeaned. Ada and Mr. Chan considered the role of the government in propping up the complementary relationship, and, in a more general discourse concerning social change in Hong Kong, the government's position in negotiating between tradition and modernity. Ada's confidence in government intervention can be found traits in recent proposals about the introduction of competition law, also known as antitrust law, which proscribes any forms of monopoly through anti-competitive behaviour and unfair business practice. Mr. Chan was pessimistic about the sustainability of coexistence. Equal footing with supermarkets is not easy to be accomplished. Wet markets would increasingly be pushed to the very edge of survival unless the government adjusts its apathetic attitude and interferes with the competition between traditional business and modern capitalist corporations. Predicament of tradition seems to be part of the modern condition. It is time for the government to consider repositioning its role in resolving anxieties and ambivalence, and hopefully, in pumping greater resources to do so.

The relationship between wet markets and supermarkets entails intricate complexities. There is no single road to understand the prospect of each of them as either incompatible or reconcilable. Rachel tried to went beyond conventional and dichotomous possibilities of substitution or complement,

Perhaps there'd be a big corporation coordinating all retailing activities in a market so that independent stalls would combine into a three large stalls selling vegetables, fish, and meat respectively. It'd be a completely different retailing landscape, which could be measured up to modern standards and more professionally managed.

While Pricilla envisaged that wet markets, as an element of static tradition, would be left behind in the process of change, Rachel concerned the nature of tradition as being constantly reinterpreted, or even reinvented. The introduction of modern entrepreneurial management would transform the traditional form of retailing business for betterment, so that wet markets could improve its competitiveness and keep pace with the development of supermarkets. Her creative imagination of a new retailing form is a connotation to the possibility of rejuvenating tradition by adopting certain aspects of modernity. It offers insights into the overlapping and cross-cutting areas on tradition and modernity and enables a dialectical relationship and articulation. Rachel's perspective is thought-provoking in opening up a discussion ground on the future of the retailing landscape where more alternatives would be emerging and consumers could choose among a set of alternative. For the moment, I consider two alternatives that have been taking shape in recent years: electronic supermarkets and organic markets.

E-shopping versus Physical Retailing

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the development of supermarkets has entered a new age where they begin to move into the digital world. The revolutionary idea of "electronic supermarket" is becoming part of our everyday landscape. Then, what is its implication in relation to supermarkets in physical sense? In the first and foremost place, the emergence of electronic supermarkets opens up a new frontier and brings

about a radical re-conceptualization of retailing business. The conventional dichotomy between supermarket and wet market has to be rewritten in the rise of this third alternative form of grocery shopping. On the one hand, this leads us to rethink and reexamine the relationship between physical supermarkets, physical wet markets, and electronic supermarkets. On the other hand, this sheds light on a new kind of shopping experience.

In discussing the nature of electronic supermarket, Medhurst (2000) points out that it represents “the combination of chic food culture and digital technology” in which food and technological devices has become an attribute of lifestyle and social status (p. 80). This manifestation is not abundantly clear in Hong Kong so far where the concept of electronic supermarkets has not yet gained significant currency, especially in making everyday household consumption (Table 1.3).

Major type of products/ services purchased online in the past six months (Multiple answers were allowed)	No. of Persons ('000)	%
Online ticket reservation	258.0	59.8
Online travel arrangement	62.9	14.6
Online purchasing of books, newspapers, and magazines	48.2	11.2
Online purchasing of clothes and accessories	43.6	10.1
Online purchasing of products delivered via electronic means	10.3	9.3
Online reservation of sport courts	39.0	9.0
Online purchasing of gifts	34.5	8.0
Online purchasing of electrical appliances	30.3	7.0
Online purchasing of supermarket goods	16.8	3.9
Total	431.4	

Table 1.3 Thematic Household Survey Report No. 27 (Jun-Aug 2006) on Information Technology Usage and Penetration. (Census and Statistics Department 2006)

Electronic supermarkets have not taken root among the mass household in Hong Kong. Its cliental is currently narrowed to business corporations, which consider online supermarkets as a better alternative to physical supermarkets. For instance, Rachel mentioned her experience as follows,

I’ve never accessed to electronic supermarkets for my family. But I had used the online service for my company. I worked in a training center where I had to order biscuits and drinks for the attendants. It’s more convenient to use the e-shopping service for bulk purchase and for business purpose. Much

time can be saved as you simply need to place your order from your desk and goods are then delivered.

With electronic supermarket, customers need not to be physically in a supermarket browsing every aisle (Medhurst 2000: 88). What they need to do is to click on the computer screen in a robot-like way and wait for the goods to be delivered. Yet, this unique selling point is not widely appreciated. The following is a typical explanation,

Rachel: I like to choose the products myself. Say, I can choose a “well-packed” biscuits among the stock on the shelf. You won’t buy a pack of cracked biscuits. For people who don’t ask for too much and simply want the goods to be delivered, shopping in electronic supermarkets is a nice choice.

