

THE ABANDONED

Photos and text by Nia Tam Kwai Ting and Melanie Leung

The Homeless

It was Mid-Autumn Festival. The bright moon shone upon family members who dined together joyfully.

But under the flyover near the Yau Ma Tei Wholesale Fruit Market, street sleepers found that same moonlight a nuisance as they tried to sleep on the bumpy cement floor. They groaned as cars sped over the flyover on this especially busy night.

For those who care to look, the homeless are everywhere. They sleep underneath highways, in parks or on the sides of desolate streets. Planks and worn-out mattresses make up the small shelters which people rarely notice. As the city goes about its business, lost in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, the neglected are struggling to survive.

Wing, not his real name, has been in and out of jail six times since 2006, mainly for drugs-related offences and stealing. When he has not been in prison, he has been living on the streets. The 32-year-old has been sleeping rough since he was released recently. He is now fed by the Street Sleepers Action Committee (SSAC), a charity organisation which provides meals to homeless people in Mongkok. "I was so bad that my family does not care about me anymore," he says.

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A few years ago his family disowned him because of his drug problems. He finally gave up relying on them and they have not tried to find him. Asked if he wants to lead a normal life, he shrugs his shoulders. "I don't know. If I come across my friends who are high, I might join them."

The government once lined him up with a job but he quit two days later. "I just didn't feel like doing it," he says. Now he spends his days wandering around and killing time in arcade games centres.

Sitting at the canteen of the SSAC, he slurps down a bowl of soup, down to the very last drop. This is where he fills his stomach twice a day. The committee provides lunch and dinner for homeless people. It also has regular outreach programmes and approaches street sleepers under the flyovers, in the parks or on the streets. The SSAC invites them to come over for daily necessities.

"If you think over it carefully," Cho Tak-Suet, the chairperson of the SSAC says, "The resources are sufficient in this community. What these people lack are care, concern and platforms for sharing."

This is what the group tries to give to the homeless. Many of its volunteers are former street sleepers who have been encouraged to reinvent themselves. Cho says that seeing their changes is the greatest reward.

露宿者行動委員會
Street Sleepers Action Committee
(政府註冊非牟利慈善團體)
味蘭街69-71號二樓
：下午三時至晚上七時(公眾假期除外)

露宿者行動委員會

The Home-alone Elderly

Eight years ago, she slipped on the stairs. The accident left her legs deformed. Even on a crutch, she can hardly walk, let alone cook or take a shower.

Two years ago, her eldest son died because of illnesses. Last year, her husband passed away.

Now 83-year-old Cheung Ling is left with three sons but they do not visit her or give her any money. Sometimes her daughter-in-law comes over and buys her food. However, her sons have not called for months and sometimes they even hang up when she calls. Asked if she misses her sons, she becomes red-eyed, bows her head and says, "Of course I miss them. But would they ever know?"

"I am just so lonely."

Alone in her flat in Choi Wan, it takes her 45 minutes to hobble to the nearest market, a journey that took her 10 minutes before the accident. Without any other choices, she has applied to live in an elderly centre. Cheung says she has asked for assistance from social workers, but somehow help never came. "They said I have to wait," she says.

Cheung does not want to be alone all the time. To feel safe, she wears a social alarm bell to bed every night.

What she wants most of all is a family life. "Please stay and chat with me," she keeps repeating, "I am just so lonely."



Cheung holds her social alarm bell tight.



She peeps through the gate.



保護遺棄動物協會有限公司
Society for Abandoned Animals Limited
愛是不殺不棄

The Animal

It was a scorching summer day with the temperature topping 30 degrees celsius. A canvas bag sat outside the gates of the Society for Abandoned Animals (SAA) in Yuen Long.

It took some time for the staff to spot it but by then it was too late. Inside the zipped bag there were over 20 puppies, piled up on one another. Despite all their best efforts, the staff only managed to save three dogs.



