

# Securing a Safe City: Labor Conditions of the Residential Security Guards in Hong Kong

Janice Shen<sup>1</sup> and Fernando Montero<sup>#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Columbia University, New York, NY, USA

<sup>#</sup>Advisor

## ABSTRACT

While contemporary ethnographies on “security” focus on abstract notions of safety or the active implementation of security measures, this paper dives into the passive, subconscious structures shaping the labor conditions of residential security guards in Hong Kong. Private security forces have been around since ancient civilization and are so familiar that they have become vastly overlooked in modern society, camouflaging within the social landscape. However, private security forces are everywhere in Hong Kong, crucial to the high levels of safety and convenience of the city’s residents. Security companies display consistent employment practices showing the intrinsic nature of how companies manage their labor in a capitalist economy. This paper depicts how divides between socio-economic groups and security perceptions channel middle-aged or elderly sectors towards residential security guard employment. Additionally, labor management strategies and relationships between residents and security guards further reinforce the structure of dominance, maintaining the status quo while preventing the security guards from unionizing and creating change.

## **Introduction**

Early in the morning, Redhill Peninsula, a residential complex on the south side of Hong Kong Island, is filled with the busy hum of gardeners, cleaners and garbage trucks spilling across the pavement in front of the apartment buildings. Already busy at work, one security guard stands between two residential towers with a clipboard, pen, and paper in hand, noting down the incoming guests and car plates. For 12 hours straight, they must be alert and active, responding to any requests from the higher income residents. Residents expect security guards to have a selfless moral obligation toward them. A couple of years ago, residents asked to store their deliveries at the management office before coming home. Although this space was where the guards keep their food and beverage, the managers agreed. Josh, a security guard at Redhill, jokingly said, “the resident is always right, no matter what.”

For residents, this apartment complex is a haven from Hong Kong’s rush culture: a bit windy as it is surrounded by sea and mountains, but cut off from all other noise and action, giving it a secluded feel. For the guards, Redhill is an uneventful and monotonous place, where they spend their time and energy day after day. Once, when Josh asked a resident when he or she would be returning from vacation, Josh received a warning from the management office for prying into the resident’s privacy. A section of this paper will explore the tensions between the guards and the residents and how these unbalanced relationships simultaneously foster anxiety and disconnect.

The polarized experience of residents and security guards echoes the problem of social marginalization. This marginalization is felt in the labor structure, labor conditions, and the unease when the guards face residents, which then cycles back into reinforcing current practices. To explain this phenomenon, I will first contextualize the social landscape of Hong Kong, then present my findings on the security guards, which were examined through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and literature reviews.

## Socio-economic Segregation in Hong Kong

In order to better understand the labor conditions of security guards in Hong Kong, it is essential to understand the diffused form of socio-economic segregation prevalent in this post-colonial enclave. On a macro level, the wealthy mainly cluster on Hong Kong Island, but this scale fails to acknowledge the lower-income groups living in the same area of the city but in highly segregated buildings (Monkkonen & Zhang, 2014). This is because on a larger scale, two different income groups in close proximity will seem like one unit, concealing internal inequalities. The security guards in Redhill, for example, live on Hong Kong Island, close to upper-class residential complexes.

This diffused socio-economic segregation, which is divided by adjacent buildings, is not common among major international metropolises. Consider San Francisco, another renowned coastal metropolis similar to Hong Kong: both cities have similar Gini Coefficients, 0.521 and 0.539 respectively, but they have highly contrasting distributions. When comparing the rank-order index, an index in which we can spatially compare levels of segregation, at 200 m radii, it was 0.123 in Hong Kong and 0.121 in San Francisco. Whereas, when the parameters increased to 500 m, the rank-order index stayed mostly constant for San Francisco (0.110) but dropped significantly for Hong Kong (0.089) (Monkkonen & Zhang, 2014). This justifies the notion that unlike typical segregation, which is divided by neighborhoods or districts, in Hong Kong, it is divided by building complexes with close proximity, which increases the daily encounters between different income groups. This then increases the unconscious awareness of divide between different income groups. The security guards in our study live under these circumstances while also directly working in a higher-income group's residential space. This heightens the psychological tension felt by the guards and reinforces that they are fundamentally different from the higher-income groups.