Jessica: Even though there’s an online catalogue including photos of the products among which you can browse and then decide what to buy, you may not know how they actually look like. Those photos can be deliberately made good-looking to attract customers for purchases.

Sensory stimulation plays a role in determining shopping preference. Electronic supermarkets fail to provide a territorialized scenario satisfying sensual shopper who “want to spend time investigating and considering those products in which they have a high level of ‘involvement,’ (Underhill 1999: 163). According to Rachel, this is not essentially a concern for “cash-rich, time-poor” customers, however. While Rachel focuses on touching and Jessica is more visual-orientated, the two stimuli are actually intermingled to shape their subjective belief towards satisfactory shopping experience. Rachel believed that she could get the “perfect” products among others on display by picking and choosing, and by checking the quality simultaneously. On the other hand, we can draw another similar implication from Jessica’s words that reliability is greatly shaped by sensory stimuli. In her eyes, photos on the web do not represent an objective reality but are potentially subjected to distortion in order to render a sense of perfection. A material object in real world is more convincing hard evidence to boost confidence in shopping.

I also observed several incidence of sensory stimulation at work in influencing consumer behaviour. In wet markets, some customers examined the fish by flipping it or touching it. For oranges that were grouped to be sold as a unit, some customers secretly changed inferior ones when the seller did not notice. In supermarkets, some customers unwrapped the already wrapped-up bananas to take out inferior or excess ones to have the exact number they wanted. Some customers were crowded at promotion counters in supermarkets to taste the promoted products.

Sensory stimulation offers customers a high level of involvement and invites comparison. But this shows only a partial picture. Ada provided another explanation.

Supermarkets are very convenient these days. It’s unnecessary to do online shopping and to wait for the delivery. If the goods are not delivered on time, or delivered to a wrong address, or arrived in a wrong quantity, I have to call back to check. It’s *mah faahn*. I prefer to get the products instantly.

To sum up Ada’s opinion, it is “instantaneity” that matters too. With the new

emphasis on speed, modernity and technology, there comes a new demand of instant things in the face of the preconceived never-adequate time (Bowlby 2001: 176). Home delivery of online orders technically takes a few days. Also, customers have to adjust the daily routine schedule to wait for the delivery slot. By contrast, purchasing in physical supermarkets renders immediate pleasure and satisfaction via getting the products instantly.

Payment in the form of credit card is unavoidable in placing orders in electronic supermarkets. Jessica and Ada viewed this practice as problematic,

Jessica: Concern about security matter is common to all other kinds of e-shopping as it involves payment in credit cards.

Ada: If I use credit card for payment in supermarkets, I just need to sign the bill. But on the Internet, I have to give the password too, meaning that I have to memorize it. This makes me feel *mah faahn*.

Jessica's unease towards security in credit card usage is widely shared. From Table 4, "concern about security" is the second most common reason thwarting online purchase. To Ada, password is an important factor for not engaging in online transactions. It is a combination of the first and the fourth reason in Table 1.4 - explicitly, there is "no such need" to add a burden of memorizing an extra password and implicitly, there is a "fear of inputting inaccurate information", the password.

Reason for not performing any electronic commerce transactions online (Multiple answers were allowed)	No. of Persons ('000)	%
No such need	761.1	70.5
Concern about security (fear of leakage of information, thief of account...)	215.3	19.9
Do not know how to use	119.4	11.1
Other choices available	94.5	8.8
Fear of inputting inaccurate information	67.3	6.2
Others	7.5	0.7
Total	1265.1	

Table 1.4 Thematic Household Survey Report No. 27 (Jun-Aug 2006) on Information Technology Usage and Penetration (Census and Statistics Department 2006)

Contemporary technological progress inevitably stirs up controversy over the issue of access. The debate is basically two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, digital divide coincides generation gap and wealth disparity. Ada explained, "Electronic supermarkets exclude elder people who don't know how to use computer".

Older people are often deprived of access to computer technology on grounds of low education level. Low-income group is also denied access for the lack of economic capital. On the other hand, the idea of online supermarket shopping can be supposedly beneficial to the elderly and the disabled who otherwise have difficulty in making purchase from physical supermarkets (Medhurst 2000: 85). But there is still a long way to go for them to fully benefit from advancing digital technologies.

The establishment of electronic supermarkets does make life easier and shopping more convenient. Still, we cannot overlook the latent problems. Technological advancement in retailing industry constructs an invisible wall that minimizes meaningful social interaction to take place and poses a threat to the maintenance of social relations. Cherishing the convenience that online shopping promises, consumers become nothing but a robot sitting in front of the computer, browsing the catalog, clicking buttons to place orders and finally waiting for the delivery. These repeated sequential of acts in essence trivialize the value of human interaction. In a nutshell, whose life is made easier and more convenient from the introduction of online supermarket shopping? Who ultimately benefit? Who are the losers? Since electronic supermarket has a very short history, it takes time and needs more research to make a more objective and balanced evaluation.

