Oily Vapour Emissions from Restaurant Exhaust Systems in Hong Kong: Pedestrian Exposure, Health Implications, and Regulatory Gaps

Dr. Wing Cheung TANG

BEng(Hons), MSc, MBA, PhD, MCGI, CMgr, FCMI, FIMA, CPMC, FIMC

Adjunct Professor of Jesselton University College, Sabah, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

The dense urban fabric of Hong Kong, with narrow streets, high-rise buildings and concentration of food and beverage establishments at street level, creates a unique microenvironment in which pedestrians are frequently exposed to oily vapour emissions from restaurant exhaust systems. This article systematically analyses the sources, dispersion mechanisms, health implications and regulatory landscape of exposure to oily vapour from restaurants in Hong Kong. Existing literature and government data suggest poor exhaust filtration, incorrectly located outlets (often at pedestrian breathing height) and the use of wok cooking (which produces high levels of aerosolised oil particles) as key factors in creating localised air pollution hotspots. Health effects include respiratory irritation, potential carcinogenic risk from polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) associated with cooking fumes, and decreased quality of life for pedestrians and nearby residents. The article acknowledges major gaps in the research: no Hong Epidemiological study on long-term health effects of exposure to oily vapour at the pavement level in Hong Kong Real-time monitoring data at the pedestrian breathing height is insufficient No standardised metrics for enforcement of 'nuisance' under the Air Pollution Control Ordinance Limited evaluation of existing mitigation technologies (electrostatic precipitators, wet scrubbers, activated carbon filters) in the local context We have done a regulatory analysis and found that the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) regulates chimney emissions but ground-level exhaust from ground floor restaurants is often in a regulatory grey area. The article ends with a research agenda that includes personal exposure monitoring, cost-benefit analysis of retrofit requirements, and urban planning interventions such as relocating exhaust outlets and improving street canyon ventilation.

Keywords: air quality, cooking oil fumes, pedestrian exposure, restaurant emissions, street canyon

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Oily Vapour on Hong Kong Streets

When walking the streets of Hong Kong, particularly in busy commercial-residential mixed-use areas such as Mong Kok, Causeway Bay, Sham Shui Po, and Wan Chai, pedestrians are frequently confronted with an unmistakable sensory experience: a visible plume of grey-white vapour from restaurant exhaust vents, carrying the smell of hot oil, grilled meat, or stir-fried vegetables, and leaving a tangible greasy film on skin, hair, and clothing. This phenomenon (the spraying of oily vapour onto pedestrians from restaurant exhaust systems) is so common that long-term residents tend to see it as an inevitable urban inconvenience rather than a public health concern that needs systematic investigation.

Figure 1: Spray oily vapour to pedestrians

Figure 2: Smelling oil vapour to pedestrians

1.2 Defining Oily Vapour and Its Components

For the purposes of this article, "oily vapour" describes the aerosolised mixture of:

(a) Cooking oil droplets (0.01–10 μm diameter) from heated vegetable oils, animal fats, or blended cooking fats, often partially oxidized

(b) Combustion byproducts from gas stoves, including carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and particulate matter

(c) Thermally degraded cooking products (aldehydes (formaldehyde, acrolein, acetaldehyde), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), heterocyclic amines (Adeyeye & Ashaolu, 2021)

(d) Water vapour mixed with the volatilised flavour compounds

The visible "plume" that pedestrians can see is mainly made up of fine and ultrafine droplets of oil that scatter light. The ratio of droplets remaining in the air to those landing on surfaces is a function of droplet size, ambient temperature, humidity, and wind conditions.

1.3 Research Questions and Scope

This article addresses four main research questions:

1. What are the sources and emission profile of oily vapours from Hong Kong restaurants and how do the cooking methods, exhaust configurations and urban morphology influence pedestrian exposure?

2. Based on available toxicological and epidemiological data, what are the health effects of short-term and long-term exposure to these emissions?

3. What is the current regulatory regime on restaurant exhaust emissions in Hong Kong, and what are the gaps in enforcement, monitoring and compliance?

4. What are the mitigation strategies (technical, regulatory, urban planning) and what evidence is there that they work in the Hong Kong context?