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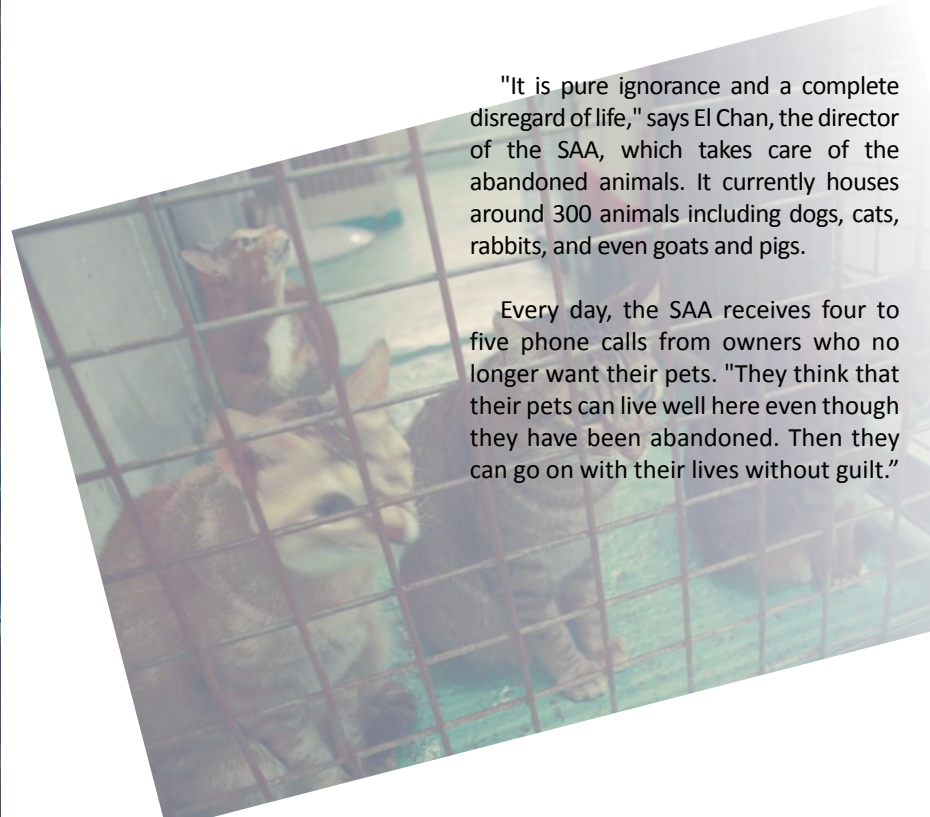
"It is pure ignorance and a complete disregard of life," says El Chan, the director of the SAA, which takes care of the abandoned animals. It currently houses around 300 animals including dogs, cats, rabbits, and even goats and pigs.

Every day, the SAA receives four to five phone calls from owners who no longer want their pets. "They think that their pets can live well here even though they have been abandoned. Then they can go on with their lives without guilt."

However, the SAA has already reached its maximum capacity, and can only suggest alternatives. For example, if the owners are emigrating, the association suggests they ship their pets over once they have settled down.

Pets are always considered as inferior. "These people used to call their pet 'baby'. But after they have their own baby, the poor animals are abandoned," Chan says.

She says animals are just like people. They feel depressed. Some cats actually die of stress when their hosts move. Being abandoned can make an even larger impact on the animal. "Animals are different. They can neither speak nor fight back."



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A Positive Story

Unlike most elderly scavengers, Chan Siu-man does not collect cardboard for money. Instead, the septuagenarian says she wants to contribute to society by collecting rubbish. She donates what she earns.

Arriving from Guangzhou four years ago, Chan says she is happy with the help of voluntary workers and the government. "In Guangzhou, I could count on nothing," she says. Her life was hard in mainland China, her family suffered political persecution. Her father was killed and her husband abandoned her.

"Hong Kong is a city of freedom and love. I have found what I need," she says. ▼