It is also crucial to note the demographic patterns that characterize three distinct income groups. The security guards belong to the middle income group, in the 3rd to 8th decile income levels, with an average median income of US\$3181 and an average of 2.9 members per household. Although about half of this group lives in private housing, the residential security guards are in the lower end of this income group, who lives in apartments subsidized by the government (Census and Statistics Department, 2017). The Hong Kong government has extensive public housing programs spaced throughout Hong Kong, allowing the security guards to reside in the city center while paying affordable rent. This is similar to the people in the lowest income groups, who mainly reside in public housing. The last 9th and 10th decile income groups comprise the highest income group, which are the people that mostly live in private housing units. There is a general trend that the higher the income group, the greater the number of family members and longer education experience. This locates the basic social context of the security guards which is essential in understanding their realities.

## Security Differentiation

Layered upon the unique housing and demographic distribution, Hong Kong is also extremely safe, creating a fundamental difference in both the perceived and actual role of security guards. For context, Numbeo, a global crowdsourcing database, compares the crime rates of global metropolitan cities into a general crime index ranging from 0 to 100, with anything below 40 considered low crime levels. Hong Kong has a crime index of 21.86, the lowest among major metropolitan cities, compared with higher ones such as London (53.29) and San Francisco (58.68), or cities with lower rates like Singapore (27.57) and Tokyo (23.56). In more concrete terms, there were 27,096 compared to 130 cases of robbery in London and Hong Kong respectively during 2018 (Un, 2018).

The safe environment then creates a more relaxed atmosphere for the security guards. Thus, their jobs are in place to remind people of social expectations and provide privacy protections rather than prevent violence. In Redhill, the security guards' tasks are straightforward: at the front gate, a guard notes down any non-residential member or car that comes into the complex. Then, the guard at the towers again notes down the incoming non-resident, creating a double security check. All of them have to report every half an hour to the control center on their walkie-talkies to

confirm if things are running smoothly. The security guards' job is organized and predictable, more closely resembling the work of a standardized service job than that of a first responder (a role people associate with security guards).

The high levels of safety were possible because of effective labor management and Hong Kong's work culture, making the system seem professional and hardwired. However, sometimes the existing structure creates tensions and problems, which we will be addressing in the coming sections.

## Labor Management

How companies manage their workers is essential to their successes and failures—this is no exception for security companies in Hong Kong. In Redhill Peninsula, Protech Property Management Limited (Protech) runs the whole management service of the residential complex. All residents pay a management fee to Protech, and a portion of this fee is reallocated for the expenditures in Redhill, which accounts for the workers' salary. The basic nature of the role of security guards in Hong Kong is comparable to a watchman—not needing any particular skill but requiring excessive time. Protech assesses these realities of the security guards and devises how to gain maximum profit while meeting the needs of its customers and workers. But of course, there is no perfect balance, only the question of prioritizing which comes first and understanding the interrelatedness between them.

For as long as Peter, a security guard, could remember, the work hours in Redhill have been twelve hours a day, six days a week, an astonishing 72-hour workweek. This is the trade off that the security guards are forced to make: sacrificing their leisure and family time for the job. The growing labor shortage of security guards causes the present guards to take on double the amount of work they are responsible for in their work hours. Previously, each guard was tasked with supervising a single security tower; now, each guard must oversee two towers. The labor shortage comes from two main factors: unequal resource distribution and demographic factors. The unequal allocation of funds back to the residential complex partly comes from the companies paying higher salaries to managers and higher ranked workers but also partly because of fierce market competition. Although Protech provides management services for 56 properties, Hong Kong has around 100 other management companies (The Hong Kong Association of Property Management Companies, 2009). Thus, due to the high amount of competitors, Protech avoids raising prices on residents, and this contributes to the low salary of workers.