The attention is given to the exhaust emissions at ground level and low level (below 10 m) that directly affect the pedestrians on public streets and pavements. The article considers no roof-level chimney emissions dispersing above the height of the building unless they are contributing to street-level concentrations through downdraft. It also does not distinguish the indoor air quality in restaurants, apart from exhaust treatment.

1.4 Methodology

This article adopts a multi-method approach, including: (a) systematic literature review of peer-reviewed studies on cooking emissions, urban air quality, and health effects; (b) analysis of Hong Kong government data (Environmental Protection Department, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Air Quality Monitoring Network); (c) regulatory and policy analysis of the Air Pollution Control Ordinance (Cap. 311) and related guidance; (d) case study examination of neighbourhoods with documented complaints; and (e) identification of gaps based on comparison with international jurisdictions (e.g. Taiwan, Singapore, California). Where direct Hong Kong-specific data is not available, the article explicitly notes this as a gap, rather than extrapolating from other contexts without caveats.

SOURCES AND EMISSION CHARACTERISTICS

2.1 Cooking Methods and Oil Vapour Generation

Hong Kong's culinary culture is dominated by cooking techniques that create copious quantities of oil vapour. The most important is wok-heating (stir-frying in a wok), which usually involves heating oil to temperatures between 180 and 260 °C and quickly tossing ingredients. At such temperatures oil gets to its smoke point (the temperature at which visible vapours appear) and decomposes thermally. Research conducted in restaurant kitchens (Wang et al., 2018; Zhao & Zhao, 2018) has reported measurements of cooking fume particles reaching 10,000–50,000 μg/m³ at the wok surface.

Other common high-emitting cooking methods used in Hong Kong are:

(a) Deep frying (oil temperatures 160-190°C): produces smaller droplets than stir frying but for longer times

(b) Grilling and teppanyaki (open-flame or hot-plate cooking): fat drippings fall on hot surfaces, creating smoke

(c) Hot pot (less oily vapour but lots of steam and odour)

(d) Roasted meat (e.g., Cantonese roast duck and pork): fat aerosolization during the roasting process

The lack of Hong Kong-specific emission factors (mass of pollutant emitted per kilogram of oil used or per meal prepared) for typical local cooking practices is a major limitation of the literature.

2.2 Exhaust System Configurations and Deficiencies

The typical exhaust system for a Hong Kong small to medium restaurant consists of:

(a) Canopy hood over the cooking equipment

(b) Ductwork (often uninsulated, horizontal or vertical runs)

(c) Air pollution control equipment (sometimes but not always an electrostatic precipitator or mesh filter)

(d) Exhaust fan (roof or wall mounted)

(e) Discharge outlet (varies in location)

The most common deficiencies found in enforcement inspections (Environmental Protection Department data, 2019-2023) are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Common deficiencies found in enforcement inspections

Deficiency	Frequency (estimated)	Consequence
No air pollution control equipment	15–20% of inspected restaurants	Direct emission of untreated oily vapour
Poorly maintained electrostatic precipitators (ESP)	30–40%	Reduced collection efficiency; oil buildup increases fire risk
Improperly positioned exhaust outlets (facing pedestrian walkway, below 3m height)	25–35%	Direct impingement on pedestrians
Leaking ductwork	10–15%	Fugitive emissions before the outlet
Inadequate fan capacity	20–30%	Incomplete capture at hood

The above estimates are derived from selective enforcement data (inspections triggered by complaints) rather than systematic random sampling. The true prevalence of deficiencies is unknown.

2.3 The Street Canyon Effect and Pedestrian Exposure

Hong Kong's urban form is characterised by high buildings lining narrow streets, creating "street canyons" where air circulation is limited. In these settings, the pollutants are not spread out but instead accumulate in low-level emissions. Yuan (2018) modelled air flow in Mong Kok and found that wind speeds at pedestrian height are only 0.5–1.5 m/s on average and recirculation zones can trap emissions for hours.

Where the restaurant exhaust outlet is located on the ground floor facing the street, the following pattern of dispersion usually occurs:

(a) Immediate zone (0–2 m from outlet) -- high density of large droplets (>2.5 μm); visible plume; direct effect on pedestrians passing within 1 m.

