

# A Bitter Sweet

## Business

by Melanie Leung and Beverly Yau

It is a late Sunday afternoon. In a quiet park, with only few people walking by, Mon Cheng Lai-mui waits for customers while her nieces play beside her cart. The ice cream and cold drinks inside the cart remain unsold after more than half an hour.

Cheng, 36, is one of the 25 “lucky” people who successfully applied for newly issued Itinerant Hawker Licenses for frozen confectionery from the government’s Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD).

The former Urban Council stopped issuing hawker licenses in the early 1970s in order to reduce the number of hawkers. The reason given was that hawkers were believed to be responsible for environmental hygiene problems, noise nuisance and obstruction to pedestrians and vehicles.

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As a response to pressure and lobbying from hawkers’ groups and after carrying out consultations, the government finally reviewed the hawker licensing policy last year and agreed to reissue a limited number of licences.

However, things have not gone as smoothly as the applicants might have thought.

Since she started selling ice cream in Tin Shui Wai six months ago, Cheng very quickly discovered she had chosen to go down a difficult road. Cheng

only sells on holidays and weekends, because she says there is no point in working on weekdays when not a lot of people would be out and about in the park. On the 20 times that she has been out, she has only earned an average of HK\$15 each time.

Cheng takes on odd jobs on weekdays but it is still hard to make ends meet. What is more, she had already shelled out HK\$6,000 for her cart and other operational tools.

“I guess I’m lucky that I have a sister I can rely on,” she says, laughing bitterly, “I can sometimes go over to her place for dinner. That saves a meal.”

Although there are more potential customers in other places, there is a reason why Cheng chooses to stay inside the quiet park. She demonstrates this by pushing her cart into a wide road nearby. After just a couple minutes, people start approaching her to buy ice creams.



But after five minutes, a van brakes noisily behind her. Two FEHD officers get out and order Cheng to move away. They say she is obstructing the road and tell her she is supposed to keep on moving as she sells her wares.

As there is plenty of room for pedestrians to move without having to passing close to the ice cream cart, Cheng asks one of the officers why he considers the cart to be an obstruction.

At this point, the officer walks right up to the cart and raises his voice. “Can I walk straight through without bumping into it? I have to walk around it, so why would this not be an obstruction?”

A passer-by sniggers when he hears the conversation. “The cart is not blocking us at all,” he says to Cheng. “If the officer puts it that way, then it would block the street anywhere.”

Fearing further trouble, Cheng hurriedly pushes her cart back to the



park where she would not be scolded or charged by the officers.

"It is pointless to argue with them," she says. "it's a waste of time, you can't sell anything and then, a couple of minutes later, the next team of people will come again to order you away."

But Cheng is only too aware that it is much harder to do business in the park. Most of the people who walk through or use the park are local residents who know there are convenience stores nearby where the ice cream is sold at a cheaper price.

In response to this case, an FEHD senior health inspector Edwin K.H. Lee says his department does not have an evaluation system to assess how frontline officers make their judgements. "When an officer evicts a hawker, he takes on a legal responsibility too. If the court deems him wrong, then he faces charges as well."

There appear to be different interpretations of what "itinerant" means. Lee says it refers to a moveable business as opposed to a fixed stall, which means the vendor could be in one location one day, and another on the next.



MELANIE LEUNG

Chu Chung-wah shows his licence to *Varsity* reporters.

But another senior hawker control officer, Wong Tin-chi says hawkers had to be moving with their carts unless someone was buying something from them. He says this definition of "itinerant" has been implemented since the 1970.

"Hawkers had to move around back then as well, and they had to carry their goods on their backs," says Wong. "It should be more convenient for hawkers nowadays because they have carts to push."

However, Cheung Chee-hung, chairman of the Dairy Products, Beverage and Food Industries Employees Union, has a different definition for "itinerant". He says that as long as a cart has wheels, it is itinerant. Cheung says there is a serious inconsistency in how the government defines the terms.

