

Rock Bottom

With the number of homeless people rising since the onset of the recession, **Winnie Yeung** says it's time for more than pocket change.



Home sweet home: Homeless people catch some shut-eye in front of the Cultural Centre to prepare for their uncertain future ahead. (Photo credit: Lei Jih-sheng, from "Homeless," a pictorial book depicting the lives of homeless people in Hong Kong, published by the Society for Community Organization.)

It's a cold midnight outside the Cultural Centre in Tsim Sha Tsui and workers are busy preparing decorations for the Chinese New Year festivities. While the rest of the city anticipates hotpot feasts with families and friends, 30-year-old Man finds an outdoor pillar, lays some newspaper on the ground, and sits down to write in his diary before catching some sleep. His five "neighbors," covered in newspaper or paper boxes or both, have already closed their eyes and appear to be asleep. It's an average night at one of the favorite homeless spots in the city.

In a city as prosperous as Hong Kong, one tends to ignore homelessness or brush it off as something that only happens to demented people—senile bag ladies, for instance. But cases like Man's prove otherwise. He is one of more than 800 homeless people in Hong Kong, and one who lost his home during the financial meltdown last year. These people, both young and old, employed and unemployed, have found themselves without shelter, searching for the least windy spots around town every night just to get some shut-eye. Many pick the Cultural Centre, others the nearby Kowloon Park, and some underneath the flyovers in Kowloon.

The Society for Community Organization's community organizer, Ng Wai-tung, who has been helping homeless people for years, says he expects the number to exceed 1,000 this year as unemployment rises. Many who used to work in construction in Macau or factories in China have found themselves back in Hong Kong, unemployed, penniless and homeless.

Man's case is a little different. He did not lose his fortune in minibonds or get laid off amid the recession. Rather, he was declared broke after his friend of 20 years—who asked him to be his guarantor for a \$1 million loan—fled when he lost it all on the stock market last year. Man's \$600,000 flat in the New Territories was taken away from him. Although he makes \$9,000 in a pharmaceutical plant, all the money has gone to repay the debt. He has not flown to Shanghai, where his wife and parents live, for more than a year. "I don't know when I can see them, or when I can find shelter again," he says.

As it turns out, many homeless people have jobs but simply cannot afford Hong Kong's high rents, where space in even a dilapidated cage home currently costs \$1,500 per month. Unionist legislator Wong Kwok-hing, who visited the homeless people at the Cultural Centre with Secretary for Labor and Welfare Matthew Cheung late last year, said cases like Man's are only the tip of the iceberg. "We have seen a shift in homeless demographics from people in hard labor, to those who used to have decent jobs in Hong Kong but got hit hard by the recession. Take the case of former managers of factories on the mainland. Without American contracts the factories closed down, and they ended up back in Hong Kong with no place to live but the street."

At the same time, according to the Social Services Department, the number of registered homeless people actually dropped from 463 in 2004 to 349 in November last year. Ng says that this is because if one would like to register as a homeless person—in order to apply for a bed in a homeless shelter and other assistance—one has to request a social worker's help by filling in a four-page, English-only form, which asks for information such as why the applicant has chosen to live on the streets (one option is "more convenient for daily life/work"), and for the applicant's "detailed address." According to Ng, less than half the homeless people are willing to fill in the form. The Social Services Department did not respond to our questions on the matter by press time.

Many homeless people, especially those who became homeless because of the recession, resent help in the first place, let alone the thought of asking a stranger to fill in an English-language form for them. During a visit with Ng outside the Cultural Centre, our offers of help were flatly refused. Both Wong and Ng believe that many do not even want to be labeled as homeless. "They don't want to live in shelters for homeless people. They want to keep their dignity in life and want to make an effort to help themselves instead of getting help from others," says Wong. "I think this self-reliant attitude is appreciated by society, but it's not like they do not need help."

Ho, 51, used to own a logistics company in China with doz-

ens of mainland factory clients. But once the financial meltdown hit the US and the factories lost all their American orders, they collapsed. He is now in debt for \$500,000. He used to have two flats in China, but he soon found himself homeless, until his family lent him \$5,600 to pay a month's rent on a 100-square-foot flat for both him and his 8-year-old son. "I can't see where my life will go; and I feel so low when applying for assistance for my son and asking people for money," he says.

Wong believes that in order to help people like Man and Ho, the government should consider subsidizing non-governmental organizations to provide cheap flats to homeless people at a rate of around \$430 per month. In 2005, the government started one such program in Tuen Mun, but it closed it down last month after a poor reception. "Most people still have jobs and Tuen Mun's too far for them," Wong says. "Clearly the government has to find a better way to do it; they should consider old buildings. This is going to be a lot more urgent after Chinese New Year when we expect more lay-offs."

And it's not just about monetary help or simply providing a shelter. Currently there are four non-governmental organizations with four teams of social workers reaching out to the homeless. Ng's team has weekly visits to the Cultural Centre, and it has a fund to help the homeless acquire work qualifications. They also provide the homeless with donated phones, so they can at least have a mobile number for employment.

But Wong emphasizes that this is not enough, and that the homeless should also be equipped with more psychological support. "Right now the services we provide are still labeled 'for the homeless,'" he says. "We need to provide them with the support to make them feel they are not being abandoned by society. If you feel you are at rock bottom long enough, you end up never trying to get back up." ■

To register as homeless and apply for assistance, one has to fill in a four-page, English-only form.