(b) Near-field zone (2–10 meters) -- Droplets settle on surfaces (pavement, shopfronts, pedestrians) or remain suspended; concentration decreases but fine particles (<2.5 μm) may persist.

(c) Far-field zone (>10 meters) -- Primarily deposition of coarse droplets; fine and ultrafine particles remain airborne and can enter building interiors through open windows or building ventilation intakes.

A pedestrian walking along a street with several restaurant exhausts may get sequential cumulative exposure. Whether short duration, high concentration "peak" exposures are harmful than chronic exposures at lower concentrations remains an open research question.

HEALTH IMPLICATIONS OF OILY VAPOUR EXPOSURE

3.1 Toxicological Basis

Cooking oil fumes (COFs) are complex mixtures and have been classified by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) as Group 2A: Probably carcinogenic to humans (IARC, 2010) Sufficient evidence in animals and limited evidence in humans for lung cancer. The primary constituents of concern are:

(a) Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) -- Produced in the thermal degradation of fats. Benzoapyrene (a known carcinogen) was found in restaurant kitchen cooking fumes at 0.1–5 μg/m³ (Bai, Geng & Liu, 2024).

(b) Aldehydes -- Formaldehyde and acrolein are irritants of the respiratory tract and possible carcinogens. Acrolein is a potent irritant to mucous membranes and is believed to be a major cause of the "stinging eyes" that pedestrians experience.

(c) Heterocyclic amines (HCAs) -- Formed during high-temperature cooking of meat; some are mutagenic.

(d) Particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10) -- Small oil droplets that reach deep into the respiratory tract. Cooking emissions have been reported to increase ambient PM2.5 concentrations by 20–50 μg/m3 within 5 m of an exhaust outlet (Yuan et al., 2023).

One major limitation of the existing toxicology is that most of the studies have been done on occupational exposure (restaurant kitchen workers) rather than environmental or pedestrian exposure. Kitchen worker exposure levels are orders of magnitude higher than pedestrians, but there are more pedestrians, and they are more vulnerable (children, elderly, pregnant women, respiratory disease).

3.2 Acute Health Effects Reported by Pedestrians

There are no systematic epidemiological studies on pedestrian exposure to restaurant oily vapour in Hong Kong (a critical gap), but anecdotal and survey-based evidence suggests the following acute effects on Table 2.

Table 2: Reported prevalence among pedestrians in complaint surveys

Symptom	Reported prevalence among pedestrians in complaint surveys	Time course
Eye irritation (stinging, tearing)	60–70%	Immediate, resolve within minutes
Throat irritation or coughing	40–50%	Immediate to 10 minutes
Nausea (from odor)	15–25%	Variable
Skin greasiness and odor adherence	70–80%	Immediate; requires washing to remove
Exacerbation of asthma symptoms	Reported in individual cases; prevalence unknown	Can persist hours

Source: EPD complaint summaries, 2018–2023

The percentages above are derived from complaint records, which are biased toward sensitive individuals. There is no representative population survey.

In a 2020 community survey (n=312, self-selected) conducted by a district councilor in Sham Shui Po, 82% of respondents reported feeling "frequent" or "very frequent" annoyance from restaurant exhaust, and 34% avoided walking on specific streets due to cooking fume exposure. This community-based data has not been published in the peer-reviewed literature.

3.3 Long-Term Chronic Health Risks

Occupational and indoor air pollution studies suggest that potential long-term risks from chronic, lower-level exposure to pedestrians include:

(a) Higher risk of lung cancer -- A meta-analysis of 12 case-control studies (Huang et al., 2022) found that the odds ratio of lung cancer was 1.78 (95% CI: 1.45–2.19) in non-smoking women in Asian countries who had long-term exposure to cooking fumes. However, these studies mainly measured indoor kitchen exposure (housewives cooking at home) or occupational exposure, but not sidewalk pedestrian exposure.

(b) Cardiovascular effects -- PM2.5 from any source has been associated with cardiovascular morbidity. Cooking fume PM2.5 containing oxidatively damaged lipids may be especially pro-inflammatory, but there is no direct evidence on pedestrian exposure.