He uses the government's mobile libraries as an example. "Who has ever seen a mobile library that moves all the time, and stops only when people want to go in?" Cheung says the FEHD is open to meeting the union and ice-cream hawkers. He adds that instead of delaying tackling the problems, the government needs to solve them as soon as possible. He urges government departments to improve the efficiency of their communication so frontline officers can make well-informed and standardised decisions.

In addition to the grey area over how "itinerant" should be defined, some wonder whether frontline officers' autonomy to make on-the-spot decisions is actually achieved at the expense of the hawkers.

Panda Szeto Tsz-chung, a 23-year-old hawker who sells ice cream in Central, believes the government makes illogical demands and he resents having to submit to them. He says he used to have his licence checked up to 10 times a day and was frequently ordered to move.



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Panda Szeto Tsz-chung is the youngest ice-cream hawker in Hong Kong.

"People won't know you are selling ice cream if you are moving around. They think you have already packed up and are no longer selling." Szeto insists on selling ice cream even when it rains. "People have to know that you're always here at this particular spot, always with ice cream to sell."

Szeto, the youngest ice cream hawker in Hong Kong, says the enforced mobility affects his business badly. He can only make about HK\$100 a day, which is half the amount he would otherwise make.

Finding the situation untenable, Szeto actively discussed the issue with the FEHD as well as different media. He says there have been significant improvements because the checks have become less frequent.

He hopes the situation will continue to improve, not just for himself but other hawkers as well. "I believe in self-discipline. We have our industry rules, and everyone abides by them," he says. Therefore, he thinks the government does not need to impose such stringent rules.

As difficult as the life of an ice-cream hawker is, it does have its returns. Szeto, who graduated with

an accounting degree, says he is only earning HK\$1,000 a month, less than a 10th of what he has earned working in jobs as varied as selling insurance and table-waiting, but he believes money and titles are not as important as trying out the things life offers.

"Sometimes it takes courage. But you know you just have to try it, or you will regret it." More importantly, Szeto is glad that he is now an important part of Hong Kong history as well as the collective memory of all local people.

Chu Chung-wah, aged 53, is another hawker who finds much joy in his new business. He used to have a stall in a wet market until the rent became too expensive.

Chu says he has also encountered a lot of trouble from officials, but things have begun to look up. He now parks his ice cream motorcycle outside a school in Ho Man Tin. He makes up to HK\$7,000 a month, more than what he earned before.

He explains the licence fee for selling ice cream costs around HK\$2,000 a year. As the first-year

licence fee is waived, profits are made more easily. "I was so happy when I found out I received a licence. It was better than winning the Mark Six," he recalls.

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By May last year, the FEHD had received up to 3,634 applications for the 61 licences they intended to reissue. The competition was extremely fierce. Therefore, a computer ballot was held and interviews were arranged to select the most suitable candidates.

Chu finds his job satisfying because he also loves befriending the teachers and students of nearby schools. "I am the only full time hawker, others are all part-timers, and some even dropped out of the business due to fear."

Chu says he has to reserve some cones for teachers, who stop by each

day. And when the students return to school from lunch, they crowd around him, talking to him and buying candies and ice cream from him. "The kids are very excited every time they see me," Chu says.

Chu claims the ice cream cones sold by ice cream hawkers are tastier than shop-bought versions. "It is because we use dry ice, which is much colder and drier than the normal ice. The cones you buy here are much crunchier," he says. There is a lot to learn if you are to survive in the business - but much also depends on luck as well as experience from trial and error. For this reason, the Dairy Products, Beverage and Food Industries Employees Union offers a 40-hour training session to assist rookie ice-cream hawkers.

The course teaches them general courtesy, basic hygiene and practical knowledge. It also gives hawkers a chance to get together to exchange information about popular confectionaries and hot sales spots.

With support from the union and meetings slated between the government and the hawkers, things just might be looking up for Hong Kong's newest hawkers. As more people become aware of this revived business, they are looking forward to a long, hot summer. **V**