Organic Markets: A Swing Back

Modern technology enables a possible boon to humankind through the advancement of electronic supermarkets, yet simultaneously has unanticipated and perhaps unimaginable far-reaching effects that are beyond human control. The use of insecticide DDT, to cite a notable example, has a ripple effect on the food chain and our health (Murphy 1989: 138). Crop-destroying insects are killed, but the DDT will be picked up by grazing cattle, and leaked out into the rivers and the sea. We indirectly consume the DDT remained on vegetables, and through the contaminated milk and seafood. Food-related scares are nothing new to Hong Kong people: diseases like avian flu found on poultry, mad cow disease found on beef, foot-and-mouth disease found on pork; the controversy over the labeling of genetically modified food; media exposure of carcinogenic toxin found in fish, eggs and beancurd skins at the end of 2006; the food scandal in January 2007 about the misleading labeling of oil fish (which can cause diarrhea) in the name of codfish in Park'n Shop and in the name of Kajiki in Wellcome Supermarket. Chemicals have become part of the food-growing process and unethical business practices for the interest of profit. It is a paradoxical and painful realization in technology and modernity. Mrs. Lau expressed the feeling of helplessness in making purchase of foodstuff,

Everything is unsafe to consume. Vegetables have insecticide residuals; meat is linked to disease of all sorts; seafood is polluted. This is tainted, that is fake. During the public panic in December 2006, I didn't risk to buy eggs from wet markets. But now, even Park'n Shop and Wellcome Supermarket, which are supposed to be credible, deceive customers, where can I make consumption?

Food consumption is a matter of life and death. We do have to eat to survive, but at the same time, unsafe food is pushing our existence to a dead end. Large supermarket chains are generally regarded as the last resorts in search for food safety,

yet have lost credit in the repercussion of the food scandal in which public fury has demonstrated that for many consumers, the belief is unable to stand anymore. So, when recent incidents have sapped consumer confidence in both wet markets and supermarkets, is there any other ways out?

In the past few years, there is growing awareness of organic food in Hong Kong. At its simplest, organic food “is produced without artificial fertilizers or pesticide using instead only organic-based fertilizers like manure and vegetable-based compost, and natural pesticide, such as predator animal species” (OECD 2003: 18). The role of local production is also emphasized. Organic markets have sprouted one by one in the retailing landscape. There are several famous organic markets in Hong Kong. Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden in Tai Po inaugurated Organic Farmers Market in March 2005, which is held on the first Sunday of every month (Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden 2005). In April 2005, Tai Po Farmers’ Market was established by The Federation of Vegetable Marketing Co-operative Societies, Ltd (FEDVMCS 2006a), and is opened on every Sunday except the first one of each month. In October 2006, FEDVMCS founded Organic Stop in Gold Coast in Tuen Mun, operating on every Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday (FEDVMCS 2006a). The consumption of organic food has been gaining progressive popularity. Organic passion has swept from New Territories to Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. Farmers’ Market in Wanchai was commenced in November 2006 and is held on every Sunday until April 2007, with the support from Hong Kong Organic Farming Association, co-organised by Greenpeace China, Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden, Wan Chai District Council and Wan Chai Home Affairs Department (Green Peace 2006). Recent food scares and food scandal have heated the fever for organic markets as an alternative to wet markets and supermarkets for safe consumption and healthy eating. On 20th and 21st January 2007, Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, Vegetable Marketing Organization and Fish Marketing Organization jointly organized Farm Festival in Mongkok. These organic markets have been well received by the public since their kickoff.

While supermarkets represent a great leap in raising the retailing industry to a higher level of modernity, the new trend of organic retailing swings back the pendulum from modernity to tradition. In the first place, the idea of organic markets reconstructing the interrelatedness between consumers and food producers, and revaluing dynamic human relationships and interaction. It revives the traditional form of direct dealing between food producers and consumers at a stable direct retailing point. The organization of wet markets in early days was that, farmers peddled their surplus produces in a fixed place at a fixed time for face-to-face exchange with consumers. The emergence of supermarkets has confused many of us about how our food comes to our table because multiples parties are involved in a transaction, including farmers, transport companies, importers and supermarkets. The supply chain is made complicated by the presence of various middlemen that alienates consumers from food producers and deprives consumers from thorough product information. The gigantic innovation of electronic supermarkets further trivializes human contact by which shopping is done alone and a transaction is completed with the computer instead of the cashier, without spatial and temporal constraints.