The second factor contributing to a labour shortage in Hong Kong is that its residential security guards occupy a specific demographic niche: the majority are in their middle ages, if not already elderly. Hong Kong security guards must be licensed to find work, and the Security Bureau shows that 70% of license holders are aged 50 or above (291,880 people), and around 8% are over 65. This aging population combined with undesirable pay have discouraged inflow of new workers to replace the rapidly vacating security posts (Ngo, 2015).

These realities also piece together why security guards in Hong Kong are an older demographic. It was only towards the end of the twentieth century that Hong Kong saw rapid advancement in higher education, but most security guards in Redhill are in their mid-50s, with a few in their late 40s or early 60s, meaning that many people in their generation did not have the chance to attend college or even secondary school. And in the 21st century, Hong Kong became a knowledge-based economy, causing job employment patterns to favor workers with higher degrees of education or specialized skills. This greatly limits the job options of the older population who did not have higher educational opportunities.

Furthermore, recruiting middle-aged and elderly sectors as security guards has proven especially practical for private security companies. While interviewing the security guards around the complex, there was a striking similarity: most guards do not have huge family obligations. Helena, a guard in her late 50s, has three daughters who have graduated college: her eldest daughter started a family in Los Angeles, another daughter is in Taiwan, and another in Japan. Other workers are either still single or already parents of adults; some live in small households with their elderly parents. The significant number of security guards above 50 shows that only older people consider applying for this job and that residential security companies actively employ older workers. The application process in Redhill also varied for the workers: some were referred while others saw the advertisement in newspapers. Either way, it was

usually middle-aged people who applied because they were the only group that could afford the long work hours and did not have the qualifications to obtain a better job.

Moreover, an older demographic group is more stable than younger age groups. A significant portion of guards interviewed have worked at their guard posts for nearly a decade. Ben, a security guard that recently retired, has worked for 17 years in Redhill. These workers show a constant and loyal trend because the security post is relatively relaxing and stable compared to other Hong Kong working class jobs. Some security guards had a different job before coming to Redhill, which gave them an extra perspective about their current job, such as the case of Linda. She came to Redhill after being a secretary at a firm. Although the pay is lower than at her previous job, she feels that being a security guard at Redhill has slowed down the pace of her life amidst the bustling Hong Kong work culture. Linda is relatively younger as a security guard, with a fifteen-year-old daughter, and this new job robs their quality time together. But instead of letting the long work hours distance their mother and daughter relationship, Linda has become more grateful for her limited time spent with her daughter. Linda knows that she needs this job to better support her family. Whenever she had the chance in our conversations, she would bring up her daughter, as this time when she showed me her recent Facebook post of her daughter's 15th birthday:

*This was her when she was a baby, and here are photos of her growing up. She's so funny; she's always like, 'mommy, mommy, BTS is so handsome' or 'mommy, mommy, that.' Yesterday she gave me a snack box to bring to work today; she's so cute. My daughter teaches me everything; I'm so grateful to have her.*

It seems that no matter how boring or draining life gets for the guards, if they have a belief to grasp upon, they have hope. For the security guards, many of their hopes are not in their careers. Like for Linda: it happens to be her aspiration for her daughter.

Although there is a five-level hierarchy among the security guards in Redhill, there are no visible differences within this hierarchy, only that the higher ranks receive a higher salary. Peter was promoted from rank one to rank two in three years, then took four years to rise to his current position—rank three. He said what got him promoted was a mixture of good performance and seniority, but what is expected of him on a daily basis remains vastly the same. This system mimics a career ladder, trying to imitate the adrenaline of promotion while not giving a tangible difference in responsibility or load. It is interesting that some guards are less attracted by the upward mobility but are expecting the unchanging work life, which also promises employee retention.

The management companies in Hong Kong understand the above nature of the security jobs and adequately address them—consolidating current class status while dispersing solidarity. The reality is that due to the extreme work hours, workers must have minimal family obligations and accept little foreseeable upward mobility as there is not much hierarchy as a residential security guard. So then the company designs structures that cater to this niche group.

