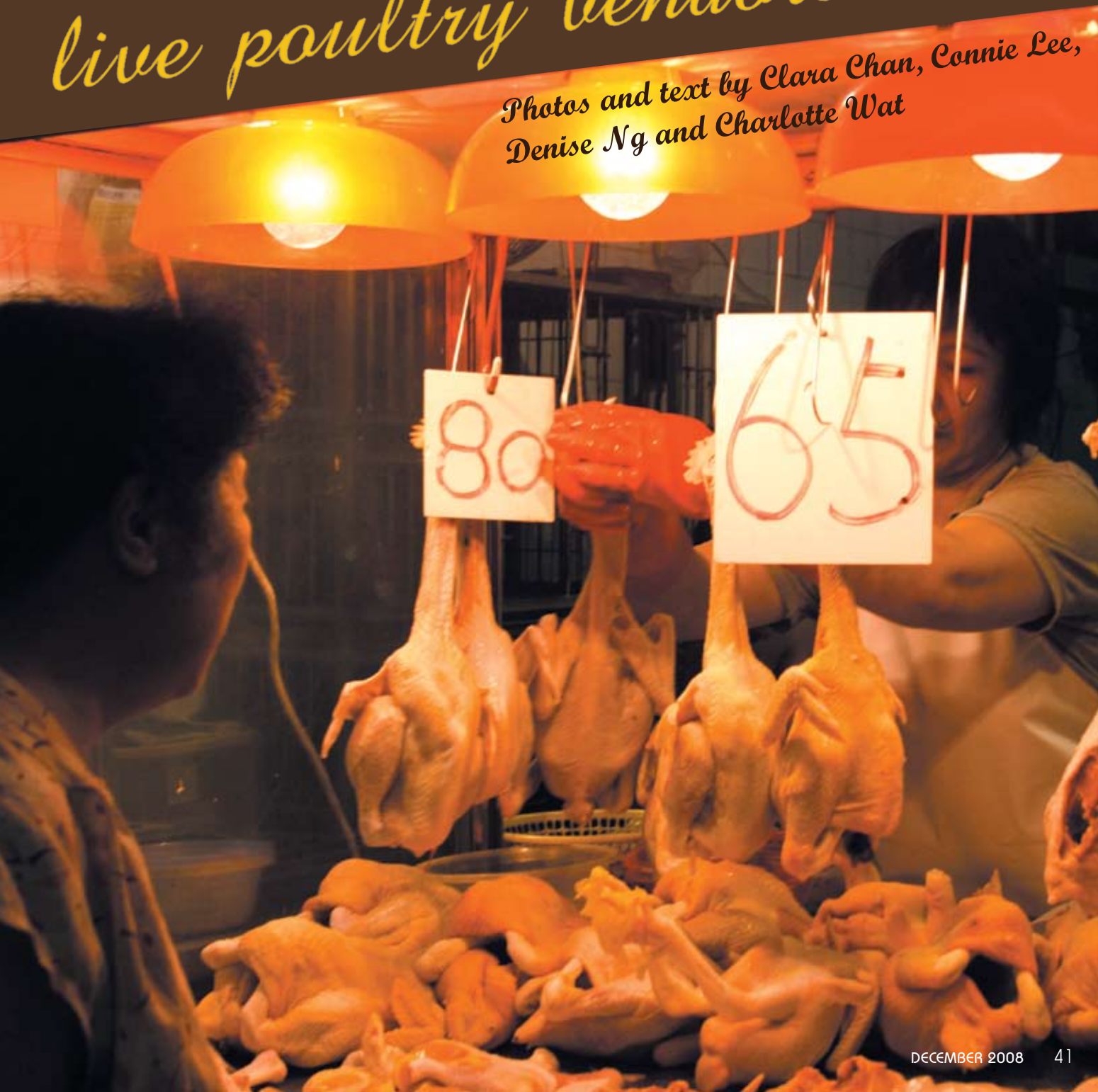


Last days of live poultry vendors

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▷ Chow Hon-ling is glad to have customers' support.

▽ Price tags of the chickens.



"Customers even drove here just to ask me not to give up my license."

Kowloon

Friendships and loyal long-term customers are the major motivations for some of the 131 remaining live poultry vendors to stay on, despite many vendors having already left the business.

"Customers even drove here just to ask me not to give up my license," said Chow Hon-ling, owner of Chow Wah Kee Poultry in Kowloon City market.

Succeeded the store from her mother, Chow has been a poultry vendor for more than 10 years. She refused to apply for the buyout scheme offered by the government because she did not want to disappoint her customers. Under the scheme, 72 per cent of live poultry retailers in Hong Kong surrendered their licenses to the government in September.