Enthusiasm for organic markets represents a protest against the ills of the cynical features of modern business practice and contemporary dehumanizing society. Direct contact with local organic farmers promises consumers a highly transparent

production process about “who grows their food and under what conditions” and allows them to gather “nutritional and culinary information”, boosting their confidence in origin and quality since farm-fresh food “has not been stored or transported for miles, losing important nutrients and taste” (OECD 2003: 42). At the same time, organic farmers can receive first-hand feedback from consumers to better plan for plantation that is tailored for their taste and needs. Organic markets facilitate transparency and communication. It is on this basis that trust is built, reliable consumption is guaranteed, laymen competence and understanding is made possible.

Human relationships as an underlying principle of organic markets is given a particular meaning in Farmers’ Market in Wanchai, where redevelopment projects are in progress. Some Wanchai residents have been forced to relocate in different areas and some historical architecture have to be demolished, including the open fair site at Tai Yuen Street which has a history of more than 70 years. Farmers’ Market in Wanchai has an explicit message to draw together scattered Wanchai residents, re-establishing the discontinued sense of neighbourhood and retrieving the sense of community, through participation in this new retailing marketplace as a compensation for the loss of the open fair site at Tai Yuen Street (Green Peace 2006).

There is a much subtler swing back brought by organic markets. To understand, we need a critical review of the relationships between human beings and food in modern industrial society. Technological progresses in transportation, preservation, communication and retailing have extraordinarily advanced food production and skyrocketed the circulation of food around the world (Goody 1982). It is no longer amazing to have such a wide range of mass-produced, manufactured, artificial and processed food without seasonal and regional constraints (such as canned food) but is a customary aspect in everyday life. Our industrialized way of life has radically transformed nature. It is indeed mechanistic working against nature and corrupts the original and better way of life and values in old days (Dubisch 1993:59). In this respect, modern life sets up an opposition of nature versus culture, tradition versus modernity in which the former is frequently subordinated to the latter.

A fundamental idea of organic markets is to return to the basic, that means moving backward to organic farming and an organic lifestyle as repudiation to destructive culture and modernity. What exactly is “an organic lifestyle”? It refers to the resurgence of traditional lifestyle following natural principles. These principles comprise naturalness, healthfulness, wellness and harmony, which can be achieved through the consumption of fresh, natural, healthy, seasonal food and the maintenance of a sustainable, balanced, productive ecosystem. The demand for organic markets symbolizes “a general nostalgia about the past, along with the feeling that we have departed from a more natural pattern of eating practiced by earlier generations” that assured nutritious, safe and tasty diet, advocating a return to early values and “real” way of life in which “people should work in harmony with nature and not against it” (Dubisch 1993: 57; 60). In short, organic markets are a means to gain control over one’s existence against the ills of highly technological life and to celebrate the wisdom of nature in constructing a simple but satisfying life.

A few words of caution, however. The belief that local grown organic food is better for consumers is unquestionable. Nevertheless, I make reservation about the extent of outreach of the organic lifestyle in Hong Kong where scarcity of land is always a headache for city planning such that local-resources-based organic

cultivation in a scale that is sufficient to feed the whole population is totally unfeasible. Therefore, the amount of organic food produced and available for sale is limited, meaning that some consumers have access to organic food while others do not. This leads to a second point. The ultimate goal of organic markets is part of the large idea of achieving harmony with the body and with nature for everyone. Impetus from recent series of food scares has stimulated interest in organic food. It is not necessarily the case, though, that those incidents have awakened public concern over food safety. The choice to go organic is a rather uneven process, being dictated by economic capital. Although it is reported that customers of Farmers' Market in Wanchai are not only rich people, but also from the middle class and some from the grass roots (SCMP 2007), wealth discrepancy does matter. Apparently, organic produces are more expansive than non-organic ones. Moreover, there are scantily a few organic markets in Hong Kong so far. Consumers who are not residents in vicinity are less willing to travel long distance for sake of fresh organic green produces unless they possess private cars. As a result, only a relatively small proportion of consumers have the luxury of changing lifestyle in an organic way. Taking organic markets as an alternative to wet markets and supermarkets is predominately an upper-class and middle-class urge but a remote option for the working class and the lower class, albeit the government is committing greater resources in popularizing organic consumption. Another concern is a well-monitored mechanism to ensure proper organic food production and to check the sales of bogus organic food. I believe, the potential of organic markets would be enormous and conducive to a better way of life for humankind, if support from above goes hand in hand with initiation from below.

What Kind(s) of Shopping Experience We Are Looking For?

Paradoxes and Contradictions

Just think back to the scenarios at the beginning and consider two additional scenarios.

Scenario Three: It is nine o'clock in the morning. A middle-aged housewife is shopping around the wet market. She greets a fruit stall owner "Have you had breakfast?"; she asks a vegetable stall owner "What is good and fresh today?"; a meat stall owner asks her "What do you want to eat tonight?"; a seafood stall owner advises her "It would be the best to steam the fish for 10 minutes".