Anticipating worker grievances, Protech set up efficient systems for the security guards to voice their opinions. On a larger scale, the company has an annual conference where the guards can assert their concerns or suggestions. Two years ago, they asked for a water fountain at each post and were granted it. Further back a couple of years, the company granted anti-static shoes to the guards on demand. And on the individual level, the guards would complete a self-evaluation form about their performance and—most importantly—predicted bonus. If there is a mismatch, then the manager would call them in to negotiate the bonus. So overall, the structure purports to be logical and benevolent. It is so effective that many security guards do not feel the need to join or establish any other autonomous form of organization for their voice to be heard. It sends off a message that the company cares for their well-being and would make adjustments accordingly. But sometimes, this overly normalized structure causes workers to feel things are meant to be like this, which immensely limits the capability of change.

There are also many other benefits that Protech provides for the security guard workers, stabilizing them. They provide health insurance for full-time workers, free transportation between work and home, and free lunch with four options per day. These job benefits constantly remind the workers to be appreciative and keep them through the long work hours.

Many other companies, regardless of economic sector or location, seem to have similar patterns of management labor. In her book *Liquidated*, the anthropologist Karen Ho describes the structure of top investment banks in Wall Street. Unlike the security guards in Hong Kong, the top investment bank's target employment group is recent graduates. As Ho writes, "Many investment bankers candidly informed me that Wall Street deliberately recruits college graduates straight out of the gate (not those who have taken time off) in order to pick the most eager, fresh-faced, driven, young, unattached analysts, as they can be worked to breaking point" (Karen Zouwen Ho, 2009, p. 89). Although this is in completely different fields, we find a surprising similarity among the fresh, young workers and the middle-aged security guards: both groups would have an employment advantage because they are more unattached to other responsibilities outside their realms of work. As Sarah Kittery, a VP, told Ho, "If you're single, and your family lives far away, like California, the better analyst you will be" (Karen Zouwen Ho, 2009, p. 89). Investment banks also give free meals and transportation to their workers, but instead of scheduled service, it is granted only after a specific curfew, which encourages workers to stay for longer hours. This shows that no matter what field, companies want as much of the worker's time as possible to maximize productivity—even at the expense of family obligations or health.

One guard summarized it well, "It has always been like this with Protech, you know what to expect and what is expected of you." This company started in 1986, and all of the security guards interviewed at Redhill have told me the labor conditions have been more or less the same. Companies produce careful systems of labor management to consolidate hierarchies while also placing mechanisms to stabilize workers. In Hong Kong, especially among security guards, labor management is so successful that workers do not perceive the viability of labor unions or the ability to muster up class consciousness.

## Resident-Worker Relationship

Not only does the labor-management shape current work practices, but the relationship between security guards and residents further enforces current practices. Despite being a residential area, Redhill displays a power-play between its workers and residents, which heavily restricts interactions, similar to experiences felt by many security guards in metropolitan areas.

To understand the relationship between security guards and others, it is important to understand that security guards not only provide physical protection; on a deeper level, they represent law and order. The perception of security has changed over time, adjusting to current events. In "Toward a Critical Anthropology of Security," Daniel Goldstein explains why regulations and restrictions are placed on security guards. Ironically, this is because security personnel bring anxiety to the subjects they are meant to protect. As Goldstein puts it, "In their very framing, 'security' and 'rights' would seem to be inherently antagonistic, with security requiring the suspension of rights in order to achieve its objectives" (Goldstein, 2010). Security forces are a constant reminder of anticipated dangers and they themselves are a threat to the citizen's privacy and rights. Especially after 9/11, security measures peaked in the States to ensure safety: a massive increase in security guards stationed outside key locations; airport security checks became more complex; and the NSA wiretapping, which in the name of security, impinged upon the rights of the people. Thus, to counter organizations hiding under the pretext of security for their own interests, people place restrictions on security measures.

In Redhill, there are a series of guard codes in place to protect the residents' rights. Guards are not allowed to ask residents about private matters and they are obligated to keep resident matters confidential from other residents. These two rules alone already greatly diminish the extent and quality of the conversations between guards and residents. It ensures that only residents can initiate talks. In such an unbalanced relationship, the guards feel inherently inferior—that any small action might jeopardize their job.