"I was very happy (about the customer's support). I've never been so happy before. I treat all of my customers as my friends," said Chow with a big smile. Usually called "Ah Ling" by her customers, Chow's friendly personality has helped her maintain a long-term relationship with her customers.

Having bought live poultry from Chow's store for 20 years, Yu Pi-li said, "The owner is very nice and she always calls me her 'buddy'. That's why I like to come here."



Chow's store in Kowloon City market.



Pairs of wooden tablets are used to identify which chicken the customer has chosen.



Customers can no longer choose live chickens after the implementation of central slaughtering.

n City market



Leung wears a bluetooth headset to receive orders.



▽ Different types of poultry are sold in the store.



△ A chicken peeks out from the cage.

◁ Fresh chickens ready for sale.

In Kowloon City Market, another poultry vendor who only identified herself as Mrs Leung also has a group of long-time customers, or “fans” as she calls them. She has worked in the field for over 40 years.

“Customers always call and ask me to reserve fresh chickens for them, as the live chicken supply is limited,” said Leung, who wears a Bluetooth headset to receive orders and gives out name cards to customers.

Leung said that her business has improved a bit after others had surrendered their licenses.



Leung's business has improved after many vendors surrendered their licenses.



△▷ The chicken will be tied and weighed before the slaughter.



The store not only is a memorable place to Leung, who has spent most of her life there, but also to her son. He held his wedding ceremony there.

"He grew up here (in the market). He knew there would be no more poultry stores in the future so he wanted to keep it as a memory," Leung said. Her son, who has a PhD, still likes to come back to the store to help his mother occasionally.

Leung said she will stay in the business as long as possible since it is difficult for her to find another job. If the government makes it compulsory for her to give up her license she will sell chilled chicken instead.

Although feeling sad that the live poultry industry is on its last legs, Leung thinks it was inevitable. "Hong Kong is already an exceptional case. Many other places had banned selling live chickens long time ago," she said.



The chicken will be put into a red bucket after being slaughtered.



Ngau Chi Wan market

“Right up till the day I die, I will ask my son to preserve it for low-skilled people.”



Ma Ping-shing has taken strong actions to protect the live poultry industry.

While some have reconciled themselves to the current situation, Ma Ping-shing, the only remaining live poultry retailer in Ngau Chi Wan market, has taken stronger action in his fight against the Food and Health Bureau to keep the industry afloat.

Ma protested with other vendors and wholesalers outside the Murray Building in Central, where the bureau’s office is located, in October against the government’s cutting of the live chicken supply by half to only 10,000 per day.

Selling live poultry is Ma’s only way of making a living. Dyslexia had affected his education and he could only apply for low-skilled jobs. “I’m afraid I won’t get as much as I’m earning now,” he said.

Ma is upset on behalf of the other vendors who had left the industry. He wants to do his best to keep the industry alive for other poorly educated people like him. “Right up till the day I die, I will ask my son to preserve it for low-skilled people,” he said passionately.



Protest slogans are hung in Ma’s store.



Ma’s brother also works in the store.

The interior of Ma’s store.



Many customers patronize Ma’s store for live chickens.



An empty poultry store in Ngau Chi Wan market.





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1-4: A staff is preparing chickens ready for customers to pick up.

5: A special scale for weighing the chickens.



5



Shek Wu Hui market

However, another live poultry vendor in Shek Wu Hui market in Sheung Shui, who would only identify himself as So, is in two minds about whether to leave the industry or not.

So, who has worked in the field for over 30 years, was tempted by the over one million dollars' compensation given out by the government if he surrenders his license.

So also said that being a live chicken vendor is such a hard job that he does not want his children to go into the business after he retires. He gets up at 3 a.m. every day, picks live poultry from Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market and then works in his shop for another 13 hours, from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m.

"I am still running the business mainly because I want to supply live poultry to people, so that they can have fresh chicken to eat," So said.

His efforts have paid off as more and more customers from other districts, who have lost their live poultry vendors, now patronise his store. A customer from Fanling, who only identified herself as Mrs Yiu, would go to Sheung Shui for live chickens during weekends and holidays.

"Fresh chicken is more tender and tastier," said Yiu. "If there are no live chickens in Hong Kong, I will go to the Mainland for fresh chickens, cook them and bring them to Hong Kong."



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6-8: So works 16 hours for his store every day.



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It is a hard time for poultry vendors due to the reduced poultry supply and the overnight stocking ban.



In spite of the strong support from the many live chicken lovers, So said that now is the hardest time for the poultry industry ever. The wholesale price for live chickens has risen from HK\$20 to more than HK\$30 per catty due to the reduced supply. "The situation is even worse than during the avian flu outbreak," he said.

The name of his shop, Tai Ho King, means "a good future". Ironically, the future of the live poultry industry is bleak as the government is determined to introduce central slaughtering, with the first central abattoir plant opening in 2011. ▼