Scenario Four: On the same day in a supermarket nearby. A young lady is being served at a checkout counter. The staff greets her "Good morning" without a second of eye contact, and then concentrates on scanning the bar code of every item the lady buys. When finished, the cashier informs her "It's \$35.6 in total. Thank you." The lady pays \$40 and the staff gives her back the change "Here are \$4.4 change." Once the deal is done, the cashier immediately turns to the next customer, "Next please."

Conversations appeared in these scenarios are typical in wet markets and supermarkets. They communicate a great deal about shopping experience and social

interaction in each retailing setting. These scenarios in fact echoes with the ones illustrated in the beginning, but enlightening a contrasting shopping experience: physical versus social. Admittedly, we are enjoying the tasty fruits of modernity and development, which bring us enormous convenience and facilitate a more intimate and instant connection. Local business environment has persistently been upgrading and modernizing. The changing urban life has reflected itself in a parallel changing shopping experience. We demand pleasurable physical experience in every facet of life. There is a “revolution” in consumer expectations. For example, we have accorded importance to convenience more than ever in our parents’ or grandparents’ day; we have set a high expectation on a clean and hygienic shopping environment that provides a diversity of products and attentive services. Retailing industry is currently moving towards customer-orientation in response to this prominent valuing on physical shopping experience. And customers’ satisfaction depends largely on the capacity of retailers to provide such an experience. Within this context, it is richly ironic that social shopping experience has been met with silence and lost flame to the prevailing value of physical experience; rather than appreciates and cherishes. In this process, humanist values inhabited in social experience like intimacy, connection, relationships, empathy, patience, attention and care are given way to the supposed rational but in reality dispassionate, detached and impersonal retailing mechanism.

Attending to surface phenomena of physical pleasure will not, in itself, help us to comprehend thoroughly the real human needs and the core values of human life. Shopping contains a bundle of meanings that cannot be polarized into pure physical pleasure and pure social connection; they are always intertwined in complex ways and presented as much of a puzzle. Physical shopping experience is placed in a paradoxical relationship with social shopping experience. This is abundantly clear in Ada’s ambivalent feelings towards shopping in wet markets,

The environment in wet markets is so crowded that customers are easy to be brushed. That makes me feel uncomfortable in making purchase, even though I seldom go there...No matter how I dislike the environment, I’d choose to buy fresh foodstuff from sellers in wet markets whom I’d built relationships with, if I were asked to prepare a meal, even though fresh food is also available in supermarkets.

The first view draws attention to the button-brush effect: “shoppers...don’t like to be brushed or touched from behind. They’ll even move away from merchandise they’re interested in to avoid it” (Underhill 1999: 17-18). A few jostles suffice to spoil entire shopping experience. Memory of discomfort is deeply ingrained. To what extent purchase decisions are made, or heavily susceptible, by physical experience? Ada’s second view gives an answer to the question. It conveys a reflective message: customers buy much more than what they need. Shopping offers comfort at a social level. Easterbrook (2003) remarks,

Human beings are happiest around other people... They need close connections to other people and are happy in a friends-or-family social setting than when alone. (P.179)

Ada’s preference on patronizing sellers whom she acquaints with is a projection of the basic human need for meaningful personal contact. Her desire to carry on the commercial relationship stands for a desire to sustain the social relationships. It is this

sense of relatedness and interconnectedness that enriches emotional satisfaction. Physical experience is explicit and direct while social experience is implicit and subtle. To Ada, a satisfying shopping experience is ambiguous and inconclusive.

Inconsistent expectations on shopping experience can be identified not only in an individual sense, but also in a social sense. Shopping in urban life is laden with competing physical pleasure and social interactions. In the process of negotiation, contradictions inevitably arise. These contradictions give rise to serious doubts and confusions in this new era of global economy. Contemporary mode of corporate management is oriented in a flexible organizational paradigm characterized by “charismatic” personality, as Max Weber put it (Brown 1997: 742), demanding somewhat expressive qualities such as flexibility, good communication skills, good interpersonal skills and empathetic understanding. With respect to supermarkets, the “modernized” form of “traditional” wet markets, these attributes seem to be missing. What we observe is continuity in “bureaucratic” paradigm basing upon de-personalized relationships, which involve highly predictable, routinized and regimented interactive service work; high degree of organizational control, the imposition of rigid rules and procedures; and the emphasis on extreme standardization to regulate human interaction as well as a sanitary environment. Just as contradictory as McDonaldisation, the introduction of supermarket is both “enabling” and “constraining”. Supermarkets “enable us to do many things that we were not able to do in the past” while “also keep us from doing things we otherwise could do” (Ritzer 2000: 18). It is a double-edge phenomenon.

Changes and Constancy

The retailing landscape has been undergone a radical transformation within the past few decades. This process of change leads us to re-examine the dynamic interplay between wet markets and supermarkets and within each retailing setting. Some elements of grocery shopping are changing, both spatially and temporally, via a period of adaptation and there involves a process of interpretation, appropriation and reinterpretation. The meanings and purposes of grocery shopping have been tremendously modified, so too is shopping experience. At the same time, there are elements that remain stable and intact. This is a phenomenon of continuity in transformation.