The security guards' fears are legitimate because there were times when residents complained to the management office that the guards "pried into their personal matters" or "made them uncomfortable." These stories then circulate among guards and disheartens them further because when residents complain, guards have no say in the situation—the fault is always theirs. The guards would get a verbal warning from the managers, and in more serious



cases, they would get a letter of warning which might get them fired. Although the verbal warning results in no consequences and warning letters are extremely rare, I still sense Helena's unease when talking about these events. This process robs the guard's dignity in that it sends off a "mind your own business" message, which builds a wall between the security guards and the residents.

Under these unbalanced relationships, the guards learn to formulate their own coping mechanisms to counteract the unease. Helena, for example, has her own method at the residential complex to retain her enthusiasm even under the long work hours. Whenever I passed by, she would ask about how my parents, grandparents, or brother were doing. She is also familiar with other residents' situations and would greet them in the same manner. And when asked about the working conditions at Redhill, she admitted that it is straining for older people, showing me her varicose veins from standing for long hours hidden underneath her black dress pants. However, she does not seem to get bogged down by this and defaults to sitting at the security desk which most guards do; instead, Helena is always on her feet, standing between the building and rushing to open the door for people. Her vibrant personality helps lighten up the mood and bring energy to the complex.

Another interesting case study was Sean, who has learned to integrate into his security guard post and find peace in it. He is slightly older, in his late 50s, and after a laborious early life as a construction boss, he almost looks at this job as a relaxer. He articulated his view on the relationships within Redhill:

*Hong Kong people are just like that, you know? They are quite reserved and quiet. I think it's great because everyone is nice and well-mannered. To be honest, I have more issues with other guards than residents. The guy over there, he is so loud, I think he is a bit crazy.*

Crazy or not, it is obvious the security guards have some friction in the residential complex. But Sean also shows that some of the guards have accepted the distinctive socio-economic divide and the way of communication between the groups.

On the resident's side, it is also a subconscious aura for class performance, which causes the guards to be anxious around the residents. It took me a couple of years to warm up to the security guards and then a while longer for the guards to open up about their lives. It was interesting because most guards mentioned the fear of getting sacked when I first started having longer discussions with them. At one point, a guard told me that I could not talk to him that day since there were security cameras at that post. There are security cameras at every apartment building, but some are watched more than others by other security guards or managers. I also found it challenging to hold a long conversation because sometimes a guard would say, "my colleague is going to be unhappy [that I talked for so long]." It seems that they have a subconscious fear of getting fired when getting closer to the residents. Perhaps this is due to the complaints from the residents, making them associate residents with negative consequences, or maybe this anxiety is from peer pressure from other guards and managers at Redhill, giving them a psychological reluctance to break social norms.

On the other hand, the residents themselves also reinforce the communication barrier. Redhill has primarily upper-income residents, and many have their own families and children. This means residents neither have the energy nor desire to relate to the security guards working for them. Most residents are busy during the day and come back to relax, eat dinner and bond with their children. The residents label this space as their home, something familiar and safe, so they would be less inclined to step out of their comfort zone and reject adding unknown elements to this space. It is their privacy and they do not want to be disturbed.

The security guards' and residents' perspectives incline them both to shrink into their presumed roles, where everything is safe and predictable. But it is a pity to lose the possibility of getting to know another walk of life, for one finds inspiration and new colors when collecting stories uncommon to one's own. It was not until this project did I realize how much goes under living at a residential complex. Security guards are unceasingly present. They ensure the safety of our homes and check to make sure everything is fine and well in the neighborhood. These security guards are essential to creating the secure landscape of Hong Kong, relieving its people from constantly worrying about their physical safety.

## Conclusion

What this research paper aims to illustrate is the effects of Hong Kong's social landscape on security guards, a group easily overlooked and ignored. It depicts how divides between socio-economic groups and security perceptions channel middle-aged or elderly sectors towards residential security guard employment. Additionally, labor management strategies and security guard-resident relationships further reinforce the structure of dominance, maintaining the status quo while preventing the security guards from unionizing and creating change.

Earlier studies on security guards have focused on abstract perceptions of security or how guards differentiate between members of threat and members of their own (Hanson, 2018). I argue it is equally important to explore the structures that the security guards live in, revealing ideological blunders and socio-political tensions within the society.

