

Temple Street Fortunes

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It is dusk on a weekday in Yau Ma Tei. The aroma of rice cooking in claypots and frying oyster cakes fill the air outside the Tin Hau Temple. Fortune tellers cluster under canvas canopies reading the palms and faces of foreign tourists. Hawkers hurriedly take out their goods from cardboard boxes as the street is already crowded with people.

Temple Street, also known as Men's Street, is a Hong Kong landmark, a flea market that opens after 2 p.m. every day. The street is closed to traffic till midnight. Hundred of stalls lit with colourful lights sell inexpensive products. There are clothes, pens, watches, electronic gadgets, CDs, videos of 1950's porn, reproduction antique products such as jade pieces and mahjong sets, and much more besides.

A new, Chinese-style archway at the Jordan end of the street, costing around HK\$3 million was unveiled by the Yau Tsim Mong District Council at the end of last year. Within the archway area, they renovated Temple Street by resurfacing the road, building new road signs and adding coloured ribbons and spotlights to attract more tourists. Since then, the street has been divided into two parts – one is inside the archway with licensed hawkers. The other, which looks messier and more dimly lit, is outside.

Ms Chan is one of the hawkers working inside the archway area. She appreciates the face-lift of the street but says there is still room for improvement. "I told my friends about the new grand archway and all of my friends looked so surprised. I have to point it out to them otherwise none of them would find it!"

Since the economic downturn, Ms Chan thinks it is getting harder to make a living. She says she was the first vendor to sell Chinese handicrafts in Temple Street 10 years ago, but now there are more stalls selling similar products. "See! Now I can't even afford to repair my roof." She points at the corroded roof with a bitter smile.

Chan Chain-Ha, who works inside the archway area, has been selling copper zodiac animals and Buddha figurines for five years. She also faces stiff competition as the number of foreign tourists has shrunk. Unlike Ms Chan, she is not so positive about the reconstruction. "It is useless that the archway was built but no promotion has been made."



The problem for business both inside and outside the archway seems to be something the face-lift cannot fix. Chan Kwok-loi, who sells antique jade products and flasks on a corner stall outside the archway, says most mainland tourists do not bother to buy at Temple Street while foreigners purchase similar products in the mainland.

"I tried to change by adding other goods from time to time in order to attract more visitors," Chan Kwok-loi says and points at the hot water bottles next to the jades that he mainly sells.

A few steps away from Chan's stall, visitors will hear the sound of cheerful singing. "Hey girls, come here and sing!" a plump middle-aged woman shouts. Former cabaret singer Ho-ho, as she likes to be called, is the owner of one of the "singing bars" in front of the fortune telling stalls.

This might be the simplest karaoke bar in Hong Kong. Under a crude canopy, there are just a few tables and chairs, an electric keyboard and a music stand. But the customers were clearly having fun. Here, customers can sing their favorite oldies and drink beer on the roadside for \$20 each. "What we wanted is to entertain others and ourselves," Ho-ho says with a welcoming smile while pulling out a stool for her customer.



"I hope singing here can help them relax."



Ho-ho thinks these old singing bars are one of the unique features of Temple Street. She loves the sharing of life and bonding with her customers. "We share a very close relationship. Whenever it rains, my phone will be ringing non-stop as people keep asking me if my bar will open or not," she says proudly.

When tourists take photographs of her stall, Ho-ho smiles brightly and waves at them. She also gives a big hug to every customer when they leave. Most of Ho-ho's customers work during the day and come at night. She welcomes people from all walks of life at her bar. "I hope singing here can help them relax."



"Hey girls, come here and sing!"





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On the day of *Varsity's* visit, two people were singing excitedly and waving their hands. Next to them sat people drinking beer and chatting with each other. Everyone was happily enjoying the show. "I have been singing in Temple Street for a long time. I have made a lot of friends here," says 66-year-old regular Leung Wai-chuen.

The colourful life of Temple Street, with its mixture of commerce, tradition and leisure has made it an interesting object of study in Hong Kong. Paul Fok Wai-bong, the founder of Temple Street Concern Group, is one of the enthusiasts.

Fok says the construction of the archway seems to have divided the street and diluted its "Hong Kong style". "The hawkers outside the memorial archway area feel like they are illegitimate children. They feel disrespected," he says. Apart from suffering the poor lighting, and the random, disorderly layout of booths, hawkers outside the archway are regarded as illegal hawkers.

However, the government's attitude towards unlicensed hawkers in the area has been tolerant up till now and Ip Ngo Tung, one of the councilors of Yau Tsim Mong District Council, does not think the issue causes much conflict.

Rather, Ip says, the noise and hygiene problems outside the archway are a concern as they sometimes get complaints from residents nearby. The important point is to balance the interests of the tourists and residents. "Foreigners like to eat in the middle of the street so much!" Ip says.

According to Ip, the car park which is located between the two parts of Temple Street will be removed. It is proposed that the stalls outside the archway area will be moved next to the archway area so Temple Street will not be separated. Whether or not Temple Street is "made whole" again, there is something here that can never be replaced. "At Temple Street we can experience a good sense of neighborhood and typical Hong Kong style," Ip says.

No one knows if Temple Street can preserve its tradition and spirit or just become another retail street full of cheap reproduction handicrafts. However, some believe Temple Street will stand forever. As Chan Kwok-loi says, "It is valuable. It is a tradition. It is very important." ▼