Shopping in supermarkets has been re-shaped from novelty to familiarity. A supermarket was once designated exclusively for the taste of foreigners and rich local people; a superstore was once considered as an equivalence of a shopping mall; fresh produces were once comparable to the mechanize in the mall. This kind of mentality was similar to that of pilgrimage, meaning meant something bigger than the acquisition of the goods itself. Once customized, supermarkets gradually lost such an appeal to routine practice. Its popularization is not simply of American concept of grocery shopping in motion but also of its contingent localization. Consider, for example, the availability of lived fish contained in fish tanks at superstores. This strategy fits local condition by adapting to Chinese taste for freshness. Within years, shopping experience in supermarkets and superstores has shifted from leisure-oriented at an “exotic” retailing milieu to a necessity-driven at a familiar retailing milieu.

Complex web of social relations that gives birth to multifaceted social shopping

experiences, through the symbolic appropriation of social space in wet markets and supermarkets, has been re-constructed. In supermarkets, seller-buyer relationships and the employer-employee relationships are made less stable and more easily diluted. The new emphasis on quality services in the supermarket industry contributes more to forge an artificial and impersonal seller-buyer relationships than a natural and sincere one that is full of *yahn chihng meih*. Contemporary practice of corporate human resources management- short-term contract-based and temporary employment- lacks a solid basis to foster a sense of belonging among employees. Dehumanizing means of corporate control over employees whose participation in phatic communion with customers is forbidden, or at least minimized. Underneath these practices is the single-minded lucrative mentality of supermarkets that severely undermines the perpetuation of both kinds of relationships through extensive human interaction and represses the desire for satisfactory shopping experience at a social level.

For customers, there is discontinuity as well as continuity in social relations. Family members are overwhelmingly distracted by all sorts of things such as work and individual pleasure these days. Re-building this loose family tie, grocery shopping has become an important activity to draw closer members of a family. This is exceptionally true at supermarkets, a shopping choice that is suitable for adults and children as well, with respect to the diversity of merchandise, the retailing style and the physical environment. Traditional Chinese family value of togetherness and familial shopping experience is even manipulated by Park'n Shop. Another shift in family relationships can be discerned in the increasing empowerment of children as decision-makers over parents. Children are given a role to participate in experiencing the joy of shopping. Grocery shopping continues to be a prominent female domain and an essential socializing activity for women, however. The shopping experience is primarily a kind of female experience for the purpose of cultivating and maintaining friendship and a sense of neighbourhood.

If we broaden our vision to a time scale or along a long continuum encompassing the past, the present and the future, we will have a more productive discussion on the changing shopping experience. The two paths of future development in the retailing business recast shopping experience in different patterns. Electronic supermarkets reverse the pendulum of familiarity to novelty. The majority of households feel uncomfortable in a new conceptualization of shopping experience, a product of online supermarket transactions. The experience is both physically compressing and socially distancing. Physical compression refers to the shrinking retailing landscape where grocery shopping no longer needs to be spatially and circumstanced as the Internet dislodges it from particular physical terrains. Social distancing means that human relations based on physical presence in face-to-face contact at fixed spaces is rearranged in faceless encounters at virtual spaces. This new shopping experience is totally unfamiliar and may be problematic for its possibility of engendering the debatable issue of digital divide and minimizing human contacts.

Alternatively, organic markets step back to forge a primitive form of shopping experience, which had historically carried with it a great knowledge bank of the nature and human intimacy. Rooted in a stable and territorialized existence, organic markets render consumers an opportunity to experience a physical and spiritual transformation of the self via a transformation of life-style. Shopping in organic markets is not purely a salvation of the body by restoring a healthy body. Meaningful social relations are promised top priority status once again, specifically, the

relationships between producers and consumers. There is something more profound that transcends the individual level. The experience is as well a salvation of contemporary society, which is rife with cynicism and self-destructive acts in everyday life. In total, it is a combination of physical wellness and social well-being. Such shopping experience is fruitful but is costly and limited in accessibility at present.

Conclusion

The active involvement of individuals in making sense of their consumption decisions and in the construction of meanings speaks to how much more complicated the retailing scene actually is, leaving a trail of the much more complex motivations that characterize grocery shopping today, and probably in the future.

Grocery shopping entails multi-layered meanings. Wet markets and supermarkets serve multiple purposes, which result in alternatives social values than a simple monetary exchange. Shopping experience is changing all the times. It can be a symbol of leisure at one time, but can be a regular aspect of daily life at other times. The very power of social relations established in shopping may be that the goals and meanings can never be precisely pinned down, that a commodity is always more than one thing. There is no clear-cut. A person may consolidate relationships with sellers, with family members and with friends or neighbours simultaneously, throughout an occasion of shopping.

