
***Exploring Informality in Chinese Urbanization:
A Case Study of Tiantongyuan
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SAMPLE FINDINGS: Street Vendors

Street vending is highly prevalent throughout Tiantongyuan and its urban villages. Hundreds of street vendors were observed during the course of this research project. The vendors sell a diverse array of prepared foods, fruits, and vegetables; articles of clothing such as socks, scarves, coats, and purses; and accessories such as cell phone holders and hair ribbons.

The majority of street vendors were observed using a bicycle trishaw to transport their goods. Some transported their products in a blanket that also served as a ground mat for displaying their products for sale. A minority of street vendors relied on automobiles or illegal motorized trishaws to transport their product. Street vendors' method of transportation is important because the illegality of their venture necessitates ease of mobility in order to escape law enforcement. One vendor switched her product from fruit to prepared food, because the food could be transported in a smaller more mobile cart than the fruit cart.

Many Tiantongyuan residents regard the street vendors as a public nuisance for obstructing subway entrances, pedestrian overpasses and streets. Some residents considered the street vendors to sell unclean food or low quality products. However, Tiantongyuan residents also felt street vendors contribute positively as well. They provide inexpensive food and goods in a place with few shopping options. Many food items cost only a few yuan (\$0.30- \$2.00). Also, they bring convenience for Tiantongyuan residents that lack time to prepare meals, and convenience to migrant workers living in urban villages where few apartments have kitchens.

Street vendors in Tiantongyuan use sidewalks, streets, and pedestrian overpasses directly outside the subway stations' entrances in the morning and evening during peak commuting hours in order to attract the most business. It is illegal to use public sidewalks and street space for vending in Tiantongyuan (as well as in most Chinese cities). Two types of street police (*chengguan* 城管) enforce anti-street vending rules in Tiantongyuan: public police and private security. Public street police chase vendors away from subway entrances, public streets and sidewalks. Private security personnel are hired by property owners which chase away street vendors from sidewalk space in front of private development. If caught, the police may confiscate the carts, valued at approximately 200 *yuan*. Street vendors report frequent harassment from street police that prevent them from selling and earning income. According to

interviews, the private security guards are even stricter than the public police. Due to this enforcement, some street vendors reported large variations in their monthly earnings. In the course of this study, the enforcement of the law against street vending was readily apparent. At certain peak hours, hundreds of street vendors lined the sidewalks, streets, and overpasses by the subways. At other peak hours, no more than a handful of vendors were selling.

As noted, private businesses pay money to hire security guards to enforce rules against street vending to mitigate the public nuisance for Tiantongyuan residents. However, some street vendors develop a *guanxi* relationship with private property owners in order to informally rent privately-owned space in public areas such as parking lots or sidewalks. (See Figure 10). One street vendor sold fruit in a parking lot directly across from the subway station. Although this space was privately-owned, she stated that she was able to sell there because she had *guanxi* with the property owner and paid a small fee. She was also able to display a large amount of fruit for sale because she did not need to be prepared to run from the police at any given moment. Similarly, another street vendor rented sidewalk space in the area directly in front of a restaurant by paying a fee to the restaurant owner. He stated that he was able to make significantly more money staying in this one area than bicycling around selling his product. These informal rental agreements between street vendors and private property owners can benefit street vendors' economic opportunities.

Street vendors also operate within public spaces of the urban villages. They sell products to the villages' thousands of residents. The street conditions vary. The streets are often much narrower than the streets of Tiantongyuan. Sometimes the streets are unpaved and muddy with no room to set up a cart or space to sell. Street vending in the urban villages is legal; however, the Village Council collects a fee from the street vendors. In Yandan, a daily fee of 2 yuan (\$0.30) is collected by Village Council officials. Street vendors considered this fee to be fair.

The streets of the urban villages serve as an informal but legal alternative to selling on the streets of Tiantongyuan. One street vendor in Yandan expressed an interest in selling in the public space by Tiantongyuan subway station, but her fear of the street police deterred her. Even though she believed that she would earn more income selling in the public space near the subway, she only sold in the urban village streets. Despite her belief, it is unclear whether or not street vendors earn more income selling in the urban village streets or in Tiantongyuan streets. Another interview revealed that two migrant worker brothers sold the same snack. One sold in the urban village of Zhongtan, while another sold in the public space outside Tiantongyuan. Both earned approximately the same amount per month. Some street vendors also expressed an interest in renting store space, but claimed that commercial space was not affordable. Store space in urban villages can cost approximately 2000 yuan (\$303)

per month. Small commercial spaces near Tiantongyuan subway station can cost over 3000 yuan (\$455) per month.