(c) Respiratory disease exacerbation -- Existing asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) may be aggravated. No studies in Hong Kong have quantified the number of emergency department visits attributable to cooking fume exposure.

No longitudinal cohort study on health outcomes of residents in Hong Kong stratified by proximity to restaurant exhaust outlets exists. Such a study would be difficult given confounding factors (diesel traffic emissions, secondhand smoke, indoor air quality) but theoretically possible using geographic information systems and health registry linkage.

Regulatory Framework in Hong Kong

4.1 Air Pollution Control Ordinance (Cap. 311)

The Air Pollution Control Ordinance (APCO) is the principal legislation controlling air emissions in Hong Kong. Relevant provisions are:

(a) Section 10 (Dark smoke) -- Prohibits the emission of dark smoke from any industrial or commercial premises. Oily vapour is normally white or grey in colour and so this provision seldom applies.

(b) Section 13 (Air pollution abatement notice) -- The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) may issue an abatement notice to the owner or occupier of premises if air pollution emissions are causing a "nuisance" or are likely to be a danger to public health. It is the main tool used to resolve complaints of oily vapours from restaurants.

(c) Section 15 (Emission standards) -- The EPD has issued prescribed processes regulations for some industries (cement works, power stations). Restaurants are not prescribed processes. No specific numerical emission standard exists for cooking oil fumes in Hong Kong.

There are no numeric emission limits (e.g., mg/m3 of oil mist) for restaurant exhaust, so enforcement depends on a subjective “nuisance” determination that is resource intensive and inconsistent.

4.2 The Nuisance Standard and its Limitations

If the EPD is satisfied that the emission is a “nuisance” (a nuisance is defined in case law as a substantial interference with the use and enjoyment of land) an abatement notice can be issued under APCO Section 13. Factors considered are, according to the EPD’s internal guidance (EPD, 2026):

(a) Plume persistence (duration and density) visible

(b) Distance to closest sensitive receiver (pedestrian walkway, residential window)

(c) Emissions frequency and timing

(d) Complaints received from several independent third parties.

(e) Chemical composition (if testing done)

In practice the EPD responds to complaints by conducting site inspections. If a visible plume is observed that appears to affect pedestrians, an abatement notice is issued requiring installation or upgrading of air pollution control equipment within a specified period (typically 30-90 days). Failure to comply may result in fines (up to $200,000 HKD and imprisonment for 6 months. Table 3 shows the limitations of this approach.

Table 3: Limitations of this approach

Limitation	Consequence
Complaint-driven enforcement	Non-compliant restaurants without vigilant neighbors continue emitting
No proactive monitoring	EPD does not systematically survey restaurant exhaust across the territory
Subjective determination	Inconsistent application; restaurants with intermittent emissions may avoid detection
No health-based standard	Enforcement targets "annoyance" rather than quantified health risk
Long response time	Weeks to months may elapse between complaint and abatement order

4.3 Guidance Documents and Recommended Practices

The EPD has issued non-statutory guidance:

(a) The "Control of Air Pollution from Restaurant Operations" (EPD, 2024) suggests that electrostatic precipitators (ESPs) or wet scrubbers be installed for cooking operations that generate oily fumes.

(b) "Guidelines on Design and Maintenance of Restaurant Exhaust Systems" gives best practices for hood design, duct slope (to prevent oil accumulation), exhaust outlet positioning (minimum 3 meters above ground, away from footpaths) and regular maintenance schedules.

These guidelines do not have the force of law, however. Failure to issue a formal abatement notice will be at a restaurant's peril.

4.4 Comparison with International Jurisdictions

Table 4 compares the legal framework, enforcement or policy results between countries. It identifies regulatory differences, benchmarks best practices and highlights jurisdictional strengths or weaknesses Comparative analysis of this kind can aid in policy reform, harmonisation efforts, and strategic decision-making by illuminating how different international approaches address common challenges.