The labor management in a capitalistic environment has matured to use the best mechanisms to run productively and profitably. Some jobs—such as the security guards in Hong Kong and financial analysts—have favorable employment patterns for people that are less attached to familial obligations and can invest all their time and energy into their career. This begs the question of what is the right balance between effective management and exploitation? Companies give workers benefits to work longer hours, but it also takes time away from friends, family, and solitude, which contributes to a worker's health and efficiency.

Moreover, relationships between security guards and residents also consolidate the present work culture in Hong Kong. There are restrictions in place—such as security cameras and guard code—to discourage guards from befriending residents; while the residents have no incentive to interact with the guards. Even though the two groups coexist with each other, the power play creates a rift between them, similar to the diffused style of segregation throughout Hong Kong. This paper discloses that under the apparent calming residential environment, the relationships between the security guards and the workers reveal that there are tensions and anxiety—especially felt by the guards. Future research could be done on the social impact of tuning out diversity while in a heterogeneous community. Other alternatives could be to explore the progression of how these structures came to be and how they shape the current practices, explaining the realities of workers in a different light than the perspectives discovered in this paper.

## References

- Census and Statistics Department. (2017). Thematic Report: Household Income Distribution in Hong Kong. In *Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong Special Administrative Region* (pp. 9, 51–54, 88–92, 104–117). 2016 Population By-census Office. [www.censtatd.gov.hk](http://www.censtatd.gov.hk)
- Goldstein, D. M. (2010). Toward a Critical Anthropology of Security. *Current Anthropology*, 51(4), 487–517. <https://doi.org/10.1086/655393>
- Guo, Y., Chang, S.-S., Sha, F., & Yip, P. S. F. (2018). Poverty concentration in an affluent city: Geographic variation and correlates of neighborhood poverty rates in Hong Kong. *PLoS ONE*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0190566>
- Hanson, R. (2018). Ethnographies of Security: Pushing Security Studies Beyond the Bounds of International Relations. *Qualitative Sociology*, 41(2), 135–144. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-018-9384-0>
- Karen Zouwen Ho. (2009). *Liquidated : an ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press.

- Konopinski, N. (2009). *Ordinary Security: an ethnography of security practices and perspectives in Tel Aviv* [PhD Thesis].
- Massey, D. S., & Denton, N. A. (1988). The Dimensions of Residential Segregation. *Social Forces*, 67(2), 281.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2579183>
- Monkkonen, P., & Zhang, X. (2011). Creating Mixed-Income Neighborhoods Unintentionally: Public Housing Residualization and Socioeconomic Segregation in Hong Kong. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.  
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2021662>
- Monkkonen, P., & Zhang, X. (2014). Innovative measurement of spatial segregation: Comparative evidence from Hong Kong and San Francisco. *Regional Science and Urban Economics*, 47(0166-0462), 99–111.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.regsciurbeco.2013.09.016>
- Ngo, J. (2015, May 7). *Union leader calls for security guard age limit to be raised*. South China Morning Post.  
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education-community/article/1787808/union-leader-calls-security-guard-age-limit-be>
- Numbeo. (2009-2022). Crime. [www.numbeo.com](http://www.numbeo.com). <https://www.numbeo.com/crime/>
- The Hong Kong Association of Property Management Companies. (2009). *Redirect Notice*. [Www.google.com](http://www.google.com).  
<https://hkapmc.org.hk/zh/%E6%9C%83%E5%93%A1/%E6%9C%83%E5%93%A1-t-z/>
- Un, P. (2018, December 21). *Numbers say all in crime tale of two cities*. The Standard.  
<https://www.thestandard.com.hk/section-news/section/11/203495/Numbers-say-all-in-crime-tale-of-two-cities#:~:text=Hong%20Kong%20police%20figures%20showed>
- Wang, D., & Li, F. (2016). Daily activity space and exposure: A comparative study of Hong Kong's public and private housing residents' segregation in daily life. *Cities*, 59(0264-2751), 148–155.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.09.010>