The competitive retailing scene is not plain as day. Nor price is adequate to capture the complexities of determinants in making shopping choices. Availability, price, quality and retailing style are four major recurrent themes in multilevel competitions between wet markets and supermarkets and each theme is interpreted to a varying degree. These concerns are competing with each other but not necessarily exclusive. Decision-making requires situational selections. That is to say, some concerns are emphasized and others are not in a particular context of time and space, because of their positive value in fulfilling expectations in any given set of historical, social, cultural, economic and/ or political circumstances. Thus, in practice, there are multiple layers of motivations at work simultaneously.

When consumers are active agents in making sense of their needs in relation to their shopping choices, they are concurrently subjected to the effect of gentle conversation from advertising, special offers and membership programmes initiated by the three largest supermarket chains. These promotional strategies produce endless “needs” that tremendously exceed genuine and basic needs of our survival. They are part of the aggressive grand project of corporate capitalism in such a way that consumers become strapped, buckled and harnessed to consumerist incentives, though reception is an intricate process, not a straightforward imposition of motivations.

The growing market share of large supermarket chains is not essentially a process of dominance over wet markets. Nor it implies a process of eradicating tradition, a removal of the stumbling block for the progress of modernity. Instead, the future of grocery shopping is opened for creative imagination. There is no one final and definitive path of development for wet markets and supermarkets. The two alternative forms of retailing I have discussed, electronic supermarkets and organic

markets, are likely to transform physical and social shopping experience. Since both of them has been introduced for a few years only, it would become clearer whether the ramification is for better or worse to humankind as a whole as time goes by.

Retailers are selling much more than a commodity itself. This is equally true for their patrons who are buying much more than the product itself. Those four given scenarios, at a specific level, each pairs highlight physical experience and social experience in shaping consumption decisions. Pleasurable material environment produces momentary feeling of physical comfort, but the feeling rarely lasts. On the other hand, humans are flesh-and-blood beings; the urge for social connections is hardwired. It is a dilemma because the physical urge contradicts the social urge in current situation: while maximizing physical pleasure, social aspects are played down and all social relations are reduced to impersonal markets and money.

In this paper, I provide a new configuration of multi-dimensional insights to better understand the ramification of grocery shopping. I enterprise to challenge and to deconstruct the oversimplifying discourse of physical shopping experience by using an alternative explanatory framework that is based on social shopping experience to discuss wet markets and supermarkets. As a concluding remark, there are two questions that worth considering. First, is a modernized shopping environment and the current emphasis on physical shopping experience a benefit or rather a loss as for all parties concerned as a whole? Second, would the world be different- nicer and better - if we can reevaluate the role of social interaction and social shopping experience as a compensation for the emptiness and barrenness of lives in spite of material and physical satisfaction?

Reference:

- A.S. Watson Group. 2007. Park'n Shop Hong Kong. Available at http://www.aswatson.com/eng/retail_fegm_221_pshhk.htm accessed 30 March 2007.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. 1984. *Signs in Contemporary Culture: An Introduction to Semiotics*. Salem, Wis.: Sheffield Pub. Co.
- Bowlby, Rachel. 2001. *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brown, Phillip. 1997. "Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion: Some Observations on Recent Trends in Education, Employment, and the Labour Market." In A.H. Halsey, ed., *Education: Culture, Economy, and Society*, pp. 736-749. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Census and Statistics Department. 2006. Thematic Household Survey Report No. 27. Available at http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/hong_kong_statistics/social_topics_studies/index.jsp (Accessed on February 1, 2007)
- Satff Reporters. 2006b. Ya Sao Pai Han Wei Liang Su Dan Hong, Chao Shi Ji Hui Shou 「鴨嫂」牌含微量蘇丹紅，超市即回收 [Eggs found Sultan IV dye, supermarkets immediately retrieved]. *The Sun News*, 26 November, p. A2.