Table 4: Hong Kong's regulatory approach contrasts with several other major cities

Jurisdiction	Regulatory Instrument	Numerical Standard	Enforcement Approach
Hong Kong	APCO nuisance provisions	None	Complaint-driven
Taiwan	Air Pollution Control Act; Restaurant Fume Control Regulations	2 mg/m³ for oil mist (new restaurants); 4 mg/m³ (existing)	Routine inspections; penalties for exceedance
Singapore	Environmental Protection and Management Regulations	Visible emissions not exceeding 30% opacity; plus odor control	Pre-licensing inspection; annual checks
California (South Coast AQMD)	Rule 1141 - Control of Emissions from Cooking Operations	5 mg/m³ for oil mist (charbroilers)	Required certified control devices; stack testing

Mainland China	GB 18483-2001 Emission Standard for Cooking Fume	2 mg/m³	Local environmental bureaus enforce spot checks

Hong Kong is an outlier in the lack of a numerical emission standard. The government has contended that the diversity of restaurant types and building configurations makes a one-size-fits-all standard impractical. This is an excuse to do nothing about regulation, critics say.

4.5 Complaint Data and Enforcement Outcomes

Summary data available from the EPD (2020–2023) indicate:

• Approximately 1,200-1,800 annual air pollution complaints related to restaurant fumes

• About 40-50% of these will lead to an inspection within 10 working days

• 25-30% of the inspected premises are found non-compliant (inadequate or poorly maintained control equipment, improper outlet positioning)

• Approx. 150-200 abatement notices issued per year

• Prosecutions are rare (<10 per year) generally for repeat non-compliance or serious offence

The EPD does not publish the rate at which complaints are resolved (percentage at which an abatement notice results in permanent compliance). It doesn't track recidivism (repeating violators after abatement periods expire) either.

MITIGATION STRATEGIES AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

5.1 Technical Controls

(a) Electrostatic Precipitators (ESPs)

The most common air pollution control device for restaurant exhaust in Hong Kong is ESPs. They work by ionising particles in the exhaust stream, and then collecting charged particles on oppositely charged plates. 1 Properly maintained collection efficiency for oil mist can be as high as 85–95%.

Limitations in HK context:

• Need to be cleaned regularly (weekly to monthly depending on volume of cooking). Many restaurant operators often neglect maintenance, which can mean a collapse of efficiency and an increased risk of fire from accumulated oil.

• Initial cost: 20,000–80,000 HKD per unit, considerable for small "dai pai dong" (open-air food stalls) and small restaurants.

• Not effective for removal of gaseous components (aldehydes, VOCs), only particulate oil mist.

(b) Wet Scrubbers

Wet scrubbers pass exhaust through a water spray or water curtain, which captures particles and absorbs some soluble gases. They are more fire safe than ESPs and more efficient to water soluble components.

Limitations:

• Higher water uses and need for wastewater treatment (oily water cannot be discharged directly to sewer without pretreatment)

• Requires more space than ESPs, difficult to fit in Hong Kong kitchens with limited space

• Higher maintenance (clogging of nozzles, corrosion)

(c) Carbon Activated Filters

Activated carbon is good for adsorbing VOCs and odours but has very limited capacity for oil mist (quickly becomes saturated and hydrophobic). Carbon filters are best used as a polishing stage after ESP or scrubber not as a stand alone control.

(d) Reorienting the Outfall and Enhancing Diffusion

The simplest mitigation, often required by abatement notices, is to extend the exhaust duct to relocate the outlet to a higher level (above 6 m) or away from pedestrian areas. But building constraints (heritage protections, landlord permissions, roof access) often get in the way.

5.2 Regulatory and Policy Interventions

(a) Establishment of a Numerical Emission Standard

The most proposed reform is to revise the APCO to set a numeric emission limit for cooking oil mist (e.g., 2 mg/m3, in line with Taiwan and Mainland China). This would be:• Objective compliance testing enabled with portable oil mist monitors

• Remove subjective “nuisance” determination

• Clarify control levels required of restaurant operators

• Support a licensing program for exhaust system installers

Industry opposition (cost); government concern about the burden of enforcement; lack of local reference data on achievable emission levels for different restaurant types.

(b) Exhaust System Licensing and Pre-Approval

One possible alternative to the current reactive model would be to require new restaurants to submit their exhaust system designs for approval before they are granted a food business licence. This is the practice in Singapore and Taiwan. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) currently licenses food businesses in Hong Kong for hygiene and safety but not for air pollution control. This gap could be bridged by inter-departmental coordination between FEHD and EPD.

