

Farewell to a street of life

Out of the Box

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LIKE MANY RESIDENTS and visitors, I felt surprised and sad when I read the news that the street performances at Sai Yeung Choi Street in Mong Kok will not be allowed anymore.

In the past whenever I visited Hong Kong, either for business or family matters, I would try my best to include a visit to Mong Kok and Yau Ma Tei for a dose of nostalgia and refamiliarization with the “real” Hong Kong. I’d visit Temple Street, Fa Yuen Street and “Women’s Street” to shop and watch.

Since joining HKUST in 2009, I discovered the street performances at Sai Yeung Choi Street South.

I’d often visit myself, but I’d especially take overseas visitors to see the real Hong Kong.

When the performances were restricted to weekends, it did not bother me much because that’s when I visited mostly.

But this latest development feels like a real loss for me personally.

What I enjoyed most about the street was the variety of performances and talents on display.

There was singing by soloists and bands, who played oldies (I wish I could play my guitar with them) and pop songs. There were also dancers and acrobats.

There were bands formed by local university students, including one from HKUST, as I recall.

One act that I enjoyed very much was a young man performing tricks with a soccer ball – as good as any I have seen on YouTube.

There were other activities besides performances, including political groups espousing their views. These were always civilized, and there was no hard sell.

To me they add to the spirit of Hong Kong, one of openness, inclusiveness and civility.

But in recent years I saw a change. There were more singing groups, and more unfamiliar songs sung in Putonghua. The sound volume seemed to have increased, perhaps due to increased competition.

I haven’t seen the soccer acrobat on recent visits – was he crowded out or has he simply moved on?

I accepted all that as a reflection of the changes in our society.

But I can also see that the increased noise volume, and perhaps the increased foot traffic, would adversely affect local residents. Apparently, it is due to their



complaints that the government decided to close down the performances completely.

There were also reports of unofficial groups who “control” who gets to perform and where, as the monetary return from performances turns into a turf war.

I just wonder though, whether there would have been a way to tackle these issues without resorting to the nuclear option of banning the whole thing altogether (which reminds me of the Cantonese saying: “Cut off the toes to avoid the sand worms”).

Perhaps regulate the volume, and the hours when they would be allowed, a better system to regulate who gets to perform?

Even if the performers moved to another location, the same regulatory challenges would remain.

I give our government the benefit of the doubt that they must have considered all these options, but it still feels like it’s a pity to have to come to this.

Many city governments around the world would love to have a vibrant venue like Mong Kok and many have found ways to compromise.

I speak from personal experience from having lived in Los Angeles and watched the street life spot moved from Westwood Village (outside the UCLA campus) to the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica.

One reason for that, I surmised, was that Santa Monica closes several blocks to vehicle traffic and allows performances, whereas Westwood didn’t.

These performances bring in visitors, and they in turn bring in shops, retailers and restaurants. It is now a must-visit spot in all of Los Angeles.

Santa Monica is thriving while Westwood is in the distant memory. A lesson for Mong Kok?

Mong Kok street performances were a part of Hong Kong culture. Culture grows organically and cannot be legislated. And culture usually takes time to form but can be taken down quickly and inadvertently.

This is my worry.