- Dubisch, Jill. 1993. "You are What You Eat: Religious Aspects of the Health Food Movement." In Arthur C. Lehmann and James E. Myers, eds., *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, 55-63. Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Pub. Co.
- Easterbrook, Greg. 2003. "More of Everything Except Happiness." In *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, pp. 163-187. New York: Random House.
- Eastman, Lloyd E. 1988. *Family, Fields, and Ancestors: Constancy and Change in China's Social and Economic History, 1550-1949*. New York: Oxford University Press
- FEDVMCS. 2006a. About Tai Po Farmers' Market. Available at <http://www.market.fedvmcs.org> (Accessed on February 12, 2007).
- FEDVMCS. 2006b. About Organic Stop. Available at <http://www.market.fedvmcs.org/> (Accessed on February 12, 2007).
- Gan, Changqiu 甘長求. 1995. *Xianggang Chao Ji Shi Chang: Ling Shou Ye Xin Qu Shi 香港超級市場: 零售業新趨勢*. Xianggang: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan 香港: 商務印書館.
- Gao, Tianqian, ed. 1994. *Xianggang Jin Xi 香港今昔*. Hong Kong San: Lian Shu Dian (Xianggang) You Xian Gong Si 香港 : 三聯書店(香港)有限公司.
- Green Peace. 2006. Rationale of Farmer's Market. Available at <http://www.greenpeace.org/china/ch/campaigns/food-and-agriculture/farmers-market/rationale> (Accessed on February 5, 2007).
- Goody, Jack. 1982. "Industrial Food: Towards the Development of a World Cuisine." In *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*, pp. 154-174. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hayakawa, S. I. 1990. "The Empty Eye." In S.I. Hayakawa, Alan R. Hayakawa, eds. *Language in Thought and Action*, pp. 193-195. San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Hong Kong Place. 2000. Infrastructure and Architecture- Wet Markets and Municipal Services Buildings. Available at <http://www.hk-place.com/view.php?id=206> (Accessed on January 11, 2007).
- Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden. 2005. Come and Visit KFBG Farmers Market This Sunday. Available at <http://www.kfbg.org.hk/eventsnew/newsdetails.asp?langg=2&ID=45&NEWS=317> (Accessed on February 12, 2007).
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1999. "On Phatic Communion." In Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland, eds., *The Discourse Reader*, pp. 302-305. London; New York: Routledge.
- Medhurst, Angela. 2000. "Shop 'til you[r Connection] Drop[s]: Considering the Electronic Supermarket". In *Cutting Edge, the women's research group*, eds.,

- Digital Desires: Language, Identity and New Technologies*, pp. 78-89. London: New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Miller, Mark Crispin. 1988. "Getting Dirty." In *Boxed in: The Culture of TV*, pp. 43-50. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Murphy, Robert. 1989. "Ecology and Economy." In *Cultural and Social anthropology: An Overture*, pp. 137-160. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 2003. *Organic Agriculture: Sustainability, Markets and Politics*. Cambridge, MA: CABI Pub.
- Ritzer, George. 2000. "An Introduction to McDonaldization." In *The McDonaldization of Society*, pp. 1-20. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge Press.
- South China Morning Post (SCMP). 2007. "Shoppers Warm to Organic Market," 14 January. Available at <<http://hk.news.yahoo.com/070114/187/1zvwu.html>> (Accessed on February 12, 2007).
- Team Clean. 2004. Progress of Measures to Improve Environmental Hygiene in HK. Available at <http://www.had.gov.hk/file_manager/en/documents/whats_new/report_to_legco.pdf> (Accessed on January 16, 2007).
- The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. 2006. Government Steps Up Precautionary Measures Against Avian Influenza. Available at <<http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200601/20/P200601200288.htm>> (Accessed on January 16, 2007).
- The Information Services Department. 2007. TV Accouchements. Available at <<http://www.info.gov.hk/isd/tvapi/service4/english/text.htm>> (Accessed on February 12, 2007).
- The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English. 2006. Highbeam Encyclopedia. Available at <<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O999-supermarket.html>> (Accessed on February 12, 2007).
- Underhill, Paco. 1999. *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Van Maanen, John. 1991. "The Smile Factory: Work at Disney." In Peter J. frost et al., eds. *Reframing Organizational Culture*, pp. 58-76. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Watson, James L. ed..1997. *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press
- Wellcome Supermarket. 2006. About Us. Available at <http://www.wellcome.com.hk/jsp/sys/Sf_render.jsp?hf_s_id=WD11&hf_srv_id=Pv_fcu_home&hs_resol=1024> (Accessed on September 10, 2006).
- Zhang, ZhiKang 張志剛. 1991. *Shang Pin Zheng Ba Zhan 商品爭霸戰*. Hong Kong : Bo Yi Chu Ban Ii Tuan You Xian Gong Si 香港: 博益出版集團有限公司.

民族誌比較：香港街市與超級市場

近年來，有關香港兩大連鎖超級市場(百佳超級市場和惠康超級市場)壟斷的關注引起不少爭議。對於香港街市未能與超級市場競爭，大眾言論普遍歸咎於前者「骯髒」的零售環境未能給予顧客「舒適」的購物經驗。不過，街市仍然深受老年、中年和年青顧客歡迎，原因是什麼？在這個研究中，我會拆解有關身體購物經驗的簡單化言論，以全面的角度理解街市與超級市場的關係。首先，我會探討購物意義的演變。然後，我會研究顧客在作購買決定時所考慮的不同因素，以滿足他們對購物經驗的要求。接著，我會將購物經驗放在傳統與現代的框架中，加以討論。最後，我會重新喚起現代人已漸漸淡忘的，最基本的和最核心的人文價值和社會互動關係。