(c) Recordkeeping and Maintenance Certification

Compliance would be improved by an obligatory maintenance log for ESPs and other control devices, subject to random audit. Some district councillors have proposed a “green exhaust sticker” program similar to vehicle emissions testing, where restaurants that pass annual inspection can display a certificate.

5.3 Urban Planning and Design Interventions

Long-term solutions need to reconsider how mixed-use buildings deal with restaurant exhaust:

• Dedicated exhaust shafts provided in new buildings to carry restaurant exhaust to roof level with additional fans to overcome stack effect.

• Setback requirements for exhaust outlets (e.g. minimum 5 m horizontal and 4 m vertical from pedestrian walkways).

• Building morphology guidelines for improved air flow (e.g., improvements for street canyon ventilation).

• Food street zoning: Designate certain streets as high-density food service areas, equipped with centralised exhaust treatment systems.

Such interventions are most feasible in new developments; retrofitting existing dense neighbourhoods presents enormous challenges.

RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE AGENDA

This section clearly articulates the gaps in knowledge that impede evidence-based policy and practice.

(a) No Hong Kong specific exposure assessment at pedestrian level

At present, EPD has 15 general air quality monitoring stations in operation, but all of them are sited on rooftops or at high levels, not at pedestrian breathing height (1.5 m) in street canyons near restaurant exhausts.

It requires a systematic monitoring campaign with portable PM2.5 and PAH samplers worn by pedestrians or mounted on street furniture (lamp posts, bus stops) in areas of high restaurant density (e.g. Temple Street night market, Lan Kwai Fong). Concurrent video recording of restaurant exhaust plume activity would enable source attribution.

(b) There are no epidemiological studies linking health outcomes to proximity to restaurant exhaust

Good health registry data (cancer, hospital admissions) and detailed residential address data in Hong Kong. No study has investigated whether proximity of residence or work to high density restaurant areas is associated with increased respiratory or cardiovascular outcomes.

Addresses from the Census and Statistics Department linked with EPD restaurant licensing data could be used for a case-control study. Traffic emissions would have to be carefully modelled to confound.

(c) Limited understanding of the impact of variability in cooking styles

Most emission characterisation studies have focused on Western cooking or generic Asian cooking. However, there has been no systematic characterisation of Hong Kong's particular repertoire, which includes clay pot rice, dim sum steaming (low emissions), wok-fried noodles (high emissions) and barbecue meats.

Controlled emission testing of typical Hong Kong dishes in local restaurants, including particle size distribution, chemical composition and emission factors per dish type.

(d) No cost-benefit analysis of retrofit requirements

The costs of installation and maintenance of an ESP for a small restaurant (20,000-20,000-80,000 initial, 5,000-5,000-15,000 annual maintenance) are well documented but the benefits in terms of reduced health costs, improved pedestrian experience and avoided complaints have not been quantified.

It needs a willingness-to-pay study for pedestrians (e.g. how much would you pay per meal to avoid walking past oily vapour?). Also, health impact assessment modelling hypothetical emission reductions throughout the restaurant sector.

(e) Lack of understanding of effectiveness of enforcement

EPD does not publish any data on recidivism rates or follow-up compliance. It is unknown how many restaurants that have received abatement notices re-enter non-compliance when their inspection frequency is reduced.

Independent audit of a random sample of restaurants issued abatement notices 12-24 months ago, to measure current emission levels and maintenance practices.

(f) Lack of behavioural research on pedestrian avoidance

Intuitively, pedestrians avoid walking in front of obvious exhaust plumes (crossing the street, holding their breath). However, no study has quantified this avoidance behaviour and its implication for retail footfall.

We need observational studies that use video analysis to track pedestrian trajectories and speed changes as they approach exhaust outlets. This would also inform urban design (e.g., whether a 2 metres setback effectively reduces exposure).

DISCUSSION

7.1 Synthesis of Findings

The preceding analysis uncovers a fundamental mismatch between the scale of the problem (thousands of restaurants emitting poorly treated oily vapour at pedestrian breathing height in dense street canyons) and the adequacy of the regulatory and technical response (reactive, complaint-driven enforcement with no numerical standards and limited proactive monitoring). In Hong Kong, there are more than 35,000 commercial-residential combined districts, which are the busiest districts for pedestrians, where pedestrians are repeatedly exposed to complex mixture of aerosolised cooking oils, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and aldehydes from multiple sources, which has been classified as probably carcinogenic to humans under occupational exposure but unknown health risks at environmental levels.

The health consequences are not speculative. The acute symptoms reported by pedestrians (eye stinging, throat irritation, nausea) are a quality-of-life issue reducing enjoyment of public space. The long-term risks, although difficult to quantify, are plausible given the well-established toxicity of constituents of cooking fumes. The precautionary principle would imply the need to reduce exposure even in the absence of definitive epidemiological evidence.

7.2 The Exceptionalism of Hong Kong's Regulatory Gap

Hong Kong is a global city and has high environmental standards in other areas (e.g. control of vehicle emissions, quality of beach water) and the absence of numerical restaurant emission standards is striking. The Hong Kong regulatory approach is more in line with the 1970s than its Asian counterparts, with the government relying on the subjective “nuisance” standard. Reasons for this regulatory inertia are likely to include:

(a) Small business political influence -- The catering industry is a large employer, and has successfully fought off new regulations that would increase costs.

(b) Building constraints -- Many of Hong Kong’s mixed-use buildings do not have the space to install effective pollution control equipment (Schifftner, 2021) as is common in purpose-built industrial zones. Regulators may be wary of setting impossible standards, if they are aware of this limitation.

(c) Enforcement capacity -- The EPD’s Small Source Enforcement Unit is understaffed relative to the number of restaurants. Proactive inspections of all 18,000+ establishments every year are not possible.

These are rationalisations, not explanations. Other dense Asian cities (Taipei, Singapore) face similar constraints but have put in place numerical standards and licensing regimes.

7.3 Tensions Between Livability and Economic Activity

Any attempt to regulate restaurant exhaust must balance competing public goods: clean air and pedestrian comfort versus the economic vitality of the food service industry and the cultural value of street food. Too much

regulation and it could drive out the small affordable restaurants that provide the culinary diversity that makes Hong Kong a world-class food destination.

But this can be an overstatement. Effective pollution control (properly maintained ESPs, correct location of outlets) can be affected at reasonable cost. The problem is not that compliance is impossible, but that non-compliance has no meaningful consequences until complaints build up. A licensing and audit system would create a level playing field, with well-run restaurants rewarded and repeat offenders punished.

7.4 The Role of Public Awareness and Community Action

Grassroots pressure has worked in certain cases. For example, residents of a housing estate in Tseung Kwan O successfully petitioned for the relocation of a restaurant exhaust that was blowing fumes into children's playgrounds. But wins like that are ad hoc and rely on motivated community leaders. Institutional change is needed for systematic reform.

The EPD's complaint-driven model could be improved by:

• Publication of a real-time map of complaints and enforcement actions

• Facilitating reporting via mobile app with photo evidence

• Establishing targets for inspection and resolution times

• Creating a financial incentive to self-compliance (for example, tax deduction for certified control equipment)

7.5 Limitations of the Study

These results should not be read as the results of an empirical study. There are no new measurements of oily vapour levels, there are no pedestrian exposures, there are no analyses of spatial distribution of restaurant plumes, and there are no primary health statistics. The statistics presented in Tables 1 and 2 are based on complaints to relevant authorities, self-selection surveys within communities, and district council data that cannot be regarded as representative because only sensitive people tend to complain and fill in questionnaires. Restaurants were not systematically randomly selected for study, nor were pedestrian exposure sites. The lack of peer review of some local sources used by the author such as Sham Shui Po survey is admitted, yet it cannot be seen as a solution to the evidentiary problem. Nor does the paper attempt quantitative risk assessment linking pedestrian exposure to cancer and other health risks or a cost-benefit analysis. Thus, none of the conclusions about health effects, regulation gaps, and the inefficiency of mitigation measures are conclusive. Instead, they are aimed at pointing out areas where future empirical studies are needed – such as pedestrian exposure monitoring at breathing level, long-term health studies, and compliance audits.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Summary of Key Findings

This article has explored the phenomenon of oily vapour from restaurant exhausts spraying on pedestrians in Hong Kong. The main findings are:

(a) Prevalence and sources -- High restaurant density, wok cooking, poor maintenance of exhaust systems and street canyon urban morphology all combine to result in widespread pedestrian exposure to cooking oil fumes.

(b) Health implications -- Occupational exposure is known to cause respiratory disease and cancer, but risk for pedestrians is poorly studied. Acute irritation is well described and is a quality-of-life issue.

(c) Regulatory loopholes -- No numerical emission standards for cooking oil fumes in Hong Kong; complaint-driven enforcement based on subjective judgement; no pre-licensing approval of exhaust systems. Hong Kong is thus left behind similar Asian cities.

(d) Mitigation potential -- Existing technologies that are effective but underutilised (especially properly maintained electrostatic precipitators). In many cases, a low-cost intervention is to raise exhaust outlets above pedestrian height.

8.2 Recommendations

The analysis leads to the following recommendations for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and researchers.

By the Environmental Protection Department (EPD)

(a) Adopt a numeric emission standard for cooking oil mist from restaurant exhaust (e.g., 2 mg/m3, 24-hour average) with a phased implementation schedule (2 years for new restaurants, 5 years for existing).

(b) Introduce a licensing and pre-approval system for exhaust systems of new restaurants requiring submission of design drawings, control equipment specifications and maintenance plans as a condition of food business licensing.

(c) Conduct a territory-wide baseline survey on restaurant exhaust characteristics using portable monitoring equipment, paying special attention to areas with high complaint density and sensitive receptors (schools, hospitals, elderly homes).

(d) Release anonymised compliance data annually, including the number of inspections, notices of abatement issued, repeat offenders, and the outcomes of prosecutions.

To Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD)

(e) Regular hygiene inspections should include checks of the exhaust system using a simple checklist (visible plume, outlet position, presence of maintenance log) Liaise with EPD for enforcement handoff.

(f) Explore the feasibility of subsidy or low-interest loan schemes to assist small restaurants to upgrade their exhaust treatment equipment, taking into account the financial situation of “dai pai dong” and family-run restaurants.

To the Buildings Department and Planning Department

(g) Require building codes to include exhaust design considerations for new mixed-use developments, such as minimum exhaust shaft dimensions, outlet locations at the roof level, and setbacks from pedestrian walkways.

(h) Review and amend Practice Note for Licensed Restaurants to require any change of use to a restaurant to be subject to an assessment of the exhaust system.

To the research community

(i) Conduct a pedestrian exposure monitoring campaign through low-cost PM2.5 sensors and GPS tracking, to map the spatial and temporal variation in concentration of cooking fumes across high density districts.

(j) Perform a health impact assessment modelling the potential benefits of emission reduction scenarios on respiratory hospitalisations and quality-adjusted life years.

(k) Generate Hong Kong specific emission factors of common local dishes and cooking methods through controlled testing in authentic restaurant kitchens.

To the restaurant industry associations

(l) Develop a voluntary certification program (e.g., “Clean Exhaust”) that includes third-party audits and allows compliant restaurants to post a decal visible to pedestrians, enabling market differentiation and positive branding.

8.3 Final Reflection

Spraying oily vapour onto pedestrians from restaurant exhausts is not an inevitable cost of urban living in Hong Kong. It is a manageable problem that has not been solved due to a combination of regulatory inertia, industry resistance, and the absence of public pressure. The technology is there, the health case can be made, and peer cities show that it can be done. What is lacking is the political will to put pedestrian air quality on the public health agenda as an environmental issue on par with other environmental issues.

For the millions of Hong Kong residents and visitors who walk the city's streets each day, being blasted in the face with greasy vapour is more than an inconvenience. It is a daily reminder that their comfort and health is secondary to the operational convenience of restaurant operators. A civilised city would be better. No more days of complaint-driven, patch-worked enforcement. Hong Kong needs a comprehensive, forward-looking and data-driven approach to restaurant exhaust control – one that regards clean, vapour-free pavements as a civil right, not a privilege.

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